

Letters from a Shuttered Country

Chapter Eleven: Redemption's Happy Hour

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As Liz took a step into the chasm of sea and darkness beneath, just then, the phone rang. What on earth? Here? Of course it was the mobile phone still in her coat pocket. As if wandering disconsolately along the cliff at Beachy Head in the little hours was sufficiently unreal, this was surreal. "Go on, answer it," she said out loud. Instinct took hold as the curiosity of the self she had been about to extinguish rose from the abyss. The indivisible blackness of sea and sky suddenly looked less intense.

"Hello" she said. She couldn't believe it. Liam of all people? Here on the phone? Now? This time of night! It had to be the oddest thing that had ever happened.

"Liz, I had the strangest and strongest impulse to phone you. I know how late it is. And you will tell me to back off and go to bed. But something has made me call. Tell me you're all right".

Liz took a deep breath and couldn't resist smiling at the situation. Maybe all her experience did not have to be a long extended conversation with oneself. Perhaps there was someone out there able to break in upon us. What should she say?

"Yes I'm all right". Even as she said these words, she felt herself struggle back over the cliff to find a foothold on life once more. "Look, thanks for phoning. I'll go back now" (though she didn't say where she was), "come and talk to me soon" she added, almost as an afterthought. Liz thought she saw a crack in the sky. And she sat there for an hour until pale flecks of morning began to line the eastern sky. A new day.

Liam and Liz met quite often after that. Once a week would see them in Starbucks talking about faith and framework – and whether the latter was helpful for the former. Liam said it was the lack of a framework that made it hard for end of millennium people to find the voice of faith and put their world together. They discussed whether there is something beyond. Liz wasn't up for much of it. She couldn't deny that at a level deeper than the life of the mind, she had responded –or not as the case maybe – to life in a certain way.

“I don’t think there’s anything there that comes to us from outside” she said emphatically, “It’s all what comes to us from within. We create our own solutions, our own redemption”.

“So tell me what led up to that night on Beachy Head?” Liam probed gently.

Liz fell silent. After a while and a second Latte, she told him what was going on before that. Her bid for an air of easy-going self-composure began to crumple.

“You’re right”, she admitted. “I needed help from outside that wild night. All the self-talk pick-me ups was suddenly hollow. But don’t you need proof? You can’t believe anything”.

“You’ve got to take a leap to be sure” said Liam. “But unlike you that night, it wouldn’t be a leap into the unknown or more obviously, into the nothingness of certain death. If it’s Christian faith we’re talking, it makes complete sense but at some point you have to jump”.

“You seem very sure of all this”, said Liz. “I suppose that’s what comes of training to be a Vicar. You should go and convert my brother-in-law Steve”, she said. “They’re back in the UK now. Silicon Valley where he worked until recently is a frenetic place. Unless you bring your full self into work with you, you should go find somewhere else to be”.

“I expect you know I’ve met him?” said Liam.

“Yes I heard”, Liz nodded. “It must be tough to keep moving at the required pace. Attentional overload is what they call it. The non-stop emails, texts, messages, meetings - just creates a hell of stress. It’s like you’re expecting the alarm to go off every minute”.

“That’s for sure”, agreed Liam. “You get to work and suddenly it’s lunchtime. And then you remember, you haven’t even had breakfast!”

“But look I am listening”, Liz said. “Maybe one of these days I’ll take the leap of faith. “Think he’s left for good that lady he was friendly with?” Liz asked, her tone heavy with euphemism.

“Hope so” said Liam. “Beth has powerful allure for him. Steve was the moth drawn to light”.

“Hope you can meet and chat sometime soon”, Liz said. “Think he’s in denial about all that”.

They parted shortly afterwards, Liz returning to her temporary accommodation. She wasn’t sure if she and Jack will get back. She said she got lonely sometimes but now had a Pentium!

"Well that wasn't an easy day!" remarked Katie as they drove home from the funeral.

"Certainly wasn't" agreed Bill. "Uncle Len was a father to me and a Granddad to you. He was a good man."

"Very poignant we couldn't see him before he died," Katie said. "This is so hard on people."

"Yes it is", Bill agreed. "Thought Liam did a good job taking the graveside service but it rubs it in that we couldn't get more than a dozen there and those that did needed to stand away from each other. It highlighted the distress of these days. We're not made to stand apart and keep our distance."

"It's all so weird Dad", Katie said, glancing as she drove at the embattled face Bill showed. "Stay indoors, stay away, stay separate but we all came together somehow".

"What we have got is technology" Bill observed. "A hundred years ago, we didn't have any of this magic in the last global pandemic. With AIDS, we didn't have anything on this scale."

"Home learning is happening in theory", remarked Katie. "I would say just over half of our pupils' parents are engaged with their children's doing lessons on-line."

"It's all going to increase the divides teachers like you have been working to close for some time," said Bill, watching the trees and lampposts merging.

