

Letters from a Shuttered Country Chapter Twelve

The Future of the handshake and a time of re-birth

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At last things were easing up.

The survivors began to emerge from their holes and jump into their cars that in many cases had been as redundant as the numerous workers laid off. Though connected with the outside through a daily walk, TV and the increasingly ubiquitous social media, it seemed at times as if the external world of people and things did not exist, that we were stuck in a matrix of our minds like brains in a vat and that all existed was virtual. But now, blinking at the warm sun that blanketed the landscape of time for day after day, the survivors could glimpse an Aristotle world of sunshine and only banished shadows. There was an external world all right – but was it all right? Gradually we were allowed to mix but not mingle, to come together but stay apart in the weird paradoxical concoction of those days. Were we ready for the next bit of normality after three months? Spaced queuing, one-way systems and the weary, wise social distancing shaped the return of cultural life. How many lives and how many businesses had not made it through the first half of that strange year of 2020?

Hope was in the air. Most people were all right. But was the economy going to be on life-support? Far fewer were fighting for life's vital breath as the deadly virus started to run out of new people to bite and control. But over in America, a Minneapolis man could not breathe: choked to death by a warrior Cop with a foot on his throat and an amoral look on his face at those who made sure the images went viral. This was a pandemic of the spirit.

By now confirmed Zoomer for private as well as worklife, Beth and Bill spoke often and then daily. An Atlantic Ocean emotion no longer separated them and neither did the years solidify their different worlds as they once had. Then one evening she had some news.

Beth – Hi Bill!

Bill – Beth! Lovely to see you. We haven't spoken since the last time!

Beth – ha ha. Not since yesterday. How have you been today? How was the conference?

Bill – nothing much to report for me. Taking part in a virtual gathering was split-level reality. You are there but not there. You miss the chit chat of coffee and cocktail commentary. And it shifts the consciousness sideways to see yourself looking at you looking at me.

Beth- sounds like alternative reality. Sadly, my cleaner has passed away.

Bill – O no. You told me she was dangerously ill with Covid.

Beth – well its finally happened. I feel really gutted.

Bill – so sorry love. She didn't have an easy life did she?

Beth – certainly not. As a black girl growing up in the Civil Rights era, she could never understand why white folk would call the police if her Dad went for a walk in the local park or why he had to wait ages for a taxi that would show up within minutes for a white guy. She still had to walk down a street in a white enclave and face the whispers or angry looks. Her brother is incarcerated to this day. He got typecast after being picked up for nothing.

Bill – we hoped this everyday racism would have died by now. At its heart is the superiority of my life is more important than yours because of your skin colouring. You just don't count.

Beth – For people who look like me, it's the privilege of not having to be subjected to it that makes it appear subtle. For her, racism came to her doorstep. Children didn't want to play with her because they thought she looked like faeces. It has been part of the lingo and the dialogue in her family most days. So hope conditions have been created for creative change.

Bill – this horrible George Floyd episode reveals the deep wound across society that's like puss seeping out. It needs healing but first off it needs deep cleaning. It's just brought out what black people have been feeling for years. I tell you Beth: this is surely a time of re-birth

Beth – do hope so. At this moment, there are processions of demonstrators outside the window that have become a regular occurrence. How did it happen that in the midst of the pandemic, that video goes viral.

Bill – Katie says it sums up how black people have long been smothered by systemic racism.

Beth - I still feel strongly about this but not sure I have the fight to make this my fight now.

Bill - Katie does though. Though she never had to experience being told, 'no blacks, no dogs' in going to rent somewhere, Katie struggled to get a job. She says people have very different personal experiences with the law, getting stopped. Her big mantra is that if we're white, it's not what you have to go through but what we don't have to go through that shows up racism in dark colours. She hopes the anti-racism leads to lasting transformation

Beth – as do all! What does she think about getting rid of statues as symbols of oppression?

Bill – that they stay as object lessons saying 'this is how it started–this is where we are now.'

Beth – a wise young lady! Bill can I change the subject? I've given in my notice as I told you.

Bill – Big day Beth! Congratulations for finally taking the step.

Beth – it certainly is. I wasn't getting much work anyway and money is tight.

Bill – Beth, I've been thinking too since you told me you were going to do this. Why don't we join forces at long last? There's something strong and enduring about what we've got that the years and three thousand miles of water could never manage to overcome.

Beth – very tempting Bill. Let something good come out of this crazy time just like it did out of the Aids plague and Katie came into our lives. O bless you....

Bill – yes my eyes are filling with tears but they are moist with happiness!

Beth – for me as well!

And so plans began to be laid. Katie was thrilled. There were choices to take and moves to make. Bill wondered about telling his old partners in crime. He knew though that Liam would be delighted. Liam could be relied on to come forward with empathy.

The taste lingered for two weeks. Liz said she wouldn't move back in straight away. Craig came over as well. But one evening, Liz was late for an arrangement they had made. Jack was cross. This time, it was volcanic. "Do you know how long I've been waiting here?" he exploded. Liz hadn't seen him angry like that since Timothy had burnt a hole in the sofa with his cigarette. Normally Jack was so placid, far too placid for her. Now, with emotions on

both sides rising to the surface, Liz remembered how she had slipped out of love with him. A romantic evening was definitely out for the night.

"Goodbye!" she shouted, slamming the door and leaving Jack stunned by the turn of events.

"Oh come on Jude," he protested. But Jude's pride wouldn't let her turn round and Great Alex didn't know how to run after her.

