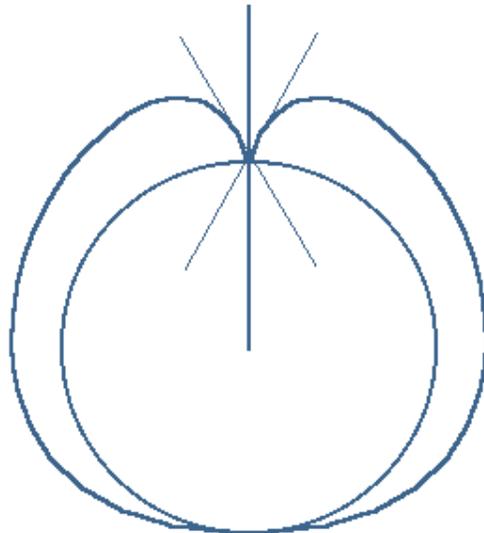


HEAVEN'S MOAT

An
Apocalyptic
Multi-dimensional
Isomorphic Redaction



by

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I HEREBY TAKE MY LEAVE OF TIME AND SPACE.

AVOIDING RESONANCE WITH GOD,

I ENTER INTO THE WORD

FOR RELIGION IS POETRY GONE WRONG.

from The Desert Gnosis

Heaven's Moat

- an isomorphic redaction in two books

Book One: Heaven's Mote
Book Two: Heaven Smote

HEAVEN'S MOAT

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PROLOGUE

The Celestial Angel lay on his back with his eyes closed. He had not only passed a difficult night wrestling with the King of Faerie in the region of the Elementals but his period of depression had also begun. The King of Faerie had insisted on trying to win him over into his realm. There had been no possibility of success, nor could there have been, but Elemental forces were blind and had no choice but to act according to their nature.

Much of Faerie had been laid waste in the ensuing conflict but it had been worth it. The Angel had obtained an intimation of what was to come and as his consciousness moved from the transhypnagogic to the hypnagogic through to ordinary consciousness, and as the night gave way to dawn, the dark to light, his first waking thought formed itself. And as he lay there on his back and opened his eyes that first thought was:

"It's time to go."

It was time to pack up his stall of ready-made garments at Crowleigh market and head back to India.

Things here were coming to an end.

Heaven's Moat

Book One

HEAVEN'S MOTE

- in two parts

Part One: INTRODUCTIONS

Part Two: DEVELOPMENTS

METALOGUE

Sally sat bolt upright on her bed and let out a yell, startling her two cats. She'd made it! She had to save Bob. But what was that noise? It was her invalid mother's bleeper. She rushed through to her mother's bedroom.

"Are you all right, mum?"

"I'm fine, luvvy. It's you that I'm worried about. What was that dreadful noise?"

"Oh, I just remembered that there's something very important that I must do today."

"Are you sure? You look a little drawn."

"No, I'm fine, fine, never better in fact. I'll get you your breakfast."

"Mrs Brown brought round some of her delicious jam yesterday."

"I'll bring some up with your toast in a mo."

"Lovely." As Sally left her mother's bedroom, the two cats attempted to wrap themselves around her ankles.

"Okay, okay, breakfast will be served as soon as poss." Sally felt something breaking inside, as though her gut had been twisted until it had snapped. She felt as though she was grieving for an unknown loss. She finished her morning duties as quickly as possible and, instead of the bus, took a taxi to work.

She had to warn Bob. It was a matter of life and death.

PART ONE

Introductions

CHAPTER ONE

Death by drowning. Running water. Ian woke up in a panic. Something wasn't right. There was moisture but there was also something solid in his mouth. It was the sodden corner of his pillow.

His panic eased as he remembered that he had been performing one of the Venerable Mahawisteria's spiritual exercises before going to sleep. It was called Intimations of Mortality and came in seven parts, one for each day of the week. Last night it had been contemplation of death by drowning but this morning's experience had been more reminiscent of death by suffocation.

Ian focused on the sound of running water coming from the bathroom and through his semi-sleep he visualised the movements of his flatmate Bob as he readied himself for work. Bob's preparations seemed to Ian to be tinged with an element of last minute panic but in Bob's eyes they were finely tuned. Three alarm clocks were required to prise Bob from the unconsciousness of the night. The first was a radio alarm preset to the news channel. The second was a digital alarm programmed to buzz for one minute out of every ten for the next hour. This could be silenced verbally. The third was a mechanical - in case of power failure - alarm which was set to ring loud and long precisely forty minutes after the radio had commenced. This was usually silenced by a pillow thrown with unconscious but unerring accuracy at which point Bob hauled himself from his bed. By now, the news, repeated every fifteen minutes, had been heard twice and a bit, and four strangled but authoritative "STOP!"s had been clocked by Ian as he listened through the wall that partitioned their rooms. The beeping of a voice-activated keyring could also be heard although this didn't appear to function so well when Bob was about to leave for the office. Genuine panic would then set in as Bob strutted round his bedroom and the rest of the flat looking for his keys, barking "KEYS! BASTARD KEYS!" to a contrary silence.

It seemed to Ian that Bob put off getting up a little more each day until it must inevitably happen that the forces of inertia and unconsciousness triumph, but Bob, against all the odds, usually pulled through. Pulling the quilt over himself, Ian quietly savoured the fact of his unemployment and relished this time of the morning when the workers were struggling to face the rigours of the day and he could bask in the accumulated warmth of the night, drifting blissfully in and out of sleep. He imagined the struggle that Bob was undergoing, the struggle to engage the day.

The main part of Bob's morning ritual took place in the bathroom. Peering at himself in the bathroom mirror through bleary, short-sighted eyes he swept his hands through his short red hair and took cognisance of who he was. He switched on a strategically placed radio to echo the news in the bedroom, shaved his stubble till it was just so, washed, then splashed himself with aftershave and sprayed himself with deodorants. He didn't use the loo. This function was taken care off at precisely 0930 each morning after his 0900 cup of

coffee and twenty-five minutes of work. Between gelling his hair and brushing his teeth he managed to slip on underwear, socks and shirt. Trouserless, with his tie draped around his neck and radio held firmly by its aerial between his teeth - in a surreal techno-parody of the tango dancer's rose - he came out of the bathroom and picked up his shoes and briefcase that were placed strategically outside his bedroom door.

The briefcase wasn't a briefcase as such. It was an old-fashioned film reel container. It wasn't much use for carrying most things because of the sprocket mould inside but as a fashion accessory it was indispensable.

Bob dropped his accumulated baggage in the vicinity of the dining-room table and with automatic purpose he fetched the mail, heated up some old coffee and filled a bowl with suspect milk and cereal of some kind.

Ian, still lying in bed, pictured his flatmate's progress in his mind's eye. Although Ian felt a certain sympathy mixed with a tinge of superiority towards Bob, he was also inspired by Bob's continuing victories over the forces of oblivion. With a certain guilt, he told himself that he would like to make the most of this new day and that if he didn't bestir himself immediately then the minutes would melt into hours and another morning will have bitten the dust. Without another thought he tuned himself into Bob's psychic backwash, rolled out of bed, slipped into a pile of crumpled clothes and went into the living room. He sat down opposite Bob at the cluttered dining table, sniffed the milk, thought better of it, and poured himself a cup of black coffee.

Bob was examining the latest edition of 'Rivet' the fashion and general interest magazine for men which had come with the mail. Ian noticed that the rest of the mail consisted of two credit card statements for Bob and an electricity bill. Indicating the bills with a tilt of his head, Ian rather perversely asked,

"Anything interesting?"

Bob looked up, dazed incomprehension with a touch of impatience in his eyes, milk dribbling from his spoon of cereal down through his designer stubble. The buzzing of the digital alarm could be heard from Bob's bedroom.

"Hmm?" he grunted.

"The bills," said Ian as if stating the obvious.

"Oh," said Bob, looking at them as though he'd never seen them before. He picked them up and directed his total attention to them. Leafing through them, he briskly announced,

"Electricity, Visa, Amex," and then turned his attention once again to the article about the latest technological accessory whilst wolfing down his cereal.

"Aren't you going to be late?" asked Ian, fascinated as always by Bob's time management. Bob looked at Ian through the slightly magnifying lens of his dual-tint spectacles and stared at him as though he had just said something utterly absurd.

"Of course not. Plenty of time," he replied in a clipped tone. However, it was time to be moving. He removed his trousers from the trouser press and put them on, knotted his

tie and put on his shoes and his new, royal blue jacket. He examined the overall effect in the bathroom mirror.

It was good.

Re-entering the living room, he removed his personal CD player from his customised briefcase, examined a few compact discs therein and inserted one into the player - Sibelius was his composer of the week - and crumpled his copy of 'Rivet' into the case.

"The sleeves of your new jacket seem rather long," commented Ian. They hung five centimetres past his fingertips.

"It's the cut, Ian, it's the cut." Bob looked faintly ridiculous in Ian's eyes. This impression was enhanced by the latest in 'noddies' or nodules. These had become the sine qua non of male attire a few years previously. Originally noddies had been small pouches of material distending from the elbows and the front of the knees which in the course of fashion had grown longer and longer. These days, nobody would be seen dead with noddies less than a foot in length.

"Nice colour," said Ian.

Bob slid his headphones on. He was on his way out with the clarinet solo from the beginning of Sibelius's first symphony sounding in his ears. Before finally leaving, he paused at the open door of another room and stared wistfully in. Bob rented two of the three rooms in the flat that he and Ian shared. Ian had the smallest room and Bob slept in the other but this room, the biggest, that Bob was gazing reverentially into now was his pride and joy. It was his Room. He never lived in it and yet devoted a large part of his income and time to its interior design.

Rooms were the vogue. In fact, the company that Bob worked for, Darling Decors Ltd, manufactured products exclusively for Rooms. In the opposite corner was a beautiful, triangular, ersatz oak wardrobe with a full-length mirror that would have been more convenient to use than the little one in the bathroom. However, Rooms were not to be used. They were purely decorative in nature, representing the triumph of form and style over function. Bob also harboured the notion - which he faintly realised was quite ridiculous - that the wardrobe mirror would deteriorate with use and he wanted to keep it in pristine condition.

Next to the wardrobe was his latest acquisition - an Italian pair of seventies-inspired diamantine platform shoes with elevated toes and needle-sharp tips. They were of course in accord with the Room design philosophy of non-functionality, that is, impossible to wear. The shoes presented Bob with a problem. Shoes should be kept in the wardrobe or on a functional shoerack. In the first instance, if they were to be kept in the wardrobe then the splendour of his new acquisition would not be immediately apparent to the casual passer-by. In the second instance, a functional shoerack would undermine the design integrity of his Room. A problem indeed. He must speak to Simon, his boss, about it later in the day.

Bob's automatic pilot snapped him out of his reverie and took him briskly from the apartment. Ian reached to switch

off the radio and then the doorbell rang. Bob came barging back in and brushed past Ian.

"Keys," he muttered urgently, "Keys."

"I heard them bleeping in your room earlier on," said Ian, not very helpfully. Bob was already in his room shouting, "KEYS! KEYS! BASTARD KEYS!" He found them and then dashed out slamming the door behind him.

"Have a nice day," said Ian to the door. He switched off the radio. The digital alarm buzzed. Ian picked up his cup of coffee and a slice of buttered toast and stared into Bob's Room. The door, as always, had been left studiously ajar. A condition of numbness enveloped Ian, a mild seizure comprised of indignation, confusion, alienation and contempt all tinged with a whisper of affection for his friend.

He looked at the triangular wardrobe, the undulating bed with the Beverage Bedhead, the film noir wallpaper, the damp, marsh-effect floor-covering, the furry sofa and the ridiculously pointed (à la Turque) diamantine shoes placed obtusely, toe to toe in the centre of the room beneath the non-functional square ceramic light-fitting (custom-made).

Ian wondered what he and Bob had in common, if anything. What formed the basis of their presumed friendship?

The seizure dissolved, leaving him feeling deflated. He drifted over to the toaster, put some more bread in, then resumed his place at the breakfast table and stared into space.

CHAPTER TWO

Simon Flare, Team Leader, liked to be in the office early, at least half an hour before anybody else arrived. He liked the peace and quiet, the calm before the storm, but he also enjoyed an unsullied sense of proprietorship which being in the empty unit by himself seemed to impart, perhaps because at that time in the morning there was nobody to challenge his authority and have a go at him.

It was an unforeseen added bonus that the mere fact of being present when everybody else arrived bestowed upon him a tacit kudos both from those above him in the company hierarchy as well as from those below, even though all that he did with the extra time was sit back, sip tea and read the newspaper. He would also from time to time surreptitiously examine the computer files of those in his section and rifle through their desk drawers. This was something that his team were very touchy about. They regarded their computer space as highly personal and resented his intrusions. But what was the problem? He was the boss after all and it's important for the boss to know what his underlings are up to especially when they don't keep him as well-informed as they ought to. He didn't usually find anything particularly interesting in his snooping but he derived a vicarious thrill from the exercise, rather like a Peeping Tom, but he would never have acknowledged this particular aspect of himself. Instead, he justified the practice in terms of keeping in touch with whatever trains of creative thought that his staff were pursuing.

Take Bob Bowley for example. He had a habit of sketching ideas in his computer notespace. His notespace also contained what Bob obviously considered to be words of wisdom and poetry that had come to him in moments of 'inspiration'. For example,

'Plug into the social conduit,
Plug into your bank account.'

'True emotion is a function of success.'

'The Creative Principle is inspired by attention to detail.'

And,

'To live a life without love,
Is sustainable if,
The thoughts come from above,
Which you can do something with.'

And,

'Placement is the key,
To the mystery,
Of form. No function,
Or content can cement,
The triumph over misery,
Of the PLACE where form is MEANT
To be.'

The lines were interwoven with esoteric doodlings. Simon regarded Bob's jottings with bewildered impatience but he found some of his design sketches interesting. He was further irritated by the fact that Bob always kept his desk drawer locked. He was the only one in the office who did so and Simon couldn't help but be intrigued by this. Was Bob challenging his authority in some way? In any case, Simon did not really mind. In fact, quite the opposite because it allowed him the rare opportunity to use his drawer master key which, with a large bunch of other keys of mainly unknown or redundant purpose, hung reassuringly from a clasp attached to his belt.

Bob had one or two ideas that Simon felt ought to be encouraged further. It was essential that his unit develop new ideas in the fiercely competitive field of 'Roomware' or 'furniture fashion' as it used to be called. Essential primarily for him. He had been in his present post for three years now which was the longest that he'd spent in any position without an upward move. His job was safe for another year as he'd passed the recent staff review but the prospect of demotion loomed large next time round. It was too abhorrent to even consider. Simon scanned the job vacancies in the newspapers and trade journals at every opportunity but although there were many suitable posts - which he always applied for - the competition for each vacancy was immense.

Simon had concluded that despite the dynamic creativity of the field, the top posts were still dominated by conservative elements that were nervous of innovative, ground-breaking talent such as his own.

Still, there were rumours that Harry Beatty, the Department Head, was due for promotion and Simon knew that he could easily fill Harry's shoes. He was, in fact, the natural choice. He not only had a proven managerial track record but a certain personal pizzazz which gave him that added edge.

Simon was the overseer of six Darling Decors Ltd employees, not including Stella May, the manager of the Virtual Design Room who was shared between all four design teams. There was, of course, no need for anybody to come to work at all, since most of it could be done at home but Company policy decreed, for reasons of creative chemistry, that all employees should spend the bulk of their time together in the work environment. Simon, however, perceived his role as too vital for him to spend any time at all away from the office. He provided the glue, the point of reference, the catalyst which maintained the corp d'esprit of his little group. Without his presence, they would fall apart. As he had often pointed out to Bob and anybody else who would listen, he worked best with people, not with machines, otherwise he would have eschewed promotion altogether and remained a ground-level designer. This was also why he subscribed to the management magazines that ostentatiously obscured his desk rather than trade journals. Simon Flare regarded himself as a human resource manager, not a technician. Not that he was any slouch in the technology department either. His own home virtual reality system was

state of the art. The fact that he needed it for nothing more than contacting his plumber or emailing the newspapers with his views on the current political situation was beside the point. In view of his position and his aspirations it was important to maintain this technological edge even though he liked to see himself as 'just one of the lads' when it suited him.

Simon was part of the creative psychodynamic that was carefully fostered by the Company. By means of personality inventories and psychometric testing each of the four design units and its manager was scientifically determined to optimise creative flow. Hence the importance of the daily office routine and the subsequent dynamic. It contributed for example to the successful development of the Beverage Bedhead, Simon's team's most recent success. Under his guidance, Linda Beverage had developed a popular range of spiky bed headboards. Such was the innovatory nature and success of her designs that her name was attributed to them - a rare accolade. Which reminded him, he must speak to young Bowley about a project that he'd been surreptitiously working on - 'Bowley's TimeCentrePeace.' Bowley had rather hopefully or perhaps even arrogantly assigned his own name to it right from the beginning. Anyway it would never work, from the design point of view of course. Yes, the Beverage Bedheads provided Simon with a glow of satisfaction tainted only by Linda's incomprehensible hostility towards him - something to do with her anti-male politics, he supposed. Maybe she was in awe of him, Simon surmised, in spite of herself, and her apparent hostility acted as a counterbalance. He should therefore regard her hostility as a compliment. But the fact was, that she unnerved him to such an extent that he kept postponing her staff development interview which he was supposed to formally undertake with each member of his team every three weeks. Today, though, he would have to talk to Bowley about his timepiece and convince him that to pursue it further would be folly.

Simon tried Linda's drawer even though there was never anything in it. What's this? It was locked as well! Simon fumbled for his master key. It didn't work. She'd changed the lock! Simon was outraged. Did she really think that she could get away with this? Simon, in a self-righteous pique, removed a cable from his drawer and connected it between Bob and Linda's terminals. I'll show her, he thought.

Linda had installed her own separate hard disk in her computer which she had passworded thus denying him managerial access to her files. But he had just the thing. He connected her terminal to Bob's and switched them both on. With an omniscient air he typed in Bob's password - 'SUCCESS', inserted a disk in Bob's drive and ran a password-breaker package that he'd recently acquired. He entered Linda's subdirectory and ran the package from there. I bet she changes the password every day, thought Simon, feeling wounded at such pointed aggression. The trouble was that the package took too long to run.

He had come in especially early yesterday morning to use it. It had run for a full hour without results and he had

disconnected it only moments before Linda had arrived. The shame at being caught would have been no less than the shame at being caught masturbating. It. Must. Never. Happen. Simon, staring into the screen on Bob's desk, relived yesterday's painful experience. He had neglected to switch Linda's machine off after he'd finished.

"Why is my machine on?" she had asked pointedly.

"Oh, you must have forgotten to switch it off last night. I thought that I'd heard one of them humming this morning."

"I never forget to switch my computer off," she had said with her typical icy superiority and a glare that had kept him out of the office for most of the rest of the day.

The memory sent a shiver up his spine. He started the program from a different point in the hope that it wouldn't take so long.

Next in line to Bob and Linda was the desk used by Sara and Stephen. Sara and Stephen job shared. This couple held no interest whatsoever for Simon. They made no impact on him.

The only thing about them that intrigued him was the nature of their relationship. There was obviously an intimate connection between them of some sort. This was most apparent on the mandatory staff weekends that the Company organised in order to promote team bonding, but the nature of their relationship puzzled him. They were like brother and sister but Sara was white and Stephen was black so they weren't blood relatives. Maybe one of them had been adopted. Were they lovers? All that Simon really knew about them was that they were both Survivalists; they believed, along with many other sects, that the end of the world was nigh and self-sufficiency was their response.

He examined their drawer. As expected, nothing. On their computer, a few dull sketches of ploughshares. Between them, Stephen and Sara had had one moderate success with indoor waterfalls but apart from that Simon regarded them as a waste of space and a dead weight. They reflected badly on him. If he could have somebody a little more dynamic in their place then there would surely be more of a chance of another breakthrough in Roomware to his credit. He'd spoken to Harry about them. Harry was sympathetic but the fact was that the Company wanted them. Harry said that it was because of what they contributed to the staff outings. They were outdoor types and they organised weekend activities not only for Simon's team but also for the other units. So Simon was stuck with them.

Directly opposite Sara and Stephen's station was Nigel's. Simon steeled himself before examining Nigel's drawer. It contained a mess of items that had something to do with the body - unguents, creams, sprays, gels, roll-ons, cotton buds and so on that evoked repugnance in Simon and confirmed for him his suspicions concerning Nigel's sexuality. Best left alone, he advised himself as he cautiously poked around.

Although repelled by Nigel in some ways, Simon could respect him in others. After all, Nigel Fairweather had been the first person in the Company to sport noddies. Simon had thought it a gay fashion at first and when he realised that it wasn't he duly kitted himself out. Simon was also very

interested in Nigel's latest project, a fabulous range of pink podia, à la Grècque. A man to watch. In some respects anyway.

And then there was Sally, seated between Nigel and himself, opposite Linda. Simon used to sit at this desk but the discomfort he experienced sitting directly opposite Linda was more than he could bear. Under the pretext of having to use the door more often than anybody else he had moved to his present location opposite Bowley. For reason's similar to Nigel's, Simon didn't like looking in Sally's drawer. It was full of 'female' things - bits of cotton wool and used tissues, a brush whose bristles had long disappeared within a dustball of hair, and other things that he wouldn't want to touch. More like a disposal unit, thought Simon. Sally got on well with Nigel and Linda but there was something about her that he himself found vaguely distasteful. This feeling was enhanced by his certainty that she fancied him. Sally was not a female that complimented his image of himself.

Simon was wrong in this respect. Sally didn't fancy him. She just mothered him a bit, feeling that this was what he needed. This was very perceptive of Sally. Simon's mother had run away from home when he was nine leaving his father to look after him and his younger brother. He'd never seen her since and he'd always had a nagging suspicion that he was to blame, that it was him that she had run away from. Sometimes Simon wondered if he were queer. Maybe that was what his mother had run away from.

As it had turned out, Sally was the dark horse of the outfit. She'd come up with not just one particular design but with a whole range. The advertising slogan resounded in Simon's head:

'Darling Decors Ltd, the Company that put
the Fur back into Furniture.'

It had begun with stick-on furry bookspines and then furry wall-mats, furry beds, sofas, etc. A whole new line had been generated which Sara helped Sally with. Sally's name hadn't been attached to them as they were too non-specific but she had turned out to be Simon's pride and joy. He glanced with satisfaction through her files. Now, if only she would do something about her timekeeping. She was always short on her timesheet. (She wasn't as short as Sara and Stephen but they didn't count.) Each day Simon administered an authoritative ticking off for Sally's benefit. And each day Sally apologised with genuine remorse and gave her excuse. It seemed to Simon that she had a bank of excuses from which to draw. Perhaps one of her cats was having problems in which case Simon would be regaled with the whole tedious saga, Sally assuming that Simon was familiar with the names, past histories and personalities of her pets. Or perhaps it might be the saga of the damp in the kitchen or the drama of one of her emotionally crippled friends or sick relatives. Simon often tried to anticipate which excuse she would come up with.

He checked the date on his watch and assured himself that he was safe for the rest of the month. His mind drifted back to a scene from a few days previously.

"And what is it this time, Sally? Cats, damp, your great-auntie? Budgie died?" Simon had to be careful here not to be too personal or to appear heartless otherwise Linda would bite his head off. "You know that I can't prevent payroll from docking hours forever."

"Woman's problems, Simon. Sorry," answered Sally in a stage whisper. This was the first time that Sally had used this particular excuse and he had been momentarily taken aback. But only momentarily.

"Well, Sally, all I can say is that that is not much of an excuse. I mean, Linda is a woman and she is always here on time, regular as ..." Simon was suddenly pierced by a hideous, eye-dagger stare from Linda over her half-specs and had faltered. Anticipating a tirade from Linda about his male inability to comprehend the intricate working of female mechanics he backed down immediately.

"Well, uh, okay, Sally, erm, I hope that it isn't too bad, umm."

"No, Simon, no, thank-you. It just occasionally comes on a little strong." Simon made a note to be careful during the second week of each month.

Simon was aroused from his recall by the sound of footsteps in the corridor. At this time of the morning these usually belonged to Stella May, the Visual Display Room and information manager, which reminded him that he hadn't yet prepared an information request for Stella. Whether necessary or not, he did this every day, partly because he saw this as exercising his managerial prerogative and partly because he simply enjoyed seeing Stella. She was so damn sexy. There was a strong chemistry between them and Simon enjoyed the flirting. It was a sore point with Simon that there were no sexy woman in his team. The other three teams had more than their fair share.

Simon heard the footsteps rushing closer to the door and realised that they couldn't belong to Stella. She always wore high-heels and her pace was even and authoritative. These ones were fast, dumpy steps. Sally burst into the office, her mousy, failed perm flapping uselessly in front of her beautiful pale blue eyes which were unfortunately set in a round dumpy face. Sally was dumpy.

"Where's Bob?" she called out. "Where's Bob?" Sally looked as though she'd just woken up from a bad dream and was not yet fully awake. Simon's immediate concern was that the cable connecting Bob and Linda's machines would be noticed. His password breaker was still running. Edging backwards to the machines he surreptitiously yanked the cable behind his back. He slipped round to the front of Bob's machine, switched it off and removed the disk. Sally was too distraught to bother with what he was up to.

"What's up, Sally? Is anything wrong? Why are you in so early?"

"It's Bob. There is something that I absolutely have to tell him." She looked as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

"Look, sit down. You're upset. I'll make you a nice cup of coffee." As he brought her the coffee he remembered that she only drank tea but she didn't object when he handed her the cup. She was sitting on his chair, her old one, staring into space.

"So is it the end of the world or what?" Simon had no knowledge of any relationship between Sally and Bowley beyond the workplace. It couldn't be that she was pregnant, could it?

Sally sipped the coffee. She hadn't heard him.

"Sorry?"

"What's the problem, Sally? What's so urgent that you've got yourself into such a state? What is it that you have to tell Bob? Hmm?" Sally put the coffee down. The distance melting from her eyes, she looked up at Simon.

"I forget."

Bob alighted from the bus and switched his music player off. It was a walk of 150 meters to the office building and as Bob disentangled himself from the audio wires he noticed a startling figure striding past, a figure dressed in bright pink ersatz satin with a long yellow chiffon scarf billowing in the self-created breeze as he strode purposefully forward, head held high. It was Nigel Fairweather.

Bob felt a need, a need whose urgency would have appalled him if he'd paused to reflect upon it, to catch up with Nigel. Nigel was the apple of Simon's eye, a man of natural creative talent, a man to watch, a man who might get in the way of his projected career path.

He stuffed his music player into his case and rushed to catch up with Nigel trying, at the same time, to appear nonchalant with the result that his gait was a stiff brisk walk with an occasional skip and a lurch.

"Morning, Nige," he called from behind, but Nigel didn't hear. He was a man who appeared to be single-mindedly fixed on a distant goal and billowed on. Bob made an extra lurch and a skip to bring himself along sideways and tried again.

"Nice noddies, Nige," he let out without thinking. Nigel looked sideways and down - he was a big man - with a look of disdain, as though annoyed at being distracted from some higher contemplation. He looked at Bob. He looked at the customised briefcase with the wires sticking out.

"Good morning, Robert," and then his head resumed its forward orientation.

"So how's it going, Nige? How're the pink podia coming along?"

Without slowing his speed or changing his orientation, Nigel replied, "Fine, Robert, fine. And how are the ... what was it, ah, kitchen utensils coming along?" Bob was still having to lurch and trot to keep up with Nigel.

"Well, no, actually, it was *gothic* kitchen utensils but my main project's a central timepiece."

"Hmm, this sounds suspiciously functional to me, Robert. A timepiece?"

Bob was mortified. "Not at all, Nige, not at all. No, no, no. It will of course be a timepiece but it won't be of any use as such." Nigel cocked a cynical eyebrow. "No," Robert continued hastily, "the time will be displayed, of course, but it will correspond to a randomised timezone and in any case most of the time it will be enclosed within a dove-engraved black hemisphere which will lift itself at random intervals so even if the owner had business in a particular timezone, it would be an unlikely coincidence that the TimeCentrePeace would be displaying a useful time when he wanted it."

Bob could see that Nigel remained unconvinced. They arrived at the revolving doors of Darling Decors Ltd. Nigel was in the door in one fluid motion. Bob had a split-second decision to make: to go into the same section as Nigel or into the next one. He felt the need to stick close to Nigel, to persuade him further, so he squeezed in behind him, catching a whiff of Malestrom #7, the perfume for men. The revolving door compartments were intended for one only. Nigel let out a grunt and they both shunted forward in small steps. Once out, Nigel bounded up the stairway to the first floor where their office was situated. Bob, in spite of himself, ran up after him.

Nigel crashed into the office without acknowledging anybody, went straight to his desk and perched himself upon it in a cross-legged position. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Simon raised his eyebrows in mock disbelief and Sally smiled. She was sitting at her own desk now and getting on with her work, her earlier concern for Bob put down to a now-forgotten bad dream.

Bob had come falling in hot on Nigel's heels and banged into a corner of Simon's desk knocking some management magazines and papers onto the floor. A loud, resonant "Ohmmmmmm" emanated from Nigel on his perch. Bob felt a sharp pain in his left thigh and muttered, "Sorry, Simon," as he scrambled to pick up the items from the floor. Sally helped him, the pang of urgency that she'd felt earlier rekindled at the sight of Bob.

There was something important that she had to tell him. What was it? Maybe it had just been a dream after all. Sometimes you have a dream about somebody that you hardly know, share an intimacy in the dream with them that you somehow feel that you have then established in the flesh. Let it go, Sally, she told herself, let it go, but it wasn't so easy. It was as though she had already told herself not to be fooled by this plausible explanation. For the rest of the morning Sally found herself staring at Bob for protracted periods much to his discomfort. Perhaps it had been a premonition of some sort, a premonition of Bob's fall, of something worse than death. She shuddered. She had never experienced such morbidity and melodrama within herself before.

During the chaos, Linda had quietly entered, sidestepping the melee and given a pursed "Good morning," to nobody in

particular. She went straight to the coffee and tea machine that was situated at the wall between Sally's and Nigel's desks. "Coffee anyone?"

Bob had just sat down at his machine and switched on. "Yes please," he said. He wondered if his leg was bleeding. Was that blood that he felt trickling down inside his trouser leg?

"Me too, please Linda," Simon said, eager to engage with Linda on this straightforward, non-acrimonious level. "By the way, Bob, I think that you could probably do with another development interview today, say at 11?"

"Okay, Simon." Simon was wearing stripes today. Bob wondered how he would look in stripes. Would he look as snazzy as Simon? Bob typed in his password and his machine responded with a tinny fanfare. Linda, with a rueful look, brought him his coffee and handed one to Simon.

"Actually, Simon, if you check the schedule that you issued at the beginning of the year, you'll notice that it's me that's due for a development interview this morning. Me this morning and Stephen this afternoon."

Damn! thought Simon. "Ah, well, actually, Linda, no I hadn't forgotten but I consider it more important that Bob has another interview as he's in the final stages of his project whereas you have just had a major success."

"That's beside the point. It's only a matter of tidying up for Bob whereas I've yet to choose a direction for development. In any case, I want to talk to you about my transfer."

Linda had nothing but contempt for Simon. She wanted to move to another unit. Although Simon realised that this would make his life easier he could not bring himself to accept Linda's absolute rejection of him. As it happened, a transfer was impossible. He'd tried several times already but Harry wasn't having it. The psychological chemistry was finely tuned. Harry suggested another team weekend. Simon groaned inwardly at putting that suggestion to Linda. There was no way that she was going to agree to go on more team weekends than the contracted minimum.

"Look, Linda, you know that a transfer is out of the question. I've spoken to Harry about it several times and all he's got to say about it is that we should go on more team weekends. And you don't want that, do you?"

Linda turned away. Simon was, on this occasion, correct. She sat down at her machine and said, "Why is my machine on?"

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! thought Simon. "Sorry?" Linda hadn't addressed the question to anybody in particular - Simon had missed a possible escape route.

"Why is my machine on? This is the second time that this has happened." Simon mentally thrashed about for an excuse. He didn't want to spend another day in the doghouse.

"Bob, did you somehow switch Linda's machine on in the confusion a few moments ago?"

Bob had already disappeared into his work. "Eh, What?" Simon's question slowly seeped through to the appropriate port of cognition in Bob's neural network. "Ah, no Simon. I don't see how I could have."

"Of course he couldn't have," said Linda. "It was you. What were you up to?"

"Yes, it was me. Of course it was me." Simon wondered if he should take the offensive and launch into an attack using the new lock on Linda's drawer as a pretext but past experience indicated that such a tactic would only be offering his throat to the wolf. "Yes, you know that I like to come in early to catch up on my paperwork and write a few memos. Well, this morning, my machine wouldn't switch on and I thought that the circuit might have fused so I tried another machine at random - yours - to see if this was the case. Sure enough, your machine wouldn't come on either but it turned out to be only a temporary power lapse and your machine obviously came on later because I'd left it switched on."

"Hmmm," said Linda.

Brilliant, Simon. Brilliant.

"By the way, Simon..."

"Yes?"

"You've got dandruff on your shoulder." Bob looked up, aghast. That was a bit below the belt but Simon parried it well.

"I didn't know that you cared." He brushed the dandruff off and gave Linda a cheesy smile. Linda cut him off and got on with her work. Simon cleared his throat and took a memo to Stella. En route, he popped into the gents for a swig from his hip flask.

Five minutes later, Nigel let out another resonant "Ohmmm" and said, "That's better. Good morning, everyone."

Another five minutes later, at 0930 precisely, Bob went to the toilet and, apart from Sally's unusual behaviour, another typical day at Darling Decors Ltd had begun.

CHAPTER THREE

The Venerable Mahawisteria was thinking. In approximately one minute's time he would stop thinking. He would stop thinking for approximately five minutes and then he would think about what he had to think about next. The foregoing was what the Venerable Mahawisteria had been thinking about during the minute before he stopped thinking.

The Venerable Mahawisteria was one of the few people on the planet who had control of his thoughts. The mind was the organ of thought and therefore he had control of his mind. So he used the mind for thinking and what he thought about was determined by the demands of the objective situation and not by any subjective conditioning. And if there was nothing to think about at any particular moment then he quite simply would not think. He would then direct his mind into a concentrated state of quietude from which he would eventually emerge refreshed and replenished. People were impressed by this talent of the Venerable Mahawisteria, especially those that were drawn to the Buddhist sect that he had founded, the Flowers of the Buddha, or the FOB.

The Venerable Mahawisteria was an Englishman from Bognor Regis who had spent 25 years as a Buddhist monk in India. When he returned from the East he perceived a need for presenting the teachings of the Buddha in a relevant form to the people of the West who were regarded by the Venerable Mahawisteria as being in a state of alienation both from themselves and from each other. He ran meditation classes and gave talks and a small but dedicated following soon built up around him.

His original Buddhist name was not Mahawisteria and he had originally called his group the Followers of the Buddha. One afternoon he was giving a talk about a particular instance in the Buddha's career when the Buddha, instead of sermonising, conveyed the essence of Enlightenment to one of his followers by simply holding up a flower. A young woman of Malaysian origin, named Rose, on hearing this story, said to the Venerable Mahawisteria that the group should really be called the Flowers of the Buddha. Somebody else likened him to a great wisteria spreading his blooms of wisdom in all directions.

The poetry of Rose's suggestion sent a quiet inspirational thrill through the Venerable Mahawisteria's scrawny frame and he said that of course it must be so. And to commemorate the new naming of his group he changed his own name to 'Great Wisteria' - Mahawisteria. Henceforth when ordaining people into his little group he named them after flowers which he supposed reflected some quality within the individual. Perhaps a Sanskrit prefix or suffix would also be added. So for example, there was Pansymitra - the pansy of friendship; Chittalily - the lily of thought; Virachrysanthemum - the chrysanthemum of energy, and so on. These names were cherished by the ordainees. They were symbolically and meaningfully charged and the flower was used as an object of meditation thus deepening the significance of the name.

It might be thought that some men would have trouble with the idea of being named after a flower; after all, this sort

of thing is usually reserved for girls - you don't go around naming men after daisies and daffodils and whatever, but the Venerable Mahawisteria taught that this was an ideal opportunity for the men to confront this aspect of their conditioning. Actually, it turned out not to be much of a problem for the men because a relatively large proportion of them considered themselves to be homosexual and they positively adored their new nomenclature.

After five minutes of quiet, the Venerable Mahawisteria thought about what he had to think about next. He was due to lead a lunchtime meditation class in twenty-five minutes and after that was the inaugural meeting of the CCI. There would be no problem with the meditation class, only some routine preparations to be made. But the first meeting of the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity worried him a little. It was a new venture for his fledgling movement and the wisdom of pursuing such a campaign at so early a stage in its development was something of a gamble and the Venerable Mahawisteria was not a gambling man. However, the objective need for such a move was clear. He needed to give his message a secular form for he realised that many people had no stomach for any kind of religion and what better approach than to target directly the root of much negative mental and emotional conditioning - the Media? The poison of media influence on the psychological makeup of the individual must be acknowledged and tackled. Hence, the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity, a campaign to give power back to the people, power over their own thoughts and emotions.

And of course, there was also the possibility of a knock-on effect that the CCI would bring people into contact with the Flowers of the Buddha.

The Venerable Mahawisteria hoped that a broad coalition of interests would rally behind the CCI and excite some media interest. Unfortunately, his would-be coalition partners in this new venture were not quite what he had been hoping for. He'd written invitations to various intellectuals and interest groups but only two positive responses had been received, one from the Survivalists and one from the Neo-Luddites, two fringe groups with a rather dubious press. There was nothing at this moment to be done about it so he directed his mind from the matter and concerned himself with the organisation of the meditation class.

Who was there to help, today? There was Rose, of course. Pansymitra would be here and there was a recent chap called Ian who seemed shy and somewhat tongue-tied. That should be sufficient.

At this very moment Ian was rushing to the Centre having finally got himself together and prised himself from the flat. Ian fancied himself as a Seeker after Truth and in this, for the time being at least, he must be given the benefit of the doubt. Not that Ian, in intensely introspective moments, didn't scrutinise his own motives in being so concerned with the reality behind surface appearances. Was he simply avoiding the harsher realities of life, that is, avoiding holding down a job and fulfilling certain social obligations?

Perhaps he was just plain lazy, living as he did on state support. It couldn't be that he was lazy, he argued to himself, because here he was going along to the Meditation Centre to help out. The Buddhists seemed very hard-working and if he were to involve himself with them he would know soon enough exactly how lazy he was.

Ian had thought about becoming ordained, about becoming an official Flower of the Buddha. He liked the idea but he wasn't so sure about being named after a flower. Thistle would be okay, he conjectured. If he was called Chrysanthemum then that could be abbreviated to Chris. Morning Glory was pretty neat though. Ian was perceptive enough to realise that he was only being anxious about this because of his male conditioning. Perhaps it would be for the best if he were called Marigold or Buttercup or something like that. He must learn to put his trust in the Venerable Mahawisteria. Here was somebody who had actually succeeded in the Search for Truth, an Enlightened Being.

Cosmic.

Ian was overawed by the possibilities that the Venerable Mahawisteria represented. Here was somebody who had realised and optimised his human potential - a spiritual superman.

When Ian arrived at the Meditation Centre only Rose and Pansymitra were around. Mahawisteria was upstairs in his private quarters meditating. Ian threw himself with gusto into the task of making sandwiches for the lunchtime meditators. He attempted to apply the Buddhist qualities that he had learned of, that is he tried to make the sandwiches with awareness and love. He was somewhat sidetracked in his efforts by the lovely Rose who was spreading the sliced bread with margarine in preparation for his vegetable pate. Male conditioning, he warned himself. Be aware and objective. But she was so sweet. He wondered if she was attracted to him.

As for Rose, she was one hundred percent into the Flowers of the Buddha. There was something significant about the fact that her ordained name was the same as her ordinary name. Mahawisteria had told her that this acknowledged her ongoing spiritual development. She was also one of the few women to be ordained into the Flowers of the Buddha.

At first, Rose had been outraged by the Venerable Mahawisteria's apparent sexism. He seemed to have trouble in acknowledging women. He didn't quite see them. They were pleasant enough creatures to have wandering around in the background but they were surely not up to the rigours of the spiritual life. This seemed to be his attitude at first and it incensed Rose. Wasn't he supposed to be Enlightened after all? However, when she discovered more about his lifestyle in India, she realised that he was simply inexperienced when it came to women. After all, he'd spent his time as a Buddhist monk and running a school for boys. To his credit, when he realised that women were attracted to his teachings and weren't going to take a backstage role, he began to alter his preconceptions and take women more seriously. Rose also appreciated that her anger related to her own ego problems and that this was something that she had to work with.

Rose was financially supported by her ex-husband and so could devote most of her time to the FOB, the rest of the time being dedicated to her daughter Lulu.

Rose did not notice Ian at all.

After the sandwiches, she hoovered the foyer and laid out the cushions and flowers in the meditation room in preparation for the meditation class. Ian was in charge of the tea and Pansymitra organised the tape recorder. Mahawisteria delivered a short talk before each meditation session and he liked to have these recorded so that a resource library could be built up.

Pansymitra was a sullen, intense individual with a wounded look about him. He didn't make small talk and Ian felt uncomfortable around him. Perhaps, Ian conjectured, Pansymitra was practising the precept of abstention from frivolous speech. Ian was impressed by this possibility and pulled himself up for hankering after frivolous speech.

Four people showed up for the lunchtime meditation class. It went very smoothly except for Henry Moody of the Neo-Luddites turning up towards the end of the meditation. He'd arrived early for the CCI meeting.

"Hallo, hallo, anybody home?" he called in his strong Lancastrian accent from the front lobby. Henry Moody passed through the heavy curtain which led into the foyer and then stumbled into the meditation room. "Oops. Sorry! Ah just let maself in, seein as the door was left off the latch."

