

Letters from a Shuttered Country

Chapter Four Rezooming where we left off

Time: the capacity to stand outside yourself, above yourself and move quickly and backwards through a ménage of memory. Time: a stream meandering from the past towards the other country that is the future. Strangely immersed in its secret flow, we caught, inexorably held in the living current of history for a while; prisoners to a movement that rushes us forward, ever forward. Those who dwelt in the strange land of the past did not realise they were living in history. They were inhabitants of the NOW. For we are, let it be said, an older version of our younger self; unfolding chronology of time and experience cautions us from telling a story from the perspective of journey's end.

Experiences of the past and expectations of the future are knit together into a linear progression. Time moulds the human continuity. It provides inner coherence and identity, enabling yourself to rise above yourself and write a narrative that integrates time past with time present. This mental task we call history, or biography to bring it into the lives of the personal, indeed of four men, moving on in the flow of the years who gathered one end of April evening. Each was a very different person, as indeed all are strangers to themselves.

The man or woman has yet to live who could fully and sympathetically appreciate the living soul of another, except by the many windows and doors that permit both light and exchange. Our powers and our weaknesses, our development and our constraints; our capacities and deficiencies render us a riddle both unread and unreadable by benign others.

Courtesy of the pandemic network tool of choice, it was Liam who played host on Zoom, sending out the invitations and admitting each in turn.

Liam – ah there we all are! There's Bill – welcome Bill! Welcome Steve! Great to see you.

Steve – well well! After all this time, we meet again. Don't know where Jack has got to.

Bill – brilliant to see you Steve! Think we last spoke.....well how long ago?

Steve – must be six years. What a lot of life has come and gone. Ah here's Jack. Hi brother! Turn your microphone on! We can't hear you.

Jack – evening Steve, evening all! Liam, Bill – it's been a long time. Far too long.

Jack - I know it's only six where you are but here in India its half past one in the morning!

Liam – we won't keep you but great to catch up. So how are we all finding this weird time? Don't think our world has ever had such a surprising interruption to all the frenetic activity!

Bill – that is of course true. Affects us all but we all experience it differently. Depends what life was for us BC (before Covid). For me as a researcher writing astronomy papers, it doesn't feel too different except I can't socialise or go out too much.

Steve – for me it's extremely taxing. My software business is right on all these ways we are engaging with each other, video conferencing and all that. But customers are like rain in the Mojave Desert back in California.

Liam – and how's Amanda?

Steve - Mandy is still doing her human rights law work but many Courts and clients have put things on hold. Our son Ben though is in a flat in London and I suspect the situation is taking its toll on his mental health. He's often had his wobbles as you know. Think he's finding out what profound isolation can feel like though we try to keep in touch most days.

Jack – we're doing ok thanks too. Liz had her brush with breast cancer a couple of years back but the charity we're involved with to help the Dalits is strapped for cash. Thousands of untouchables are starving under the lockdown so it's pretty grim. One positive is that the incessant blaring of horns is much subdued. We still miss our son Timothy every day. Liam?

Liam – can't get out like anyone else but like millions, I'm suddenly immersed in this social video eco-system. At first there was a shared mourning for all we have lost but I guess many of us are finding alternatives. I can look at my diary of speaking engagements and there is in effect a line through each of them saying 'cancelled'.

Bill – I'm fortunate to have Katie here with me. Every day I thank God I agreed to bring her up. She has her struggles but doing all right after she broke up with her boyfriend. Trouble is he sends her revenge porn and it bothers her quite a lot. Her friend Maddy is a trainee nurse and is now on the front line. Katie's quite concerned. Maddy is right in the thick of it.

Jack – tough call! Hope she stays safe! Be great to see her again at some point.

Bill – thanks. Katie's concerned too about some of the children on the radar of the school. They were struggling learners many of them. They are having to cope with the intensity of the pressure cooker at home. In one household she knows, the Mum is locked down with a terrorist of an abusive partner. How horrendous is that!