Two weeks went by. Jack bought the computer game that had gone straight to number 1 that autumn in the CD Rom charts. The 'Sims allowed players to recreate their lives in virtual suburbia. Everyone was doing it. But Jack was hollow. A second - hand life no longer had any attraction for him. Jack's roses were returned. "It's not going to work Jack," wrote Liz. "Life was easier in our virtual relationship. There are too many emotions in the way. Let's be internet friends again".

> Great Alex. Hey Jude. Guess who?

> Jude. I can guess. How are the roses?

> Great Alex. Fading fast: hope that's not a parable. How was your day by the way?

> Jude. Well, the boss is still a pig.

> Great Alex. My new boss just doesn't know how to say sorry when he walks all over you.

> Jude. Do you expect him to?

> Great Alex. Maybe not. It's on my wish list in my virtual world.

> Jude. All the best things only happen in the virtual world.

> Great Alex. Like us, for example.

> Jude. Is there a place for us in the real world?

> Great Alex. To step into the real world is too messy and mature.

> Jude. It's much less complicated like this

> Great Alex. But nothing is solved, nothing resolved.

> Jude. And all the possibilities are left unopened, like your present.

> Great Alex. Liam tells me there's a way into the real world

> Jude. Which way? Down?

> Great Alex. He says it's along a road called forgiveness

> Jude. See you around the cyberworld Jack

> Great Alex. Jude, Jude? Are you there? For God's sake Liz

But Jude had disappeared. And the sound of was broken by sobbing. It would happen. He knew that. But it would take time.

> Liz. Jack. It's me again.

> Jack. Well, hello stranger. I've not heard from you for three months.

> Liz. I needed time to think whether I'm ready to try again with you.

> Jack. I sent you all those messages. They came straight back from the server.

> Liz. I changed my E Mail address. It was such a shock finding out it was you. I wasn't sure if I could trust again. I just had to slam the door shut.

> Jack. Ok - never asked you. What did you think when you found out it was me all the time?

> Liz. I was angry. And I was amused. And I was frustrated- at different times.

> Jack. But were you secretly pleased?

> Liz. OK. The truth. Take away the shock and yes I was.

> Jack. So was I. I suspected for ages

> Liz. I wanted it to be you. But when it really was, I was afraid it couldn't work

> Jack. There's a very odd feel to our relationship, don't you think.

> Liz. Maybe it's Millennial madness.

- > Jack. What does that feel like?
- > Liz I couldn't tell you. I wasn't here the last time.
- > Jack. Instead, tell me what the end of our relationship was like for you.
- > Liz. When there seemed no prospect of reconciling our differences, I was in a state of shock. One minute I was crying, then I was shouting at everybody.
- > Jack. For me, came the anger. I'd lash out at anything going. Then came the pain.
- > Liz. I see we're using proper names, not nicknames
- > Jack. Maybe we've come out of our virtual world
- > Liz. Is there a real world for us, where we can be who we really are?
- > Jack. The real world is much harder. We have to face up to our disappointments, break free from our utopias and look life in the face.
- > Liz. Alex told Jude that his relationship broke up because two people couldn't stop hurting one another. Can we forgive each other?
- > Jack. I think we should meet up.
- > Liz. Until recently, you wouldn't have wanted to meet me. I had put on so much weight these past few years, I needed to put a zip on my mouth. But just lately, I've lost pounds without hardly trying. I still love you. (I think). How's Steve and Mandy by the way?
- > Jack. Liz I have a suggestion, what about coming to our Christmas re-union soon?

In the dying days of the second millennium, Steve was relieved that at least Mandy hadn't reacted against the note he had left on her pillow inviting her to a crisis session tonight. Then Amanda entered the room in her wheelchair, flat and defeated but with a soft entry that made both men wonder if she had been listening outside, so quietly did she enter. "Hello" she said, with a voice drained of emotion and a face to match refusing Steve's glance. She eased herself on to the sofa.

"Can we talk?" asked Liam gently, hoping that her troubled soul was preparing for re-entry from prison. But silence. Nothingness. No emotion.

"It's obviously come to a head," said Steve heatedly. "You've been building up to this. Get it out. Let the volcano burst!"

Then tears flowed, gently at first but soon with sobs that shook Amanda. Her body was about to break in half. Steve reached out to hold her but his touch was unwelcome. After a while, Amanda's lips moved. To begin with, Steve was in the third person. He listened impassively. Words came slowly, haltingly at first but gathered strength as a trickle turns into a tributary.

"I need to start at the beginning" Amanda said, between deep sighs of grief. "I became involved with a professor at Law College. For two years we were together. I was lonely when I wasn't with him".

"His responsiveness to me made me feel noticed, enjoyed and valued. Then he began to look down on me. I was just a silly girl to him".

Steve sat outwardly still, wondering why an old familiar story should rise up and bite him.

"We all want to love and be loved I guess" said Amanda. "Deep down, that's what I was looking for. On a good day, I was alive. On a good day", she underlined. "It couldn't have worked. He lost interest and moved on. Then I met Steve one night at a disco in Chinatown. He was seeing the sights of San Francisco and already dreaming of his start-up. We got talking. At first I thought nothing could change the way we felt about each other. Then Steve proposed to me. It was dreamy. We were invincible, we were a team".

Steve nodded. He noticed that a dreamy look had enveloped her like a sheet despite anger.

