

A Dream of Albion

A Novel

Stuart Jackson

'I see science and mysticism as two complementary manifestations of the human mind; of its rational and intuitive faculties ... Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science; but men and women [require] both ...What we need therefore, is not a synthesis but a *dynamic interplay* between mystical intuition and scientific analysis.'

Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, 1975

'I ask myself,
Where does lust come from?
I ask myself,
Why love can never touch my heart,
Like fear can?'

Matt Johnson, 1989, *Dusk*

One

Sarah

Hi, I'm Sarah. This is my story.

Woo!

I've never written a story before you know, and this one is a biggy too: semi-autobiographical you see?

Where do you start with stories? Don't say *at the beginning*. I know *that* don't I? But I don't know where the beginning for my story *is*, so what I think I'll have to do is just start it ...

Here, in my boyfriend Zoumi's room, in his parents house in Thorverton. I was lounging on his bed while Zoumi studied at his desk: all my exams were over, thankfully, but Zoumi still had S-level Maths to do. Zoumi is a bit clever you see, though I try not to remind of that too often.

The book - oh yes, the *book*. Oh the book is *very* important! - was just lying there, cover-face down on the bedside table. Being the inquisitive type, I picked it up and read the title: *The Fountains of Pleasure*. I flicked it open and read the first passage, first casually, then with growing amazement. 'Zoumi, what *is* this?' I asked laughing, looking over at him.

Zoumi turned and smiled when he saw what it was I was holding. 'Ah! I thought you'd be interested in that! That's *The Fountains of Pleasure*.'

I snorted. 'Yeah, well, I know *that* don't I? I mean what *is* it?'

Zoumi got up and came and sat beside me on the bed. 'It's like an Arab version of *The Joy of Sex*.'

'No!'

Zoumi nodded. 'Yeah, written by this like *really* old Muslim scholar, like 800 years ago. All about the copulatory arts.'

'The *what*?' I laughed and opened my eyes wide. 'The *copulatory* arts? You mean like *shagging*? Wow great, has it got anything about *masturbation* in it?' I eagerly opened the book up again and read the first passage. This is what it said:

In the name of Allah the merciful the compassionate.

Know ye, all of good faith, that Man was created to be an instrument and an example of the glory of Allah. He was made of flesh and blood and bone to remind him of his weaknesses and fallibility and of the greatness and strength of our Maker.

Allah is beautiful and Himself loves beauty. The Most Merciful gave us minds in order to praise Him and serve Him. We must praise Him in prayers and incantations, and we must serve Him through good service to our fellow men. We must also praise Him by joyously accepting and perfecting the gifts of the senses and their pleasures which He has bestowed on all of us.

Know ye, that the character of the flesh has been made by our Glorious Maker, not to be denied, but to be enjoyed to the fullest. It is hideous and blasphemous to deny and reject Allah's gifts of the flesh and the senses, and may He always be thanked for these pleasures, which are like the twinkling stars and planets that shine into and illuminate the darkness of the night of life.

Know ye all, that the supreme pleasures of the flesh and the senses are those that arise from the practice of copulation of man and woman. Copulation is the ultimate act which was designed by our Maker for the propagation of Humanity. Copulation must be considered as the most noble and beautiful and meaningful of all human acts. Our great Prophet Mohammed said: "Blessed is the passionate, responsive woman in copulation and blessed is the man who taught her, and they both shall glory in Allah's gifts".

I put the book down. 'Wow.' I was stunned. 'I didn't know Islam was like this! I thought Islamic countries hated sex? They make women wear veils and cover themselves up all the time and stuff don't they?'

Zoumi nodded. 'Yeah, they do.' He indicated the book. 'I think this is a bit heretical though. Dad told me to keep it to myself.' He shrugged. 'Fucking religion.'

'So who did you say wrote this?' I turned the book over and tried to read the long complicated name. 'Al Sayed Haroon ...'

Zoumi took over. 'Al-Sayed Haroun Ibn Hussein Al-Makhzoumi. I'm sort of named after him, you see?' He pointed to the last part of the name. 'Al-Makhzoumi, see?'

'Oh yeah!' Zoumi wasn't Zoumi's real name of course. His real name was Gopinath Makhzoumi Wickremasinghe, but all his friends called him Zoumi because *Gopinath Makhzoumi* was a bit of a mouthful. 'Where did you get it?'

Zoumi took the book out of my hands and flicked through it. 'My dad gave it to me for my thirteenth birthday. He told me to study it carefully.' Zoumi pulled a face and tried to make his voice go as low as Mr. Wickremasinghe's. 'You have hair growing around your penis and under your arms and on your upper lip now Gopinath. This means you are becoming a man. Soon you will feel your penis go thick and hard when you think about women, eh? Maybe already eh?' Zoumi laughed at the imitation and I did too.

'He's a *hoot* your dad isn't he?' I was being truthful: I really liked Zoumi's dad, who was a clever, funny philosopher who worked at the University. My Mum and Loveday knew him and his wife Jamila sort of vaguely, which was nice. Mr and Mrs Wickremasinghe were both high-caste Hindus which, as far as I understood, made them kind of like Indian aristocrats. But they didn't *act* like aristocrats.

'He's crazy more like!' Zoumi stood and took up a pose, looking haughtily down at me, like his dad did to him. He took on his dad's voice again. 'Let no one say of Ajit Vijah Wickremasinghe that he did not instruct his son in the noble copulatory arts.' Zoumi tapped the hard cover of *The Fountains of Pleasure* with a nail. 'Now Gopinath, this book will tell you everything you need to know about copulation between man and woman. You must study and learn all that it contains, for it is the pleasurable, though sometimes irksome, lot of man to love woman and to give her pleasure in copulation.'

I laughed: the thing was, Mr. Wickremasinghe actually *did* talk like that, really quickly too, using all this flowery, formal language.

Zoumi laughed too. 'No, this is the best bit. Listen!' He did his Dad's voice again. 'Ah Gopinath, the *wonders* that await you my boy! Breasts and clitorises and vulvas and defloration eh, haha!'

Zoumi laughed but I didn't: I didn't like the sound of the word defloration. I didn't really know *why* I didn't like it, I just *didn't*. 'Did you say *defloration*?' I asked.

'Yeah.' Zoumi laughed again. 'There's a little section on it.'

I grimaced. 'What, a section on how to have sex with virgins? That's *gross*.' I didn't like the idea of Zoumi reading about men having sex with virgin girls: I was one, for a start. That should matter to a man, shouldn't it?

Zoumi shrugged. 'Yeah. Well sort of. Look, I'll show you.' He sat down on the bed and flicked through the book, leafing towards the back and stopping on a particular page. 'There you go.' He handed the book over and I grudgingly read. This is what it said:

Before her defloration (fadh al bakarah) the virgin is as innocent of the true and voluptuous pleasures as a new born infant. It is the man who opens this gate for her, and hastens her into the garden of delights. The defloration is the most important and critical event in the woman's life, for it may influence her whole future response to the man both physically and spiritually. It may be that physically, some repair may be effected following damage done during the defloration act itself, and the woman may ultimately come to respond with some pleasure. But she will never forget nor forgive the man who, by his uncouth behaviour, causes her great physical pain and spiritual anguish while occupied in her defloration.

I put the book down. 'Oh, but this is really nice Zoumi! I thought it would be really macho but it's not is it? It's like you can really feel that he cares about women! Oh yes! And all this stuff about spirituality too!' I looked at Zoumi's face and saw him smiling at me.

'Read on,' he urged. I did so, and this is what it said:

It must always be remembered that the virgin (al adhra'a) may be profoundly shocked or frightened by the sight of the man's erect and swollen penis, and it behoves the civilised man not to expose it suddenly and flagrantly to her view.

I laughed and put the book down. 'Oh this is great! Now just remember Zoumi, that I might be terrified, poor little virgin that I am, so you must wear your pants OK?' I read on, and this is what it said:

Much time and patience may be needed between the first encounter with the virgin and the moment when he will introduce his penis into her. During this period, the virgin must be put completely at ease and she must be prepared with gentle and sweet words and caresses, so that her vagina will become moist and ready, instinctively, to accept the penis.

THIS ACT MUST BE ACCOMPANIED WITH THE GREATEST OF RESTRAINT.

The most natural position for defloration is where the virgin will sit on the man's lap, facing him, and thus she may be coaxed gently to spread her thighs when the time comes and to descend voluntarily on his penis.

The virgin, like all children, has been accustomed to sit from infant hood on the laps of her male elders, to be hugged and kissed, and this position will not cause her undue embarrassment or anguish, while she may come to feel panicky and may even become hysterical if the attempt is made to lay her on her back, and to pin her down and mount her.

I let the drop fall from my hands, amazed. 'God, wow. And your Dad gave you this book Zoumi? That's *amazing*.'

Zoumi nodded. 'I know it all too.'

The phrase irritated me. 'What do you mean you *know it all*?'

Zoumi shrugged. 'Well, you know. How to do it.'

This clumsy phrase annoyed me as well, I didn't know why. 'What, you know how to *deflower* girls?'