"That's true", agreed Katie. "Teachers from the most deprived schools report a much lower parental engagement than those from the least deprived schools. The shift to remote learning during lockdown has made the implications of children and young people's unequal access to IT equipment and connection even more stark. We have to help these children to catch up. Some of our children who already face the greatest challenges have suffered the worst impact to their learning during the lockdown. The digital divide is largely to blame."

"Covid-19 has changed our older students' expectations of what the university experience will be", she added. "They fear the social aspect will be almost non-existent. Covid changed the future. All that freedom of adulthood! They'll be stuck at home doing lectures online."

“Sure”, agreed Bill. “You enjoyed university. It was a good time for you”.

“I did” remarked Katie, as they turned off the motorway. “I had been really looking forward to joining societies and clubs like hockey, but for this generation, how can a Zoom call give you that experience?” I personally find face-to-face learning much more useful than online teaching,” she said. “But the world is changing fast and young people will just have to get on and deal with whatever may happen.”

“Find love on-line”, asked Bill, watching for clues in Katie’s expression. She smiled.

“We had a Zoom date last night”, Katie said. “That was different! Neither Robert or I wanted to rush into another relationship but it feels good.”

“How do you do a Zoom date on-line for goodness sake?” Bill asked. “Wondered why you wanted the meal in your room!”

“Dad it was fun. Candlelit dinner, a glass or three – all very romantic.”

“Very different from when you were a baby at the time of AIDs when your Mum died and we were just getting on to Internet Relay Chat.” Bill said, instantly wishing he hadn’t.

Katie went quiet. They drove the rest of the way in silence as Bill remembered what Jack, his school-boy partner in crime, had told him over a drink one night years ago.

It was still fast for 1999. One morning, Jack Bright purchased his first Pentium. It ran at 333 Mhz and came complete with a modem and Internet access to the mysterious world of cyberspace.

Quickly, he began to be hooked on E-mail and USENET newsgroups. But despite these services that seemed impossibly futuristic to anyone only ten years before, Jack Bright yearned for something more. If only he could have a real conversation with someone rather than a game of phone tag; ‘first my turn, then yours’.

Cyberspace was a new world. Often Jack wondered where it actually was. Using your mouse, you could buy anything from Viagra to Venetian blinds. You could enter a bookshop and browse through a global selection of four million titles. Given the right equipment, you could get into web TV or trade stocks and shares on the Net. Virtual reality appealed to him. It was a growth industry everywhere. Jack began to feel more at home in cyber space than the real world; whatever that was. He spent hours walking into virtual art galleries, being shown round the White House or watching the world go by through a camera in New York. And there was porn too, complete with 360 degree imaging of bodies, voyeurs from any direction. Jack savoured it, though only temporarily. It all seemed hollow to him now.

One day, he discovered Internet Relay Chat. "Hmm", thought Jack as he sat in front of the manual. He worked out how to adjust configuration and settings, got on-line, and by trial and error, went through the steps. Now he was ready to go.

In the next few days, Jack familiarised himself with the current lingo. He would need user ID by which he would be known. Every line of text he would send to the network would be prefixed by this nickname. He chose a boyhood hero, a role he had loved to play. Alexander the Great. Jack typed in "/nick Great Alex".

Up came a welcome message on the server. "Welcome to the Internet Relay network". He entered a command to find out which channels had at least ten people on them. Chat lines were operating 24 hours a day in a world that never slept.

Within a month, Jack was hooked. He was back at the graduation ball. People from all over the world stood around in groups. Anytime he wanted, he could join in their conversations or eavesdrop for a while, walk from group to group and even invite someone into a separate room to have a private chat. That was how he met 'Jude'.

It was a chance encounter. And their first private channel did not last longer than three minutes before there was a 'G ' for gone next to her nickname. But the following week, there was an 'H'. Jude was back.

> Jude. Hi. It's me.

> Great Alex. Hello again.

> Jude. ASL right?

> Great Alex. Fine by me. Age is 40--50; sex, yes please and I'm male. Location- somewhere south of London.

> Jude. Our profiles are similar. My age is 40--50; sex, not yet and by the way I'm female. Location? somewhere to the north of you but not that much.

That was how it started. At first, chat sessions averaged once a fortnight. They notched it up to once a week and then hardly a day would go by without some message from the mysterious 'Jude'. For some time, Jack was happy to abide by the rules. Jude could be anybody. A married woman having a fling? His neighbour even? Who knows. That was the adventure of cyber community.

Jack had began by using a log file to save all his IRC sessions. But there was such drivel. He remembered CB radio in his teenage days. All this hi tech didn't mean that human beings suddenly had profound things to say to each other. So why did he think his chat correspondence with the mysterious Jude produced gems that were worth keeping? Jack told himself off for keeping love letters as if he was playing the role of all lovers throughout history. But he couldn't bring himself to erase the files.

> Jude. Hi. It's me again.

