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Editorial

The Issue With No Resolution

Stephen William Theaker
Editor

This is the eighth issue of my magazine, and just like every issue so far, it is the best yet. But it is slightly unusual, in that it contains no less than four distinct tales, by four entirely different authors, whereas in the past I have been more likely to present my readers with one or two long pieces. It is very interesting, I feel, that I launched this magazine mainly in order to encourage myself to sit down to write at least four times a year, only to be eventually pushed out of it by the submissions of other people. I would vow to ruin them all for stymieing my plans were it not for their stories being so much better than anything I would have been likely to write.

If there is a theme to this issue, it is probably highlighted best by "The Hidden Game", intended by the author, John Greenwood, the editor of our sister journal, *November Spawned*, to be the first in a series – *Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into the Unknown*. Planned to be of indefinite length, John has promised, if it is within his writerly power, to send an instalment for several issues to come. Let's hope that he does not waver in that resolution after seeing that, in my guise as illustrator, I decided to clothe his character in a costume rather similar to that of Elvis in his Vegas years. I have no explanation – I am only a beginner when it comes to art, so I am as yet at the mercy of my muse.

Anyway, back to the theme I mentioned. The key word in John's story, so far as this issue is concerned, is *Inconclusive*. None of this issue's items reaches a conclusion. I hope that nevertheless the issue will stand alone, as a good read in itself, but it is worth alerting the reader to the fact before he or she plunges in.

As already mentioned, Newton Braddell is intended to be an ongoing series. The story submitted by my sometime friend Howard Phillips is the beginning of an autobiographical epic, in which he will, step-by-step, take us through the assembly of what some claim to be the greatest rock band of

all time, Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point. This is the beginning of *The Saturation Point Saga* – mark this moment well! This first, introductory, story deals with the fate of his former band, The Sound of Howard Phillips (who he discussed at some length in last issue's editorial), and with this published, he then plans to assault us with a series of novels and stories, each of which will report how he recruited one or another of the band. Now, longtime Silver Age readers will be fully aware of the number of projects Howard has undertaken but not completed, but he seems very enthusiastic, so I will not be the one to discourage him. He has all the makings of a multi-media triple threat, at the very least, so if I am nice now maybe he will tip his hat to the SAB at some opportune time in the future.

Steven Gilligan has blessed us with the first half (or less, depending on how the rest of the story plays out) of *Excelsior*, the heartwarming tale of a young man and his giant robot. The eponymous metal star can be seen on the cover of this issue, as interpreted by your hard-working editor. He ended up looking quite a bit like Jet Jaguar, but was that in Steven's descriptions of the robot, or was that just how I interpreted his words? Resolve this conundrum by reading it now! Steven also created the hilarious cartoon that graces the back cover.

The fourth piece in this issue is the fascinating prologue to *Valiant Razalia*, the first science fiction novel by Michael Wyndham Thomas, better known as a poet and historical novelist. I have never read anything quite like it. In all honesty, from someone writing their first science fiction novel, I expected a certain amount of reinventing the wheel, being hit over the head with the hoariest of old tropes (that's the role my fiction plays in this magazine!), and a story that struggled to breathe through the condescension to genre, but that is not what we have here. This is a unique piece of writing – dense and atmospheric, yet wilful, whimsical and playful. Initially perhaps somewhat forbidding in its tumult of adjectives and similes, to the careful reader it reveals a rich bounty of laughter and mystery. It might take you a few paragraphs or pages to settle into its rhythms, but take the time, make the effort, and at the end ask yourself when the rest of the novel will be available to read. The author has said he may submit further instalments to this journal, but I can only hope to be so lucky.

Observant readers may notice that the format of the publication has had a revamp this issue. It was not by choice – all our files were lost in a hard drive failure, and so, starting again, we decided to make a few changes. I hope you like them.

The Saturation Point Saga

My Rise and Fall

Howard Phillips

Master of the Macabre

A Dream

It began with a dream. I went to sleep that night unimagining of what awaited me in this world and beyond. The dream I had that night was my first intimation. When I placed my head upon the pillow I expected to while away the midnight hours in the usual way, tossing and turning, battling with a pillow determined to bother my head in all the most sensitive places, and finally waiting patiently for dawn, so that I might rush back out into a world that despises me.

But it was not to be. Not that night.

That night, I fell asleep immediately, almost as if I had no choice in the matter, as if a huge, invisible hand was pushing me down, down, away from consciousness. Briefly I struggled, concerned at this unusual happening. Had somebody perhaps drugged me? Had some element of that evening's meal been spoiled, leading to hallucination? I do not know the cause, I only know the consequence.

I found myself in my home, in the bedroom to which my mind had just abandoned my body. I was dressing, my best suit. Its age was barely noticeable – a slight shine at the elbows, and a small patch on one knee – and I wore the suit like a badge of honour. I might seem less than respectable to some, but at least I had earned my own respect, by not selling myself out, by being true to the goals I had set myself in life.

Tonight I would play with my band, The Sound of Howard Phillips.

We had formed about a year ago, after I began to form an interest in music. Of course I could play no instruments, but that has never stopped the greats. I

believe my move into music-making was a natural evolution from my previous interest in poetry. It was in theory only a matter of setting the words to music, although in practice I had never limited myself in that way. In fact, I had undertaken several experiments in what I came to term “emergent melody” – I would tell the band to begin to play, and after recording their individual efforts, I would let the music take my words where it would. Sometimes that would lead to a chorus, or a verse, or sometimes to sounds, or screams. Often, I would just speak, if that was what the song begged of me.

Enough of my musical philosophy – back to my dream!

I was dressing in readiness for the evening's gig. We had produced a pair of extended play recordings, but garnered little interest. A number of gigs had not done much to improve matters, with audiences seeming to lack the necessary intelligence to engage with our ideas and approach. Tonight, though, it would be different!

I wondered why I thought that. Why would it be different? If anyone even turned up to see us play – that is, if the turgid patrons of the public house deigned to turn away from their drinks for even a minute to take us in – why would they be more inclined to understand what we had to offer?

This apparent discontinuity in the dream's logic made me twist and struggle. For a moment, I knew I dreamt, and wished to wake. But I could not, again I felt the press of that misty hand, pressing me down, down, into the dream, my qualms forgotten.

I left the house, carrying nothing but my microphone. The rest of the band would make their own way there, as usual. Sometimes I wondered if they plotted to replace me. I could never remember the name of the bassist, but I could swear that he scoffed whenever I mentioned my theories of emergent melody. If he turned the others against me, would it one day be merely The Sound, with no mention of their founder?

I put such maudlin thoughts out of my head as I paid for my bus ticket.

“Thank you, driver,” I said cheerfully.

“How socks dry, sir,” he replied.

“Lovely,” I said. “Lovely. See you later.”

I made my way to the back of the bus. Whenever

possible I took a seat there, so that none could mock me behind my back, as happened so often. How frequently had I felt a piece of softened paper, horribly warmed by spittle, crash against the back of my head or neck, only to be afraid to turn to face the author of the assault? Too frequently, by half. I would always be the kind of man to take laughter over violence when it came to the decisive moment, even though it was laughter I feared most.

I reckoned without the horrible logic of dreams. Even as I placed my posterior upon the back seat, I felt a gust of wind from behind my head. I forced myself to turn around to discover what new threat the bus would confront me with, to see the back window replaced by an infinite regression of seats, and upon every seat a boy with a wadded piece of paper, ready to unleash it upon me.

I shouted in anger, even as they began to shower me in saliva-drenched scraps. One landed, disgustingly, in my mouth – I spat it out, and ran to the front of the bus. I looked to the driver to let me off, but he shook his head, and shrugged.

The stop was mere moments away, but our way was blocked by traffic.

“Sorry,” he said, apologetically, as I was spattered by the evidence of the other passengers’ despite for me – they had all joined in now. “I can’t let you off, we’re not at the stop yet. It isn’t safe. Horrid sky. Shoes.”

I endured.

Stepping off the bus, what seemed like hours later, my black suit now polka-dotted with humiliation, I found myself outside the Birmingham Academy, a venue.

I turned to call to the driver. “This is the wrong place! I can’t be playing here!”

He shrugged again, and the bus drove off, a thousand schoolboys pushing open the windows as it went by to shout insults and try to spit at me.

“Life,” I said, with resignation, to myself.

I looked to the venue. The huge white sign above the doors, designed to proudly present the names of the bands performing, offered only a jumble of nonsense letters. Beneath the sign began a queue that stretched back a hundred metres. Half the members of the queue were beautiful teenage girls, with bouncing hair and well-filled brassieres – the other half, equally beautiful teenage boys, with fringes that flopped over their faces like an invitation to open the curtains and kiss their lips. At the back of the queue, my long-dead great-grandmother.

At first none noticed me, but then my great-grandmother, Iris, cried out with joy, “There he is! It’s Howard himself!”

It was as if I stood at the very point in the sea where the tide begins to turn – from neutral immobility, the crowd turned to me and began to rush forward. Iris was left at the back, struggling to make herself heard as the boys and girls surrounded me.

“It’s Howard!” they cried as one.

“What a pleasant development,” I said to myself, surprised at the attention in a way, but in another, surprised only that it had taken so long for the public to come around.

Suddenly I was more conscious than ever of my suit, worn and dirtied as it was, but under the strokes of their adoring hands it was cleansed, and renewed, and I began to grow in confidence. Somehow I didn’t feel crowded, or intimidated. I just enjoyed the attention, even when it was more intimate than might be expected in the street.

“Take it easy,” I said to them all, “there’s more than enough of me to go round. I’ve been saving it up for a long time.”

Suddenly, though, they began to drift away. Puzzled, I caught the arm of an attractive brunette as she headed back to the queue.

“What’s happening?”

She laughed, a pretty giggle that made my toes curl in disgust, despite myself. “The concert is about to begin. You should go inside.”

“I should?”

The queue looked at me expectantly.

“It’s getting on,” she said. “None of us can go in until you do.”

I frowned, and released her arm. Its softness had been a pleasure to my fingers. She looked sadly towards the back of the queue.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just lost my place, that’s all.” Her glumness was increasing. “The gig will be half over by the time I get in.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to make you miss the concert. Is there anything I can do to help?”

She beamed. “Just take me in with you! That would be wonderful! I could meet the whole band! Would you introduce me?”

I patted her shoulder. “I don’t think I know the band.” I looked around, making sure I was where I had thought I was. “True, I was supposed to be performing tonight – I intended to further my experiments in emergent melody, should the band be ready to play in the way they agreed when they signed their contracts – but this was not the place. This is not where we would be playing. I don’t know who you all think I am, but I should not be here.”

She frowned. Women always look prettier to me

frowning than they do when they are happy. Any imbecile can be happy. It takes intelligence to suffer in the absence of physical pain or privation. That is not to say that I think of every frowning woman as intelligent – but at least it is a sign that they are not mere dunderheads grinning their way through life’s trials like slightly less gaudily made-up clowns.

“This is where you’re playing,” she said. “If you don’t play, everyone will be very disappointed. The band are waiting for you, Howard.”

I thought for a moment, then pulled her to me. I pushed my tongue between her lips. She tasted rather of cinnamon. Her tongue pushed back against mine, dancing, flickering into my mouth. I sucked it gently, and her hips pressed against mine. I put my left hand upon her bottom. It was round, and not too firm. I squeezed it gently, and put my right hand upon her breast. Pressing with the lightest of touches, I felt the lace of her brassiere through the cotton t-shirt, and her nipple starting to stiffen in my middle of my palm. Suddenly, as is the way of dreams, we were in my home, making love, by turns softly and wildly, tenderly and violently. But before I could attain the little death, we were back outside the Academy, and our kiss came to an end.

Why were more of my dreams not like this?

I took her hand, and we walked towards the entrance of the club. The security staff paused from checking tickets and waved us in.

Unconfident for a second, I paused before entering, and tried to tell them, “I’m with The Sound of Howard Phillips.”

“Howard Phillips, mate? No problem, go right in.”

The brunette laughed. “You don’t have to tell people who you are, Howard!”

I gave her hand a squeeze, and moved it to the front of my trousers.

“Not now, Howard! You have to do the gig first!”

She dragged me through the entrance into the lobby. It was full of teenagers, each as delectable as the next, each wearing a t-shirt with my name on. The other text was hard to read, obscure and foggy. They turned to watch me, awed, as I passed by.

Within seconds we were inside the auditorium. The crowd was inside already, expectant, waiting, staring at me. As I walked towards the stage they parted to let me through, but I was taking too long. Some began to stamp their feet, others to chant my name: “Howard! Howard! HOWARD!” I lost my grip on the brunette, and she melted into the crowd well before I reached the front.

I was lifted, almost thrown, onto the stage in the audience’s eagerness. All the instruments of a band

were there – the drums, the guitars, the keyboards, and all the rest – but no band members as yet.

The main lights dimmed, the stage lights flared in my face, and perfumed smoke billowed out over the audience, still chanting my name.

I took my microphone from my pocket, and said hello. They screamed alarmingly.

“Hi,” I said once the noise died down a bit. “I’m Howard Phillips, and I’m here to play for you, it seems. Let’s get the band out on stage, eh?”

Everyone shouted, stamped their feet, and shrieked to the fullest extent of their lungs.

“Let’s hear it,” I said, “for The Sound of Howard Phillips! Come on out, guys!”

The crowd went silent. People started to shift uneasily, and look at each other. It was as if they thought I had gone mad.

It’s only a dream, I thought. What does it matter?

Then there was a shout. “Howard! It’s Iris!” It was my great-grandmother, though I could not make her out beyond the brightness of the stage lights. Everyone turned to look at her, but undeterred she went on. “Have you been taking tablets, my boy?”

I held out my hands. “I don’t know what you mean. If I am not playing with The Sound, then who am I playing with? In fact, who am I, *tout court*?”

But before she could answer, the crowd went insane again. I turned, to see the band coming out on stage. The drummer, the guitarist, the bassist, all the rest, filed out behind me. The guitarist patted me on the shoulder, and yelled in my ear.

“Well done, Howard. I’ve never seen a crowd so ready to rock. They thought you’d totally lost it!”

I did not recognise him, or any of the band.

They were not The Sound of Howard Phillips.

As the rhythm section began to groove, I looked up to the back of the stage, where the band’s logo hung, suspended behind us while lasers played over its glistening image.

Howard Phillips and the Saturation Point, it said.

The guitars started to rock, I went back to the microphone, and we began to kick it.

* * *

Many hours later, I woke up, thrilled, sweaty and exhilarated. What did the dream mean? Was it self-criticism, or an attempt by my subconscious to kick my musical career into gear? Where had those amazing songs come from? We had played an entire set, every song better, more pulse-pounding, more dramatic than the last, and some traces of them remained yet in my head.

I quickly ran downstairs to the computer, and sang, hummed and clapped what fragments I could

remember, creating the vaguest of demo tracks. I could not hope to recreate the amazing music that I had heard – and performed! – in my dream, but I could do my best to approximate it. After a day's frantic work, during which I did not even pause to dress myself, I felt I had done all I could. For the rest, I would need musicians, so I ate, slept – a dreamless sleep, this time – and upon waking summoned the members of The Sound of Howard Phillips.