Zoumi looked uncomfortable. 'Well, yes. I think it's good.' He moved a little closer to me and took my hand. 'And I know that you're anxious about ...'

I got spiky and snatched my hand away from him. 'I am *not* anxious! And anyway, anxious about *what*?'

Zoumi squirmed again. 'You know about *what* Sarah! About losing your *virginity*! It means a lot to you, I know that, and all I'm *saying* is that, you know, because I've *read* about it and *know* about it then maybe you needn't be, you know ...'

'*What*?' I asked acidly, suddenly *really* angry.

'You know!' Zoumi tried to take my hand again, but I was having none of it. He sat back. 'It could be really *nice* for you, instead of ...'

'Instead of *what*?' I asked, laying on heavy sarcasm. I didn't know why I was asking so many questions: I was just *angry*.

Zoumi threw his hands in the air. 'I don't fucking know! It's *you* that's got the problem with it, not *me*! How bad do you think sex is going to *be*?'

I fumed. 'I don't think it's going to *bad* at all!'

'Well then, what's *stopping* you?'

'Nothing! I'm just not *ready* yet!'

'Well, *when* then? How many of your friends are still virgins Sarah, huh? Tell me that huh? *None* of them.'

I glowered and crossed my arms. 'So?'

Zoumi got up and paced about, pointing at me with his finger, which annoyed me even more too. 'I know why you're frightened. It's all because of your Mum isn't it?'

I was appalled and now I got really furious. '*What!?* No, it is *not!*'

'Just because you *Mum's* a lesbian Sarah, doesn't mean that ...'

I saw instant red and leapt to my feet. 'How *dare* you! How *dare* you talk about my Mum like that!' I stamped my foot, shouting. 'She's *my* Mum!' I grabbed up my things. 'And I don't *care* if no-one else is still a virgin either *Gopinath*, thank you very much, because *I'll* decide when the time is right and *not* anyone else, and *certainly* not you!' I ran out of his room, down the stairs and out the front door. I was just getting on my bike when Mr. Wickremasinghe arrived back from work in his car.

'Sarah, nice to see you!'

'Hello Mr. Wickremasinghe,' I managed but didn't stop to talk further, and just cycled past him. I heard Zoumi come running out of the house after me, shouting my name.

'Sarah please, come back!'

But I did not stop. *How dare he say that!* I thought. *How dare he!*



Gopinath Makhzoumi Wickremasinghe watched his girlfriend Sarah cycle away down the path, feeling like shit. He had left *The Fountains of Pleasure* lying around deliberately, of course, just so that Sarah would pick it up. She had, and all had seemed well, until he'd opened his big mouth about her Mum being a lesbian.

'Shit.'

Mr. Wickremasinghe stepped out of his car. 'Did you upset Sarah my boy?'

Zoumi scratched his head. 'I don't know dad. Yeah, I guess. Didn't mean to.'

Mr. Wickremasinghe took his son by the shoulders and walked with him towards the front door of their house. 'Gopinath my boy, it has been a constant source of amazement to me throughout my life quite the *vast* number of ways in which a man may upset a woman without meaning to. What was this one all about?'

Zoumi looked glum. 'Sex.'

Mr. Wickremasinghe nodded sagely. 'Ah. What specifically?'

Zoumi shook his head. 'Thing is dad, me and Sarah haven't ... you know.'

'What? Haven't copulated?' Mr. Wickremasinghe looked shocked. 'Good heavens boy, you've been seeing her for over a *year!* What's up with you?' He stopped suddenly. 'You're not trying to tell me that you're gay are you? Though I would of course be *immensely* understanding if you were. Shame to waste Hafeezah like that, of course but ...'

Zoumi tutted and rolled his eyes. 'Dad, I am not *gay*, alright? And it's not *me* that's got the problem, it's *Sarah*.'

‘Oh, I see.’

Zoumi shook his head glumly. ‘It’s not like she’s not *interested* in sex Dad you know? She *talks* about it with her friends all the time, and with me. But she just ... she just doesn’t seem to want to *do* it, and it’s driving me *crazy!*’

Mr. Wickremasinghe nodded again. ‘I see. And you two argued about this then did you hmm?’

‘Yeah.’ Zoumi grimaced. ‘Sort of. Well, not exactly. Look, all I said was ...’ He paused. ‘Well it’s a bit *dumb* actually.’

‘Come on boy, spit it out.’

Zoumi sighed. ‘Well, all I asked her was whether her *Mum* being a lesbian had anything to do with, you know, her not wanting sex. With a man. And she just went totally ballistic and stormed out.’

Mr. Wickremasinghe hummed. ‘Yes yes, I see. My dear Gopinath, I will tell you what you now must do. You now *must* apologise to her.’

‘Apologise to *her*? Why?’

Mr. Wickremasinghe chortled. ‘Gopinath my boy, because you’re in the *wrong*.’

‘Dad, *I’m* not in the wrong, *she’s* in the wrong. *She’s* the one with the problem.’

‘Ah, but *Sarah* thinks *you’re* in the wrong, and that is the only important thing. Women are beautiful, enchanting creatures Gopinath, but they are never *easy*. No, you must apologise to Sarah, unreservedly, for whatever slight she imagines you to have inflicted upon her.’

Zoumi tutted, reluctant but he trusted his father’s advice. ‘Yeah, OK. But what about Sarah’s problem? An apology’s not going to do anything about *that* is it? What do I do about that?’

Mr. Wickremasinghe stopped before the front door. ‘What you must *do* Gopinath, is be gentle and patient and understanding, as your namesake advises.’ Mr. Wickremasinghe appeared to consider this for a moment. ‘That is presuming, of course, that you do really want Sarah. Yes. This is what you must decide. Whether Sarah is who you should be pursuing. Otherwise you should turn your attentions elsewhere. But whatever you do ...’ Mr. Wickremasinghe smiled. ‘Don’t waste Hafeezah, eh my boy?’ Mr. Wickremasinghe clapped his son on the back and went inside, calling his wife’s name. ‘Jamila!’

Don’t waste Hafeezah? What did he mean?

Hafeezah, a prostitute, had been Mr. Wickremasinghe’s present to his son on his sixteenth birthday, and had constituted for Zoumi the chance to acquire more than just theoretical knowledge, from *The Fountains of Pleasure*, about the noble copulatory arts.

Mr. Wickremasinghe was not an entirely *conventional* parent, you see.

Hafeezah had been beautiful and dark skinned, more fragrant than an orchid, with long, silky hair and beautiful, laughing eyes. After his father had left him alone with her, Zoumi had been terrified: Hafeezah was a *woman*, she bulged in all the right places and she wore lipstick and perfume, and Zoumi and his penis did not yet know how to behave in the company of women.

But Hafeezah had been slow and patient with him, just like Al-Sayed Haroun Ibn Hussein Al-Makhzoumi had said that the man must be with the

woman: Zoumi had only appreciated this reversal of roles later. Hafeezah had talked to Zoumi and soothed him, allowed him to smell her and taste her and suck on her generous breasts. And then when he was excited and Hafeezah judged the moment appropriate, she had put him on a stool and sat in his lap, playing the virgin for him, just like in *The Fountains of Pleasure*, allowing his penis the first taste of the fabulously forbidden fruit.

Zoumi had lasted about three seconds before both his heads exploded.

The first time that is.

'Well? Highly instructive eh my boy?' Mr. Wickremasinghe said afterwards, walking his dazed son back to the car. 'Breasts and clitorises and vulvas eh? Haha!'



I got back to Exeter half an hour after leaving Zoumi in Thorverton. I turned into Patricia Close, parked my bike outside our house and ran inside, down the stairs into the kitchen, told Mum and Loveday what had happened, and then burst into tears.

Mum gave me a hug. 'Oh, you poor thing! I'm *sure* that Zoumi didn't *mean* to upset you darling.'

'Ughoohoo! Hugh hugh, I know but he still *did* Mum and I *hate* him because hugh hugh ummghbooo!' I felt Mum's jumper get wet under my cheek. 'Hugh huh, he said that because you and Loveday are *lesbians* then I was one *too* and that's why I wouldn't have sex with him, *ahahughuchwoohoo!*'

Loveday turned from chopping asparagus for the Wednesday night quiche. 'Yeah, well that's just fucking *bollocks* Sarah, isn't it?'

Mum stroked my hair and made shushing noises. 'Sarah darling, your sexuality has got *nothing* to do with me and Loveday darling, *really*. You're your *own* person, you know that don't you? Always have been too. Ever since you were a little baby.'