"Steve was a perpetual adolescent. He had a bruised childhood, the legacy of a domineering mother and a father who was emaciated in the war. You were quite remote when we first met" she said. It was the first time she had spoken to Steve directly for three days. He was counting.

"I think you found my strength both comforting and intimidating. I was the rock. I drew you out. Until then, you had been unable to express your feelings. Before long and hey presto, you're transformed into the most romantic man I've ever known. We were engaged. You were involved, solicitous, considerate".

Amanda suddenly shouted in anger.

"That's why it bloody well hurt so much don't you see? I was the one that opened the book. You did that for me too. But then you lost interest".

Steve averted his eyes from her. Amanda quietened down.

"On my wedding day I trembled with the sheer joy of existence. I learnt to cherish each moment. We couldn't have any of our own at first but children loved to be in Steve's company. In spite of being this successful businessman, he was like them in so many ways. Then Jane came along unexpectedly. I went to Steve and said 'I'm pregnant'.

"You can't be. That's not possible," he said disbelievingly. We had stopped going for any more tests".

Steve enjoyed the memory. His eyes lit up in fond recollection.

"I felt so alive when our children came along" he said. "It seemed natural to renegotiate the relationship, to give up a free-wheeling existence for the sacrifice of having kids. We would be the ultimate parents in training. But somewhere along the line, I think we had a bypass operation from each other".

Amanda nodded as the tears flowed once more.

"Gradually, all your time disappeared in building up your business. We had our differences. You began to withdraw your affection for longer and longer periods. I couldn't stand it when you did that".

Then came a pause in her story; a pause that lasted for three centuries.

"Mind you, I changed too. The woman you married had gone. A mother had replaced her. Like most men, you wanted mothering. You used to complain I put the children first. I should have put you first. Things would have been different now".

"No, no". Steve shook his head strongly, not wanting to be let off the hook.

"But" said Amanda, "Don't think I didn't know about those one- night stands. Your excuses were paper -thin. If you're going to tell a lie, at least make it convincing. But you always came back".

"I used to extol the virtue of being true to myself," said Steve dejectedly, with the air of a man waking up to the emptiness of his whole philosophy. "I never pretended to be something I wasn't. The worse crime was to lecture people about morals or religion".

But Amanda didn't seem to have heard his familiar disclaimer of moral unpretentiousness. Now her words were coming quickly.

"I honestly thought you would never want to detonate your family just for a rough and tumble between the sheets. I told myself again and again that we had a strong enough bond between us to ensure that our marriage was solid".

Amanda looked up, her face wincing with unforgotten rejection.

"Then you met Beth. Why did you have to fall in love with her?"

Steve time-travelled back to their first encounter. Was it his fault he had fallen deeply in love with Beth? He seemed to bump into her. Everywhere, there she was, everywhere he found her. She was so lovely; a living emblem of another world. It went deep. He hadn't planned to fall in love. But what he had with Beth couldn't be denied. He shook himself. Reality drew him back to the present. Amanda went on.

I thought the crash really changed things," said Amanda. But you had to go back to her, didn't you. You just couldn't keep away. And then I found out you got her pregnant!"

Steve looked at Amanda, speaking softly.

"Looking back, that slide down the hillside was a turning point. You were the book I had left behind all those years, barely having started to read. An enormous regret swept over me. I had consigned you to the outermost darkness of being unread".

"When I went back to see Beth," he continued after a pause, "It was to say goodbye. But I got drawn in. I couldn't help myself. She had stopped believing I would leave you but she was determined to have something of me that was permanent. She stole it".

"Stole it?" asked Amanda in disbelief.

"No I gave freely. But we both knew it was for the last time. I had made my choice to stay with you. But I couldn't help myself."

"We're talking about your child she was carrying," said Amanda shaking her head, anger combining with tears, hands beating against him. At least Steve wasn't dishing out paper lies.

But who would now be the first to break unending silence?

Steve spoke. "Well now we've brought all this out into the open, what's the script?" he wondered. "I wish there was some way of putting my life into reverse gear. Why do the invoices seem to come to the wrong address? I never intended Amanda to suffer. I need her to forgive me. Your trust is worth a great deal to me," he said.

A quiet voice spoke up from the depths of the sofa.

"I can put the past behind but it's going to take a lot of time to recover the amused intimacy we once knew. I need somewhere to dump the anger and injustice that shrieks down here. Or the protest I feel will howl like our first Labrador often did when it cried to come back in. You remember the Labrador?"

"Yeah. Joey? Chewey? Whatever did we call that four legged monster?"

Liam rose and left them to it. He said goodbye. Steve shook his hand.

"Look, thanks for coming. I think we can take it from here. The odds in favour of us staying together have just improved. We've made a start towards a reconciliation that's real. I guess" he added as an afterthought, "forgiveness couldn't begin until we could acknowledge between us that something had happened. Painful honesty was needed; we couldn't just brush it off like old Joey used to have a good shake".

"It had to be acknowledged," said Liam simply, "like an invoice that begs to be opened. See you around. Call me if you need me" he said. "Let me know if the restaurant boat is still on".

"Will do", said Steve. "The invoice had to be opened," He repeated to himself, glancing at a couple of brown envelopes that had arrived in the post, bills that wouldn't go away.

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They say a sure sign that business is booming in central London is to count the number of cranes. Steve Bright stands in his Canary Wharf office, crane-spotting. Cranes to the left of him, cranes to the right. Was it 38, 39 even? And why had Beth phoned today, leaving a message with his secretary? He looks at his watch. It is time to go to the re-union dinner.