> Great Alex. You hung up the other day before I could ask you something.

> Jude. Ask me what?

> Great Alex. Hey Jude, why Jude?

> Jude. No big secret. The Beatles are still my favourite.

> Great Alex. Mine too! 'Yesterday. All my troubles seem so far away!'

> Jude. We seem to have a few things in common.

The phone goes in suburbia.

"Dad?" went a sallow voice.

"Craig? Craig!" said Jack in groggy voice. It was the first time for years that Craig had called him that. Memories of a shy little boy instantly stood to attention. "Craig where are you?"

"Can you come?"

"What time is it?" asked Jack.

"About 2am I think," said the scared voice on the other end of the phone. "Look, I'm at Casualty. There's a problem. I need help".

"I'll be right there" said Jack and quickly dressed.

At Casualty, he pieced together what had happened. Craig had been sleeping round a mate's house for the past three nights. They had run short of hash. His mate had approached the dealer for more dope. He had given him 20 pounds but then realised, too late that he hadn't collected the change. The dealer was known to turn quickly and the lads quaked. Wanting to act tough and unafraid, Craig said he'd sort it though inside he was petrified. The pusher was dealing with someone else when Craig showed up demanding his change. Things quickly got out of hand. Craig got beaten up with a cricket bat. The pusher had been arrested for assault though Craig didn't know how long he would be locked up.

Jack sat looking around him as they waited for Craig to be seen to and the police to take a statement. It was 2.45 in the morning. One man sat with his head in his lap, holding a towel to his eyes. "It was meant to make you mad!" erupted a loud voice in the corner.

A fight had developed outside a night club. The bouncer intervened and in the scuffle, pushed them through a shop window. Across hospitalised rows of red seats, both parties now glared at each other. It struck Jack as a little picture of hell, an advance warning of a day of reckoning. "What a mess" he thought. "People blowing it and lashing out. They're trapped," he thought. "Guess I'm trapped, trapped in my bleak, sad solitary existence".

Craig spoke about the change that had been coming over him, that he was beginning to put distance between him and King H.

"I thought heroin was a dependable friend. It relieved the pain just as the effect of the last dose began to wear off.

"Craig, maybe you've got to speak it out and say ' I don't need this anymore..you're no friend of mine!"

They chatted for a while, watching hurting people meander through the reception area. Occasionally, a nurse walked briskly through from one end to another. In the middle of the night, everyone and everything was daubed with grim colours.

"Where did you and Mum meet?" asked Craig curiously.

"In India" Jack replied. But that was as far as he got. Just then, Craig went to make a statement. Jack sat looking at the tear stained lives and anger that sicked up all over the place. The record in Casualty that night stirred him deeply. "We definitely pay," thought Jack, "just like someone's going to pay for that shop window".

Craig was there for ages, being interviewed and being stitched up. Jack fell into as sound a sleep as a hard chair in casualty would allow, dreaming of India and the last time he and Liz had visited there together. Maybe they would go again. Please God!

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India. A bewildering human drama where the scenes were changing incessantly and disturbingly. Scenes of beauty and ugliness, poverty and wealth, peacefulness and noise, luxury and squalor alternated rapidly and with a contrast that was profoundly unsettling. Jack Bright and Liz knew that they would be as affected by the encounter as any amongst the caravan of western travellers before them.

A 20 hour journey by train brought them to Varanasi Junction. They had arrived at the ancient capital of Hindu faith and learning. Once a life time Hindus visited old Benares to wash away their sins. Jack looked nostalgically at the familiar sights.

"It was Mark Twain who said 'Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together'" he remarked to Liz. "To die here is to be most favourably placed to ensure the best possible rebirth.

After checking in a low budget hotel, they sought the services of a rickshaw guide. They could have made it around by foot but Jack said it would be good for a first time visit. A

guide would stop them being pestered by beggars and fake Sadhus after their money. And so, in the twilight world of early evening, they found themselves carted round a mysterious world populated by dope fiends, money lenders, holy men and road side barbers. Purveyors in the silk emporium followed the traditions of centuries. When a royal prince Siddhartha, the Buddha had prized the silks of Benares. If Jack and Liz were lost amidst the countless bazaars and stalls, they needn't have worried, the rickshaw guide explained. Following a sacred cow or a funeral procession would always return them to familiar landmarks.

The wind of the night stirred fretfully against the windows of the hotel and the travellers had arranged to be woken an hour before dawn. Their guide was waiting. He pulled them in silence through winding alleys dominated by mountains of incense, fruit and vegetables. The skyline was dominated by domes, towers, minarets and hundreds of temples dedicated to Shiva, presiding deity of old Benares.