I pulled myself away from Mum's shoulder and wiped my eyes. 'Hugh jugh, just because I want some *time* Mum, that's all. That's not unreasonable is it? I mean, he should *like* it that I won't have sex with just *anyone* shouldn't he? But he *doesn't* and I *hate* him and ugh hugh *wahhahaha!*'

I didn't hate Zoumi at all, of course: I loved him. He was not big and strong, but then I didn't go for that anyway. I liked funny and clever, which Zoumi was, and gentle too, with lovely black hair. So, no, I didn't hate Zoumi. But sometimes - well, quite a lot actually - my feelings got the better of me and I ended up saying things that I didn't mean and that I regretted later, like when I got angry with Zoumi in his room. I shouldn't have shouted really. I knew that Zoumi was being kind and patient and lovely, and I really *did* want to have sex with him. I had learned all about masturbation from Mum and Loveday, and had been happily pleasing myself since I was 14, so it wasn't anything to do with being frigid or frightened of orgasm or anything. But sex, full blown, on my back,

exposed ... I just *couldn't*. I wasn't *ready*. Don't get me wrong, I knew I wasn't a lesbian, like Mum and Loveday. I knew that I fancied boys, not other girls. It was just that ... I didn't know what I was waiting for - a birthday, a situation, the right moment. All I knew was that I was *waiting*. I think that I just wanted everything to happen *naturally*, so that I wouldn't be anxious or worried, so I wouldn't be worrying about spots or my small boobs or my big feet or (nightmare) getting pregnant.

So when Zoumi phoned me later that evening and apologised for upsetting me, I went all gooey and told him that I loved him and spent an hour talking to him and being really nice and laughy, and he told me that he loved me *again* and said that he was so sorry for upsetting me *again*, and that he would wait for me as long as it took, and then I cried *again* because I was so happy.

When I went to bed that night I had a lovely dream, where I was naked and riding a beautiful brown pony (who was somehow *Zoumi* too, though I don't know how) across grassy meadows with the hot sun on my bare skin, bouncing up and down in the saddle, feeling all really nice and warm with the wind in my hair, and I think we all know where *that* dream was heading.



Zoumi found his mother sitting on the sofa in the lounge, reading the Sunday papers. 'Mum, what do you know about the Bombing?'

Mrs. Jamila Wickremasinghe peered at her son over the top of her *Observer*. 'Lots.' She did too: she was a lecturer in History. 'What do you want to know?'

Zoumi flopped into a nearby armchair. 'Well, who *did* it for a start?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe shrugged and let her paper fall to her knees. She spoke quickly and delicately, as she always did. 'No one really knows for sure Gopinath. No agency ever claimed responsibility. Well, not reliably anyway.'

'So who do *you* think did it?' Zoumi asked.

Mrs. Wickremasinghe folded her paper and set it aside. 'I don't know Gopinath, I really don't. I have yet to be convinced by any of the theories. Perhaps the Irish Republican Army as was, or perhaps the Central Intelligence Agency. Maybe any one of a host of Islamic Jihad organisations, or maybe even forces within the British Establishment itself. The evidence against none of these is unequivocal however, nor unopen to different interpretation.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe paused briefly, contemplating her double negatives and frowned very slightly.

Zoumi hummed. 'Must have been a *huge* bomb, mustn't it, to have killed all those people? Did you see it?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe shook her head, her animated face becoming more sombre. 'No, but I heard the explosion. I was an undergraduate at Imperial at the time. I was in a lecture on Economics as I remember. Everyone there heard a ... ' Mrs. Wickremasinghe paused, searching her memory. 'A *boom*. A huge, muffled *thump*. All the windows in the lecture theatre shook and some even

broke, and we heard breaking glass in the distance too, elsewhere. Then silence and later, sirens. We didn't know what had happened until later.'

Zoumi knew a little about his country's history of course, having studied it in school, but nothing like in the detail that his mother knew it. He found it *fascinating*. 'And so it was the *Bombing* that started the Cardigan Rebellion then?' he asked.

Mrs. Wickremasinghe shook her head. 'Not *directly* Gopi, you are confusing *causes*.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe clasped her long, brown fingers on her lap, and took a deep breath : this generally signalled the beginning of a mini history lesson, and so it proved. 'The destruction of the old Houses of Parliament 20 years ago is *the* defining moment in modern political history. It was *totally* unprecedented, and the cause of the *greatest* single loss of life in peace-time British history. Over fifteen *thousand* poor people died when that bomb went off above the Palaces of Westminster Gopinath, including all the MPs in the House of Commons at the time. *Fifteen thousand!*'

Zoumi frowned. 'What are MPs again? Ministers of ...?'

'*Members*, Gopi. *Members* of Parliament. Like Albion's Representatives today.'

'OK.'

'OK. Now, that event, the 04 bombing, absolutely *ripped* the country apart as it was then, do you see?' Mrs. Wickremasinghe did not just talk with her voice : she used her hands and her body and her face to great effect when she spoke also, waving her hands around, shifting her position and pulling faces expressing delight and astonishment and severity. 'There was simply no *government* anymore you see? *Unprecedented!* Well, apart from the Scottish Assembly, and I'll come back to that. But in *England*, people did what people do when there is suddenly no government : they variously argued and fought and rioted and looted and some held parties.'

'So the Bombing *was* the direct cause of the Rebellion then!' said Zoumi. 'All these people rioting and stuff, that was caused *directly* by the Bombing wasn't it?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe tutted. 'Yes Gopinath, people *did* riot as a result of the Bombing, but these riots were not the Cardigan Rebellion *itself*. They were only its *preamble*. The Rebellion came later, in 05. Actually, it's badly named, because it was more accurately an attempted *coup* by forces within the British Establishment *itself*, against the Local Interim EU Government, rather than a genuine *people's* rebellion.'

Zoumi frowned. 'Who were the British Establishment? Were they like a terrorist group or something?'

'No!' Mrs. Wickremasinghe gave a little chuckle. 'No no, the *Establishment* Gopinath, is a collective term that political analysts and historians use to refer to the people In Charge of Things, whether publicly or privately. For example, the public Establishment today is composed of Representatives and Commissioners, whereas in pre-Bombing Britain, the public Establishment were the party politicians, MPs, Ministers and so on. But unlike Albion now, in Britain 20 years ago there was a huge number of *private* Establishment figures who were equally, if not more, In Charge of Things. Think of it like an ice-berg : you

only ever saw the small public *tip*, but there was a much bigger, private *mass* hiding underneath. And the private British Establishment were In Charge of Things because they controlled either a lots of money, in the City or in big corporate business or in the media, or because they controlled lots of guns, as in the Military.'

Zoumi frowned. 'Does Albion have a private Establishment today?'

'Oh yes. There are still banks and businesses and VIPs. Our government is much more transparent now than it used to be, and so some of the worst abuses of power cannot occur. But yes, there are still rich people In Charge, running things simply because they *are* rich.'

Zoumi shook his head. 'But these rich, private Establishment people aren't *elected* by anyone are they? Like in Britain for instance before the Bombing, how could private Establishment be in charge when no-one had voted for them and no-one wanted them to be in charge?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe smiled at her son's naiveté. 'Well, there *were* people who wanted them in charge you see Gopinath, specifically, *other* members of the British Establishment.'

'But ... ' Zoumi struggled to understand. 'But that's *bad* isn't it? I mean, it's *undemocratic*. And anti-constitutional too.'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe nodded and brushed her lap, smoothing away a crease in her vivid sunset-orange sari. 'Yes, Gopinath. It is. But you must remember that Albion was a *very* different place then. I mean, there was no Albion as such at all, there was only Britain, and the political system of that state at that time was malfunctioning badly.'

'How?'

'Oh, in many ways. The country was polarised, divided against itself, fundamentally unhappy. Institutional corruption in public life was wide-spread and accepted. There wasn't even a written constitution, so no one had any guaranteed rights as a citizen. In fact, there was no notion of *citizenship* at all, as such, because Britons were *subjects* of the Crown, serfs effectively in a semi-feudal state. Mix all that up with some *dreadfully* crude economic philosophy and you have a *sorry* excuse for a democracy indeed.'

Zoumi grimaced. 'Sounds very ... *primitive*.'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe nodded. 'Good description. Indeed, a *societal* primitivism Gopinath, exemplified by the response to the bombing from the Establishment, which was to put the Army on the streets and declare martial law.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe paused and blinked, shaking her head. 'I tell you my son, the sight of soldiers with loaded guns on my country's streets is something that I shall *never* forget. Terrible Gopinath, just *terrible*.'

'What happened then?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe grew more sombre. 'The soldiers did what soldiers do, and Bloody Sunday happened all over again.' She shook her head sadly.

'Bloody Sunday?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe explained about Bloody Sunday. 'Only this time it happened in Manchester and London and Newcastle, in mainland *Britain*, not Ireland. *Hundreds* of people were shot "for their own protection" Gopinath.'

Because that's what the Military said it was there for, you see?' Mrs. Wickremasinghe snorted indignantly. 'To *protect* the people.'

Zoumi was appalled. 'But that's murder!'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe nodded. 'Yes, it was. And in another age perhaps the Military might have got away with it. But not in an age of instantaneous media communications.'

'How's that?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe again brushed at a crease in her sari with a delicate hand before replying. 'The eyes of the *world* had fallen upon us Gopinath, you see? The *whole world!* I have never *seen* so many television cameras and journalists and reporters as I did during that time in London and elsewhere! And *all* of them, *all* of the *world*, were watching and waiting to see how the oldest democracy on the planet, the Mother of Parliaments, would react to the loss of one *entire arm* of its government.'