By eight in the evening, the last guests have arrived. Liam is delayed. The tube has unaccountably stopped for ten minutes. Hastening down from Charing Cross to the Embankment, he quickly finds the restaurant boat, showed his invitation to a man with a beard and bow tie and makes his way down a corridor lined with tarpaulin. A young Greek looking lady welcomes him aboard and shows him to the area booked for the occasion.

It was a fine night in December 1999. The lights on the south side of the Thames projects splashes of colour as if on a Monet canvas. Gentle piped music that wasn't out to assault the senses floats through the restaurant and disappears into the guests. Steve Bright, deep in conversation with Bill glances up and comes to shake his hand.

"Glad you could make it! Welcome. We're all here. I think you know everybody".

Steve ushers him to a seat beside Amanda. On one side of a long table there sits Jack and Liz and on the other Bill. They greet one another.

"Jane is going to be baby-sitting" Amanda is saying about the pre millennial eve. She put her name down when she thought she could collect a two hundred pound fee. Doesn't seem likely now".

"Are you going to the Dome?" Jack asks.

"No, we couldn't get tickets," Steve replies. "But we'll be there somewhere amongst the three million expected in central London".

Liam looks at them all with great affection, these friends that he had got especially close to in the last three years of his journey, sharing their joys and sorrows; the ebbs and the flows of lives tense with anger, tenderness and guilt. He had read the script, populated by characters struggling to survive experiences, painful with failure.

Jack occasionally glanced at his surprise date, who had been warmly welcomed by Steve and Amanda. The run-down man had found himself and found her in the process. How difficult it had been to learn to trust others, to realise his own competence or to sustain relationships that worked, condemned to second class mediocrity - or was he? Jack looked convivial enough over the meal table but still occasionally smoked with resentment against a brother who had usurped him. And Liz, haunted by the ghost of failure that wandered the corridor of her mind, riddled with guilt because of Timothy, unable to let herself off the hook.

Amanda says something to Steve but there was clearly lingering tension between them still. Steve was softer now, ever the genial host, laughing, joking his way through life. But to the knowing observer, it is clear that Steve and Amanda are burdened, burdened with the weight of an imperfect relationship and a past that left much unresolved.

And Bill: to be let off the hook for the death of his wife would have been too cheap at any price. It would constitute another betrayal. AIDS had not yet brought Ali's life to a full stop but Bill was getting support from Beth. She would help him. They'd help each other.

Dinner was served. Pre dinner drinks were supplemented with the Green Muse. Absinthe, the fien de siecle drink of Paris a century before, was making a comeback. Laughter flowed over the old friends like a Thames tide. They all look so smart, so genuinely pleased to see each other, Liam thought.

"I wonder if they know what secrets each is carrying, and if they know I know?"

For an hour or more it goes on. Although enjoyable, knowing something of their inner life, to Liam it is also an evening bathed in pathos. He sees old friends playing out lives with memories, aspirations, unrealised dreams, the fragile happiness, lost opportunities and wrong turnings. Here they are, garrulous about the past, re-living their adventures, re-constructing history. Tension mounts within him. He knows what they cannot articulate, of an experience that had affected their lives so deeply that was calling to them across the

years. The shared experience that he knows must come out lies heavy upon him. His stomach begins to churn as if eaten something that disagreed with him. His churning grows worse- the knots, the burden, the pain mounted.

And here comes the sound of the Beatles drifting unmistakably through the restaurant boat.

"Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away. Now it looks as though they're here to stay. O I believe in yesterday".

Jack and Liz looked at each other, eyes smiling and began to sing softly. "Why she had to go I don't know, she wouldn't say. I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday".

"Earlier this year, it was voted the most memorable song of the century. It's been the most widely recorded song in popular music", Jack remarked.

"1965," said Amanda. "So much has happened in our lives".

"It was a good year," agreed Steve. "That's when we started at the school". And with that, the guests fell silent.

"Just look at us" remarked Bill after a pregnant pause. "Perhaps life would make more sense if we lived it backwards!"

Steve dropped his avuncular, genial host hospitality and grows serious. There comes a point of muddled realisation that the road will not be so long as we first thought. The journey will be over and all too soon we start asking ourselves what will be our legacy to those that come after. He gives voice to what is in his head – though much remains hidden.

"So many travellers on this strange journey of life exhaust themselves on the senseless pursuit of material possessions and finish without finding spiritual capital"

"It's a spiritual crisis really" adds Liam. "Live, fling, do the things you always wanted to do while there is still time and youth has not yet fled in embarrassment. But there are other travellers who seek healing from the pain of life and the baffled perplexity that haunts us all, for whom the answer lies in a difficult trip back to the beginning of the journey. Maybe we need to understand the road we've travelled".

Liz is easily swayed by the reflective mood. "It's always hard I think to turn round and begin to work against patterns that have moulded us. Difficult but not impossible otherwise no one could ever dare to be different and get away with it. Just look at us now. So here we are, children of the permissive age, raised amidst the distinct tremor of social and moral earthquake and the crumbling of values and institutions".

"All that did indeed shape us," agrees Amanda, finding the nostalgic mood hard to resist "There was plenty to take the shine off. But in turn, Jane's generation has been shaped by high unemployment, family breakdown, loss of community and environmental nightmares. Not to mention a revolution in communications impossibly futuristic when we were kids. What kind of a new century will it be that Ali's little girl will grow up in?"

"Katie is it?" she asks Bill. He nods.