Jack and Liz were drawn to an unforgettable kaleidoscope of temple priests, pyres of smouldering people and old ruined temples sliding into a river. They had arrived at the Ganges. Hindu pilgrims crowded on to the Ghats, stepped embankments along the river bank, and prepared for a ritual bath and the ceremony of Puja in praise of the rising sun. Thousands stood waiting for priests to summon the dawn. Then came huge redness of the rising sun; with it, a broken silence. Ghats draped in the mistiness of early morning suddenly woke to life. The faithful flocked into the river to wash clothes along with their sins.

Pyres were being lit for the first cremations of the day. The rickshaw guide explained that ghats were different; one had a shrine to the goddess of smallpox, another was used for cremating the bodies of outcasts, one was dedicated to ascetics and yet another, the Hanuman Ghat, was the scene of worship to the monkey god. The furthest embankment was the first of five special Ghats that pilgrims must bathe in during the course of a single day in order to fulfil a complete purification ritual. By the riverbank, sick people lay on filthy rags or mats of rattan, waiting to die. As the sun began to build intensity, Jack and Liz were glad to pause under a tree that offered shade. They reached the market. A dozen butcher's stalls were killing animals right there on the street. Car horns were blown obsessively.

Jack pointed out where Brahman priests used to observe the Asva Medha, the most important sacrifice in old Hinduism. It took a whole year commencing with ritual sacrifice of

609 horses in exactly the right order. But get it right and performing the Asva Medha gave unlimited saving power. Jack knew of the old priestly literature, the Brahmanas. 'This is the atonement for everything, the remedy for everything'" he intoned. "'He who performs the Asva Medha, redeems all sin. Whosoever performs the Asva Medha sacrifice, obtains all his desires, and attains all attainments.'"

"India's millions," Liz observed "are told that the problem with the human race has been that we are trapped; trapped on an endless round of birth and re birth- Samsara , the constant flow of the human soul from one form of life to another. What we need is Moksha, freedom, so we can be released from the wheel of life to which we are hopelessly bound".

As if in harmony with this statement, bicycle wheels were glinting in the sun. Occasionally, their riders stopped to get off. Was it possible to get off the cycle and find freedom? You've got to build up enough karma, Jack said. But how do you ever know if there is enough in your personal account? The consequences of actions follow you about forever like chains on a condemned man. Is forgiveness possible, real forgiveness that clears away the past? It was a question that hung in the air.

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It was early evening in early summer of the last year before the twentieth century took its farewell. Liam moved briskly along the top of the circular mound that curved across the old Neolithic hill fort of Cissbury Ring on the chalk hills of the English South Downs. Colour in the green grey sky was receding, leaving him alone underneath fading light. He came here sometimes to commune with his father. But he was not alone. A man with jet black hair and a black heavy knit Sherpa fleece was walking briskly along the top of the mound from the opposite direction, his legs moving easily beneath a stocky body, his emotions bleeding from soul-emptiness. Eyes locked with simultaneous recognition. They surveyed each other with an approving air, then spoke out their greeting.

Bill Trimble's voice sounded. "Here you are? Ok?"

"I'm Ok. Good to see you Bill!" said Liam.

Bill had phoned earlier that day. They had arranged to meet up when it transpired that he was lecturing in astronomy in Brighton at the university that week and Bill had a couple of hours between sessions. They hadn't spoken since Liam had visited San Francisco.

They talked for a while about family and friends.

"But tell me. Do they take you seriously?" Bill asked, in a flush of genuine curiosity despite himself. There was something enigmatic about his eyes, brimming with friendliness but on a closer view, not wanting to disclose his inner turmoil.

"I think they're starting to" Liam replied. "People are genuinely searching I think. I've seen enough on my journey to know that spirituality is the buzz of our times. It's not 'do you believe', like it was in our younger days. It's 'what do you believe!' Some sort of faith is everywhere".

Aware that he did not have long, there came upon Bill an impulse to reveal his inner thoughts to this man. They stood looking out over soft green downs. Bill was in pensive mood. From his fleece pocket, he withdrew a newspaper.

"Have you seen this?"

The headline for the 12th March in that year of 1998 proclaimed that asteroid XF11 was on collision course with Earth. October 2028 was the target.

"These are interesting times we live in," said Liam. "There's almost a sense of history building to a conclusion".

"It gets to me," Bill said suddenly, surveying the evening. "If I was to go in for religion, I wouldn't side with those who convey an easy familiarity with the cosmos. I want to stand awe-struck before everything that is beautiful. I want to cease living in a drab, functional world drained of astonishment. Where's the magic in the mundane?" As he said this, he looked surprised that he could even admit thoughts like this, let alone articulate them. But something about Liam drew him out.

"If only religion didn't involve giving power away to an organisation," he continued. "If it was about connecting to the divine through the beauty of nature, or unconditional love for human beings, I'd be in. Any ideal is always spoiled".

Liam stopped and looked earnestly at him.

"But it's equally messy" he said, "when it comes to working out any ideal, like marriage for instance. It's inevitable that wherever you get people doing something in community together, not just indulging an individual whim, there will be an institutional, organised aspect to things which can then go wrong". "But you're right of course" he added. "The church has struggled with its humanity like we all do individually".

