

Letters from a shuttered country

Chapter Two Tonight we saw a Pink Moon

Moonrise that night was larger than usual. A bright glow was cast on the horizon of the chimneys. Our neighbour looked bigger, brighter, nearer. It doesn't usually get this close.

"So why do they call it pink? asked Katie, mesmerised by the eerie glow that wrapped enchantment round the Moon. They had watched in the garden fascinated, as the moon climbed higher, assuming a brilliance and a sharpness that brought its craters within reach of their hands.

"It's named after an early-blooming wildflower in North America" explained her father. "Pretty good isn't it?"

"Breathtaking!" said Katie. "It gives such a sense of calm and positivity over everything. Just makes you peaceful to looking at it. Don't think I've seen it this big!"

Planet Earth was shutting down fast. Everyone had to shun society. Across the globe, Governments rushed to impose draconian controls over their people that had never been seen before. We were living through mass quarantine. There were a few lunatic spoiling things for everyone else but tonight was the global fellowship of lunar admirers. Across the world people were looking at the Supermoon, pausing to glance upwards and take in the view. Well-known landmarks were being photographed against its radiating glow. Though separated from each other by fences and shuttered lock-down, fellow-watchers were joined in solidarity. The little piece of flotsam and jetsam they called Covid-19 had come together to catch on to unsuspecting humanity with virulent force. It had taken down cities, systems, communities and communities of systems. People and families had been overwhelmed. The sound of weeping and wailing had gone up from countless homes – yet here was the Moon, steady and serene, making its regular call from the Sea of Tranquillity.

"Don't think I've paid such attention to the moon before", Katie remarked after a while. It was then that she saw him. Across the street stood a youngish man, watching the night sky in rapt attention. 'I don't think I've seen him before either' she thought to herself. It was if the thought had willed itself into wings. He averted his gaze suddenly and looked across the street. Eyes met and then smiles coalesced. A wave followed. He seemed to be alone but went in after a few minutes.

"Who's that? Katie asked her father.

"O that's Robert Morrison" said Bill. "He moved in eighteen months ago after his wife died in a car accident. Think he came to have a change of scenery. Previous place too full of memories I suppose".

Bill knew about that and imagination filled in the gaps.

Through the atmosphere of his aching and often cloudy soul, the astronomer in him caught fire, though with a subdued wet flame. What would it be like, he wondered as he had so many times before, to stand on the edge of the universe to gaze into the unknown and uncharted? The estate just went on and on. Before their last walk together, Bill and his wife Sarah had to move quickly along a California beach or they would have been cut off by the tides; as if Earth was being rocked by the Moon and water sloshed about helplessly. The human footprints still on the Sea of Tranquillity were embedded deeply in the imagination of his boyhood. That was before the troubles arose and his own tranquillity was forever raped. The events in Jerusalem, the loss of his mother, Micky his brother in Vietnam, Sarah and now this. The rush of tragic memories moved quickly past him.

"Why is the world in such a hurry?" he thought. "Ever since we have been born, we've been space travellers; living on a world constantly rotating, spinning and turning on a non-stop journey".

"Does the universe listen to the ache in my heart?" his inner soul cried out as he strained to hear. Was there a friendly face behind everything? Could he put a name to the face?

"We are a sophisticated generation used to computers, space probes and discerning between the images of Hollywood," he had often reasoned. "Is there anything out there that corresponds to what is in here?" Bill's inner voice had cried indignantly.

After a while he walked back to an empty house, silent with the intensity that clothes the hours of the night. Katie joined him. She had found herself wondering if Robert Morrison was going to put in another appearance. About to dismiss herself as a lunatic, there he was again; again the wave. She wondered if she should wander but thought it wasn't really allowed.

"You're in very pensive mood Dad", she said.

Bill had been seated for a while giving only perfunctory responses to comments and questions. Time past had raced at blurring speed but now one particular period of months had dragged themselves by. Katie wondered about the letters and documents she had been allowed to read.

"Who is this Liam?" she asked. "His name seems to come up a lot".

It took a minute for the trance fog of memories to dissipate. Bill Trimble was playing host to his guest from the UK back near the turn of the Millennium. An internet dialogue had led to an invitation to come out to California. Liam was taking some seminars and speaking across the West coast of the US about spirituality. He was a lecturer in microbiology at a college on the outskirts of London and often spoke at meetings but had recently begun to accept wider engagements outside of term time. He was a deep thinker. Now Bill told Katie of this.

"When we met for the first time and took the measure of each other, there was a worn, almost hungry look about him as if he needed taking in hand. Meeting Liam had the ring of significance." They had driven through steep twisting streets that wound through overgrown hills north of the University where Bill had a weekday apartment. Within two hours, they were descending the foothills again to enter the gourmet ghetto boasting restaurants renowned throughout San Francisco Bay. They made for Chez Panisse, home to the California Cuisine. Bill's cell phone went but it wasn't her. A hidden emotion was working its way up to the surface. Bill's whole face moved. Where was Ali. Why had there been no more contact?