"I would love it that I could adopt her formally but that's another road to travel."

Steve holds Mandy's arm and looked at her with affection.

"But of course, there's something else that has defined our lives," says Jack.

The dinner party went quiet once again. Each man in that restaurant boat is sailing away to a stormy sea of memories, without immediately comprehending they had reached the same destination. Among the three men, or was it four, scenes flashed, a searing experience that bound them together in bonds of blood.

"We have never talked about Israel," Steve observes, breaking cover.

Suddenly, it is there before them like a funeral bell tolling. They remember the headmaster expressing the grief that the staff and everyone in that school were feeling, grief that had turned to anger. "If it wasn't for you running off like this, it would never have happened!"

And many other words from their compatriots; "it's your fault...you're responsible". Words that had shut them up in a sealed room, unable to talk about it since or resolve the guilt that had hounded them like stubborn dogs for 28 years. Their parents had been unable to face the school again. The boys out had been put into other schools. Impact was momentous.

"I believe this group of men is bound together by a shared secret," said Amanda.

"There's definitely something here," said Liz. "Come on, out with it!" she says.

And out it all comes, bit by bit as if each of the men was adding bricks to a Lego house. The evening of exploration despite the warnings not to go off by themselves, sarcastic and caustic comments they all made against the teacher in charge of their group, painted in the unwelcome colours of a jailer.

"He chose to do that for us" said Bill. "He knew if he took the blast, we would be all right".

"How much has that moulded our lives," Jack observed.

It was now Steve who, pointing to Liam says, "We've spoken what has been unspoken between us all these years. I have a hunch that now we've brought it out into the open at last, this is going to be the final reunion, the last supper. Anything you want to say?"

Liam nods. He had been half-expecting to say a few words. He waits until the waiter clears the table and serves Beaujolais to the assembled guests.

"The individual journey we make" says Liam slowly, "is indeed shaped by the events of the day. But it's also moulded by the choices of every day. These are the real defining moments; what we do with the legacy we are given. But the question I have is whether it's really possible to put right the past? Do we remain bits of inert plasticine, moulded by the choices we made and the events that weathered us? Or can we begin a different journey? What happened outside Jerusalem left an indelible mark on all our lives".

It strikes the lawyer in Amanda that he said 'our' lives. Why would he say that?

Liam pauses for a minute, as the music played on.

"I'm glad you've asked me here and to say a few words tonight by way of reflection" he concluded. "There's something you need to know about me. As our paths began to cross, and you were beginning to come back into each other's lives again, I knew there was a significance. You see what took place in Jerusalem has affected us all, me as well as you".

"You? Why you?" five voices exclaim in near unison.

"Before I was adopted, my name was Chapman. I was the son of your teacher who lost his life in Jerusalem so long ago." As all those years ago, it was a moment to freeze the frame.

“Lost?” no Liam adds. “That’s not quite right. He gave himself for you: his life for your life. Every life can be redeemed. That blood upon you all lays claim on you but in a positive way”.

One by one, they look at each other before hugging; their eye contact genuine and warm. Then they gather round Liam and embrace silently, tearfully. It was the dream-coat Joseph making himself known to his brothers after many years.

For a while after that, they sat in silence, absorbing news on this scale. Bill, Jack and Steve look at Liam and he looks at them; not the face of their accuser but of their forgiver as of one who sacrificed himself for them and redeemed their lives. It was the teacher back from the dead come to acquit them. And round the table in that restaurant boat, they link hands along with Liz and Amanda and Liam prays softly for them speaking powerful words.

5

"Let's go back to my hotel for coffee," said Bill with sudden decisiveness.

And so they wander the embankment and find their way back to the hotel. Steve lags behind, making calls on his mobile phone.

As they asked Liam about his father, his sense of grief from long ago was stirred like an old wound being reopened. He had thought it all resolved and settled. But speaking of the loss churned it all to the surface once more. There was no retreating to a safe world. The ancient wound went deep, as deep as anyone had ever gone. He didn't know they made drill bits that bore so far into the earth.

Then Steve made an announcement.

"My old friends" he says stirring, "I feel there is something we need to do. And as I was the one who led us into these waters, will you allow me to help find a way through?"

"What do you have in mind brother," asks Jack.

"Look it's Friday evening. I think most of you are staying around this weekend. I am going to propose that we fly to Jerusalem and make our peace with the past in the very place where it all happened".

There are whistles round the room.

"A pilgrimage you mean?" wonders Bill.

"I suppose so," says Steve. "Why not? We'll know whether the question our friend here has posed can be answered. Can we put right the past?"

"But what about flights?" Jack says. "I'm in. But with the millennium, Jerusalem will be heaving with visitors".

"I would have thought so. But it so happened that a Jewish member of staff went to Israel today to see his ageing mother. We all said the flights would be jammed but the big rush is next week. There are tickets available before the storm. I've checked and they're holding four tickets for all the men here. I'll pay".

"That include me?" exclaims Liam. "What about accommodation?"

"All arranged if you're up for it. It's the Jerusalem Towers Hotel again".

The whole idea seems eerie, stunning. The world is moving too fast. But as they consider it, there is nothing in the way. The women acquiesce, sensing it is important that Jack and Steve abandon their small engagements for the weekend and come to terms with the past. It is something they need to do. Steve phones back to confirm. By four in the morning, four men are in the airport lounge at Heathrow waiting for the early morning flight to Tel Aviv.