Everybody continued to sit motionless on their cushions except for Rose who quietly got up and guided Mr Moody back to the foyer to wait for the end of the meditation. He was a short, burly, red-faced man with thin black hair brylcreamed across his scalp.

"What's goin on in there, then, lass?" but before Rose could reply, Henry Moody launched into a loud exposition of the principles of Neo-Luddism. "Ah'm sure it's all very interesting, lass, but me, Ah'm a back to basics man maself. Keep it simple, that's what Ah say. And by the great Harry, why shouldn't it be, eh? Why do we go and complicate our lives so, I ask ye? There baynt no need for high falutin philosophising and all the rest of it. Where's it ever got us, that's what ah'd lahk to know? What's wrong with us that we're always getting our knickers in such a twist? - if you'll excuse the expression lass. Ah'll tell you what's wrong and what's more, Ah'll tell you in one word and that word is -," and here Henry Moody leaned conspiratorially closer to Rose and, using every muscle in his face, enunciated the word

"Technology.

"Now don't get me wrong, lass. Ah'm not against machines as such. I dare say that they have their place. But we've become *overdependent* on them and in order to remedy this sorry state of affairs we quite simply need to learn to do without them. Now this Boodhist leader of yours, this Megamysterious -",

"Mahawisteria," corrected Rose.

"Right then, whatever, this chappy of yours seems to have his head screwed on the right way. I mean, Ah'm no intellectual, only an honest tiller of the soil and I'm not

the world's greatest communicator if you know what Ah mean but I like to think that we, the Neo-Luddites that is, have something to offer the majority of people in this blighted society or ours and your Megahysteria chappy could very well provide the intellectual clout that we need to put our message across. T'bring some of you young folks into the fold, lahk."

Rose listened patiently to all of this and wondered how on earth Henry Moody would fit in with the Venerable Mahawisteria's intentions as she was sure that Mahawisteria was unlikely to fit in with Henry Moody's expectations. She wondered too if her mentor would get a word in edgeways. Mr Moody was interrupted at that moment by the meditators leaving the meditation room. He went up to them and shook each of them vigorously by the hand and with genuine warmth said,

"Henry Moody of the Neo-Luddites. Good health to you."

Ian had nipped into the kitchenette and boiled the kettle.

"Tea, anybody?"

"That would be lovely, sonny," said Mr Moody. Ian felt his post-meditation high plummet to the ground at being called 'sonny'. Henry Moody's presence seemed to fill up the whole sitting area that constituted the foyer. The four novice meditators, in their sensitised state were somewhat jarred by being greeted by Henry Moody on exiting their meditation. There didn't seem to be any room left for them in the foyer so they made their excuses and left.

Mahawisteria finally appeared. "Mr Moody? How do you do? Please be seated." He indicated a pile of purple cushions.

Henry Moody, in the swing of handshaking, grabbed Mahawisteria's soft limp hand and gave it the same vigorous treatment before balancing himself on a pile of cushions. He had difficulty in bending his knees and his position looked precarious. Ian poured a cup of tea for him and also for Mahawisteria who had seated himself on a single cushion. Ian placed a plate of sandwiches on the floor between them.

"Ah, wholewheat bread, the *only* kind of bread," remarked Moody. With saucer and cup in one hand, he reached over for a sandwich with the other, and unaccustomed to such manoeuvres he toppled sideways along with the cushions onto the plate of sandwiches. There was tea and vegetable pate everywhere. At that point the doorbell rang and Ian answered it leaving Rose to mop up the mess.

"Julian Sands MP," a large barrel-chested man, pinstriped and carnationed, with blond swept-back hair announced himself. He was clutching a letter and looking distinctly ill at ease.

"Fob?" he asked.

"Sorry?" said Ian.

"I have a letter here from the uh," he opened the letter and read, "the Venerable Mahawisteria. I was invited to attend the inaugural meeting of -"

"Ah yes, the CCI," chimed in Ian. "Come in." Sands passed through the lobby curtain. A thin young man with a white spotty face and unkempt black hair also turned up. He was a reporter from the local press. He followed Julian Sands in and positioned himself inconspicuously in the corner.

"Ah, Mr Sands, I'm so glad that you could make it. Please make yourself comfortable," said Mahawisteria. Henry Moody

was sitting bolt upright on some cushions with a fresh cup of tea. He was looking a little wary. Rose was scrubbing the carpet with a cloth. The young reporter stood by the curtain. Nobody took any notice of him.

Ian surveyed the scene. He wondered if he should make some more sandwiches. He noticed a plate of biscuits placed on a small table near Henry Moody and decided against it. Ian wanted to stay for the meeting but he hadn't been invited. He had hoped to walk Rose along the road after the meditation but she was obviously staying behind. Nobody said anything to him and feeling a little rejected he decided to leave. He let out a quiet "Bye" which nobody noticed apart from Julian Sands who turned around and gave him a rather dissolute backward glance. The reporter glared at him as he made to leave. Ian stopped outside the gate at the end of the path to the house and breathed in the fresh autumn air. What to do now? He tried to practice mindful awareness and then decided to practice some compassion. He would go to the grocer's and buy some veg and prepare an evening meal for himself and Bob.

Meanwhile, back inside, Henry Moody's tongue was shifting into gear once again. He was feeling uncomfortable and his response to discomfort was to talk. His tongue would take on a life of its own on such occasions, dragging and bouncing him along behind it.

"No. No machines, no 'dark, satanic mills'. That was the Fall you know, the Fall in the true sense of the word, the Industrial Revolution. Believe me, Paradise is around the corner. The Garden of Eden is beckoning. We simply have to walk through the gates if we so choose. And why do we choose not to do so? Because we have been hypnotised by those damnable machines, that's why." Henry Moody cast his gaze aggressively around the room, like a military commander surrounded on all sides by the enemy. It rested on Pansymitra who was tinkering with the cassette player again. "It saddens me to say, sir, that you are already infected." Pansymitra looked like he wanted to plead his innocence but the verdict was already delivered. Addressing Mahawisteria Henry Moody continued,

"And you have the audacity to talk about *cerberal* integrity. Sir, I don't think that we can do business." At this, he stood up, held his head high and was borne out on a cloud of self-righteous pique, an effect ruined by his becoming slightly entangled in the lobby curtain.

Julian Sands also didn't want to be there. It was all too fringe. He'd heard on the grapevine that the Buddhist Centre was a new potential gay pick-up place and when he received the invitation he thought that he might as well check it out but it didn't look too promising. The fellow by the tape machine looked sweet enough but not really his type. And the scruff in the corner, pencilling in a notepad was obviously a reporter. No, there was nothing to be gained, either personally or professionally, from being here. He pressed a few buttons on his watch which also served as a personal organiser. It let out a beep.

"Oh my goodness!" he blurted. "I've just remembered an important appointment that I must keep at the House. I'm

dreadfully sorry that I can't stay but do keep me informed of the progress of your commendable campaign." He leaned forward to get up and fell right over. One of his legs had gone to sleep. Flustered and in pain, he hobbled as quickly as he could into the lobby and out into the street. The reporter slinked out after him.

Mahawisteria closed his eyes and went into a meditative trance. Rose followed suit and so did Pansymitra, having finished his business with the tape machine.

Some minutes later, Rose became aware of the scent of honey and candlewax. Her eyes being closed, she assumed that somebody had lit some candles and incense although the fragrance was unfamiliar. Pansymitra detected a heady aroma that could only be described as that of scrubbed alpine flowers. He wondered whether he might have entered a divine state of consciousness whereby the body is supposed to emit heavenly fragrances (he'd read about such things). Did the Venerable Mahawisteria notice his spiritual achievement?

The Venerable Mahawisteria hadn't noticed anything. He was entirely focused on his breath and there was nothing else to it.

A slightly questioning but self-assured "Hello" roused the three of them from their meditative efforts. Before them stood a radiant woman of Nordic Aryan features and proportions. Long flaxen pigtailed framed a round beaming visage. Deep green eyes and a full smile radiated a sense of the outdoor life and exceptional vitality.

"Hello, I'm Sonja Zolliker, from the Survivalists."

Sonja Zolliker wore a green waxed multi-pocketed jacket on top of a lumpy purple woollen jumper, faded yellow denims and, even though it was the beginning of autumn, only simple sandals on her otherwise bare feet.

"I'm here on behalf of the Leader of the Survivalists, Mitchell Paragon, who sent me to represent him at the inaugural meeting of the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity. Is this it?"

Rose rose to make tea.

"Yes it is," answered the Venerable Mahawisteria, "but I'm afraid our campaign looks like being off to a somewhat inauspicious start as you are the only other to have shown an interest. Still, as they say, from little acorns -"

"Exactly!" bounced in Sonja Zolliker. "Mitch is very excited about the campaign and is sorry that he couldn't be here in person but he had to fly to Angola all of a sudden to sort out the new Survivalist offshoot there. He's read one of your books - 'The Three Petals', I think it was - and he was impressed by your thinking."

The Venerable Mahawisteria found himself warming to Mitchell Paragon and the Survivalists. They were a much larger and longer established organisation than the FOB. Mitchell Paragon was a household name, a larger than life character who frequently appeared on news programs and chat shows to put the case for self-sufficiency and to espouse a lifestyle of environmental and communal harmony. He was usually interviewed whenever there had been a disaster,

natural or otherwise, and told everybody what they were doing wrong.

The Survivalist movement owned several country estates in which they practised and developed the Survivalist lifestyle. The Venerable Mahawisteria, having read one of Paragon's own books, 'Surviving the Apocalypse', was favourably disposed to many of the Survivalists' practices although he himself would prefer segregation of the sexes into separate living and work environments. This was the way that he wanted to take the FOB even though he appreciated that this might hamper the movement's expansion.

He'd been somewhat disappointed by the rapid dropout of ordainees - about fifty per cent of those that he'd ordained into the Flowers of the Buddha had eventually lost interest or been attracted to some passing fad or other. In response to this he had decided to instigate a probationary period culminating in a short retreat in the countryside after which the would-be ordainees would be deemed suitable or otherwise for entry into his Order.

The Venerable Mahawisteria, being of a poetic disposition, decided to call his new order of Buddhists the Blossoms of the Buddha in keeping with the floral metaphor. A probationer would therefore be referred to as a Bud of the Buddha. Yes, both the logic and the poetry of this arrangement would be both satisfying and appealing. The organisation as a whole would continue to be known as the Flowers of the Buddha. All that was needed now was a venue for the first FOB ordination retreat and this, he was sure, the Survivalists could provide. He intended to bring this up with the young lady after the meeting.

"On behalf of the Flowers of the Buddha," he said, "I would like to welcome you to this, the first meeting of the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity. May this prove to be a long and fruitful relationship between the Flowers of the Buddha and the Survivalists."

Sonja's smile beamed even brighter enveloping the foyer in a warm glow. "Thank you so much, Venerable Mahawisteria."

"And let me introduce you to two members of the Order, Pansymitra and Rose." Rose reappeared with the tea. She gave a friendly "Hello" and Pansymitra gave an uneasy smile and nodded. He leaned over and asked in a quiet voice, "Shall I record this?"

Mahawisteria, having a sense of occasion and a penchant for historic moments said, "Yes, I think that that would be a rather good idea." Pansymitra immediately began to fiddle with the tape machine once again and regained a sense of calm after the earlier disturbance with Henry Moody.

During the meeting a press release was prepared - subject to approval by Mitchell Paragon, a conference was planned, an agenda posited, and it was suggested that the main activities of the CCI would be to offer retreats in the countryside whereby the participants would work on the land and be taught meditation. Mitchell Paragon was very keen on meditation and on introducing it to the Survivalists. Sonja told Mahawisteria that Mitchell Paragon practised a technique that he had developed himself but he considered it too dangerous

for all but a small circle of initiates to practise. Mahawisteria raised an interested eyebrow when Sonja mentioned this and asked for more details but she said that she didn't know because even though she was one of Mitchell Paragon's wives she was not yet a meditation initiate.

"I think that I can look forward to meeting Mitchell Paragon," said Mahawisteria.

"Oh, you can," said Sonja enthusiastically. He's the most wonderful human being in the world."

CHAPTER FOUR

Simon emerged from the lavatory after propping himself up with a shot of alcohol and loped into Stella's small office. She was sporting the very latest in fleurs de la derriere fashion. Because of the exigencies of this attire it was not possible to sit on an ordinary chair. Instead, she was leaning forward on an upholstered platform at sixty degrees to the horizontal from which she could easily and comfortably operate her computer console.

"And how is my favourite information and Virtual Display Room manager this morning?" asked Simon, the warm glow of the recently imbibed whisky and Stella's extravagant floral posterior contributing to a sense that all was well with the world.

"Very well, Simon. And how is my favourite unit manager?" Stella reciprocated in what was obviously a little ritual between them. Stella liked Simon. She liked his sense of humour. She knew that he was a bullshitter but, knowing that he had problems, this only endeared him to her. She was happy to play along with him.

"A team leader's responsibilities are a heavy burden to bear," said Simon. "Especially my obstreperous lot. They wouldn't know corps d'esprit if you hit them over the head with it. Too much rugged individualism for their own good if you know what I mean. I mean, you do your best for them and all you get in return is a lot of flack."

"Tell me about it!" said Stella. "My job is to rig up virtual prototypes of design specs but sometimes you'd think that they want me to write the blooming specs as well. They expect me to know what they want without providing all the details and then blame me when it's not quite right."

"Terrible," tutted Simon.

"So what can I do for you this morning?"

"Ah, do you think that you could arrange an activity weekend for this benighted team of mine? You know, the usual thing, canoeing, archery, etcetera. I'll imbue them with a sense of team spirit even if it kills them." Simon knew that he was putting his head in the noose as far as his team were concerned - they were far from enthusiastic about these outings - but this was the only excuse that he could come up with for visiting Stella.

"Consider it done," she said and began typing away at her keyboard. "Fill in an official request form and give it to me. You know, the green ones, over there." She nodded at some pigeonholes in a corner with piles of forms of various colours in them.

Simon felt that this recourse to formalism soured their rapport a little. He knew that Stella liked forms to be filled in but she usually did it for him. He felt that he and Stella shared a 'special understanding'. "Er...one of these is it?" he inquired plaintively.

"Yes," said Stella. "Oh, here, give it to me and I'll fill it in." Simon passed the green form to Stella and felt that their rapport was intact. "By the way, would you like to come to the American football tonight?"

"Sorry, Simon. I'm going ice-skating with Richard this evening."

Damn! thought Simon. He didn't like to be reminded of Stella's university lecturer boyfriend. He made a mental note to buy a pair of ice skates on the way home and to sign up for a course of lessons.

"Okay," he said, feeling deflated, "whatever turns you on. Erm, what about dinner tomorrow night?"

Stella clicked her personal organiser icon on the screen. "Hmmm, let's see..." Simon peered over her shoulder at the long list of names that he didn't recognise. He wondered if he could handle being turned down again. "Yes, tomorrow is free. What'll it be? It's a while since I've had Italian." She looked at him expectantly.

"My favourite," said Simon. "Now, must dash; a team manager's work is never done. Young Bob Bowley's staff development interview has come round again. And it's up to me to make sure that his creative juices are properly channelled."

"Maybe you can do the same for me Simon..." said Stella, saucily. Simon felt a sharp thrill pierce his gut.

"You'll have to wait till tomorrow night to find out, senorita," he said with a parting grin. He was sure that she was his. She just didn't realise it - yet. Tomorrow night surely....

On his way back to the office he popped into the gents for another swig.

On entering the office, the first eyes to meet his were Linda's, peering at him accusingly over her lunettes. He felt like a little boy who had been caught doing something wrong. Surely she couldn't know about his drinking? thought Simon. He considered himself to be very discreet about it, even using a throat spray after each tipple.

The fact of the matter was that Linda did indeed know about his habit. In fact, everybody but Bob acknowledged it. Bob considered it malicious propaganda on Linda's part. It was true that Simon slipped out of the office rather a lot. Bob had bumped into him in the gents once. "Bladder problem," Simon had muttered and as far as Bob was concerned, this was the truth of the matter. He wondered whether he should tell the others but had decided that it would be better to observe a little discretion on his part.

Linda had spoken to Harry Beatty, the Department Head, about Simon. She had difficulty accepting the fact that Simon had passed the staff review for the third year running. The directors couldn't possibly be in receipt of a full psychological profile. She had to query it even though she suspected that she would be up against the old boys network. After all, Harry and Simon often socialised together.

"He's an alcoholic, Harry. The man is sick and he's getting worse. He needs help. I can't believe that the directors appreciate the full extent of his problem. And it's not only that he's an alcoholic - I don't think that this has anything to do with his illness - but alcoholic or not he's utterly incompetent," complained Linda.

"Don't you think that you're being a little too harsh on the man, Linda? Okay, he takes a drink on the job every now and again but that's not unusual in fields of creative endeavour. As long as he isn't falling down drunk then it isn't really a problem, is it? As for his competence or otherwise, your little team has been doing all right. Its track record under Simon hasn't faltered, has it? So let's be objective about the situation."

Linda wanted to say that the team's track record had nothing to do with Simon. Success had been in spite of Simon and not because of him but she felt that to state this point of view would put her in a bad light. She tried a different tack.

"But surely you must have some say in the matter, Harry? Why not give one of the rest of us a chance at the post? Perhaps there's another position in the Company more suited to Simon's, er, talents. What kind of psychometric analysis do the directors do anyway?"

"You know that information is classified. But let me make it quite clear, Linda, that Simon's retention of the post had nothing to do with me. Sure, I could register a protest if you wish, but the decision procedure is entirely automatic and based on up-to-date psychometric techniques and the latest developments in creative psychodynamics."

Linda felt helpless. Her remaining hope was that Simon found a promoted post for himself elsewhere. But the chances of that happening were slim to say the least. Her anger was sparked once again by consideration of Simon's complete incompetence and a sense of her own impotence.

Simon, feeling like an animal transfixed by the lights of an imminently fatal oncoming vehicle, tore his eyes from Linda's glare and said,

"Right, Bob, staff development interview in ten minutes and," - in a louder voice - "everybody, team meeting this afternoon at two." There was a communal groan. "You know you'll love it," quipped Simon.

"What about an agenda, Simon?" asked Linda, with a broken glass edge to her voice. Bob detected a noticeable drop in temperature and concentrated even harder on his screen. "Do you think that one could be circulated *before* the meeting so that we could give it some consideration beforehand?"

Simon didn't have an agenda. It wasn't something that he considered important. The important thing for Simon was that he was going to hold a meeting. This was his managerial prerogative, an opportunity to spout forth for half an hour. He liked the notion and he assumed that everybody else enjoyed joining in the game. It made him feel good inside, never mind the reality that previous meetings had left him traumatised. It was like sex. The idea and anticipation were wonderful but the actuality was inevitably disastrous. The strange thing about this was that the previous disasters never dampened his ardour for the next occasion. He was going to hold a team meeting which, in his mind's eye, was an opportunity for him to shine at his best, to display his true colours, to operate in his natural mode revealing his innate qualities of

leadership. Linda harping on about an agenda didn't fit into this perception of things at all and was plain incomprehensible.

"Umm, I was going to circulate an agenda at the meeting, Linda. Anyway, the meeting will follow the usual format."

"In that case, it should be a simple enough matter to distribute an agenda beforehand." Linda had him on the spot. Simon experienced a familiar sinking feeling as a cold reality front penetrated his warm fantasy.

"Linda has a point," said Nigel. "It should be standard practice to distribute an agenda well before a meeting and we should be given the opportunity to include items on it that we would like discussed."

"Okay, okay. I'll do an agenda right after Bob's interview," conceded Simon.

"As for items for the agenda," said Linda, "I'd like to discuss the decision-making process around here." Simon was stunned. This was a direct attack on his authority.

"But there's nothing more to be discussed," pleaded Simon. "We've been through all of this before."

"Put it on the agenda, Simon."

"As you wish." There was an awkwardness in the air as everybody tried to concentrate on their work.

"Come on, Bob. The conference room." After they'd left, Sally spoke.

"He does his best, you know, Linda."

"That's not the point. The man's not fit for the job. I think that we really ought to know by what criteria that he's been re-selected, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," said Sally, "but you know how things are around here - they're shrouded in mystery. It's impossible to find out what goes on in the upper echelons."

"Come on, Linda," said Nigel, "the man's harmless enough. Leave him alone."

"He's not only incompetent but patronising, arrogant and ill. And it's time that he faced up to it. What do you think, Stephen?" Linda was attempting to cultivate Stephen as a potential ally. Stephen usually kept out of such discussions. He looked up.

"He doesn't bother me and I don't bother him." Linda was irritated by Stephen's unwillingness to take a stand but the fact that he was a member of an oppressed minority tempered her anger towards his masculine foibles. She felt that Stephen strongly needed to develop his political awareness but this possibility was preempted by his involvement with the Survivalists. Her knowledge of the Survivalists was limited and so she felt obliged to reserve judgement on Stephen.

"But what about the time he tried to pass your mock door designs off as his own? He still thinks of them as his project which he graciously let you have the credit for," Linda continued. "You signed the vote of no confidence in Simon along with the rest of us that was submitted to Harry."

"Yes, that's true," admitted Stephen. "He stepped over the line on that occasion but now that we regularly submit copies of our development logs to Harry he won't be able to do that again."

"I suppose that if you worked here full-time instead of jobsharing then you might feel differently," said Linda in an attempt to claim the moral high ground.

"You're right," said Stephen. "But I wouldn't want to work here full-time which is why I don't. I suggest that if you don't like it here so much then you should either apply for a transfer or arrange a jobshare."

"You know that it's impossible to get a transfer," said Linda.

"And a job share?"

"I need the money," said Linda quietly, relinquishing her claim to the moral high ground.

The conversation was over and everybody returned to their work.

A possibility glimmered within Linda as to why Simon had been retained in his position. Assuming that Harry told the truth and that he had no influence in whether or not Simon remained Team Leader, it could be that by having someone like Simon in charge, someone who got up everybody else's nose, it could be that this actually brought the team closer together, together in adversity. Linda was surprised by how well-disposed she was to members of this unit. This was the first work situation where she actually liked the majority of her colleagues. Take Stephen, for example. Although she regarded him as politically naive, she respected his lucidity and objectivity. And Nigel. Creative and camp, he brought a dash of colour to an otherwise drab work environment. Nigel considered himself an artist, someone for whom a job was beneath him, a necessary evil. Except as a means of survival, he didn't regard the job as important and so didn't get upset about it. As for Sally, Linda didn't take to her at first, considering her dizzy and superficial, but in the course of time, although uncomfortably twee, it became apparent that Sally possessed a certain strength of character. She was also very positive and was like a ray of sunshine at times even though she wasn't exactly shining this morning. Sally also got on very well with Nigel. They appeared to share a common understanding about something, almost as if they had a shared secret. Linda wondered what it might be. She could ask them of course but if she did then they wouldn't have known what she was talking about.

Their secret, the secret that they themselves didn't know, was this: they were both able to recognise beauty and at one level or another, they strove to allow their lives to be affected by it.

And as for Bob, mused Linda, he was still only a boy. He didn't speak to her much unless he had to and this suited her fine because she didn't know how to relate to him. What irked her was Simon's obvious influence over him and, because there was no channel of communication open between herself and Bob, there was nothing that she could do about it. All she could do was look on helplessly as Simon sucked Bob into the boys together syndrome. She wouldn't be surprised if Harry moved on and Simon moved into Harry's position - nothing was

impossible - then Bob might take over as Team Leader. The thought knotted her stomach and she grimaced.

"Doesn't anybody here have any ambition?" she blurted out in exasperation. Sally, Nigel and Stephen all stopped working and looked up at her quizzically.

"No, I didn't think so," Linda muttered to herself. Everybody got back to their work, unaffected by Linda's outburst.

Meanwhile, in the conference room, Simon was giving Bob some avuncular advice.

"Well, Robert, how are the gothic kitchen utensils coming along?" This was an awkward question for Bob and Simon knew it. Under Simon's guidance Bob had begun work on the gothic kitchen utensils. Bob was into gothic but not kitchen. He'd begun work on his TimeCentrePeace without advising Simon and had diverted all his effort into it. It was an idea, a vision even, that had come to him during an out-of-the-body experience. He kept this fact to himself.

"Er, well, I'm not actually working on them at the moment."

"Oh?" Simon cocked an eyebrow in mock surprise. He was toying affectionately with his protégé.

"Ah, yes. I thought that I'd finish the TimeCentrePeace which is in its final draft before going back to the utensils," said Bob.

"You know as well as I do, Robert, that an incomplete project is a sign of an undisciplined mind. After all, how are you going to get on if you don't finish what you've started? I'd be failing in my duty if I didn't give you the benefit of my experience and my experience tells me that you are on to a winner with the utensils. Don't you think that this timepiece is a little...., well, a little presumptuous, not to put too fine a point on it."

Bob was crushed. "How do you mean?"

"Well, Robert, it isn't that it's just a timepiece - which smacks of functionality, by the way..." Bob groaned inwardly at the prospect of having to explain himself yet again but he rose to the challenge.

"But it won't be functional," he began, "at least not in any practical way -"

"Let me finish, Robert," said Simon, breaking in with affected sternness. "It isn't just a timepiece, is it, it's what you've referred to as a time centre piece. And it's 'piece' spelt with an 'ea' - are you trying to make a political statement or something? Not only that but I couldn't help noticing when I chanced to glance at your screen that you've labelled it as *Bowley's* TimeCentrePeace. As I said, a little presumptuous - and somewhat grandiose, don't you think?"

Bob had to admit that Simon was right. "Yes, I'm afraid that you're correct, Simon. But I really think that I'm on to a winner here."

"That may or may not be the case," said Simon, "but let me see the kitchen utensils finished first."

Bob had no enthusiasm for this project but he would just have to see it through.

"Okay. I'll get back to it straight away."

"Let me make it quite clear, Robert, that I'm not being short-sighted in this matter. I'm thinking long term." Simon paused. "Do you get my drift?"

Bob didn't, as his vacant stare indicated.

"Long term, Robert," continued Simon, "as in promotion. You know, upwardly mobile."

Bob continued to look baffled.

"Bob," said Simon with a hint of affected exasperation, "Harry isn't going to be in his present post for long, you know, and guess who's going to be stepping into his shoes?"

Bob couldn't imagine. "I don't know," he said.

"You're looking at him!" said Simon with genuine exasperation now. "And I'm looking at a likely candidate for filling my shoes," he added.

It was becoming clearer to Bob. "Gosh."

"And of course it would expedite matters if you had a success under your belt."

"I see," he said but Simon had lost him once more. Somehow Simon had become Team Leader without having any successes under his own belt although his film noir wallpaper had had a limited production run. Bob felt that it would have been a little churlish to bring this up. "Point taken," he said.

"Good," said Simon. "I think we'll leave it at that." Bob rose from his chair and then suddenly remembered something.

"I was wondering if I could ask you something, Simon. Something personal."

"Of course. Of course. Fire away." Simon was leaning back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. Bob sat down again.

"Well, it's like this. I recently acquired a pair of diamantine platform shoes with negative gradient soles and needle-sharp tips." Simon nodded approvingly. "The problem is: how can I display them optimally without being ostentatious. I can't possibly keep them out of sight in the wardrobe but a shoerack, for obvious reasons of functionality, would be out of the question. I'm in a fix."

"It's a tricky one song doot. My advice to you, Robert, is to purchase the shoerack." It was a bold suggestion. "BUT. Don't place the shoes on it. Leave them lying untidily next to it thus imbuing a sense of lazy fer."

"Brilliant. Thanks. Thanks a lot." Bob was impressed by Simon's simple yet ingenious solution.

"Don't mention it, Bob, don't mention it. Now let's rejoin the toiling masses."

Back at the office everyone was silently focused on their work. Simon sat down at his desk and idly flicked through a management magazine.

"The agenda," said Linda, glowering at him over the top of her spectacles. Simon, suddenly feeling miserable, sullenly complied with her demand and began scratching out an agenda on a scrap of paper.

Bob sat down at his terminal, looked at his menu, and clicked on his TimeCentrePeace file.

Simon suddenly felt an urgent need to be out of the office. Without even thinking about it, he called Stephen for

his development interview. This was the lesser of two evils.

For Stephen's interview, Simon used the official staff development interview form, reading out the questions and ticking the appropriate boxes and writing a phrase here and there. Stephen answered all the questions in a straightforward, no nonsense manner. There was no small talk nor was there any sense of rapport between the two of them, only gaping silences while Simon wrote on the form between questions. It was over very quickly. Simon signed the form and then gave it to Stephen to read and sign. Simon leaned back in his chair, his mind dreaming ahead to his date with Stella.

Stephen signed the form and pushed it back towards Simon.

"Is that it?" he asked, disturbing Simon's reverie.

"Eh?"

"The interview's over?" Stephen rose from his chair.

"Yes. Yes thanks." Simon didn't want to go back to the office just yet. He decided to engage Stephen a little longer.

"Em, you're a Survivalist, aren't you, Stephen?" Stephen sat down again. Survivalists, although they didn't actively proselytise, were always on the lookout for new recruits. This was one reason why a proportion of them had to hold down ordinary jobs, to bring people into contact with their movement.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Ah, just out of interest. After all, I don't really know you. Or Sara for that matter. I see you on alternate days, sitting in the far corner of your office getting on with your work. You never make any fuss or hassle and your indoor waterfalls and your,... er,..."

"Mock doors," interjected Stephen.

"Yes, your mock doors were great successes. But what I'm trying to say is it's as though...as though you and Sara share a certain peace of mind. I mean, aren't you trying to run away from the end of the world or something? It's not a belief I'd have thought was conducive to peace of mind."

Stephen gave a humourless but understanding smile. "The media, even when it's accurate only gives a fraction of the overall picture. It's not so much the end of the world that we're preparing for but the end of society, at least as we know it."

Simon's eyes glazed over.

Stephen continued: "So when you say 'running away', yes, it's true, we are running away but wouldn't you run away from a block of flats that's crumbling all around you?" Stephen didn't wait for a reply. "And running away is only the beginning, not the whole story. The Survivalists are building a new society, Simon. One that brings us back to our roots in Nature. A lifestyle of simplicity and self-sufficiency. A balanced, healthy, natural lifestyle."

Simon couldn't relate to any of this. He couldn't arouse sufficient interest even to try. He had entered a numb reverie. He became aware that Stephen had stopped talking and made the effort to dredge up another question.

"And what about this leader of yours - Mitchell Para... Para..."

"Gon."

Simon looked blank.

"Mitchell Paragon," said Stephen.

"Yes, right. Is it true that he has ten wives or something like that? How does he manage it? He must be quite a guy." Stephen let out a long breath of air. This was what people always latched onto.

"He has six wives actually and they're not wives in the sense that the term is normally understood."

Simon leaned forward and found himself taking an interest. Maybe there was something to this Survivalist lark after all.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"The categories of wife and husband are formalised relationships as they are in ordinary society. But there is none of this 'till death do you part' business. A person can take on a new wife or husband whenever they want to and can separate when both parties are in agreement."

"But what about children? What about diseases? This kind of set-up surely gives rise to all sorts of problems. Jealousy for example. Come on, it must be an emotional mire. Still, I can see why many people would consider it an attractive option." Like me, for example, he thought.

"We have special marriage courts and counsellors for dealing with problems. Children are brought up communally and there is regular testing for sexually transmitted diseases. So far, it's worked rather well."

"And how many wives have you got, Stephen?" Simon asked salaciously.

"Two."

"Two!" Simon felt a twinge of envy.

"Yes. Carol and Sara. Carol stays full-time at the Buxmead Survivalist centre. Sara has another husband and Carol has two other husbands."

Simon felt his enthusiasm evaporate at the thought of a wife of his having another man. "I don't think that I could handle that."

The conversation came to a halt. Simon felt like seeing Stella again but he needed a pretext. Suddenly, an idea came to him.

"Hey, don't the Survivalists run outdoor activity centres or something like that?"

"Yes, they do. I help in running one myself on alternate weekends."

"Do you think that they would be suitable for our staff weekend outings?"

"I don't see why not." Stephen took an address card from his waistcoat pocket and gave it to Simon. "Phone this number and ask for Monika. She'll give you all the details."

"Thanks. Monika, eh?" Simon examined the card and Stephen returned to the office.

Simon wondered how many husbands Monika had. He imagined himself working on the land, stripped to the waist, scythe in hand, on a hot summer's day surrounded by his many wives. They would have to be the sort of women who would be content with

one man, though, surely not too impossible if he were the man in question.

With Stephen's card in hand, he went to see Stella. Stella was standing up drinking a cup of coffee. "Ah Stella, just the girl I wanted to see."

"Hi Si. What's new?" Simon helped himself to a cup of coffee. "About the team outing, I think that I've come up with a possible venue." He handed her the card.

"That'd be handy. All our usual venues are booked for the next month."

"Ask for Monika...I'll do it if you like." Simon smiled his naughty boy grin.

Stella studied the card. "The Survivalists, eh?"

"Yes. Stephen gave it to me. Apparently it's okay to have several wives if you're a Survivalist. Fancy joining up?" He flashed his naughty boy grin again.

"Actually, Richard's been to some of their open days. He was quite impressed." Simon wasn't the least bit interested in talking about Stella's boyfriend.

"Really?"

"Yes, but religion's not for him and he regards Survivalism as essentially a religion and this Mitchell Paragon as nothing more than a demagogue."

"He's got ten wives," said Simon, erroneously.

"Which backs up the point." Stella's console started bleeping. "Specs waiting to be processed. Two of them."

"Two! Which team?"

"Holly's," said Stella as she assumed her work position on her oblique platform. Holly was a new Team Leader. She'd risen from the ranks to replace Andy who'd returned to the ranks. Andy had hit the bottle pretty hard at first but he was over the worst of it now. Simon wasn't sure that he could have coped so well. He suddenly felt a renewed sense of calling in his vocation as Team Leader. He needed to rouse his team to greater efforts. Finishing his coffee he made to leave.

"I'll ring Monika this afternoon and bring you any information asap," Stella called after him.

"Okey-doke." Simon needed to get his head together. He went into the gents, locked himself in a cubicle, took a shot of alcohol and stared at the back of the door. Holly's putting in two designs. Simon reasoned that he needed one or more designs in production if he wanted to be sure of filling Harry's shoes when Harry became a director. He imagined himself fulfilling this goal, moving into Harry's job and giving a speech at a special dinner party in his honour. He began working on the details of his speech.

After a while his mind went blank. Then a thought gently intruded. Wasn't there somewhere he was supposed to be?

The meeting!

He checked his watch - the meeting should have begun five minutes ago! He dashed out of the cubicle, startling somebody at a urinal, who called out after him, "Hey! Don't bother to flush!" and muttered something under his breath. Simon rushed into the office. There was nobody there. They must all be in the conference room. Simon picked up the scrap of paper with

the agenda on it and rushed back into a modified cupboard where the photocopier was kept. It was being used, but the person using it could see Simon's urgency and stepped aside.

"On you go," she said.

"You're a lifesaver." He made six copies and ran to the conference room.

His breathing was noticeable in the silence. Linda was sitting upright with her arms folded. Nigel was gazing distractedly out a window. Bob was browsing through Rivet. Sally was sitting conspicuously close to Bob, her hands clasped tightly in front of her and an uncharacteristic look of anxiety on her features. Stephen just sat there, almost invisible.

"Sorry I'm late. Rather a lot to attend to. Umm. The agenda. Here it is," he announced, rather pleased with himself for getting it together. He distributed the sheets of paper.

"What is this?" asked Linda in a tone of unmistakable steeliness.

"What?" said Simon in all innocence.

"This!" said Linda, lifting the paper disdainfully between the tips of her thumb and her forefinger.

"It's the agenda!" said Simon, his voice rising to a squeak. He felt like a child who couldn't do anything right. Linda was livid. She believed that Simon was making a deliberate attempt to humiliate her. This time he had gone too far. She exploded.

"You might think that this is funny, Simon Flare, but I'm taking this to Harry right now as hard evidence of your inability to organise even a simple meeting and then we'll see if you find it so amusing. Linda stormed out.

Simon looked forlornly at the remaining sheet of paper in his hand. Unfortunately, the person who had been using the photocopier before him had been using size reduction and had neglected to tell him. Simon, in his rush, hadn't noticed. His already illegible scroll had been reduced to a further degree of illegibility with black bands of toner across it. He dissociated himself completely from it.

The rest of the team were looking at him expectantly.

"Did I tell you about the fight I had with the photocopier?" he asked.

"-the photocopier won."

This provoked a laugh from the group and released the tension. "It's not a problem. I'll write the agenda on the board," which he did, missing out any reference to the decision-making process.

The first part of the meeting was given over to each person updating the team on the progress of their current projects followed by feedback, suggestions and questions from the others.

Bob felt a little uncomfortable about this as he knew that Simon would be expecting him to talk about the kitchen utensils. He had nothing to say about them. It was his turn to speak but that moment, Linda walked in, sullen and subdued, and sat down. Everybody expected Linda to say something but

nothing was forthcoming. Simon cleared his throat. He'd forgotten about Bob.

"Ummm, we've just finished reporting in on our projects, Linda. Is there anything that you'd like to say about yours?"

"Not really. I've only recently begun a series of footboards to complement the Beverage headboards. I've decided that they should be suspended from the ceiling rather than attached to the bed."

Everybody was impressed.

Bob wondered what had happened with Linda and Harry. She was making him nervous. What had been the outcome of her meeting? Was she preparing an attack on Simon? Did she have something up her sleeve? As for Simon, he seemed remarkably cool and was handling the situation with his usual panache. Simon himself wasn't sure what was going on. No meeting had gone as smoothly as this one. It was a little unnerving but he felt that at last he was being allowed to shine.

"Before we move on to the next item on the agenda...." and here, Simon smiled obsequiously at Linda, "Does anybody have any feedback for Linda?"

He must be joking, thought Bob.

Sally said, "I think that hanging them from the ceiling is a great idea, Linda, and also, from what I've seen of some of your preliminary drafts, I think that you're onto a sure winner."

Nigel smiled and nodded in earnest agreement.

"Absolutely," he said.

Linda allowed herself a tight smile. Nigel and Sally were sweet and she appreciated their moral support.

"So, another winner then, Linda? Let's all hope so," said Simon, rubbing his hands in anticipation. Linda's smile inverted itself. "Moving on, now, the next part of the agenda is given over to our team weekend."

"Is this not a bit soon?" asked Nigel. "It doesn't seem so long since the last one."

"Yes, you're right. However, there might not be another opportunity for a while and I thought that it would be better to have one sooner than later. In fact, I'm expecting Stella along at any moment with details. I'll pop along and see if she's ready."

At that moment, as if on cue, Stella walked in and, flashing a smile at Simon, handed him a sheet of paper. "All the details are on it," she said, turning to leave.

"Won't you stay?" asked Simon.

"Too busy," she said and left, her posterior bouquet trailing behind her like a peacock's tail. Simon scrutinised the paper.

"Okay, the outing will take place at the Troward Heath Survivalist Outdoor Centre." Simon looked at Stephen. "I take it that you and Sara will coordinate activities as usual, particularly since it's on your own turf?"

Stephen nodded.

"Good. That takes care of that." Linda took a deep breath.

"When is it, Simon?" she asked, incredulous at the fact that he hadn't bothered with such an important detail.

"Oh yes. It's the last weekend of the month."

"I can't go."

"Why not?"

"I've got an OAFS day," said Linda.

"A what?"

"OAFS - the Once And Future Sisterhood."

"Ah yes, I've heard of them. I've often meant to ask, but haven't you handicapped yourselves somewhat with such a name?" asked Simon, who considered himself a staunch supporter of feminism.

"It takes OAFS to fight oafs," recited Linda.

"I'm not sure that I can manage either," said Nigel.

"Ah. Well, I'll see what I can do for you both, but Stella has only listed one date here and, as I said, all the usual venues are all booked up. I'm sure that I don't have to remind you," - Simon assumed his managerial air -, "that you're under contractual obligation to attend these weekends being excused only in circumstances of bereavement or illness."

Nobody said anything.

"Okay, meeting over."

"Any other business. There should be 'any other business'," said Nigel.

Simon silently penned 'AOB' on the board.

"Any other business?" he asked.

There was a pregnant pause. Simon - and Bob - were waiting for Linda to say her bit about the decision-making process but she remained silent.

"Meeting over," said Simon. A success, he thought, and he felt very pleased with himself indeed.

Crowleigh Park was bounded on one side by a market and on the other by a main road. In the middle of the park, on a bench strategically chosen so that it was equidistant from the market and the road, and was, therefore, the quietest spot possible in the park, sat Ian, his recently purchased vegetables in a bag at his feet.

He'd been sitting there for almost an hour, musing. He liked this park. There were squirrels and tits in it. Magpies and sometimes a bunny rabbit might be glimpsed. Although he didn't like the cold, there was something about this time of year that Ian loved. Summer's over, the leaves are gone, the clocks will soon change and the first frost will be here any day now. There was a magic cosiness about it all. Things go underground into a secret place to prepare for the renewal of Spring. He could sense parts of himself shutting down. It was as though he no longer had to make an effort in some ways. Like the end of the day. Days were awkward, they demanded action, demanded to be filled somehow. When Ian woke up in the morning, he felt the day hovering over him, impatiently tapping its foot, as if to say, "Well, what are you going to do with me today?"

He invariably felt that he always wasted each day that came along, never quite getting on with the important things. Maybe being in the FOB would change all that and make his life more effective and worthwhile and give it a structure that it sorely lacked.

It would be a good idea to get ordained, he decided, floral name and all. He resolved to ask the Venerable Mahawisteria this evening, at the evening class. He tried to picture the scenario. How did it work? He'd heard that you usually had to wait until the Venerable Mahawisteria approached you first. This makes sense, thought Ian, as he's probably telepathic and knows when the moment is right. Apparently he also takes past lives into consideration. Ian had read that one of the psychic powers of the advanced Buddhist is to know the past lives of yourself and others.