Zoumi shook his head. 'And we reacted by declaring martial law and killing people?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe nodded her head vigorously. 'Precisely Gopinath, precisely, that is what we did. Or rather, what the *Establishment*, via its members in the Military, did anyway.'

Zoumi shook his head again. 'That's terrible.'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe agreed. 'And what makes it *worse* is that it wasn't just the *young* and the subversive, the *looters* and *agitators* who were shot by the Army after the Bombing you see Gopinath? *Everyone* was on the streets - teachers, parents, bankers, lawyers, builders, waiters, just *everyone* - and when *these* kind of people started to get shot, the tide of world opinion swung against the Military in a big way. And the final straw, as far as the Military were concerned, was the Edinburgh Incident, where a whole live CNN camera crew were gunned down whilst filming a demonstration against the imposition of martial law.'

Zoumi grimaced. 'What, really? So the British soldiers actually *shot* people who were *filming* them at the time?'

'Yes, and everyone in the world saw it *live* on their television screens, as it happened. Now, civilised countries simply *don't* go around *murdering* their own people. They just *don't do it*. And Britain, of course, was the quintessentially civilised society, or liked to think it was. The Military *knew* that the country would become an international pariah if it carried on killing its citizens like some third-rate African dictatorship.'

Zoumi nodded. 'So this camera crew getting shot was a really big turning point then?'

'Oh yes, and in two ways. Because of the bad publicity obviously, but more importantly, because it triggered the intervention of the Scottish Assembly.'

'The Scottish Assembly? How were they involved?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe used her hands to frame an imaginary scenario. 'Well, just *imagine* Gopinath : after the Bombing, the Scottish Assembly was the only *democratically-elected* political body with a mandate to govern, left in the country.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe raised a finger. 'Because, remember, the Army

appeared on the streets after the Bombing without any *executive* order, that is, with no-one in political command actually *ordering* them there.'

Zoumi nodded. 'Because all of the Government were dead, right?'

'Right. Now, when troops appeared on the streets of Glasgow and Edinburgh and other Scottish cities, the Scottish Assembly initially did not object : there were legitimate public order reasons for their presence, after all. But the Edinburgh Incident changed all that, and on June 11, the Scottish Assembly announced to the world's assembled media that it was ceding from the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and declaring its own independence within the EU.'

Zoumi was fascinated. 'Wow. It must have been a really exciting time. What happened *then?* '

Mrs. Wickremasinghe laughed. 'Well, *that* announcement led *directly* to the intervention of the European Union, and the establishment of the Local Interim EU Government, which in turn led to Britain's transition into federal Albion.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe leaned forward a little, using her hands expansively. 'There was a *completely* unique conjunction of circumstances in 2004, you see Gopinath? In any other time, this would have been *impossible*. The three wings of the British Establishment - the political, the financial and the military wings - would have acted collectively and quickly to stop any disassembly of the Union.'

'But *after* the Bombing, the political wing had been *amputated*. The Military were under the spotlight of the world media and couldn't act without political direction. That left the financial wing of the Establishment, which could still have acted to prevent the break-up, but didn't : no profit in revolution, you see? And anyway, the City and its markets were still collectively trying to cope with the Artificial Lifeforms that were wreaking havoc inside the financial Intranets at the time. So the age old British Establishment was rendered effectively impotent, helpless to influence events.'

Zoumi shook his head. 'Wow. Amazing.'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe smiled. 'And what events they *were* Gopinath! After six months of Local Interim EU Government, the people of Britain were presented with the opportunity for a *velvet* Revolution, like that in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, to establish a new, truly *democratic* federation of autonomous regions, sharing a common written Constitution. The rest you know, and here we are today.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe sat back and folded her hands.

Zoumi nodded slowly, digesting it all. 'So when did the *Cardigan Rebellion* happen, then? *After* Scotland declared independence?'

'Yes. When certain powerful private Establishment figures - who, no one really knows, but it certainly involved high ranking Military officials - realised that the people of Great Britain were likely to opt for a republic of autonomous regions within the EU, they decided they didn't like it, and tried to take back control, causing the Rebellion itself.'

Zoumi nodded. 'Right. So it was the *Establishment* that tried to rebel against the Local Interim EU Government? But it didn't last very long did it? The Rebellion I mean?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe smiled. 'No, it didn't, thankfully.' Then she frowned. 'But not before lots more people were needlessly and brutally shot.' Mrs. Wickremasinghe bristled with the memory, shaking her head. 'I seem to remember Sarah's mother Helen telling me that her partner Loveday was shot during this period, during the Cardigan Rebellion. '

Zoumi didn't know this. 'Wow, she was really *shot*? ' He would have to ask Sarah about that. 'Why do they call it the Cardigan Rebellion?'

Mrs. Wickremasinghe smoothed out another crease in her bright orange sari. 'Well Gopinath, think : what do you most associate with cardigans?'

Zoumi thought about it, then : 'Old men,' he said.

Mrs. Wickremasinghe nodded. 'There you are then.'

Apples and Hearts

The old man awoke at 6.30 a.m. to the sound of Radio 4. He lay motionless for an hour, then drew back the covers of his narrow bed with a tired arm, and slowly sat up, oblivious to the sagging whiteness of his body. He stood, shuffled into the bathroom, urinated and washed his face, avoiding his eyes in the mirror. He dressed, went into the kitchen and mechanically prepared food : toast, coffee. He sat at the table, bit into the toast without tasting the jam and chewed, deriving no pleasure from the eating experience. A second radio was on : white news noise. He swallowed and took a sip of the coffee, mostly unaware of either the flavour or the temperature.

The old man wasn't really old, not chronologically at least: he had been born in 1968, which made him 53 years old. Yet he seemed old, prematurely so, slow and brittle in his thoughts and limbs. Life had played a part in this of course, but he was its agent. In pursuit of final dissolution, he seemed to have actively willed senescence upon himself, as if eager to hasten his release from life.

The old man heard the letterbox go at 8.15. He levered himself slowly to his feet and shuffled to the door, bending, toiling downwards to reach the small stack of mail. He grabbed it on the second attempt and stood upright, wheezing. He leafed through it. Junk. Bank statement. Bill. Junk.

The old man stopped on the fifth letter. He looked at it, recognising it by the handwriting, by the size and colour, by the Exeter postal stamp. With recognition came involuntary memory, and with memory came his old companion shame, clutching at him, choking him, as it did every time such a letter arrived : he knew he would dream tonight.

The old man held in the letter in his hands, staring at it sightlessly for many minutes. Then he grimaced, turned and shuffled into his study, where he opened a wooden box, perhaps 40 centimetres long and 20 centimetres wide. He placed the unopened letter inside, along with the many others that it contained, all similarly unopened.

Then the old man closed the box and shuffled away.



You sat during the day staring into space, drinking strong, cold cider and contemplating what you were going to do that night, turning the wisdom of the decision around in your mind like a piece of sculpture, looking for flaws or careless rendering. Now, after re-affirming your decision once more, you are

excited, increasingly aware of the odd tightening, crinkling sensations in your eyes brought on by the amphetamine sulphate you smeared over your gums half an hour ago.

When, ahead of you on the loose gravel path, Jim stops and pulls open the old, heavy stable-door to the Cottage, spilling warm air and ruddy illumination into the dark night, it is as if you can see with binocular eyes. The single room is large, ten metres long by five metres wide, mostly rectangular, making up the entire bottom story. It is presently dark, lit only with candles, fragrant with the smoke from expensive Dutch Skunkweed and rich Indian incense, the latter burning in a phalanx of ornate holders on a shelf above the cold fire-place in the far left corner of the room.

You pause in the doorway, holding the stable-door open in your right hand, feeling the intricacies of its wooden texture keenly, and sweep your eyes around. In front and to the left of you is a straight, wooden staircase leading upwards into shadow. To your right is a small open-plan kitchen, perhaps three metres square and walled off at waist height by an L-shaped work surface, saucepans and utensils hanging ambiguously on hooks in the gloom. Ahead of you, in the far left corner of the room, the large, cold fireplace is stacked with neatly chopped wood. To the right of the fireplace is a fabric-covered sofa, with three enormous cushions in front of it. Over on the right-hand side of the room, its long edge butting up against the half-wall delineating the kitchen, is a wooden table, antique pine, with three chairs.

The room has four other occupants, all familiar to you to some degree. You know Lars and Ceri best, especially Ceri. They occupy the large, lumpy sofa. Nick is sitting at the old table, rolling a long spliff with some of the Skunkweed. And Jan, Ceri's sister, has the big cushion in front of the sofa. There is music playing and after a second you place it. *Ambient Auras*, side two, track three : *Neuro Project* by Lovechile.

Ahead of you and thus into the room first, Jim greets all four people individually and effusively, kissing first Jan then Ceri enthusiastically on the mouth, hand slapping Lars, turning the contact into a long, involved hand-shake, like an African American, and then turning and bending from the waist to hug Nick around the middle, the two friends falling instantly into private conversation, with Jim's left arm draped nonchalantly over Nick's shoulders.

You are less effusive.