6

It was ten days later. The wine flowed and the lights glowed in the Bright household too. Amanda surprised herself at how light she felt when she finally let go of her anger. Someone had just snapped old chains. She was free to go.

Jane came over for dinner on Christmas Eve and ended up staying over two nights. She was running into problems at the BBC and wondering about applying for a new media company that had just started out. Relaxing after one of Amanda's gourmet Christmas dinners, they sat together as a family for the first time in six years. Amanda had been counting. Many things that hadn't been said between them were spoken of. Words that had been thrown around the room like daggers were pulled out of their victim and retracted. Steve said he was desperate for them to forgive him for what he had put them all through.

"No worries. You're all right Dad" said Jane.

A soft glow from the lights above bathed the room as the clock struck nine. It was a father and daughter moment. Jane was in tears as Steve told her about Jerusalem and the visit the four of them had made there.

"I guess we all fail as human beings" she said. "Goodness knows I'm learning that well enough. I don't connect with what has changed you. You've obviously had a powerful faith experience. But it must be nice to find a place where we can forgive and be forgiven and walk away unburdened. Like driving to a council tip and leaving all the black sacks behind".

"To me it feels like that moment we had renovating the house, stumbling across an antique beam in the dining room and restoring it to pristine glory," said Amanda enjoying the scene.

"Any unfinished business" she said to Steve, "or can we get on with our lives now?"

"I've written to Beth," said Steve. "I'll show you the contents later when we are on our own Mandy. There is one thing I can't get out of my mind though".

"What's that Dad?" said Jane, as they sat and watched Christmas tree lights flickering. For a moment, Amanda thought he was about to get up and pace the floor but he was only leaning forward.

"I keep thinking about that Bedoiun woman whose son was killed in Tunisia".

A wistful expression stole over him as if curtains were half pulled.

"It's not your fault Dad!" Jane was firm.

"I know that," said Steve. "I'm not trying to soak up any guilt I can find. It's just that..oh I don't know".

"What?" said Amanda quizzically.

"It's all very well isn't it for foreigners to come in and out of a situation like that, as if we are on a bombing mission. No of course I wasn't responsible. But I was there".

"I think I see what's troubling Dad" said Jane slowly. "You can't rest easy being a part of what happened".

"I suppose that's it," said Steve. "There must be no loose ends dangling in the air".

Amanda looked at them both fondly. Their relationship was being converted from past tense to a gleaming future.

"Dad" said Jane. "As soon as we can in the New Year, why not go to Tunisia and try to find her. I'll come with you. Let's go for it".

"Sounds good to me," said Steve.

"One other thing" said Steve. "I'm thinking of giving up my addiction to office life. Everyone else will eventually. Why not be a tortoise and carry my office world around with me everywhere I go. These days, you can run the world from a yacht in the south seas" he smiled laconically. "I'll stick with the software design company but run things from here. In fact I'm wondering about disbanding the Canary Wharf office altogether and make us a truly mobile outfit. I want to run my work more by timeless principles, not time driven priorities".

"Show me your letter," said Amanda later as she and Steve closed the bedroom door.

"Here," said Steve, fishing a sheet of paper from a book he had purchased in Israel.

Amanda sat on the bed and read in silence, communicating her reaction through tears that made rivulets through her mascara face and watered her cheeks.

"Dear Beth,

"You will be surprised after all this time to get a letter from me. I have loved you and will always be richer for it. I can never deny what we had together. My love for you and your love for me brought us a confusing concoction, a mix that was both sumptuous and maddening, a mix of pain and pleasure. We only wanted to bring laughter to each other's face, but succeeded in bringing tears to each other's eyes.

"Three weeks ago, something happened to me in Jerusalem. You will no doubt have heard about it from Bill. His life was touched too. It feels like I've had a bath. All the muck and grime of the past has been washed and I am enjoying the experience."

"So where does that leave you? Beth, I am writing to ask if you will forgive me. We embarked on a ride together. I rode up there with you and we reached out to encounter a

hidden secret that was missing from our lives. The cost was that I hurt someone I loved very much. You may think I didn't mean all those things I said to you and the promises I made but at the time I really did mean them and let my heart speak louder than my head. You deserve better than an oasis that turned out to be a mirage. I really hope that you and Bill can make a life together that you can be openly proud of, a garden that's the envy of all neighbours."

Your friend, Steve

"You should write some of this down", she said the next day. "It might help someone one day, you never know".

"Maybe" said Steve reflectively. "But if I ever do that, in respect to you I'll disguise names".

On the night after Steve and his son returned from Tunisia, Steve brought Amanda the roses that he knew she loved so well. Eyes shining, she drew in their scent and received his love that was now fresh to her. She prepared the bed and delicately, with fine hands, placed on it fragrant petals from her favourite roses.

7

The next few weeks were heavy with the sound of pages turning. Chapters yet to be written were invested with a new plot. Jack found himself surprised at what was happening inside him. Would there be fresh strength rising up in him to retrieve the towel he had thrown in? A new relationship with Liz, Steve and Craig? No, there was something more. It was lazily watching the airplane movie out of the corner of his eye that he was now free to dismantle the false story about himself he had so carefully devised. The role he had been handed out could now be given back. Emerging into the real world suddenly tasted better than the old virtual world that had let him down.