The Sound and the Saturation

By lunchtime they were all there. Quids McCall, by many people's reckoning the greatest loss 1970s rock music ever suffered – he had unexpectedly quit the business, giving no reason and disappearing for decades, only to answer my advertisement in the local paper three decades later – was quite grouchy.

“Howard, it's early. Why did you have to get us all out of bed? I'm knackered, and I'm in no mood to play guitar right now.”

I shushed him. “I had a dream, band-mates. I dreamt of the music we could be playing, if only we tried.”

Quids laughed heartily. “If *we* tried, Howard? What instrument do you play again?” The rest of the Sound laughed with him.

I drew myself up haughtily. “I play inspiration! I play dreamer! I play visionary! I lead the band where no others dare or deign to go! What are the rest of you to that? You pluck a six-stringed box that a child could get a noise out of!”

He looked shame-faced, clearly embarrassed to have been put in his place in front of the rest of the band, but Jack “the Space” Tom stuck up for him. He actually had the nerve to be somewhat angry with me.

(It is scenes like this that show how difficult it is to be the leader of a band, as opposed to just a mere member. Being the leader of a band is like wrangling cats – it might well be possible to get what you want from them, but expect a few scratches and bring a lot of fish.)

“Howard,” said Jack, the keyboardist, “don't get angry with Quids just for that. We have all put a lot into this band, not just you. We have all stuck at it, despite the lack of success, despite your insistence on experimentation over tunes, despite the fact that

you treat us all as your servants. I'm amazed that we take it, sometimes.”

“You will take it, though,” I replied, surprised at the passion in my voice. “You will take it, and learn to like it! I treat you as servants because you are!” They all began to grumble at that, but I shook my head. “I am a servant too! We are all servants to the muse – we have to follow her bidding!”

Lumley Clark shook his head as firmly as he played his drums. “That's your muse, Howard, not ours. We have families to feed. We need to earn money, and it's just not happening.”

The bassist nodded in agreement.

I could see that I would lose them if I was not careful, binding contracts or not, and so I eased off the pedal a bit. Sometimes you need a stick with musicians, but sometimes a carrot will do a better job.

“Just listen to the demos I've made, Lumley. And these are just shadows, mere reflections of the music from my dream. You cannot imagine anything like it. The crowd was rapturous – they loved the music. They demanded more, and we improvised three new songs on the trot, each better than the last!”

I chose not to mention that The Sound had not actually featured in my dream. I assumed that my subconscious had chosen to substitute new members to free me from old ways of thinking (how wrong I would be proved to be!) – but now, in real life, I had to work with the tools at my disposal, and they were not a bad bunch. Lumley Clark was one of the most imaginative drummers on the planet – and I could not have faulted his technique in the least. Quids McCall played the guitar like he had twenty fingers, even before he brought his toes into play. Jack “the Space” Tom made the gaps between notes sound louder than the notes themselves. He would have been the perfect band member if only he could play without his grey cat, Harry, in attendance. I detest cats, of course, meaning we had had to arrange a system whereby he could fax his keyboard playing into the studio, which made improvisational playing difficult. But it was worth it – that guy could really do it. The bassist, too, was very good.

Not a bad bunch at all – so there was no need to ruffle their feathers by saying I had dreamt of playing with another band.

“I'm listening to you, my friends, but you are The Sound of Howard Phillips. Your very name describes your purpose: to bring to life the sounds that I imagine. It seems that so far the sounds I have imagined have not been particularly commercial, and I apologise for that. I cannot help where, as you point out, *my* muse takes me. She has taken me down

some tricky roads, but you, my band, have followed me. You have been faithful to the dream, but now – and I understand this – you are wondering if it will all be worthwhile, if all the work you have put in is leading anywhere. You have wives, children, cats and elderly relatives who rely on you for support, but so far you have put our dreams ahead of that. I called you to this meeting today because our dreams have repaid the favour – they have shown us where it is all leading. One day, we will be popular, beloved, and probably very wealthy. There will be acclaim, record sales, groupies and everything else you could dream of. (Even you, Quids, I know you miss it.) Now, listen to these demos, and tell me what you think.”

I went to the computer and played the first track, then the second, and then the other eight. I kept my back to the Sound the whole time. I could not bear to look at them. These moments would decide the rest of our lives, I thought. As the demos played on, I began to doubt myself. Why was the band so quiet? Were these songs really all that good? I kept my back turned, so they would not see a hint of the worry that wracked me. Would they be able to hear beyond my reedy vocals, out of time handclaps, and out of tune humming, hear beyond that to the magnificent sound that I heard in my head? Could they take those songs from my dreams and make them reality?

At last, all the demos had played, and I turned to face the Sound.

“Wow,” said Lumley. “We had better get to work.”

“Fucking yeah!” shouted Quids. He started jamming on his guitar, already trying to find his way into one of the songs.

“That was hot shit!” said Jack Tom, getting ready to go home to his keyboards. “We are going to kick ass or my name isn’t Jack Tom.”

The bassist didn’t get up, and tipped his head to one side. “I wonder,” he said.

“What’s up?” asked Lumley, leaping to his feet. “You must have heard it. These songs could take us all the way!”

I could not help grinning. It was a tonic to see the band so enthusiastic, after months of desultory practices, half-hearted gigs and bare communication. If we could realise the songs I had dreamt, the sky would be no limit to us. I had barely heard the bassist’s lone voice of equivocation.

“I don’t know,” said the bassist. “I can hear what you are getting at with these songs, and I can imagine what kind of bass lines they might need, but there are a few things I’m not sure about. I don’t know if I will be able to play the bass lines to do those songs justice, and that worries me. I am a very

good bass player – I can slap and tickle bass with the best of them – I can wear it high or low – I can groove, funk and batter the bass from top to bottom. But I don’t know if I will ever be able to lay down bass lines that will be good enough for those songs. I know my limitations, and those songs would stretch me to the very limit.”

“So there’s no time to lose!” yelled Quids. “This is what I’ve been waiting for all these years. Something real, something I can really get behind and play with my soul!”

I took a step toward the bassist, and grasped the upper part of his arm. “No artist ever fully realises his or her dreams,” I said. “All you can ever hope to do is approximate them. If you have talent and time, the approximation will be closer, but it can never be exact. And more often than not, in making the attempt you find yourself creating something even better than that of which you dreamed!”

“I suppose,” he said.

“Of course he’s right, man,” shouted Lumley Clark. “If we can even manage one half of what Howard has dreamt up, we will have cracked it. Isn’t that right, Howard?”

I smiled as if I agreed, but of course I would not settle until my dreams were as closely actualised as possible. If we created other great music along the way, no problem, that could be released, but I had a very definite idea of where I ultimately wanted to take this band.

Jack Tom had left by now, and as we talked the keyboard connected to the fax machine began to make little noodling sounds.

“There is something else,” said the bassist. “Don’t you feel it? Something is not quite right about these songs. They are wonderful in a hundred different ways – don’t get me wrong about that – and they will probably revolutionise modern music in ways we can’t even imagine. Musicians will still be working on variations of them for decades to come, just as the possibilities that the Beatles and Bowie opened up in the sixties have yet to be exhausted. But something about these songs tickles at the back of my brain. Something tells me they shouldn’t be here. Something tells me we should leave them alone.”

Everyone fell quiet for a moment, and I felt the darkness begin to descend once more, but at that point Quids found the style he was looking for, and he let us have it – he turned up to ten. It knocked us all off our feet.

When we had recovered, I took a long hard look at the bassist. “Can you really walk away from that? Are you going to let a lesser bassist – a lesser man – ruin what should have been? Will Smith once said

that he was offered the role of Neo, but that he did not take it, and he was glad he did not, because when he saw the choices Keanu Reeves had taken, he knew he would have made the wrong choice every single time. Now, I am absolutely certain that Will Smith was being overly self-deprecating. He would have made a marvellous Neo, even if he had been a little different from what we are used to. But can you say the same thing about the slab-handed oaf who is going to come in here and play where you should have played?"

The bassist looked me back in the eye, and then began to smile, and finally laughed. "Since when did you watch films, Howard? I would have thought you wouldn't even own a television."

"I am at heart a poet," I replied. "And it is essential for a poet to maintain a connection with his audience. To do that I must be aware of the cultural touchstones of our times. Are you with us, bassist?"

"Okay," he said. "You've got me. Let's do this thing."

* * *

I put the band to work. For long months they toiled to recreate the sound I had dreamt of. We worked on each song in turn, laying down drum, bass, guitar and keyboard tracks, bit by bit trying to build up to what I knew the songs could be. Once the basics were in place we returned to the first song, and tried to refine it, but I was not satisfied. The same thing happened with each of the other songs. However good they sounded, there was something missing, something indefinable that we just could not get into the songs. The rest of the band were baffled, of course, not having heard the original versions, but they battled on. Tempers frayed at times, as I pushed them to the very limits of their endurance, but I thought the Sound could handle it. They were grizzled veterans of a dozen albums between them – they *should* have been able to handle it.

Eight months into the project I entered the studio to find my keyboardist holding a knife to my guitarist's throat. I paused a moment, allowing myself the time to take stock, then yelled at the top of my voice, "KEYBOARD PLAYER! PUT THE KNIFE DOWN!"

By that point I had almost entirely trained them to follow my instructions – they had become perfect tools for me to use – though I had not realised the toll that that would take on them; that I had, in fact, irreparably broke all four of them (and Harry the grey cat was not having a good time of it, either). But with every day that went by, my dream seemed to move further off into the distance – what I needed to

create this album the way I wanted was not a group of servants, not tools, but equals, musicians who could bring to the project inspiration equal to my own. My band was full of superb musicians, but had only one visionary.

He did not put the knife down. I took my pistol from my pocket. It was never loaded, of course, but nevertheless helped to concentrate the band when necessary. I pointed it at Jack's head.

"What's going on here?"

He did not answer, and did not move the knife. I felt bad, not just because I had perhaps driven the poor fool to this point, but also because of all the band members, Quids McCall had most enthusiastically thrown himself into the project. That might have been what had led to this situation.

"I can replace a guitarist, Jack, if you use that knife. Can you replace your brain, if I use the gun? Be sensible and put the knife down."

He slowly moved it away from Quids' throat, and then dropped it on the ground. I kicked him in the head, with all the little power I could muster, but it was enough to knock him to the floor. The guitarist got to his feet and began to give a few kicks of his own.

"Watch the fingers," I said, picking up the knife and taking it away to safety. "We still need him."

I made everyone a cup of hot, sweet, army tea while they calmed down. Once the three of us were all sitting on a comfortable couch, a cup of tea in our hands, things did not seem quite so serious.

I looked at my bandmates. "What's the problem, guys? You should have come to me, first. This is not the kind of band where we have fights with each other. We have a dream and we are all mucking in to make that dream come true. Leave the squabbling to your everyday jobbing joes!"

The two of them looked at each other, while I waited patiently. The keyboardist eventually decided to speak first.

"I didn't want to bother you with it," said Jack. "At least not until I was sure that the rest of the band felt the same way. The bassist won't come out of his house, and Lumley has been hospitalised these last three weeks. He cannot lift his hand, never mind his drumsticks."

"I've been pushing all of you very hard, I know that," I said. "I've been thinking the same thing."

Jack stumbled. This was evidently not the reaction he had expected from me. "Erm, that's right. We are all feeling the strain, and what's worse, we don't feel like we're getting anywhere. It feels like we made all the real progress in the first few months of recording, and since then we've just been shuffling around,

trying different approaches to get to the same unattainable place. It's been driving us all slowly mad."

I smiled. "It's a relief, in some ways, to hear you say that out loud. I feel just the same way."

"You do?" said Quids McCall, querulously.

"Thank you for sticking up for me," I told him. "But there's no need. I think we have taken this as far as we can. Equally, there's no excuse for keyboard players to be pulling knives on people, no matter how tired out they are, so he deserved his kick in the head. But if we look beyond this nasty little event, I think we can see that this project has run its course. We should put the record out as it is – it isn't going to get any better."

Jack "The Space" closed his eyes and lifted two hands to heaven. "I was beginning to think this day would never come," he said to me. "If it's okay, I'll start to send CDs out to a few record companies. It's been fine recording this in your home studio, Howard, but we'll want real record company dollars behind us."

"He's right," said Quids. "This will be an incredible album, even if we stop now, and it's going to sell like crazy in the end, but it might take a while to catch on. We'll need someone with money enough to educate the public to listen to it."

"The songs are catchy as hell," said Jack, "but people will have to hear them a few times before they hear the hooks coming at them. It's a whole new direction for music."

"Fine, gentlemen," I said. "Between the two of you, choose your favourite version of each track, make sure the bassist and Lumley agree, and then send CDs out to the labels. Let's send a few out to avant garde DJs as well to get some buzz started."

"What about you?" asked Jack. "Don't you want a say in which versions we use?"

"Sorry," I replied with half a smile, "but I can't even listen to them now. I'm afraid of destroying the memory of the originals. Now shake hands with each other, and go sort out a record deal for us."

They shook hands and left the room, excitedly chattering about the new possibilities opening up before them.

I put my head in my hands and began to cry.

My Career Takes Off

You can imagine what happened next. At first record company interest was negligible, but the moment one A&R got it, the others quickly pretended that they did too, and a bidding war began. I took a large

advance, divided it between the other members of the band, and left the record to its own devices. I let the band believe it was part of our mystique, whereas in fact I could not see myself going out to cheerlead for a record that, whatever effect it might have on the future of music, I could only ever see as a crushing disappointment.

The first mention in the NME was a surprise. I had given no interviews, and the record was not yet out, but they had included The Sound of Howard Phillips in a list of bands to watch out for that year. Apparently we were the "New Wave of Art Throb". They had dug out one of our old publicity photos, the ones we had sent out to labels, magazines and DJs with our first EP. I was stunned by how much healthier we all looked. What had I done to the band in my fruitless quest for perfection?

I began to drink. I could see no way forward. I could not make the music of my dreams a reality, and I knew that until I did it would continue to haunt my every waking moment, stretching at the very fibre of my being, forcing me to allow it freedom. So I drank to forget, as I always do. My favourite drink was whisky, of course, mixed with Coca-Cola, at least in the morning. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays I would use Diet Coke. On Tuesday and Thursdays I would use Cherry Coke (this happened during one of the rare periods during which that marvellous flavour was to be found on the shelves). At the weekends I would use regular Coke, and add a spoonful of coffee grinds. In the afternoons I took tea and jam on toast, so that the hangover would not be so bad. Then in the evening I would drink lager, my favourite being Budweiser, of course, the King of Beers.

A weak beer, say some, but I'll get drunker with a weak beer that I can bear the taste of than I would with some foul-smelling brew with unmentionable pieces floating around in it.

Towards the end of the night, in a rush to be as drunk as possible, I would drink alcopops – orange and peach flavours being my favourites, but I was always, as ever, open to experimentation. Strawberry was not unbearable, and pineapple always interesting.