That is your nature. You do not kiss or hug or display physical affection. Instead, you smile and murmur your first hello, breathing in the heavy, greenspicy air. Nick raises his head, smiles, pursing his lips in the odd fashion he has, looks down, returning his attention to his spliff and his friends whispered imprecations, Jim's free right hand mobile and gesticulating above the table.

'You made it!'

You know this voice well.

Ceri.

You watch as she leaps up from the sofa and comes toward you, her long legs accentuated by a clinging skirt, and smile as she reaches for you. She is smiling too, the pupils of her eyes a little dilated, her face flushed. She insinuates herself into your personal space, reaching her hands behind your

neck. Her smell, as always, intrigues and excites you : a musk, very potent, very distinctive, and almost pheromonal in its subtlety and effect. She kisses you lightly on the lips, her breath smelling faintly of semen, her mouth soft and wet.

You remember the last time she kissed you, your penis was inside her.

'My friend. You are well?'

You hear Lars' greeting, as Ceri drops her arms languorously from around your neck and steps to the side, her right hand brushing down your chest to take hold of your left hand, and then letting that go too. Lars is sitting on the sofa, dressed in voluminous pale trousers and shirt.

'Lars,' you say, taking a step and reaching to shake the proffered hand, noting his dilated pupils and the half-closed lids of the eyes. 'Fine, thanks. You?'

Lars puts a finger just below his right eye, pulling the lower lid down, revealing an expanse of red-stained white. 'Look into my eye.' The pupils of Lars' eyes are grossly dilated, with very little iris left showing at all. You are momentarily alarmed and drop his hand, stepping back a pace. *Had he changed his mind?* You search his face : it is slack, sheened with perspiration. Before you think to frame an appropriate response, Ceri pulls away from you, returns to Lars on the sofa, puts her hands on Lars' chest and inclines her face up at him. Lars stares at you for a moment, his eyes cold and unnaturally black, unreadable, before he breaks the contact and smiles. Then he bends his head, kissing Ceri roughly on the mouth.

You stand, feeling uncomfortable, and watch Ceri return the kiss, rubbing herself against Lars and passing her hands over his chest. She breaks the kiss, turns and glances at you, past you, to the person who is just closing the stable-door of the cottage.

James the Drugs.

'James!'

'Yo, pepp-pull!'

You take the opportunity to sit down, taking the seat at the end of the table, opposite Nick and Jim. Nick looks up, smiles, puts the wrong end of the spliff into his mouth, bites off the paper twizzle, and offers you the joint across the table.

'Thanks Nick,' you say, your fingers feeling the smooth, even roll of the joint.

Nick purses his lips in his odd fashion. 'My pleasure,' he says, smiling still. 'Hope James is well sorted, cos that's the last of the Skunk man.'

Jim is appalled. 'No way!' he exclaims. 'That was a fucking *quarter* this afternoon, what the fuck have you been doing with it? Hey James!' Jim straightens, raising his voice. 'What you got for us man?'

James the Drugs is just that, you know, although you have only met him twice : he is the Drugs man, a walking dispensary of variously illegal substances. Class As are his thing. Recreational pharmaceuticals? He's got them by the bucket load. This fact is confirmed when he announces from the centre of the room, his hands held out at shoulder height either side of him : 'Fucking *well* wild place man, fucking *serious* place for Acid and music and abuse!'

James the Drugs starts to reel off what he has for you all that evening, prompted by Jim's question : tetrahydrocannabinol of course, in no less than six different varieties of resin and leaf forms - the best of which is the Skunkweed - as well as some thick, dark-red opium resin. James the Drugs has MDMA, of course, the pure thing or cut with salt (for dancing use) or non-hallucinogenic amphetamine. He has Acid too, lysergic acid diethylamide, in numerous different designs and dosages. He has some engineered Ketamine from Berlin; he has cocaine, white and powdered, and brown and crackable; he has psilocybin in two dried forms, either whole or powdered; he has mescaline and beta-carboline analogs, and something new from the illicit pharmaceutical factories of Manchester, called Heaven (similar to MDMA, a serotonin re-uptake inhibitor, James the Drugs explains and you believe him : he has a PhD in organic chemistry). Finally, if a little prosaically, James the Drugs has Paracetamol and Nurofen.

'For the hangover, man!'

You know what you are going to have. You have placed your order already. Like picking and mixing cheap toffees, you have selected an MDMA cocktail : amphetamine, followed by Ecstasy and rounded off with a small, measured dose of Acid.

You know why you are here, and what it is you want to achieve. You have caught a glimpse of it already, on that unforgettable, incredible evening with Ceri, when Rationalism and Intuitionism seemed to merge and blend within you, when the Scientist seemed to exist in harmonious, dynamic balance with the Mystic.

Archaic Man.

The prospect thrills and terrifies you. You have seen just a fraction of the knowledge that is potentially available, waiting for you. It excites you, it makes you want to reach out and claim it for yourself, invites you to try and become something other and greater than you are.

Archaic Man.

The night is just beginning. You light the spliff, drawing the rich smoke into your lungs.

Across the table, James the Drugs is doing brisk trade.



The old man awoke at 6.30 a.m. to the sound of Radio 4. An hour after doing so, he threw back the covers of his narrow bed and sat up slowly, oblivious to the sagging whiteness of his body. He shuffled into the bathroom, urinated, avoiding the mirror. He dressed, went into the kitchen and mechanically prepared food : toast, coffee. He sat at the table, bit into the toast without tasting the jam and chewed, deriving no pleasure from the eating experience. A second radio was on : white news noise. He swallowed and took

a sip of the coffee, mostly unaware of either the flavour or the temperature.

After breakfast the old man walked to work, across Blackwell Place and down to Duke Street, following the Super Tram tracks across Park Square and up Commercial Street, towards the shopping High Street. He walked slowly, his mind a numb blank, filled only with the realities of rain and the grey smell of concrete. He crossed Castle Square and carried on up West Street towards Glossop Road, then turned right onto Mappin Street and went into his place of employment, Regent House, via the back way, taking the lift up to the second floor.

The old man worked at his job to pay for those things that life and cleanliness required of him to have - clothes, food, heat, light - but he derived little pleasure from doing it : he had long since ceased to find teaching undergraduate students either rewarding or interesting.

The old man had no friends, though he had a number of colleagues with whom he regularly conversed : about administration, funding, the weather, nothing more challenging. He was generally neither liked nor disliked by anyone : no one knew him well enough for his manner to engender any strong emotional reaction at all. He did not socialise, apart from the odd, obligatory departmental occasion, where he stood apart and sipped mineral water, looking awkward and out of place.

The old man lived alone : he had had a cat, once, a Persian Grey tabby whom he had called Babbage, as his Grandfather had similarly done. But Babbage had died, poisoned - he discovered later, when he found the pathetic corpse - by the raggedy children that ran about the squalor of the Tembray Flats on Duke Street. He received few phone calls, and anyway screened everything through an answering program. He had no family, no wife or lover - sex had not been a part of his life for over a decade, and masturbation he considered wasteful - no brothers or sisters, no children, no playmate, no companion, no confidante.

Nothing but himself, his thoughts, and his book.

When the old man returned from work, he would listen to the radio, prepare himself a meal and then sit reading or watching television. Or he would work at his autobiographical book, or play computer chess : his games often took weeks to complete. Then he would sleep, get up, eat a breakfast he never tasted and go to work, where he would teach and talk, and then he would come home again, listen to the radio, prepare himself a meal and then sit reading or watching television. Or he would work at his book, delving back into his past, or play computer chess and then he would sleep again.

And, as always after a letter arrived, the old man would dream, alone in his narrow bed, of The House in Summer at which he was the Visitor. The dream was always the same. There would be the taste of cold Chablis and the smell of warm asparagus quiche hanging in the air, and the radiant Mother would be with him, her beautiful Child suckling at her breast, and - *in his sleep the old man would stir and moan because he knew what was coming and knew that he was unable to wake, not until after* - he, the Visitor, would reach out with a gnarled snake's head hand and rip the radiant Mother's smock to shamefully reveal her

other, milk-full breast, with its blue infant food hanging from the nipple in tremulous globs, and then - *in his sleep the old man would groan and cry out painfully as* - he, the Visitor, would take the mewling Child from the radiant Mother and discard it, the snake's head hand jabbing and spitting, and wrap his lips around the blue-dripping nipple, intending to suckle but instead biting into the soft tissue, causing the radiant Mother to shriek and eject blood and milk in a furious torrent, filling the Visitor up with a boiling whiteness from which ...

The old man would awake sobbing into the empty darkness.



You are now starting to feel a little stoned from the joint that Nick passed you, but the alcohol you have already consumed, combined with the amphetamine sulphate you smeared over your gums earlier, is negating any trace of lethargy very effectively.

You decide to roll a joint, something you have learned how to do only recently. You pull the necessary makings from your pocket, and inspect the three extracted items : a fresh quarter of Skunkweed recently purchased from James the Drugs, a new unopened packet of Marlboro, and a packet of blue Rizla papers. You take out three papers, one by one, attending abstractly to the crisp sound of their extraction. Slowly and deliberately, you assemble them just as Ceri has shown you, and place the fragile creation of paper and saliva on the table.