Steve – ghastly! Hope the police are on it. Must say it's good to have a break from the frenetic pace. After what happened as we were leaving California, I was able to re-assess things as you know. Now I can notice the flowers and when we go out, we take in the clean air and clear soil. Guess we've all lost our temper at one point or other. We certainly have.

Bill – and we can look up and see stars! Wonderful.

Liam – and we can go out and be thankful that we have another whole day to live! How cool is that! Our obsessive perfectionism, our urge to succeed is all so challenged by this.

And so the old friends talked.

For twenty minutes they talked, a minute for each year. Each marvelled in their own way at the capacity of old friendship to pick up where you left off, to resume from frozen moments.

They began on the edge but then began to move into the centre, remembering that for at least three of the present company, past such moments had led towards a black hole. How close would they now get? There were, Steve had heard, different pandemic personality types. How do we do this when there is no how to survive pandemic guide available? Whether a wise stance was Accepting, Suffering or Resisting occupied five minutes or so.

It seemed that with one exception, they had all been thrown by the shuttering of their world, not knowing how they were supposed to or work out what they were supposed to do. Bill said he found perspective looking up at stars, peering through an inky night in search of the friendly face he knew was there. This was a cosmic moment though only a moment.

Steve said he had become an NHS volunteer. It emerged that Mandy was not doing so well really. She was vulnerable and what with the wheelchair, mobility wasn't straightforward. The feeling of things being out of her control and being unable to escape the situation was imprisoning. There were days at first when she hadn't even wanted to get dressed. It felt like their Dalmatian was sitting on her chest. Rubin just sat there unwilling to move. Their daughter worked in a care home where Covid-19 had slipped through the careful defences.

"It's pretty bad", said Steve. "Last week Jane thought she had it and had to go back and quarantine. They managed by her isolating in the spare room. Her two year old couldn't understand why he wasn't allowed to go in to see Mummy and kept trying the door. The footsteps and plaintive cries tore Jane in half until the danger passed and life zipped itself".

Her colleague Ovidio had been unwell but, as he had mild symptoms and no underlying health conditions, quarantined himself at home. Six days later he phoned the ambulance. On the seventh day he messaged his family to say he was deteriorating rapidly. What a difference a week makes. Intensive care; ventilator – it was too no avail. After another week had gone by, Ovidio drew his last gasp. An angel sat and held his hand at the last. "Nothing will replace the physical contact when someone dies", he observed. At that moment, Bill had vivid memories of Katie's Mum Ali dying of AIDS in the days of another plague.

Liam agreed. He had taken another funeral that week. Telling people they can't go to a funeral felt pretty harsh. In a strange paradox love takes sometimes, it was a compassionate move. Samsungs came up as the coffin went down. Dozens had Zoomed in, 80% present.

Jack said that India had experienced extended lock-down but few cases so far. Accused of being a virus super-spreader, the previous week a Muslim guy was dragged away and beaten until blood oozed his nose and everywhere. So much for Covid being a Muslim plot.

And that was that. A re-union on-line. Steve's suggestion of "Let's do this again" was well received. Liam said he would send email links for next Thursday. And they left the meeting.

"All well Dad?", enquired Katie, putting her head round the door. "Dinner's ready".

"Yes fine", confirmed Bill. "It was good to talk as they say".

He went into the kitchen.

"This wretched thing was hovering at the edge of consciousness for a while but now the virus hangs like a grey cloud over everything", he remarked.

"Sure does", agreed Katie. "Seems to be affecting lower paid workers and taking a toll especially on ethnic minorities. My friend Maddy says that many of the nurses she knows who have died were Filipino. They came to find a better life and look what happened!"

"Mind you," she added, "some of our school families are having to cope with dwindling resources to put food on the table and pay the rent".

"Structural inequalities they call it", Bill observed. "Poorer people are dying twice as fast."

They ate in sobering silence.

"Going to chat again?", asked Katie.

"Next Thursday", said Bill, pouring himself a glass. He had enjoyed that encounter. How honest would they be if the road of memory took them through the minefield of the past?

"Including Beth in this conversation?" said Katie suddenly. "It's all men in that Zoom time."