And that was how, painfully and with quiet steps of trepidation, Jack and Liz began to rebuild things. This time it would stand the test of time. It was redemption's long reach. When a substantial legacy came her way, Liz determined to invest in housing. The opportunity came in the form of a possibility from a property developer to build a house on the strength of a sizeable investment. Liz and Jack needed no second urging. Brick by brick, they built something to last. Craig, by now leading a drug rehab himself would often join them. When

Jack was offered redundancy from the Merchant Navy company he worked for, the package was generous enough to make it viable for him and Liz to take long trips to India.

Increasingly they got involved with some projects to help the Dalit people build self-respect. For those who lived their lives as wallpaper for the higher value people, it was really worthwhile. Jack and Liz felt their lives had been re-routed.

8

It happened to Bill as he was jogging on Brighton sea-front in that fraught year of 2020. The country could come out. We did not have to be locked up, locked in, locked down anymore.

The feeling that stirred in him caught Bill unawares. It reminded him of jogging on a warm San Francisco morning twenty years ago when he had received a text message that brought him overwhelming joy. He was allowed to adopt Katie! He was going to be her Dad. Never had he known such warming of the heart.

In Golden Gate Park, this antidote to the city centre, there came a moment of realisation like seeing the punch-line of a joke, a light-bulb of an insight in which sudden clarity brought a reaction. And as if the joke was extremely funny, the effect on him couldn't be contained. It was too palpable to dismiss. He felt as if he were suddenly implanted in his own body for the first time, though not as a baby, pinching himself in amazement and laughing like parents exploding with wonder at their newborn child, the latest cosmic creation. When he paused for breath, Bill had an urge to laugh out loud.

"Just look at it, look at what we have been given. Eyes, ears, fingers, toes, muscles! I can see, jump, walk, run, laugh, cry!"

Bill felt the mystery of a new life fused together, a foetus dividing breathtakingly, into wonder. A human child was born, the result of nine months of silent, hidden sculpturing, enacting a programme for the formation of a unique person. Skilfully, mysteriously, the instructions know when to build an arm, leg, heart, brain, skin and bones. The hidden work had taken place in each of the million children who would be born before midnight. In years to come, today would be filled with birthdays. He would make all Katie's birthdays magic.

Laughter and tears erupting from a group of children playing nearby made Bill marvel that human thoughts are flushed with emotions. No computer can fall in love or joyful like this.

He looked around him. To the east were the museums and the horticultural palaces, tea gardens and bandstands. To the right were paddocks, arboretums and thousands of trees running down to the Pacific. Joggers, cyclists, skate boarders and strollers were enjoying the warm spring day. Babies were in their push chairs, toddlers were taking their first hesitant steps and children were kicking a ball about. Teenage girls were being feted by adolescent boys; emotions and strange impulses rising for the first time. Without even asking, hormones were reconstructing their bodies, leaving them defiant and confused. In the hazy, lazy day, couples were walking, smiling or being cross, exchanging hard words or shy glances. People in mid--life were using the park and so were those who were ageing fast, whose bodies were wearing out. The body is, let it be said, a remarkable feat of design engineering; a wonderfully complex piece of machinery with functioning parts that enable their occupants to grow and to go.

"OK" thought Bill. "We have a bones, glands, muscles and genes. But how come we have a spirit? What is the essence of a human being?" he asked himself. "There's got to be more to us than these amazing bodies of ours. Two thirds water, a pinch of salt; a brew of iodine, chlorine, sulphur, potassium and chemicals worth a few dollars and then chuck in enough iron to make a couple of rusty nails. Is that a human being? Is that what we're worth?"

He asked as he had a thousand times before, though now with new insight. What are the mysterious origins of a being who can even ask such a question? There must surely be a cosmic plan whereby the universe has produced people and come to consciousness. Does the universe value the end product? And how did we come up with concepts of God, physics, trust or love or was it all the product of chemical reactions ? Should we not pinch ourselves, looking at each other to ask in amazement -- "who are we and how on Earth did we get here? There's a story in this realisation waiting to be told. Sometime I'll work on it.

He continued to jog around the park. A Dad! Bill was going to be a Dad. He punched the air. And now here he was and Katie was a fine young lady and thoroughly in love. She had come through all the rubbish life had thrown at her and indeed had turned it all to good effect. When she had become more and more active in social causes during lock down, especially

black lives, she said it felt like receiving the title deed to her house. Though white, in Robert she had found someone who shared her social passion. They would make a great couple!

9

It was clear from the outset that there was something wrong. The pre-arranged Zoom rendezvous lacks someone. Bill is wondering if he should share that he and Beth were going to get together. But heck. All that was twenty years ago. Sensitivity about Steve and Beth should surely have cleared by now. He waited for the old friends to come on. Then two people are in the waiting room seeking admission.

Bill – Jack! Liam! Good to see you. How’s everything been in the last month?

Jack – Better now but Liz and I have had a bad time. O hi Liam!

Liam – just caught the end of that. Good evening everyone. What’s been going on?

Jack - Both Liz and I have had more than a brush with coronavirus. It’s not been the normal pattern but I think I got off lightly. Liz’s coughing fits though left her breathless.

Bill – sorry to hear that Jack. This is a disease we had never heard of at the start of 2020. Talk about that book, ‘The Year of Living Dangerously’.

Liam – big stress for so many. Bill, I can’t help wondering about Beth in New York when I hear the news from America though. Surge in new cases as we speak.

Bill – her cleaner died of it last week. Beth feels passionate about the way racial division has always been America's original sin and default setting. She’s decided to come over here and join me.

Liam – wow! That’s great Bill. So so pleased. Why didn’t you do this years ago though?