Bill paused to pick the bud off a tree that hung limply besides the footpath. Beneath them, the sea glistened. There was no stopping the overflow of the dam.

"I'm tired of a sardonic rationalism and the materialism that's blighted my life" he said despairingly. "I'm tired of the props being the centre of the stage. There has to be more".

They slowly walked down the hillside.

"We all have" said Liam slowly, "a hunger to experience a reality greater than what we could touch and see. We built this universe boxed in by the horizons of what we could prove with our tiny mind, what we could calculate, what we could buy. But we couldn't live in such a confined prison. We needed to depose arrogant rationalism, to rediscover a spiritual dimension and make the world an enchanted place once again".

Bill reflected on this for a moment. He felt himself cracking and crumbling. "I am curious about the spirit zone in the self development courses I have attended in Esalen" he said. "Wasn't like the summer of love in 67 in San Francisco" he added. "I was too young for that one but you still got marijuana, mescalen and LSD taken in large quantities. Drug induced mysticism or psychedelics as agents for personal and social change! On arrival for my course, the guests were handed a drink of beetroot and orange. The food was light and healthy and you should have seen the bedrooms!"

"What about them? Liam asked curiously.

"They came complete with a frankincense pillow spray to encourage relaxation and a bedside booklet to suggest how you could wind down, assuming you were still stressed after a late evening reflexology session in the health club or a head and neck massage for those who needed it. It's all about creating karma I think but it's got a good spiritual feel to it.

"Mind you we need something to tell us how to take a deep breath and focus on priorities."

Liam looked at his friend inquiringly.

"Look around" he said. "At this end of millennium moment, there's a vast range of products available- health foods, alternative medicine, altered states of consciousness, positive thinking, smudging, self-help courses to help maximise your human potential. It's spiritual thirst. The ordinary stuff doesn't work anymore. We need more and more, like sailors who drank salt water and died with a raging thirst. What we really need is fresh water".

"I've been doing a lot of thinking recently" said Bill gesticulating at the darkening night sky above them, "what with Ali's being seriously ill with Aids. OK, I'm a person, I hurt. But is there any echo? Does the universe respond to my cry to count, to be conscious, to be loved and valued? Or is all our humanity met with a cruel mocking laugh, like.... like the laugh of an empty horizon?"

"How can the spirit keep intact in a place where everything is evaporated as the dew of morning?" said Liam. "And what is it about us that we even ask such questions" he added. "You, me, those people over there" he said, indicating a couple strolling up the hill, "we're all born with a gap. There's a hole. It needs explaining. Even more, it needs filling".

"You know what my lecture is about?" Bill asked Liam rhetorically? "The structure of the universe has been a perennial quest over two and a half thousand years or more. In the past century, a deeper quest has been the concern of theoretical physicists. How is everything connected? With the addition of the Higgs field, the fundamental forces are fairly well known but how they fit together is another matter. What is the nature of reality?"

"You know Bill", Liam said "we hold our arguments about the greatest question of all, we can bat them back and forward as in that Ideas Group you came to in San Francisco that time. But that gap you speak of is frighteningly real. Is there anything out there that corresponds to what's in here? Does the cosmos give any personal meaning to our lives?"

“As the dimensions of the cosmos have exploded into unimaginative scale, human insignificance seems smaller and smaller. Yet there is a huge gap. Our personal lives protest hugely against being written off. The gap is between the objective laws of physics and the everyday subjective experience that yearns for significance. For me that takes us straight to the existence of God.”

“How do you get to that from the question of our own need to count?” asked Bill curiously. “So here’s the thing” said Liam as they returned to the car park below Cissbury Ring. What ultimate realities are suggested by the drive to feel we are significant, that we count? How does the universe generate human participants who not only are conscious and self-aware but have an imperative towards high worth? Or has an impersonal universe given rise to this fundamental way we are wired up? A personal God is the most satisfactory explanation of valuable personhood. We can object all we want but we only have to look within to know we need to be of value as people. What’s that based on?”

Bill nodded occasionally under these blows to his old, crumbling mind set. When his clutch was engaged, he could drive through intellectual arguments with the best of them. But he could no longer deny that he was born with a gap. By now, they were strolling down the long slope that leads to the car park. An approaching couple talked together with honeyed voices and furtive expression on their faces. Bill thought of Beth and knew he loved her.

"I've come to this spot because this is where I used to wander as a boy when I wanted to think things over. I came here many times after Jerusalem. Why, I wonder, do we create special places, full of mystery?" he added intently.

Liam stared at him, lingering over the incalculable outcome of that fateful day. Liam still had no idea who he was. Now wasn't the time.

"Where are you staying?" Liam asked, deflecting the blow to his ancient wound.