"Hmm", said Bill, gazing intently at her. He wondered what she knew of the disturbing part Steve had played in her life. Beth tried to come over from New York every other Easter.

That had to be called off. It was hard not being with folk you were used to being with.

"See Robert over the road tonight?" Bill asked with a smile, changing the subject.

"Yes I did", replied Katie. "He was there when we clapped the health workers".

They had exchanged smiles and waves. Tomorrow they would join a Neighbourhood What's App pub quiz. That morning there was a note amidst car wipers. It had a mobile number.

Bill decided to email Beth.

Dear Beth,

I was sad you couldn't come over for Easter as we are used to. It would have been excellent to have seen you. Loneliness is sharper on the days when you are not supposed to be alone. Fortunately (for me), Katie has moved in to hunker down here until her flat sale goes through whenever that will be! Here, the Government has introduced new housing laws to boost tenants' rights: a ban on no-fault evictions and so on. It'll help a great deal to reduce the uncertainty for those that might miss the rent that month: we'll see how that works out. Katie is getting quite a bit of revenge porn from Freddie sadly.

I can't get my head round what's happening to our world and I don't suppose anyone can. Life is changing so rapidly that this time last week feels like years in the past. 'Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans' – that's Lennon of course. How far away from where you guys are now was he killed incidentally? I was reading the other day that his killer, Mark Chapman, confessed in an interview. 'I thought if I killed him, I would become him, I would acquire his fame.' It's interesting isn't it. The loss of your own value makes you seek the value of someone else. Maybe that's what happens in acts of violence. They create a force-field like those I studied in physics. All kinds of transactions take place. Now there's a thesis for someone!

Speaking of transactions, I was in the local supermarket today. You hand over a note and they look at you and say 'No, no, no, we don't want that –use contactless because it's safer than handling grubby money'. The demise of cash? Discuss!

Expect you are able to work remotely. How's that? Got any work at the moment?

I had a very vivid dream last night. You wandered in and out! We're having to process a huge amount of stress and collective anxiety. Maybe it shows up in dreams. Wonder what the mental health and well being is like in New York? The fact that lots seem to be having vivid dreams shows our collective psyche is over-charged I reckon.

What I wanted to mention though is that I had a re-union earlier. It was on Zoom but worth doing once you get past the slightly tinny voices. Liam was there and acted as host. You will imagine who else? Steve and Jack: I can't remember if you ever met Jack. In this virus-laden world, I'll guess that in view of what passed between you and Steve twenty years ago, you wouldn't want to meet. That would be laden with another kind of heaviness. So there we were, friends re-united from the fateful day. Speaking of emotionally charged history, San Francisco will have too many memories for you I'm sure but wonder what's going on there. E-mail me if you can about the situation in your part of New York.

For now I send you my very fondest best wishes,

Bill

Later, after he and Katie had gone to their own rooms, Bill lay there trying to get to sleep. Through the unquiet moments of tossing night, recollections jostled for attention.

Six days had passed since meeting Liam. Bill took his new friend from Britain to an Ideas Group he attended just below Telegraph Hill. Bill said that the group convened monthly, rotating its venue round seven or eight regulars. It had started a year ago, the inspiration of Andrew Calvin, a Berkeley physicist. They were drawn together in fascination with a fine tuned universe that mesmerised all who gazed with wonder.

The door of the apartment was opened by a man in his mid fifties. His face was long and thin as if his head had been compressed. He looked slightly odd, an impression compounded by an incongruous combination of designer jeans and an old cardigan. But there was natural warmth about Andrew Calvin that quickly made Liam feel at home.

"Come on in. Hi Bill. And Liam. You're very welcome!" he said with a smile. They walked into the main room. Five men and two women were standing or sitting. One was not joining in the other conversations but stood gazing out of the window. This extraordinarily beautiful woman turned and looked directly at him, with hair that seemed to dance like it should in a shampoo advert.

"Beth, meet Liam," said Bill introducing his guest.