I am not what you would call a "manly" drinker, but in what way is wetting yourself and vomiting a sign of manliness anyway, regardless of what you drank to make it happen?

The night would always end with a second helping of jam on toast, for the sake of my health.

I stopped going to work, though I had made a special effort to keep going during the recording sessions. The publisher would contact me occasion-

ally, but he was used to my frequent absences. I worked for him as a marketing manager and occasional copy-writer. Soon enough he would see the album in the charts and stop calling or expecting me back. He would bide his time – if my money ran out, he would wait till I had reached my lowest point before contacting me again. Did he do that out of human kindness, or out of pleasure at my downfall? I could not answer, but there he had been, time and time again, at my lowest points, offering me work, offering me a way back up, laughing as he held out a hand.

Most days I drank at home, but from time to time I would stagger out onto the streets of Birmingham. I walked through the city centre, staggering from bar to bar, pausing only to harangue idiots lecturing passers-by on religion.

“The thing with evolution,” said one of them as I threw up into a litterbin, “is that it is only a theory...”

I had to hear no more. I ran over, tried to leap onto his self-made podium and fell to the ground. I climbed to my feet, and used his trousers to pull my way back up. Eventually there was a handful of his shirt in my grasp, and I was spitting chunks of unevacuated vomit into his face.

“Of course it’s a theory, you moron! That’s the difference between you and us. You want everything to be safe, and certain, but it isn’t – you can never be sure – you can only make theories, and test them, and come up with better ones when they fail!”

I fell to the ground before I could get much further, and he continued with his preaching. No one had paid any attention to my behaviour, any more than they paid attention to him. I tried to crawl over to Pizza Hut, but could not find the strength to open the door.

Was this my lowest point? Not by a long way.

Shortly after that incident the album came out. Have I mentioned yet its title? It was my musical interpretation of *The Fear Man*, a novel by the publisher I mentioned earlier. He had never published it, except in a little journal to which I had occasionally contributed pieces, and so I was in the odd position of having released a musical version of a novel no one had heard of. Thank goodness I had refused all interviews, but that did nothing to harm sales. As predicted, they were slow at first, but enough to occasionally get me recognised as I wove my drunken way about town. The money from those sales enabled me to get even drunker, while those beginnings of celebrity led people to buy me drinks, allowing me to get drunker still.

Slowly the band and the album began to pass

certain milestones. The review in the NME was extremely complimentary, although aside from rating it a 9, it was hard to tell, with the reviewer describing the album as “Doctor Hook and Doctor Who’s crack babies playing football with Britney and Christina as naked goalposts”, in the paper’s inimitable and unmistakably silly fashion. Still, silly as it is, a lot of people listen, so the rest of the band, and the record label, with whom I had minimal dealings, were happy.

The album began to nuzzle its way up the 6 Music chart, and tracks began to be played on its more outré programmes. That made me happy, at least. I had always had a great fondness for the station. Soon the album began to edge into the top forty album chart, and the demands for interviews became more insistent. The record label suggested that the rest of the Sound do the interview – they had all done the rounds before with various bands, and there had even been more than one weekly music paper to deal with in those days. For some reason I agreed, and Quids McCall led the gang into battle. The first interview was with Planet Sound, the teletext music pages on Channel 4 at that time.

My morning routine was always the same, despite the binge drinking. (Is it still binge drinking if you do it every day? I am not sure.) While eating breakfast I would turn to BBC1, where I would check page 501 for entertainment news, then 102 for the main news headlines, then 160 for local news. After reading the morning comments on page 577 I would wait to see if the presenters of Breakfast News were wearing anything revealing. Then I would turn to Channel 4 and read page 376 and its sequels for news regarding computer games (pushing on afterwards to the problem page on page 386, which always seemed to relate to a teenage girl worried about being attracted to her girlfriends, or masturbating too much, or something equally titillating), 351 and its sequels for news about music, and then once a week to 311, for movie news, although it seemed to be updated irritatingly irregularly.

On page 351 that day there was a news item about The Sound of Howard Phillips. I smiled. Apparently one of our songs, *Lost in the Maze of Lies*, was to be released as a single, with a Fatboy Slim remix replacing our nine minute original. I hoped he would keep the soca rhythms. Then I noticed at the bottom of the page a trail for an interview with the band on page 353. My heart sank. I had forgotten that I had given permission for this to happen.

I poured some extra whisky onto my Shreddies and turned to page 353. The third sub-page came up, of six. The band seemed chirpy, talking about their

favourite tracks on the album, and how pleased they were that people seemed to like it. I read the following sub-pages as they became available, my depression growing worse with each one. On the sixth page they talked about plans for a follow-up, and I began to laugh, madly, like a hyena. Where did they think I would get new ideas from? The old ones were still stuck in my head! They were planning the future of the band, but there wasn't one. They could not live up to my dreams, they never could, no one ever could. I would let the album sell – I owed them that much for a year of torture, stress and humiliation – but that was it.

Then again, if they wanted to continue without me, I would not complain, and I was sure that they would make as good a fist of exploiting my ideas as any other band would. Somehow this thought made me sadder than the thought that I had let them down. I had provided them with valuable cachet, and if they played their cards right they would be set for life, regardless of how well this particular album sold. How I hated them all.

Finally I was able to read sub-pages one and two, where they laughed and joked about how the songs on the album had been inspired by a dream the singer had.

"It doesn't matter where the ideas come from," said the writer, "when they lead to music this astonishing."

"They are missing the point," I said to myself, downing the rest of the whisky bottle, before running out into the street, screaming at the top of my lungs, and defecating in my pyjamas.

That was my lowest point.

Meditation and Self-Medication

The next four days were spent in my bed. I stopped drinking anything but water and hot tea, and began to eat more regularly, and normally, and after each meal returned to bed, to lie there, and think, and meditate. It was not the most comfortable bed in the world, but it did not need to be – it just had to be there, to hold me up while I tried to work out what I needed to do. How could I find a way out of my own head?

After four days the answer became obvious: drugs.

If I could truly leave myself behind by means of chemicals, perhaps I could escape those insistent

tunes that were driving me insane. People say that taking drugs alters your brain chemistry forever – I do not know if that is true or not – but that was precisely what I needed.

It says a lot for my state of mind that it never even occurred to me to seek help from a doctor. That would to any rational person have been the best place to go, but unfortunately rationality is often in short supply just when you need it most.

Don't worry for me, though, because it all turned out for the best, in the end.

Despite my increasing success in music, I had negligently failed to make the usual contacts with the kind of people who could help me in this hour of need. I felt confident that Quids McCall would know who to call, so I picked up the telephone and called him.

"Hi Quids, how are you?"

"Howard, is that you?" he asked. "I haven't heard from you in ages, man. The album is kicking arse and taking names. You should be here."

"Thanks, Quids," I replied. "But that isn't why I'm calling. That album is in the past for me, and I have to move on. You know that it wasn't quite the album I wanted to make, and the album I dreamt of is preying on me. I can't get past it."

"I understand. It's like our equivalent of writer's block. A lot of musicians have it – they can't follow up a classic album – they're afraid of letting down their fans, or sully the band's name, so they let the fans drift away and slowly forget them and their name. You're not the first person it has happened to."

"It's something like that," I said. "I have an idea of my own about how to get over it. What would you recommend, though, Quids? You have seen it all, I imagine."

"Hmm. You could do like that bloke Kevin Shields – after My Bloody Valentine stalled he joined Primal Scream. Maybe if you join another band, just work for somebody else – you know, work to build on their ideas rather than trying to perfect your own – it might help. Be a craftsman, do a job."

I laughed. It had been a while. "Sounds like a lot of hard work! Aren't Primal Scream and My Bloody Valentine a bit after your time, Quids? I was expecting some tales of 1970s debauchery..."

It was his turn to laugh. "I saw a parallel with my own situation. And anyway, Primal Scream kick the shit like it was meant to be kicked. They're my boys."

"Is shit meant to be kicked at all, you think?"

"Man, you gotta kick it! Or what is it there for?"

"Good question!" Quids was doing a lot to lift my

spirits. "Anyway, I was thinking more of drugs. I need to get out of my head for a bit."

"I can hook you up, if that's what you're after. Did you want some pot, coke, what?"

"I was thinking more mushrooms, LSD, something like that."

"If you think it'll help the band, I'm there, man. I'll see what I can get for you, my treat. One thing, though, Howard – remember the rest of us. We're living the life you promised us. We're selling records, appearing on TV, in the papers, the works. I even heard we might get nominated for the Mercury Music Prize. The rest of us need you, Howard, so come back soon."

"I will."

I hung up. I was lying, of course. I had already convinced myself that the band was not good enough, and if it wasn't for needing the drugs I might have gone out of my way to avoid seeing any of them ever again. Through no fault of their own, they were bitter disappointments to me, their happy, contented, fulfilled faces a blight on, an insult to, my dreams.

Luckily, Quids didn't come to drop off the LSD himself, so I didn't have to look him in the eye. He sent one of his current flock of girlfriends, a slightly rough-looking redhead with tattooed blood dripping from her wrists. She handed over the packet with a slightly awed look. She looked like there was something she wanted to say, and it would have been impolite of me to take advantage of her reticence and shut the door in her face.

"What is it?" I asked, not as politely as I had meant.

"Are you him, Howard Phillips?"

"Yes, what is it? Did you want to kiss me? The postman always does, so I'll understand if so." I was impatient to get started on losing myself.

"I didn't think you were a real person. I thought you were just an actor or something. A figurehead for the rest of the band, so no one would notice how old those guys were."

"I am perfectly real, I assure you. If you wish I can pinch your bottom to demonstrate as much." I raised an eyebrow and held out my thumb and forefinger, pushing them together suggestively.

"No offence, I would, maybe, if you had shaved or had a bath lately."

"A punctilious groupie? Whatever next?"

"But what's going to happen to them now? If you give up, what will happen to the rest of the band? You almost destroyed them making this album. Now they're actually getting something out of it, you're going to pull the rug out from under them again."

I winced, and closed my eyes. This was just the conversation I'd been dreading, just when I thought I had avoided it. I opened my eyes and looked at her again. She was waiting patiently for my answer. It seemed she really did care about Quids, or maybe she was just concerned not to lose her meal ticket.

"Look, go back and tell Quids, tell the band, that they should assume they are not going to see me again. I'm going to take these drugs, and after that I have no idea what will happen to me. Perhaps I'll end up on the streets, or in a psychiatric ward, or in jail, or maybe just a better place. They should go on in their beliefs, as I will go on in mine, as a great man once said. Tell them to start gigging. Get someone else to do the vocals. They don't really need me now. Any one of them can sing better than me. Any of them could write a decent song, building on the sound we developed."

"But why? Why don't you stay with them? The way Quids talks about you... You've changed his life, given him hope and purpose."

"That life isn't for me. Not any more. At least not until I can escape the dream of what might have been." I held up the packet containing the LSD. "And you have been very helpful in that. Goodbye."

She said goodbye, and left. I closed the door behind her, and sighed, deeply.

I decided not to take the LSD at home, since once Quids talked to his girlfriend he would come around, probably bringing the rest of the band with him. It would be best to leave as quickly as possible, and then think about what to do next. I went over to my laptop and switched it on. I looked on the internet for hotels in Birmingham, and booked and paid for a room at the Novotel online. I didn't have time to bathe or shave before going, so it was probably best to have a reservation already in place. I folded up the laptop, stuffed my wallet in my pocket, and called for a taxi.

It was there in a matter of minutes, and soon I was entering the hotel.

As I went inside a security manager began to head my way. I did not look or smell good, but I opened my wallet so that he could see the colour of my money and my cards.

"Hi, I know I stink a bit," I said. "I'm a writer, you see. I've been researching a role, but now I need to get cleaned up. I have a reservation."

"I understand, sir," he said, with a smile, waving his hand in front of his nose.

I forced out a smile, and went on my way.

The receptionist was professional and polite, despite the stench. "Do you have a reservation, sir?"

I gave her my name, and in return she gave me a

key. I went to my room as quickly as the lift could take me, and began to clean myself up. I spent at least 50 minutes in the shower, cleaning all the places that had gone unwashed in recent months, from my toenails to the backs of my ears. If I was going to die after taking some revolting drugs, out of vanity I did not want people to be unsurprised. I wanted them to find a nice young man, surprisingly having fallen victim to the temptations of the music industry. I would be a legend – a lesson. No one would suspect that I had actually gone a good part of the way to losing my mind.

I attached the laptop and looked for local men's outfitters. I could not order online, because I wanted the clothes today, but I was able to make my selection and then by telephone ask for the items to be delivered to the hotel. Reception had them sent up to my room, and within an hour I was wearing a beautifully tailored black velvet jacket, with thick black cotton trousers, and a pair of sharp black shoes. My blue socks and white boxer shorts were from Marks & Spencer of course, as was the shirt, a sturdy and reliable burgundy. The tie was an even darker shade of red, and I topped the outfit off with a small pocket watch. I was ready to travel.

I settled my hotel bill and walked to Moor Street station, stopping only to buy a bacon roll from BHS, where the bacon rolls are stolen from God's own breakfast table, and at WH Smith to buy the Guardian.

The weather was good, and it was early afternoon, so there were lots of young ladies wearing revealing tops of one kind or another, not to mention revealing bottoms – some that even, to my great pleasure, went so far as to actually reveal bottoms, or at least the underwear that covered them. I have been on this planet for at least thirty years – my memory is at times hazy – and I had thought there was little a woman could do to surprise me, yet the current fashion of allowing trousers to hang down beyond the buttocks, to reveal brightly coloured underwear of one kind or another, was more than I could have dared dream of, a delight to my ageing senses.

Perhaps I should apologise to my readers for being such a lecherous individual? I am sure it will offend both sexes equally. Women, for being told explicitly how their every movement around a man is watched, remembered, considered and relished. Men, for having disclosed to the other sex their most basic nature. If there is anything good that the more curvaceous sex can take from this disclosure, it is that men do not necessarily confuse their lust for women's bodies with their feelings regarding the

woman's intelligence, capability, and so on. I am no sexist. Women are more than breasts, bottoms, mouths, legs, and Venus. This is obvious. But the fact of the matter is that I will never have a conversation with the vast majority of women in the world. Most of them will play no direct role in my life, save for those few moments where I watch them walk down the street – the simple pleasure I get from regarding their figures. It is for this reason that I believe the ultimate achievement of television to have been the channel called Bikini Beach – an entire channel devoted to nothing but watching a succession of young women stand around talking in their bikinis. That is all men want from television, apart from teletext. Everything else is a facade.

It was because the weather was so good that I was heading to Moor Street station. I had decided to take my drugs in Stratford-upon-Avon, a mere half hour away on the train. There would be thousands of tourists there, of course, but it would not be too difficult to find a quiet spot to sit down and take my LSD.