"How did your people come to America?" Liam had asked Bill over dinner, hungry for leads and confirmation. Suddenly, a fixed stare had held Bill and he dropped his eyes. He had told a few people that his close friend Ali had AIDS. Was that why she cut off contact after few faltering steps when she had renewed contact after a discomfiting break? It merged in his mind with Mum's illness.

"My grandfather was a boy of three when the family fled the pogroms of Czarist Russia. They were numbered among the million who arrived in America in the year 1905 to build a new life."

A friendly smile never left Bill's face but there seemed to be a masked, petulant sadness.

"Did they come straight to California?" Liam had enquired.

Bill narrowed his eyes. "No, that happened after the crash of 1929 when there weren't any jobs back east. Josef Petrovsky, Grandpa on my mother's side, joined the despairing ranks of sixteen million unemployed. Like so many, he travelled the long dusty road to California: California, the golden land where the streets had money on the ground", Bill had remarked sardonically. But here was Katie.

"Grandma Petrovsky died in the last global pandemic", he told her.

"You mean Spanish flu?" she asked.

"That's what they called it", replied Bill. "It wasn't actually Viva L'Espagne. They only called it that back in 1918 as there was a concentration in Madrid as there is at the moment. It's what we do best – blame foreigners just like at the moment: the Chinese virus."

"Yes", agreed Katie. They had both seen the news that night after the daily Government Briefing.

"I think when they tried to do some source tracing, the culprit was a poultry farm in Kansas" Bill said.

"It jumped the species barrier and before you knew it, millions were coughing their lungs out. A neighbour along the street told me once that her grandmother had lost her fiancée through that". "I grew up on war-gaming and military history but you could read about the titanic battles of 1918 without any realisation that a pandemic was leaping along the trenches of friend and foe alike".

Katie shook her head in sadness. She looked at Bill. She knew he wasn't her real father. The husband of her mother's boyfriend- well that had been good enough for her these twenty years. They were close.

Bill told Katie that his grandfather found menial work at first at the observatory on Mt Wilson, north west of Los Angeles. The family interest in space began. Those were exciting times to be at Mt Wilson, in whatever capacity. The new 100 inch telescope was yielding a dramatic view of the universe. The astronomy bug was highly contagious. Bill's uncle caught it. He had worked his way through college, applied for and got a job at the silver domed 200 inch telescope on Mt Palomar when it opened in 48'. With unparalleled ability to gather light, the observatory unveiled a universe twice as big as anyone had thought. The Moon was only 8 miles away.

Bill went on with his story with Katie.

"That's where I come into the story," he said. "It was a good time for us at first. The memory of those days in Britain now seems painted with sunlight. I went to a private school near Brighton. It meant I was separated from my parents during term time. "

"Many of the kids made fun of my stutter", Bill continued. "But I guess I was blessed with mum's capacity for making friends. It served me well till she died".

A dim, diffused softness filled Bill's voice before he regained composure. "No one was surprised that I followed in the family tradition. I guess a liberal helping of star dust had been sprinkled in my eyes too," he chuckled.

"Did your grandfather have faith?" Katie suddenly asked.

"Yes he certainly did". Bill was surprised at the question as he was unaware he had ever discussed that with Katie.

"Think I found a reference to that in one of the letters" she answered.

"Well I'll tell you" said Bill. "It never caught on for me, especially after we lost Mum. After Jerusalem it had begun to make sense though, at least the second time. The gaping years were done".

"You mean it made sense for the second time", puzzled Katie?

"The second visit", Bill said. "It bridged the gap between what's inside here and what's out there".

Katie disappeared to write some emails. Bill sat there travelling across time and space, faster than light-speed.

He had found himself getting on well with Liam his new friend. Across the bay, lights illuminated the city. Outside Bill's home, a large shed housed a 20 inch telescope. With little cloud cover to impede viewing and away from the glare of San Francisco, Liam was able to peer into space. His host provided expert commentary.

"Our galaxy is not alone," Bill had explained. "No corner of the night sky is exempt from those pin pricks. We only saw so much with the naked eye. Even with the early telescopes, we were unsure what those faint wisps were between the stars".

"But then" he said with incredulity, "we found they were distant worlds, other galaxies! Andromeda, our neighbour, is also a rotating mass of millions of stars!"

Through a telescope, the only galaxy that could be seen unaided exploded into cosmic beauty. Bill paused before starting up again.

"Everywhere we look, the place is teeming with galaxies. 70 billion galaxies! Who knows how many more. The number keeps rising the further we look".

Bill had been unable to contain himself as he said this and Liam heard cosmic music play. To join that song was to begin to understand. Bill told him about his grandfather, who comforted him after the gaping years when Mum died and Dad had been unable to handle life for a while.

"Tell me about the stars, Grandpa" Bill would ask as they plied the river in search of breakfast.

"Those were exciting times!" his grandfather had replied, warmed by soft nostalgic light. His eyes lit up in sparkling reminiscence. The air itself had been alive as the dimensions of the cosmic architecture began to grip everyone who worked at Mt Wilson. Together they had set out to chart the night sky.

"And then" Bill had exclaimed to Liam, "the chief at Mt Wilson, Edwin Hubble, proposed that our Milky Way is part of a vast scheme with no special place and no privileged position. What's more we're still on the move; accelerating every second. Suddenly, the size of the universe had leaped by a 1000 million. It's what they call dark energy, a mysterious force pushing everything apart."