Wow, thought Ian. He found such notions mindboggling. Out of all the human beings on the planet he was indeed fortunate to be in contact with one of the few, if not the *only* Enlightened being in the world. Maybe Mahawisteria would give him the lowdown on his past lives. He'd love to know. The enormity of failing to associate himself closer to the Venerable Mahawisteria hit Ian hard. He resolved to become ordained no matter what it took.

Ian suddenly became aware that he had been staring at two young girls playing with a skipping rope. He wondered if anybody had noticed him staring at them and if they did whether they thought that he was a pervert or a child molester or something horrible like that. He felt guilty and, picking up his bag of vegetables, he made his way back to the flat to make dinner for himself and Bob.

Sally caught up with Linda in the corridor. "So what happened with Harry, Linda? Did you speak to him about Simon?"

"He wasn't there. I sat for a while waiting for him. I was furious but then the longer I sat there the more I realised that I was being stupid in letting that jerk Flare get to me like this. I still want to make a formal complaint. I feel that Simon is not only exploiting us but undermining me personally and I can't sit back and let him get away with it. I went to Stella's office to see if Harry was there - you know how men like to hang out there. Stella said that he was at a meeting with the directors. So that's that. Harry will probably get his directorship. You know what?"

"What?" Sally stared into the hard distant gaze of Linda's eyes.

"If Harry becomes a director then I'm going for his present job."

At that moment, Bob passed by on his way to the office. He happened to catch that last remark. The thought of Linda as Department Head sent a shiver up his spine.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ian squeezed through a gap in the railings. He was walking for the second time that day to the Meditation Centre. Crowleigh Park was closed at night but rather than walk round it Ian knew a short cut. The evening was dark and cold. There were only a few clouds and, away from the street-lights, stars were visible in the deep blue sky. Ian was hunched within his second-hand army overcoat as he walked briskly along, his breath condensing in the scarf that was wrapped around his mouth and neck.

Bob hadn't turned up for dinner. Ian didn't remember Bob saying that he would be late or that he had a prior engagement. Where could he have got to? Because he had been waiting for Bob, Ian hadn't stir-fried the vegetables until the last minute and now he risked being late for the beginning of Mahawisteria's talk. Ian wondered whether he should be worried about Bob. Perhaps it was quiz night in the Maiden's Arms and he'd gone straight to the pub from work as he sometimes did. But no. Bob had said that he was going to come to the meditation class this evening. Ian remembered him mentioning it only the previous week.

Their shared interest in matters spiritual had been one of the factors that had brought Bob and Ian into friendship with each other. Bob had had several unusual experiences of which Ian was jealous. Not only had Bob been out of his body but he'd also had visions. An angel often visited him in his dreams with the same message: "Wake up". Cryptic but significant, thought Ian, but these days Bob's pursuit of the spiritual life seemed to be edged out by his work and other interests. He was also absent-minded and it was quite possible that he'd forgotten all about tonight's talk and introductory meditation.

There's no point worrying about Bob, thought Ian, as he hurried along. Bob's life was his own. He thought about Rose instead. She'll be there this evening. Should he ask her out? If he did, would she think that he was being unspiritual? Perhaps she only went out with fully ordained Blossoms. But wasn't there a rule or something against that? And if she did agree to go out with him, where would he take her? For a meal, to a show? Could he afford it? What a headache! He could see how right the Venerable Mahawisteria was. Keep life simple. Don't get caught up in sexual attraction. But was his attraction to Rose simply sexual? Wasn't there something pure and even spiritual about it? Yes, of course there was. The Venerable Mahawisteria didn't seem to allow for this possibility. He stipulated celibacy and segregation of the sexes for the ideal living environment. Ian admired this ideal and could see the logic of it but he wasn't sure that he was up to it. One thing was for sure, though, - he shouldn't be thinking about women. This wasn't why he was going to the Meditation Centre, was it? Surely not. He was going for spiritual enlightenment. It was important to bear this in mind, especially if tonight was to be the night that he was going to ask the Venerable Mahawisteria if he could become an ordained member of the Flowers of the Buddha, a Blossom of the

Buddha. Ian was a little peeved that the Venerable Mahawisteria had not already invited him to join the Order as he had done with the first ordainees. Wasn't his commitment to the spiritual ideal apparent? Surely the Venerable Mahawisteria with his enlightened insight could see into his soul and discern the purity of his aspiration? He had been consoled in his disappointment by talking to Chittalily about it. Chittalily said that the Venerable Mahawisteria had decided that it was important that potential Blossoms take the initiative of actively asking. In this way they were making an active decision rather than passively saying just yes or no to an invitation.

Ian could see the sense in this but he also knew that if the Venerable Mahawisteria was sufficiently impressed by somebody then he would still invite them to join his Order. So why wasn't the Venerable Mahawisteria sufficiently impressed by him?

Oh well, there was obviously a lesson in this for him. It must be pride. Yes, he could do with being more humble. Or perhaps there was too much sexual desire in him and the Venerable Mahawisteria had seen this. Oh God! Of course! How could he expect to be taken seriously as a spiritual aspirant when he spends most of his time at the Centre pining after Rose?

Ian felt humbled and contrite and in his humility he felt a sense of the wisdom and complete rightness of the Venerable Mahawisteria. There should be no desire in his heart except for that of spiritual enlightenment. He wondered whether the Blossoms had achieved such purity of desire. They must have, he concluded, otherwise they wouldn't have been ordained. Ian was impressed and felt a renewed respect not only for Mahawisteria but also for the Blossoms of the Buddha themselves. He felt that he'd learnt his lesson. Tonight he was going to go for it. Tonight he was going to ask to be ordained, to become a Blossom of the Buddha. All other thoughts would be banished from his mind.

Ian, after climbing over the railings at the other end of the park, had now reached the door in one of a row of terraced houses that lined the other side of the main road that bordered the park. He pushed it open. Somebody at the curtain leading into the room hissed at him, "Quickly! The talk is about to begin!"

Ian kicked off his shoes and rushed through the curtain. He almost tripped over some people sitting on the floor at the entrance. The room was packed with about twenty people in it.

At the far end, on a wooden dais, sat the Venerable Mahawisteria, cross-legged, calm and collected. He was looking directly at Ian. On the wall behind the Venerable Mahawisteria was painted a large fanciful mural portraying a golden Buddha seated in meditation beneath a peepul tree. Animals were gambolling in the background next to some scenes of traditional rural life in India. Incense was burning in front of the mural and there was a vase of flowers on the floor to the right of Mahawisteria.

Pansymitra was adjusting the tape recorder and it was apparent that the talk would begin when Pansymitra's preparations were complete.

The Venerable Mahawisteria knew what he was going to say. He'd thought about it earlier. Now, before his talk, he'd stopped thinking. The room was quiet in anticipation. The Venerable Mahawisteria was aware that somebody had entered the room through the curtain but he did not allow this awareness to develop into a thought, conscious or otherwise.

Ian was acutely aware of the Venerable Mahawisteria's gaze. Tonight's the night, and he knows it, thought Ian, as he picked his way between cross-legged bodies to a pile of cushions in the corner on the right. He knows that I'm going to ask for ordination and he's sussing me out; stay aware, he told himself. Ian recognised the person that he found himself sitting next to. It was the reporter from the local newspaper who had showed up at the CCI meeting. He gave Ian the same hard stare that he had given him then.

Ian felt relatively experienced in the ways of the Flowers of the Buddha compared to this newcomer. He gave a smile in which he attempted to convey assurance and wisdom but instead was tight, artificial and awkward. As he settled himself on the pile of cushions which towered over the reporter on his right, he realised that in his haste he hadn't removed his scarf and coat at the door. A wall of incense and calor gas heat had hit him as soon as he'd come through the curtain. He was also warm from the walk and now he was sweating profusely.

His nose began to drip. He had some paper hankies on him somewhere and was about to disrobe but at this point Pansymitra nodded at Mahawisteria and pressed the RECORD button. The Venerable Mahawisteria began to speak.

"Flowers of the Buddha and friends, both old and new," he began in his measured and somewhat ponderous way.

Ian froze.

"This is the last time that I will address what has come to be a regular weekly event of talk and meditation in such a way.

"Ours is a young movement, a new movement, not merely a transplant of a particular form of Buddhism into the West but an in-fusion of the spirit of Buddhism into Western culture.

"Hence the term 'movement'. We are not a calcified institution. Neither could we be described as 'petrified' .. 'petrified' in both senses of the word; firstly, petrified in the sense of having turned to stone: inflexible, brittle and unyielding. Lifeless. And secondly, 'petrified' in the sense of terrified. Terrified of what? you may ask. Terrified, like all great institutions of *change*. Sadly, like all institutions set up to promote a lofty ideal, Buddhism in its many and various forms, unfortunately, in one way or another, has become pet-ri-fied.

"And so, we are a move-ment. Not an institution. We are a movement moved by the spirit of Buddhism, and the essence of the spirit of Buddhism is *change*. And I would like to take this opportunity to announce one or two changes in our nomenclature this evening."

Ian thought that his hankies were in his left trouser pocket but to get at them he was going to have to first remove his overcoat. This was going to be tricky. How could he do it without creating a disturbance? The Venerable Mahawisteria spoke with many pauses in his speech as if he were speaking in counterpoint with the silence that pervaded the room and the reassuring rush of the calor gas heater. Ian spotted Rose sitting in profile by the wall opposite. What if she turned round and saw his nose dripping? Worse still, what if the Venerable Mahawisteria chanced to look at him again?

Ian surreptitiously rummaged through his overcoat pockets and came across an old crinkled paper handkerchief. Any port in a storm, he thought with relief as he picked open the decaying hanky and honked his nose into the less than adequate receptacle. It occurred to him that his nasal activity would now be immortalised along with Mahawisteria's words on tape.

Now, if only he could ease himself out of the overcoat. He was sweltering. He became uncomfortably aware of the smell of the reporter's feet. At least, he hoped it was the reporter's feet and not his own. How embarrassing it would be if it were his own feet causing the malodour. He wondered if there was any way that he could covertly deduce whose feet were to blame.

The reporter with his spotty pale face and unkempt, black greasy hair looked a likely candidate to have smelly feet. Ian's own socks were fresh on yesterday and as far as he knew, it wasn't a problem that he suffered from. His embarrassment was heightened by the presence of a stunning blond woman with plaited hair, seated in a perfect lotus position in front of him to the left.

This was Sonja Zolliker whom Ian had yet to meet. She was listening to the talk with what appeared to be beaming rapture and seemed oblivious to any smell. He wiggled his toes to see if he could detect any change in the intensity of the odour but it was difficult to tell.

The Venerable Mahawisteria spoke about the changes in the structure of the Flowers of the Buddha. He spoke about the new probationary period of being a Bud before becoming a full Blossom of the Buddha and the new system of ordination retreats that was being inaugurated at the end of the month. After twenty-five minutes the Venerable Mahawisteria was interrupted by a click from the tape machine. He paused while Pansymitra turned the tape over. This gave Ian the opportunity to remove his coat. He folded it and placed it casually over his feet.

A large stylish fellow, with swept-back fair hair - Ian guessed that this was Nigel from talking to Bob - turned around and looked distastefully at Ian. Ian felt that he was being wrongly accused with no opportunity to establish his innocence. He wanted to call out, "It's not my feet, it's his!" but of course he would never have done this.

Ian was impressed by the Nordic looking blond woman. He found it impossible to sit in the lotus position and here was she, a newcomer, sitting for half-an-hour like this. How on earth could she do it?

He pulled himself up. He should really be concentrating on what the Venerable Mahawisteria was saying and see if he could plug into it in the way the Nordic woman was doing. He

composed himself on top of the cushions, sat up straight and placed his hands delicately on his lap.

The Venerable Mahawisteria resumed talking. Ian closed his eyes in imitation of the blond woman. The best way to take in the words of an enlightened being, as this woman obviously understood, was to go into a meditative trance and listen from there. He focused his mind and beneath the foreground smell of feet he became aware of the smell of lavender and honey. He found himself afloat in this evocative scent and then suddenly came to as he caught himself toppling from his perch. He'd nodded off! The late meal, brisk walk and now the heat combined with Mahawisteria's soporific tones had put him to sleep. As soon as he came to he looked around rapidly to see if anybody had noticed. Fortunately he was at the back of the room. He felt a subversive camaraderie with a few other people who were nodding off.

The blond woman, who looked like a pagan goddess, appeared to be in meditative ecstasy. Ian thought her beautiful and longed to be with her in whatever space she now inhabited. Her cheeks were flushed red and a broad smile lit up her already bright countenance. She was wearing a kilt with rainbow woollen leggings and although she was wearing a chunky woollen sweater, the forward thrust of her breasts was prominent. Ian admired their shape and surmised that they must be massive. He imagined losing himself between them. He shut his eyes and was carried away by this comforting thought. He came to with a start as he once again began to keel over. He was beginning to feel disappointed with himself. He exhorted himself to stay awake and concentrate on the talk. He imagined himself falling on top of the reporter and the commotion that that would cause.

He envisaged the big fashionable fellow looking at him disapprovingly once again. If he fell on top of the reporter then he would simply have to leave. What would the Venerable Mahawisteria say?

What was he saying right now, in fact? Ian, as he dozed off once again, tried to focus on the words. The Venerable Mahawisteria was talking about the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity. He was saying that we should practise ecology of the mind. Ian saw an image of a giant brain with lots of little guys in blue overalls pushing brooms through its crinkly tunnels. Some of the tunnels were filled with fluid through which dolphins coursed. Ian wondered if the little guys with brooms knew about the tunnels with fluid and wondered if they would get wet. All of a sudden the fluid was everywhere and the little guys were getting washed away.

Ian jerked awake once again. He was finding this intensely uncomfortable. If only he could just lie down, preferably on the blond's lap, and rest his head for a few moments. He wondered if she'd object. Maybe she'd realise that he was one of the good guys and an immediate rapport would spring up between them. He imagined himself married to her and an image of them living in the countryside in an idyllic farmhouse setting with lots of beautiful children presented itself to his mind's eye.

Mahawisteria droned on. "Each of us must take complete responsibility for what we allow to enter our mind through our

senses. The effort to purify our mind and maintain cerebral integrity is the greatest endeavour that any of us can undertake on a personal level."

"And it's the greatest country of all," said Ian. Ian was woken up by his own words. Omigod! he thought. I've been talking gibberish in my sleep. Mahawisteria paused for a few seconds.

Ian kept his eyes firmly shut and immediately sat up straight and tried to look as though he was in meditation. He imagined that all eyes were on him. He wondered if he'd said anything rude in his sleep. Had it been recorded on tape? He was now in a state of anxiety and terror and this allowed him to sit bolt upright for the remainder of the time. Ten minutes before the end of the talk, he felt a tapping on his knee. He tried to ignore it but it persisted. He opened his eyes. It was the reporter. What was the problem now?

The reporter was jabbing his finger in the direction of the opposite wall by the sliding door that led to the small kitchen. Rose was beckoning him to come and help her with the tea. With a sense of relief and a pleasant feeling of being wanted, he stood up, stumbled over his overcoat, and picked his way through to the opposite side of the room. It was cooler in the kitchen and Ian felt himself regaining his composure. There wasn't much to do in the kitchen as the mugs had been prepared in advance. Once the tea had brewed the mugs had only to be filled and distributed. Ian realised that here was an opportunity to ask Rose out. She'd been eclipsed somewhat in Ian's emotions by the blond woman and he wondered if perhaps he should observe silence until the end of the talk as Rose seemed to be doing.

Seize the day! he told himself. But he couldn't do it. The contrast between how he saw himself in his own fantasies and how things were in the harshness of immediate reality was too great. There was no bridge between the two, only an uncrossable gulf. Maybe he wasn't so interested in Rose after all, he rationalised to himself. Still, he wished that she would evince some interest in him but she didn't. She was quietly centred on the task of filling the mugs with hot tea. Ian thought that it would be great to have a girlfriend who was committed to a spiritual ideal like Rose. They could break through into Enlightenment together.

The sound of gentle applause could be heard through the door. The Venerable Mahawisteria had finished talking. Rose poured some tea into a fine china cup and added four spoons of sugar to it. She placed it on its saucer and gave it to Ian.

"Give this to Mahawisteria," she said. Ian was hit by an attack of nerves. He was going to say, "Me?" but nothing came out in the face of Rose's matter-of-factness. He put the tea down, took out his hanky and blew his nose and then, collecting himself and trying not to tremble, he opened the door and took the tea to Mahawisteria.

Mahawisteria was talking to the reporter and the big guy - Nigel - who had given him a dirty look earlier on. They were talking about the retreat at the end of the month. Ian handed the tea to Mahawisteria just as his hands were breaking into

the shakes. Mahawisteria took the tea without pausing in what he was saying.

Ian egged himself on, Seize the day! Seize the day! "I want to be ordained and go on the weekend retreat at the end of the month, Venerable Mahawisteria!" he blurted out, interrupting Mahawisteria in mid-sentence.

Mahawisteria stopped what he was saying and turned his inscrutable gaze on Ian.

"If that's okay,..." mumbled Ian, self-effacingly.

Mahawisteria nodded politely. "Give your name to Chittalily and he will provide you with all the details." Mahawisteria took a sip of his tea and resumed his conversation with Nigel and the reporter.

"Thank you, Venerable Mahawisteria," said Ian so quietly that nobody else heard him.

He turned away and craned his neck looking for Chittalily. He'd done it! He'd asked to become a Blossom! He had at last reached a turning point in his life.

Chittalily, easily noticeable by his wild blond hair, was standing at the other end of the room by the curtain talking to Sonja. Great, thought Ian, here was a chance to meet the blond lady as well. And then he saw Rose dispensing mugs of tea and he remembered that he was supposed to be helping her. Ian went into the kitchen and poured water into the teapot and then filled up another tray of mugs. Tray in hand, he made straight for Sonja and Chittalily who were engrossed in conversation. Ian presented them with the tray of tea and they both took a mug without looking at him.

"Em, Chittalily," said Ian, reluctant to interrupt their conversation.

"Yes?" Chittalily looked at him quizzically. He had a prominent aquiline nose and deep-set, smoky blue eyes. The eyes of a mystic, thought Ian.

"Mahawisteria said that I should speak to you about the ordination retreat at the end of the month."

"Ah, so you want to become a Buddha buddy," said Chittalily with a smile. Sonja grinned as well, sharing the joke. Ian was momentarily nonplussed then realised - Bud, buddy.

"Yes, I suppose I do," he laughed. This was one of the things that Ian liked about the Flowers of the Buddha. Unlike many other religious/spiritual groups that he'd investigated, this lot didn't hit you with any hardsell and they weren't averse to making fun of themselves. Chittalily put his mug on the tray and took a piece of paper from his pocket.

"Ian, isn't it?" he asked as he added Ian's name to a list with a pencil stub which he materialised from behind his ear.

"Yes." Ian was pleased that Chittalily remembered him. He was beginning to feel that he wasn't quite so invisible.

"Okay, Ian. Sit at the front of the room when we begin the meditation and the old man will formally proclaim you a Bud. There'll be a small group of you. I'll give you a sheet of paper with all the details at the end of the class."

Sonja was beaming at Ian as though pleased for him. Chittalily retrieved his mug and continued his conversation with Sonja.

The second part of the evening was about to begin. Everybody had assembled in the meditation room. Ian was elated and nervous at the same time. He sat cross-legged on the cushion with his back straight and eyes closed. He wondered if the blond woman could see him and if she had sensed his spiritual prowess. He imagined all eyes were upon him. He fantasised about one day being in Mahawisteria's enlightened state, leading the spiritual seekers from ignorance to Truth, from suffering to bliss. And, of course, his sole motivation was his compassion for his fellow human beings. What could be more worthwhile!

Mahawisteria was talking once again. He talked about the important step that each of them was about to take - and here he read out the names from Chittalily's list. Ian almost burst with excitement, pride and embarrassment when his name passed Mahawisteria's lips. This was punctured when Ian's name was said again. So there was another Ian going on the ordination retreat. (It turned out that Ian was also the reporter's name.) Each of them was then formally pronounced a Bud of the Buddha.

I'm a Bud, thought Ian, his mind becoming a little unhinged, a Bud of the Buddha, a buddy, a Buddha buddy, a budda-budda-budda-BOOM!

Ian felt his consciousness expanding in all directions sending out waves of love to the whole world.

The meeting came to an end and Ian sat in meditation a little while longer. He'd seen other people do this at the end of other meditations, sit on after the final bell. The ability to sit for extended periods in meditation impressed him because his own efforts often resulted in such excruciating physical agony that he usually longed for the bell to ring that would terminate the meditation session. But this time he was feeling quite detached from his body. He could feel his body's discomfort but it wasn't bothering him. So this is where they're at, he thought. He heard people getting up and leaving, the quiet mutter of good-byes from the other side of the curtain. A refreshing draught of cold air wafted in as people left. He heard the sound of cups being washed in the little kitchen. He knew that he should go and help Rose but he was finding it too difficult to move. Best to just let this take its course, he thought, and then he opened his eyes.

Mahawisteria was gone, probably to his room upstairs. Pansymitra was at the tape machine sorting out his tapes. The blond woman was just leaving, reluctantly it seemed, after talking to Chittalily. Chittalily, seeing that Ian had finished his meditation, came up to him and gave him a sheet of paper with all the details of the retreat.

"Great," said Ian. "Thanks. Ow! My leg's gone to sleep." He hobbled over to the kitchen. Perhaps Rose thought that he had carried on sitting in order to avoid doing the clearing up.

"Em, do you need a hand, Rose?"

"No thank you. It's all finished."

"Sorry I didn't get up to help you."

"That's okay. You weren't expected. It was nice of you to help earlier on."

"Would you like to go out for dinner tomorrow night?" Ian couldn't believe he had said this. It had come out of its own accord.

"Okay. Where?"

Ian felt himself begin to crumble. This was totally unexpected. There was only one place that he could think of.

"Mama Mia's," he said. "It's cheap and cheerful. Great pizzas."

"Would seven o'clock be all right?" asked Rose. My childminder can't usually manage before then."

Childminder? thought Ian. He hadn't been out with a mother before.

"Fine," he said.

Ian took the long route home around the park. He was high as a kite and had a roaring appetite. He popped into the next chippie that he came to and bought himself a packet of chips. Savouring the hot vinegary snack he wondered what Bob would think of what he had done. He was bound to be really impressed. His action might even spur Bob on to do the same. It would be great to be an inspiration to somebody else. Maybe Bob would be so inspired that he would want to come on the retreat as well. They could both go together.

The flat was unusually quiet. Normally the TV or radio or hi-fi would be on. The door wasn't double locked so Ian knew that Bob must be in.

"Hey Bob! Guess what?" Ian strode to Bob's bedroom. The door was ajar. He knocked and pushed it open. "I'm a Buddy!" he announced proudly. Bob was lying supine on his futon, the only illumination provided by his bedside rock lamp. He didn't move.

"That's great," Bob replied in a dry and husky voice. Without a trace of sarcasm or piss-taking, he added, "And I'm a plantee."

Ian stared at his flatmate. Bob was lying there with his eyes closed. There were dark rings around his eyes leading to the natural assumption that he had been attacked.

"Are you all right, Bob?" Ian felt the foolishness of the question. He obviously wasn't all right.

"Fine. Fine."

"You don't look it. In fact, you look dreadful. You've got two black eyes. What happened?" Ian felt his concern rising. Something altogether dreadful had happened.

"Oh, the eyes. It's not as bad as it looks. It's just the blood redistributing itself after the operation. It should clear up by morning.

"Ask me the time."

"Operation? Operation!! You've had an operation!" Ian's voice was strangulated. "But you were fine this morning. There was nothing wrong with you. Why did you need an operation? What was it for? And where?"

"In the brain," said Bob matter-of-factly. "I went for it after work."

"Ask me the time."

"A *brain* operation!" Ian was dumbfounded. He hated the thought of any kind of operation but this was the worst. Out of the blue his flatmate had suddenly had a brain operation. Not only that, he was simply lying there as if it were nothing. Perhaps he'd been lobotomised. Ian took his cue from Bob and calmed down. "Okay, Bob. Why have you had a brain operation and how can you be in and out within a few hours?"

"First of all, ask me the time."

"I'm not the least bit interested in the time," said Ian with more than a hint of exasperation.

"But that's the whole point," said Bob, still lying there with his eyes closed and now becoming irritated.

"You mean that the point of your brain operation was so that I could ask you the time?"

"It wasn't exactly an operation. It was just a plant. One hundred per cent safe. Routine."

"A plant?"

"An implant."

"You mean that you've had something stuck into your brain?" Ian felt his horror rising once again.

"It's a biochip," explained Bob. "The whole procedure took only thirty-five minutes. It looks like they'll soon be able to streamline the process even further, perhaps even automate it, and there's a possibility that before long the plant will be administered orally. Brilliant, eh?" He paused and opened his eyes. A satisfied smile melted across his face.

"Well, aren't you going to congratulate me on being one of the world's first plantees? Look, I've got a certificate to prove it." Bob reached up and handed Ian a large manila envelope that was lying by the lamp. Ian removed the certificate. Apart from Bob's name and number, which were typed, it was in copperplate script. It read as follows:

'This is to certify that Robert Harrison Bowley
is the 9492nd pioneer of the Bio-Industrial Revolution.
On this day (see date stamp above) Robert Harrison
Bowley received implant ZX01 Mark I.'

It was signed by the manager of the clinic.

"It's the new boomindustry and these clinics are going to be sprouting up all over the place. And I'm one of the first. Some of the R & D was carried out at Crowleigh University which is really fortunate. It meant that Crowleigh was in the first wave of towns where clinics were opened."

Bob tossed Ian his copy of Rivet magazine which contained an article about the new technology.

"I was really lucky to get done today," Bob continued, "as people have booked up weeks in advance. I phoned from work on the offchance and they had a cancellation so I just popped in on the way home. Fantastic, isn't it?"

Ian felt a heaviness in his heart. "And what does this biochip do exactly?"

"It tells the time." Ian's heart hit the bottom. His friend had had a brain operation so that he could tell the time. "No

more need for a watch," said Bob. He waved his bare wrists in triumph. "Watches will go the way of balaclavas and anoraks. Soon, nobody will be seen dead wearing one. Go on, ask me the time."

"Okay," Ian sighed, "what's the time?" Bob was becoming quite perky now.

"On the third beep it will be ten-twenty-three precisely."

He waited a moment and then said in a high pitched voice, "Beep. Beep. Beeeeeeep! Great, eh?" He threw his head back and laughed.

Ian had been feeling a gulf opening up between himself and his flatmate and now he saw it crystallising into solidity. He knew that Bob had always had a penchant for the latest useless gadgets but this time he had gone too far. To actually do this to himself... It was too much.

"Not only that," said Bob, "it's got a dozen customised alarms, it's easily adjustable and has as many decimal places of accuracy as you like."

In spite of himself, Ian found himself becoming interested but only from a philosophical point of view. Didn't the mind-body problem come into this somehow? "How does it work?" he asked. "Do you see the time in front of you all the time?"

"Only at first. The brain eventually gets used to it so the digital display disappears but all I have to do is consciously look to the lower left of my visual field and there it is."

"And how do you adjust it?"

"That's easy. When I look to the right of the display I can see two buttons. I imagine pressing them and then use them to set the clock in the same way I would set a gross clock."

Ian winced as the word 'gross' was shanghai'd into a new jargon. "It seems to have interesting implications for the mind-body problem, doesn't it?"

Bob thought for a moment. Ian often caught him off-guard with these deeper observations of his. "You mean the problem of how immaterial thought directs the material body?"

"Yes. By will alone, you're directly affecting a material artefact."

"Hmm. That side of things hadn't occurred to me."

"Anyway, Bob, I'm tired and I'm off to bed. You look like you could do with a good night's sleep as well."

"You're right. Night-night. I'll see you in the morning."

CHAPTER SIX

It took a couple of days for the implant to settle in. Bob didn't sleep well that first evening. Perhaps it was his excitement at being a "pioneer" in bio-technology. Perhaps it was the fantasies - he imagined all variety of scenarios whereby he could impress people with his latest acquisition. Or perhaps it was only the brain/chip interface settling in. The nurse at the clinic had said that this would take a few days.

Whenever he closed his eyes for sleep during that first night, he became vividly aware of giant red digits flashing away the seconds. His usual mental life felt as though it had been banished to some remote corner of his brain. All that remained had been this neon clock display. It had been possible by simply willing it to observe the one-tenth seconds flashing by and even the blurred hundredths. In his drowsiness he had imagined that he could see the thousandths, the ten-thousandths, the hundred-thousandths and so on, stretching into infinity, spinning and whirling by until he would awaken with a violent jolt. This happened several times and then he was woken by one of the internal alarms that he had practised setting. There were various alarm sounds to choose from. The crash of thunder almost sent him through the roof at 0256 precisely. He had had to forcibly prevent himself from running through to Ian in blind panic. He reset the alarm sound to the Turkish gong. Mellow and atmospheric, this was the sound that he chose to welcome him into the day, as though being ushered into a sultan's court.

The following morning he had felt dreadful. He felt that he had watched every second of the night tick by. Ian hadn't got up for breakfast and as Bob sat there by himself, chewing his muesli, a fleeting panic flashed at the edge of his consciousness and there was a momentary resentment at this alien artefact lodged in his brain. The operation was irreversible. He was stuck with this implant for the rest of his life. For a moment he appreciated Ian's concern about the biochip and then dismissed it. After all, implants were nothing new. They went back to the time of metal plates in the cranium and false teeth. And of course, there were transplants. Organic and inorganic organs were routinely inserted into the body. At least the biochips were semi-organic and were therefore more natural than a pacemaker, say. What was it Ian had muttered last night about mental purity and being a buddy? Bob had been curious about this new Buddhist group that Ian had been going along to and had even considered popping along himself. Now, however, he wondered if perhaps Ian wasn't taking it all a little too seriously. Perhaps Ian was turning into a religious nut of some kind. It was a concern but there was probably nothing to worry about because Ian had been through similar phases before. This one would surely pass in the same way that his previous interests had. Still, he had spoken of making a commitment to this particular group and this had struck an ominous chord.

Perhaps he's losing his objectivity, thought Bob. Perhaps, even, Ian was jealous of him and this was his way of competing

with Bob. After all, let's face it, Bob was going places. He had a good income and a state of the art Room. Not to put too fine a point on it, Bob was at the cutting edge of Room decor and had a career that was about to rocket. His TimeCentrePeace portfolio was almost ready for submission and he was even considering putting in for Harry's job. And why shouldn't he? Okay, he may be the youngest member of the team but was he doing any less of a job as a consequence? No way! Bob considered the implications of applying for Harry's job. He would be in competition with Simon who would probably get it anyway in which case his application for Department Head would set him up well for Simon's post. Bob wasn't sure what Linda's chances of success were. Nobody else on the team seemed to have any ambition in this direction. There would be applicants from the other teams of course but they were unknown quantities. The only certainty was that he didn't want Linda running the show. It was nothing personal. But it was difficult enough working with her, how much more oppressive it would be working under her. Bob imagined her ruling by terror. The more competition standing against her the better. In fact, Bob concluded, he had a moral obligation to his co-workers to stand against Linda and to do what he could to prevent her from getting the job.

Bob had been tickled by the response of his colleagues to his plant. It had been quite a coup. Even Simon had been impressed, so much so that he had phoned up the clinic immediately and booked an appointment. Nigel was already on the waiting list for his. Sara, Stephen's jobshare partner, being a Survivalist, had shown only a polite interest. Even Linda seemed to afford him a new respect. The only person whose response baffled him had been Sally's. True, her behaviour had been strange since the day before when he felt himself the object of her attention. Did she fancy him? She seemed to be expecting something from him but he didn't know what. The intensity of her attentions had diminished as the day had progressed but now the revelation of his implant had fired her with a renewed sense of urgency and panic even. She had insisted that he go with her for tea after work.

Bob felt the need for some advice about women. He was vaguely aware that women were driven by all sorts of biological imperatives. Perhaps Sally was on the lookout for a husband.

Afternoon tea with Sally turned out to be a very pleasant experience in which Bob's perception of Sally changed considerably. Beneath her unintimidating manner was a strong and formidable personality. She'd given him some very useful advice on the presentation of his TimeCentrePeace portfolio. The conversation between them was easy and meaningful. They talked about relationships. There was somebody that Sally went out with now and again, somebody from her schooldays who regularly proposed marriage to her but she didn't take his proposals seriously. The fact that somebody had proposed to her allowed Bob to appreciate Sally's physical attractiveness which she didn't flaunt in any way. She was obviously quite desirable. He wondered what it would be like being married to Sally. He could see that she would be a good wife and

homemaker. And mother. Perhaps, after all, it was time for him to think of settling down. He considered the prospect of spending the rest of his life with Sally and it seemed not at all bad. They could work a jobshare like Stephen and Sara or perhaps they could resign and set up their own company. After all, they had sufficient talent between the two of them.

Bob sat back and imagined this scenario during a pause in the conversation.

"Why did you do it?" asked Sally out of the blue. Bob sat up and looked at her, wondering at her sudden change in manner. She looked as though she was about to cry. Bob was going to say something but she rubbed her eyes and shook her head. "Sorry, Bob. I really wish that you hadn't had that implant." The mood up to now had been cosily intimate. What had happened?

"I'd better be going." Sally left without a good-bye, leaving Bob to ponder the wisdom of his implant and the ways of women.

"You're a little late today, luvvy? Everything all right?"

"Sorry, mum. I should have phoned. I was having tea with a colleague."

"Anybody nice?"

"Oh, mum. Well, yes, he is actually."

"And am I going to meet him then?"

"You will, you will."

"Tim will be disappointed."

"I've told Tim often enough. We're good friends and nothing else. He knows that I'm not interested in marrying him. If he chooses not to believe that then that's his business."

"It's a shame all the same."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Maybe I'll bring Bob round for dinner sometime." If you don't mind having a robot in the house, added Sally to herself.

Why did he do it? she asked herself. And why was she so choked up when he announced his implant at the office today? Yes, she felt attached to Bob in some mysterious manner but it was as if the plant, in her eyes anyway, had turned him into something else, something not quite human even though he seemed the same on the surface.

Sally was confused. She realised now that she was attracted to Bob but for some reason she was repelled by what he had done. Was her feeling of repulsion connected in some way with the urgent feeling that she woke up with yesterday morning, the feeling that something terrible was going to happen?

Ian was always early on dates. Always. He'd arrived fifteen minutes early and had now been waiting outside Mama Mia's for thirty minutes altogether. He decided that Rose wasn't going

to show. This experience wasn't unusual for him. He'd been stood up more often than not but it was still very painful. He tried to be objective and considered the possibility that Rose had a very good reason for being late but the feeling of personal rejection persisted. He resolved to have a pleasant evening anyway, whether Rose showed up or not.

He went into Mama Mia's and sat down at a small square table next to which was seated, diagonally opposite, a stunningly beautiful woman. She was obviously waiting for somebody as well. Ian hadn't noticed her until he had sat down. She was mature and self-composed and wearing what Ian presumed was the latest in shoulder fashion - imitation rhinoceros horns, three each of graduated sizes on each shoulder, the largest on the outside, that arched inwards towards the curve of the cranium. The horns pierced roughly through the shoulders of a tight leather bodice.

Ian viewed modern fashions with contempt and generally regarded women as ridiculous in their attempts to be trendy but this lady was different. He could appreciate the effect of wild yet cultivated sensuality that this particular fashion was intended to invoke.

The woman looked at him with her sparkling blue eyes and acknowledged him with the hint of a smile that played gently across her sensual lips. Ian felt himself plunge into acute self-consciousness and his throat dried up. He picked up the oversize menu and, hiding behind it, studied it intently.

He wondered if he should say something to her. He observed her over his menu. She seemed occupied in her thoughts from which she seemed to be deriving a pleasant satisfaction. Ian considered a few possible opening lines but he wasn't sure that he could depend on his voice. Such thoughts soon came to an end as her date had turned up.

Ian's heart sank. How could such a beautiful woman come to be dining with this travesty of a man? Her date was wearing broad-lapelled pinstripes, slightly crumpled. Not only was his suit noddied but he was also sporting the utterly tasteless crotch noddy. His only distinguishing feature was his aristocratic nose, otherwise he was bland, with greasy, dandruffed black hair. To cap it all, the fellow spoke with unjustifiable suave self-assuredness. Ian felt that the little rapport that he'd felt with this beautiful woman had been betrayed.

But maybe it wasn't as bad as it at first seemed. Perhaps they were relatives. Yes, that was a consoling possibility but there was no physical resemblance between them. The man's name was Simon. Simon cocked an eyebrow at him and peered at him down the sights of his nose.

Ian hunched up even more as he was put in his place. The situation was perfectly clear. This fellow, Simon, was dining with a beautiful woman and he, Ian, pathetic wretch that he was, had been stood up and was reduced to dining by himself. He began to feel sorry for himself and felt like leaving but this would be admitting defeat. He was also feeling acutely self-conscious and the act of leaving would draw too much attention to himself. He was going to have to brazen it out.

Anyway what was wrong with sitting in a restaurant by yourself? Even if he was the only person here dining alone... Ian made an effort to centre himself, to concentrate on his breath and get a sense of himself. He reminded himself that he was pursuing a spiritual ideal...which was more than could be said for anybody else in the restaurant. Yes, he was in fact the fortunate one. He doubted that anybody else in this restaurant would be capable of dining alone, especially this jerk sitting at the table next to him. There's no accounting for taste though, he thought wistfully.

Ian could hear Simon pontificating loudly on the respective merits and demerits of each item on the menu in turn. Ian beckoned the waiter and was about to order a pizza fungi when Simon began an exposition on this particular item.

"I would never order the fungi," he informed Stella, "without ascertaining first of all whether the mushrooms are fresh or canned. Sometimes they run out and resort to the canned variety. On the other hand, if you ask Giovanni if they have any in the kitchen, then he'll see to it personally that some rather delicious wild mushrooms are included in the pizza."

Luckily, Ian had failed to catch the waiter's attention. He felt trapped and claustrophobic. He folded his arms and closed his eyes and searched within for some sense of himself.

He saw only desolation.

"Hello. Hello." Ian opened his eyes. It was Rose! She was well wrapped-up and looking abashed. Everything changed. Ian felt himself rejoining the human race once again. He noticed Simon looking at her and sizing her up. Sure, Rose wasn't as beautiful as the woman that he was with but he was probably incapable of appreciating real beauty anyway. In any case, Rose was *his* woman for the evening.

Rose was profusely apologetic for being late. Her flatmate who had promised to babysit for her had been delayed. Ian was very understanding and told her that there was no problem and that he was just about to order. He felt a little uncomfortable once again at the mention of Rose's child. If he and Rose got closer together then he was also going to have to try to get on with her daughter. He didn't see himself as a father figure.

Ian said that he'd decided what he wanted and Rose quickly deswaddled and studied the menu. Ian disappeared into his thoughts. As he came to, he realised that he had been staring absently at the woman at the next table. She returned his gaze and Ian felt the urge to explain that he hadn't really been looking at her and that she mustn't get the wrong impression.

He looked at Rose who was still studying the menu. What were they going to talk about over the next hour or so? She seemed to have softened in the way that she regarded him but he had found his feelings towards her becoming more aloof.

Simon's voice continued to be clearly audible. It became apparent that Simon worked at Darling Decors Ltd, the same place as Bob. So did the woman, Stella. Bob had often spoken enthusiastically of a Simon Flare, who spearheaded his team. This must be another Simon, concluded Ian, as he in no way matched Bob's description. Without even thinking about it,

and a little to Rose's consternation, Ian intruded into their conversation, or rather Simon's monologue. It occurred to him that in doing so he might be doing Stella a favour.

"Oh, you work for Darling Decors, do you? You must know my flatmate, Bob. He works there too." Simon stopped talking and looked at Ian. Simon didn't like being interrupted and having attention diverted from him.

"Bob. Bob Bowley," continued Ian. "Perhaps you work in a different section. Bob works in a team lead by Simon Flare."

"I am he," said Simon. "And yes, Robert Bowley works under me." Ian wasn't sure whether to believe him or not.

"He speaks very highly of you," said Ian, not knowing what else to say. Simon decided that this interruption wasn't entirely unwelcome.

"Does he indeed? Yes, young Robert is surely about to make his mark on the world. However, he must first accept that creativity is at least as much inspiration as discipline or, to quote Shaw, 'Creativity is 10 per cent inspiration and 90 per cent perspiration.'" At this, he cocked an eyebrow towards Stella fancying that she'd appreciate his erudite quote. Not having heard the quote before, she did. Although Simon could be a pain at times, she often found him amusing and sometimes even witty.

Prat! thought Ian. He turned to Rose and asked her if she'd decided what she wanted to eat. He felt the need for some alcohol. He wondered if Rose, being a Buddhist, would be offended.

"They only have one vegetarian pizza on the menu," she commented.

Vegetarianism was something that Ian was trying to get to grips with. Both he and Bob were carnivores but thought that vegetarianism was a good idea. They had each undertaken to cook one vegetarian meal each week. It was a well-intentioned ideal but in practice it had turned out to be something of an ordeal. Bob invariably made stuffed green peppers, a dish which, unlike Ian's response to it, he produced each week with unbridled enthusiasm, as though making it for the first time. Still, at least it was edible, unlike his own efforts.

"What about the pasta?" asked Ian.

"Boring. I'll have the pizza fungi." The waiter was standing by the table with pencil poised.

"Emm, are the mushrooms fresh tonight?" asked Ian.

"No, they're from a can," said the waiter. Ian didn't know what to do. He looked to Rose for a cue. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Two pizza fungi," said Ian. He sensed a sideways glance from Simon which he ignored.

"And to drink?" Ian had thought better of this, what with him becoming a Buddy and all.

"A mineral water, please." He looked at Rose. She said,

"I'll have a glass of red wine."

"Oh, you drink alcohol?" said Ian, surprised. It was his understanding that Buddhists weren't supposed to drink.

"Yes," she said matter of factly.

"Maybe we could get a bottle then..."

"I only want a glass."