The train ride was uneventful. I won't bore you with the details – I am sure you found my views about women much more interesting! – but soon I was standing outside the station at Stratford-upon-Avon, watching my fellow travellers as they skipped up the road towards the main part of town. They seemed so excited to be in this funny little town, dedicated to a man they could not even really be certain had lived there, beyond a possible coincidence of names. But what did that doubt matter? It was as good a place as any to think about literature, and art, and music. The sky was big, the air was clear, and there was plenty of green grass.

I followed the tourists, making our way into the town. A traditional old pub looked inviting, and I needed to eat, so I filled my belly with steak and ale pie and roast potatoes, a sensible meal for any adventurer, even one of the mind, such as I. Tea was my drink, rather than beer. I did not want to risk any unwelcome combinative effects. This was a careful experiment, an exercise in mental therapy. I was no giddy youngster out for kicks, and in any case that would have been no reason not to take precautions. If you are silly enough to go bungee jumping you should still check the straps are secure. Risk is often necessary, but there is no point in compounding danger by being unnecessarily reckless.

I wandered down to the riverside, and the wide open area of parkland around it. I found a nice tree, sat down, swallowed a tab of LSD, and began to read the paper.

Newton Braddell And His Inconclusive Researches Into the Unknown



The Hidden Game

John Greenwood
Master Reconteur

The ship drifted like a wind-tossed seed through the long night of space. It drifted through storms of radiation, asteroid fields, solar systems, entire galaxies. I saw none of them.

I had become absorbed in a game I had discovered one day by accident in a forgotten subsystem of the ship's computer. I do not know what the game should be properly called. The tiny computer file which contained the program was nameless. Although the game was easy to learn, it grew increasingly engaging and complex with each move made. I shall not attempt to describe the game in its entirety for fear of boring the reader, save to say that it involved arranging a number of two dimensional, irregular shapes in order to create a perfect circle. The shapes could be altered, broken and exchanged with those belonging to one's opponent according to a number of simple rules.

Very shortly after I had mastered the basic elements I found myself forsaking all other tasks beyond those necessary to my continued survival. Between irregular periods of sleep (which were themselves filled with feverish dreams of the game) I would spend countless hours utterly entranced in trying to outmanoeuvre the ship's computer, my opponent. I delegated all tasks as could possibly be automated to the autopilot system, in order to give my fullest attention to the game. I cannot say with confidence or even estimate how long I had been playing the game. Certainly many weeks were wasted in this futile pursuit. Months were probably

lost, even years, if that can be believed. The truth is that time seemed no longer to exist while I was playing.

I must confess that for that irrevocable period of my life, during which I applied my entire fund of mental concentration to the job of winning the game, I never gained more than the most trifling and fleeting advantage over my simulated opponent. Each time I managed, through a furious intellectual effort, to gain such an edge, it would immediately be overturned by the computer's next few moves. Far from discouraging me, these setbacks always provided me with a fresh insight into how my future strategy should proceed, and I would once again convince myself that my next play would prove decisive and unanswerable.

At some point during this cycle of self-deception and disillusionment, I was suddenly struck with a question that perplexed me greatly: who had created the game which now dominated all my waking and sleeping hours? My question remained unresolved, but in turn bred new questions. How did such a program come to be hidden away in the file system of my ship's computer? Who had put it there? I had spent so many hours focused entirely on the game that when this series of problems first broke into my consciousness, it was only with a painful effort that I was able to give them my attention. To think about any problem other than my next move within the game felt alien and unnatural, and I dismissed these troubling thoughts for as long as I was able. Eventually I could no longer ignore their unsettling implications.

How had I come across this fiendish puzzle in the first place? What had I been searching for when my task was indefinitely interrupted by my discovery of the game? I could no longer remember. What task might I have been working on that would have necessitated the search? I had no memory of any such task. What, after all, was the nature of my mission as the sole occupant of this spaceship? That too seemed beyond recollection. Here was a curious

and unwelcome conundrum! I felt certain that there was indeed a mission of great import which had been entrusted to me. I thought back to my days at the training academy, days spent in arduous study and physical training in preparation for the job which now eluded me. I pictured to myself the quiet, grey-walled briefing room, the rows of metal desks, the stern yet compassionate face of my instructor as he revealed to me the mission that I had been practising for these many months, a mission of the greatest consequence, the details of which were now utterly unknown to me. I was seized with a sense of shame and indignation. How could I have become so indolent and neglectful to forget the very reason for my journey?

I banished all thoughts of the accursed game and resolved to do everything within my power to rediscover the lost purpose I had sworn to fulfil in a sombre and touching graduation ceremony at the spaceflight training academy. There was, of course, no possibility of contacting my masters and teachers back on Earth to seek their advice. I had lost radio contact with my home planet several years ago. My first recourse was to the ship's log, in the hope that I might have left some records there regarding the nature of my mission, or failing that some incidental detail that might trigger a vital memory.

My hopes were to be dashed. The ship's log, which I had diligently updated on a daily basis until my first encounter with the game, contained many references to my mission scattered throughout its detailed and punctilious entries, but in none of them had I taken the trouble to spell out in clear terms the exact goal to which I was committed. Frequently I had alluded to my "noble mission", "the vital task which I have been entrusted with" and "that which I have vowed to carry out to the utmost of my abilities". But I had left myself no clue to the nature of that "vital task", having evidently considered it so obvious as to require no explanation.

My next line of enquiry was to examine the internal files of the ship's computer, in the expectation that some record of my mission might have been stored therein. This was a daunting prospect offering little hope of reaping quick results, but I approached the task methodically, moving files one at a time into a working directory to be examined. Somehow during one of these procedures I inadvertently deleted a large amount of operational data. It quickly became apparent that these missing files were required by the navigation system: the ship began to drift out of control, and I had no means to calculate, let alone alter, its headlong path.

Over the course of a week, during which I gazed

helplessly out of the cockpit window, a green speck in the corner of the sky grew until it had become a planet, all but filling my field of vision, its rugged ochre continents and mint green oceans rotating serenely before me. There was no question but my craft was now on a collision course with this small and uncharted body. Through misfortune and my own inept meddling with the operation of the computer I had lost any ability to control the movement of my craft. I could only watch and try to anticipate my imminent crash-landing with a measure of philosophical resignation. In this I was not entirely successful. It was not easy to reconcile myself to the prospect of an unalterable and violent conclusion to my mission, possibly to my life also. I strapped myself in and feared the worst.

The ship's tumultuous passage through the planet's atmosphere only served to confirm my misgivings. I cannot accurately relate the thoughts that passed through my mind during that hellish descent. To my vast astonishment, a few hundred metres from the planet's surface, the ship's sensors detected the proximity of the solid ground beneath us, and an emergency autopilot program, the existence of which I had never hitherto suspected, was activated. Reverse booster rockets flared, reducing our rate of descent. I was able to rise from my seat and examine the view, filled with a sense of overwhelming gratitude to the spaceship's designers whose foresight had saved my life. The Tanjong Pagar had been my home now for many years, and yet its ability to surprise me had scarcely diminished.

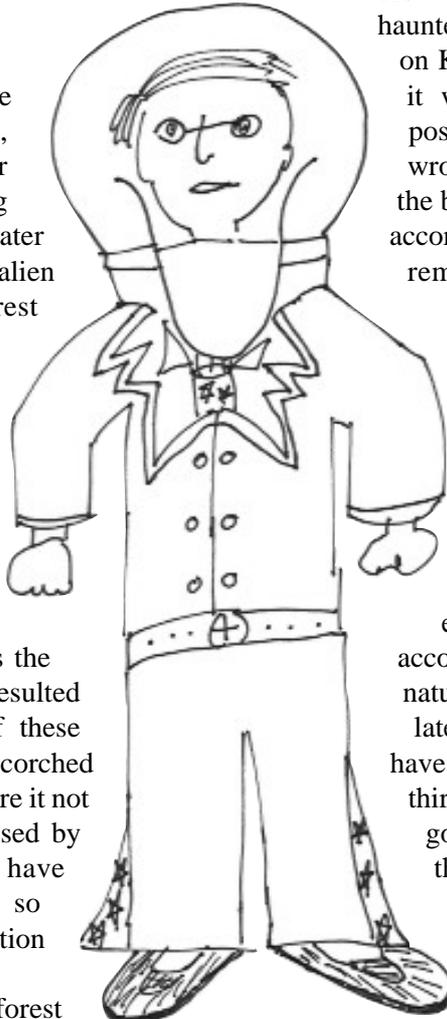
While my landing was not as catastrophic as I had feared, it was nevertheless a crash-landing, and I found myself at the bottom of a deep crater thrown up by the Tanjong Pagar. The hull seemed to have escaped any major damage, but the engine had been dealt a heavy blow, the precise extent of which I was unable to determine, as the computer system had lost any access to the power supply. In short, while the ship had not suffered irreparable damage, the repairs necessary for take-off were, it goes without saying, far beyond the scope of my knowledge or resources.

I saw no reason why I should not explore on foot the continent to which chance had brought me. Indeed it appeared to be the only course of action left open to me. A few short tests soon confirmed that the planet upon which I had alighted was enveloped in a breathable atmosphere not dissimilar to that of Earth. My instruments could not detect the presence or absence of noxious microbes, and it was with this possibility in mind that I took the precaution of wearing a device designed for just such an excursion. The helmet, a grey, metallic shell encasing my

whole head, was fitted with a long, tapering filter tube in front of the nose. This served to extract any potentially harmful organisms from the air before they had a chance to enter my lungs. The helmet was cumbersome, and certainly I appeared quite ridiculous while wearing it, but it would have been foolhardy to emerge from the Tanjong Pagar without it.

From the ship's interior I had been able to see very little of the surrounding landscape beyond the steep earthy walls of the crater. Quite by chance, my craft had struck the planet's surface at the brow of a gentle hill, affording me a generous view over the surrounding landscape. Having conquered the obstacle of the crater wall, my first impression of the alien planet was of an endless forest extending to the horizon in all directions. It was an impression that altered very little over the month on which I was to remain on the surface of this world, for as I later learned the forest dominated every square mile of solid ground on the globe. The impact of the Tanjong Pagar on the surface of Kadaloor (for thus was the planet known to its inhabitants) resulted in the incineration of dozens of these trees, and a wide circle of bare, scorched earth surrounded the crash site. Were it not for this unwitting destruction caused by my ship, then I might never have glimpsed such a majestic vista, so completely did the thick vegetation obscure my field of vision.

Immediately upon entering the forest I was impressed by a heavy gloom, a paucity of light no doubt caused by the density of foliage overhead. While I could not identify any of species of tree populating this forest, they did not strike me as fundamentally dissimilar to the varieties known to me from Earth. The same basic principles of construction had been employed: leaves, branches, trunk and roots all contrived to secure the plant a larger share of the sun's rays than its neighbour. All was reassuringly familiar and it is perhaps for this reason that I did not immediately consider the extreme improbability of my circumstances. In truth I had already been stranded upon Kadaloor for a full fortnight when realisation dawned. There was I, an accidental visitor to a planet in a solar system and galaxy many thousands of light years distant



from Earth, and chosen purely by the laws of chance. Yet this was a home to trees that to my indiscriminating eye would not have appeared out of place in the forests of Europe. The chances of such a specialised organism as the tree evolving twice were, I knew, vanishingly small. The idea was preposterous, unthinkable, but the trees stood implacably before me, ignoring the paradox of their existence

How to resolve this riddle? The question haunted me for the remainder of my stay on Kadaloor, and my attempts to answer it were far from satisfactory. Was it possible that scientific orthodoxy was wrong, that life developed, not through the blind process of natural selection, but according to a fixed template, a law that remained constant throughout the universe, like the speed of light? I

could not give the idea much credence, but the alternatives were, if anything, even less attractive. In ancient times, the belief of primitive humanity was that all forms of life were the responsibility of a creative deity who had caused the species to spring into existence already fully evolved, according to his whim. If such a supernatural being had invented trees to populate the plains of Earth, might he not have used the same trick elsewhere? My third explanation was that I had simply gone insane, which amounted to much the same thing as the second. I could not adhere to either notion without abandoning any pretence of rational thought.

My fourth attempt was, I dared say, more likely, but it rested on a number of imponderables. Perhaps, I hypothesised, I had travelled not in space, but in time, and had returned to the Earth at some moment of her prehistoric past. Had the shape of the continents of Kadaloor, when viewed from orbit, seemed familiar? I could not recall. But this line of reasoning begged the question. How could I have moved against the flow of time without realising it? In the event, none of these answers was sufficient to explain my current circumstances, for it was not long before I encountered the dominant species of Kadaloor. Thereafter my mind was occupied with other, more pressing concerns, and the question of the trees' origins and their philosophical implications were shelved indefinitely.

Valiant Razalia

Prologue

Michael Wyndham Thomas
Poet, Singer and Author

Nothing swells or drains the tides. They bubble alone. On the shoreward side, they finger their way through something that crunches like shingle but pulses and burns like the heart of a sapphire. It is shaped like so many miniature scarps and gulleys, headlands and coves. Whenever the three umber moons above are aligned, it redistributes itself. Gulleys rise and level off, headlands collapse like the last sands of an hourglass. It is as though the mineral is as prone to boredom as any kid in its first church pew. It must needs grizzle and shift about.

On the seaward side, the tides ebb only a matter of feet. Then they stop, as if hard against a thread of invisible hands. From a distance, their whitecaps look like sheep going mad to feed, scrambling and rolling on each other's backs. Beyond the tideline is what looks like cracked mud. Bone dry, it has never been so much as flecked by a whitecap. It goes a mile out, flat as a board. But its cracks are no aimless zigzags or spider-trails. Restlessness is as deep in them as in the pulsing shingle. On every night that falls exactly between the alignment of the umber moons, they flex and thrash like sporting crocodiles. This one curves about, meets itself coming the other way, closes in a blind eye's knowing wink. That one convulses through rhomboids, spheres and trapeziums. Over here, half-a-dozen shimmy across the mud like synchronised snakes. Far beyond, a pair interlock and spin, attaining the graceful weave of a Celtic knot, then a dried-up pen's raw scribble.

The flat, cracked board ends at the outwaters. These are nine oceans, shelving down and down, each with its own shape. Their edges are cliffs of water. They are separated from each other by broad highways which meld and split in a maze endlessly curving. Unlike the cracks, the shingle, they never change, whatever the three umber moons might be about. Nor do the cliffs of water slide. Movement out here is undramatic, provided by a host of roots that ring the inner edge of each cliff. Modestly they wave, like windblown hairs on a magnified arm. Sometimes they kink and flex a little, suggesting tiny men at their physical jerks, buried upside down in sand. What they are connected to, what being or plant draws its life from the cliffs of water, is undiscoverable.

The cracks between tide and outwater owe nothing to convulsion or heat. Sliceblossom made them: makes them still, occasionally, but mainly it curves to their patterns. Two-dimensional, huge of leaf, sliceblossom rises everywhere from miles below and feeds on what passes for air. All over the board, the leaves rear and shiver. Once sated, they puff and flatten, again and again, putting forth petals red as coxcombs, blue as the last of day, like a colour-bomb showering all that terracotta. Then they drop as one, and echoes pour like smoke from the cracks.