A curious method of ingesting a recreational intoxicant, you think, as always, contemplating the simple elegance of the sculpted paper.

'You must always let your papers *dry*,' you remember Ceri telling you as you struggled to master the complex motor-procedural task of assembling a joint for the first time. 'Otherwise, the spliff will fall apart when you roll it, you see?' And she had demonstrated the principle for you, by attempting to roll a joint without waiting for the papers - she called them *skins* - to dry and, sure enough, you saw that the shearing forces involved overwhelmed the wet, and thus unbonded, papers within seconds. But she had been cross-legged and naked at the time, with your cock still sticky and raw from her wet embrace of her insides, so your attention had been elsewhere.

Lost in a pleasant tetrahydrocannabinol-induced daze of recollection, only scant months ago, suddenly from nowhere - perhaps it is the sound of her laugh behind you, perhaps a hint of her subtle, exciting musk, she is in the same room as you after all - you experience a vivid mnemonic reconstruction of events preceding the last occasion you rolled a joint, some five days ago, when Ceri was in your bed and her vaginal canal was freshly awash with your semen.

You and her had just had made love.

Not just made love though. *She* had fucked *you*. She had wanted it badly, and told you so in hoarse whispers, while she clung to your neck, her legs wrapped around you. She had wanted you to fuck her brains out, to bite at her and pin her down, to grunt and thrust into her. She had told you all this,

graphically, breathing into your ear, exactly all that she wanted you to do to her, about how she wanted to have you come all over her, to have you bring her to orgasm with your body and your cock and your mouth ...

You force yourself to discontinue the mental pseudo-narrative, mindful of Ceri's warnings, knowing it is dangerous in this company, feeling your tumescent penis stretch the fabric of your trousers.

'Hello? Anyone at home?'

You realise that the question is being addressed to you and something in the voice suggests that this was not the first occasion of utterance. You feel uncomfortable, and your cheeks grow warm. You look up, coughing first into a closed hand. Jim and Nick are both looking at you. Jim has pulled the third and last chair up to the table : it was he that asked the question.

'What?' you ask, embarrassed, blinking rapidly, swirling, erotic images like the afterimages from naked light bulbs fighting for perceptual permanence in your minds eye.

'You going to roll that or what?' Jim asks with a grin, indicating your half rolled joint. You look down. The papers have gone dry, and have crinkled a little at the edges. They are ready to be filled.

'Oh. Sure,' you say, and pick the crinkled, bonded papers up, glad for something to do, for an activity to dispel that awkward sense of feeling discovered in some dangerous, illicit pursuit. Like an echo, Ceri's voice comes back to you. *Fuck me. Fuck me.*

Pause.

'And you're going to smoke *all* of that then are you?' Jim continues, indicating again with his finger. You don't understand at first, then notice that you are still holding the joint that Nick handed you earlier in your left hand : about half is gone. You must be more stoned than you thought because you didn't even realise you were holding it.

'Oh shit!' you exclaim, chastised, a little embarrassed. 'Have I had it long? I forgot.'

Nick laughs, purses his lips in his odd fashion. 'No problem.'

Nevertheless, you hand the remaining joint to Nick - it has gone out, and needs re-lighting. As you do so, you wonder why, in fact, it *has* gone out. When you light a joint, it stays lit. You vocalise your concerns and after re-lighting the joint, Nick answers, brushing his hair back from his eyes with one hand, leaning forward, smiling as he replies, the words emerging from his mouth wreathed in smoke.

'Oh, I use rolling tobacco, not cigarettes.' Nick shrugs, smiles and purses his lips, then looks at Jim for a moment, saying : 'Doesn't stay as hot.'

You are - perhaps, just barely - aware of some privileged meaning quantum passing between Nick and Jim at that moment, intangibly coded somehow in the simple utterance, but are not alive to its salience.

'Oh,' you say, and reach for the packet of Marlboro, looking for and locating the little tag that will allow you to remove the cellophane easily. You pop the lid of the box, extract a cigarette, find and then run your tongue down the length of the cigarette, wetting the paper join. Breaking the cigarette at its union with the filter, you peel the Marlboro like a fruit, revealing a limp cylinder of flaky tobacco,

half of which you deposit in your Rizla sculpture. Then, unwrapping the fresh quarter of Skunkweed, you extract a small pile of dark, matted fibres and begin crushing and breaking them up in your hand, drizzling the resultant green fines over the tobacco. When the joint is stacked to your satisfaction, you pick up the bonded papers, and begin to roll it, using all your fingers, trying to tease the mixture of tobacco and Skunkweed into a compliant cylinder, just as Ceri showed you.

'Speshall delifferee mon!'

James the Drugs is suddenly at your left shoulder, his arm reaching down past you to the table, his hand releasing a very small, cling film-wrapped parcel there. 'Sorted for E and A man!'

'Thanks James,' you say, and stare at the little, innocuous-looking parcel for a moment before looking up. 'What have I got here?'

James the Drugs leans over the table, numerous long, dirty blond dreads spilling over his long, horse-like face. The smell of patchouli and tobacco is very strong. 'The Acid is just ... ' James raises his hands to either side of his head, and shakes his long, blond dreads. 'Just fucking *awesome* man.' He unwraps the parcel a little, showing you the tiny, half centimetre square piece of paper impregnated with the lysergic acid diethylamide. '400 mics of *Jovian Lightning*. Fucking *well* stormin' man. And the E's straight from Manchester, fucking clean, pure MDMA man, none of this chalk shit.' James sniffs quickly, drops his voice. 'And hey, and if you *really* want a treat man, come to me for some *Heaven* yeah? Something new, yeah?'

'Thanks James,' you say.

'Cool.' James straightens, turns, greets Nick and Jim, reaches his hand into his voluminous bumbag, pulling out half a pharmacy of recreational pharmaceuticals. Jim and Nick gather round him, haggling, bargaining, discussing.

You return to your joint rolling, looking down at the tiny package in front of you. You can see that the MDMA is in the form of a white tablet, a lozenge like aspirin, with an apple stamped into one side. You look up, then round, and see Lars smiling at you

'The Goddess is with us tonight my friend,' he says, but before you can respond, he looks away. Ceri and Jan are over by the hi-fi, calling to him.

You look down. *A and E*. Accident and Emergency. Acid and Ecstasy.

The Archaic Man beckons, promising forbidden, dangerous, precious knowledge.

Loveday

Loveday switched off the engine and sat back, staring down the short, steep drive at their new home : Number 5, Patricia Close, Higher Hoopern Lane, Exeter. 'Well babe, there it is.'

Helen had tears in her eyes. 'Hello little house.'

The structure was small and unexceptional, seeming to hide at the bottom of the driveway, half overgrown with unhealthy looking ivy. The walls were a dirty cream colour, badly in need of a new coat of paint. There was a garage on the left hand side, a central front door and two windows on the right. The roof was smothered with moss and lichen, colouring it drab orange and green and grey. The garden was un-cared for, hacked back rather than cultivated, and wilting in the unprecedented heat of the last summer of the millennium.

Loveday jabbed her finger at the windscreen. 'I fucking *love* this house!' She turned to Helen. 'And I love you too. Give us a kiss.' She leant over and kissed Helen full on the mouth. 'You're *gorgeous*, do you know that?'

Helen laughed. 'Of course.' She ruffled Loveday's spiky hair and draped her hand down the line of her jaw. 'And you need a shave.'

'Do I?' Loveday rubbed her hand across her stubble. 'So I do.'

Helen laughed again. 'Oh Loveday, isn't it *beautiful*? Our *own* little house!'

They had been lucky. When Helen heard that she had got the job at the University, the two of them had driven down to Devon from their rented flat in Edgebaston to look around for somewhere to buy. The previous owner of the house - an old, single man - had died suddenly, and the house had been on the market for only two hours when they walked into the estate agents.

Three days later it was theirs.

'Shall we unpack now or later?' Helen was excited. 'Or do you want to go out? I'm hungry. Why don't we go out to eat? My treat!'

Loveday grinned, happy like she had never been before. 'Whatever you say babe.'

Helen's face softened. 'I do love you, Loveday.'

Loveday felt her stomach flip. 'Me too babe.' She and Helen kissed and hugged for a long time. When they separated Loveday pulled the keys from the ignition. 'Change of plan.'

'Yes?'

'Yeah. We need to unpack the bed.'

Helen's eyebrows rose. 'We do?'

Loveday slipped her hand up Helen's smooth, plump thigh. 'Yeah, we do.'

Helen wiggled provocatively. 'Umm!'



They were an unconventional couple.

Helen was pale and round and plump and 31 years old, whereas Loveday was darker and slimmer and two years younger. Helen was an intellectual: Loveday valued her body above her mind. Helen wore her long, dark hair unfashionably straight, while Loveday's was short, spiky and dyed blond. Helen liked white wine and Siamese cats and gardening and the colours of autumn, whereas Loveday rarely drank anything but water, preferred dogs to cats, hated gardening and worshipped the sun. Helen was an exploratory software designer. Loveday was a postal worker. And their differences did not stop there.