"I'm sure that we'll manage." He ordered a bottle of house red.

Ian was feeling good about the evening. He was looking forward to talking to Rose about the FOB. It was only five weeks since he had begun going to the Meditation Centre and he felt that he had yet to connect with any of the people there. He'd had some interesting and deep conversations with one or two of the male Blossoms, conversations which in his past experience would have cemented some kind of friendship, but it didn't seem to work this way with these guys. After the initial conversations there had been no follow-up. In fact, the conversations might as well never have happened.

A couple of weeks previously he'd volunteered in response to a general request to do the lunchtime dishes. He'd hoped that this would give him some inroad, perhaps there'd even be more of a chance to connect with the Venerable Mahawisteria. But there had been no change. He still felt himself to be outside the group. Perhaps he had the wrong attitude. Perhaps there was something wrong with him although he'd never had this problem before. He recalled other newcomers who appeared to hit it off with the Blossoms immediately. That fellow Nigel for instance was straight in there and Ian the reporter who as far as he knew had only turned up yesterday, seemed to have connected straight away. What did it take? he wondered.

"How did you come to be ordained, Rose?"

"I asked."

"You mean you just went up to Mahawisteria and asked to become a Blossom and he said 'Okay'?"

"More or less, although it was called the Followers of the Buddha in those days. I was one of among half-a-dozen women who attended Mahawisteria's first lectures. He'd been back in the West for about a year before he decided to start a new Buddhist order, one that he supposed would be particularly suited to the Western mentality without compromising the spirit of Buddhism. A core group of people gravitated around him and he suggested that they become the founding members of his new Order. He put the suggestion across in a very convincing manner implying that the Order and our participation in it would be of cosmic significance. This implication was all the more astonishing given his usual low-key and prosaic approach to meditation and the teachings of the Buddha."

"Do you think the FOB is cosmic?"

Rose thought for a moment. "Yes, I do."

Ian shifted in his seat. The waiter put two glasses and a carafe of wine on the table and filled the glasses. Another waiter was serving Simon and Stella.

"The only problem was," continued Rose, "that Mahawisteria hadn't anticipated women wanting to join his Order. He seemed to have difficulty acknowledging women. In the East women were little more than background figures for him and he really didn't reckon on having to deal with them here. I think that he'd automatically assumed that his new Order would consist entirely of men. A group of us approached him about this after one of his talks. He was very reluctant to take us on

board saying that women's commitments, socially and biologically, hindered our spiritual progress.

"We weren't going to let him off with that, though."

Ian was disturbed by this. "That doesn't sound like the attitude of an Enlightened being." Rose shrugged her shoulders. "Well? Don't you think he's Enlightened?" asked Ian. "And if not, why bother?"

"I don't know. All I know is that a lot of things have come together in my head since I first heard what he's saying and since practising the meditation. Mahawisteria's given a voice to a lot of things that I've often thought and wondered about and that voice is more lucid and coherent than anything I've been able to come up with in the past. He's putting across a vision which takes an effort to get a grasp of, but once you get some notion of what he's on about, you're hooked.

"Okay, so he needs educating about women but it's to his credit that he has altered his views although it's an uphill struggle. Only two of us remain out of the first batch of women that he ordained. It's unfortunate that they dropped out for the very reasons that Mahawisteria was reluctant to ordain us in the first place. Relationships, childbirth and what not.

"It's good to see that some women have signed up for the ordination retreat at the end of the month. You're going on that, aren't you?"

"Yes. I know what you mean about his teachings. That's the sort of effect they've had on me as well, putting my thoughts into order. I've felt for a while that it's time that I made some kind of commitment and gave my life a direction.

"Do you know if Mahawisteria is Enlightened? Have you asked him? I'd really like to know. I mean how can he tell us how to get there if he hasn't got there himself?"

Rose answered, "I don't know. I don't think anybody's asked him. What difference would it make?"

"What difference would it make! It would make *all* the difference. It doesn't take much to have a way with words, you know, to spin some spiritual kind of philosophy. Look at Charlie Manson for example. Mahawisteria could be a lunatic with some degree of spiritual insight who, with a touch of charisma and some clever words, influences others for his own unwholesome ends."

Ian was suspicious of gurus. It seemed to him that there was a dreadful amount of ego, gullibility and idiocy associated with gurus and their disciples. He had an almost allergic reaction to them and their cults but Mahawisteria seemed different. He didn't appear to be into self-aggrandisement. Not only that, but he took positive steps to nip in the bud any attempts by others to put him on a pedestal. He simply wanted to impart the teachings and help those who wished to practise them.

Perhaps this was why Enlightenment wasn't an issue with the Blossoms. Perhaps ascribing Enlightenment to Mahawisteria was akin to trying to put him on a pedestal. Yes, thought Ian, this must be it.

"I suppose you're right," said Rose.

"No, I think that you're probably right. Enlightenment isn't an issue."

Ian felt a glow inside. His glass was empty, Rose's barely touched. He filled up his own and made to top up Rose's but she indicated otherwise. Their pizzas arrived, bringing a break in the conversation.

Simon and Stella were half way through their course. Simon began to tell a joke.

"There was this fellow who had a fancy for the bird next door. The thing was that he was very shy about it and didn't know what to do. He went to see this mate of his for some advice.

"When do you normally see her?" his friend asked.

"In the garden usually. You see, they have an outdoor loo next door so I sometimes see her when she's going to the loo and I happen to be out in the garden."

"Well then. There's your opportunity," said his friend. "You've got a chance to talk to her then."

"What'll I say to her?" asked the bloke.

"Anything. It doesn't matter. As long as you break the ice and make contact."

Next day, the fellow was outside doing a bit of gardening and as luck would have it, out comes the girl next door on her way to the loo. He made up his mind to say something to her when she returned from her call of nature. That gave him a few minutes to think of something to say. But could he think of anything? No. His mind was a blank. He leaned over the wall that separated the gardens. At that moment, the girl came out of the loo and was returning to the house. The fellow called out,

"Been for a crap then?"

Simon let out a loud guffaw. Stella, who was a bit tipsy herself, exploded with a shriek and some half-chewed pasta fell out onto her chin which she immediately covered with a napkin until her laughter had subsided.

Ian and Rose had both overheard the joke. Ian thought that it was in bad taste, especially over dinner. He was a little embarrassed and the glow that he had been feeling disappeared along with his appetite. Rose looked a little uncomfortable as well.

Ian took another sip of his wine and sat back in his chair before tackling the pizza. He looked at Simon who had his nose down in his spaghetti, still chortling away to himself. He looked at Stella. She was staring directly at him. Nobody had ever looked at him like this before. Her mood seemed completely altered. All frivolity and tipsiness had disappeared. Her face displayed a seriousness and intensity as her eyes pierced directly into Ian's soul.

He passed out.

It was a lifetime later that Ian became aware of somebody lifting him from the floor onto his chair. He didn't know who he was or where he was. He'd been somewhere else. He tried to hang on to the quickly disappearing memories. He didn't sit down. Instead he leaned on the table and closed his eyes in concentration.

"Something happened," he muttered to Rose. His attempts to remember were interrupted by a divine fragrance. He opened his eyes. Stella was standing next to him. There was something terrifying about her beauty. He sat down and gripped the underside of his chair.

"Are...are you all right?" asked Stella. There was a pre-Raphaelite sadness in her eyes.

"Fine, fine, thanks." Ian poured himself a glass of water and with a shaking hand put it to his lips and downed it.

"Maybe you should go outside for a breath of fresh air?" Stella was about to take his arm.

"No, no, I'm fine thanks." Ian warded her off with a palm. Stella returned to her seat. Ian regretted his decision and wished that he'd gone outside with Stella. Within a minute it was as if the whole incident had never occurred.

"It is a bit hot in here," said Rose as she removed her woollen pullover. She was wearing a purple sleeveless vest underneath. As she struggled to remove the pullover over her head Ian appreciated her smooth olive skin and also the fact that she obviously wasn't wearing a bra. It was the first time that he'd regarded Rose as sexy. Her straight black hair was sticking up at the fringe as a result of her disrobing, adding an endearing element to her attractiveness. He wanted to hold her close. She smiled at him a little shyly and Ian's original feelings for her were rekindled anew only this time they were fuller and earthier.

"Do you have a boyfriend, Rose?" Her expression turned distant.

"Not really. I still see Lulu's father from time to time but only because he's Lulu's father.

And Lulu's your daughter, thought Ian. "What's Lulu like?" he asked.

"She's a sweet, inquisitive little girl. She's a lot of work but along with the FOB she gives my life meaning."

Ian tried to imagine himself with Lulu. Would he be expected to be a father figure to her? Ian thought that he could get used to the idea of being some kind of 'uncle'. He was still having trouble coping with the fact of Rose's parenthood. He would have had even more trouble coping with knowledge of Rose's 'experimental' lesbian relationship with her flatmate, Lotus, but Rose spared him this.

The fact is that Rose was a bit confused about her sexuality. Lesbian/feminist and Buddhist ideas were very much in vogue amongst the women that she associated with and she felt more or less obliged to explore her potential for lesbianism. She wasn't too happy about this. There existed a strong solidarity between herself and her female peers which in some ways had been highly beneficial. However, she'd felt almost pushed into an acceptance of lesbianism and she found herself rebelling against it. Her friends would tell her that this was just her heterosexual conditioning holding out and that she should make the effort to liberate herself from it but Rose was uneasy with this argument even though she went along with it in practice.

She wondered if another heterosexual encounter might help her decide her sexuality one way or another. She had Ian in mind. He was cute and she considered him 'safe'.

"What about you?" she asked.

Ian pursed his lips and answered in the negative. At twenty-three he was technically still a virgin and this bothered him. He'd been sexually close to women on two previous drunken occasions and the memories of both were painful.

"I don't seem to be very lucky," he said.

"It's just a matter of meeting the right person," Rose said encouragingly.

"I put it down to a combination of an awkward personality and a severe lack of sex appeal."

Rose studied Ian. No, he wasn't short of sex appeal. It was just that it wasn't immediately apparent. Ian was wearing a black tee-shirt embroidered with the occult symbolism of some obscure rock group. He was slightly built with high cheekbones cupped by a week's wispy growth. An unkempt mop of thick brown hair contributed to an overall impression of restless distractedness which was offset by a twinkling tranquillity which could easily be missed in his soft brown eyes. He tended to avoid eye contact but when on occasion their eyes met there was a questioning look in his eyes, a look that seemed to plead directly with her soul causing something to melt deep down inside her.

Simon's voice had been growing in volume. It's a fact that the more people drink, the more loud and voluble they become and Simon and Stella were coming to the end of their second bottle. The subject of their conversation turned to Rooms.

"I make a point of incorporating all the successes of my team into the decor of my Room," said Simon. "Now you might ask yourself, 'Wouldn't this compromise the design integrity of the Room?' to which my answer would be 'No.' You see, Stella my dear, this is one of the advantages of being Team Manager. In a way, my team's creations are *my* creations. They are under *my* direct influence and so my team isn't going to come up with anything which conflicts with my taste. Certainly, one is often faced with a small problem in Room management but it's nothing more than that."

Simon's Room was the cause of one of his emotional scars, a scar which he had learnt to ignore completely. The fact of the matter was that Simon had locked the door to his Room almost a year ago and hadn't opened it since. He had chosen a film noir motif inspired by his film noir wallpaper which had been his only - albeit moderate - success. When he'd moved into his present accommodation, the design of his Room had been a major project, one that he had devoted much time, money and effort to.

Simon wasn't aware of it, but he had unconsciously dedicated his Room to his mother. In the process of creating his Room he had felt his mother watching over him and vetting every detail. It was a Room that would entice back the mother that he hadn't seen since he was a boy.

Apart from himself, only one other person had ever seen his Room and it hadn't been his mother. It had been an American

woman that he'd been dating and had finally inveigled back to his flat one evening. He'd done nothing beforehand but talk about his Room in such superlative terms that it would have been difficult not to have been disappointed with the actuality but this woman's response had been too much. On being led into his Room she had burst into shrieks of uncontrollable laughter.

She had been laughing so much that she had been unable to answer Simon's queries as to the cause of her amusement, queries which in themselves provoked further hoots of laughter. She could only point. She pointed in the direction of the spinning lampshade with the stencilled window motif. It wobbled somewhat on one side of a vibrating bed. On the other side of the bed stood a dresser sporting a red siren light which cast an ominous moving red shadow. And as she looked round further the poor woman doubled up in convulsions.

Simon was numb with shock. He escorted the heaving woman to the front door and locked her out of his flat and his life, ignoring the ringing of the doorbell and her subsequent entreaties.

He stood at the entrance to his Room and stared at the spinning lampshade. What did his Room say?

It said that he was pathetic and unloved. That's what it said. This was his life. He broke down in tears, fell down on his knees in the doorway and wailed miserably.

He had been unable to dismantle his Room. Pathetic as it was, it represented his soul and from that time on he had kept it locked. The Room had come to embody the chasm that lurked at the threshold of his consciousness, the chasm of his utter worthlessness and patheticness, a chasm plugged to any degree only by alcohol and his unremitting egoistic affectations.

As a team manager at Darling Decors Ltd he felt obliged to talk often of his Room and for such occasions he had concocted a Room, which, apart from the film noir wallpaper, was totally imaginary. The Room that he had created in his head had become more real for him than the one in his apartment.

"As Team Leader," he continued, "it behoves me to keep tabs on not just the current state of the market but also on products that are about to come on-line. My Room must, by necessity, be state-of-the-art for, out of the present comes the future and the first to the future is the one who succeeds." Simon was impressed by his own eloquence and made a mental note of that - 'The first to the future succeeds.' He liked it and vaguely wondered if it might have been something that he'd read from Bowley's notespace.

The waiter took their dishes and placed the dessert menu in front of them.

"Take for example, these implants that have come on to the market -"

"I've got one," said Stella. Simon lost his stride for a moment but quickly regained it. Of course Stella would have one. She was a highly efficient information and VDR manager and was bound to be onto anything that would enhance her performance.

"Well done, Stella," said Simon in sincere admiration.

"Yes. You know my boyfriend Richard works at the University. Some of his colleagues were instrumental in parts of the biochip's development.

"Haven't you got yours yet, Simon?"

"Actually, no, I haven't. I'm still on the waiting list although I've booked ahead for the calculophone plant."

"Oh, I didn't know that there were any others on the market."

"There aren't but a friend of a friend who's in the know said that it won't be long before this calculophone plant is in production and demand will be great." Simon had read this in one of his management magazines.

"I ought to put my name down as well, but does this mean that if we both have calculophone plants then you won't be in and out of my office so often? After all, you could just give me a mental ring."

"Technology is no substitute for the personal touch," he said with a leer.

Stella gave him a smile and then suddenly shot her hand straight into the air, catching the attention of somebody who had just come into the busy restaurant. Her whole demeanour changed. Up until now she had maintained a certain composure in spite of the wine but now that her boyfriend had shown up she seemed imbued with a fresh spark of vitality. Her boyfriend came to the table. She stood up and threw her arms around him.

He in turn cautiously arched his head back to avoid Stella's shoulder horns.

Simon felt his evening quickly fall to pieces.

"This is Simon. You've met my boyfriend Richard once before haven't you Simon?"

This was so. They'd once met at a staff dinner and Simon hadn't been particularly impressed.

"Yes, I have. You're a ... teacher, aren't you?"

Richard raised his eyebrows.

Stella laughed. "He's a phil-os-ophy lecturer, silly."

"Ah yes. At the University. Where the implants came from. I suppose you have one as well."

"Well, actually, I -"

"No he doesn't." Stella gave Richard a cuddle. "He doesn't approve. He's very old-fashioned, is my Dicky."

Ian, from his adjacent table, followed this development with interest. The evening was taking an interesting turn. Richard looked like a nice bloke and he was glad that his initial intuition about Stella had been correct and she wasn't just a bimbo. A philosophy lecturer, eh? That was impressive. Richard was wearing a plaid woollen tie over a cream denim shirt beneath a sleeveless university pullover all beneath a white trenchcoat. He was refreshingly noddyless. His face was round and boyish and he seemed a lot younger than Stella who was in her early thirties.

Ian felt acute empathy for Simon who was struggling to maintain his composure. Stella seemed cruelly unaware of Simon's feelings.

"Will you join us for dessert, Dick? We were just about to order."

Simon was ready to make an excuse and leave.

"No, I won't," said Richard. "I'm in the pub across the road with some of the guys and I thought that you might like to join us when you're finished. You're invited as well, Simon."

"Thanks, but I'd better be going. I have a few bits and pieces to attend to for tomorrow."

"I'm sorry that I interrupted your dinner. I'll head off now and leave you two to it."

"See you soon," said Stella. She gave him a coy goodbye wave and then picked up the dessert menu. "Aren't you going to have a dessert, Simon?"

Simon had sobered up completely. His evening had taken a nose-dive. He felt insulted but couldn't quite understand how. His mood had crashed and he called the waiter for the bill.

Stella pouted. Simon couldn't bear her company an instant longer and went directly to the cashier and waited for the bill there. Stella got her things together and went to the lady's room.

The rest of Simon's evening went like this. After settling the bill, he left without waiting to say goodbye to Stella. He went home, poured himself a brandy, fell into his armchair and flicked through twenty-six channels of TV before resorting to his audio system and Mahler's second symphony. He polished off the rest of the brandy bottle before falling unconscious. When Stella returned from the lady's room she looked around for Simon. Ian told her that he'd left whereupon she just shrugged her shoulders, picked up her cloak and joined her boyfriend across the road.

Ian had really felt Simon's humiliation but the conversation of a few moments ago had turned over another set of feelings within Ian, about the implants.

"What do you think about these implants, Rose?"

She looked at him quizzically. What was there to think?

"I suppose they might be useful in some situations," she ventured.

Ian realised that in asking the question he had been looking for confirmation of his own emotional response to the whole notion of having an implant. He had considered his reaction simply the only natural response but he was beginning to realise that his own feelings were far from universal.

"Doesn't Mahawisteria have something to say about them?" he asked. "I mean, what's this Campaign for Cerebral Integrity all about if it isn't about this sort of thing?"

Rose answered. "The Campaign for Cerebral Integrity is one of Mahawisteria's reformulations of the Buddhist teachings. He's always looking for ways to put his message across and he wants people to appreciate that Buddhism isn't religion in the usual sense of the word. The CCI is a secular expression of Buddhism. The basic premiss of the CCI is that we're trapped by the negative conditioning of our own mind, a conditioning which arises in dependence on many social factors. It's the job of the CCI to identify these factors and to minimise their damage."

Ian knew all this and was becoming restless. Rose continued.

"The prime factor that needs to be countered is the influence of the media over our mental make-up although it's really the message of the media that's the problem, not the media itself. The problem is the software rather than the hardware. The implants are hardware. The brain is hardware. The message is the software. It's how we respond to the software that's important and the software associated with these implants is more or less non-existent as far as I understand. In fact, they could be quite useful."

"What?" Ian had found the force of Rose's logic both illuminating and disturbing.

"Well, for example, if they are going to produce a calculator implant then it would be useful to somebody like me. I used to study accounting and I might take it up again."

Ian hadn't realised that Rose was so high-powered. He felt in awe of her and embarrassed by his own lack of profession.

"You say that the brain is hardware, but it's where the software, our thoughts, resides. These implants are connecting directly with the software which would surely make them a concern of the CCI. After all, here you've got conditioning in it's most concrete form - exterior hardware acting directly on our minds." Ian wasn't sure that what he'd just said made much sense. "The medium is the message," he added for good measure.

"I think I see what you're getting at," said Rose. "To be honest, I don't know what Mahawisteria thinks about the implants. I suspect that he doesn't even know about them. We have our weekly Order meeting with him tomorrow so I'll ask him about it then."

"That should be interesting."

"He probably won't like them. He's somewhat anti-technology - he won't even use a typewriter never mind a word processor. He and Henry Moody have more in common than I first thought. I'm surprised that they didn't hit it off."

Ian wondered if Rose wasn't being a little disrespectful of Mahawisteria given that she was a disciple of his but this seemed to be one of the hallmarks of the FOB that he liked. They certainly didn't go in for 'guru-gushing'.

"Would you like any dessert?" he asked. His mind was feeling a little fuzzy after the alcohol - Rose had made her one glass last and he had felt obliged to finish the bottle - and he didn't feel up to further in-depth discussion. He decided that he wanted to have sex with Rose and he wondered how it could be managed. Another problem was money. He'd done a fine calculation on the cost of the meal beforehand assuming that he would pay for Rose but he wouldn't be able to afford two desserts.

She said, "Yes. What about you?"

"No, I don't think that I'll bother." He felt uncomfortable. "I'm a little broke."

Rose smiled. "Desserts are on me."

"Okay. In that case it's got to be the chocolate fudge cake!"

"Make that two," said Rose to the waiter who had reappeared.

An easy silence prevailed while they waited for the cake. Ian decided to make his play and became self-conscious as a consequence. He cleared his throat and asked,

"Where do you live exactly?"

"Clever Street. And you?"

"Park Road. Near the University." They lived on opposite sides of town which was unfortunate. In any case Ian couldn't take Rose back to his place. It was a tip. How would he put it anyway? - 'Wanna come back and see my shrine?' No. He didn't think so. He'd walk her back to her place and take it from there.

They shared a moment of communion when the chocolate cake arrived. Identical feelings of enjoyment resonated as they both wolfed it down.

"Excellent," said Ian. "Good-sized portions as well." He sat back in his chair and felt a bit sick.

It was a cold cloudless night as Ian walked Rose back to her place. One or two stars were visible between the streetlights. The warmth of the food and the restaurant had stoked them up and their winter coverings seemed unnecessary. Ian self-consciously took Rose's arm but she responded stiffly so he let it go.

They talked about how a good meal could be an uplifting experience. They talked about what a beautiful night it was and Ian tried to show Rose Orion, the only constellation that he knew apart from the Plough.

He wasn't sure of his ground with Rose. She was a Buddhist but what did this mean? Okay, she's vegetarian but will take a glass of wine and implants - which he would have assumed to be definitely 'unBuddhist' - were okay with her. Relationships seemed okay with her as well. Sex probably wasn't a no-no either. Buddhism for her seemed to be about working on one's mental conditioning. How did she do this and how often did she do it? Was she doing it now? Was that why she didn't like him taking her arm? Was she making some kind of Buddhist effort that he had interrupted? He wished that he knew so that he could tell what the boundaries were.

Ian was correct about Rose's arm tensing. When they'd left the restaurant Rose had started wondering if Lulu had gone to bed all right and whether she had caused Lotus any problems. Then Rose had started thinking about Lotus. She and Lotus operated a no-males-across-the-threshold policy in keeping with the other women in their peer group. Rose found difficulty in enjoying the physical side of lesbianism. Earlier on she'd thought that it would be nice to go back to Ian's place - she wondered what it was like - but now she was looking forward to getting back to her daughter and the clarity and warmth of the all-female environment. Although it had been sweet of Ian to walk her back she was looking forward to saying goodnight to him.

By and large, Rose enjoyed living with Lotus and it had been refreshing to live in a context where women could define their own roles in life without any male influence. The sexual aspect was a small price to pay and there was also the perfectly valid option of celibacy.

They'd reached her door and Rose became aware of Ian once again. She knew that he would like to be invited in but she didn't feel like explaining why it couldn't be.

"Thanks, Ian."

He wondered what to do. "Yes, it was nice." He leaned stiffly down towards her and gave her a peck on the cheek. He wanted to hug her but Rose seemed enveloped in a no-go cocoon. This is as far as it goes, he told himself. He made one final effort.

"Perhaps you'd come round to my place for dinner some time? I'm still trying to get into vegetarian cookery."

"Okay."

"Goodnight then. I'll probably see you at the Centre next week."

"Goodnight." Rose closed the door and Ian hunched up his shoulders and turned once again into the cold night.

Nigel wasn't happy about the staff weekend at the end of the month. It fell on the same date as the FOB Bud retreat. This prompted him into one of his recurring fantasies, that of resigning from his job at Darling Decors Ltd. After all, this was a matter worth resigning over. His job was beginning to impinge too much on the rest of his life. Unfortunately, the job was a necessary evil. He needed it to finance his artistic endeavours which presently expressed themselves in sculpture but his patience for his job was limited.

There were many things that Nigel had no patience for and another of those things was the modern fashion for Rooms. He regarded them as an unnecessary extravagance. It wasn't that he disagreed with the ethos of non-functionality, far from it - in fact, one could regard non-functionality as a defining characteristic of Art. What bothered Nigel was the *confinement* of the expression of the principle of non-functionality to Rooms. This confinement neutered the philosophy of non-functionality, deprived it of its existential significance, rendered it commercial and safe, and destroyed its anarchic, Dadaist spirit. Non-functionality was something to be *lived* and such a lifestyle could not be better exemplified than in the life of the Artist.

Nigel lived in a studio. He regarded his current work in progress. It was a sculpture in plaster, approximately oval in shape, about sixty centimetres in height and had a series of winding tunnels going through it. This was his template, the starting point from which he wanted to express something, something that couldn't be expressed in words. As with all Art, he wanted to communicate an experience directly to the experienter.

By a creative use of mathematical reasoning he described his sculpture as one-dimensional. Consciousness was zero-dimensional and because sculpture was physical it would only, at best, be able to approximate the aspect of consciousness that he wanted to convey.

Nigel regarded himself as a prophet for the philosophy of non-functionality. Another thing that annoyed him was the way people confused non-functionality with lack of purpose as if the purpose of something was identical to its functionality. A

work of Art is non-functional but it always had purpose even if it was meaningless! The whole point of non-functionality was to make way for purpose - the less functionality in an object then the more easy it is for meaning to be conveyed. Functionality made way for purpose and meaning. This was the whole point and it was entirely missed by young go-getters like Robert Bowley who saw non-functionality as nothing more than a way up the career ladder. This disgusted Nigel but he had to allow that there was purpose here even if it was only in terms of career although this was purpose of such a low order that it made him wonder what things were coming to.

Nigel consoled himself by meditating on his work of Art. He stirred a bowl of plaster and applied a handful to his model. It was intended to represent a particular quirk in consciousness that sometimes arises when an individual is doing something that they do on a regular basis in company and are suddenly overcome by the inherent strangeness of it, an almost noumenal strangeness. For example, eating a cucumber sandwich. The individual is sitting eating a cucumber sandwich and becomes suddenly aware of the bizarre nature of the situation to the extent that they look around to see if anybody else notices. It was as though the Universe were trying to tell them something through the medium of the cucumber sandwich. It was this flip in consciousness that he was representing by geometric etchings on the surface and on the walls of the winding tunnels. His irritation, though, at the unnecessary staff weekend was inhibiting his creative flow. He wiped his hands on a towel, fell into a low armchair and poured himself a glass of Chablis from a bottle on an adjacent table.

Nigel liked his studio. It was on the top floor of a block of flats and during the day the light came in through a long window at the top of the wall of his work area. The single bulb in the work area reflected from the lower half of the window. The upper half was fringed with frost and one or two stars could be discerned. Nigel wished that he'd switched the light off before sitting down so that he could appreciate the peacefulness of the night but he couldn't be bothered getting up again.

For Nigel, the Venerable Mahawisteria was a prophet, a bringer of revelations. Buddhism put the life of the individual into a meaningful cosmic context and this context could be applied at every moment of the individual's life. It removed at a stroke the alienation of the individual from the Universe. The removal of this alienation implied that with some effort, hostility and all manner of negative behaviour between people could be eradicated. This effort was surely worth making and this would be what he would be doing by living in accord with Mahawisteria's teachings.

If only all the world could see this! But the world won't even let him go on his first retreat! The facts of life were such that he was going to have to go on the staff weekend. Nigel consoled himself that there would probably be another ordination retreat in the not too distant future. And at least he was now a Bud. Nigel felt a rounded glow of satisfaction and contentment prompted by the wine. And his

sculpture was coming on well too. With a smile that expressed his appreciation of the world, he got up, emptied his glass, switched the light off and went to bed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Next morning, shortly before he was fully awake, Ian felt himself immersed in the afterglow of something good. He tried to recall what it might be and the events of the previous evening recounted themselves to his mind's eye. No, there was nothing particularly wonderful to remember. In fact, he distinctly remembered being rejected and the afterglow disappeared leaving him empty and discarded. He pulled the duvet over his head and tried to bring back the warm feeling but a feeling of failure now predominated. He wanted the memory to go away. Another day presented itself to him, another day to be filled in one way or another, and he wanted this to go away as well. It oppressed him and he knew that it would be early evening before he got himself together. He was squeezed between the unpleasant memory of last night and the weight of the day ahead.

The sounds of Bob's morning routine penetrated the walls. Ian had a sudden urge to get up and tell Bob that he'd met Simon last night but the urge failed to connect with his body and the moment passed. He wondered how Bob's plant was settling in and this led him into a train of thought where he considered his Neo-Luddite - there was no other word for it - response to it.

As it happened, Bob and Ian didn't see each other for another two days, until Sunday morning when they shared the single inviolate ritual of their lives. This was the late protracted breakfast in which they devoured the Sunday newspapers. Over endless toast and coffee they immersed themselves completely in what the newspapers had to offer, every now and again each drawing the other's attention to a particular item which on occasion would lead to heated discussion, terminated only by the query, "Another slice of toast?" The one who wasn't making the toast would then be diverted to another article and the heat of the debate would fizzle out.

"These plants seem to be taking off in a big way," said Ian bemusedly indicating a two-page advert for the forthcoming radio implant. "Have you seen this one?"

"I'm already booked for it," said Bob. Ian was impressed by his friend's alacrity. He was beginning to feel that he might indeed be missing out on something after all. Not that he could afford it anyway even though the prices had fallen drastically.

"So yours is okay now?"

"No problem. Time on tap." Bob tapped his right temple.

"It makes your TimeCentrePeace redundant though, doesn't it?" said Ian smugly.

"Ian, my lad, you have completely missed the point. The TimeCentrePeace is not an object to be depended upon for accurate timekeeping. Although the integrity of the piece demands that it should be accurate in three different modes - digital, analogue and sand, it is purely decorative and is not intended to function as a timepiece."

Ian felt like an anachronism. "Of course, yes. Sorry." He'd been put in his place and rightly so.

"You're not concerned about going through another operation then?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I won't need one. The operation is only necessary for the first plant and they might even be able to do away with that eventually. You see, the first plant has a transmitter in it which subsequent plants can home in on. It's literally as easy as swallowing a pill."

My God! thought Ian. For some reason this seemed more horrifying than having the operation but he tried to control his reaction. "Wouldn't it be worth waiting until the calculophone implant?" asked Ian, demonstrating the fact that he wasn't totally ignorant.

"Oh? I haven't heard about that one."

"It's inside news," said Ian, milking it.

"And how, pray, would you be privy to such information?"

"I heard about it from a colleague of yours," said Ian with a grin.

A colleague of mine? thought Bob. There was only one person who Bob reckoned would have the nonce. "Simon? You met Simon?"

Ian came clean. "Well, I found myself next to his table in a restaurant the other day and I overheard him mention it. He knows somebody at the University who's involved in the research."

"He's quite a guy is Simon, quite a guy." This was Bob's stock phrase with respect to Simon - quite a guy. "I suppose he was out with a stunning woman..." surmised Bob.

"He was actually..." said Ian wondering whether he ought to qualify the impression he was giving.

"What a guy," said Bob, indicating that Simon was too much for words. Ian thought it better to leave the illusion intact. "What a guy. And what about you? I take it that you weren't dining alone..." Bob grinned. With toast poised in one hand, he used the fingers of the other to try and remove a piece of chewed toast stuck between two of his teeth.

Ian lowered his head bashfully. "I was out with somebody from the Buddhist centre.

"Nice? I remember you came back late one night this week."

"Yes, but nothing happened."

"Seeing her again?"

"She might come round for dinner - on one of our vegetarian nights if you don't mind."

"Not at all. In fact, I've invited Sally round this Thursday. We could make it a foursome."

"Maybe." said Ian unenthusiastically. He didn't feel up to the reality of the possibility. There was also the burden of having to actually invite Rose which he didn't feel up to either.

"Sally's been a great help in preparing my submission."

"It's in then?"

"Yup. Bowley's TimeCentrePeace is now in the laps of ye gods. I'll do the cooking. It's just by way of a little thank-you for her help."

"So we can look forward to stuffed green peppers then?"

"Indeed."

Ian smiled and returned to the newspapers. Another period of intense immersion ensued. There was a report on the first manned trip to Mars. They had reached the quarter-way point.

Ian came across another article on the implants, this time it was on the philosophical implications of the implants, something that he had wondered about himself, but the article was too abstruse. The writer was working on the basis of unmentioned assumptions and thus raised more questions than he addressed. Ian had little time for western philosophy since his conversion to Buddhism. Inasmuch as western philosophy was a purely mental exercise its relevance to the rest of experience was highly tenuous if not non-existent. Buddhist philosophy - 'philosophy' was probably not the correct word for it - addressed all levels of experience. It was a way of life. Ian gave up on the article.

"Mitchell Paragon's at it again," muttered Bob. "He's opened a Survivalist centre in Angola of all places." This was something else that Ian knew firsthand but he didn't say anything. "These African nations seem to lap him up."

"That would be because of the emphasis he puts on self-sufficiency - 'Minimum dependence on minimum others'. That's how he puts it, I think."

Bob was occasionally impressed by his flatmate. He certainly knew his gurus and demagogues. It dawned on Bob that if Ian rated Mahawisteria highly then there was probably something in it. He really must try to get along to one of the meditation classes sometime although if the truth be known, he himself was actually more impressed by Mitchell Paragon.

"It's funny how we're both going off to Survivalist centres next weekend, you to your retreat and me for a staff weekend."

"Hmmm."

"You don't fancy joining the Survivalists then?" Bob was having a dig at Ian.

Ian put his paper down and answered the question, taking it at face value. "There's no doubt that Mitchell Paragon is an impressive fellow but his whole movement is based on paranoia concerning the end of the world. His followers regard him as an Enlightened being and almost worship him as such."

"You don't think that he's Enlightened then?"

"He might be. Who am I to say? And even if he was, I don't think that I could get into gushing over him the way his disciples do. It strikes me that Survivalism is essentially centred around Paragon's ego. Enlightenment is about eradicating the ego and so no, I would disagree with the contention that Paragon is Enlightened."

"And what about Mahawisteria?"

"It's more difficult to say in his case although he seems to be guilty of sexism." Bob appreciated Ian's reservations. He appreciated that Ian didn't accept his new guru's words as absolute truth, that he hadn't sacrificed his critical faculty. "But what does it matter?" continued Ian, echoing Rose. "The main thing is that the teacher is more spiritually developed than the aspirant. Why do we insist on having God

Incarname for our guru? All we need is somebody who is further along the Path than we are and as far as I am concerned, Mahawisteria fits the bill."

"So you reckon that you're more spiritually advanced than Mitchell Paragon?" Bob dug in.

"Maybe I am. But maybe it's the wrong question to ask because the Survivalists aren't concerned with the spiritual nor do they claim to be. They're basically cranks with a few valid points to make about the state of modern society."

Both Ian and Bob had read Mitchell Paragon's book, a transcription of a series of talks that he had given, entitled, 'Surviving the Apocalypse'.

"You could be right," said Bob. "His book was a heady mix of nonsense and valid insight. And what about this Henry Moody?" Bob had a stockpile of questions that he'd been intending to ask his flatmate about and was now offloading them in one go.

Ian snorted. "Henry Moody? He's a nutter. I wouldn't mention him in the same breath as Mitchell Paragon, never mind Mahawisteria. He was at the Meditation Centre the other day."

Bob was impressed by this as well. Ian was right out there in the thick of things. "I don't understand why the Neo-Luddites don't throw in their lot with the Survivalists."

"I'll tell you why," said Ian, well into his stride. "One thing that you can say in favour of the Survivalists is that they live or at least try to live in accordance with their beliefs. The Neo-Luddites on the other hand, sure, they make do without technology, but they're still attached to their home comforts. It's very much about keeping up a certain appearance. Also, there is nothing more to them than their anti-technology stance. If you ask me, they are simply new middle-class people trying to assuage their guilt about abandoning the working-class roots of their forebears. So they live without technology and make a big song and dance about it. There's nothing more to them than that. No way would they do what the Survivalists have done and go off into the countryside and give up their nice little home comforts."

"Another reason they wouldn't join with the Survivalists or any other group - this happened with Mahawisteria, I think - is that the Neo-Luddites are very much Moody's baby and he doesn't want anybody else stealing his thunder. He's a very weak character."

Bob raised his eyebrows and took a deep breath at the thoroughness of his friend's analysis. "More toast?"

"Mmmmm. I think that we could do with more coffee as well."

"Hey!" called Ian as Bob busied himself with the coffee filter. Ian was perusing the 'Squeak', the affectionate local name for the Crowleigh Advertiser. "There's a bit here on the Meditation Centre. 'Take care of your Mind by a Reporter'," Ian read. Beneath the headline was a fuzzy black and white photograph of Mahawisteria. He read out the article.

"We often know what's good and what's bad for our body. Eat too much chocolate and you feel sick. Too much greasy food and you run the risk of a

heart attack. Fresh fruit and veg and moderate exercise puts you on top. But how many of us have considered the effects of what we take into our mind? This was the question raised by the Venerable Mahawisteria at the inaugural meeting of the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity. The Venerable Mahawisteria is an English Buddhist monk who runs the Crowleigh Meditation Centre situated conveniently in the centre of town. According to the Venerable Mahawisteria, 'Our knowledge of mental nutrition, of the negative and positive influences on our mental development, is akin to the state of ignorance concerning physical nutrition two centuries ago. There are many factors in modern society working to hinder the development of wholesome, happy, and focused minds.'

The Venerable Mahawisteria recommends taking the occasional weekend retreat in the countryside to remove ourselves from our habitual sources of mental pollution. Or, for those too busy to spare a weekend, he advises a course of meditation at the Crowleigh Meditation Centre."

"Not bad," said Ian. "I think that the guy who wrote this is coming on the retreat next weekend."

Bob felt a pang of remorse, as he did every now and again, that he wasn't paying enough attention to his own spiritual development. He really ought to try and make some sort of commitment the way his flatmate had. He checked the time in his mind's eye. It was 1345.

Ian knocked back another cup of coffee and suddenly felt sleepy. He went back to bed and fell asleep.

Next day, Ian found himself in a state of considerable anguish at the Meditation Centre. He and Rose had just finished washing up the lunchtime dishes. He felt pressurised into asking Rose round for dinner but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. Bob's vegetarian meal was in three days' time but his heart wasn't in it and he didn't have the nerve to ask. His status quo with Rose seemed to have reverted to what it was before their dinner date. It wasn't as though she was deliberately ignoring him. It was more likely that he wasn't a sufficiently interesting part of her environment to be noticeable. She was simply getting on with her business at the Meditation Centre as she had always done. Perhaps it was something to do with her being a Buddhist. Still, he couldn't help feeling cold-shouldered.

Why did he long for her attention so? Was he emotionally immature? Well, if this was the Buddhist way then he was just going to have to live with it and try to be more emotionally independent the way the Blossoms were.

Sonja had been at the lunchtime class. Ian was aware that when Sonja was around he forgot all about Rose. Sonja eclipsed Rose entirely. Not only that, she seemed to be on very familiar terms with Mahawisteria. She was having a long

conversation with him now. He wondered if she would be going on the weekend retreat and whether he would have an opportunity to talk to her then.

Ian upbraided himself. Here he was thinking about women again. This wasn't why he wanted to get into Buddhism, to chase women. He wanted to understand the Buddhist teachings and to practise the meditation. He wanted a response to the puzzle of his existence and it was his questioning on this level that was surely more fundamental than his emotional and sexual longings but the latter seemed to prevail.

Get into the meditation, he told himself. This was the only path to take. Perhaps this was how Rose saw it. We're here to get on with some very important business and the forthcoming retreat provided an exciting opportunity to really get down to it. Ian felt himself coming into focus. This, he knew, was what he was fundamentally about.

A bit of him, however, still watched for an opportunity to invite Rose to dinner but one never arose.

Thursday evening came round and Ian had dinner with Bob and Sally. Ian had found Sally very attractive which surprised him as Bob hadn't mentioned how pretty she was.

As for Bob, he was stunned when Sally arrived at the flat. He'd never seen her look like this. At work, she looked as though she had just tumbled out of bed and put on whatever clothes were at hand. This was in fact what she did. But tonight she was wearing a simple black evening dress revealing her form as full and curvaceous rather than 'dumpy' - a word that Bob had often used in the past to characterise Sally. The dress was set off by what looked like a diamond necklace and she had been to the hairdressers. Her fair hair was parted in the middle and her curls bounced gently on her shoulders when she moved her head. Her round face was flushed and there was a twinkle of bashful excitement in her eyes.

"Mademoiselle" said Bob when he answered the door and bowed gallantly. "You look - lustrous."

"Merci, monsieur," she giggled. She came in and removed her false camelhair coat.

Ian was sitting at the table and was introduced then Bob went back into the kitchen to put the finishing touches to his "cuisine". Sally had brought a bottle of wine which Ian promptly opened.

"I wasn't sure that you drank," she said. "Bob told me that you were a Buddhist and Buddhists don't drink, do they?"

For the first time Ian experienced being straitjacketed by a label and it would have ordinarily flummoxed him but he and Bob had already polished off the best part of a bottle the effect of which leant him a certain spontaneity.

"This one does!" he joked. Sally laughed. "But seriously," he added, "I don't make a point of calling myself a Buddhist or anything for that matter. I've taken a strong interest in Buddhism and I consider myself to be looking into it."

Bob bobbed through, attired in stripy kitchen apron, fussed with the hi-fi and put on some Bach. "Harpsichord Concertos," he announced. "But Ian, you're going to get

ordained so you will to all intents and purposes be a Buddhist."

Ian was having trouble putting what he felt into words.

"Well, yes, but being a Buddhist isn't about following a list of do's and don'ts. It isn't about following a set of rules."

Sally was curious. "What is it then?" she asked.