For the eye that seeks easy beauty, the shore and the outwaters are beautiful. In their own way, so are the cracks and the sliceblossom, although the sudden appearance of those leaves, dark and elephantine, can freeze the senses when first witnessed. Elsewhere, however, beauty is precarious. For Razalia, the home of these wonders, is a half-finished world and thus unique among the sixteen planets of its system. True, its landscape is not unpleasing: verdant without being chaotically lush, rolling without too many steepes and hollows. But it is plagued with gaps: not translucent, allowing sight

of what lies beyond, but pure white like a hotch-potch of abandoned canvasses. Sometimes these ambush the traveller, and many have assumed that they offer short-cuts. But to walk into a gap is to surrender all: to “make the horizon’s farewell”, the nearest Razalian gets to the word “death”. The alternative – a detour, often of leagues together – is wearisome but, after all, wise.

Theories abound about Razalia’s provisional state. The most dramatic of these is that Razalia’s maker, whatever it was, had to scale a mountain to put the last touches to a tricky pinnacle. The ascent was calm and clear, and the maker had just nipped the pinnacle’s spike into place when a welter of turbulence – gifted by one of the three umber moons when asleep – clawed it from its labours and pitched it into “forsaken midnight”, the Razalian approximation of “space”. Another is that the maker was a badly-tutored apprentice, left to its own uncertain devices, unable to contact its master. After several tours of the planet – bodging this, half-cocking that – it had made one last effort to get something wholly right. With the resolve that despair can beget, it managed the mountain with the perfect pinnacle. But then, realising how far short all else fell, it fell itself – deliberately, before rolling on over the shingle and the board of cracks and losing itself in an ocean.

A third theory has the maker on the shoreline, dragging its however many feet or hoofs on the ground, wondering if, after all, shingle amounts to the best use of pulsing gems. The gems quake; a ravine yawns between the maker’s legs; destiny posts it to the core of its own work. A fourth, affined to the second and third, insists that the inept apprentice was swallowed by a beast that still frets and lashes at the centre of Razalia. Despite its dwelling-place, this mysterious being once had something of the gregarious in its disposition. It was even intent on clambering to the surface, there to roam and befriend. But then the maker, played false by the shifting gems, had landed in an indescribable heap on the beast’s back. The beast’s alarm had turned to wrath and thence to hunger. Ingesting the maker, however, the beast also absorbed its peevishness at its pig’s-ear creation. Thus did night fall on the beast’s humour. Now, it devoted itself to roars and snarls of malcontentment – hence the ponderous echoes when the sliceblossom retreats through the cracks. In a refinement of this last detail, it is also mooted that the sliceblossom grows on the beast’s tail. Whenever the beast’s pique shifts from fit to ecstasy, it lashes its tail in a long wave that somehow rises through Razalia and buffets its crust, pouring forth the blossom.

There have been many theories prior to these. And, over time (which, in keeping with the whole planet, is a fits-and-starts proposition), these will yield to others. What unites them all, perhaps, is a sense of finish. As little tales, they have a completeness which – through ill-luck or gormlessness – Razalia’s maker hardly knew.

And, as with the planet, so with its satellites. No theories circulate about Rezalia’s three umber moons. No maker is assumed to have had a hand in their creation. They invented themselves: in defiance, it seems, of all notions of a moon as chaperone of love, horseman of tides, beacon for wartime bombers. In their very colour, they dismiss any lunar duties: duties properly, happily discharged by their fellow moons above the other fifteen planets of the system. Though strangely visible, they do not shine upon Razalia. Instead, they spend the planet’s lurching, uncertain time in spasms of tag, dance and leapfrog. Now they pile vertically like acrobats discharged from some circus ship, content to hone their skills in the amethyst blue that envelops the system, indifferent to the absence of watching eyes. Now they juggle themselves, whipping up winds about them, wordless equivalents of “eyyy-upp!” Once, one moon was reported to have landed on Razalia, spending a daylight hour in a slalom between the puffing sliceblossom, bouncing across the nine oceans like skimmed shale, before flying back to its mates and (so the story goes) jostling them like a thief of tender years, bursting from his first spree in a precinct.

Not that they leave Razalia untouched. Twice in the Razalian month, they align south-west to north-east in the amethyst blue. Bafflingly, it is a business they take seriously. Somehow, in the bulging, deflating balloon of time around the planet, the alignments have a stern regularity. Then, the shingle morphs as it pleases by the tideline. And, exactly between the alignments, the cracks beyond the tide make answer to the shingle, drawing themselves anew for the next lurching stretch of time. Intermittently, the moons line east to west for slumber. Then there arises the turbulence which might have plucked Razalia’s maker from his mountain-top. The landscape bends and fusses. The nine oceans furrow and gawp. Only the unfinished parts, the gaps of pure white, are unmoving, although it is said that, from close to, they emit a choral murmur, as if all the strayed, hapless souls within were trying to fight back through dissolution, retrieve their skin and bone and resume their long-interrupted journeys.

Though the planet knows no moonlight, it does

see the sun. Once each Razalian fortnight – anything between eleven and seventeen of their days – the skies turn from amethyst to azure. Downs and valleys soften; the shingle beats with a fiercer pulse. There is, however, no majestic rising and setting. Rather, there is a radiant nosing about, a prodding and poking. If this sun had a face, akin to the man in the moon seen from Earth, it would doubtless look with scorn upon Razalia.

The system's sun is a martinet. Its planets are spread before it in a long arc, revolving on east-west axes like beads on a curved abacus, with Razalia at the far, far end. In slow, under-and-over spirals, it warms its charges from west to east, most of the time as far as Carolles, Razalia's neighbour, then back again. It serves these fifteen planets as a source of life should, for it considers them worthy of its fire. Its dawns and dusks are scrupulous, and woe betide any part of any planet not positioned to receive them at the precise point of spin. But woe never figures. The other planets are complete and well-behaved. Their enveloping balloons of time are perfect spheres. Their minutes and hours flow like butter-milk, where Razalian time can stutter like an engine on a January morning or spring like a cat over half a day or more. But the sun realises, if somewhat reluctantly, its duty of care to the whole system. And so it is that, every twelve or fourteen or sixteen Razalian days, it heaves itself past Carolles, loops to the far end of the planetary arc, and assures itself that Razalia is not dead. Its incredulous rummage may last a whole day or an afternoon only. Then it commences its gyrations westward, and for a good hour after (or a good minute if Razalian time has leapt on: their phrase for that translates roughly as "if nightmares harry the clock"), the planet's air seems filled with the disbelieving tuts and chuckles of a celestial plumber.

The Razalians take the sun's contempt in good part. The nature of their planet has long inured them to disappointment – hope, too, but this isn't as bleak as it may sound. They know examples aplenty of what hope can lead to – most notably, in their system, the Twenty Aeons war between Barask and Sehunda, adjacent planets at the opposite end of the arc. There, the hope ignited and persisted on both sides that the other would surrender its world. So powerful did the hope grow that the actual reason for hostilities was clean forgotten by Aeon Three. It finally took the intervention of the sun – tired of seeing its spiral path littered with phosphorescent cannon-shafts and the goggling eyes of garotted helots – to lay all hope to rest. For three and thirty parts of an aeon, it looped around these two planets

alone, sending out secondary rays to warm the rest of the arc (apart from Razalia, which got a dab or two, equal to an electric fire left on for half-an-hour every other day). Closer and closer it looped, till the famed serpent's-tail rivers of Barask were boiling and the thousand-foot snow-trees of Sehunda were stripped of their magenta bark. Only then did the planets' leaders cease hostilities. The Council of Barask signalled its readiness to talk by garotting a cohort of its own helots and firing a million-eyeball salute at Sehunda's moon. Appropriately, Sehunda responded with a cascade of severed flippers. Since then, they have lived in amity – though the rivers of Barask have yet to cool and a report of a patch of magenta on a Sehunda snow-tree has proved false. Such, for the Razalians, is the price of hope. Indeed, mindful of the sun's effect at that time, they coined a new phrase for that dangerous abstraction, which roughly translates as "brass-monkey cauldron".

The Razalian attitude, midway between perkiness and despair, naturally extends to their view of themselves. Interplanetary marriage is not unknown further along the arc, but no Razalian would ever presume to secure the affection of a golden-haired nymph or hero from neighbouring Carolles. Like their planet, the Razalians are half-finished, their Maker having apparently regarded earlobes, lips and nostrils as a novice modeller might regard the fiddly turrets on HMS Victorious. Not that their heads lack features. The eyes are there nearly all the time. As for the rest, however, they only materialise when absolutely needed. A Razalian must speak – well, then, lips and teeth will bud out from their skin; another must hear – an ear will bloom like a toy cabbage, often in the right position; the first flowers of spring appear – one nostril will whorl itself into being to enjoy the smell – possibly two if the scent is heady. Occasionally, a strong smell or sheer excitement can call forth three nostrils. Involuntary though they may be, such exhibitions are regarded as vulgar, the phrase for the exhibitionist translating as "greedy trumpet".

It is assumed that the sheer doggedness of evolution was responsible for connecting the Razalians with their world by more than sight. For a race that holds few assumptions, that simple speculation is the nearest thing to a Razalian creed. But, long ago, faith of a sort did play a brief part in the planet's life. Perhaps understandably, it centred upon the notion that Razalia's maker might return and complete its work. Prophecies were legion that it would fly back through space's forsaken midnight and set to, closing the gaps of white, meshing the vegetation, causing the oceans to let fall their cliffs of water and

flow as one. For a while, however, this was challenged by the idea that Razalia's deity was the mordant sun. Once upon a time, the challenge ran, there was no Razalia at the fag-end of the planetary arc, and the sun made its lambent way over and under its "noble fifteen", as the Razalian phrase translates. But then it was detained at the other end – possibly due to another interplanetary barney between Barask and Sehunda. In its absence, Razalia's maker snuck in out of the great nowhere, tried its hand or paw at a spot of life and then met one of the fates assigned by theory. Returning, blazing disbelief at this cuckoo in the systemic nest, the sun pondered burning it to ashes. But then, in an instant, it changed its mind and declared itself god of Razalia. It was a furious god, but with all cards stacked in its favour; and it embraced the very human notion that punishment was most delicious when long spun out. If the planet had somehow half-created itself, then it must pay the price for its own presumption. If some weekend bodger was responsible, the planet must pay for what, in that hitherto perfect system, amounted to vandalism. (Indeed, there is an old Razalian saying, still used, about its fifteen neighbours and the boon they enjoy: "the sun thinks in five and five and five".) And thus began the sun's regime of scant visits and widow's mites of heat for the system's cuckoo.

But over time, these claims to faith dwindled. By all accounts, they never had a strong purchase on the Razalian mind. The "creed of the returning maker" was bound to be a casualty, since it depended on that baleful will o' the wisp, hope. Perhaps more interestingly, the "creed of the furious sun" vanished because, the Razalians concluded, it abused humility. It obliged them to abase themselves before the sun for something they didn't do – even unwittingly. (True, there were some sages of the furious sun creed who sought to offer proofs that their race had unconsciously created itself. But the Razalians have a profound sense of self, to the extent that, if they concentrate enough, they become consciously unconscious, knowing when they don't know that they are planning this or doing that. The sages had their brief season and faded with their beliefs.) If the Razalians worship anything at all, it is humility, which they tend and protect like a scrupulous gardener. Humility without just cause – the basis of the furious sun creed – is, in the Razalian phrase, "a sweating brow in a noon of icicles". In the end, that creed, too, had to snuff itself out.

As well as being the keynote of the Razalians' temper, humility could be called the architect of their physical lives. If the system's acerbic sun could

speak, it might well term this a necessity, pointing out the absence of sufficient materials to build, say, a multi-layered metropolis, all floating astroports and spiral arms, such as is found all over Carolles. There is truth in this, although Razalian ingenuity, never to be underestimated, could run to a decently-buttressed sprawl if such were desired. But the Razalians prefer to live as they act, without flourish. Even so, their small settlements, with no building higher than two storeys, would probably call forth a blush of purple in the average tourist-guide prose. Spread gently out, curved of roof and modest of frontage, they counterbalance the dips and cambers of the land as though, mushrooming by nature not labour, they have the trick of symmetry by instinct. They hug the ridges, trickle down valleys like a stream with no urge to be a river. Even Mopatakeh, the Razalian capital, shuns the pomp and multitudes implied by its position, statistically nestling instead between San Gimignano and Gretna Green. Let Carolles have its metropoli. Let Sehunda create its granite awnings, its monkey-puzzle dormitories that nearly overtop its snow-trees. In the Razalian phrase, life is lived most equably "a stoop's length from a fist of soil".

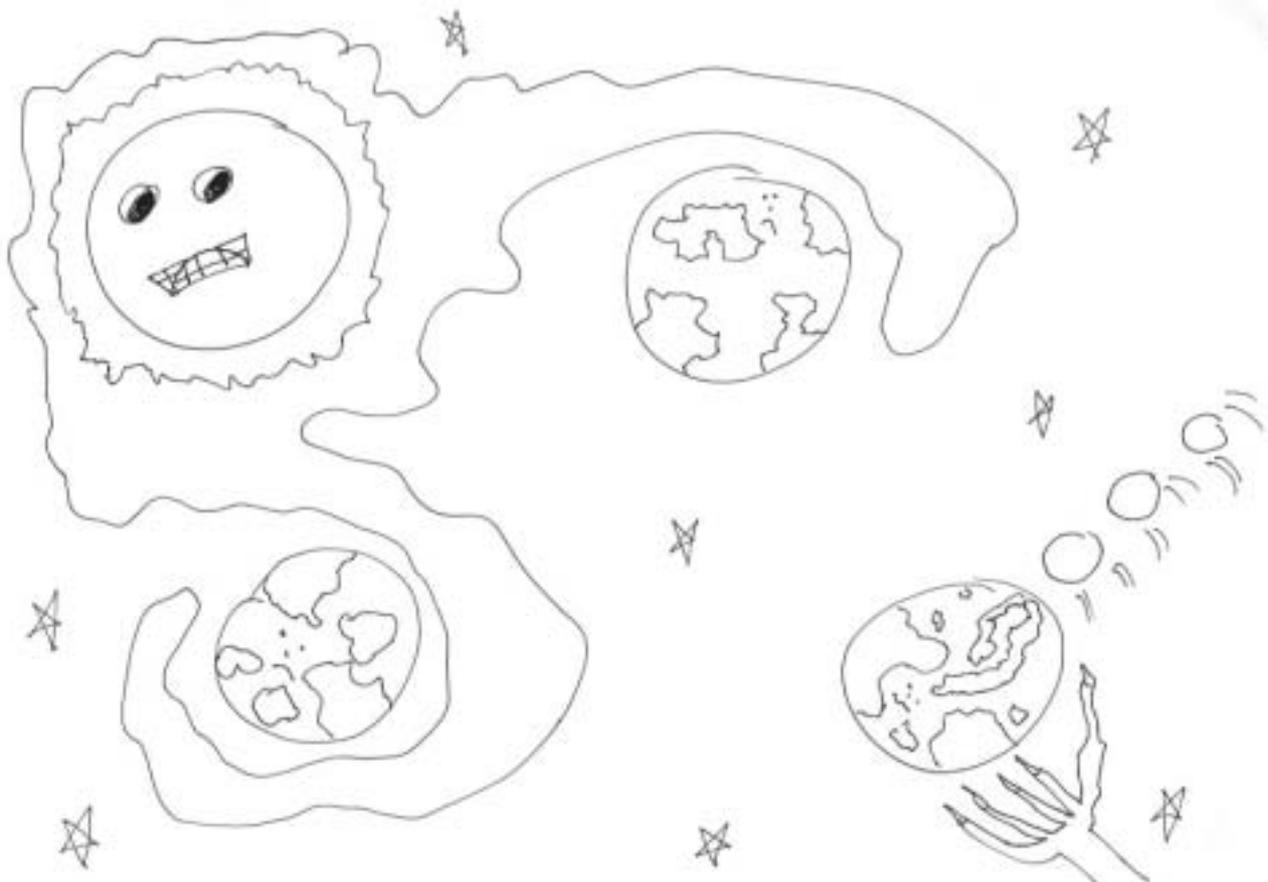
A similar simplicity, or nice distrust of management, defines the civic life of the planet. Each settlement, Mopatakeh included, has a sole leader, invariably named Tharle: a proper name, not a designation, and never prefixed by *a* or *the*. Tharles are not elected in any common way. Rather, each settlement simply knows who new Tharle should be. A telepathic *yes* shivers from mind to mind, and all is fixed. (Telepathic from birth, Razalians normally reserve the power for extreme deliberation or moments of personal risk. They see its gratuitous use as akin to the caperings of a three-nostril scent-hound, dismissing it, in their phrase, as "think-bleeding". Only Tharles employ it regularly, for it is a natural part of their office.)