Bill had looked down and his voice lowered as if he was about to convey the secret of the universe. Between sips of coffee, they tucked into a fruitcake Bill brought out from somewhere as the evening turned into small hours.

"Think of it!" he exclaimed. "It's growing. It's getting bigger. Stars are moving away from each other just like these currants baked in the oven. Every other currant is moving further apart too! If the stars are shooting away at such a colossal rate, the universe must be expanding. Fast".

"I just can't take this in," Liam had said, whistling softly. "I read somewhere that astronomers now think the universe is growing even faster than we suspected. And what about black holes?" he asked.

"Everyone wants to know about these celestial monsters from which no light can escape," said Bill the astronomer smiling.

"It was just theory at first" he said. "Surely something would prevent so bizarre an object from actually existing. But observations are mounting up to show that these strangest of objects in the universe are for real".

"Any near us" Liam had asked. He suddenly felt like a tourist.

"Our local black hole may be only 10,000 light years away in the constellation of Cygnus" Bill Trimble replied. "We're beginning to detect such monsters as rotating black holes that drag space and time round like a tornado. Heard about a new millennium sport? Planet hunting in other solar systems!" Now his voice trembled with awe. "You know it's curious" he said. "The more we find out, the more we retreat in amazement. The cosmos has not stopped pulling surprises on us. People have looked up and thought they had it all worked out. And then some new observation bombed complacency until today we stand numb and in shock. Just how big is it? How much more is there?"

"As many stars in the sky as there are grains of sand on the seashore" Liam quoting the Bible.

"I reckon that's about right", Bill had replied. But even as he said that, he was back on a beach near to where he went to school in Britain, where he used to stand watching the dredgers scooping muck and mud from the bottom of the estuary. After the shock of losing Sarah, he had just been beginning to feel that if only he could let go of the past, a vigorous, purposeful life would be given to him.

Two days later Ali had come down the lonely drive and the roof had blown off.

That was then. For now Bill thought he would write to Liam. It had been a while. Katie had said everyone needed to reach out to friends old and new in order to conserve and expand. That had to include friends who had helped sort out your mortality.

Dear Liam,

I thought I would write to see how you are doing in a Covid world? Assume you are self-isolating like most of us.

What a weird time we live in! The collateral damage to society and the economy is going to be huge.

This lockdown has given me lots of time for self-reflection. The pace of life is slower now. The news keeps infiltrating the whole time like an unwelcome intruder. Only the important things are important now and the small things don't seem to matter. In time this will pass for us all and the light around will shine much brighter than it did before. Katie is amazing and I'm lucky to be in a safe environment with her. Her flat sale being delayed has been a while which has worked out really well. Katie's best friend Maddy is a nurse and doesn't in any case have a relationship with either of her parents where going back would be an option. That's really sad. Maybe we should invite her to live here but we can't. You will know I expect that Eyam in Derbyshire quarantined itself during the Black

Death. And there they stayed until it was all over. Everywhere borders have closed and nations have shut themselves in. This is a world where shutters have down. How do we inhabit those broader places where we used to live, that beckon to us like the memory of another world we had left behind, receding into the horizon?

Home is a weird place for me because it reminds me of when my mental health was really bad a few years ago. You helped me find faith twenty years back and that's really helping.

It's ridiculous. Why do we kid ourselves that we should feature at all when we hardly loom very high in the scheme of things? Maybe we are only the sigh of the universe yet none of us can live like that.

Tonight we saw a pink Moon. Did you see it from wherever? In fact not sure where you are at the moment. You always were a guru sort of person so interested to know what you are making of it all? I thought tonight about that evening we spent in San Francisco peering through the telescope in my shed. We were awed. That night, we talked for hours, our conversation interrupted but also stimulated by peering through the eye piece. Coffee, like the very universe itself, went on forever. The night sky had put on a stellar performance.....

I recall the words of an old Zen Buddhist poem. "The world is dew... and yet... and yet". How can the spirit keep intact in a place where everything is evaporated as the dew of morning? In the scheme of things we carry no futile importance. To be involved with ourselves in this way is to add delusion to collusion. Better if we did not feature so highly in our imaginary world and shrink away to a dot on the landscape. And yet... what you taught me those years ago is that we matter to God. And to each other. Until then, it had felt like the old life was going to be shipwrecked. Old patterns would not work for much longer though I would cling to them as long as possible. How things changed for me.

A couple of years before we met, the Leo and Kate *Titanic* story was about the travails of individuals – the private story. Bit of a contrast between that and that 'Night to Remember' film. Did you ever see it? 1957 I think it was. It was about public safety. So the private had trumped the public. Where will it go now though in this disaster movie? Maybe we'll re-discover what's important.

The story of this crisis can go one of two ways. It can be about being under house arrest, loneliness, of stockpiling and looking after number one. And as ever, it's people in poverty who pay most. Or shift into something more hopeful.

How's your family? Your Mum, step-Dad Eric? Do write to me. Hope to hear from you. Bill Trimble