"It's about understanding,... insight,... insight into the way things are at the most fundamental and unconditioned level of reality. This insight usually comes gradually. There are disciplines that it's advantageous to follow - these are conducive to experiencing this insight, but following the disciplines, the rules in themselves isn't the point."

Bob wanted to stop and listen but he had to go back into the kitchen. Sally was intrigued by Buddhism and took the opportunity to ask Ian several penetrating questions. Ian for his part could see that here was a woman of imagination, intelligence and sensitivity. He felt a pang of jealousy.

What did his flatmate have that he didn't have?

He suggested to Sally that she come along to the Meditation Centre sometime and she said that she'd love to. Ian thought it more likely that he'd see Sally at the Centre than Bob.

With a fanfare and a flourish, Bob served the food. The stuffed green peppers were a success. After he'd eaten, Ian suddenly sobered up. He could see that there was something going on between Sally and Bob and he was beginning to feel in the way so he decided to go to his room. Sally and Bob protested but he couldn't gauge how sincere their protestations were so he said that he felt tired and retired. He lay down on his mattress and felt the lack of love in his life. Lucky Bob, he thought. He wished that he'd invited Rose after all. He tried to read a book but his attention kept drifting to the other side of the door to the sound of conversation and laughter. The music changed from Bach to Van Morrison. It was now becoming unbearable for Ian and he decided to go to the pub. But how was he going to leave the flat? He would have to pass through the dining area and he didn't want Bob and Sally to feel that they were driving him out even though they were. There was no way out. He was stuck. He tried to meditate but he was too keyed up. He tried to force himself to sleep but he was too restless. He tried reading again and gave up in despair. Suddenly the music and chatter stopped and he heard the front door close. He listened a little longer. Silence. He went through. The dishes had been washed and the table cleared. They'd gone out. He knew it was foolish but he felt rejected because they hadn't invited him. He sat down in an armchair, his mind empty, and switched on the television.

It was early on a grey, cold, wet Saturday morning at the end of the month. Simon Flare's team was assembled in the car park of Darling Decors Ltd - minus Simon Flare.

Nigel was glaring into the distance beneath a large golf umbrella. Linda was glowering.

"This is outrageous," she said at intervals. "Where is he?" Out of habit she kept looking at her wrist but she now had the timeplant and it had quickly become quite unfashionable to wear a watch. The watch and clock manufacturing industries were on the brink of total crash, their products grasping at straws as Room accessories. "Where is he?" she repeated.

Bob and Sally weren't bothered. They were content to just be with each other. It didn't matter where.

Sara and Stephen were consulting a map beneath an umbrella - there were motorway roadworks and they were studying an alternative route. They were doing the navigation but Simon had the key for the company four-wheel drive and he was half-an-hour overdue.

"Oh this is ridiculous!" said Nigel. "Where is the man? Doesn't anybody have his phone number?" Nobody could believe that nobody else had Simon's number. Nigel took out his cellular phone. "I'll try directory enquiries."

At that point a red car pulled up. The window wound down electronically. It was Stella.

"Simon called me. He asked me to drive over here and tell you that the weekend has been cancelled."

"What!" cried Linda. "Just like that?" She was indignant. She knew that she could now go to her OAFS meeting but she wasn't going to let that spoil her indignation.

"He's got a cold," said Stella, knowing that it sounded feeble.

"What are we supposed to do with this man?"

"That's what I had to tell you. Now I'm going back to my bed."

"Thanks, Stella," said Linda, her hackles relaxing.

Sally and Bob were disappointed as they'd been looking forward to the weekend together in the countryside. Sara and Stephen decided to go up to the Survivalist Centre anyway. Nigel, fulminating in his mind against Simon, immediately got into his car and drove to the Buxmead Survivalist Centre where the retreat was being held. He reckoned he could be there in under two hours.

Ian had left for the Survivalist Centre at Buxmead the previous afternoon. He'd travelled by car with Chittalily and another Blossom called Virachrysanthemum. They'd actually asked him if he'd mind coming up before the beginning of the retreat on Friday evening to help set things up. This was something, he thought. At last he was beginning to belong. He'd wondered beforehand if Mahawisteria might be in the car as well but Mahawisteria was to be chauffeured by Pansymitra. Ian found himself in the back seat with Chittalily and Virachrysanthemum in the front, Chittalily at the wheel. Chittalily and Virachrysanthemum didn't speak to him much, partly because, he supposed, that it's awkward to hold a conversation between the front and the back of a car, and partly because he didn't share the same bond that Chittalily and Virachrysanthemum shared, that of being BOBs - Blossoms of

the Buddha. Not only that, Ian had ascertained that Chit and Chrys - this was how they addressed each other - had been to school together so it wasn't surprising that he felt left out. Never mind, he was excited about heading out into the countryside. Even though he loved the countryside, he rarely managed to get there under his own steam.

Something jarred Ian from his reveries. Did he hear one of the Blossoms in the front refer to the Venerable Mahawisteria as "old wishy-washy"? He must have misheard.

He began thinking about paranormal powers again. It was a topic that niggled at him. The Buddha is clearly credited with miraculous powers in the texts. He could instantaneously transport himself from one place to another not only in the physical world but also in the heavenly realms. The Buddha preached to the angels and knew all about his past lives. His disciples were also credited with such powers and indeed, it is stated in the scriptures that certain psychic faculties come into operation quite naturally in the accomplished meditator. He imagined himself quizzing Mahawisteria and pinning him down on the topic. He wanted to know if Mahawisteria had any of the psychic faculties listed in the texts. The problem is that the meditator is not supposed to concern himself with these powers. In fact, it's a definite faux pas in some spiritual circles to even mention such things - it would be nothing less than a sign of spiritual immaturity. But Ian had to know. He had studied science and philosophy at university and this was a matter that challenged the scientific perspective. The Flowers of the Buddha was one of those groups that didn't talk about psychic powers except to mention their undesirability. They were dismissed as a hindrance to spiritual development. Ian appreciated this point but he wanted to know whether they were fact or make-believe. What was their reality status? Was the Buddhist teaching, which seemed so rational in some respects, inclusive of fairy tales? He would like to know the reality status of these 'fairy tales'. Just one simple display of levitation would resolve his confusion on the matter. He could then put it out of the way. He often watched the Venerable Mahawisteria meditating for signs of the paranormal or an indication of the transcendental bliss which is supposed to envelop the meditator but so far he had been unsuccessful. The Venerable Mahawisteria was no doubt relaxed and impressively concentrated but that was all that could be said. One thing was certain - he wasn't using the power of instantaneous teleportation to get to the retreat venue.

They arrived at dusk on Friday afternoon and were met by Sonja. Mahawisteria was still to arrive. There was a resident Survivalist community but they lived separate from the building and grounds where the retreat was to be held. Sonja was their liaison with the Survivalist community and she provided the retreatants with fresh vegetables, dairy produce and bread. Rooms were set up as dormitories with one small outbuilding where Mahawisteria would reside. All that remained to be done was to set up the meditation room and prepare the evening meal. Ian was assigned to the kitchen with *Virachrysanthemum*.

"Ian, isn't it?" said Virachrysanthemum with a friendly smile as they entered the spacious and well-equipped country kitchen. It was the first time that he had directly acknowledged Ian's presence. He was of stocky build with an excess of puppy fat. He had a fresh, round face, curly black hair parted at the side, large brown bespectacled eyes and tended to speak quickly and breathlessly.

"And you're...Chris, right?" said Ian hoping that he hadn't misconstrued the tone of familiarity that Virachrysanthemum had set.

"Oh no-no-no!" said Virachrysanthemum in teacherly disapproval. "Mahawisteria has specifically warned us against shortening our names. They have a spiritual significance which would be negated if we abbreviated them."

Well what about in the car? Ian wanted to ask, but somehow remarks overheard from a personal conversation didn't seem admissible as evidence. The other problem that Ian had was that he had difficulty in getting his tongue around the word 'chrysanthemum'. He remembered the first time that he had heard the word. He was six. He was in his father's allotment and it was his mother's birthday. His father had cut some chrysanthemum's and given them to Ian to present to her. He ran to his mother in the kitchen. "Mum!" he called out. "Here are some christen-my-thumbs for your birthday." This caused some affectionate amusement on the part of his parents and had been a family story ever since. Oh well, perhaps he could get by without having to refer to this guy by name.

He said, "Sorry."

"No probs. Ah, here's the gear." Virachrysanthemum took a couple of plastic aprons from the wall and gave one to Ian.

His was bright red. Ian's had onions on it. "Now, let's see what we've got here," he said, perusing some wicker baskets of vegetables on the large pine wood table in the middle of the kitchen. "I think that we'll settle for soup and bread this evening. Most people are likely to have eaten before getting here. Would you mind getting started on the onions?" Virachrysanthemum placed a dozen large onions in front of Ian, rooted through some drawers and produced a few knives. Much to Ian's alarm Virachrysanthemum began juggling with them but they mercifully clattered to the floor before he had a chance to catch them. "Oops. Out of practice." He picked them up and then smacked them down on the table next to the onions.

Ian wasn't feeling too enthusiastic about it but he set to work peeling the onions. Virachrysanthemum examined all the cupboards and eventually hauled out a huge iron pot from one of the lower cupboards. He gave it a rinse and placed it on the gas cooker. He went through the cupboards again and produced some more ingredients. Ian began to chop the onions. Virachrysanthemum stopped in his tracks and came close up to Ian and observed him. Ian felt self-conscious. What was going on?

"Do you know how to do onions?" asked Virachrysanthemum somewhat pointedly.

What's there to know? wondered Ian. He held the knife limply and looked at Virachrysanthemum helplessly. "Well, you've obviously never lived in a community before."

Ian hated being the novice. "Em, I live with a flatmate," he said feebly.

Virachrysanthemum edged him out of the way and grabbed a knife. "For a community to work - and this is essentially how we'll be living this weekend - as a community, certain forms have to be followed. Watch." He deftly cut an onion in half then cut one of the halves along its natural markings producing fine, curved slivers. "These forms give coherence to a community. Think of it as a practice. It doesn't matter what it is or how trivial it might seem. Anything can be done with awareness or without it. Obviously, since you're here, you'll want to bring awareness into everything." He handed the knife to Ian.

Ian resented this. He hadn't asked for a teaching. However, he could see that Virachrysanthemum was sincere and what he said made perfect sense. And the guy was a Blossom of the Buddha after all. He'd been ordained by Mahawisteria himself so he must be spiritually okay. Ian admonished himself - he shouldn't let his own ego get in the way of putting into practice what he'd been told.

"Thanks," he said humbly and sincerely.

Virachrysanthemum smiled. "What do you reckon makes a good soup then, Ian?"

"Carrots, potatoes, swedes and peas." He omitted mentioning the chicken stock that he always used.

"Too many roots. What's this?" Virachrysanthemum picked up a bag by the side of the cooker. It contained a mixture of pulses. "We'll bung this in for starters." He upended the bag and the entire contents clattered into the large pot. He pounced on another bag and emptied that in as well. He heaved the pot over to the sink and half filled it with water and then struggled back to the cooker with it. He lit the gas with an electric lighter and sent a dangerous looking cloud of flame up around the sides of the pot.

"Aren't you going to put any veg in?" asked Ian.

"Let's see ...we've got onions. Let's put some carrots in as well, shall we? Bung the onions in when you've finished and then you can get started on these." He plonked two handfuls of carrots in front of Ian.

Ian stared at the carrots. "Emm...is there a form for the carrots?" asked Ian, trying not to sound facetious.

Virachrysanthemum stared at him as if he were but then decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. He picked up a carrot and washed it at the sink. "Wash and peel them first," he said. He searched through a few drawers. "I find that a potato-peeler is best for carrots. Let's see if they've got one here. Yes! Here we are!" He displayed the potato-peeler with nonchalant triumph and then applied it to a carrot. The rind came off in long, unbroken strips.

"Now - cutting. You want the pieces of carrot to be about the same size so that they cook evenly. Cut the carrot into three. Halve the two thick parts and then just slice the lot." Virachrysanthemum cupped the diced carrot into a neat

pile beside Ian's onions. "There! Now what we need are some herbs. Herbs, herbs, herbs," he purred as though he could entice them to him while searching through the cupboards. Then he remembered that he'd already laid some out on the table. He emptied copious amounts into the pot.

"Onions ready? Rightiho." He took the onions in cupped handfuls and dumped them into the pot, dropping rather a lot, Ian noticed, onto the floor.

Ian's eyes had been watering painfully. He rubbed them.

"Onions, eh?" said Virachrysanthemum. "I've always found that when slicing onions, it's advisable to stand well back, preferably at arms length. You avoid the vapours that way. If you stand over them then obviously you're going to get the full brunt of them."

Thanksalot, thought Ian. Still sniffing, he got on with the carrots. "Is this it for the veg then?" he asked.

"I think that we'll put in a few potatoes as well." Virachrysanthemum lobbed a dozen potatoes into the sink and turned the tap on full blast sending a spray ricocheting in all directions. "Now, where's the salt and pepper?" and off he went through the cupboards again, briskly opening and banging shut the doors. He returned to the sink just in time to prevent it from overflowing. He gave each of the potatoes a cursory wipe, quartered them and dropped them into the pot.

"The salt and pepper's over here," said Ian nodding between the baskets of vegetables. Virachrysanthemum poured liberal quantities of both into the bubbling mixture and then deposited Ian's carrots in as well. He turned the gas down and placed an ill-fitting lid on top.

"Now, simmer gently for two hours," he said conspiratorially to Ian.

Ian heard some female voices in the driveway through the window and was eager to investigate.

"Let's see how the others are getting on," said Virachrysanthemum. He removed his apron, tossed it on top of the vegetables and exited the kitchen closing the door loudly behind him.

Ian was somewhat stunned by the vacuum left at the removal of Virachrysanthemum's presence. A fledgling thought concerning the degree of Virachrysanthemum's awareness attempted to raise its head but Ian was too numb and it died a death.

It was Ian's experience that some places had what he referred to as a 'strong atmosphere'. The effect on him of such places was that his whole personality would become somehow overshadowed. All that would be left of him would be the sensation of the place. It had been particularly strong when he was a child. In the classroom, for example, the dark browns of the walls, the texture and smell of his wooden desk, the light fittings all predominated, stifling the functioning of his personality. The gym was another such place. The smell of stale sweat and feet and from the padded equipment the smell of leather and sawdust all conspired to induce a mild catatonic trance. Big buildings and the family homes of friends also had strong atmospheres.

This was not usually a problem if nothing in particular was expected of him. However, shortly after graduating, he went for a job interview at a large petroleum company. Before he'd even entered the building he felt himself phasing out at the sight of the imposing structure. On entering, he experienced the sensation of entering not only a building but also a vast corporate mind. The hundreds of people who worked there had somehow assimilated themselves into this overwhelming entity.

The interviews were on the sixth floor. The carpeted, mirrored elevator and the smart, corporate dress of the employees produced a dreamlike feeling of unreality. Ian sat in a room with eleven other applicants on low plastic armchairs. The windows were opaque, the lighting fluorescent and the authenticity of the green pot plants undeterminable. The fellow next to him attempted to start up a conversation with him but Ian couldn't decipher his accent and not wishing to appear uncongenial answered enthusiastically in the affirmative to any question put to him.

There was a woman sitting cross-legged at the wall opposite him. Her skirt had ridden up her thighs thus engulfing Ian's field of vision. No matter where he looked, all that was visible to him were her legs. She didn't pay him any attention. She kept looking impatiently at her watch as if the whole business was an unnecessary intrusion on her time.

As for the interview, Ian couldn't remember any details. The panel of four seemed apprehensive of him. There was one woman on the panel who had regarded him sympathetically. He remembered that the questions had struck him as contrived and irrelevant and that an awkward silence followed his replies.

He didn't get the job.

Another time he was at a friend's house. The parents and siblings were there. A steamy smell of grease, cat and old sofa hit him on entering. The TV provided background noise to the general melee. The washing machine could be heard from the kitchen. Instead of talking, everybody shouted at each other. His friend was behaving quite differently here in his family environment to how he knew him. Ian wondered what the game was. Everybody had a very set and definite role in relation to each other and this promoted a powerful psychodynamic which left no room for Ian. Mild catatonia, a petit mal of sorts, set in but it shifted when he was alone with his friend once again in his friend's bedroom.

And now, here he was in the countryside and he began to feel overshadowed by the atmosphere of the place. The only sound was the bubbling of the soup. There was also its aroma, the scent of the vegetables on the table and the underlying smell of the kitchen linked to the countryside. The steamed-up windows allowed a placid light to settle on the rustic ambience of the kitchen. It was one of those moments when all the components of the present experience somehow combine into a coherent expression of sublime intelligence, an intelligence which seems to communicate itself in mystical silence.

The sound of female voices and the crunch of gravel brought him from his reverie. He went to the window, wiped it

with his wrist, and peered out. The window looked out onto a backyard. There were three figures kitted out in boots, denims and woollens. One of them had long straight blond hair which streamed down from a woollen hat. She looked up and he moved away from the window, not wanting to be caught peeping. What to do now?

He decided to go and check where he'd be sleeping. He found the back door and went into the yard. The women had gone. He walked round to the front of the house where some cars were parked. His rucksack was by the door where he'd left it on his arrival. Swinging it over his shoulder he went inside. There was nobody around. He ascended a central stairway leading up from the entrance lobby. A woman was taping signs to the wall. One indicated that WOMEN should go to the right. She was now putting up the one for MEN.

"I guess I should go in this direction," said Ian pointing to the left. She looked at him and gave him a smile. There were three rooms for men, one at the end of the hallway with a room on either side. He went into the one at the end as the door was open. There were three bunk beds in it positioned with their heads along the right wall. There was a window opposite the door. Somebody was lying on the lower bunk in the far right corner next to the window reading a thick paperback. It was the reporter from the Squeak. Ian went to the middle bunk and threw his bag on top.

He said, "Hi." The reporter looked at him expressionlessly, without moving his head, and then returned his eyes to his book. Ian clambered onto the top bunk and sat on the edge, banged the mattress a few times - solid enough - and examined the view from the window. A memory of a previous experience in a bunk presented itself to his mind's eye.

He'd been Youth Hostelling in Spain and was sleeping on the lower bunk. He was stretched out, relaxing. He didn't know the person on top but saw more than he wanted to of his dirty feet which he was in the habit of picking at during conversations with his companion on the adjacent bunk. After this experience, Ian had resolved whenever possible to avoid lower bunks. He was glad that he'd got here early.

"You're the reporter from the Squeak, aren't you?" he asked, looking down. The reporter looked at him and Ian realised that he could have taken a more diplomatic approach.

"Sorry, the Crowleigh Advertiser."

The reporter gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"I'm Ian," said Ian. He decided to make an effort to be sociable with the reporter. He could see that he just wanted to get on with reading his book - it was about Japanese Tantra - but Ian felt mischievous and wanted to distract him. "It was you that wrote that piece on the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity, wasn't it?"

"Oh you saw it?" said the reporter, thawing.

"Yeah, I thought that it was really good."

"It was the least that I could do."

"How do you mean?"

"For the Venerable Mahawisteria, of course."

Ian was a little abashed. "Yeah, it's a really good thing that he's doing."

"Good? It's more than that. It's what the world desperately needs and those of us that come into contact with him and are deriving the benefits of his teachings have not only a duty but a *responsibility* to help the Venerable Mahawisteria in any way that we can so that others can benefit as we have."

Ian felt guilty. The reporter was correct. The teachings of the Venerable Mahawisteria addressed themselves to his deepest needs and instead of helping to the best of his abilities, he puts the bulk of his energy into pining after women and wondering about his Enlightenment status and his paranormal prowess. You're pathetic, Ian, he told himself.

He tried to console himself with the fact that he helped out at the Meditation Centre with the tea and that he had helped with the soup earlier on but this only made him feel more pathetic.

But this is why I'm here, he told himself. I'm going to become a Blossom of the Buddha so that I can commit myself fully to the Venerable Mahawisteria's teachings.

"It's the least that I can do," continued the reporter, "to give the Venerable Mahawisteria as much positive coverage as possible. Fortunately, my editor is fairly sympathetic."

"Are you going to write up this weekend?"

"Actually, yes. I thought that I would - with the Venerable Mahawisteria's blessing of course."

Ian winced at this. Since when did Mahawisteria 'bless' things?

"Well, if I happen to say anything profound this weekend then feel free to quote me."

The reporter wondered what Ian was getting at and then realised that he had made a joke. One side of his mouth contorted into what looked like a sneer but was actually a smile.

Ian asked him if he was expecting to go home with a new name this weekend.

"That's what I'm hoping for. I'm told that there's a strong likelihood of it."

"Who told you that?" Ian was piqued that nobody had said as much to him.

"Chittalily. In fact, I'm supposed to be going for a walk with him about now." The focus of his eyes shifted as he referred to his plant clock. "I'd better go and find him."

Ian lay back on his bunk, his hands behind his head. He was confused. He'd come here with the intention of committing himself to the Flowers of the Buddha. He had no doubt that this was what he wanted to do. The reality of having a floral name was now uncomfortably close. He would have to stop wondering and musing about things and begin getting on with the proper business. It occurred to him that he was rather attached to his habitual vagueness. This vagueness allowed him to spice his spirituality with a degree of romanticism, a romanticism which tended to be punctured by Mahawisteria's austere clarity and intellectualism. Ian realised that if he was serious about spiritual progress then he would have to stop romanticising about Enlightenment and superpowered

meditators. This prospect saddened him but he really needed to work on his concentration and his awareness.

He wondered why Chittalily had spoken to the reporter about the likelihood of his being ordained and not to him. A horrible realisation arose. He felt superior to the reporter. He felt superior to him in many ways, especially spiritually, and he didn't even know him. There was no justification for this assumption and it could easily be wrong. It could happen that the reporter might be ordained and himself not. It was a painful possibility, one that Ian felt that he deserved.

A strapping, ruddy-faced fellow with thick black curly hair and lustrous brown eyes appeared at the door. "Any beds at the inn?" he called.

"Help yourself. There's only the two of us here already."

"Great! A top one!" He threw his knapsack on the bunk by the door and climbed up. "This is all right, innit?" he said, bouncing up and down.

"It's comfortable enough." They introduced themselves. The newcomer's name was Jim.

"What's the score then Ian? Are you expecting to turn into a pansy or what at the end of this weekend? Me, I'd settle for Buttercup which is what one or two of my friends call me already. They're close friends, mind you. If anybody else called me that, they wouldn't live long enough to become a close friend, knowwhatI mean. Now, I'm going to have to get used to any Tom, Dick or Harry calling me it. But that's what it's all about innit, changing your attitude. It's not easy though, is it, I mean, that's the challenge we've got to face and I don't expect most people are up to it. Take me old mum f'r instance. She's a sweet old dear but try to get her to change her attitudes - you might as well spit in the bleeding prevailing winds. She blames the Pakis for everything but she gets on like a house on fire with Mrs Kaur down the corner shop. What can you do with her but that's people innit.

"So what's your line then Ian?"

The sudden question caught Ian unawares. He had trouble with this question at the best of times. "Emm, I'm not doing anything at the moment. What about you?"

"Gardening. Self-employed. And I love it. It's hard work but you does your toil, gets your money, and at the end of the day you're knackered but at the same time you feel great, ifyouknowwhatI mean." He went to the window and looked out.

"The grounds here are well-kept. I wonder if I could get a contract here. You've got to hand it to these Survivalist loonies, they know how to get a job done. I mean, just look at this place."

Ian knew what he meant. The Survivalist philosophy seemed up the creek but it didn't stop people signing up and pouring funds into Survivalist projects.

"Yes, they've certainly got things together on a material level but spiritually they're in the dark."

Jim turned round and looked at Ian pensively. "That's impressive, Ian. I've never heard anybody sum it up so neatly. That's it in a nutshell, innit. The Survivalists know how to put places like this together but spiritually they

don't know their arses from their elbows." He laughed. "Hey Ian, d'y'think we should write Mitchell Paragon a letter? 'Dear Mitch, We are writing to let you know that materially you are doing great but spiritually you don't know your arses from your elbows. With love, your mates, Jim and Ian.'" Jim roared and Ian joined in the laughter.

"PS," said Ian, "Hope this gets to you before the world blows."

Jim quietened down. "That's a point though, innit. Why do they bother making all this effort if the world is going to blow?"

"Actually, they don't really believe that it is. What they believe is that society is going to collapse. The basic infrastructure can't be sustained so what they're doing is setting up their own infrastructure, keeping it as simple and independent as possible. There'll be widespread sickness and starvation but they'll survive."

"Cheery lot, int they? Still, everyone to their own." Jim looked out the window. "Hey, the man himself has rolled up."

Ian slid off the bed and went to look. Mahawisteria was standing next to a car talking to Pansymitra. Sonja appeared. Pansymitra parked the car and Sonja led Mahawisteria to the outhouse that had been prepared for him.

"He's a great man," said Jim, reverentially. "I reckon we're privileged to be here with him this weekend. I don't know about these other punters around him but old Mahawisteria has got it. We are in the presence of the Buddha incarnated."

Ian found himself caught up in Jim's sudden solemnity and reverence. After all, Jim was probably right. "So, do you think he's got powers then?"

"No doubt about it mate."

"How can you be so sure?"

Jim cocked an incredulous eyebrow at Ian. "Haven't you been talking to any of the Blossoms then?"

"Not about that, no." Ian wondered why he hadn't.

"Well, Ian, I can tell that you're on a higher spiritual plane than me but between you and me this is what I'm interested in - supernatural powers. Okay, I know the old man tells us that this isn't important but the likes of me will never be able to attain his state of grace - not in this lifetime anyway so I'm just going to have to settle for what I can get. Like number one, invisibility. Pansymitra was telling me that he never sees Mahawisteria approaching. Suddenly he's just there. Number two - being in two places at the same time. I heard this one from Mettatulip.

"One evening, Mettatulip, you know the geezer, decided to meditate in his community meditation room instead of going to the meditation class that Mahawisteria was leading at the Centre. So there was Mettatulip sitting in front of his altar, deep in meditation when he experiences this strange tingling sensation on the back of his neck. He looks round and opens his eyes and who do you think is sitting right next to him in the bleeding meditation room? It's old Mahawisteria in the flesh sitting there in the lotus in profound concentration. So what does Mettatulip do? Hah! The poor git pees himself! Gennup, he bleeding wet himself! He told

me this himself when we were out having a couple of jars one evening.

"And number three - levitation. But you've probably seen him do that yourself. Number four - remembering past lives. He can tell you what you were up to in your past life as well but you've got to be initiated before he'll do that for you."

Ian was agog. He must have been going along to the Meditation Centre with his eyes closed because he could relate none of Jim's account to his own experience. His resolve to remove his romanticism from his idea of the spiritual life took a severe knock.

After an awe-filled silence, Jim suddenly snapped down to earth and said, "Come on, let's go exploring."

Ian followed him out the door, right down the hallway in the direction indicated by the sign marked 'WOMEN'. Ian tried to stop him but Jim barged into the first door on the left. Inside, were three women huddled together in intense conversation.

"Sorry, I thought the loo was along here," said Jim.

"It is - for the ladies. The gents is downstairs." The girl with the long blond hair that Ian had seen in the driveway earlier came to the door, her eyes softening when she saw Ian.

"Oh," said Jim, so we're to have sexist toilets on our spiritual weekend?" He turned to Ian and, much to his embarrassment, gave a conspiratorial wink.

They went downstairs. Jim nudged Ian and said, "You're well in there, mate."

They turned left at the bottom of the staircase and walked into a large lounge area. At the far end of this was a door that led to a room that had been set up for meditation. They looked in. A large meditating Buddha figure was set up on a cloth-draped box. Two vases of flowers were placed on either side of it. Some incense was burning in front of the Buddha. It was the same incense as was used in the Meditation Centre and it evoked a surprisingly large stock of associations for Ian.

A woman was seated in meditation in front of the shrine. Jim whispered, "I can't wait to have a crack at that."

Ian didn't know whether Jim was referring to the meditation or the woman. He desperately hoped that it was the former.

They backed out, crossed the lounge into a room at the other side of the staircase. They walked through it to a door opposite. This led into the kitchen. Virachrysanthemum was stirring the soup.

"Where have you been? I thought that you were looking after the soup," he said with more than a hint of accusation.

"I only got to it in time to prevent it from sticking to the bottom."

"I thought that we were both doing it," said Ian, in no doubt at the unfairness of Virachrysanthemum's tone.

"Smells delicious," said Jim, peering in and sniffing deeply.

"Okay, guys," said Virachrysanthemum. "People are turning up now so the game plan is this... we'll give people a chance

to settle in and then we'll serve up the soup in about forty minutes. After that, there'll be a short talk in the lounge, then a short meditation. This'll give people a chance to have an early night so we can get an early start tomorrow. We're expecting about twenty so if you two would lay out twenty places next door - bowls, side plates, spoons and knives. You could cut five or six loaves as well."

"No probs," said Jim. Ian was excited. It was like preparing for a party but with even more to look forward to than an ordinary party. He was looking forward to meeting new people - he'd already hit it off with Jim. He was looking forward to the meditation and perhaps even meeting Mahawisteria and who knows? He might even come away from the retreat a fully-fledged Blossom.

It was bitterly cold outside. This imbued the warmth of the country house with an atavistic hearth quality. This quality became indirectly associated with Ian as one of the providers of the hot, peppery soup.

Virachrysanthemum ladled it into earthenware bowls with all the enthusiasm of a commander directing critical military operations and Ian and Jim delivered it to the expectant retreatants in the dining room. For the first time Ian felt at home with the Flowers of the Buddha, felt that he truly belonged. He had even made contact with Ann, the blond girl that he had noticed earlier, by muttering an apology for his and Jim's encroachment earlier on. She had such a sparkle in her eyes. The soup was a great success and everybody was in high spirits.

After the meal, Chittalily gave a short talk in the lounge outlining the program for the weekend and exhorting everybody to practice awareness. Mahawisteria had retired early.

Ian felt the atmosphere of the place pleasantly overshadowing him. It was a magical effect. He basked in it for the rest of the evening.

During the meditation he was focused and positive. The smell of the incense, the flowers and the softness of the carpet were all sources of contentment. He felt a sense of identification with the aims of the retreat and a feeling of shared enterprise with his fellow retreatants. He also noticed, to his delight, that his mind hadn't wrapped itself around thoughts of Ann. It now threatened to do so and he inwardly smiled at its habitual predilection. His composure was such that his mind's intentions were foiled.

Ian wondered if he was now experiencing one of the so-called 'heavenly states' that meditators were supposed to enter. The possibility sent a shiver up his spine which exploded blissfully in the centre of his forehead leaving him in a non-conceptualising state of vibrating joyful energy.

He dimly heard the delicate ring of the bell that signified the end of the meditation but he sat on for a while longer. It felt late and with an effort he connected with his body once again.

When he opened his eyes, he saw a few others, including Ann, still sitting in meditation. He tiptoed through to the lounge which was empty apart from one person sitting in an

armchair reading a book. He went through to the lobby and put on his shoes, pullover and army overcoat.

He followed the garden path through some trees and turned off to the right. They had been told not to follow the left path which led to Mahawisteria's cottage so as to respect his privacy. He halted and felt himself within Mahawisteria's aura. He wondered if Mahawisteria was aware of him. He'd heard that Mahawisteria didn't sleep but spent the whole night in meditation. Ian felt confident that Mahawisteria would ordain him if he could pick up his thoughts at this point. He sat down on a cold stone bench and leaned back against the tree. He looked up at the stars twinkling through the leafless branches on this clear cloudless night. He sensed that what was happening here this weekend was somehow in tune with the fundamental nature of the Cosmos.

"Am I interrupting you?" It was Ann.

"No, no, not at all."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said. She leaned against the tree, her back arched against the trunk, her long blond hair hooking onto the bark of the tree in cascades. She seemed to be offering herself to the heavens, her face and eyes clearly aglow even though the illumination provided by the house was faint.

Ian felt that the natural thing to do would be to take her to him but he decided not to go along with this habitual thought pattern. "Cold though, isn't it? I think I'll head back and try to get enough sleep for tomorrow."

They ambled back together then stopped at the porch and chatted. They talked about Mitchell Paragon, the leader of the Survivalists. Ann was very much into his writing and philosophy and thought that she was likely to join them. They talked about the book of Paragon's that Ian had read.

A woman came out and informed them that lights out was ten minutes ago and that silence should be observed until after breakfast tomorrow. Ann and Ian's conversation came to an abrupt end and they ascended the stairs together, silently waving goodnight to each other at the top.

Ian felt as though he'd been mugged. He'd been woken up by the clanging of a bell. Jesus! It was still pitch dark outside. He hadn't been able to get to sleep last night. His mind had been like a boat propeller out of water and he had been on an emotional high. He must have fallen asleep shortly before the morning bell was rung. He curled himself into a foetal position and hoped that it wasn't really time to get up. He also hoped that the heating would come on soon. He could feel the ice in the air. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing going on. He inched his sleeping bag down in disbelief. Everybody else was already up! Jim the gardener came in.

"Come on mate. You'd better get up smartish - the hot water is about to run out."

Ian remembered the rule about silence until after breakfast. He put a finger to his lips.

"Christ, you're right, forgot-all-about-it," Jim said in a stage whisper.

The reporter came in looking completely unrefreshed by any morning ablutions that he might have taken. He glared disapprovingly at Jim. Jim pulled a face, imitating a scolded child. He threw a blanket across his shoulders, Clint Eastwood style and whispered to Ian, "There's some tea on the go in the kitchen. See you down there."

Ian got dressed except for one sock which he couldn't find anywhere. He'd only brought one pair with him so he decided to go downstairs barefoot rather than go with only one sock on. That should be cool, he punned to himself.

A silent communion was taking place around the tea urn. Ann was there looking half asleep and lost in thought. Ian poured himself a cup of tea and then the bell clanged again indicating the beginning of the meditation.

Ian was beginning to resent the sound of the bell.

Everybody shuffled through to the lounge and then through to the meditation room. Ian wondered if he should go to the toilet but he didn't think there was enough time.

Mahawisteria was already in trance, seated on a dais to the left of the Buddha figure. Ian took a cushion and a blanket and sat down with the blanket draped over his shoulders. He studied Mahawisteria. Would he levitate? Ian lost interest in this train of thought. His mind was fragmented. Following Mahawisteria's lead he positioned himself and closed his eyes.

He wished that he'd gone to the loo before sitting down. His bare feet were cold. He tried to cover them with the blanket but it wasn't quite big enough. He opened his eyes and looked around at the silent meditators. He didn't want to be there. All he wanted was for the next fifty minutes to pass as quickly as possible. He knew it wouldn't. He closed his eyes again and looked fruitlessly for an area marked 'Oblivion' in his mental landscape. Instead his mind presented him with a sex fantasy involving Rose and Ann.

I don't want this, he told himself. But it was no good. His mind hooked into the fantasy and, as a consequence, he felt even more uncomfortable.

Every now and again he would begin to doze, wake with a start, wonder whether he had been dribbling and then return to the fantasy. And so it went for the best part of an hour. Finally, after the last meditation bell, he stiffly made his way upstairs, clambered up to his bunk, noticed his missing sock peeping out from beneath his pillow slip, and crashed out. He missed breakfast.

When he awoke he felt more human. He leaned over to look at the bunk below.

"Hello," he said. There was a pale, thin, anxious-looking chap lying there staring up at him. His mouse-like eyes were perched closely together atop a formidable angled nose. His sparse red hair had been left to its own devices. "Is anything happening?"

"No, not yet," the newcomer answered. "The program is pinned to the lounge door." He focused on his subtle clock. "Mahawisteria is due to give a talk in twelve minutes followed by a question and answer session. Should be good."

"Are you a Blossom?"

"Yes. I'm Ratnadaisy."

"I'm Ian. I don't remember seeing you at the Meditation Centre."

"No, I tend to avoid it." This surprised Ian, given the effort that he himself had been making to establish a connection with it. "I prefer to meditate by myself. There are too many extraneous, psychic hindrances from other people." This was a new consideration for Ian. "I'm going to take some air before the talk. Care to join me?"

Ratnadaisy was slightly built with loose joints. He loped along with his hands in his pockets and a forlorn look about him. Ian didn't know what to make of him. One thing that he noticed was that he felt completely at ease with him. He liked him but had nothing to say at the moment - he was still feeling woolly in the head.

"This is the sort of place that Mahawisteria wants for the Flowers," said Ratnadaisy. "He plans to launch a fundraising appeal this weekend."

"He ought to hook in some famous, rich people like Mitchell Paragon's done."

Ratnadaisy laughed. "Mahawisteria was saying the very same thing a couple of days ago. He was joking of course, but we could certainly do with some wealth. We seem to attract the unemployed and the poor. It's a disgrace, Mahawisteria hasn't got a single limousine to his name!"

It was Ian's turn to laugh. This was one of the things that he liked about the FOB - it was down at heel. This gave it an earthiness which it would lack if there were loads of money along with the personalities that typically accompanied wealth.

They came to a small rock garden which they both stared silently at for a minute and then they returned to the lounge. Ian paused at the door to study the program. After the talk there would be another meditation and then lunch. The next item dried his throat out and brought moisture to his armpits. After lunch, private interviews were to be granted with Mahawisteria for all those Buds that wished to become Blossoms. The reality of the prospect of a face-to-face with Mahawisteria, although it was what he had longed for, suddenly made him very nervous. His mind immediately began to carve out possible scenarios.

Inside, in the lounge, Chittalily was standing at the far end in front of the seated audience waiting for Mahawisteria. He was holding a piece of paper and looking ill-at-ease. Ian sat down on a chair that had been brought through from the dining room.

Mahawisteria entered. He was wearing his Buddhist robes with a heavy, yellow, woollen shawl draped over his shoulders. Everybody's eyes lit up and their mouths melted into smiles as he passed to the far end of the room. Like the shadow of a bright light, Pansymitra followed him in and sat down at the back of the room.

Mahawisteria conferred quietly with Chittalily. Chittalily then said a few words by way of introduction, referring now and again to the paper in his hand. He said that a list of times would be posted on the door and that all Buds who had

asked for ordination should put their name next to one of the times.

Mahawisteria was sitting solidly composed. The look on his face suggested that he was experiencing something faintly distasteful. When it was time for him to begin his talk he looked around the room and smiled a cold smile.

Everybody was ready to hang on his every word. Mahawisteria was aware of this and he took his time. He began to talk. He spoke slowly and deliberately as though wanting to ensure that there could be no possible misinterpretation of his words.

Mahawisteria spoke about the Flowers of the Buddha. He spoke about what it meant to be a Bud and the significance of the transformation from Bud to Blossom. The audience was rapt in earnest consideration, totally absorbed in the words of Mahawisteria.

There was a disturbance some fifteen minutes into the talk when a new retreatant suddenly arrived. It was a wild and dishevelled Nigel Fairweather who had torn along the motorway and the country roads. Nigel was led out by Pansymitra and shown his bunk. He crept in ten minutes later to listen to the remainder of the talk.

That's his chances scuppered, thought Ian, in a moment of unguarded superiority. Mahawisteria paused until Nigel had settled down.

Definitely scuppered, thought Ian. And then, just as Mahawisteria was about to begin again, Ian's stomach emitted a loud sproinging noise. At first, he wouldn't believe that he was the culprit but he was famished, having missed breakfast, and his stomach wouldn't let up. Mahawisteria continued talking in counterpoint to Ian's stomach.

Ian's mind went numb with embarrassment but it came into focus again when his stomach had finally settled and it was time for questions and answers. There were many questions that Ian was burning to ask. For example, does Mahawisteria consider himself to be Enlightened and, if so, does he have the supernormal powers attributed to an Enlightened being? He wanted to ask Mahawisteria if he had contact with supernatural entities. He wanted to ask him in what way he was different from everybody else; what was it that made him into a guru, and made him a cut above everybody else? He wanted to know if he had a sex life. There was a rumour that he was a homosexual. Was this true?

However, in the immediacy of the moment, Ian found himself too timid to even raise his hand. Instead, he mentally criticised the questions that were actually asked. Somebody asked who the Buddha was. Ian felt indignant that a prospective Blossom should ask such an elementary question.

Somebody asked what the difference between Tibetan and Burmese Buddhism was. Yes, thought Ian sarcastically, we really need to know that.

Another asked if Buddhism had a pope. Ian was apoplectic. Somebody asked Mahawisteria if he planned to get married. This produced some coy laughter.

Ian wondered if he should take a chance with one of his questions and he edged his hand unnoticed into the air a few times but somebody always cut in before him.

Somebody asked Mahawisteria what he thought about the implants and if they didn't contradict the aims of the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity that he'd set up.

Ahh, thought Ian. At last, an intelligent question.

This was Mahawisteria's answer:

"Having lived in rural India for some twenty-five years, one develops a certain attitude to timekeeping. If you go to a public lecture in India you are doing well if you hear it on the scheduled day never mind the scheduled time. Sadly, or otherwise, depending on your interests, things have been changing in India. The trains run on time and, in general, the Western experience of time has infiltrated the Indian psyche. Be that as it may, living in the West today demands certain timekeeping skills and even here, on our little retreat away from the demands of the rat race, we have a program that makes demands on those skills. In fact, I can't help noticing an increased punctuality and therefore an increase in efficiency on the part of those Flowers that have had the timeplant - that's what it's called, isn't it?" he asked in an aside to Chittalily who nodded in the affirmative.

"And now, it seems that there is going to be a whole range of these devices. There are to be calculator and telephone implants and who knows what else.

"Let me make it clear that as far as the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity and also the Flowers of the Buddha are concerned, it is the message and not the medium with which we need to concern ourselves, although our Survivalist associates in the CCI might not agree with us on this point.

"Nevertheless, you've all heard the expression: Money is the root of all evil. A moment's reflection will tell you that money is not the root of all evil. Love of money is the root of all evil. Desire for money for its own sake is the root of, if not all, then a great deal of evil.