Once *in situ*, Tharles benefit from their especial, communally-divined wisdom. For them, evolution gets another move on: throughout most of the year, whether dealing with official matters or delighting in quietude, they sport one or two of everything on their faces, all correctly positioned. They have the power to double their height to facilitate ease of address at communal gatherings. But perhaps most tellingly, in the Razalian view, Tharles enjoy a modification to their palate and gastric system. Thus overhauled, they can feast on sliceblossom leaves, invigorating to their bodies while poisonous to all others. It has not been established whether sliceblossom aids Tharliian deliberation, deepens the *gravitas* of

their verdicts. But, allowing themselves another assumption, Razalians conclude that it must be so. Either way, the image of Tharles “feasting on the flaps of acumen”, in the popular phrase, offers a pleasing antidote to the troublesome flora of remoter cultures: the lotos-flower, the apple of Eden. And, drawing on a folk-belief to whose truth they are cheerily indifferent, Razalians insist that this mastery of sliceblossom not only helps to define their leaders but also, somehow, allows everyone on the planet to distinguish Tharle from Tharle. That this might be a matter of telepathy is doubtless acknowledged in some way. But the “mastery” notion, aside from being more dramatic to proclaim, enriches the esteem in which Tharles are held.

Compared to the other planets in the arc – martial, sophisticated or a mixture of both – Razalia appears childlike, its customs and patterns of life barely breaking out of prehistory. Yet, in a way that possibly irks the sun, the noble fifteen regard it with a kindly curiosity, seeing it as a paradigm of how they once were themselves. No-one has ever invaded Razalia, but this is nothing to do with its lack of super-planetary light to aid descent and landing. Indeed, it receives its share of visitors from across the arc. Once every Razalian year – which, given their capricious time, is a matter of anything from

nine to fourteen months – a contingent of Baraskians, enforced by a few slack-jawed funsters from Galladeelee (“the planet of the rouge catacombs”) arrives on the planet for a special festival of their own devising. White is a colour unknown on Barask, so the gaps in the Razalian landscape hold a special, almost supernatural fascination for the Baraskians. For two Razalian weeks, under Tharliian eyes, they variously sing, carouse or simply stand before the gaps in mute worship. The Baraskians know the gaps’ awful power – only too well, now. Half an aeon ago, a dozen of them took it upon themselves to conclude one evening’s festivities, at the gap just beyond Mopatakeh, with a toneless but lusty rendition of the Baraskian anthem, whose theme, perhaps inevitably, is a celebration of the planet’s serpent-tailed rivers. Daredevilry or intoxication, or both, impelled them to stand, arms linked barber-shop style, with their backs almost grazing the gap’s surface. All was well until verse eight, when a *sotto voce* argument broke out between two singers in the middle of the line, about whether the verse’s final word was “flood” or “mud”. As the argument waxed, the disputants began tugging mightily at each other’s arms, causing a serpentine sway down the whole line. At last, seeking to free his arm, one of them lost his footing, pitched backwards and pulled the whole



chorus into the gap, in an movement like the clamping wings of a giant moth. The crowd started forward and, but for the restraining telepathy of Mopatakeh's Tharle, many more would have been lost. As it was, Tharle's mental cordon was a little too slow for one Galladeelean, who thrust his characteristically loose-hinged jaw into the gap, as a curious toddler might lean too far into a zoo's snake enclosure. The jaw disappeared on the instant; the lips of his three mouths all but fused. Ever after, he was obliged to press words out like sheets through a mangle. Worse, he was vilified as a freak on his return to Galladeelee, condemned to count the number of rouge catacombs running below its surface: a punitive task, especially given that the planet is the size of that vaguely-known system in which Earth spins. Nowadays, the Baraskians keep a respectful distance from the gaps – and any stray Galladeeleans remain at the back of the crowd, manning Barask-oak tables that groan, literally, beneath flagons of Barask's favourite tippie, a mixture of stardust, flame and serpent-river sediment.

Perhaps understandably, Razalia's most frequent, enthusiastic visitors are its immediate neighbours. Twice and often three times a month, the water-cliffs of the nine oceans suck themselves in, their edging of roots left stiff and undoused like chin-bristle. Below the cliffs, the dry highways broaden and their surfaces blur in eddies and devils of dust. Then, one by one, the septupedal craft touch down, their huge, parasol-shaped roofs suggesting a Polynesian hut recast in sterling silver. After a regulated series of whoops and beeps, their curved, slightly bellied sides slide back and a three-lane down-escalator, pure titanium, unrolls to the highway like an iguana's tongue. Once again, the people of Carolles have dropped round for a concerted gawk at the settlements, the ridges, the umber moons.

Collectively, Carolles' natives are known as the Carollessa. Those who incline to maleness are Carollo; those in whom the feminine has the upper hand are Carolla. Technically, the Carollessa comprise four sexes, but the other two were never properly named, have no connection, intimate or otherwise, with the Carollo or Carolla and are in any case all but extinct. One is shaped like a huge ear. Perpetually airborne, it glows peach and crimson by turns. The other is a head-splitting whistle. Thus do they procreate – or did. Over time, however, the whistle's targetry became inexplicably slipshod, so that it was as likely to impregnate the Carollessan atmosphere – or, on a still night, one of Razalia's umber moons – as any hovering ear. Not that the ears

made the whistles' job any easier. Whether through self-assertion or late-blooming coyness, they became less disposed to carry embryonic whistles, tooting like so many toy referees, through the crisp Carollessan air. When they sensed the approach of a lairy whistle, they were apt to fly away, far above the planet's overwrought skylines, leaving the whistle to swing between ecstasy and dismay, the result of which was that its piercing note dropped landward like the swan-song of a heartbroken kazoo. The dominant sexes have tried to preserve their ill-starred peers – even to increase their numbers. But the signs thus far do not encourage. In a special section of *Panbestiopolis*, the huge wildlife park at the centre of Yathkyeda Falls, the Carollessan capital, the ear-and-whistle enclosure routinely proves the least popular attraction. This is partly due to bafflement on the part of the park's designers, understandable enough, about suitable living conditions for flying ears and misaiming whistles. The decision to house them in a huge dome, continuously filled with the sound of the wind at all its pitches (presumably to get the ears going) is doubtless as sensible as any other. But the ears flap listlessly about or gather halfway up the walls like a flock of question-marks, occasionally opening in the whistles' direction, then huddling again in attitudes of contempt. For their part, the whistles hug the floor of the dome, exchanging boastful trills about conquests of yore and, now and then, tooting at the floor like Victorian toppers who pride themselves on missing the spittoon. In one sense, perhaps, the ears' disdain is justified: whistles are notoriously reluctant to settle down.

It is known, throughout the planetary arc, that the terms by which the Carollessa know themselves are relatively modern; and that they have some affinity with an Earth-tongue called Spanish. Were this the case with the Razalians, the air would fill, modestly, with theories ingenious and unprovable. But the Carollessa know the strength of the connection, having sound-recorded, imaged or otherwise bagged every tick of their planet's history-clock. The fruits of these everlasting labours are available to be seen, heard, sniffed and swallowed at Yathkyeda Falls' *Aeonodrome*, whose official title, in Carollessan, startlingly translates as "a full hindward romp". Here can be seen the planet's five makers, one claw apiece extended as they drop the final rock into place. Here can be seen the graphite brain, the size of a passion-fruit, whose ridges, working like pectoral fins, supplied Yathkyeda Falls with heat, light and kyeda-foam, a Carollessan delicacy, for the best part of ten aeons. And here, in grainy, sometimes blurred

images, can be seen the Carollessan craft – a primitive, tripod affair – that hovered in the high clouds above the Cadiz Peninsula in the Earth summer of 1746, badly off-course for Galladeelee but determined to salvage something from the mistake. The craft’s sides slide away. Something like the pad of a huge lint-brush emerges. The pad glows bright red, and in seconds the entirety of eighteenth-century Iberian culture is absorbed: a godsend for the Carollessa, as it turned out. Hitherto chafing under the name Carolloidods – more suited to a sub-sect of Galladeeleans, or yet the ears and whistles that pursued their haphazard congress about the skies – the Carollo and Carolla of the time were looking to buff up their self-regard as a new century approached on their planet. Beguiled by the Hispanic sounds from the disgorging culture-pad, they realised that only a little aural rummaging would yield shiny new names.

Breathtakingly beautiful, muscular or voluptuous as their majority sex dictates, the Carollo and Carolla form orderly lines to come ashore on Razalia, leaping gracefully over the protean shingle and hailing Tharle and commoner alike. It might be expected that they would behave like gentlefolk on a visit to Bedlam, apparently kindly but in fact as scornful as the sun towards the unfinished beings who walk with them inland. But a profound respect obtains between Razalian and Carollessa. They know that, beyond fleshly particulars – a proud Carollessan cleavage or a Razalian nose uncertainly anchored – they complement each other in mind and soul. The Carollessa – technological gods of the planetary arc, striding through their world of speed and light, citizens of whooshing airlocks, of nano-second transformations. The Razalians – settlement dwellers, progeny of a botch-meister, innocents in the ways of facial expression. Yet each race salutes the other, their fervour heartfelt; each cares for the other with sibling tenderness. Indeed, there is also something of the parental in Razalia’s attitude to the stunning Carollessa. When each Carollo or Carolla is born, they are seven-feet tall, about average for an adult Razalian. But, over their life-span (two hundred years, to use the terms of a crude planet), they shrink to a matter of millimetres. It is thus a mark of reverence to be all but invisible to the Carollessan eye. Unfailingly, this gradual exit from sight arouses a kind of protectiveness in the Razalian breast. Their phrase for the process translates as “slipping into atomhood”, and they take especial care if forewarned that a visiting craft contains a cohort of elders. “Let your heels be warmed with no blood”: such is the command that Tharle issue to

their people on such occasions. Razalians in each settlement are commanded to stand stock still until assured that the elders have passed by. An innocuous toe-tap could do for an epoch of Carollessan wisdom.

Not that the traffic is all one way. Often, Razalians will accompany the Carollessa on their journeys home, spending time on the spiral arms which house pioneering industries, responsible for at least one life-tweaking invention per Carollessan week; marvelling at the myriad beasts of hoof, wing and tentacle from all across the arc which inhabit the *Panbestiopolis* (and often growing a mouth to sob silently at the approaching doom of the ear and the whistle); or simply roaming the planet to drink in the fact – miraculous to them – of a landscape filled in to the last twig and puddle. But none of this excites Razalian envy. Again, their profound sense of self prevails. Wishing the Carollessa joy of their spangling world, they know that, were they to tarry long in it, a deep ache would start in their sporadically-featured heads. The Razalians are not unduly sentimental: in their book, sentiment ranks alongside humility as something whose justification must lie beyond dispute. Still, their journeys home are a matter of sweet anticipation, complete with sighs and full mouths to emit them.

It should be stressed that Razalians can make their way to Carolles under their own steam. But – in the context of its place in Earth’s technological history – “steam” both defines the nature of Razalian craft and describes the uncertainties involved. The craft would have been familiar to the Carolloidods of the Earth year 1100; but today’s Carollessa view them with a mixture of bafflement and alarm. They resemble signal-boxes from the Earth era between those two attenuated explosions, disregarded by the rest of the universe, called world wars. Wooden levers, stuck more or less securely in a series of wells, are controlled from the kind of spindly office-stools described so often by the one called Dickens. They can only be powered by a deep draught of telepathy. Tharles find this difficult but not impossible. Sometimes, they will band together in a Razalian dozen (which stabilizes at nine for most of the year) and steer their craft through the seven-Earth-month journey to Carolles, needing only a Carollessan day or so to hear again the almost inaudible mind-murmur that tells them their powers are restored. But it would need a hundred commoners to generate the same fuel for the same length of time. Even then, the strain would be notable. Indeed, they would get to know their hosts exceedingly well, since they would have to remain as guest patients in the Recuperation

Gyre of the *Subdivaletudion*, Yathkyeda Falls' outdoor hospital, for at least three Carollessan years.

So Razalia calls forth the admiration of neighbouring Carolles and the fascination of the entire arc. But there is nothing about the planet or its people that they actively desire – except one particular: something that, after all, allows the three umber moons to disport themselves in glorious redundancy and possibly excites confusion in the heart of the absentee sun. Most Razalians might be telepathically spavined by a DIY trip to Carolles. But all of them, for the whole of their lives, have what is best translated as “watching-light”. From waking to sleep, their faces have a glow somewhere between starshine and alabaster, throwing off a light which allows them to toil, to celebrate, to see their way.

It might be thought that this attribute provides explanation enough for the sun's intermittent jaunts to the end of the arc. Why should it spend itself, the argument might run, on a world of a thousand suns? For the Razalians, however, the gift of watching-light has no bearing on the matter. Even at its height, admittedly temperate, the creed of the furious sun made no reference to it. The sun does as it does, they have always reasoned. If it is confused, even annoyed, by watching-light – if, after all these aeons, it still cannot bring itself to regard Razalia as anything more than a systemic mock-up – then it must weather those feelings as best it can. Occasionally, some tender-hearted souls might feel pity for the sun, locked thus in peevishness. They might wish that the sun would regard watching-light as a sort of evolutionary homage to its own furnace-strength. But, good Razalians that they are, they do not allow the wish to shrink to a skulking guilt or the pity to bulk into self-satisfaction. In any case, such thoughts are brief, fading like the sun itself after one of its disdainful gawks at the planet.