Helen menstruated: Loveday did not.

Helen had breasts: Loveday did not. Least ways, not so that anyone would notice.

This often caused some confusion.

Often people thought Helen and Loveday were a heterosexual couple, and mistook Loveday for a man. For good reason too, because Loveday certainly *looked* like one: there was nothing fragile or feminine about her at all, despite her small stature. Her shoulders were wide, her hips narrow, her chest flat. She was muscled like an athlete or a runner, with no excess fat at all. But appearances can be deceptive. Her birth certificate showed that she had been born a baby girl and christened Maxine Loveday Grant. Loveday was something genuinely new. She wasn't a woman, strictly and hormonally speaking, but then neither was she really a man. She would describe herself something like this :

'I'm a lesbian. What can I say? I just love women. I love cunts and tits and I despise cocks and balls. So I'm a lesbian. Yeah, fuck off alright? But not your ordinary lesbian either. Shall I tell you something? Guess how long my clit is. Give up? I'll tell you. Five centimetres. *Five*. Count 'em. Fuck off. It's fucking beautiful, I tell you! Helen loves sucking on it and making me come and I love her more than my whole fucking life. I have to use male bogs most of the time (and do they *stink* or what) and I haven't had a period in over 5 years. Freaks hetties out. I take testosterone, you see? Inject it. And it's just this little hormone that turns women into men at birth. Cos all of us humans are women when we start out, did you know that? All of us touched by the Goddess.

Some hetties think that what I do is perverted or something Yeah? They think I do what I do because I want to be a man. *Bollocks*. They can think what they fucking like. I don't want to be some prick *male*. I'm want to be a strong *woman*. I fucking *hate* all this shit about how women are considered less *important* than men because they're not as strong as they are, you know? Bollocks. I can bench press 200 kilos and run a marathon in three hours and do the 100 metres in 13 seconds. Call *me* a weak woman and I'll snap your fucking hetty neck, alright?'



They didn't unpack the bed in the end. It was Helen's idea and Loveday was appalled.

'Outside? No way!'

'Why not?'

'Because someone might see us that's why!'

Helen laughed. 'No one will see!'

'How do you know? They might.'

'No they won't, I've checked. Now come on.' Helen took Loveday's hand and led her down the drive to the front door. 'Have you got the key?'

'What do you mean you've checked? And no, I gave it to you.'

'Did you? Where is it then?'

Loveday gave a little snort. 'On some string around your neck *bimbo*.'

'Oh yes.' Helen giggled. She retrieved the key and opened the door. Then she took Loveday's hand again and went inside. Directly ahead of them was a staircase, leading down. Their new house was built on a hill, like the other four houses on Patricia Close. From the front, it looked like a bungalow, but because of the slope, there was a "basement" to the house, which housed the kitchen and living room. So Helen led Loveday down.

The entire west-facing, bottom half of the house was glass : it was late afternoon now, and the whole, big airy space was flooded with sunlight, thick with dust. Helen opened one of the French doors and stepped outside onto short, yellowing grass. She led Loveday along the back of the house, then turned the corner. There, underneath the north facing wall of the house, was a completely secluded patch of garden. There was a high hedge of conifers at the back (to the east) and a wooden fence on the left (to the north). Out to the west was their steep garden, sloping down toward the fence at the bottom, beyond which was only the vegetable uniformity of a wheat field.

Loveday looked around the warm, grassy nook. Helen had been right. It was completely secluded. 'I love this house.'

In answer, Helen pulled her little cotton dress up off her head, and threw it carelessly to one side. She put a finger into her mouth and sucked on it, looking at Loveday from under hooded eyes. 'I want you Loveday.' Then she turned round and bent forward, wiggling her hips and looking at Loveday over her shoulder. 'Now, please.'

Loveday looked at her standing there, shockingly naked, wearing only a pair of white knickers and sandals, her body pale and full and inviting in the warm sun. *God she loved this woman!* Loveday guffawed. 'Tart!' She strode forward, grabbed Helen up in a fierce hug, and swung her around. 'I fucking love you!' Then she let Helen undress her and the two of them lay down in the warm grass and made each other come with their fingers and mouths.

Helen got stung by a bee and swore that next time they should use a blanket.



They met their first neighbour the next morning while unpacking the van. He was called Gary. Gary had a fat face, a moustache and blond hair. He presented the faintly comical, bulging aspect of a short man who worked out to make himself wider in compensation for the fact that he wasn't taller. 'Hi, 'I'm Gary, your new neighbour.' He looked Helen up and down, in an obvious and rather impolite fashion. He pulled one hand out from the pockets of his faded, tight jeans and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating number 4 Patricia Close next door. He shrugged and grinned. 'Moving in?'

Helen smiled socially. 'Yes, that's right. I'm Helen. Pleased to meet you Gary.' She always made a point of being scrupulously polite when meeting new people for the first time. Even when they were being crude and inane.

Gary hunched his big, rounded shoulders. 'I saw you and your boyfriend arrive yesterday but I thought I'd wait till now to say hello. Settling in alright are you?'

Helen was used to this kind of confusion and did not attempt to correct him. 'Yes, thank you.'

At that moment, Loveday appeared in the front door carrying a huge box. She was dressed in a short, cut off tee-shirt and tight, lycra shorts, both black. The muscles of her arms and legs were clearly visible under her dark-tanned, smooth skin. She looked like an Olympian god, a pure, powerful athlete. Helen felt a stab of pride. Her beautiful, handsome Loveday.

'Helen, where d'you want this ... oh right.'

'Sweetheart, *there* you are!' Helen affected a pathetically female tone. 'This is Gary. He's our next door neighbour. He was just asking if we're settling in alright. Isn't that nice of him?'

Loveday put down her box and came up to stand by Helen's side. 'Yeah.'

Gary pulled one podgy hand from the pockets of his jeans and extended it. 'Alright mate?' His voice came out several octaves deeper than before. 'How's it going?' He appeared to have made the same mistake as other people. He thought Loveday was a man.

Loveday slapped the proffered hand. 'Alright.' She looked Gary right in the eye and pointedly put her arm around Helen's shoulders. 'Neighbour eh?'

'Yeah, that's right.' Gary looked a little worried. It was obvious that he thought Loveday was unusual in some way, but equally obvious that he didn't know quite how. He put his hand back into the pocket of his tight jeans and hunched his large shoulders. He looked down and then up, scuffing the loose gravel of the drive with a dirty trainer. He addressed Helen. 'Yeah, there's just the two of us next door. That's me and Sally. Sally's me girlfriend.'

Loveday grunted.

Helen smiled. 'Oh yes?'

'Yeah, we like it here. Nice and quiet, you know. Not many students, and the University is just down the valley a bit.' Gary pulled his hand out again and gestured behind him. 'That's where I work. Sally too, actually. At the University. She's a secretary. I'm an engineer. We're getting married next year.'

Loveday grunted.

Helen smiled. 'That's nice.'

'Yeah. Great woman. Good work too you know. Engineering.' Gary stuck out his jaw and grinned, looking from Helen to Loveday. 'Well, I suppose you'll get to meet everyone else sooner or later. I expect. Yes, we're all quite a little family up here.' He laughed.

Loveday snorted. 'Great.'

Helen smiled. 'Lovely.'

'Yeah, there's old Mr. Gogherty at no 3. He's a retired lepidopterist and binds PhD theses. Did mine you know. Then there's the two Filmer sisters at no 2. They grow vegetables. Then there's Thomas at the end ... Thomas works at the University, like me and Sally. Though ... oh no, I've said that. Yeah. Nice bloke, Thomas. Chemist. Bit quiet, though. Likes to keep himself to himself, you know?'

Loveday grunted. 'So he doesn't go wittering on about himself to his neighbours then? Sound. I like that.'

Helen smiled. 'Yes.'

The sarcasm appeared to glance off Gary like water off wax. He drew a deep breath, which inflated his already distended chest even further. Then he hunched his shoulders and tried to push his hands further into the tight pockets of his jeans. 'Yeah. Right. OK. Well, I'll let you get on. Nice to meet you Helen and uh ...' His voice dropped in pitch again. 'I didn't catch your name mate.'

'Didn't you?'

Gary coughed and narrowed his eyes.

Loveday let him sweat a bit before she said : 'Loveday.'

Gary looked blank. Then he grinned, frowned, looked nonplussed and blinked rapidly several times. 'Loveday?' he asked. Loveday could almost see the thought processes going on in his mind. He had thought about laughing then thought better of it. 'Right,' said Gary. He had thought about making some comment about how Loveday's parents must have been born in the sixties then thought that perhaps he shouldn't. 'OK,' said Gary. He had thought about shaking hands then changed his mind. 'Right.'

'Yes well, nice to meet you Gary,' said Helen. 'I must meet Sally soon.'

'Yeah.' Gary stole a last look at Loveday. 'Yeah. Cheers, then.'

'Bye.'

He went.

Loveday grunted. 'Wanker.'