"But in Buddhism we go a little deeper than that. Desire in Buddhism is seen as the root of all evil, desire for what is not necessary - neurotic desire. This is the poison in our minds that needs to be cured. However, before the cure can be administered, the ailment must be clearly diagnosed and this is the function of the CCI, to highlight the nature of the problem.

"Now, the poison in our minds is like a virus. How is this virus transmitted? It is transmitted not by the media but by the messages in the media and the prime antidote is awareness.

"With the implants we have a new medium although they are arguably simply variations on existing media. Who knows what the future will bring but at present the messages carried by this new medium are benign and unlikely to lead to an increase in neurotic desire but we must be ever on our guard and review the situation at a later date."

Chittalily looked at Mahawisteria expectantly. Mahawisteria nodded and his features settled into their customary expression of delicate disdain.

Chittalily said, "Thank you, Mahawisteria, for providing such full and revealing answers to our questions. It isn't often that one has the opportunity to hear something straight from the horse's mouth so to speak. I'm sure that we'd all like to express our appreciation in a round of applause."

Polite applause.

"Lunch is in twenty-two minutes."

Mahawisteria exited followed by Chittalily. Everybody else gradually meandered into the garden. Ian remained on his seat, hunched over, his elbows on his knees and his chin cupped characteristically on his palms. He felt somebody looming over him.

It was Jim.

"Fuckinace, intee. I don't know about you mate, but sitting here in *his* presence -" and here Jim paused and gazed reverentially at Mahawisteria's vacated cushion, "- in *his* presence, it's enough to take you into a higher plane of existence, innit. I tell you man, the man is evolved. Evolved."

Ian took in Jim's words. "Yeah, but I thought that some of the questions were moronic."

"Words, man, just words. There is one piece of advice that me who is as thick as two planks can give you, my friend, and that is - Get out of your head. You are one of these blokes who is too wrapped up in his own head for his own good. You have to drop the words before you can *experience* the Venerated Mahawisteria. Mahawisteria can get up there and talk shit for all I care but I'm telling you, man, the way to do it is to tune into the Presence."

Ian didn't feel in agreement with Jim but he couldn't find the words to argue the point so he went along with him.

"Sure, so why does somebody want to know about the difference between Burmese and Tibetan Buddhism?"

"My point exactly, mate. Head stuff, so just drop it."

"Maybe you're right. Shall we go for a stroll before lunch?"

"Sure, and maybe pick up a couple of chicks," Jim said with a nudge and a grin.

They followed the driveway onto the main road.

"Have you spoken to any of the Blossoms about becoming one yourself?" asked Ian. Ian had been feeling left out again because it seemed that all the other retreatants were involved in a mysterious process that was taking them to Blossomhood and he didn't know anything about it.

"I'm not even a Bud," said Jim. "It's just words again, innit."

Ian was thrown. "But don't you want to be involved in implementing Mahawisteria's vision?"

"Sure. If he wants me he can have me but I don't know about this Buds and Blossoms lark. I mean, maybe some blokes could handle being called Primrose but give me a break."

Ian tried to remember a conversation that he'd had yesterday with Jim. Hadn't Jim said something about changing his attitude? He was contradicting himself. Ian felt that Jim might be missing the point somewhere. Perhaps he didn't really understand what Mahawisteria was about after all.

They wandered back to the dining room and took their places. Rose and another woman were serving. Ann sat down next to Ian much to his delight. This was his big chance. The lunch itself was disappointingly meagre - only bread and tea. Ann leaned towards him, a huge slice of wholemeal bread and crunchy peanut butter in hand. She leaned close to him and whispered in his ear,

"I'm in love."

Jesus! thought Ian. How was he supposed to respond to that? He had no illusions about his being the object of Ann's affection. A piece of bread worked its way drily down his gullet. In spite of himself, he felt rejected. He said,

"That's nice. Anybody I know?"

"Chittalily."

Surprise, surprise, thought Ian. Golden boy himself.

Ann nudged him excitedly and whispered, "There he is!" Chittalily had come into the dining room and was talking to somebody at the door. "I've arranged to go for a walk with him after lunch." She polished off her bread and tea and went to him. Ian noticed a lump of peanut butter attached to her chin. He decided not to tell her.

I must have 'MUG' written across my forehead, he thought. Feeling extremely foolish and let down he went through to the hallway to put his name on the list of interview times. The earlier the better, he thought.

He examined the list. All the earlier times had been booked so he penned his name in for 3.30pm, over an hour from now. He went upstairs to lie down and played through an interview scenario in his head.

He consoled himself with the thought that once he'd had a good chat with Mahawisteria then there shouldn't be any problem with him becoming a Blossom. After all, if Pansymitra or Virachrysanthemum could do it then why not him?

Thinking thus, Ian fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, having neither watch nor timeplant, he panicked. Had he missed his appointment? There was nobody else around. He ran downstairs where Ian the reporter was involved in conversation with a Blossom.

"What's the time, please, Ian? I think I've missed my interview."

The reporter stared at him disdainfully and without taking his gaze from him said, "3-49 precisely."

Ian was furious with himself. He ran outside towards the path and up to the fork. He heard some voices coming from the clearing where the stone bench was. It was Ann and Chittalily. They looked like they were about to get intimate and he was interrupting them.

"Sorry. Sorry. I'm late for my appointment with Mahawisteria. What'll I do?" He felt like bursting into tears.

"Wait here," said Chittalily. "I'll go and see what's happening." He left Ian with Ann. She was sitting on the bench and had a guilty look about her but her cheeks were rosy red and her brown eyes as bright as ever. Ian was too distraught to even try to figure out what to say to her.

Chittalily returned. "It's okay," he said. They're behind schedule anyway. Follow the path up to the outhouse and wait in the lobby. You'll be called."

Ian felt deep gratitude towards Chittalily and did as he was told. He saw some shoes at the door and left his own next to them before entering. Inside, the lobby was very small, containing only a wooden bench along one wall with a long flat cushion on it.

A timid-looking girl was already waiting. She was holding a rose in her hands. Ian wished that he'd brought something to give to Mahawisteria who had often spoken of the importance of giving. He could hear Mahawisteria's voice on the other side of the door opposite.

"I thought I'd missed it," said Ian quietly to the girl. "I was fast asleep."

The girl smiled awkwardly and Ian slouched back against the wall. The bench was uncomfortable. He had nothing to say to the girl and she had nothing to say to him. He listened carefully to Mahawisteria's voice but it was too muffled to comprehend.

Suddenly an elderly lady appeared from inside. She was radiant with ecstasy. She sat down and put on her shoes. Pansymitra came out and asked the girl what her name was.

"Agnes."

Pansymitra went inside and returned a few minutes later, beckoning her inside.

Ian recognised the lady as the one who had asked the question about Mahawisteria's marriage intentions.

"Did you pursue Mahawisteria's marriage plans then?" he asked.

She doubled over, let out a laugh, and waved her hand dismissively.

"Oh no-no-NO! But he's such a dear, isn't he? I wouldn't say no if he asked me. I was married for thirty-six years you know. And now widowed for one." Her expression changed and her humour faded. She visibly pulled herself together.

"Now I have the teachings of the Buddha to support me. Mahawisteria is a godsend, or should I say buddhasend," she joked. Her bubblyness returned.

"Do you know what he asked me? He asked me how I felt about taking on another name after sixty-two years. I said that it all depended on the name. Now. I already had a name in mind for myself but I said that I'd be happy with whatever name he gave me. And with that knowing smile of his, he asked me, 'What do you think of Hyacinth?'"

"Well, my jaw dropped to the floor. It was the very name that I'd chosen for myself." And with a knowing pat on Ian's knee, she solemnly rose and left.

Ian wondered about the name that he fancied for himself - Morning Glory. Could he admit this to Mahawisteria? Of course, he couldn't. His mind went blank and his armpits began dripping sweat.

He was beginning to feel like he was at a job interview. Or in a dentist's waiting room. He couldn't hear anything through the door. He sat bolt upright and tried without success to centre himself. He wished he were somewhere else.

Agnes appeared at the door. Her eyes had a light in them that hadn't been there before and her nervous smile had been replaced by one of genuine happiness.

Ian jumped up but Pansymitra appeared behind Agnes and motioned him to wait.

"What's your name?"

Ian was piqued that Pansymitra should have to ask him. After all, he'd seen Pansymitra several times a week at the Centre over the last month.

"Ian."

Pansymitra went back in and reappeared a few moments later, beckoning Ian in.

Mahawisteria was sitting in an armchair facing the door. He heaved himself up to greet Ian. Pansymitra introduced Ian and then sat down on a low sofa by the door and stared disinterestedly out the window.

Ian shook hands with Mahawisteria who directed him to a wooden chair opposite his own. Ian sat down, trying to bring as much awareness to his actions as possible.

Mahawisteria sat down on the armchair in a very peculiar position. His backside was resting on the edge of his chair and the only other part of his anatomy to come into contact with the chair was his head resting on the back. His arms drooped over the side and his knuckles rested on the floor. Was this his idea of appearing relaxed? wondered Ian.

"Ian," said Mahawisteria, as though pondering the name. "Yes, you've been a regular helper at the Centre over the last few weeks. It's a pity that we haven't had the opportunity to have a little chat before now."

Mahawisteria paused. Ian wondered if he should say something but he couldn't think of anything. The words, 'Morning Glory, Morning Glory,' were going through his head.

"Tell me, Ian, why do you want to become a Blossom?"

Jesus! thought Ian, Why is he asking me that? Doesn't he know? Isn't it obvious? Okay, just answer the question...But why do I want to become a Blossom? Surely I've thought through this already?

But try as he might, he couldn't remember any conclusion that he'd arrived at but he had to say something.

"I need a way to express my spiritual longings and your teachings are the best that I've come across." Ian knew that this sounded all wrong. It sounded feeble and insincere. Hell, it could even be construed as flattery.

"You've been involved in other groups?" asked Mahawisteria.

"No, I've only read books." Ian looked down at the floor. The carpet had an intricate and ornate design that swam in front of his eyes.

"Only read books..." repeated Mahawisteria.

"Yes. I wanted to read before I committed myself to anything."

"And have you read enough now to be sure of your decision?"

"I suppose so," he said listlessly. He didn't dare look Mahawisteria in the eye.

"Is there anything that you'd like to ask?"

Ian remembered that he wanted to ask Mahawisteria about his psychic powers. Instead, he asked,

"How do the implants work?"

Mahawisteria appeared to be swallowing something unpleasant. "Please be more specific."

"I mean from the point of view of Buddhist philosophy. These devices seem to be interfacing directly with the mind. How can they do this? I mean, if mind is non-material how can they affect it? What I'm asking is, how can this be understood in the Buddhist understanding of the relationship between the mind and the body?"

Mahawisteria nodded. "It must be borne in mind that Buddhism is essentially a practical philosophy. The mind is regarded as simply the organ of thought just as the eyes are the organ of sight, the ears the organ of hearing and so on.

"In Eastern philosophy therefore, thinking is regarded as sensory experience and as such has never been equated with the realm of the spirit as it has in Western thought. So you see, the relationship of mind to body has never been a problem in the East. If you wish to think in Western terms then you must consider everything to either consist of matter or to consist of mind although you would have to review your understanding of these concepts.

"Now, the implants. I have no understanding of modern technology but I would expect that they utilise the principle of electricity. And what is electricity? Is it mind or matter? I rather suspect that electricity lies at the boundary between the two. The brain works on electricity and the implants work on electricity and there is your ... interface is the word that I believe you used."

Ian waited for Mahawisteria to continue but he didn't.

"Will you make me a Blossom this evening?"

"Everything in due course. Although this is our first retreat, there will be many others."

In other words, No, thought Ian, feeling that it was no more than he deserved.

They sat in silence for another minute and then Mahawisteria said, "I think that our time is up. Others are waiting."

On his way out, Ian passed Nigel sitting in the lobby with a bouquet of flowers.

He felt wretched. He put his shoes on and followed the path past the outhouse. He didn't want to see anybody. He leaned against a tree and felt that this tree was his only friend in the world. What was it all about? He was going to have to take stock of his perception of himself and with this resolve he walked back to the house.

He met Ann at the top of the stairs.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Terrible." A look of concern crossed Ann's face. They sat down together on the top stair.

"Are you sure? Sometimes these things aren't as bad as you first think."

"No. It was bad. There is no doubt."

"But how could it have been? You mustn't forget that Mahawisteria is a highly evolved being. He's incapable of thinking badly of anybody." Ann was speaking emphatically.

"You're right. I suppose it's my ego. It's taken a knock."

"That shows that you're changing. Change is painful."

"I suppose so." The truth of Ann's words and the chance to talk about it lifted Ian's mood. "What about you? I saw your name on the list. Did you have an interview?"

"I didn't go. I spent the time with Chittalily. I got what I needed from talking to him."

I'm sure that you did, thought Ian uncharitably. Ann continued, "You see, I'd been talking to Lotus and she said that I wasn't ready to become a Blossom so she recommended that I move in with her and Rose so that I might gain a better understanding of what it is to be a Blossom. This is what I was talking over with Chittalily."

"And is that what you're going to do?"

"Yup."

Ian was inspired by the good-natured way in which Ann dealt with not becoming a Blossom. He also felt consoled by the fact that she too had been rejected. He said, "It'll be interesting to see how you get on."

Ann smiled with mock dread. "Imagine... living with two Blossoms..."

"I'm going to lie down," said Ian. "I'm feeling washed out."

He was woken a short while later by a car coming to a halt on the gravel at the front of the house. Jim rushed in and went to the window. "Guess who's here?"

"Who?"

"It's the Big Chief himself."

"Mahawisteria?" He slid off the bunk and went to the window. Ratnadaisy was lying on his bunk, looking up, away in another world altogether.

Parked in the drive was a huge four-wheel drive.

"Nice wheels, eh?" said Jim.

"Who is it?"

"Mitchell Paragon, straight back from Angola. Whataguy."

Ian recognised him. He was talking to Sonja. There were two other woman unloading luggage from the back. Mitchell and Sonja walked to the path that led to Mahawisteria's quarters.

Ian had always regarded Mitchell Paragon with a degree of disdain but now that he was here in the flesh he couldn't help but feel excited. He was a larger than life character.

"Do you think that he's got psychic powers?" he asked Jim.

"No way. His power is purely physical. He's a man who knows how to get things done just like you said. You see, Ian, our Mister Paragon is a master on the physical plane but our own guruji is a master on the *spiritual* plane. You need to have them both."

Neat, thought Ian. There might be something in that. Jim continued, "Not only that," Jim's voice dropped to a stage whisper, "I don't know if anybody else has cottoned on to this ..." he paused, waiting to see if Ian knew what he was going to say but he obviously didn't, "... but don't you think that

it's all happening a little too neatly? If you catch my drift..."

Ian didn't.

"In words of one syllable," said Jim, "Big Chief Paragon is under the psychic influence of our very own Venerable Mahawisteria."

"You mean that Mahawisteria used his psychic powers to draw Mitchell Paragon to him?"

"In a nutshell, matey. In a nutshell."

"For somebody who claims not to be a head person, you've certainly thought things out."

"It's just the way I see it, mate," said Jim, slapping Ian on the back. "You see, I know that I might not have a full deck up top but I reckon I'm more of an *intuitive* sort of bloke, if you know what I mean."

A meditation was programmed for before the evening meal. Ian and Jim decided to go down early for it but when they entered the meditation room it seemed full already. At first, Ian thought that they were late rather than early and then he saw that there were actually only three other people present. Rose was busying herself at the shrine, preparing the candles and incense. She was uncharacteristically flustered. Ian had never seen her like this before. Was it something to do with the two people who were sitting in meditation - Mitchell Paragon and Sonja Zolliker?

Yes, it was Mitchell Paragon in the flesh. Ian had seen him often enough on the TV and in the newspapers. His face was pockmarked - something that had never been apparent over the media - but this didn't diminish the charisma that radiated into the space around him. He was wearing a red lumberjack shirt and he had the build to match. He cut an impressive figure, sitting easily in the lotus position, his back rigid, his long golden, curly hair, neatly parted in the middle, draped across his broad shoulders on either side of his aggressive, stubbled jaw.

Ian sat down next to him, as though drawn by a magnet. Jim was surprised at his new friend's boldness. Ian made himself comfortable, centred himself and then closed his eyes. A bolt of an electric shock hit him and he let out a little whimper.

What the hell was that? Was it static from the carpet? He opened his eyes. Nobody seemed to have heard him. Rose was still fussing with the shrine. He closed his eyes and watched a blazing light flare up behind his eyelids. Relax, focus on the breath, he told himself, but he might as well have doused a fire with kerosene. A very real concern presented itself to him that he might spontaneously combust but he did his best to remain calm. He began to spasm as though ejaculating inwards and then awareness of his physical body disappeared.

As though from a far distance he heard other people slowly shuffling into the meditation room and taking up their positions. The shrine was ready and a silence gradually broke out heralded by sporadic clearing of throats and blowing of noses. Mahawisteria entered and took his place on the dais next to the shrine. After everybody had settled he said,

"Let us begin with the chanting of AUM twenty-one times."

A bell was tapped and the sonorous invocation swelled, filling the Cosmos which Ian now identified with the shrine room. In effect, he was at the heart of the Cosmos. He had travelled to the end of space-time and returned to where he was but at a transcendental level. There was nothing else but these walls, this Room. The activity here symbolised all activity, the significance of which was Absolute. He chanted the next AUM with everybody else. As his voice merged with the others' he felt himself rising and falling with the rhythm of this primordial pulse. Indeed, he was this fundamental vibration being inhaled and exhaled. There was nothing else.

Midway through the chanting, the connection with his vocal chords died away and he entered a realm of concentrated and sublime peace. Another ringing of the bell marked the last chant and a silence of a higher order prevailed.

Suddenly, Ian felt himself jerked fifteen centimetres into the air with such force that a bone in his neck cracked and he let out a yelp. The divine silence had been destroyed but there was nothing he could do about it. He was bouncing up and down violently on his cushions as sharp spears of energy jabbed through him. They gradually subsided, tranquillity returned and he felt himself re-united with his body. But there was also something else, something that could only be described as Love, Love in a sense that he'd never experienced or understood before.

It was the Love of the Cosmos towards him..., not for him as a personality, not for him as Ian, but for him as a personification of the Cosmos. From this experience of Cosmic Love, he could look at this person, this personification bound in ego called Ian and he felt compassion for him, felt compassion for all the pathetic sufferings that this little spark of life inflicted on itself. A tear rolled down his cheek and then he turned his inner ear to an ominous rumbling originating in the depths of his ego.

A tidal wave of convulsions crashed over him and before he knew it he was wailing, sobbing and shaking like he must have done when he was a baby, long before his conscious memories began.

And the waves kept coming and crashing.

Each time he formulated the thought of pulling himself together it was lost, swamped by those peals of sorrow at how this personality had crippled itself as revealed in the light of Cosmic Self-Love. His head was bent over, tears streaming from his eyes forming a damp patch on the pale blue carpet. His sobbing had its own rhythm which he had no choice but to yield to. It gradually subsided but the tears kept flowing as the memory of his insight echoed in his mind and heart.

There was now a restlessness in the meditation room. It was difficult for the other meditators to focus on their own inner experience when somebody else was exhibiting such powerful emotional behaviour.

Ann had wanted to go to Ian and comfort him but she knew that this was not the way. He had to be left to get on with whatever was happening to him.

Sonja had been watching him as well, her eyes filled with tears, tears at the beauty of what she felt had been happening to him.

In spite of himself, Nigel was also moved by what was happening to Ian although he persisted in his efforts to get on with his own meditation.

Ian the reporter stared coldly at his namesake.

Mitchell Paragon and Mahawisteria didn't flinch.

The experience passed and Ian, unable to think or do anything else stared at the meditating Buddha figure and waited for the bell that signified the end of the meditation.

When it finally rang he got up promptly and went through to the lounge and sank into an armchair. Some people coming from the meditation room looked at him with wary smiles but he was unperturbed. Ian stood up and then Mitchell Paragon appeared at the door, strode over to him, looked into his eyes and as though saluting his soul, shook his hand; then without a word he strode out of the house into the drive. Sonja, with a smile in Ian's direction, followed him out.

Ian went to the window and watched. There was a brief conversation between Sonja and Mitchell. She kissed him on the lips and then off he drove in his four-wheel drive.

There was a party atmosphere at evening dinner. It was almost the end of the first full day of the retreat and, the ice thoroughly broken, everybody was in high spirits. Appetites were primed and they tucked into the wholesome fare. Ian was sitting between the reporter and Jim both of whom were engaged in conversation with their other neighbours. Ian didn't mind being not being spoken to. He was enjoying the food and the atmosphere. The magic of the previous evening had returned and he was happily contented. At another table he saw Sonja talking with Lotus, Rose's flatmate, but Sonja's attention seemed divided between Lotus and himself. His behaviour in the shrine room must have triggered her interest. Ann, too, had been snatching coy looks at him.

It's nice to be noticed, thought Ian, as he mashed his potatoes.

The ordination ceremony was to be held later in the evening. Ian had been informed by his fellow soupmaker, Virachrysanthemum, that he wouldn't be ordained this time round. He was told that he wasn't ready. At another time, this would have upset him, especially coming from somebody like Virachrysanthemum. He could see no quality in Virachrysanthemum that he would want to aspire to. Yet somehow Virachrysanthemum was regarded as fit for the spiritual journey that began with Blossomhood and he, Ian, wasn't. Indeed, with the exception of Mahawisteria and perhaps Ratnadaisy and Chittalily, he found it difficult to discern anything that could be described as spiritual in the Blossoms of the Buddha.

And then, sitting next to Mitchell Paragon for less than one hour triggered the most profound experience of his life. What had happened? What did it mean? Did spiritual power reside in Mitchell Paragon? Should he turn to him for his

guru? Having read one of Paragon's books - an incoherent mishmash of half-baked mysticism, megalomania and paranoia, Ian dismissed this option. Yet the man's presence had been a catalyst for the most moving experience of his life and there were implications in this that could not be ignored. He decided to speak to Sonja later on about it.

The evening ordination ceremony was poignant and beautiful. Eight buds were to become Blossoms - six men, and two woman, one of the women being the elderly lady that Ian had met earlier in Mahawisteria's lobby. She became Hyacinth after all. Ian looked around for Agnes, the girl that he'd met outside Mahawisteria's interview room. She wasn't being ordained but she was putting on a brave face, trying to feel pleased for the others in spite of her own disappointment. Nigel became Camomile, a name that he took immediately to heart and Ian the reporter became Tulsimitra. The only other ordainee that Ian had spoken to was a dreadlocked trumpeter called Roy. He became Meghaclematis. Everybody was very happy for them. Mahawisteria gave a talk on the significance of this moment and how it meant a fundamental reorientation of one's life. The values around which they centred their lives had changed. Their ideals were now spiritual.

Ian tried to imagine himself as one of the blossoming Buds and he now knew that it would have been inappropriate for him at this moment in time to be ordained. Although he was happy for everybody involved he now found it all a little meaningless. The meditation room was beginning to feel stuffy and he wanted to be out in the fresh open air beneath the night sky.

Lights out was at eleven o'clock but nobody felt like sleeping. Couples were out walking and talking. Some were sitting in the lounge, reading or writing. Some were gathered round the tea urn and outside the grounds, by the main road, the smokers congregated forming their own subcultural bonding.

The meditations, the practice of awareness, the reflection and introspection, the communication with each other and the focus on a spiritual ideal, as well as the idyllic country setting, all of this had lifted the quality of consciousness in each and every one of them.

The retreat finished the following day after lunch. The morning meditation was flat because of the late night that the retreatants had enjoyed. Few people had bothered to turn up for it and the study groups that were formed to study a Buddhist scripture on Universal Love were rather desultory. After this, the retreat began to dissipate.

Jim offered Ian a lift back home in his truck. He was leaving early because he had a gardening job in the afternoon but Ian was reluctant to leave. He had decided to stay behind with Camomile who was helping to tidy up.

Camomile gave him a lift back to Crowleigh along with Ratnadaisy and a teenager called Ambrose. Ian wondered if Ambrose was a Blossom but it turned out that he too was a Bud that had been rejected.

Ian felt an immediate bond with Ambrose.

PART TWO

Developments

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sally was anxious and, unusually for her, she was finding it difficult to concentrate on her work. This was because it was the day of the interviews for Harry's vacated post of Department Head. The office was almost empty. Only Sara, Stephen's jobshare, and Nigel, or Camomile as he now insisted on being called, were present.

Sally was stunned when Bob had told her of his intention to apply for Harry's job. After all, he was relatively new to the team. What made him think that he had any chance whatsoever? Sally had thought him more than a little arrogant but as far as Bob was concerned what did he have to lose? Anybody from any of the teams could apply for the post. So why not him? And now he was being interviewed. Sally naturally hoped that he would get the job but she worried about the effect that that would have on Simon. Of course, Bob's only motivation was to prevent Linda from getting the job - or so he said. Perhaps Bob was much more ambitious than he let on. After all, Linda wasn't really such a bad egg. She's somewhat fixed in her views but at heart, once you got to know her, she was really quite sweet. But Bob just shook his head when she'd put this to him. He found her impossible to relate to and to be fair to Bob she had to acknowledge that Linda didn't make it particularly easy for the boys to like her. After all, Simon had the same problem so it must be something to do with her.

How would Simon cope if Linda got the job? In fact, how would Simon cope with anybody but him getting the job? He'd probably hit the bottle. Sally concluded that it would be best if the post went to an outsider.

She picked up a memo that had been lying on her desk for almost three weeks. She didn't know what to do with it and it disturbed her in a way that she couldn't fathom. It seemed to hint at a deep and dark reality, a chasm at the edge of which she was teetering. She picked the memo up and stared at it. It announced that, in the interests of company productivity, Darling Decors Ltd would contribute seventy per cent of the cost to any employee wishing to avail themselves of the forthcoming phoneplant. There was something unhealthy and unwholesome in the way people were jumping in droves, like lemmings over the cliff, onto this trendy technological bandwagon. Sally turned and looked at Nigel/Camomile, engrossed in his work. He already had the timeplant, the calculator plant and the radio plant. He was probably listening to the radio at this moment.

Nigel's pink podia had been a success but they'd been overshadowed by Bowley's TimeCentrePeace. Even so, he was unconcerned and had thrown himself into his new project - kinetic stained pseudo-glass. This consisted of blobs of gelatine-encased parti-coloured chemicals that were sensitive to changes in heat and light. Attached to window panes they would change colour, shape, and, as an optional extra, glow in the dark.

Sally decided to break Camomile's concentration. She looked through her messy drawers until she found what she

wanted - a small, tissue lined box of chocolate fudge. She went behind Camomile and wafted the open box beneath his nose.

His attention-induced rigidity softened and she rested her forearms on his broad padded shoulders. Camomile visualised his subtle radio and switched it off. Craning his neck round to catch Sally's eyes, he asked,

"What's going on in the head of my favourite temptress? Hmm?" He cleared his throat and then popped a cube of chocolate fudge into his mouth.

Sally perched herself on the corner of his desk. She was the only person who could get away with interrupting Camomile at his work. They used to have a little game that they played whereby they pretended to be nineteenth century lovers who for one reason or another were always encountering insuperable obstacles to consummating their love. They hadn't been playing it so much since she and Bob had become an item.

"Nothing really," she said.

"Missing lover-boy?" said Camomile teasingly.

"Don't be rotten!" Sally hit him playfully on the shoulder. "But I'll be so disappointed for him if he doesn't get the job. I suppose I'm being feeble."

"Well you know my opinion -"

"I don't know *what* you see in him," they chanted in unison.

"I know, but there's a lot more to him than you think, Nige.. sorry, Camomile." Sally didn't take Nigel's name change seriously but she did her best to accommodate him and made the effort to use his Blossom name.

"Oh, you think he's got it in him to become Department Head?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. There's a spiritual side to him as well, you know. You don't have a monopoly on spirituality, Mr Buddhist Camomile."

"I bow down to only you in that department as far as our fellow employees are concerned, and perhaps to our resident Survivalist opposite who is pretending to work but is really hanging on to our every word."

Sara looked up from her console and grinned.

"Here I am, working in an office with a Buddhist and a Survivalist and tonight I'll be having dinner with a Buddhist and a Survivalist," said Sally.

"How so?" asked Camomile.

"Bob's flatmate is making dinner and Mitchell Paragon's wife will be there as well."

"Bob's flatmate, Ian. A fine young fellow. One of our lot, you know, although I must admit, I find it difficult to focus on him. He seems a bit...wispy. Yes, that's the word, wispy."

"And Sonja Zolliker will be there as well?" asked Sara. Sally nodded. "She's only one of Mitchell Paragon's wives, you know." From Sara's tone, it was apparent that there was no love lost between herself and Sonja.

"Do I detect a conflict in the ranks?" asked Camomile.

"She eats men, that's all. I don't trust her. She's got her own agenda."

Sara seemed an unlikely sort of person to become involved with Mitchell Paragon and Co. She could easily be imagined working as an office secretary in whom thoughts of Domsday were out of keeping with her sweet and fragile demeanour.

"Even so," she continued, "Sonja is a wife of Mitchell Paragon and I respect her for it.

"But what about you, Sally? Who will you sign up with when it comes to the crunch?" asked Sara.

"You mean the end of the world? I suppose if it looked like happening then I'd have to throw in my lot with the Survivalists. After all, if it was the end of the world then that's what you Survivalists have been preparing for. And what about you, Mr Buddhist Camomile? What would you have to offer me if the end of the world came?"

"The answer to that is simple, my love. If people practised the teachings of the Venerable Mahawisteria then there simply wouldn't be an end to the world."

"You really believe that?" asked Sally. She'd rarely spoken to Nigel about his beliefs. Although she had an intuition of God a system of belief was something that she'd never personally felt any need for. She'd never realised before how central a belief system could be to a person's outlook. Ever since she'd realised that Nigel's interest in Buddhism wasn't simply a fashion statement she'd seen him in a different light. It unsettled her a little.

"Yes," answered Nigel. "I suppose that one of the things that the Flowers of the Buddha have in common with the Survivalists - one of the few things I hasten to add, they're as different as water and oil - is that we both agree that society is in a mess. Politics has failed. But rather than retreat from the situation, we in the Flowers believe that there is a remedy and this remedy must be effected on an individual basis. Each individual must make the effort to change. If even a minority of individuals succeed in this effort then they would leaven society as a whole."

Sara smiled, shook her head, and returned to her work. Nigel said to Sally, "If you're honestly interested then you should come along to one of the meditation classes. There's one tonight."

"It's my dinner date tonight. All the same, I'll take you up on it some time and maybe bring Bob along as well. He's often mentioned it. I wonder if he's been interviewed yet? Do you think he'll get the post?"

"I confess to utter disinterest. It makes no difference to me whatsoever. I don't care."

Sally was beginning to find Nigel/Camomile irksome. "What about you, Sara? Who do you think will get the post?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't matter to me either. I have to concur with Nigel. Unfortunately."

"Camomile," corrected Camomile. Sara smirked.

"Don't you believe in anything?" Sara asked Sally.

"Not really. Belief seems to complicate life so. Why not simply attend to what one has to do and try to be nice to people?"

"Thus spake the Buddha!" said Camomile.

"Really?"

Camomile nodded. "That's the essence of the Buddha's teaching."

"Well if that's the case, then there's little point in me coming along to the meditation class."

"My dear, you are indeed an enlightened individual. However, there is no limit to wisdom and compassion. The only way is up. You, though, would have a head start. I think, too, that you have a duty to that boyfriend of yours to bring him along."

"I do worry about these implants though," said Sally, changing the subject. They're so downright unnatural. What's your venerable whatsisname got to say about them then?"

"They're a disease," said Sara, butting in. "They increase dependence on gadgetry. They are unnecessary and are another example of technology taking us farther away from what we are as human beings."

"You sound like a Neo-Luddite," said Camomile.

"The Neo-Luddites are merely reactionaries. Our attitude to technology is carefully reasoned and doesn't stem from an atavistic fear of unemployment. In fact, this is the point of the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity."

"No it isn't," said Camomile, realising that he'd snapped on to the main bone of contention between the FOB and the Survivalists. "The CCI is about not losing one's awareness in the pursuit of meaningless diversions."

"Like your radioplant, I suppose," said Sara rather pointedly.

Ouch! thought Camomile. Yes, the radioplant was a weakness. He had to acknowledge that but it made this bloody job tolerable. He said, rather weakly, "I'm not attached to it. That's the point."

Sara smiled and raised her eyebrows in the knowledge that Nigel was being insincere.

"So what does your guru have to say about the implants, Camomile?" asked Sally.

This was a touchy subject for Camomile. The Venerable Mahawisteria had finally decided against the implants. He firmly put his foot down at the prospect of the Flowers, particularly the Blossoms, having the radioplant. There was no need for it, he had said. Unlike the time, phone and calculator implants which he thought of as neutral and utilitarian, he regarded the radioplant as dangerous. With it implanted, the only way spiritually was down. After all, it was difficult enough weaning oneself off the gross media, but having to wean oneself off something that was inserted inside one's brain...well, spiritually, it could only be detrimental.

"Emm, he was okay about the clocks and the calculators but he's rather down on the radioplants."

This was unfortunate for Camomile because the plants held an alluring potential for him. He had an intuition about them. He suspected that they might ultimately provide access to the very mechanisms at the heart of consciousness, to a different reality, a reality more real, more creative than the one that we habitually inhabited. Of course, this might be one of his crackbrained theories but Camomile was along for

the ride and reserved the right to make up his own mind no matter what the Venerable Mahawisteria decreed.

"So if Mahawisteria doesn't approve of the radioplants then why did you get one?" asked Sally.

"I didn't know that he felt that way until I had one," said Camomile. He now felt that he had to defend himself, to say something that would remove the look of smug superiority from Sara's face. "And besides, we don't do something in the Flowers because Mahawisteria tells us to do it - we aren't enslaved by the whims of a demagogue. No, we're regarded as individuals responsible for our own decisions."

"But surely you follow his teachings?" asked Sara. "Otherwise what would be the point of being in his group?"

"We follow them as best we can in the context of our own lives."

Sara laughed. "In other words, you do what you like, and if it suits you to follow one of your guru's teachings then okay, you'll do it, but if it's going to put you out too much then forget it."

"Well, I wouldn't quite put it like that but you're essentially correct."

Camomile squirmed. He knew that the Flowers of the Buddha were regarded by the Survivalists as something of a joke. They were seen as well-intentioned people who spent too much time in their heads. And their movement wouldn't have lasted this long without the support of Mitchell Paragon through the CCI. He had another go at putting his case to Sara.

"It's like this, Sara. Our teacher doesn't say 'Here is a list of rules that you should follow each day. Get on with it.' No. He teaches us the principles on which we should be basing our lives and this will reflect itself differently in each individual."

"It's the same with Mitchell Paragon," said Sara.

Camomile could see that the subtlety of his point was lost. "In any case," he said, "the Survivalists aren't a spiritual movement."

"That's true, but we don't claim to be anyway. All the same, Mitchell Paragon is a very spiritual person."

It all depends on what you mean by 'spiritual', thought Camomile, but he decided not to pursue this point. Instead, he defocused his eyes and in his mind's eye he conjured up the image of a simple radio. Some classical will do nicely, he thought, as he mentally adjusted the tuning dial and popped another piece of Sally's chocolate fudge into his mouth.

Sally had lost interest in the conversation a few minutes earlier and had returned to her work but she still couldn't concentrate. She looked at the memo again. What this memo means, she finally told herself, is that I am going to have to leave my job. Once they all have their phoneplants then I might as well not be here. It would be like telepathy. Everybody else could be nattering away with each other on their subtle phones and she would become sidelined. Perhaps vocal speech would go the way of the wristwatch.

She stared sentimentally at the slender gold and diamond watch on her wrist. It had belonged to her grandmother. Sally knew that Bob was embarrassed by the fact that she still wore

a watch even though she now put a lot more thought into her appearance for his sake. Sara didn't wear a watch either but she had noticed that Stephen did. Perhaps the only people that she'd be able to talk to in the future would be the Survivalists and the Neo-Luddites. Sally felt a shudder of horror as she imagined the scene; the plantees, with their glassy, defocused eyes, would be smiling and laughing to themselves. She would cease to exist because she would no longer inhabit the same world as them. It would be ghastly. Of course, there might be plus sides to it. Perhaps they wouldn't need to come into the office any more and they could work from home. Sally painted a cosy picture to herself. She could stay at home with her mother and her cats. And Bob as well?

She'd recently finished her first book, 'Harry the Armchair'. It was a tie-in with her line of furry furniture and the Company was enthusiastic about it. There was already talk of a sequel which she could write from home. She would miss her colleagues but she felt that she was missing them already, engrossed as they were in their subtle radios. She looked round at Nigel. He was in a different world. Sara caught Sally's concern. Yes, she had more in common with Sara and Stephen now than she had with dear Nigel. She felt grateful for her Survivalist colleagues otherwise the whole office would be plantees. She wondered if the Survivalists regarded the plants as another sign of society's degeneration. She began to cry. There's something not right about it, not right at all. She felt the dark brooding feeling welling up inside, a feeling that, until that morning a few months ago when she had rushed to work with a forgotten message for Bob, she had never known before.

CHAPTER NINE

Ian wished that he could relax and simply be friends with a woman. He wished that he wouldn't fall in love so easily. He also wished that he wasn't a virgin.

Ian's relations with women were tortuous. Like a moth to flame he was constantly seeking the masochistic quagmire of emotions which women engendered in him. And so it was with Sonja. At first, he had managed to remain uncharacteristically cool when Sonja began to take more of an interest in him after the first retreat. He seemed to have become an object of fascination for her and she made a point of talking to him at the meditation classes. He had been remarkably phlegmatic about her attentions, perhaps because the retreat experience had cleared him out to some extent. Or perhaps he just wasn't interested in Sonja. After all she was nine years older than him and she was already married although Ian wasn't sure about the legal status of the Survivalists' polyandry.

They soon began to spend time together outside the Meditation Centre, walking in the park, visiting cafes and eating together. They both helped at the lunchtime classes run under the auspices of the CCI in the commercial part of the town. This was a joint enterprise between the FOB and the Survivalists where meditation without the Buddhism was taught.

Ian had even spent some time with Sonja and the Survivalists at Buxmead. The Survivalists ran guest programmes whereby people could sample the Survivalist lifestyle for short periods of time at minimum cost. Ian had gone for ten days as Sonja's guest. Unlike his experience with the FOB he had been warmly welcomed and made to feel at home.

He received the warmest welcome from somebody who turned out to be Sonja's husband. She had married him before marrying Mitchell Paragon and had mothered a boy by him. He appeared to be without jealousy and even happy every time he encountered Ian and Sonja together. Ian had gone for walks with Sonja and her son. Although the Survivalist children were reared communally Ian had felt very much part of a nuclear family unit. It hadn't been unpleasant.

Ian had worked with Sonja and her workteam in the gardens. He wasn't used to physical labour and had found it hard to keep up with the others at first but by the end of his time there he felt that he could put in a good innings and had nothing to apologise for. The work, although difficult, was made all the easier by Sonja's company and the company of the workteam. There was an equal ratio of men to women making for a harmonious ambience. The only time that there was any segregation was in the dormitories although the resident Survivalists had more private options.

Ian's only regret was that Mitchell Paragon hadn't been there. In his absence, the Centre was run by Mother Sheila, another of his wives. Mother Sheila was a diminutive and dynamic figure who could often be seen in the distance putting her white stallion, Xerxes, through its paces. Ian came across her once in the forest. He had been enjoying a rare moment of solitude in a clearing in the small forest which adjoined the Survivalist property. Suddenly Mother Sheila and

Xerxes had come crashing out from the undergrowth, as if from nowhere. She reined Xerxes in and stared at Ian. She was breathing deeply and her brow was moist. Ian had an urge to jump up behind her, to join her, to ride off in glorious unfettered abandon. He felt that with Mother Sheila anything was possible, an uninhibited freedom which extended itself to sexual possibilities as well. Without a word, she had turned round and rode off leaving Ian erotically charged.

It had been an anticlimax returning to his Survivalist work mates who seemed prosaic in comparison to Mother Sheila but the feeling soon wore off. He'd travelled back with Sonja from Buxmead and they had hardly been apart since then.

He felt different when he was with her. He felt different when he was with her in public. People looked at her. They looked at him. She was radiantly beautiful. He felt noticed and respected. He felt like a man. His attachment to Sonja had been quietly growing. His life was beginning to revolve around his meetings with Sonja. He felt incomplete when she wasn't around and would look forward to the times when he would be seeing her. He was hooked and he knew it. He also knew that he mustn't blow it. Although he wanted more, although he wanted to hold and kiss her and declare his love, he knew that this would be a mistake and that he would risk losing whatever it was that they presently had between them. He was certain that Sonja saw him as a friend, a spiritual friend even, and it would be wrong to betray that.

Sonja was helping him in the kitchen. It was the first time that she'd been to his flat. For some reason he had been avoiding introducing her to Bob. But now here they were, both of them, in his kitchen, together, preparing for the small dinner party this evening. This must be what's meant by domestic bliss, thought Ian. We fit together so well. Does she feel the same? Why does she have to be married? Isn't it obvious that she's happy with me?

Ian tried to put these thoughts aside and concentrate on his stuffed marrows. It was important that the meal turn out right. He wondered if Bob had got the job and if so, then was it necessarily the best thing for him? Bob was bringing Sally round for dinner. Ian liked Sally. Perhaps he could be friends with her. It was obvious to Ian that Bob didn't fully appreciate her. In a burst of ego, Ian wondered if Sally knew, deep down, that her true happiness lay with him rather than Bob.

And that's true for all women. You are indeed God's gift to women, you silly sod, Ian told himself.

Still, what did Sally see in Bob? Sure, he's a decent enough bloke, but what does she get out of their relationship? Perhaps he's really good in bed.

This was something that Ian hadn't considered before and he wished that he hadn't. On one level or another men are always jockeying for position. This was true for Bob and Ian as well only it hadn't yet extended into the sexual arena.