"The Grand Hotel" said Bill. "That's where the IRA tried to blow up the entire British cabinet in 1984. It's rebuilt now of course. Look, he added, “when I return to the UK, lets meet.”

They said their farewells and Bill returned to the conference and flew back to America.

Two days later, Bill sat looking at the fog that had once again enveloped San Francisco. He imagined himself at home in the restless sea, forever in turmoil, forever yearning upwards. Strong winds were driving the water. A dark grey restlessness hung over him like a cloud through which little penetration by the sun was possible. He remembered the many times when he had longed for a shaft of warmth and light to dissipate his cold joyless life.

"Guilt is the heavy burden I must carry round with me. I'm paying," Bill had said to Liam.

"And others pay for me. You won't find the answer to that at the bottom of a bottle".

"Very true" Liam had said. "Where will you find the answer?"

"We choose," said Bill, turning heavy eyes upon Bill and holding him in his stare. "And we live with the consequences forever!"

"No we don't" said Liam. "There's a way out. It's a road called forgiveness. To be forgiven and to forgive breaks the chains as nothing else can."

Liam had related an old story. Bill knew of it. It was of two brothers. The youngest brother pleaded with their father to give him his inheritance now, without waiting around until the old man died. With a heavy heart, the father agreed to it, and watched as his son trod the pathway to fame, fortune and fast living. It didn't work out. Aiming high, the youngest son spent and spent until he sunk low because he had spent everything. He sunk so low that he became a feeder of pigs which was as low as you could get in those days. One day, he came to his senses. What on earth was he was doing there? "I will arise" he said to himself, "and go to my father" Which he did. And the warmth of the welcome took his breath away and was spoken of for centuries.

7

It was August 1999

> Great Alex. Did you see the sunset tonight?

> Jude. The evening was ablaze. Someone soaked the sky in paraffin and lit it

> Great Alex. I knew a lady once who could set the sky alight

> Jude. Now that's a fine thing to say to me.

> Great Alex. I really hope this isn't a step too far. I think I'm falling in love

> Jude. I feel that too. Perhaps we should meet and feel the vibes between us

> Great Alex. Speaking of the future, are you going to the eclipse?

> Jude. Yes I'm going with some friends. Are you?

> Great Alex. Sure. When I was a boy, I read that the last great eclipse of the century could be seen from Britain. I made up my mind there and then I'd see it.

> Jude. Alex, or whatever your name is, let's not play anymore.

> Great Alex. You need to explain that

> Jude. We've been on line friends now for ages. Let's meet.

> Great Alex. I was hoping you'd say that

With mutual trepidation, it was agreed. And so were a rendezvous point and means by which they could spot one another amidst the spectators. Great Alex would wear a red striped shirt, a mauve jacket and would be sporting a small black holdall. Jude would wear a cream coloured top and have a dahlia tied to her handbag.

They had feared Cornwall would sink under the weight of several million visitors. Amongst the invaders were druids, New Agers plus other assorted pagans come to commune with the earth and heaven, with myth and with mystery. Like tourists making a bee line for a continental beach, sacred sites and monuments that dotted the Cornish firmament were ideal for the nature based spirituality of modern paganism. The eclipse was a great time for giving birth.

Amongst the crowds come to see a once in a lifetime nature spectacular, Jack looked out for someone who might answer to Jude's description. In the heaving sea, there was little hope of finding a stranger. Waiting for the moment when the sun would be blotted out, Jack mused why it was that men in a second marriage often ended up going for a wife- look-alike. He waited with anticipation for the eclipse and for Jude. As the tension of the crowd began to solidify, he caught the mesmerising event unfolding before him. Most of Cornwall was draped in rain cloud. But where they were, a gap suddenly appeared.

Yesterday, the warmth of an August sun had filled the morning and Jack felt the power of an energy machine so vast it defied comparison with anything else in the solar system. Now, the moon arose to stand directly in the way, turning day into night. Through special glasses, he and thousands more continued to watch as the sun and moon wrestled for control of the day. Flames licked round the side of the moon.

Two minutes passed before the issue was no longer in doubt and the sun reappeared in the blazing glory of a raging, unending, nuclear conflagration. Once again, it was converting ferocious energy to light and heat to radiate out across the solar system.

"Who lit the fire at the centre of the sun?" Jack pondered. And it seemed to him that the curtain had fallen on the old century but that the sun had re-appeared and there was hope.

But nowhere was any sign of anyone who might be Jude. Then he saw Liz. Jack stood mesmerised, unable to break free from the magnetic earth. His ex-partner was wearing the same top and jacket and had the same bag as Jude was supposed to have. Liz was Jude. Jude was Liz! The moon that was Liz had just obliterated the sun that Jude represented for him. Jude was now eclipsed forever. For a while, they hugged without words. Then words began to flow, expressions of thoughts that should have been uttered long before, a river of words and a disclosure of emotions that continued as they drove back to the family home. Liz was stirred by the transformation of an uncommunicative man into someone who seemed to actually enjoy articulating his inner mind.