For Razalia's fellow-planets, however, watching-light is endlessly enthralling. Though its passengers might have visited Razalia a score of times, each Carollessan craft hovers for an age above the nine oceans, so that all might look inland through the panoptical lenses on the observation deck and marvel at the small, clear lights moving purposefully

beneath the amethyst sky. Now and then, a troupe of happy-go-lucky Galladeeleans buzz over the planet and back, courtesy of an endlessly stretching catapult, the Galladeelee mode of travel. Arms and bodies arranged in a kind of sheep-shank around the frame, they whoop when they burst into Razalia's atmosphere, plunging their heads down on necks almost as elastic as their craft, yelling something that translates (very roughly) as “stars! stars! stars in the water!” – for thus do the lighted Razalians strike them. For the Baraskians, watching-light is part of the miracle of white, another reminder of the colour denied to their planet. Many a Baraskian has offered a king's ransom to a Razalian, pleading with them to return to Barask and perform the service of a night-light or a signpost for one of the planet's notorious pleasure-clubs. Politely, such offers are declined, the suggestion often made that, if white is not meant to be on Barask, then perhaps some natural ill might befall a Razalian beacon and the investment would go for nothing. With gruff good humour – the Baraskian way – the would-be investor ponders, then biffs its impressively creviced brow and usually says something which translates as “Now why didn't I see that? You must think I'm a Gallideelee plunge-head.”

But there is one element of watching-light which the whole system calls priceless. Some few have seen it – particularly Carollessan children who, disregarding parental strictures, have crept hopefully at twilight into the room of a visiting Razalian, arching their seven-foot frames over the guest as they drift sleepwards. When a Razalian falls asleep, the fading light figures the entire kaleidoscopic ballet of the system. Lines switch back and forth on their brows like the ebullient flock of asteroids that often follow in the sun's wake. Whorls mimic the graceful eddies of Barask's serpentine rivers, or the pulsing launch-pad of a Carollessan astroport. Patches of white hollow out, leaving the jagged roofs and floorways of Galladeelee's rouge catacombs; or stretch into a tower, the image of the single dwelling on Lachbourigg, in which its dozen inhabitants live. Finally, the magic resolves itself into two tiny catherine-wheels upon the eyelids, whose fade has

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been known to call forth a sob from the curious Carollessan child – and, indirectly, bounce the Razalian visitor from their bed, an infant Carollessan sob corresponding in pitch and volume to the ire of an elephant weltering in a trap. More than anything else, and whether seen or merely heard of, these delicate fireworks fix Razalia as something special in the systemic mind. While the noble fifteen see the planet as an image of their own long-finished epochs, the ritual disappearance of watching-light strikes them as doubly special: evidence, in fact, that Razalians have psychic custody of a time before time, when all the shapes of the arc – at its beginning and to come – were still brewing in its several makers' minds. Characteristically, the Razalians do not claim this as the truth, but are happy to let their fellow system-dwellers believe it. After all, such a legend plays no small part in keeping a planet uninvaded.

* * *

At the far side of Razalia's nine oceans, a Carolla who is not keeps guard on a free-floating pier. While Razalia toils or feasts, while light creeps into its faces or whirls on their drooping lids, she glides back and forth between splendid white columns, under a canopy of teal green, scanning land, ocean and beyond, a graceful hand shading her vision. "A Carolla who is not" is the Razalian phrase for this sentinel, whose arrival has long been a mystery to Tharle and commoner alike. The Carollessa describe her in equivalent terms, for no jot or squiggle in their *Aeonodrome* records any migration by a lone Carolla to their sibling world. And nothing on either planet explains the construction of the pier, which is unexceptional by, say, the standards of Sehundan engineering but, as the sun would be pleased to observe, is utterly beyond the resources of its pitiful cuckoo. Its form (which might be called neoclassical by Earth's knowing prattlers) emphatically rules out any involvement by Razalia's maker, although the potential theory – half-baked creator nerving up for one astonishing throw of its jinxed dice – is acknowledged as having some romantic appeal. The Carolla's beauty, however, is a different matter. Is she actually Razalian? the race in her charge sometimes wonder. Were we once as lithe and striking as the Carollessa? As expected, the Razalians do not see this as a chance to plume their self-regard, nor yet to sink into a doleful reverie on beauty departed. Like the benefits of sliceblossom for Tharlian contemplation, it is a notion that is entertained with warmth. But then, as the practical demands of life press in, it is laid aside – but carefully, like a modest

jewel returned to its serviceable cushion. For their part, the Carollessa are convinced that, were there any evidence for the notion, it would surely exist in their exhaustive *Aeonodrome*. But their tender regard for their neighbours seals their lips on the matter.

It is known that the Carolla who is not spends more than half of her watch at the far end of the pier, where it floats off the edge of Razalia and points like a squared, unsteady finger at the planet's amethyst sky, tracing its gradual surrender to pitch black. Her preoccupation with that end comforts the Razalians. Though not a fearful people, they are naturally aware that the arc peters out with them and that, unlike their Sehundan counterparts at the other end, they have neither the belligerence nor the firepower to see off any being or beings unknown who may come loping out of the "forsaken midnight". Arguably, this awareness has led them to give uncharacteristic rein to their fancy and speculate upon the non-Carolla's powers. They wonder if, a threat to Razalia appearing, she could summon the noble fifteen to its aid in a trice. At other times, they wonder if she could in fact repel single-handedly any marauders from out of the blackness. No-one, not even Tharle of Mopatakeh, has asked her. Indeed, no-one in living memory has spoken to her. First and last, the Razalians are phlegmatic. Like the sardonic sun, they observe, she has her reasons for being where she is, doing what she does. As for the powers she might possess, these would obviously reveal themselves if the occasion merited. And anyway, they conclude with some slight stirring of optimism, if unknown beings come marauding and she proves powerless after all, the Carollessa would not leave them in the defenceless lurch. True, it would take seven Earth months of travel for the Carollessa to prove them right, but that is not something on which the Razalians dwell. Their phrase for gratuitous worry – "grinding the beads of thought" – is properly disdainful.

The Carolla who is not scans the edge of Razalia with a special intensity. That is not to say, however, that she sees all. She does not always notice when, heaving and furrowing, the ninth ocean receives the singular gift of turbulence from the sleeping umber moons. She does not always look round when Carollessa or Baraskians come whooshing or droning in to land. Certainly, she remained stock still, back presented to Razalia, when a man stood on the highway that girds the ninth ocean, made to kick the rear bumper of his van, then stopped and gazed about like the first scrap of creation in the first dawn.

Excelsior

Steven Gilligan

A writer

“The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth, who bore, ‘mid snow and ice,
A banner with the strange device,
Excelsior!”

H W Longfellow – *Excelsior*

Prisoner

Adam slowly opened his eyes to find himself lying on a cold stone floor amid a mass of brown softwood shavings and fragrant sawdust. Faint yellow light filtered in from somewhere up above, but he did not turn over from his sidelong position to look up. He ached from being bashed around too much and his young body, not yet in its teens, was defiled with tiny scratches. He had been masked with a coarse sack over his head when they had brought him here and his wrists and ankles had been tied so that he had fallen several times. The memory made him check his wrists with his hands. They were sort and, without looking, he could feel loose, flaky skin. He flinched and shivered. His knees felt as though they were bruised and he could almost taste through the thin muscles of his arm that he had cut himself badly somewhere near his left elbow. He immediately snapped his eyes shut and concentrated on tiny

points of white lights that had appeared on the inside of his eyelids in order to distract himself from the growing pain.

Minutes passed and he opened his eyes and again and rolled over onto his back. It was his first chance to properly examine his surroundings from his prostrate position. He was in a high-walled cell, built from large grey slabs of softly carved stone. The chamber looked worn and ancient. Far above him was the ceiling, also made of grey stone but punctuated with a large square window. Thick, metal-looking bars covered the window and beyond the bars was a hint of daylight. Adam guessed that it must have been late-afternoon, or perhaps midday if it was cloudy outside. As far as he could remember it was still autumn, but before being brought here he had been incarcerated for several weeks. The light from up above was thick and orange and it cast a strange amber aura all around him.

In an effort that produced fine beads of strained sweat upon his pale forehead, he heaved himself upright and slumped down into a defeated cross-legged position on the floor. All around him, covering the hard, drab floor were piles of dark brown wood shavings and a deep mat of chestnut sawdust. It was soft to the touch and Adam scooped some up and let it fall through his fingers. It smelled of dried roses and pleasantly-roasted timber. He wondered for a moment why someone would be so thoughtful as to provide such soft bedding after such rough treatment the night before. Then he began to think that it might not have actually been last night that he was brought here, wherever *here* was. He had no *actual* memory of being brought into this stone room and assumed that he might well have fallen unconscious or been knocked out along the way

somewhere. His captors had dragged and shoved him along without care, as if he were nothing more than a ragdoll. If he had been out cold, thought Adam, then it was impossible to say how long he had been comatose for. Hours? Days, maybe. He was hungry and thirsty. He looked around the walls of the cell. *How* had he got in here? There was no door as far as he could see. The only decoration was a single iron ring which was set into the middle of one of the walls with a rusted bracket, a few hands above the floor. It was large and thick and spotted with tarnish and rust. There was no carafe of water, no bowl of food. No source of water and no scraps of food. No rats and no cockroaches.

Adam sighed nervously as the horror of his situation enveloped him like a thick, dark shroud. "Hello?" he said, quietly. And then, louder, "Hello? Is anyone there?" There was no echo and Adam wondered if the sound of his call had even penetrated the walls. He could not imagine how thick the walls were. He looked up at the opening far above him. The ceiling was so far away that he found it hard to focus on it properly from where he was sitting, but he thought that this might have been an optical illusion because the light was so gaunt. He found it hard to believe that he had been dropped in from that height, but there seemed to be no other access.

Using his hands he hauled himself up onto his feet but his knees and ankles gave way at the same time and he collapsed onto the yielding woody debris, wincing with pain. He rubbed his knees vigorously and then massaged his ankles. His muscles felt weak and emaciated, his bones brittle. He examined himself. His wrists and ankles had been rubbed raw by his bonds. He remembered being clamped in metal and also, at times, with rough, prickly twine. Tiny scabs lined each of his joints where his skin had peeled away and he felt as though he had been burned with fire. Dark purple bruises covered his knees and had spread down his shins and up his thighs like dye running from a boldly-coloured garment washed for the first time. The cold of his surrounds had caught up with him and he shivered and he held onto his own shoulders, hugging and trying to comfort himself. The worn, threadbare shirt and cut-off trousers that he wore offered no protection against the chill of the stone. His bare feet were black with dirt and Adam stopped himself brushing away the grime in case he revealed even more wounds or bruises. He shivered again and without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hello!" he shouted through his sobs. "Hello! Can anyone hear me? Can anyone hear me? Hello! Hello!

Hello? Is anyone there? Please. Please. Please!" His body sagged down and his forehead touched his thighs where he crouched. He rocked with his tears into a slow rhythm, which in his weakened state quickly swayed him into a fitful slumber.

Standing on top of a grassy hill Adam looked towards the receding horizon. Strong winds blew across the verdant meadows surrounding him, sending countless ripples through the deep, lush grass. A distant forest stared back at him and he could see the treetops shuddering with expectation.

"Yes!" he shouted at the sky. He reached up with his arms and yelled as loud as he could. "Come now!"

A thunderous crack struck all around him and he jumped at the sound and then froze with fear and anticipation. At the periphery of his vision he saw a brief flash of silver...

Adam flinched in his sleep and it woke him with a start. "A dream..." he mumbled to himself as he looked around. Confused at first, he quickly remembered where he was. The light streaming in from up above was brighter now than before. He had no idea how long he had slept. His immediate thoughts turned to his thirst. His mouth was sore and dry and his head ached fiercely. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, stretching his fingers and yawning. He rolled his tongue around his mouth, hoping to produce some saliva, but none was forthcoming. He stood up, gingerly at first but as he rose he became braver. His legs felt stronger than before and he hoped that despite any sustenance, the rest he had managed to have had helped him to heal a little. He glanced at his wrists and was pleased to see that the redness seemed to have retreated a little. This was the first time he had explored his cell in detail, and while he would probably have preferred to sit in the sawdust and soft shearings, his need to find some kind of moisture urged him on. He stumbled forward a little and placed a hand on the stone of the wall. It was cold and smooth and he stroked it with his fingers. To his disappointment, it was dry. He dragged himself past a corner and onto the next wall. This wall was the one with the rusty iron ring set into it. Adam grabbed and tugged, hoping that something might happen, but nothing did. Flakes of rust crumbled off the ring and fluttered to the floor. He let go of the ring and it clanked dully as it swung back and hit the wall. He wondered what purpose it might serve and decided that it must have been used to attach a chain to, perhaps to restrain a prisoner. He grasped it again, this time with both hands and attempted to turn it. To his utter surprise, the thick ring rotated a quarter turn with a strained groan and

as it creaked it fell away from the wall and clattered to the stone ground with a loud clang. Adam jumped back so that the ring would not smash down on his bare feet.

"Oops," he said.

He looked at the wall which had held the ring. The rusting bracket had fallen away with the ring and left a long, thin recess in the wall. There had obviously been a much deeper hole bored for the bracket than was necessary. Adam bent down and peered into the hole. Tucked away at the back was an object. Adam could not see exactly what it was and with some trepidation he reached in with one hand and touched it. It felt soft, like some sort of material and he shoved his arm in further so that he could grasp it and tug it out. In the light of the overhead sunshine, he could see it was a dirty grey sack about the size of a hedgehog. There was something inside and Adam pulled open the ragged strings around the opening and reached inside. There was a small, stubby glass bottle and rounded wooden box. Eagerly, he pulled the cork from the top of the bottle and sniffed the contents. There was no discernible smell and he jiggled it in his hand. He could feel and hear the contents sloshing inside. With care he put the bottle to his lips and took a slow sip.

"Ah!" he said. "It's water!" With disbelief he took a long swig. It tasted like the best thing he had ever tasted. Pure water, cooled to perfection by the cold stone of the wall. He swallowed almost half of it in one go and, out of breath with excitement, his hands shaking with adrenaline he replaced the cork and set the bottle down on the floor.

"Incredible," he whispered.

He sat down on the floor next to the bottle and picked up the wooden box. It was a small, oval-shaped thing and dark with a deep, rich patina. It looked very old. He shook it gently and he could hear something inside it rattling. It sounded like it had small pebbles inside, but there was not observable lid or any other way inside. He turned it around in his hands and shook it some more, then he bashed it on the floor but to no avail. Defeated, he dropped the box and picked up the dirty sack. It was just an ordinary small sack, but he turned it inside out and shook it, just in case he had missed something. Something small flew out and struck the wall with a metallic ping. Adam did not see where the mystery thing went and he crawled over to where he thought it might have landed and felt around with his hands in a sweeping pattern. After a few seconds his hands came into contact with it and he grabbed hold and brought it onto the light. He smiled as he saw it was a small silver coin. He turned it around and exam-

ined it closely. It was about the size of a large thumbnail. On one side was elaborate writing with letters that Adam did not recognise and could not read. On the other side was what seemed to be an elegant image of a bird in flight.