It's none of my business, Ian reprimanded himself.

He put the rice on to boil and wondered what had happened to Sonja. She'd gone to the loo ten minutes ago and hadn't returned. He went through to the dining area and then he saw

that the door to Bob's Room was open wider than usual. Ian started. Surely she hadn't gone in there? Bob's Room was sacrosanct. Nobody went in there, not even Bob himself, unless it was to work on the decor. Sure enough, Sonja was inside walking casually around the TimeCentrePeace, looking at it all in disbelief.

"It's crazy," she said.

"Bob would be upset if he saw you in here."

"Really?" She was unconcerned.

"Yes. It's very important to him. He's put a lot of time and money into this room."

Sonja picked up one of the diamantine shoes and laughed.

"What does this do for Bob?"

Ian was still standing at the doorway. He couldn't bring himself to cross the threshold. "You'd better come out," he said. He didn't like this. It was as though his friend was being defiled.

Sonja obeyed, sauntering out slowly with an unnerving look of mischief on her face. "It's his religion, isn't it?"

Ian didn't understand.

"His Room is a shrine," she continued, "a shrine to his ego. Yes. This Room is a monument to his ego. This is the religion of the ego and it's perfectly absurd."

Sonja's observation was cruel but correct, thought Ian. How come it had never occurred to him before? At the same time, he felt that his friend was being condemned without a trial. "I think that there's more to it than that," he began, but Sonja had left the Room, strode across the living room and over to the bedrooms.

"And what's over here?" she asked. She looked into Bob's bedroom. "Bob's," she surmised. "So this one here must be yours."

Ian had taken the precaution of tidying and airing his bedroom earlier on but still... He followed Sonja in. She was lying back on his mattress, her denimed legs wide apart.

"Lumpy. I think, Ian, that you are a natural ascetic." Sonja looked at him expectantly with a hint of challenge.

Ian didn't know where to sit or position himself. There were no chairs in his room. He could sit at the end of the mattress but this would give him a panoramic view of Sonja's crotch. She was opening and closing her knees, enjoying the space. He went to the uncurtained window and looked out at the lamplit street. It was cold and quiet and had a soothing effect.

"Why don't you come and sit down?" Sonja moved aside and patted the space next to her.

Ian sat awkwardly on the edge of the mattress. Does she want to have sex? he wondered. But we're in the middle of cooking and Bob and Sally are due to turn up any minute. He couldn't handle this and then a hissing noise came from the kitchen.

"The rice is boiling over!" With great relief, he leapt up and dashed through. As he was stirring the rice he wondered if he had just missed a golden opportunity. This was never how he behaved in his fantasies.

He studied the recipe book and then set to work scooping out the marrows. Sonja stood leaning in the doorway, her arms folded, and watched him. He gave her a broad, easy smile. When he wasn't feeling self-conscious, when he wasn't being tortured by his many and conflicting needs - and this was such a rare moment - he felt good and honestly appreciated Sonja's company.

Sonja laughed. She came up behind him and put her arms around his waist thus destroying his fleeting moment of self-composure.

"You're a funny one, Mr Flower." She hugged him and Ian could feel her breasts squashing against his upper back. She was wearing a white blouse this evening, her curvaceousness more apparent than usual. There was a stirring in his loins. He cleared his throat.

"And is this how married women are supposed to behave, Ms Survivalist?"

Sonja backed off, as though stung.

"Oh! You really are an ascetic, aren't you?"

Ian regreted his words. He wanted her to hold him again but he had spoiled the moment. He said, "Not really. I have to live within my means and my means are limited."

"That's not what I meant and you *know* it."

Ian looked at the recipe book again.

"Look, you chop the onions and I'll open the wine." Ian needed a drink. He opened the bottle and then watched Sonja chopping the onions. Straightening up, he folded his arms and said, "Don't you know how to chop onions?"

"Show me." Sonja handed him the knife.

"I will show you ze esoteric Flowers of the Buddha technique," he said in a hopeless mock German accent. "First ve must have ze tool appropriate to ze task." He examined the knife disapprovingly and rummaged through the utensil drawer finding nothing. "Ahem. And if ve have only one tool zen ve must make do with it. Now, to chop ze onions. First, hold ze onion like zo." He poised his fingertips delicately on the round surface of an onion half. "Now, ve begin to pare it, just so. Now, ze secret to chopping ze onions - now pay attention - is to stand as far away as possible when chopping ze onions zo as to avoid ze stingy fumes." At this point, he bent over and stretched himself as far away as possible from the onions. With a theatrical gesture he invited Sonja to try.

"Clown," she said.

"I thought that I was an ascetic."

"You're both."

"Is that not a contradiction?"

"Yes."

"So you're saying that I'm a contradiction?"

"Yes."

"I see." Ian studied the recipe book again and took a sip of wine. The meal was coming together slowly. Oven on, rice okay, salad,...

"Do you love Mitchell Paragon?" Ian asked out of the blue. Sonja was silent. Ian wondered if he had been indiscreet. "Emm, you don't have to answer of course."

"No, it's okay..., do you remember your experience sitting next to Mitch in the meditation room?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, what impression did he make on you?"

"I thought that he was magnificent. That's the word for him, I suppose."

"Exactly. That's how I feel towards him and I feel his love for me. I love what he is and what he's doing."

"He's committed to his organisation and his work, isn't he? So you have to share him with that - and his other five wives." It doesn't make sense, thought Ian. There's more woman in Sonja than most men could handle. Why does Paragon need five wives?

"Yes, it's very much a spiritual relationship. He's celibate, you know," she added, as if sensing Ian's unspoken question."

"Really? You don't read about that in the tabloids. Just the opposite in fact. And then there's that stuff about his teddy bear collection."

Sonja smiled. Ian didn't know what to make of Mitchell Paragon's teddy bears. "Yeah, Mitch reckons that the innuendo about his sex life is better for his public image than the suspicion that his celibacy might arouse in the media. You know how people reckon that celibacy is unhealthy for example."

"Well isn't it?" Ian wondered what Sonja's views on the subject were.

"Not if you're ready for it?"

"Are you ready for it?" Ian asked, with a gleam in his eye.

Sonja smiled. "Where do these go?" she asked, cupping the onions.

"In here," said Ian, taking the onions and emptying them into a pan of steaming oil.

Ian was impressed by Paragon's celibacy. It was an option that he had considered for himself but he was realistic enough to know that it was out of the question. Celibacy was reserved only for the most advanced of spiritual initiates. Mahawisteria was supposed to be celibate but this might be due to a complete lack of sex drive on his part rather than spiritual attainment. Celibacy was about converting sexual energy into spiritual energy. Ian felt that if it was possible to do this then his charismatic power would be as great as Paragon's.

The upshot of this was that Ian no longer doubted Mitchell Paragon's spirituality. In fact, having failed to become a Blossom on the second ordination retreat and having spent some time with a Survivalist community he had become much more favourably disposed towards the Survivalists and he longed to be with Mitchell Paragon once again in case there might be a follow-up to his experience next to him in the meditation room.

Perhaps he should become a Survivalist? They were very friendly towards him and accepted him far more readily than the FOB. There would be no problem with him signing up. What a contrast to the FOB! But there was no getting away from it,

the Survivalists were not concerned with spiritual development but physical survival and this was not the way for him.

"And how do you know when you're ready for celibacy?" he asked.

"Mitchell will tell you." This answer annoyed Ian. Okay, Paragon was one hell of a guy but how could he be privy to this kind of knowledge?

"And how, pray tell, would he know this?"

"John tells him," said Sonja matter of factly. Ian felt the ground beneath his feet becoming uncertain. He thought that he'd mapped out a fairly accurate picture of Mitchell Paragon and the Survivalists but what was this? This was the first time that he'd heard mention on any 'John'. What was going on here? His whole perception of the Survivalists was about to be undermined. He looked at Sonja to see if she was pulling his leg. She wasn't.

"John, his spirit contact," she said, matter of factly.

Ian felt deflated by his own ignorance and shock at the sudden knowledge that the supremely pragmatic Survivalists were dependent on supernatural revelation or, as was more likely, the psychosis of a demagogue.

Sonja continued: "Mitchell's ideas aren't his own. I thought you knew this. They come directly from the spirit world. That's why they seem a bit garbled at times. John communicates directly through Mitchell using Mitchell's voice. The communications are recorded and then transcribed. There are contradictions of course, but aren't there contradictions in any system? The difference with our system, though, is that once it is put into practice the contradictions disappear and everything makes sense.

"This isn't a head trip, Ian."

"Do all the Survivalists know about John?"

"Yes. It's not hidden from anybody else but we don't broadcast it. We're already regarded as crazies as it is, but within the Survivalists it's regarded as very important. Mitch receives a transmission every month from spirit John. We're in the process of linking up all the Survivalist communities so that everybody can watch the transmission live. It's a sign of just how desperate things have become that the spirit world has decided to intervene directly. All of the Survivalist philosophy has come from John."

"It's like Noah's ark, isn't it?"

"Yes. There have been times like this before to greater or lesser degree. Great purges of humanity. According to John this is going to be the last and final one. The only survivors are going to be the ones in our camps. Survivalists, basically."

Ian let out a deep breath as he assimilated this new information. "Is it John who's against the plants as well?"

"Yes. John is very emphatic about this. Having a plant is the only ground for expulsion from the Survivalists."

"Gosh." A whole new light was being thrown on the Survivalists for Ian. "Why haven't you told me any of this before?"

"It's never come up, and as I said, I thought you knew although now that I think about it there's no reason why you should have."

"And you really believe that the world is going to end?"

"It's a fact."

"When?"

"According to John there are three possible scenarios. The most optimistic one gives us five years at the most."

"That's not long. What's the worst scenario?"

"Everything will end within the year."

"Jesus." The thought of all this ending, of his life in the flat, his time with Sonja, the Meditation Centre, drinking with his friends, and worst of all, the end of the future and all the possibilities that it had to offer.

Much of Ian's present, like those of many young men, was filled with thoughts of the future. The future held unlimited potential and to have the future snuffed out just like that was a very sobering consideration. "It's quite a thought," he said, piling the stuffing into the marrows.

"I'd like you to join the Survivalists, Ian," said Sonja with genuine concern.

"But look, the Survivalists aren't the first group in history to predict the end of the world. Nor is Mitchell Paragon the first person to have a divine revelation about it. But the world is still here and so are the doomsday cults albeit with their dates revised. What's different about the Survivalists? Why should they be right when everybody else has been wrong?"

"I know that the world seems in pretty bad shape at times but it's looked this way to certain people in every generation for the last two thousand years." Ian put the marrows in the oven. "Things will have to get a lot more desperate before I sign up."

"It might be too late by then."

"And if it's all going to end, why are the Survivalists bothering with the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity?"

"You could ask why we're bothering to do anything at all. We're involved because we need people and we need resources."

"Oh I see. You're recruiting," said Ian accusingly.

"But it's in everybody's best interests."

"And so is every fascist tyranny." Ian knew that he'd stepped over the line. He could see the hurt in Sonja's face. He said sorry and kissed her on the cheek and then Bob appeared at the door.

"I hope I'm not interrupting?..."

"Nope. Dinner will be ready in half an hour. Where's Sally?"

"She went to Simon's place after work. She was worried about him. She'll be along later."

"So you got the job?"

Bob nodded, secure in his triumph.

"Congratulations." Ian introduced Sonja and Bob as they hadn't yet met even though Ian had often spoken about Sonja to Bob. Bob was taken aback by how little she corresponded to Ian's description of her. She wasn't as beautiful as he had

made out. In fact, there was something creepy about her, an ageing earth mother with a mad look in her eye.

They shook hands and Bob felt the roughness of her calluses.

Sonja's impression of Bob wasn't particularly favourable either. The fact that he was a blatant careerist and a plantee combined with his ridiculous dress and her impression of his Room made it difficult for her to be favourably disposed towards him.

Ian sensed the chill between Sonja and Bob and hoped that Sally wasn't going to be too long.

Simon hadn't returned to the office after the interviews. The loss of face would have been too much, thought Sally. She had rung his home number a few times before leaving work without success and now she was trying again.

This time a woman's voice answered. Sally was relieved that Simon had somebody in his hour of need. She had a vague recollection that Simon had an American girlfriend but this accent wasn't American.

"Hallo, I'm Sally from the office. Is Simon there?"

"I think that he was here when I arrived. Wait a minute." There was a lot of shuffling and knocking about of the phonepiece.

"Hallo?" Simon's voice was dry. He'd been sleeping after finishing off the contents of his hip flask.

"Simon, I hope that I'm not disturbing you."

"Emm, no."

"I didn't see you after the interview and I wondered how you'd got on."

"Don't you know?"

"Well of course, I know that you didn't get it."

"Yes, your boyfriend did rather well for himself." There was an undertone of bitter accusation in his voice. Sally ignored it.

"I know that you badly wanted the post."

"If I'd wanted the post that badly then I would have got it." Simon was returning to form. "As you know, I'm a grass roots man. Do you think that I'd want to be sitting in an empty office by myself all day? I only went for the job to prevent Linda from becoming Department Head. I know that you like her but believe me, she would have destroyed the team."

Simon's doorbell rang.

"Could you get that Mrs T?"

"It's a man about an accordion, Mr Flare," said the charlady.

"Hang on a mo," he said to Sally.

Sally heard some heated arguing which culminated in an unknown voice shouting, "Give me my fucking money back or I'll knock your fucking block off!"

Then there was silence.

"Simon?"

"Simon?"

She heard the shuffling and untangling of his phone cord again.

"Hallo, Sally? Sorry about that. An irate customer."

"Are you indulging in some private enterprise."

"Yes, accordions."

"I didn't know you played."

"I don't. But they're nice instruments, aren't they? I buy them broken, take them to get repaired and then sell them at a mark-up. Sometimes they're beyond repair so I sell them as seen. That fellow was obviously dissatisfied with his purchase."

"You've got a girlfriend, haven't you Simon?" Ah, she still carries the torch for me, thought Simon.

"You mean Joanne?"

"Yes, she's from Texas, isn't she? Will you be seeing her today?"

Although not personally attracted to Sally, there was something appealing at the prospect of stealing his new boss's girlfriend. He was now the underdog in Sally's eyes and Simon suspected that Sally was one of those women who were attracted to the underdog. He decided to milk it for what it was worth.

"No I won't. We have an agreement to limit our contact to one interaction per week. She phoned me yesterday so that's it for this week. And anyway, she's busy."

"Oh yes. She's a sales rep, isn't she?"

"Yes. Pharmaceuticals. So what are you doing this evening?"

"Umm. I'm having dinner with Bob and his flatmate."

"A celebration dinner, I suppose."

"Well, no. We planned this a while back. Bob's flatmate will be there, with his girlfriend, I think."

"Ah yes. I believe I met him once. In a restaurant. He was with an oriental woman."

"He'll be with a another woman tonight."

"A man after my own heart." Simon laughed.

"What will you be doing tonight?"

"Me? I might give Stella a ring. Then I'll take some accordions round to the repair shop."

"If we go to the pub afterwards would you like to come?"

"I'm sure Bob would love that. Don't you think that you should ask him first? After all, he is your boss as well now." Simon yawned. "Anyway, I don't think I'll bother. I'll probably have an early night after all the excitement."

"Okay. Listen, Simon, do you have my telephone number?"

Sally heard the flicking of pages.

"We won't be using these much longer," Simon muttered. "Once we have the phoneplants, gross phones will be out. You're boyfriend will probably get his any day now. The board of directors have theirs. That's how it goes with any new plants now: first the politicians and leaders of industry get theirs and then they filter down to the rest of us. It's one of the perks of being a boss. Ah, here it is. Yes, I've got your number."

"Okay, give me a ring whenever you want to."

"Will do. Thanks for ringing."

"Bye."

Sally went round to Simon's house after work to check up on him but nobody answered. He was probably fast asleep.

Ian felt anxious. It was always like this when he introduced his friends to each other - they never got on. Thankfully Bob had gone to lie down for a bit. Hopefully, Sally and Sonja would hit it off. Sally seemed the sort of person who could get on with anybody. So did Sonja come to think of it. Ha, look at her now.

Sonja was dancing by herself to Bob Marley, a glass of wine in hand.

"Come, dance!" she commanded.

Ian took a sip of wine and did as he was ordered. He adopted the pose of a slick disco dancer.

"This is your lucky day, doll!"

They bopped around to Bob Marley, laughing their heads off.

Bob was lying on his bed wondering what the hell was going on. After all, weren't they supposed to be religious and preparing for the end of the world or what? Maybe he should get a drink and join the party and then he heard Sally's voice.

Ian hadn't seen much of Sally since their first meeting four months previously. Bob tended to spend the weekends at her place. She was still wearing her clothes from work but her own unique beauty was still apparent, the softness in her eyes and an easiness about her body. Perhaps Bob is good for her after all, thought Ian. He could see that Sonja had taken an immediate liking to her and was pleased. Bob noticed as well. He was always glad when people liked his girlfriend. And hey! he'd got the job!

Bob's spirits lifted. "How's Simon," he asked.

"I think he had a bit of a binge but he seems fine."

"I told you that he would be." Bob's perception of Simon had been changing. He now acknowledged that he had an alcohol problem. He no longer regarded Simon as his preceptor. Instead, he reckoned that Simon's career had peaked. He'd gone as far as he could and now he'd been superceded. That's the way it goes.

The stuffed marrows were a success. Sally was finished and put her knife and fork down.

"I've just realised something," she said.

"Everybody looked at her expectantly.

"This is rather an unusual situation in that the majority of those present aren't plantees. Most people have taken at least one plant. I was thinking about this at the office today. So how does it feel, Bob, to be eating with three prims?" Prim, a contraction of primitives, was the vogue term for non-plantees.

"I'm dining with history!" laughed Bob. "But seriously, it's just a matter of time, isn't it? After all, what's the point in not having them unless you've got some kind of religious belief against them, I suppose." He looked at Sonja and inadvertently rekindled the original chill between them.

"Do you think of yourself as having religious beliefs, Ian?" Sally asked.

"I try to follow Buddhist practices but I wouldn't say that I hold to any items of faith. To be honest, although I don't like the idea of them, I haven't really got any rational

arguments against the plants and intellectually I agree with Bob. I'd even been considering subscribing to a course of plants myself. After all, they're cheap enough now."

"But you mustn't!" Sally and Sonja said in unison.

"Why shouldn't he?" said Bob. Bob had never been able to pin down Sally's objections to the plants. It was the only time that she appeared to be unreasonably emotional and the whole issue was a major stumbling block in the development of their relationship.

"Well, I've no intention of doing so, anyway," said Ian. "I suppose that I'd like to keep my options open as far as the Survivalists are concerned." Both Sally and Bob stared at him looking as though he'd sold them out. They had always thought of Ian as quite disparaging with respect to the Survivalists. Obviously, Sonja was having an influence on him.

"Well, you never know ..." he added weakly.

"But your teacher has put his foot down about the plants anyway," said Sonja. "He has said that there is no need for anybody in the Flowers of the Buddha to receive an implant."

"That's correct but that hasn't stopped some of the Flowers going ahead, some of the Blossoms even. Some of the other Blossoms feel that the whole business might cause a split in the movement. Those of them against it are tending to express their opposition by working mainly through the CCI.

"The what?" asked Sally who was experiencing acute *deja vu*. She was stunned by the mention of the CCI, a reaction which caused some unease in the other three, especially Bob.

"The Campaign for Cerebral Integrity," said Ian.

"Why haven't you told me about this before," Sally rounded on Bob. She was genuinely cross.

"I...I."

This was it. Sally felt a realignment of her being. The answers were here, coming before the questions which flooded through her mind as the future direction of her life became clear.

CHAPTER TEN

The novelty of Bob's new office had yet to wear off. It was big, bigger than the team offices even though there was so little in it. There was a large desk with a virtual reality system on it, a big leather upholstered swivel chair for himself and two hard chairs on the other side of his desk for visitors.

The desk had bothered him at first. It was big, old, and made of wood. And then it dawned on him that this must be the management style and the very things that he hadn't like about it became points of attraction. Yes, he liked his desk, its size, its apparent age, the style and the material.

This morning he'd already held a meeting with Sales and Marketing. Next he'll hold a meeting with the four team managers. He was a little nervous at seeing Simon. He had had an introductory meeting with the team managers when he first moved into his office four weeks earlier. Simon had said nothing and he hadn't turned up for the next meeting - he had been to a job interview apparently. Bob realised that emotionally he was still in awe of Simon although rationally he knew that this was absurd. Equally absurd was the feeling that he'd somehow stabbed Simon in the back by being promoted over him. It wasn't that he *really* felt this but he imagined that this was how Simon must feel and how Simon expected to Bob to feel. Bob considered what he could do to dispel such feelings on Simon's part. Or perhaps he should just leave Simon to stew in it. After all, he's supposed to be a grown man, thought Bob. So long as he doesn't cause me any problems then his feelings really aren't my concern.

And that was that.

There was a large pot plant in the corner next to a door which opened on to a corridor which led to the directors' suite. Bob often found himself gazing at this door. Soon, he thought. Soon.

Bob considered himself en route to directorship. Within the period of one month that he'd been Department Head, Bob had set up a ground breaking deal with The Plant Plant Inc. This was the company that manufactured the biochip implants. Bob's dealings with The Plant Plant Inc would revolutionise the nature of the work done at Darling Decors Ltd.

Instead of designing furniture for Rooms they would soon start designing furniture for Heads, for Subtle Rooms. Darling Decors Ltd would produce the design and The Plant Plant Inc would produce the biochip that would recreate the design in the planter's head. Bob had already swallowed the first prototype. There would be no more need to visualise an object as the biochip would present the object at will to the mind's eye. He wondered if the prototype had settled in yet.

But first there was something else that he wanted to try. Bob pushed the VRS to one side of his desk and then lay down on the ample space remaining and closed his eyes.

First, he visualised the clock and checked the time. He set the alarm to coincide with his next meeting one hour's hence. Next he visualised his telephone, bright red with diamond encrusted numerals. He loved the phone. Although

everybody now had a phoneplant the novelty had yet to wear off. The process of visualisation and actually using it had developed into a ritual for Bob.

The phoneplants were essentially miniaturised cellular phones. The innovation involved the bypassing of the vocal chords. The intention to speak, the intention that normally activated the vocal chords was electronically hijacked, electronically encoded and finally transmitted by the phoneplant to the desired number. The receiving phoneplant, once the call was accepted, would demodulate the incoming signal into thought instead of voice. The clever thing about the phoneplants was that they also worked with gross phones. In the case of gross phones the incoming message would be demodulated into voice.

Bob had thought that Sally would really appreciate this aspect of the phoneplant. He had tried it out on her the other day, phoning her from inside his head. After all, one of her complaints against the plants was that they were cutting him off from her, that he was spending too much time with his subtle gadgets, and he had wanted to prove to her that this wasn't necessarily the case.

Curiously, subtle time did not correlate exactly with gross time. Upon consideration, this was no great surprise. Subjective time passes differently from objective time. However, what was surprising was that a call originating on a subtle phone comes out slowly and haltingly on the gross phone. This seems to imply that, contrary to expectation, mental time is actually slower than physical time. What happens is that the subtle originating phone message takes longer to be processed by the gross technology and is held in a buffer, releasing the communication in measured quanta of information.

The upshot of this was that Bob's thoughts, as picked up by Sally's phone, sounded as though he was drugged and talking from within a deep cave. Far from putting her mind at ease, he'd done exactly the opposite, confirming all her fears, fears which Bob was coming to regard as increasingly hysterical.

He'd manage to swing it for her so that she only needed to come into the office three days a week but Bob felt that he had been taken advantage of because Sally was now spending most of her non-office time working for the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity who were campaigning actively against the implants. Talk about the forces of ignorance! thought Bob. If only they had some understanding of what they were up against. There wasn't a single individual who regretted having the implants. If those CCI people would only take a look at what they were campaigning against then they'd see how ridiculous and nebulous and, yes, hysterical their objections were. In any case, you can't halt progress.

Bob phoned the leaders of the teams to remind them of the meeting. He phoned Simon last. It took a while for him to respond. Simon had been listening to Afternoon Armchair Theatre.

"Hi Simon, it's Bob. How're things?"

"Thriving. What about you? Are you keeping away from your old team-mates? Mustn't let success go to your head you know."

"Ha-ha. You know how it is. Busy busy. I'm calling to remind you about the Team Leaders' meeting in one hour. How's my replacement doing?"

"Sandra? She fits in perfectly. Her first design is almost ready for submission. I expect great things of her."

"Good, good. I'll see you in an hour then."

Bob sat up on his desk and let out a long breath. He removed a sheaf of paper from a drawer and, using it as a pillow, he lay back down and closed his eyes.

He imagined a long cavernous hall, checkered with black and white marble tiles. He visualised a jukebox - the chip for this had come out just before the phoneplant. He chose some Wagner. He imagined some of Sally's furry wall mats on the walls and a few of Nigel's pink podia dotted about the place. At one end of the hall was his desk, the same as the one that he was lying on. On his desk he visualised his clock in the style of his gothic kitchen utensils and his red diamond-encrusted telephone.

Hmm, they don't go, thought Bob. He wanted to provide an aesthetic unity to his subtle office the way he had to his gross Room. He was now beginning to appreciate the effort that this would take. His radio was in the style of the 1950's. He wanted to do something about the calculator and he tried visualising it as a huge thing with cogs and wheels but it was tricky. He gave up on this and visualised a space in the centre of his desk for his newest subtle acquisition.

Bob stopped the visualisation at this point and sat up. He retrieved a sheet of paper from his inside pocket. It had a few simple illustrations on it and was headed: 'The Joybox - Suggested Visualisations.' His contact at The Plant Plant Inc had slipped it to him with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"We won't be advertising this one. We won't need to. It's hot."

Bob hadn't even bothered to look at the instruction sheet that came with it. He'd swallowed the plant immediately. Why waste time? This was the first plant not to have a gross counterpart and he, Bob Bowley, along with the politicians and leaders of industry was one of the first to have it.

He examined the illustration. It resembled a hot cross bun. Each quarter had a large coloured button on it on which was inscribed the name of a season, spring at the top left, clockwise through to winter on the lower left.

Simple enough, thought Bob, lying back and returning to his visualisation. He formed the joybox on the space on his desk and imagined pressing the button marked summer.

Whoomph!

Bob's body jerked and his back arched from the desk. He also developed a fierce hard-on but instead of the erotic charge being localised there it was diffused throughout his whole body. The Wagner still playing, provided a suitable soundtrack. My god, he felt powerful. It was as though every obstruction, every limitation that hindered him from realising his true potential had been removed. He was ready to go

places! This empowerment, this rapture, it was all so wonderful that he suspected that it might be made illegal. Imagine, anybody with a joybox could experience this with the press of a button! And this was only 'summer'! There were three other seasons to experience!

Bob turned his attention once again to his subtle office. He visualised a few chandeliers and instead of having his equipment on the desk he projected it all, larger than life onto one of the walls. There were giant cables connecting the different pieces of equipment and his calculator had huge whirring cogs.

Now *this* was more like it!

He surveyed the expanse of his cavernous office. There was the wall of equipment. To the left, at one end, his empty desk and to the right, at the other end in the distance, what was that? There was an object at the distant wall. Concentrating, he focused on the object and as he did so it appeared directly in front of him. It was a television in the style of his gothic kitchen utensils. Across the screen was stuck a notice : 'Transmission begins on April 1st'.

Was this a joke?

No of course it wasn't! This was the first product of his collaboration with The Plant Plant Inc. It was the customised television implant - the first of its kind! Ideally, the consumer would be offered up to a hundred different styles to choose from for their television. When the Plant Plant Inc had asked for a design for the prototype Bob had cobbled one together based on his gothic kitchen utensils. And now here it was. There was no need to visualise it. He concentrated and willed his office to fade away into white and sure enough, all that remained was the television. Here it was without any effort. And this was only the beginning. Soon, everybody's head would be filled with Darling Decor designs. Imagine, a Bowley's TimeCentrePeace effortlessly manifesting in and occupying every mind!

The phone rang. He walked across his subtle office and picked up the sparkly handset. It was a call from the board of directors. They wanted to see him about the latest development with the PPI. On opening his eyes he stared at the ceiling and took a few moments to acclimatise to the gross office environment. He stood up, straightened his tie, pulled his noddies so that they were dangling freely and with a downward tug of his jacket he opened the door and walked along the corridor to the directors' suite.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was the first day of spring and Sonja had gone. She'd been "recalled", as she'd put it. Tonight was supposed to have been their last evening together and up to this point Ian had wondered if they would actually consummate their relationship but it had all been too heavy, too heavy to even think about sex, and too heavy to even be together. They had agreed that it would be better if Sonja spent the evening with her FOB flatmates - she had been staying with Rose, Lotus and Ann - rather than spend their last few hours together in painful anticipation of their inevitable separation.

Ian loved Sonja. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He had no doubts about this but whenever he had got close to talking about his feelings with her, she would cut him off and remind him of this moment when she would have to return to her Survivalist community. The call had gone out to all the Survivalists. The end was nigh and the Survivalists withdrew from all life outside their communities. Of course, Ian could have returned with her to Buxmead but in the meantime he had finally become ordained as a Blossom of the Buddha. Basil. This was his Blossom name. His heart had sunk when the Venerable Mahawisteria had intoned his new name at the last ordination retreat. He was not happy with it. His fellow retreatants, however, had congratulated him on it and told him how beautiful and appropriate it was. He meditated on his new name, visualised the plant and discovered what an excellent and useful herb it was in cooking. All the same, he resolved that he would reserve the name for use in FOB contexts only. He was even referred to as Ian in the CCI until the Survivalists left, leaving the CCI solely in the hands of the FOB.

Perhaps if he hadn't been ordained he would have joined the Survivalists. He didn't have a problem with the polygamy and the polyandry and he didn't see any other difficulty that he might have with the Survivalists that couldn't easily be overcome except for the issue of personal freedom. There was no way that he was going to confine himself to the boundaries of a Survivalist camp. And anyway, in spite of his experience with Mitchell Paragon and the news of his spirit guide John, Ian still believed that the Survivalists were about physical survival in contrast to the FOB which was about spiritual development.

Ian had wondered whether the two philosophies need be mutually exclusive. Why couldn't he be a Blossom and a Survivalist at the same time? He had put this question to the Venerable Mahawisteria. The Venerable Mahawisteria told him that he should be able to find everything that he needed within the context of the Flowers. It was suggested to him that he form a community with some of his fellow Flowers. He intended to follow this advice. Himself, Ratnadaisy, Meghacllematis and Jim the gardener, all of whom had been on the first Buddy retreat were into the idea of living together and would do so as soon as suitable rented accommodation was found.

In the meantime he was wretchedly alone. His heart was broken, he was by himself and where the hell was Bob? It was his turn to cook. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to contact him earlier on to ask him not to be around this evening because he had anticipated spending the evening with Sonja. But in fact, he hadn't seen Bob since their communal meal the previous week. The flat felt desolate. He phoned Sally.

"Ian! How are you? Aren't you with Sonja?" Sally had thrown herself into CCI activities and she and Sonja had become close friends.

"We decided to make the break rather than drag it out."

"You and Sonja have hardly been apart over the last couple of months."

"That was mainly due to circumstances. We were both involved in the CCI and the meditation classes. She was even interested in becoming a Blossom. You know, I think that she was just about to ask to become a Bud herself before she got recalled."

Sally wasn't particularly interested in hearing about the FOB. She had enough to do with them through her involvement with the CCI of which she was now chairperson. The CCI had been the perfect opportunity to express and work through her deepest anxieties concerning the plants. It had brought her life into focus and she now felt that she was directing her life to the purpose for which it was intended. At first, Mahawisteria hadn't been happy about a non-Flower being chairperson but it had become obvious that Sally, being neither a Flower nor a Survivalist, was in fact the best person for the post. Her clarity of purpose and conviction dwarfed any reservations about her suitability and even Mahawisteria eventually respected her abilities and prowess. The role of the CCI had changed. The Survivalists had left. They'd been recalled. Nobody was interested in the CCI anti-plant propaganda anymore. The plants were too firmly entrenched. They had developed and spread like a rapidly mutating viral plague. Sally now saw the role of the CCI as the only hope against this plague. The plants had to be stopped one way or another. Sally's proposals had alarmed Mahawisteria and some of the Blossoms at first but she eventually won them round. Sally had little time for FOB niceties. Although she got on with the individuals involved, the FOB structure proved to be a hindrance to effective action and communication.

It was time for direct action. She had sent Ratnadaisy and Rose to Westminster to see the local MP Julian Sands about legislating against the plants. Richard, Stella's lecturer boyfriend had promised to use his University contacts to look into the possibilities of removing the plants. She wondered if The Plant Plant Inc might know if there was some 'antidote' to the plants, some way of switching them off, and she planned to visit them herself. Ian's call was a bit of an intrusion but she had a soft spot for him and was happy to make time for him.

"So what are you going to do now?" she asked. This question always flummoxed Ian and put him on the defensive. It implied that he was going to be doing something different from

what he was doing now. He appreciated that when people looked at his life he didn't appear to be doing much. He doubted that his perception of himself as a Seeker of Truth would be taken seriously by others. What are you doing, Ian? Oh, I'm looking for Truth. I looking for the reality which gives rise to the reality of our sense impressions.

"What do you mean, Sally?"

"Do you think that you'll join the Survivalists?"

"Why should I?" Ian was a little piqued. After all, he'd only recently become a Blossom. Didn't Sally understand the significance of what he'd done?

"Well, you know, with Sonja gone..."

"Sally, I'm a Blossom, for Pete's sake..."

"Oh yes, right, and you're evolving into a higher spiritual being. Sorry, I forgot."

"Yes! That's right. What's wrong, Sally? I didn't think of you as the sarcastic type."

"I'm sorry, Ian. I feel so strongly that we're running out of time and this spiritual stuff just gets in the way. Haven't you noticed how much quieter the streets are these days? And the shops aren't always open when they're supposed to be?"

"I hadn't really thought about it as I don't use the shops much." Indeed, Ian's world revolved around his flat, the Meditation Centre, and a few likeminded friends. "I suppose that people are spending more time in their heads, in their subtle worlds, so they don't get out and about much. All their leisure is subtle now and some work is as well I suppose."

"Exactly! Do we really know what's going on inside the plantees' these days? We're prims. We're no longer within their field of communication. We don't exist in their world any more." Sally paused and thought of Bob. "I'm losing Bob."

Ian was beginning to feel a little awkward talking to Sally, a little guilty even. Swallowing a plant was an option that he wanted to keep open for himself even though old Wishy-washy was against them. He found Sally's fanaticism disturbing but he acknowledged that she had a point. He looked at Bob's personal hi-fi lying on the kitchen table.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I haven't seen Bob for a week. He said I could have his personal hi-fi last time I saw him. It's gross technology. I never thought that I'd see him parted from it. Apparently they've got something like a jukebox installed inside their heads. They can dial up any piece of music that they like. It must be really something."

"It's evil, unequivocally evil."

"When did you last see him? I'm getting a little worried about him."

"I've only seen him in passing over the last two weeks. He's spending a lot of time at the PPI. There's something big in the works. He's tied up with this new partnership with The Plant Plant Inc, spending much of his time in subtle communication with them. Sometimes he doesn't even come home - sorry, Ian, I think of his home as with me now. But I know that he sometimes spends all night in his office. I don't know whether he's sleeping or playing around in the subtle

world. He phoned me on his phoneplant a few days ago. He sounded ghastly, like he was drugged."

"I understand that it's only a makeshift interface. It isn't any reflection on how he really is."

"Yes, but why did it have to sound so ghastly?"

"You're reading too much into it. Perhaps I could try ringing him."

"It's almost impossible to get through to him. They have answering machines in there as well. I can't bear it. It's like a boat that's lost its anchor and is drifting off to sea. Isn't there anything I can do, Ian? Anything that I can do to bring him back to reality?"

Ian was tempted to ask her what she meant by 'reality' but thought better of it. He could hear her quietly sobbing.

"Emm, would you like to come round for something to eat, Sally? We could talk about it a bit more. I could rustle something together." Ian felt the need for her company. In a way, they had both been abandoned. He found Sally very beautiful. Perhaps something might develop between them.

Ian was horrified at these thoughts. Sonja had only just left and here he was, making designs on another woman, a woman who was, officially at least, still in a relationship with his friend.

"Thanks, Ian. That's very sweet of you but I need an early night tonight. I have an agenda to prepare for Saturday's CCI meeting and a report to prepare for Mahawisteria.

"I've also decided to leave Darling Decors at the end of this week." This came as no surprise to Ian as Sally spent most of her time on CCI activities.

"How do you feel about that?"

"Sad, especially since it takes me physically away from Bob. But what else can I do? We're to begin designing the specs for blasted biochips. This is Bob's great brainchild. I'd be contributing directly to what I'm fighting against. And apart from that, the office isn't pleasant anymore. It's like being with zombies. Even the new girl that took over from Bob. She seems sweet but I can hardly get a word out of her.

"And the smell! The plantees aren't concerned with personal hygiene and she has the typical plantee glassy stare. You're talking to her but she obviously isn't there, caught up with something or other in her head. I'm not sure that she's even registered me. Camomile isn't so bad. He hasn't let the plants take him over completely."

"The meditation helps him."

"You think so? Do you really think that meditation can help people control the plants?"

"Definitely. It's why Mahawisteria wasn't so bothered about the plants at first. He had faith in the meditation."

"Faith? Is meditation about faith." Sally's bitterness was coming to the fore.

"Not in that sense." Ian didn't want to pursue this discussion. "Look, Sally, I'll see you at the meeting on Saturday. Go to work tomorrow and try to see Bob. Tell him to ring me."

"I still don't know what to do about him, Ian."

What could he say? What did she want him to say. They'd been through this already. "Call me anytime, Sally. And drop by anytime that you like." Ian felt a little anxious about his motives.

Sally hung up disconsolately.

The doorbell rang. "Express delivery for Mr Robert Bowley." Two African security men were at the door. One of them was holding a small package and the other held a carboned form. Ian told them that Mr Bowley was at his office and rather than leave the package with him they followed Ian's directions to Darling Decors Ltd.

Meghaclematis lay back on his bed and closed his eyes. Using his meditation techniques he relaxed his body and focused his mind on an image of a clear blue sky stretching to infinity in all directions.

So what if I've lost my job? So what if people no longer wanted to listen to gross music, especially *live* gross music, especially *my* live gross music. I can accept this. This is evolution, man, and to survive I must adapt. And that's what I'm doing man. Adapting. Quietly now. Quiet.

Meghaclematis took a very deep breath and exhaled completely. He let the paleness of the visualised sky soothe him. He imagined a bloom of purple clematis blossoming out of the empty blueness. He imagined other heads of clematis blooming from the stalk and then he imagined more stalks bursting into bloom. In this way his sky filled with clouds of clematis. 'Cloud of clematis' - this was the meaning of his name. He kept the visualisation going for about ten minutes and then he willed the blooms to slowly disappear until there was only one head of clematis left. This then curled itself into a bud and popped into nothing. The clear blue sky remained.

And now to the business.

Meghaclematis imagined a vast disc in his blue sky. A fierce demon with bulging eyes and two massive outwardly curved top canine teeth was standing behind the disk clutching it in taloned claws. The demon was surrounded by a halo of smoke and flame.

The disc was crossed into four quarters, each quarter a different colour and containing an image depicting a season of the year. He imagined the four quarters enlarging with a white circular space appearing in the very centre. In this white space he imagined a jukebox. He held the complete image for a minute - the jukebox surrounded by the four seasons and these in turn clasped by the ferocious demon. He focused on the jukebox and this immediately filled his field of vision. He examined the jukebox display and this in turn filled his field of vision in all directions.

Jazz, he said to himself. And there was the jazz section. Armstrong, Louis.

Ahh, Satchmo. Meghaclematis's anticipation was peaking. He was going to listen to every recording by Louis Armstrong in chronological order. It was all here. He looked for the

code for the one he wanted and then entered it on a panel of buttons beneath the display. It took a short while for the music to be relayed. In the meantime, he drew back his field of vision so that he could see the complete image once again.

He focused on the autumn quarter and activated it by imagining himself disappearing into it.

He shivered. He felt a sharpness and a clarity, a sublime good to be alive feeling. He could hear Satchmo's trumpet but the experience of the sound was secondary to the feelings that he realised were those that first gave birth to the sound. Meghaclematis was crying now, crying at the expressiveness, the vital energy, the desire to reach out and touch. He was experiencing what Satchmo experienced when he played. And it was beautiful.

Meghaclematis was whitewater rafting on an ethereal river of emotion. Every nuance of the music was enhanced with autumnal vigour and poignancy. Every note was experienced in absolute freshness and carried within it a world of meaning. Each world brought with it in turn a sense of complete affirmation and with this affirmation the secret of the Universe was laid bare.

His body was integrated into the music - the pumping of his blood, the beat; his physiology, the harmony and his emotional life was the melody. The pattern, the correspondence, was complete. And yet, as complete and as fulfilling as each nuance was, they contained within them the seed, the seed of the next note, the next nuance, the seed of potential revelation. Although Meghaclematis felt that he was already experiencing the ultimate revelation, he knew that he was only experiencing as much as he could handle. The potential for revelation was limitless. Each according to what he can drink and Meghaclematis's cup was full. He had ascended to the top of the ladder and he dimly perceived that this ladder was only the first rung of another ladder which eventually reached beyond infinity. This was as it should be and then he felt himself breaking through to yet another level of revelation, a new limit, and this was more than enough.

No more.

The music stopped and he lay on his bed looking in absolute silence at the visualisation, at the juke box, the wheel of the seasons, and at the demon grasping it from behind. The demon was in flames, black smoke billowing all about it and in silence. Meghaclematis lost any sense of himself. The visualisation was all there was.