That was how Alex and Jude met up again as Jack and Liz. A month later found them talking and walking for an evening and a long night along the Thames embankment and streets of London that were beginning to empty. It was warm enough to allow a conversation that was unremitting, full of lost tenderness. Both were surprised how easy it was to make the transition from cyberspace to reality. Both wondered if such a jump was itself artificial.

As they passed a restaurant boat moored on the Thames, Jack said. "Look, in December I've got a reunion with Steve and Bill Trimble, an old friend from school. Amanda is coming. Will you come as my surprise date?"

"Yes sure" said Liz. "Why not? Let's do it. How are Steve and Amanda by the way?"

As the world was slowly enveloped in darkness, the city slipped into a different phase of life. Most formal work in the office block world was winding down. Office blocks pierced the sky and buildings of all kinds were silhouetted against the gathering night. But even as the lights were coming on, the city was coming alive with a beat and an excitement that was palpable. Out there in the inky world were restaurants and wine bars, cinema complexes, throbbing nightclubs and shops that stayed open till late.

"I love city life," thought Steve contentedly. "Give me the shops, the people and the entertainment you get in the city. There's a vibrancy here you just can't beat."

As a student, he had decided the only way he could have the life he aspired to was to stay in the city but to try to live more cheaply. That was another tension with Mandy. Despite working in both San Francisco and now London, she hated the city.

"Dirty, sprawling urban monsters that gobble up people and countryside", she called them. Their daughter Jane had sung that song too once. "Cities oppressed humanity, overshadowing the rustic simplicity of life with concrete mistakes!"

The lift stopped and out popped Jane. They had arranged to meet up and eat out together that night. For a few minutes, they stood there, trying unsuccessfully to see stars behind the neon glare of night.

"Through a telescope" said Jane, "I once saw Hercules, city of a 100,000 stars".

Steve looked at Jane, a growing respect forming for his daughter. Jane already seemed perfectly at home in the BBC, exuding the kind of breezy confidence he associated with his peers in business or lawyers Amanda rubbed shoulders with. The ups and downs of home life didn't seem to have left her too scarred.

Father and daughter went into Starbucks and ordered coffee.

"I think you'll be good at children's TV actually" he said proudly. "You'll relate well to slightly older kids who, like her at that age enjoy bright colours and pop music. Even as a child, you had a maddening mix of innocence and naughtiness."

"Naughtiness?!" Jane exclaimed. "Dad, you haven't exactly been My Good Boy! Our family life hasn't been blissful."

"I've had to learn the hard way that happiness was learning when to go home," remarked he father biting his lip.

"Are you still working all the hours?" Jane enquired.

"It's easier now," sighed Steve. "Before I had the business, I worked for companies that demanded complete commitment from staff. It initiates you into a long hours culture. You're drained of time or energy to be with your family or pursue your interests. There's not much time for anything else there".

"How's Uncle Jack" she said suddenly. "I thought I saw him the other day."

"He's trying to patch things up with Liz after all that's happened.

"Look Dad", Jane said, slowly increasing pressure on his arm, "since we're talking reconciliation, contact brother Ben. He needs you. Don't believe his air of 'I'm all right'."

"Will do", Steve replied. "Mind you, I reckon I've got some accounting to do with the past. Everyone's gotta to go home and pay their dues. It's about time I went and paid mine."

"You mean with Mum?" Jane asked.

"No, much further back than that", her Dad replied. "It's what took place when I was a boy."

Israel. May 1971. It was the last day of the school trip.

In Jerusalem, the six day war had been a half that as Israeli paratroops encircled East Jerusalem and the old city. By the end of June 67, the Israeli Government declared the reunification official. Jerusalem was annexed. A new phase of Palestinian nationalism had begun. Guerrilla organisations were formed. Despite that, Jerusalem was changing quickly. The Jewish quarter in the old city was being rebuilt. New neighbourhoods were being thrown up around the city to make repartition physically impossible. It was safe enough for a school trip to Israel to go ahead. Mr Chapman, the history teacher, was guide in chief.

The party of 26 boys spent two days in Tel Aviv, two days in Galilee and a day at Masada. Via the snake path, the boys climbed up to the fortress. As the thermometer stood at fifty degrees, the boys saw the rampart on which the Romans had mounted siege towers for the final assault. Old ruins of Masada resonated with the last ditch resistance of its defenders and their decision to put each other to death rather than let themselves be taken.

In the culmination at Jerusalem, most of the sites were included in the itinerary. The boys saw the memorial that was a half mountain: Yad Vashem redolent with the most shocking descent into the heart of darkness that history had ever known. And to think it was less than thirty years before. That evening, they discussed the effect it had on them. Mr Chapman described the flapping of bodies of lynched boys on trees in the Deep South of America or the marches of the Civil Right movement he had witnessed personally five years previously. His black American friends said that if you assert a right to be here, you challenge the entire power and value structure of the Western world. 'The root is rage', the writer James Baldwin had written. Bill sat incredulously as this was related one evening. He could not understand the hatred that white people had for black people and the rage against those who paid for the way of life and prosperity white people enjoyed. Bill had a dim perception that the loss of his own mother fused at some level with the stirring of a social conscience. He would have no problem in having a black lady for a wife one day.