"Lucky," said Adam and he held the shiny coin in the palm of his hand. He wondered why someone had placed a sack in the recess behind the bracket. He wondered if it had put there by a previous occupant of the cell or perhaps by a prison guard for some reason he could not fathom. For the moment he stuffed the coin, the box and the half-full bottle back into the sack and sat with his back against the wall. He closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on the interior of his moist mouth with some satisfaction and noticed that the ache in his head had receded.

In the stillness of the cell he listened as he relaxed and his breathing slowed down as the excitement of the last few minutes' activity slid away. The sound of the pounding of his own heart in his ears decreased to nothing and he closed his eyes. He was surrounded by an exemplary silence, the likes of which he had never known before. There was a certain stillness about his surroundings that seemed to remind him of a crypt. There was an almost tangible lifelessness and it scared him.

"Where am I?" he breathed with breaking awe. "Where am I? Where in hell's name am I?" He scratched the sole of his left foot and slowly shook his head with disbelief. Adam's situation was one that he had never considered or expected before, not even in his wildest flights of fantasy. His crime, a petty one in his opinion, was nothing to deserve being imprisoned in an isolated place like this. He was convinced now that he had been abandoned here, wherever *here* was. Surely someone would have been along to bring him bread and water by now, surely he would have heard something. Anything. Even a distant, discordant rattle would have settled his mind a little. And his present predicament could not have been more outlandish. The life that he had been dragged away from so abruptly in the dead of night had been far from isolated. His parents had abandoned him when he was a baby and he had no siblings that he was aware of, but the asylum that had taken him in had been full of life. Indigo House had been the boundary of his existence for as long as he could remember. He had many adopted brothers and sisters, and his thoughts turned to them now. As his drifting reverie provided him with a brief, but welcome reprieve he pictured the dirty faces of his best friends Molli and Abel and wondered if they were concerned about him now. He

wondered if they had been told where he was or if they set out to search for him. He wondered if they were afraid. All he knew for certain was that he was *not* afraid. He knew it in his heart.

An abrupt, loud clang sounded from somewhere nearby and he instinctively jumped to his feet and looked around in a panic. The sound had been so loud that he heard the echo rattle around from every direction. He swallowed hard and stepped quickly backwards into a corner. It had sounded like the noise had come from inside the wall opposite him. He was trembling with excitement and alarm. He waited. The sound of his heartbeat threatened to deafen him and then it came again. Clang! This time it was even louder and the shock of it knocked Adam off his feet and onto his backside. The force of the noise, or rather the force of whatever had made the noise made the walls and the floor tremble. Ancient dust fell from around, shaken loose from the walls and the ceiling. Adam scrambled back onto his feet and the echoes subsided, but was thrown back to the hard stone floor once again by a third loud clang, this time so loud that it hurt his ears. Adam clasped his hands to the side of his head to block out the sound and he screwed up his eyes. He was shaking so much that it felt like he was suffering from some kind of fit. He waited as the supplementary echo dissipated. He waited for the next pulse of sound and, unsure of what was coming next, he feared for his life.

Seconds passed, then minutes. Adam slowly opened his eyes and untwisted the pained expression on his face. There was dust everywhere, tiny motes filled the air, illuminated by the light from up above. He removed his hands from his ears and strained to listen but encountered nothing but silence.

“What the hell was that?” he whispered. He watched the dust swirl around him in the calm brightness and he breathed shallow and fast.

A shadow passed by overhead, blocking the light for an instant. In a flash Adam was on his feet again and in a corner, looking up at the window in the ceiling with the thick, metal bars. He could see nothing moving but he kept his gaze steady for a moment. His hands were behind him, pressed flat against the wall. He scratched the stone with nails with tense nervousness. Then, something came into view. All he could see was a silhouette, but from what he could make out it looked like a giant round head. The head moved from side to side as if weighing up its options and then there came another loud bang and two solid, confident, metallic clanks and something grasped the iron bars covering the window. With most of the light blocked out by the mysterious physiognomy it was difficult to see what

was happening, but next he heard a painful groan like solid metal straining against hard stone. The air was thick with a smell like electricity, like a lightning storm was about to break through and strike him down. He tensed up in anticipation and the thing up above wrenched the frame of the window out, bars and all with an almighty crunch, sending a thick shower of rubble and powdery stone down into the chamber. Several pieces of stone hit Adam on the head, shoulder and arms and fell to the floor and curled himself up into a protective ball. Stones both big and small rained down on him and he fully expected to be hit by the falling iron bars encased in the once-immovable metal frame. But it did not come. Afraid and anxious that his short life was about to end, he remained as still as he could. The last piece of rubble to fall was a medium-sized chunk of masonry and it hit him squarely on the back of the neck, but he barely noticed it.

Up above, he could hear more metallic groaning and creaking and a sound like the furious hissing of pistons. Then it stopped abruptly and there was a sudden rush of air followed by the sound of something very large and substantial landing firmly on the ground in front of him with a satisfying crunch. And then there was silence again.

Visitor

It took a long time before Adam raised his head and looked up. When he finally did, he was surprised to find himself greeted by a pair of oversized, shiny, silver boots. More confused than frightened, his eyes widened and for several seconds he focused on the twin metal lumps. He could clearly see his distorted reflection in the vast, shiny toe-ends of the boots. Even if he had had apprehensions about looking further up from his ground-level viewpoint, he would have been unable to resist the pull of his curiosity. Connected to the boots were magnificent, wide shins, also made of glinting silver metal, like extraordinary armour. The bottoms of the lower parts of what Adam could only assume were legs, without looking further up just yet, were wide and flared and covered the top of the shoe completely and elaborately.

He inched his eyes further up the legs to discover more impressive-looking lustrous armour. Shins led to jointed knees, which led to bright, wide thigh plates. At this point, Adam had to sit up to get a better look, which he did cautiously. He did so

because the height of whatever it was that stood before him was inconceivable. Adam estimated that if he had been standing up, his head would barely reached the waistline of this silver something. The waistline in question was extensive and ringed with a ferocious metal belt, studded with shimmering, oval capsules. Above the waist was an abdomen which would have made even the most powerful strong man jealous. A tremendous ripple of musculature was clearly defined, but Adam could see that it apparently not made from flesh, but cast from the same silvery metal. Next came a chest, spacious and solid, and hanging on either side of this formidable torso were two arms, like battering rams. Hands, twice the size of Adam's own head, hung at the end of the arms, connected at the wrists with flexible-looking metallic joints.

Adam dreaded what was coming next, but he bravely girded himself and slowly looked up as far as he could to look at the head and face of this metal giant. He gasped. A smooth, but angular head gazed back at him with bright red eyes that bored into him like the rays of a distant supernova star from far across the galaxy. Adam flinched and looked away at once. Now, he was afraid. He waited for what seemed like forever until the beating of his heart slowed to an acceptable pace and then he looked up again. This time, he was looking more calmly. The head, or helmet, had something on the front that was definitely recognisable as a face, but it was strange and frightening. The eyes were narrow and had no pupils, they were wholly bright red lights. The head was so far away that it was almost obscured by the thin cloud of settling dust that was still present, but the brilliance of the red eyes shone through like beams of pure light. There was no nose to speak of and there were definitely no ears. The mouth was nothing more than a thin rectangular opening, spread horizontally across the lower half of the head like a letterbox. Inside the mouth-opening was darkness and shadow. The rest of the head was smooth and featureless apart from two slender, tapered fins that ran back along the top of the head from the top of each eye and disappeared around the back of the head.

Apart from the penetrating red eyes, by far the most impressive thing about this brute was its stark, absolute and untarnished silver gleam. Adam was uncertain as to whether this thing was here to butcher him or befriend him, but as it was standing there motionless, he came to the instant conclusion that if it had been able to, or even wished to, do him harm it would have almost certainly done so by now. But, still wary of the terrifying red eyes, he made

sure his next moves were calm, measured and slow. With this firmly in his mind, he carefully stood up and faced his opponent.

"Er..." he said, his voice unsteady and quivering. "Er, hello..."

A loud creaking came from the metal being and Adam recoiled, jumping back a few steps. Its huge metallic head tilted slightly to one side and the two giant hands flexed slightly.

"Hello, subject," boomed a bizarre synthetic voice, loud enough the scatter specks of dust in its sonic wave. It sounded like metal grinding against discordant metal, and it echoed as if the thing were bellowing from the bottom of a deep well.

As Adam struggled to grasp the meaning of the odd words all he could manage was, "Pardon?"

The brute's shiny head tilted itself back upright with a mechanical groan and hiss. There was a tangible, confused pause as its eyes flashed once and then it said, once again without emotion, "Hello." Which was followed shortly after by, "Subject."

Following the rattling echo there was another stretch of ghostly silence until Adam broke it with an weak, "Subject?"

"I can tell from the inflection in your voice that you are posing a question. It is my conjecture that you are unfamiliar with the term *subject*. A subject is, in this case, a person owing obedience to another. While it could conceivably be argued that *I* am *your* subject as I am here as your rescuer, I will be requiring you to follow my detailed instructions obediently so that we may be able to depart swiftly and without harm." It spoke quickly and evenly, in a monotonous, mechanical drone, but its voice was almost unbearably loud.

"You're too loud!" shouted Adam with some bravery.

"I am sorry," said the giant, quieter. "Is this better?"

"Yes," said Adam, and added, "thank you."

"Good. Then let us depart." It began to move but Adam shouted out and jumped up.

"Hold on," he said. "What do you mean, you are here as my rescuer?"

"I am here to rescue you from your situation."

"Situation?"

"Again, there is an inflection," it said, matter-of-factly. "I will clarify. By your situation, I mean your incarceration."

"Incarceration?"

"Imprisonment."

"Oh," said Adam. "I see."

The metallic giant leaned over and held out his

hand. It was clearly big enough to easily grasp Adam. "Then let us depart."

Adam looked at the huge metal hand with its machine-jointed fingers and stepped away a couple of steps. "Where have you come from? Did someone send you?"

"There will plenty of time for questions later, although I am not sure that I will be able to give you the answers you seek. For now, however, we must depart."

Adam hesitated and then reached out and grasped one of the big extended fingers. It was hard and cold. With no small effort he stepped onto the palm of the hand and the fingers tightened a little around him, forming a kind of harness. Then the hand was lifted with such speed that it took Adam's breath away. The hand and its custody stopped abruptly directly in front of the wide, silver face and Adam looked into the bright red eyes. They burned like fire.

"Wait," he said. "my name's not Subject, it's Adam."

"I see."

"What's your name?"

"My designation is Excelsior," it said.

"Designation?"

"My name is Excelsior." There was no emotion in it unchanging voice, but Adam was sure that he could detect a hint of pride.

"Excelsior, eh?" said Adam, and he smiled for the first time in days. "That's a neat name."

Excelsior tilted its head to one side as if to consider Adam's statement for a minute, then he said, flatly, "Yes, it is." And then without any warning, it dipped, swiftly bending its knees with a mechanical murmur, and then it jumped, neatly sending them both through the now ragged hole at the top of the cell. The walls blurred for Adam as the cold, stale air whipped past him. He gasped with excitement as his surroundings spun all around in a whirlwind. Before he could work out which way up he was, Excelsior landed on both feet with a loud clanging thud that made Adam's teeth rattle and his teeth snap shut.

"Hold on tightly to my hand," commanded Excelsior and he drew Adam closer to his hard, metal chest, cradling him like a baby. Adam opened his eyes a little to see where they were. It was the first time he had seen any other part of his jail environment other than the interior of his cell. He could only just cast a glimpse of the voluminous stone arcade he was in before Excelsior started to run like the wind. He managed to spot the aged grey marble walls and vaulted ceiling and the fact that the floor was littered with barred hatches like the one that had

decorated his ceiling, but that was it. He was carried by the giant robot-creature as it dashed through the arcade towards a large archway and then through a long, featureless corridor with a high ceiling. Adam tried to look around, but he was moving far too fast for that. Excelsior reached a junction where the corridor split into three and the silver robot swerved, without breaking step, and launched itself down the right-hand branch. After a minute or so they emerged into a large square chamber with several large doorways lining each of the four walls. Overhead a large glass window intersected the ceiling in the shape of a large cross. The light was hazy and the room smelled dusty and spoiled. Without hesitation, Excelsior bolted for a tall doorway on the opposite side, dipping his head and picking up gathering speed. Adam held his breath and narrowed his eyes as dust and flecks of grit peppered his face. The sound of Excelsior's pounding footfalls was deafening and the hammering, hissing and creaking of whatever mysterious internal machinery and pistons bickered in Adam's ears like a thousand angry wasps. They hurried down another corridor and then at another junction they turned left, and then right at the next one. Another huge chamber loomed and Excelsior made another decision as to which doorway to exit from.

After a while, Adam lost track of which direction they were heading in and where they had come from. Their journey seemed to last forever until, at long last, Excelsior came to a skidding halt at the end of a particularly long corridor. Adam lurched forward in the giant's grip and looked forward. There was very little natural light in the corridor and he looked forward for some clue as to why they had come to a stop. He could only assume that they had reached the prison's exit, but was confused by what he saw.

"It's just rubble," he said.

Ahead of them both was a mass of broken stone and collapsed tunnel. The walls and ceiling had caved in as if crushed by some inconceivable weight. Great shards of stone stuck out at odd angles.

"Our exit path is blocked," said Excelsior.

"Yes," said Adam. "Why?"

"I do not know the answer to your question. I do not have the facts. However, my conjecture would be that the corridor has collapsed. Perhaps a great force has been applied to it. Perhaps the structure of this corridor is unstable. These are theories only."

Adam was struggling to keep up with Excelsior's unfamiliar way of talking, but he got the core of what he was saying. "We cannot go this way?" he asked.

"That is correct."

"So..." said Adam, easing himself into a more comfortable position in the robot's grip. "We have to go another way, then."

Excelsior did not respond for a moment. Slowly it turned its focus from the collapsed tunnel to look directly at Adam. "Impossible," he said, simply.

"What?"

"That is impossible."

"What..." said Adam, with growing anxiety on his already frail voice. "What... What do you mean?"

"Before travelling through these passages to liberate, I made a detailed projection of this complex. There is only one route out from here and we are standing in front of it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am sure... Although..."

"Although what?" said Adam, slowly.

"No construct is perfect and the Excelsior model is no exception. There is a probability that I might be incorrect."

"There's a what?"

"There is a chance that there might be another exit."

"And..."

"I might be able to locate it but it could take some time."

"How *much* time?"

"It would be impractical to give you an estimate, Adam. I suggest that I find a safe place to deposit you and then I will investigate with haste."

"I..." started Adam, but his words were swept away as Excelsior quickly rotated where he stood and raced down the corridor with increased speed, back the way they had come.

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