Loveday and Helen discovered the Edge of the World soon after they moved into their little house, during the course of one of Loveday's regular early morning runs. It wasn't anything of the kind, of course but that was what they called it anyway. The Edge of the World. It was just a small rise really, with a flat

top. An artificial hill at that, with a subterranean reservoir hidden beneath it. But the view out to the north from the top of the Edge of the World was beautiful. They fell in love with Devon from this view, with its soft, green hills and warm, clear air. Sometimes it seemed like from the Edge of the World they could see all the way out to Exmoor.

During the rump end of the summer they took to making love on the artificial hill, in tents at night, like teenagers. They took pillows and scented candles and music. Helen flew her kites on the good, windy days. Other times they shared tablets of Ecstasy and hugged each other for hours on end, watching fairies and dragons and trees and steam locomotives being born in the clouds and living their brief lives and then dying, stroking each other and dancing, wrapped up in cotton wool love protecting them from the hard outside world.

Then one day in December it was all ruined.



Loveday enjoyed her holiday. Helen took her to Croatia for two weeks, to Dubrovnik on the Adriatic coast. Off-season, the ancient city was not as hot as it might have been, but that didn't matter. They spent many happy hours wandering around art galleries and museums, eating in small restaurants, talking and holding hands, enjoying each others company. But as much as she liked being away, Loveday liked coming home too, because when she was home she could run and work on her body.

And Loveday loved running.

Checking that she had her keys, she stepped out into the morning darkness and pulled the door closed behind her. She paused to savour the clean, cold air, rehearsing her route. *Down Pennsylvania and across. Hmm. Two kilometres there, two back along Collins Road. Say two circuits of the common and home. Great.* She jogged to the end of Patricia Close, turned left down Higher Hoopern Lane and picked up her pace. Two minutes later she was at Pennsylvania Road and turning left, running down the hill. Halfway down, she cut left into Sylvan Road, running past familiar sleepy little houses with familiar sleepy little gardens, and came out by the roundabout at the end of Union Road. She took the second exit and climbed up Stoke Hill, her lungs and legs working hard. At the top she cut right down a narrow, frozen mud path to emerge on Mincinglake Valley Park - a grand name for a grim piece of unkempt common land - and began her circuits, leaving the ruins of frozen puddles in her wake and thinking hostile thoughts about mobile phone towers.

Loveday had been thinking about mobile phone towers a lot recently.

None too positively either it had to be said. They seemed to be *everywhere*, big metal masts sprouting dishes and aerals. Loveday didn't like them. In fact, she *hated* them. She hated the phones that needed them, and the

people that used the phones that needed them. She might describe her reasons something like this :

'For one thing, they're big and fucking *ugly*. And for another, they're always put *high up*, on the tops of untouched hills so everyone is forced to look at them all the time. So everyone can see how big and obtrusive and *ugly* they are from just about fucking *anywhere*. And *especially* from the Edge of the World, you can see them out on Stoke Hill and Sweetham and Upton Pyne and just *everywhere*. And Helen, right - Helen is well clever - Helen reckons that give it a decade or so and there'll be lots of new cheap satellites that will do the job better. So why have we got to put up with these corporate hetty *wankers* vandalising my countryside, eh? That's what *I* want to know. Fucking answer me that!

Helen told me if these towers bugged me that much then I should complain to the council. So do you know what? I did. I wrote and complained. Waste of time. They told me that they couldn't do anything if the mast was less than 15 metres high. *15 metres!* That's like *50 foot high!* And *why* can't you do anything I asked? And they said that they were "obliged to follow government guidelines which support the development of telecommunications in the interests of economic growth." Fucking economic growth *shit*. So I contacted the people who put them there, Cellnet and Orange and all those other big corporate wankers. Vodafone told me that all their masts were "colour coded to blend organically with the landscape". Like, that means they paint them brown. *Bollocks*. After that I phoned Orange right, and they told me that the future was bright and would I like to buy a state of the art electronic informational exchange facilitation device in order to share in it? *Wankers*. Cellnet just laughed at me. And Mercury quoted me the DoE, who said "the protection of Britain's heritage landscape must be balanced against unnecessary burdens on the burgeoning telecommunications industry in which Britain leads the world." My fucking arse. *Bollocks.'*

After she completed her two circuits, Loveday turned right out of Mincinglake Valley Park onto Stoke Hill again and headed up Collins Road to where it joined Rosebarn Lane. She turned right here, then sharp left almost immediately, back onto the top of Pennsylvania Road, and hence down to the right onto Higher Hoopern Lane. She didn't stop there though : she had been away in Croatia for three weeks and wanted to see the dawn from the Edge of the World.

So she jogged past Patricia Close and ran quietly on through the concrete courtyard of Gardenhill House. The path curved along the head of the little valley carrying the Taddiforde Brook down towards the Lafrowda Flats. She turned right at the end, heading upwards, past the huge open compost heap where the University grounds staff deposited the organic rubbish generated by their activities. Ahead, the Edge of the World rose into the sky, a black mass against the dark grey of the early morning sky. Loveday followed the path up as it curved left, then forked right, jumped the ditch, and then was running up the steep side of the Edge of the World towards its flat, plateau top. But when she got there she slew to a halt, stunned and horrified, her chest heaving. There was

something there. It was tall and made of metal with dishes and aerials all sprouting from its top.

Someone had erected a mobile phone tower.

'*Shit. Right. Bastards. That's it ... bastards.*'



Loveday ran back through the courtyard of Gardenhill House like a lycra tornado, cursing under her breath. 'Fucking *wankers*.' She vaulted the gate onto Higher Hoopern Lane using both hands and accelerated, sprinting up the short slope with her legs pumping, angry and hurt. '*Bastards*.' It was like someone had burgled her house or stolen something of value and trashed it. 'Fucking *bastards*.' She threw herself left into Patricia Close, blinded by her anger and resentment and sprinted for her house. Helen was in knickers and tee-shirt just starting on her breakfast when Loveday stormed down the stairs into the kitchen and told her what had happened. 'Some hetty *wanker* has put one of those *fucking* telephone towers right on the top of *our* fucking *hill!*'

Helen had only just woken up. 'What?'

Loveday jabbed her finger out the window, indicating. 'The Edge of the World! One of those *fucking* telephone mast things is slap *bang* in the *middle* of it!'

Helen's mouth fell open. 'Oh *no!* Loveday! Surely the University wouldn't let somebody *build* there!'

'Yeah well, they fucking *have!*'

Helen shook her head. 'Oh, but that's *terrible*.'

'It's out of *fucking* order is what it is!' Loveday was pacing up and down in the kitchen with her hands on her hips, steaming - quite literally - after her run. '*Wankers*. I can't *believe* it. I just can't *fucking* believe it.'

'Why there?' Helen asked. 'I mean ...'

'Because the phone companies can do what they like! Because the University would sell its own back *passage* if it could. Because ... because fucking *nothing!!*' Loveday lashed out with her foot, kicked the wall with the flat of her foot and then threw herself into a chair and glowered at the floor. The effects of the testosterone with which Loveday dosed herself were not limited to changes in her physical appearance, of course. Her mind was changed too. Mentally speaking, she *thought* more like a man and experienced emotions more like a man.

Hence she got angry a lot.

Helen sought around for some words of comfort. 'Well, there must be *something* we can do, mustn't there?'

'Yeah, like *what?*' Loveday leapt up out of her chair and began pacing up and down the kitchen again, her fists clenching and unclenching, reminding Helen - as always - of a caged tiger. '*Pisses* me off Helen you know? Some big company can just come along and do *whatever* the *fuck* they like, putting their

towers up wherever they like. You know, like right at the tops of *hills*, all alone and really obvious and *exposed* so people can ... Hey, wait a minute.'

'What?'

'Shit, now *that's* an idea.'

'What is?'

'There *is* something we can do you know.' Loveday smiled viciously. 'We could blow the fucker up is what we could do.'

Helen went into sarcastic mode. 'Yes, well we *could* do Loveday I suppose, except that we haven't got any bombs or high explosive.'

'Make some. Can't be that difficult. What would you call it? Peoples Vandalism? Ecological sabotage? *Ecotage!* Oh yeah!'

Helen became slightly alarmed. 'Make some? What do you *make* some? Make some how? With what?'

'I don't know. Weed killer's good isn't it? You must be able to find out, musn't you? Books. Libraries. I dunno. You're supposed to be the clever one. What about the Internet? You're always telling me how great that is.'

Helen pouted and pulled at the extended lip in a sceptical fashion. 'Yes, but ...' She got to her feet and went over to Loveday. 'You're not really *serious* about this Loveday are you?'

Loveday turned and stared out the window. 'Dunno.' She thought about it a bit. 'Maybe.' Then she thought about it a bit more. and turned back to face Helen. 'Yes, fuck it Helen, I *am* serious! I *really* want to blow that fucking thing off the planet!' Loveday had indeed got into her idea. 'Shit, it'd be *great*. It's sitting there all by itself. Just *think!* No one would ever know it was us! It's not very strong either, I bet. Aluminium most likely. Oh *Yeah!* Loveday, Eco-warrior!'