The last day began with a walk along the Rampart on top of the Old City Walls. A guide explained how General Gordon of Khartoum suggested Jesus had been crucified on the hill opposite the Damascus Gate. Some of the boys agreed the shape did resemble a skull; Golgotha in the Aramaic language. Others were not so sure. Under expert tutelage, the boys saw the Western Wall, the last remnant of the Jewish Temple. The Dome of the Rock and the Temple Mount stood as dominant monuments of wounded history over the Jewish quarter to the west and the Arab quarter to the north. Through the Old City and then they retraced the pathway of Jesus on the way to crucifixion. It was walking down the Via Dolorosa that a group of three of the schoolboys muttered mutiny and conspiracy.

"How many more sights are we going to see?" Steve could still hear himself groaning.

"It's doing my head in, all these places of interest," said Jack with usual melancholy.

"I'm bored," agreed Bill. "I don't want to stay at the hotel for another of those talks put on by old Cruikshank" he said, disgusted. "Fancy doing that to us on our last night! Two thousand years of Jewish history in two hours!"

"I have a plan. This is what we're going to do," said Steve. And so it was agreed.

They would go off in search of adventure that evening. A bar? A night club? This was their last night in Israel. Let whatever come that would come. Mr Chapman, the schoolmaster in charge of their group, would no doubt kick up a stink. Conspirators plotted to slip away after the evening meal at the hotel.

The boys wandered through a Jewish quarter covered with elusive mystery. Through the Arab quarter and the Damascus Gate they went, in search of a night club and adventure that was proving unexpectedly tantalising. But they found themselves in a bar and stayed there for a while. Steve purchased some cigarettes from a market stall. As they sat there, puffing away, they seemed to have found the trap door that emerges into manhood.

It was 9.45 when their adult reverie was shattered. Mr Chapman was looking at them through the window of the bar. There was no escape. He had come for them. "I'll deal with you later!" he said.

The boys knew they were in for it though they secretly loved Mr Chapman. He was the best of a bad bunch. Having a son a couple of years younger than them helped him get on their wave length. He frogmarched them along the road and then made a fateful decision. They would return to the hotel by bus.

As these scenes moved by his memory like an old film, poignant with tear jerking emotion, Steve wants to run to the front of the cinema screen in his mind and say.

"Stop the film. Stop the film" as if he was hailing down a taxi.

What would anyone do if they knew they had only four minutes to live?

In slow motion, in the film of memory, he sees the face of a terrorist appear at the entrance of the bus and a small object of terror thrown to the back where the boys sat. To his dying day, Steve would remember horror erupting volcanically. There was no escape.

Roll the film on two eternal seconds. Most days, the look on Chapman's face was one the boys saw when they shaved. Bill, Steve and Jack looked again at the face of a fedayeen, who had appeared in the door of the bus, throwing to the back a small dark object of destruction. "Grenade" shouted a passenger, but the stampede from the front of the bus was not going to allow any escape for passengers at the rear. Horror built up in their voices and in their faces as they remembered the almost involuntary action of their teacher throwing himself on the grenade. 'NO, NO STOP THE FILM'. It would be there before them once again, the 30 centuries, or was it only 30 seconds, before the explosion, Mr Chapman's face looking at these boys for half a lifetime, willing them to live though he would not. For a long lingering eternity, they looked at each other, the sacrifice and the freed, rescuer and rescued. For one long, lingering moment, the boys watched, transfixed by the volcano horror that had engulfed them from nowhere. Statuesque, rooted by terror, they looked at Mr Chapman and he looked at them, the face of their conscience forever. It took a long lingering moment for the grenade to go off. Absorbing the fatal impact, Mr Chapman's body dissolved into a living flame, the sacrifice wholly consumed on the altar.

Bill looks up at the film. "Will Mr Chapman please reappear? Whose is this thick red sticky blood moving over us?"

Frame by slow frame, Steve sees a bustling street erupting into chaos. He sees dozens of screaming people showered with glass, the air filled with black smoke and sharp with the smell of an explosion; he sees bystanders running and shouting.

Jack had to have glass shards removed from his leg. A passer by endeavoured to stem the blood with his handkerchief. They all went temporarily deaf with the loudest noise they ever heard before silence descended. Thankfully, miraculously, the boys suffered minor injuries.

"How that incident shaped my life," Steve thinks as he finally stopped the film.

"The Romans believed that if my name is on someone's lips, I'm still alive. Maybe Chapman is still alive somewhere. I don't think I am" he whispers.