They talked for a few minutes before other hands were shaken. Liam didn't catch all their names. Each was involved in some field of science. After a drink, the routine exchange of news fell silent, comfortable chairs were occupied and preliminaries enacted. As the evening moved on and they exchanged book reviews and comment, Liam was intrigued by their conversation and their openness to a spiritual dimension. He was introduced.

"You must come and talk to us sometime," said Andrew Calvin. "Beth has prepared something for us tonight so we'll now turn to her now if that's OK."

There are not many jobs for a professional philosopher apart from being a professor. Most of those trained, degreed and gowned in the subject ended up in other walks of life. Like the San Francisco Police Department. Beth was a vehicle examiner who applied logic to working out the causes of accidents. It required careful sifting of the evidence, always searching for causes; immediate causes, first causes and causes of causes.

Beth began to talk, without notes and almost without breath.

"For four centuries" she said, "religion and science held to their exclusive way of looking at the world. Science was for the real world, for medicines, weapons, engineering. Religion was for poetry and wonder, the uncertain, the indefinable. But now science has come round to talking about a moment of creation. Even Einstein had to accept the evidence for an expanding universe and the implication that everything started off one dark night".

Beth paused, her brows knotted as she struggled for expression. "It would be breathtaking if instead of being an enemy, science was helping to unveil the face of the Creator. But I honestly think that's where we're headed. Some very elegant theories have been built about how something comes from nothing. That time and space switched on spontaneously as if it's all been explained and can we go onto the next problem now?"

"It looks convenient," she went on. "The gap between nothing and something is bridged with a tremor that sparks it all off. Nothing has a hiccup. Next thing you know, something is waving at us. Suddenly they've pulled 70 billion galaxies out of their hats. But wait a

minute! Wait a minute! Either there is nothing to begin with, no time, no quantum vacuum and no physical laws. Or there's something. And that something needs explaining!"

Beth went on, with the air of a practiced debater you hoped was on your side. "Almost all physicists start their account of how the universe came into being with the laws of nature. But where do the laws that shaped everything come from? We have grown accustomed to its face, but why is there a universe to begin with and why did it form this way?"

Beth said it ran counter to all our human experience to say that we must just accept the existence of things. When we look at the universe, we instinctively ask the question 'how has all this come to be?' Every explanation leaves us with something that is uncaused and not dependent on anything else for its existence".

"Don't you think they've explained how the universe came into existence?" interrupted a man whose name Liam had missed.

"Don't you believe it," said Andrew Calvin dismissively.

Bill nodded his head. "We've learnt to live with the way things are. But it's far, far more likely that there should be nothing rather than something. Either that or there ought to be total chaos. Anything other than this fine tuned cosmos we see everywhere."

Andrew Calvin nodded. "And of course no explanation of the universe can be taken seriously unless it can account for some basic observations, some of which are quite recent," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Liam, looking round at these brilliant people who were yearning to restore wonder to Third Millennium people.

"I think we're in for a long evening", said Bill.

Within that group, Liam thought, the wonder was definitely growing, the curious mystery of the beginning of time itself, the wonder of a mysterious event that unfolded the entire cosmos. They said that the starting-pistol was a Big Bang. Perhaps it was a flower unfolding with breathtaking speed and the whole structure of everything was profoundly biological.

"It is for us all to interpret this evidence" Beth concluded. "I have come to believe that science and faith are converging. Both need expanding to include a wider picture of the other. From being traditional sparring partners, who knows if their marriage won't be the great social event of the new Millennium?" And after the Q and A, discussion wound up.

"That was very moving!" Bill said as they returned home.

"Tell me more about Beth", Liam asked curiously. "She speaks freely and there's a buzz about her. Her words feed my sense of wonder. But when she talks about herself, her voice and expression drop as if hiding a loneliness her mind doesn't somehow touch".

"Oh she has mysterious depths all right", said Bill. "She's definitely got star quality".

"Is she married or in a relationship?" Liam wondered.

"To her friends" said Bill, "this is one of the cosmic mysteries. You'd think someone would have grabbed her heart. Recently, she's found this guy. The only snag is, he's married".