Bill – I really don’t have an answer for you on that. To be honest and in these four Zoom walls, it was all a fresh defence against the possibility of surrendering again, watching for anyone who came just that bit too close. To abandon her defences was too high a price.

Liam – and now? Beth has always struck me as a locked up person living a locked up life.

Bill - I think its realising she no longer wants to live her life with all those ramparts! What is she doing, she wonders. How long does she want to live life behind careful fortifications?

Liam – I am delighted! If you marry, would love to have the privilege of taking the service.

Bill – that may well happen! Don't know how many guests we are allowed?

Liam – up to 30 at the moment but things could change, depending on when it is.

Jack – never met the lady but I've heard bits about her from Steve. I do of course realise that the story he wrote, contributing to our Canterbury Tales, was thinly veiled autobiography.

Bill – mine was too and I didn't really reveal my inmost thoughts.

Liam – finish it sometime Bill! Maybe before Beth comes over as your time may well be spoken for. By the way, while waiting for Steve, I've been urging people to keep a gratitude journal to record all the positive things each day. Folk write in to our church and say how important it is as well as the on-line services and things we're doing to help people pray.

Bill – Katie says the future will be kinder than the past. The most treasured things in this world are exchanged, she reckons. They cannot be bought or sold. That's a cause for prayer.

Jack – and while we're about it, pray for India. In Europe, the situation is easing up but over here, the chief minister of Delhi has said the speed at which coronavirus has spread has severely challenged its health system. That's the worst hit area but where we are, reaching out to Dalit peoples, things are pretty bad. We have been able to distribute food to migrant workers in slums, extreme poor in rural areas, and most recently to HIV-affected families.

Liam – love to come over as soon as we're through all this period of distress.

Jack – sure. O no!

Liam and Bill – what is it?

Jack – O dear. I've just had a text from Mandy. She says Steve is having heart attacks.

It was true. Steve paused to look up from his office at home, glancing at Amanda pottering around in the garden on a June day as she tended her Queen Elizabeth roses, that had been

fading but were beginning to bloom again. The thumping inside his chest grew louder and it felt like his heart was straining to break free. The doctor had been warning him about his angina. No. Not now. Not yet. Please Lord. More time. More time. Please Lord.

He tried calling to Amanda, still tending her roses, but no words would form on his lips. He reached out a hand to beckon to her but she didn't see. The pounding continued, a noise as when two railway carriages are de coupled. But even as mind and body had threatened to separate and had come back together, a peace came over with an exultant sense of homecoming that he could swim in.

And in that moment, time stood still and he understood. He understood that all he had ever worshipped was misplaced yearning. He understood that in all his friendships, he had pined for friendship with the One who made him.

He understood that in every sunrise pregnant with the new day, in every mountain rising into the morning, in every meadow and in every leaf of every tree, he had glimpsed the source of beauty who had endowed the world so generously.

He understood that in every stumbling act of compassion, of forgiveness and mercy he had unwittingly declared that compassion, forgiveness and mercy lay at the heart of all things and were to be prized above gold and silver. He knew now he could exchange a world where roses bloom only for a time for a garden of fresh flowers.

Postscript

One autumn day, Beth walks up the aisle of the church where Liam was minister. Bill was waiting for her. He had waited for many long years and here she was walking towards him, her eyes shining with love. Katie gave her away but in truth, was maid of honour. The service that Liam took was replete with the most profound happiness. Robert was there but so was Jack and Liz, pleased to come and share the long awaited joy. Jack from First Corinthians Thirteen; the most sublime elegy of love ever penned, said Liam as he preached on the love of Christ that redeemed and the blood- shed one far-off Friday in Jerusalem. They all watched as Beth and Bill vowed to laugh and weep in the measure that life would take them, until they would come at last with fullness of years and hearts' content to the banquet where the children of God feast together at the Father's table.

There in the glow of forgiveness a man and a woman express their love in a fire, sometimes soft, sometimes fierce. Whether tired and worn, new or renewed, no one can take this fire to themselves without being singed in its incandescent flame. They melt into one another; snatched moments of eternity that transcend their ordinary existence and propel them forward. The mystery of human loving haunted and taunted them, bound sometimes for glory, sometimes for shame.

Exquisite touch, routine motion, rough handling, the sweet smile of tenderness, boots worn between the sheets; a skill to be learnt; a reunion to be enjoyed. Such is the delicate tapestry woven by the man and the woman as endowed movements of a strange dance become not 'mine' and 'yours' but 'ours'.

What means this mystery, they think that a strange force seizes us and extends our bodies in surrender? What complexity of fraught and blessed emotions, awkward tangle of bodies and communication: exchange of vulnerability that strips us and mocks our pretensions. What strange democracy of bonding, this aristocracy of pleasure offered to our common humanity, joining and merging that are a part of the entrancing magic of permanent love?

We walk with a limp that is a constant reminder of our frailty. And we hear from within our own soul the discordant cry that is an echo of heaven or an echo of hell.

Love was made to flower in its proper seed bed. But how is that some have remained a sealed garden, never finding the secret of what opens and closes the door?

"I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride. I have gathered my myrrh with my spices. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk".

And in the time of love, a song is born between the man and the woman, a song to be redeemed and treasured and shared without knowing it with lovers across the continents and across the years.

"If I could take a raptured moment and imprison it within a scented memory, if I could hold fast a wave that stirs unannounced from an ecstatic sea, it would be clad in gift wrapped betrothal and presented to you".

The End