"What about her faith then?" wondered Liam.

Bill shook his head. "Beth is, or was a practising Catholic. But there's a void inside that she's never allowed her faith to connect with. Beth enjoys keeping her distance. If anyone got too close, they'll reach into her inner being. Now she's met someone who has found a way in".

They drove on in silence. Then Bill added, with a tangible lament in his voice, "why did it have a man she couldn't have? It's like a Greek tragedy playing itself out".

"Who is he?" Liam asked.

"His name is Steve Bright"

Liam looked quizzical, trying to disguise a knotted expression that formed on his forehead. He knew that name.

"I gather that Steve Bright is the owner of a software design company here in Silicon Valley", Bill said. "I'm told that Amanda, his wife has a growing reputation as a human rights lawyer. I knew Steve Bright at school once. I met his brother a couple of years ago on a cruise liner."

A week later they had gone for dinner with Beth. She lived alone in a sizeable house that once belonged to her father. He had moved to Marin County when he began to do well financially, in the days when it was full of cocaine enthusiasts. Bill went to talk to Beth about his Ali. Liam glanced through a paper, sticky with a new age feel. Therapists and practitioners offered re- birthing and astral travel.

"How come you work for the famous SFPD?" Liam asked, as drinks entered, courtesy of this elegant woman with long black hair.

Beth smiled and her curls seemed to dance in symbiotic waltz.

"While I was doing my degree" she said, "Watergate broke. Raised in the liberal era of the 60s, this was the final stage of disillusionment just at the time I was forming opinions about everything".

She paused to pour herself a drink.

"It made me cynical about leadership and institutions. I saw that truth and justice have to be fought for. We're always only one step away from corruption. Rather than stay in academia, I looked round for a job where I can make a difference. Idealistic but there it is" she added.

"Any regrets?" Liam was curious.

"Not really. When I hear philosophers talk these days, I'm not sorry I left the intellectual establishment. Three years ago, I went to the 19th World Congress of Philosophy at Boston. Philosophy is so tribal, so balkanised. All those Aristotelians and Nietzscheans, Marxists and logicians, neo Kantians and ethics experts; all jostling together, talking to their own tribe. Like Babel, a dialogue of the deaf!"

"Philosophy can be very stimulating but it can also be as empty as the void within the human soul," observed Liam.

Susan smiled faintly. "I studied Heidegger, once acclaimed round the world but whose life played out the spiritual tragedy of our times. In 1945 as his beloved Nazis were at their last gasp, the most elevated statement that formed on his lips was 'Being is the trembling of Godding'. It was all hot air; chasing after wind as the old book of Ecclesiastes puts it".

"How come you know Bill?" asked Liam.

Beth told him that she met Bill after his wife had died in a car accident. She had been one of the investigators working out the cause. A friendship developed.

"Strictly Platonic right Bill?" she said with a smile.

"Chance would be a fine thing" replied Bill, twinkling.

"And how long have you been a part of that Ideas Group?" Liam was intrigued.

Bill became her spokesman. "After I rebuilt my life, I was looking for something. I introduced Beth to a number of friends. We were all converging in our ideas".

"That's about it," said Beth. "When I investigate an accident, I ask who or what caused it and how did it happen?" She paused to suck the juice out of an orange. "It's daft to say that we mustn't enquire about the existence of things and just accept them", she went on. "All our human experience is against it. When we look at the universe, it's natural to ask the question--how has all this come to be?"

"Only today," she exclaimed, "we were examining an accident the other side of Richmond Bridge. The cause of death seemed to be the driver's air bag that exploded into her face at 150 miles an hour, throwing her against the headrest. "The universe definitely needs explaining. Why is there something rather than nothing? Blind chance? or cosmic accident?"

"Could the universe have given itself birth?" Beth pondered. "We only consider the idea of a universe continually pulsating with life, expanding and contracting having a Creator because we are reluctant to face the truth. It is a flight from the light".

And with that, the light increased. Bill realised the day was dawning. It was time to awake.