Sally stared at the girl at Bob's old desk. Sandra was her name and that was all that Sally knew about her. She had tried to make contact but Sally might as well not exist as far as Sandra was concerned. She was young and should have been pretty but she had bags under her eyes and a premature haggard look to her. She would stare at her screen and every now and again a broad smile would light up her face and sometimes she would laugh out loud. She gave Sally the creeps.

Sally looked at her own screen. According to her last project review some weeks ago with Bob she should have been finishing 'The Adventures of Harry the Hairy Sofa', the sequel

to her first book. But what was the point now? Even if her heart was in it, there is no way that it was going to be published, at least not on paper. Maybe the plantees will be able to download books into their heads in the near future, hers included, but she really didn't want to know. She'd finished the agenda for the next CCI meeting and written a letter to the American president.

She looked around the office. Sara and Stephen had resigned. They'd been 'recalled' with all the other Survivalists. Sally had never considered throwing her lot in with the Survivalists as a serious option. The CCI had provided her with the calling that she'd needed even though it was now beginning to look pretty hopeless. In any case, she couldn't leave her invalid mother. Although in theory any prim could become a Survivalist, it was widely known that in practice you had to be fit and healthy. The Survivalists did not accept the lame and the sick into their ranks.

Linda was looking different these days. There was a softness in her eyes that Sally had never noticed before. Her hard edge had disappeared. Sally watched Linda get up, go over to the coffee machine, place a cup on Camomile's desk another for Sandra and then take one for herself. Sally had been neglected.

"Thanks, Linda," said Sally. Linda didn't hear at first. She looked up with surprise.

"Sorry, Sally, I didn't know that you wanted any."

"You didn't ask."

"I forgot."

Of course you did, thought Sally. It's less effort to buzz somebody on your phoneplant than it is to make the effort to operate your vocal chords and talk to a prim.

"What would you like? Tea?"

"It doesn't matter. You've changed, Linda. What's happened?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of."

"You seem different, as if you've lost your anger."

"I never saw myself as an angry person. If I was angry then it was probably because of Flare and he's keeping himself more to himself these days."

It was true. Like most of the other plantees he had been disappearing into his own world. He was disappearing from the office for longer and longer periods and some days he hadn't been coming in at all. Sally was becoming quite worried about him because it wasn't like Simon not to come into work. He'd much rather sit around the office than his apartment and yet he had missed yesterday and he hadn't come in this morning.

"Where is he?"

Linda shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps Camomile knows."

She nodded towards Camomile who was hunched up over his machine.

"Would you contact him for me?" It was dispiriting trying to contact a plantee, trying to get them to pay attention to you. The easiest way was through another plantee. Linda's eyes faded for a few moments and then Camomile spoke.

"Sally, my love! How are you? You needn't have gone through Linda, you know. I'm not going to forget my favourite -" Camomile stopped himself just in time.

"Prim," said Sally, completing his sentence for him. She burst into tears. She felt rejected and isolated.

Camomile rebuked himself. He leaned over and took her hand in his.

"I'm an unfeeling idiot," he said. "I didn't mean anything derogatory by it."

"I know. It's a statement of fact. I don't know what you plantees are experiencing in your heads but look around you, Camomile. This place is dead." Linda and Sandra were completely oblivious to their conversation. "Whatever faults there might have been with us as a team at least there was some kind of corps d'esprit, some kind of... humanity." Sally opened her drawer to look for a tissue. "I'd better get this cleared out, I suppose. After all, today's my last day," she sobbed.

Camomile's heart went out to her. He'd forgotten it was Sally's last day. Or maybe he'd never known in the first place. "Let's go for a walk." He put his arm around her. Sally noticed that he no longer wore perfume.

Outside, it was a bright spring day and once out of the office, Sally's spirits lifted a little. Camomile looked around. It had been a while since he had taken any notice of his environment and he shuddered.

"Don't you think that the streets are unusually quiet these days?" she asked.

"I can't say that I've been paying much attention but now that you mention it... I don't suppose that people need to get out and about much anymore. Another advantage of the plants - reducing traffic congestion." He smiled at his attempt at levity but he could see that Sally wasn't amused.

"There are rumours that people are dying of malnutrition. They go into a plant-induced coma and don't come out of it."

"That's just -" and Camomile stopped himself once again.

"I know," said Sally. "It's primprop. That's what you plantees call it, don't you? You think that it's just CCI propaganda."

Camomile didn't answer her point. "What's this all about? Why have you become like this, Sally?"

Sally looked at the ground. "Don't you think that it's possible? Don't you think that people could be dying of malnutrition? I mean this joybox seems to be rather potent. To use another primpropism, don't you think that it's possible that people could be becoming joybox junkies?"

Camomile considered what Sally was saying. "Yes. You're right. It's entirely possible. To be honest, I had wondered how some people's minds might cope with the joybox. It's a very powerful experience and it could conceivably lead to something like drug addiction although I've found that each successive press of the joybox leads to a less intense experience." Camomile paused and in a quieter voice he said,

"The teleplants are probably more dangerous."

"What was that?"

"The teleplants."

"You have them already? A television inside your head?"

"Mmm. You know, Sally, with each new biochip development, I've tried to look at it from your point of view. Is this really the evil that you say it is? I wasn't so sure about the joybox at first but then as I said, its effect doesn't retain its initial potency. I feel the same way about the teleplant. It's extremely potent. For example, you know how people used to get addicted to soap operas on the gross telly?" Sally nodded. She used to really enjoy her soaps, sitting there in the evenings with her mum and her cats.

"Well, it's just like that on the subtle telly except more so. There's a process which I've heard about called autosimulation. It's similar to what happens when you begin to fall asleep. Hundreds of images flip through your mind until it hooks onto an image and identifies with it completely. This usually launches you into a dream. It's the same when you switch on your inner telly to watch your favourite soap. What happens is that you tend to identify with one particular character. It's like an extremely vivid dream. You become assimilated into it. This is all very well, but it strikes me that a weak personality might have trouble getting a sense of himself afterwards and might not be able to bring himself out of it. So yes, I do agree, that malnutrition is a possibility but the nutripills should alleviate it. There go some now."

An African rode by on a scooter. He could have been a pizza delivery man but instead he was delivering nutripills and plants both to private addresses and to public dispensing machines. The plants had become freely available and as people were tending to minimise their time in the gross reality, the nutripills had been developed so that they didn't need to waste any time in the gross reality preparing food.

"All your daily nutrition in a pill. Great, isn't it?"

Sally wasn't impressed. "Who's behind it all?" she asked.

"Why should there be anybody behind it?"

"Somebody must be making something out of it."

"What's the point of money now? That's part of the beauty of it. We're evolving, Sally. We're evolving beyond the need for money. Soon we'll all be artists. I think that even you and maybe even Mahawisteria will have to acknowledge this. We're evolving beyond the limitations of our body into the realm of pure mind. And your boyfriend - I really must take my hat off to him - is playing an instrumental part in this evolution. "We don't design furniture for Rooms anymore. What we design now can be chipped right into somebody's head. Today is your last day but the gross office is finished anyway. We'll be doing our work on subtle computers very shortly. The human race is entering a new level of experience but you and a few others have opted out. Sure there are dangers with the plants but this is what the CCI should be about - helping the plantees to avoid these dangers. You know, I've heard all your concerns and worries about the plants but your arguments have never withstood logical scrutiny."

They entered Crowleigh Park and sat down on a bench. Some of the other benches were occupied by prostrate bodies, the owners of which were lost in some subtle world.

"I don't think that it's about logic," said Sally. "I look at what's going on, for example look at these people on the benches, and it's just obvious to me that something is seriously wrong. If I see something that others don't then what can I do about it? I've heard that people are dying in London. That tells me that something is wrong. Where's the need for logic? I mean I haven't seen Simon for two days. That indicates to me that something is wrong although nobody else seems bothered. When was the last time that you saw him?"

"Er, I don't actually remember."

"Can you ring him?"

"I'll check the directory. Wait a mo." Camomile closed his eyes and dialled on his subtle phone. "There's no answer."

"Try Stella." Camomile called up his subtle phone again. He was becoming a little anxious.

"She hasn't seen him for a couple of days either."

"We're going round to his place right away." It was a half-hour walk. Camomile didn't really want to go but again he felt that Sally should be given the benefit of the doubt. He also felt guilty about not realising that it was her last day.

They arrived at Simon's address. The street looked abandoned. Nobody answered the door.

"Break it down," ordered Sally.

"Do you really think that that's the best of course of action. Perhaps we -"

"Break it down. I'll take full responsibility."

Camomile braced himself. He'd never broken through a door before. He threw his weight at it and was surprised at his feebleness. He tried several more times to no effect and then tried kicking the lock with the flat of his foot. It began to give and he eventually managed to shoulder his way in.

Sally rushed passed him. She knew immediately by the stench that her worst fears were confirmed. She went into the living room. There was a pile of accordions lying in front of the fireplace. Apart from that the room was strewn with the remnants of old microwave meals and empty bottles. She was facing the back of an armchair. She felt sick but stifled it.

A dehydrated Simon was slumped in the chair.

"Is he dead?" asked Camomile who was shocked by what he saw.

"I think he's comatose. Phone an ambulance. I'll get some water." Sally moistened Simon's parched lips before attempting to pour some water into him. He stunk of dried sweat and stale faeces.

"There's no answer," said Camomile hoping that they could leave straight away.

"Then keep trying. In the meantime we wait." An ambulance finally came. "I'm going to the hospital with him. Tell Bob what's happened and that I'll come by later on to pick up my things."

"I'm not sure that I think much of your 'evolution'," Camomile.

Camomile returned to the office. It had been a very disturbing experience. It was terrible but was it really the

fault of the plants? Should cars have been banned because of the number of accidents that they were involved in? Should alcohol have been banned because some people became alcoholics? It was a fact that some people weren't going to be able to cope. It may sound heartless but this was the way of evolution; some people simply weren't going to be able to adapt. It wasn't that he wanted to write off a part of the human race but the solution wasn't to neutralise the plants but to educate people to live with them. This was really what the CCI should be doing. People needed to develop some form of mental control if they are going to survive. He wondered about the possibility of setting up something on the subtle level, perhaps a CCI phone helpline for example. Maybe he could attend a CCI meeting and make this suggestion. In this way he could give Sally some moral support.

Camomile felt better, his conscience had been appeased.

When Sally arrived at the hospital, Simon's body was directed to ward 12. "I think that it's malnutrition," she said to a nurse who was studying a clipboard. "Is there a doctor around?" The nurse was preoccupied and ignored her. Sally assumed that she was a plantee and when the nurse turned to walk away Sally lost it.

"Now just a bloody minute!" she shouted. "Don't ignore me and answer my questions!"

The nurse stopped in her tracks and looked at her. Her face was pale and her expression stony. "No, there aren't any doctors around. Yes, it's malnutrition. His symptoms are the same as every other patient in this hospital, all one hundred and ten of them. Your friend will receive a course of salt solutions and nutripills. He'll be discharged in a few days.

Now excuse me."

Sally rushed back to the office. She had suddenly become concerned about Bob. After all, she'd only seen him in passing during the last two weeks. She went straight to his office. He was lying on his desk. Was he comatose or was he just in a plantee trance? She couldn't tell. She went to get Camomile. She shook him back to the gross world and brought him to Bob. "What do you think? He's awfully pale and his cheeks seem a bit sunken. I think that we'd better get an ambulance. It looks the same as Simon." Sally was on the verge of hysteria.

"I'll see if I can get through to him on the phone," said Camomile, sinking into Bob's chair. He was feeling very tired. He closed his eyes and concentrated. After a while his features relaxed and a broad smile appeared. Some muscles on Bob's face twitched. That means that he probably isn't in a coma, thought Sally.

Camomile, still smiling, somewhat smugly, opened his eyes.

"Well?"

"Our man is fine. The computer plants are on the way and he's going to announce the new arrangements at the beginning of next week." Camomile was almost giggling, like a child anticipating Christmas.

"You mean to say that all you spoke about was your damned biochips? He's not well you damned fool! Look at him! Can't you see? Didn't you tell him that I was here?" Sally felt as though Camomile had delivered her a body blow.

"Er, well actually Sally, it wasn't easy to talk to him. He was in conference with the directors of The Plant Plant and I was interrupting." Camomile realised that his manner had been perhaps a little inconsiderate but he wasn't sure that he deserved to be the object of such wrath.

Sally wanted to leap at him and pound him into pulp. She wanted to vent all her frustration on him but she could see that he was contrite. "Has Bob forgotten that this is my last day at work? We had originally planned to go back to my place later on."

"I'm sure that he hasn't forgotten that you're leaving," said Camomile, lying. "It's just that time is different for a plantee. It's actually quite difficult not only to keep track of the hours but also of the days. We don't need so much sleep and we tend to develop our own internal individual cycles. A plantee's sense of time is rather amorphous."

This was the way things had been going. Regular hours had all but disappeared.

Stella came in carrying a package. "This was delivered for Bob earlier on. We're supposed to open it."

The package contained a supply of nutripills and a bottle of water with Bob's name engraved on it. There was also a card - 'With the compliments of The Plant Plant Inc'. They left the pills and the water next to him on his desk.

This was a watershed for Sally. She no longer had any doubts. The Survivalists were right. This was indeed the end, the end of the world. She dismissed Camomile's notions of evolutionary progress. There was nothing that she could do about it but as long as she was alive she determined that she was going to keep Bob alive as well.

"Can you leave a message for Bob from me, Camomile?"

"Sure, I'll leave it on his answering machine."

"Tell him to contact me as soon as his conference is over. Tell him it's urgent."

"It's done."

Sally turned to leave.

"Oh Sally," called Camomile, still trying to make amends. "I've had some thoughts about the CCI operating on the subtle level which I'd like to put to you."

"There's a CCI meeting at the Meditation Centre tomorrow night at seven. See me beforehand about it and I'll put it on the agenda."

Sally's face was blank and impassive as she left. Camomile still felt that he'd let her down badly.

Mahawisteria's teachings and philosophy left Sally cold. She'd had a good look at them and she was sure that they contained a lot of good ideas but they still left her cold. Life was something that you just had to get on with. It was difficult

enough as it was without having to come to terms with a foreign philosophy and trying to fit one's life into it.

All the same, she liked the FOB Meditation Centre. The main lounge area was tastefully set out and the meditation room itself was very tranquil. She was sitting there now by herself before the others arrived for the CCI meeting. It was the practice before every CCI meeting for everybody to sit quietly for ten minutes, a practice which Sally thought should have been adopted by Darling Decors before the team meetings. Simon might not have had such a rough ride.

Simon, what's going to become of you? Perhaps you should move in with me as well as Bob? Once I'm sure of Bob then maybe I can do the same thing for you.

Sally had made Bob promise that when he was staying over with her, which until recently had been most of the time, that he remain on the gross level but it seemed now that he had forsaken her completely for the subtle level.

Sally looked at the big golden Buddha figure sitting in cross-legged meditation at the end of the room, it's pupils only partly visible beneath heavy eyelids. She remembered the very first time that she'd set eyes on the statue. It had struck her as alien and grotesque but it had grown on her and it now embodied that special feeling of tranquillity that she experienced at the Meditation Centre.

She started as a thought suddenly entered her head, a thought that shattered the settling peace.

Were you a plantee, Mr Buddha? What kind of world were you living in behind these droopy eyelids? You rejected this world, left your wife and son and punished yourself to the point of death in order to escape from it and finally you went on a hunger strike - you refused to carry on with the work of living until you had got what you wanted. You probably resembled a far gone plantee, emaciated and absorbed in some other world, but you came out of it at the other end only to try to lead others away from this world into the realm that you had experienced.

Just like Camomile tried to do with me.

Perhaps your implants were ideas, ideas that you used to create another world, your Nirvana. Was it a fantasy world or was it somehow more real than the gross one that the rest of us lived in?

Sally knew how a plantee would have answered this question with respect to the plants. The subtle world was more real, more perfect. This was what Camomile had meant by evolution. The plantees were evolving from the gross to the subtle, from the less real to what they believed was more real. Were they right? Was she, as a prim, a dinosaur that would soon be extinct?

But who was it who was dying? Not far away was a hospital full of plantees who were dying, not prims. And how many were lying dead and decaying in their homes like Simon might have been. This wasn't evolution. It was folly. There had been no campaign of resistance in the media or anywhere else, only a few eccentric voices like her CCI. People really thought that they were stepping into some promised land by swallowing these chips.

Sally was agitated now and stood up. She noticed a figure seated in meditation in the recess along from the dais. It was Mahawisteria with a blanket draped over his shoulders. He opened his eyes and looked at her. Sally said,

"Sorry, I didn't realise there was anybody else in here."

"You've arrived early for the meeting," said Mahawisteria.

"I like to take time to prepare myself and to make sure that the meetings are going to be as effective as possible."

"I hope that you don't mind if I take the opportunity to make a personal announcement this evening."

"Of course not." There was something different about Mahawisteria. He seemed subdued, more relaxed, more human. "After all, you're the co-founder of the CCI."

They walked through to the lounge and Sally put the kettle on. Mahawisteria continued,

"Recent events have prompted me to review my situation here. I have had to consider where I can be most efficacious and as a consequence I have decided to go back to India. However, the only flight that Pansymitra has been able to track down for me leaves later this evening so this is the last opportunity that I'll have to see all of you before I leave."

Sally wasn't happy about this. Her meeting would be hijacked. "Some of those present are bound to be upset and it will detract from the focus of our meeting. Perhaps the CCI meeting should be cancelled and you can be alone with your FOB?"

"No, don't cancel it. The Blossoms know already and I would like to take my leave of the others personally."

"It's very sudden."

"My decision is determined purely by circumstances. Unfortunately the commercial airlines are no longer operating. Pansymitra has secured a seat for me on a private flight."

"Another nail in the coffin..." mused Sally. Mahawisteria looked at her quizzically. "...the breakdown in transport schedules, it's another nail in the coffin of society. Our society is dying. I don't blame you for giving up on it."

Bob sat on the edge of Sally's bed, his eyes closed. He felt heavy and groggy. It took an effort of will to re-enter the gross world. It was an effort that he made purely on Sally's behalf.

With his eyes still closed, he stretched out an arm to where the dispenser should be and scooped out the two nutripills. He put them in his mouth and then reached out for his bottle of water. He swallowed the water and pills and then made the effort to open his eyes. He pressed the lever on the dispenser and two more nutripills were released in readiness for the next time.

I'm living with Sally now, he reminded himself. He looked abstractedly at his pale, scrawny body and scratched his beard. I'd better get myself together. He took a few moments to focus his will and then went to the bathroom and showered.

He decided to keep the beard.

With a towel wrapped around him, he walked into Sally's living room. The evening sunlight was shining brightly through the windows. He closed the curtains. Sally's cats were lying in a huddle on an armchair. Bob didn't know what they were at first. He almost sat on them thinking they were a cushion. He sat on another armchair instead and looked around Sally's living room. It was crammed with pot plants and knick-knacks. The plants seemed artificial although they weren't. What an effort Sally must put into maintaining all of this! Bob giggled. He was tickled by Sally's eccentricity. It was part of her appeal.

It was something of a relief not to be stimulated for a while. The passive pleasures of the joybox had worn thin and become habitual. Bob's real high came from creativity, from his work and he was truly excited by current developments. He had recently swallowed a masterchip. This chip had come out hot on the heels of the computer chip. With the masterchip the biochip development program had climaxed. The masterchip not only made all previous chips redundant but it was also futureproof. All new biochip designs would now be programmed directly into the masterchip and the masterchip would then produce a 'virtual biochip' which would emulate the functioning of an actual physical biochip.

Bob picked up the remote control unit and switched the television on. Flicking through the channels all he found was static. He checked the aerial. It was plugged in. The TV had gone subtle. They had stopped transmitting on the gross level. Bob remembered that Sally's invalid mother was also in the flat. He knocked on her bedroom door and, not hearing a reply, he looked in. She was fast asleep.

He went through to the bedroom and lay down. He would much prefer to watch his favourite soap on the subtle telly anyway. The phenomenon of autosimulation made all the difference. Subtle space allows for a more complete identification with the objects of mental perception. Just as time is fuzzier so too is space and as a consequence, the boundaries of the ego became less well-defined. Hence the immediacy and the vividness of subtle experience - the music, for example, and the joybox - and now the television.

The television was the first instance of head furniture. It didn't need to be constantly visualised. The TV chip actually visualised it for you although it was a function that the masterchip would now appropriate just as it would soon be visualising the products of Darling Decors Ltd. Perhaps the company should now be called Darling Decors Unlimited. After all, they needn't confine themselves to ornaments. Whole houses could be designed, whole streets and even landscapes. In fact, whole new worlds could be created in inner space.

Not only that, Darling Decors workers would not only be designing products for subtle space but they would also now be working in subtle space as well, using the computer chip until they'd all had their masterchips installed. Subtle space was becoming increasingly independent of gross space.

Bob activated his subtle telly and autosimulated into the role of the son of a rich mineral magnate declaring his

homosexuality in the face of the prejudices of his neurotic, power-obsessed family.

Even before the meeting began, Sally could feel the heaviness in the air on the part of the FOB members present. Mahawisteria was leaving but it wasn't just that. Some of the Flowers, including some of the Blossoms had gone comatose and been hospitalised. There was more than heaviness in the air. There was desolation. The world as they knew it had come to an end. The FOB was broken, its seeds fallen on stony ground and choked by weeds.

Sally still had her hopes for the CCI. It would need to redefine its purpose. Camomile had had a point. Perhaps the CCI should also be operating on the subtle level as well as the gross, maintaining a link, a channel of communication between the two, in which case she would need to persuade some more of the non-comatose FOB plantees to work with her. Sally looked around the room.

"Has anybody seen Camomile ... or Meghaclematis?" Nobody responded. Camomile had promised to be here. Typical chipheads, she thought. They've probably lost track of the time. "Okay everybody, let's get down to business. We have a lot to attend to this evening. Ratnadaisy and Rose have just returned from London. What's the situation there? Did you see our MP?"

Ratnadaisy and Rose had obviously had a harrowing experience. Ratnadaisy was particularly ill-at-ease.

"Well actually, yes, we saw him. More than we wanted to, in fact. Er..."

Rose butted in. "Julian Sands was in his office at the House of Commons. We walked right in. Nobody stopped us or questioned us. Sands was lying naked against his desk, dribbling and grinning like an idiot." Ratnadaisy was blushing furiously. Rose continued: "Judging by his condition he was probably locked into a pornographic autosimulation. They were all like that."

"Naked?" asked Ian.

"No, plantees. London's dead. Everybody's chipped out. The only traffic on the road is Africans, mainly Sudanis for some reason, delivering nutripills and water bottles. Some of them have become plantees as well. There were quite a lot of bodies lying in the parks and in some streets. They might have been in a plantee trance, a coma or dead. It was difficult to tell."

"So if an enemy power is behind this then now would be a good time to make their move," somebody said.

"What would be the point?" asked Chittalily. "There's nothing to be gained."

"Did you visit any hospitals?" Sally asked.

"Yes, but most of them are closed. Some large warehouses have been converted into mass treatment centres for the comatose. Not everybody has taken the full course of biochips and some nurses, prims and some of the military were providing care and basic services."

Without any warning Rose's face cracked and she broke into tears. "How could it have happened so quickly?" she cried.

Lotus put a hand on Rose's shoulder in an attempt to comfort her. "Life seemed so steady and normal and now suddenly it's ended. What's going to happen to us?"

A few others expressed their grief, especially those who had plantee friends who had become comatose. Ian's heart went out to Rose but at the same time he felt that new opportunities had been created, exciting new possibilities were in the air.

"I've heard talk of a military takeover," somebody said.

"My impression was," said Ratnadaisy, "that the military have their hands full keeping basic services operational. The military has been as severely affected by the plants as any other organisation. The main efforts, however, are in the distribution of nutripills and bottled water. This seems to be very well organised. The nutripills are manufactured in Asia somewhere and delivered to various ports for distribution around the country."

"Somebody must be behind all this organisation," said Chittalily.

Stella's boyfriend, Richard, spoke next. "As you know, Crowleigh University played a part in the development of the biochips. I obtained a list of all Plant Plant Inc addresses in England and over the last week I visited every one of them.

They were all closed. All I found was a supply depot. It was staffed by one Sudani. The only information that he had was when the next shipment of nutripills was due and a dispatch rota for each day."

"Why didn't you burn it to the ground?"

"It was only nutripills and water. The last of the biochips have already been distributed. There is no need for another biochip. A masterchip has been created and is in the final stages of distribution. This operates on a deeper level of neural processing removing the effort of visualisation altogether. It's difficult for us primis to appreciate the implications of this. Perhaps if Meghaclematis or Camomile were here they could give us some idea."

"It's academic," said Chittalily. "It only confirms that the situation is unlikely to change for the better. What I'd like to know is if there is anybody behind this and if so what their motive is. It's obviously not money."

"We can find out now," said Richard. "I have the number of one of the PPI directors. It was on a letter that I found at the University. Stella phoned him earlier but he didn't want to speak to us at the time. However, Stella managed to persuade him to speak to us en masse this evening over the phone." He nodded at Stella who dialled the number on a gross phone and switched the speaker on. Everybody listened anxiously to the ringing tone. Anticipation gave way to disappointment as it continued to ring for over three minutes. "It takes time," Stella said. "They experience time differently in their heads."

It rang for another few minutes and then somebody answered. There was only the sound of static.

Stella spoke into the phone. "Hello, Mr Dalrieth? Mr Dalrieth, are you there?"

A small voice from incredibly far away answered through the static. "Hello...hello. Who's there?"

"It's Stella. I'm with the Campaign for Cerebral Integrity. You said that you would speak to us this evening."

"...Ah, Stellaaa ... beautiful name ... evoking the stars ... so full of promise... An angel you are...."

Stella shifted uneasily. "Mr Dalrieth -"

The voice cut in. "My dear, I am no longer Mr Dalrieth. I am Omshshoomlaalala-ithmunavowan. You are addressing an Agent of Heaven." The voice chuckled haltingly. "We should be talking in Heaven, my dear, not like this."

"We'd like to ask about The Plant Plant Inc."

"...It has served its purpose. It is no longer relevant and has ceased to function."

Chittalily broke in. "Why did you do it? Many people have died. Why did you create and develop the biochips?"

"... the needs of Heaven ...out of Love ..."

"Do you know how many people have died as a result of your...your infernal inventions?"

"...it is difficult to be precise. I cannot give a specific figure for the area referred to as the British Isles...terrestrially ... the figure is eighty-five per cent..."

"Eighty-five per cent?"

Silence.

"...please...take your...masterchips... your destiny awaits you."

"You mean eighty-five per cent of the human population?"

There was no reply. The ensuing silence, accentuated by the empty static, lasted indefinitely. The human constitution is not able to respond appropriately to such figures.

Mahawisteria replaced the receiver silencing the static. In retrospect the telephone message had had a dream-like quality. How could it be taken seriously?"

"He's nuts," somebody said without conviction.

During this period two others had entered the room. They had cycled far. They were Survivalists from Buxmead who had been sent by Mitchell Paragon personally. Mitchell Paragon was now based at Buxmead and was offering non-plantee members of the CCI refuge as Survivalists any time that they wanted. It was an option that excited Ian and which was immediately accepted by some of the others. This angered Sally. The CCI was needed more than ever. People in Crowleigh and elsewhere needed help. But she said nothing.

Ian produced some tea and biscuits. Sally took the opportunity to invite Mahawisteria to say what he wanted to.

"Now that we have some idea of the enormity of the situation here in England, one wonders how much worse it might be in Asia. The oblivion offered by the masterchip would be no less attractive, I fear, to Easterners than it would be to Westerners. Some of my worst fears were allayed by Ratnadaisy's report. That is, there were no indications of looting and barbarism. As you all know, I founded a school for boys in the North of India and frankly, I'm worried about them and their community. It is there that my duty lies.

"I did not give due attention to the biochips when they first appeared and in this it could be said that my judgement was flawed. Indeed, of all of us, Sally appears to have had the clearest appreciation of their import.

"I consider my mission in the West to have been a success only to the extent to which some of you have grasped the essence of the Buddha's teaching. If possible, the Flowers of the Buddha should continue to function as well as it can and to this end I nominate Irisananda as my successor. The Flowers of the Buddha must determine its own future."

"We are going to need all the help that we can get, Mahawisteria," said Sally, finding some of Mahawisteria's sentiments inappropriate. "It would be better if you didn't go. We need to help the plantees and coordinate the prims. There must be groups like ours all over the country. TV broadcasts could be made, liaisons with the military. Who knows, perhaps a central authority has been set up to coordinate all of this but in Crowleigh alone there must be hundreds of people who need our help."

"This is all well and good but who is looking after my boys in India? I must go."

Sally felt that Mahawisteria had written them off and as a consequence she concluded that he was no longer relevant.

"It's late now. I propose that we retire for the night and meet again tomorrow morning to draw up an action plan."

"Um, excuse me, Sally, but what about the Survivalists' offer? Perhaps we should discuss it."

"I assumed that it was out of the question - who can we help in Buxmead but ourselves? It doesn't need to be discussed but if anybody wants to go to the Survivalists then let them go."

Pansymitra appeared with some suitcases, ready to drive Mahawisteria to the airfield. People gradually left. Ian waited behind and walked Sally home - they didn't say anything - and then returned to his empty flat.

After feeding her cats Sally went into the bedroom to check on Bob. She smiled. He still had a damp towel wrapped around his waist. He was lying perfectly supine and although he had the look of distant absorption typical of the plantee trance there was also a look of childlike innocence.

The TV was still on, displaying only static. Transmission had been terminated! Sally felt a sickening jolt in her belly. Her emotions had grasped the significance of this before her thoughts had. The TV was her invalid mother's lifeline. She rushed into her mother's bedroom. Her mother's TV was still on, displaying static. Her horror deepened when she saw the tell-tale nutripill dispenser and bottle of water next to her bed. Her mother's head was lolling hideously.

Sally curdled inside. This wasn't a coma. Her mother was dead. She'd taken a chip, the masterchip most likely, and the shock had killed her outright. She pressed her mother close to her hoping somehow that she might be able to revive her by imparting some of her own life-energy. Then she carefully released her and fluffed the pillows as though to make her as comfortable as possible. Her mind and emotions numb, she went

back to her own bedroom and lay beside the entranced Bob. Hugging herself close to him for comfort she embraced oblivion.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Ian/Basil woke up next morning he felt elated. Looking for the reason for his elation he found nothing as the memories of last night's CCI meeting came back to him. Why was he feeling so good? Did he not appreciate the tragedy that had befallen not only his friends and acquaintances, not only his countrymen, but perhaps also the whole human race? The weird phone call last night only corroborated what Ratnadaisy and Rose had reported. No TV and no radio, and according to something that Stella had said, all computer communications were about to go subtle as well. As far as anybody knew millions of people had gone into a plantee coma and many millions more had died from the shock of taking the masterchip. There was something unreal about it all which was maybe why he couldn't connect with the situation emotionally.

Or perhaps he was simply evil?

Instead of the heaviness that he usually felt upon awakening, Ian felt light and ready for action. Indeed he'd actually made a decision - he'd decided to join the Survivalists. It made sense any way that you looked at it. He wanted to be with Sonja, he enjoyed being with the Survivalists, and he had some unfinished business with Mitchell Paragon. Mitchell Paragon had not only been proven to be right but he had had a profound spiritual impact on Ian on a spiritual level. The Survivalists had prepared for this time. They had a functioning society which would be largely unaffected by what had happened to the world at large. Ian checked the telephone - it was still working but probably not for much longer. He'd better make some telephone calls.

The still afterimage of the demon remained against the dull blue sky. There was a creaking, gnawing sensation which presented itself as an empty, cavernous sound. A word began to form itself in Meghaclematis's temporarily atrophied consciousness and the word was

...hungry...

His thought processes thawed and gradually began to function. He opened his eyes. Yes, we are back to the Gross, he ascertained. He was sitting on the floor, propped up against a large bean cushion. He was afraid to move because he knew it was going to be painful. He wondered how long he'd been out. However long it was, his flat had been carrying on regardless. He looked around his room as though renewing an old acquaintance. The curtains were open and it looked like it might be late afternoon although it was surprisingly quiet. He moved his head gingerly to the left and gazed into a long mirror which was propped against the wall. He ran his hands through his dreadlocks, large strings of hair coming away in the process.

Uncool, man, uncool.

Lying to his right was the nutripill dispenser, bottled water and a masterchip pill. He swallowed the biochip and along with two nutripills downed the contents of his bottle.

Hey! he thought to himself as though inspired. What I need is a cup of tea.

He staggered up, refilled his bottle from the tap and made himself a cup of tea. It took his eyes a while to focus on the mess inside the fridge. He found an old carton of milk and then thought better of it.

He was interrupted by a drum ratatat accompanied by a periodic ringing noise. Somebody was phoning him, the ratatat being the sound of his subtle phone. Out of habit he was going to answer it subtly but for novelty's sake he decided to answer on the gross machine. He couldn't remember where the telephone was but it shouldn't be difficult to locate - it was the one with the shrill trill. He found it under a pile of old laundry.

"It's Roy the boy, the freak who speak, who dis?"

"Hi Meghaclematis, it's Basil."

"Hey, herb dude, howsit cookin?"

"You're talking on the gross phone?"

"Yeah, why not? You think I'm some kind of chiphead junkie?"

"No, I just thought that it was supposed to be uncool."

"Hey, man, whatever I do is cool. So how're the guys? What's the latest on the domicile front?" The plan had been for Ian, Meghaclematis and Ratnadaisy to move in together. Jim the gardener had dropped out and gone to live with the Survivalists at Buxmead.

"Well, that's what I'm ringing about. Did you hear about last night's CCI meeting?"

"I thought that it was supposed to happen on Saturday."

"That's right and today is Sunday." Meghaclematis did a calculation - he'd been out for three days. "Hello, Meghaclematis, are you still there?"

"Ah ... sure, sure. Just doin' some relative time calculations."

"Right, well, you might not know but the situation seems bad."

"What situation?"

"People are dying. The biochips have proved fatal or near-fatal for the majority of people. This masterchip is definitely a killer."

"Yeah, that's bad." A vague memory presented itself to Meghaclematis. Yes, he did swallow a biochip a few minutes ago and that biochip was in all likelihood this masterchip.

"Fatal, huh?"

"Yes. Not only that but fresh food is no longer available. And the Survivalists have invited any remaining prims to join them at Buxmead. It looks like they were right all along. Mitchell Paragon could be the only one who really understands what's going on and what to do."

"And what about our man? What does he have to say?"

"Mahawisteria? Jesus, Meghaclematis, you're really out of touch. Mahawisteria's gone. He went back to India."

"Gone? Hey, the man can't leave us in our hour of need."

"He has. He's left Irisananda in charge."

"In charge of what? The FOB is nothing without our main man."

"Listen, you know what Mahawisteria taught about personalities. The Flowers of the Buddha is not a personality cult. Irisananda spends all his time in meditation and study. He's more grounded in Buddhism than any of us."

"You're right. For an ex-accountant, he's an okay dude. So what's the game plan?"

"I spoke to Irisananda this morning. He doesn't trust Mitchell Paragon and thinks that it would be best for us to hang in here even if it means living on canned food and nutripills for a while."

"Suits me. Paragon is tuned in but man, what's this about rejecting the lame and the sick? That is definitely uncool."

"You're right." Ian was beginning to feel guilty about his decision, about not staying behind to help. He was being selfish. "But I've decided to go anyway. I feel that I've unfinished business with him, and also, well, there are personal reasons. And maybe in practice they're not so strict about the infirm." Ian thought back to his time at Buxmead. Everybody was fit and healthy. He hadn't seen any old folk there. What happened to a Survivalist when he became old? He had an intuition that the answer was unpleasant. This is something that he would have to deal with when he found out. "It could be what I need. And anyway, what's there to lose? I can always come back if it doesn't work out."

"And what of our fellow Flowers?"

"Some of the women were going to go but they've decided to rally round Irisananda. Er, he it seems that Hyacinth is comatose. Tulsimitra and Virachrysanthemum are dead. I think it was the masterchip."

"Christ."

Ian hated himself. None of this had sunk in. It suited him to take the official Buddhist stance on death, that is, that death is an opportunity for release and as such is a positive experience, an occasion for rejoicing rather than mourning. Ian didn't feel particularly warm to either Virachrysanthemum, the main image of whom was still the overbearing kitchen chef of his first retreat, or Tulsimitra, the reporter, who Ian felt had got what he deserved. This was cruel and uncharitable but Ian had worked with some success to try and like the guy and now part of him was relieved that he no longer had to make the effort.

"Be careful, Meghaclematis."

"I hear you loud and clear." Meghaclematis knew that he had been lucky. The masterchip hadn't killed him. Maybe it hadn't taken effect yet. "Uh.."

"Keep talking to us primis. And keep an eye out for Camomile. He wasn't at last night's meeting either. See if you can contact him."

"Uh.. yeah, the man is tagged." Meghaclematis wanted to tell Basil that he'd taken the masterchip but what was the point? What could Basil do?

"I'm off now. I need to see Sally. There's another CCI meeting at noon. See you there. I'll be leaving for Buxmead after that."

Ian had already packed a rucksack, filled mainly with books. He put some clothes in a bag for Bob which Sally had

asked him to bring over. He left the keys on the table - it didn't seem worth bothering about locks anymore. On the way out he paused and looked into Bob's Room.

So this is it? he thought. This is what it's come to? He'd always imagined that when the time came for either Bob or himself to leave the flat that there would be some kind of celebratory party. It was unbearably sad for it all to just fizzle out this way. He experienced an aching pang in his chest. This is the way of Truth, he told himself. This is the pain of material dissatisfaction that prods us on. Ian sometimes believed that there was a Force in the Universe pushing us towards Enlightenment, whether we wished it or not. This Force was now taking him to the heart of Survivalist country. There wasn't any real choice. It was what he had to do. His parents had joined a Survivalist community up north - this would be the first time that he'd followed in their footsteps.

What did the future hold? Was there a future? What would become of him? What would become of Bob? Bob's Room struck him as something which went beyond absurdity. It was pathetic in its meaninglessness. How could it have meant so much to anybody? Ian was seized by the impulse to smash it up but he let it go. The sheer futility of it all brought tears to his eyes.

He pushed the unlocked door into Sally's flat. Bob was lying naked on Sally's bed, a blanket draped over him. Ian shuddered. Was he dead? In spite of all the death that was happening Ian had yet to see a corpse. No, his friend wasn't dead. There was a faint breathing motion. Ian studied Bob's body. What was the connection between this body and his friend? He couldn't relate to it at all.

Ian looked around for Sally. He found her in her mother's bedroom, sitting silently by her bed. There was an unpleasant smell in the room.

"Hi Sally. I brought those clothes that you wanted for Bob. I left them by his bed. Emm, I'd better just come out and say it but I've decided to accept the Survivalists' offer and throw my lot in with them...I hope you don't mind."

Sally didn't pay him any heed. A Sudani appeared at the door wearing the usual loose blue shirt, trousers and white cap. Sally leapt up and letting loose a blood-curdling scream she attacked him. The Sudani parried her blows and managed to grab her wrists. She began to kick him but he skilfully evaded her kicks as well.

"You killed her! She's dead! She doesn't need any more of your fucking pills!"

"He doesn't speak English, Sally."

Sally had yet to register Ian's presence. She pulled away from the courier and, pointing to her mother, shouted, "Don't you understand? She's dead. Dead! YOU killed her."

The Sudani attempted a placatory smile. "No problem, missy." He pressed a button on a cellular phone and spoke briefly into it. He cagily deposited a box of nutripills on a table by the door and made his exit.

Sally looked on in disbelief and then let out a strangled scream of rage. She picked up the box of pills and hurled them at the back of the departing deliveryman.

"I'm sorry about your mother, Sally." Ian was standing over the body wondering what made it dead. "I didn't realise." He looked over his shoulder. Sally was standing in the doorway, her shoulders rounded and quivering with grief. Ian had never seen anybody look so forlorn or abject. He went to her and embraced her as she fell against him.

"What have I done? Tell me, Ian. What have I done to deserve this? Where's God? Doesn't he care? How can he let this happen? Surely we deserve better than this?" Sally's whimpering was laced with anguish as she attempted to bury her head in Ian's chest. Ian bore the pain and said nothing as he let his own tears quietly flow in response to Sally's wretchedness.

Bob was sitting next to his mother who was in intensive care. She was unconscious and had tubes going in and out of her all over. Bob was holding her hand and talking out loud.

"I don't know if you can hear me, mother. The surgeon said that it's possible that you might be able to hear me even though you can't show it.

"What did you do to deserve me as a son? I guess that by all rights it's me that should be lying there. Throughout your life I've caused you nothing but pain and sorrow and now, for all I know, I might have killed you. Why has it taken this moment for me to be able to tell you that I love you? I want to tell you that I love you, mother, and I don't even know if you can hear me.

"No matter how I behaved, you always cared for me and gave me what I wanted. Yes, I know that it was you who persuaded father to buy the car for me, the car that, in my drunken state, I ran right over you. But please, believe me mother, although I've never been able to show it, I've always thought the world of you."

His mother's EEG flatlined and emitted a continuous tone. A beautiful blond nurse came up behind Bob and placed her comforting hands on his shoulders as he cupped his head in his hands. A doctor switched off the life-support. The sound of swelling violins played and a Turkish gong sounded in the distance. Bob was distraught and disorientated.

Ian was shaking him. Sally was listening to the receiver. "He's not answering," she said. "Is he in the coma?"

"I killed her," Bob moaned. "I killed my own mother. I don't deserve to live."

"It sounds like he's dreaming," said Ian.

"That's probably a good sign. I'll try again later." Sally hung up. "So you're heading off after the meeting?"

"Yes. Chittalily said that he'd drive me to Buxmead."

"I'm truly sorry that you're going. Although you don't often say much, there's something about having you around which is quietly reassuring. You have a presence which isn't properly appreciated until it's gone."

This was the nicest thing that anybody had ever said to Ian. "Uh, well, I could stay if you like, if you think I'm needed."

"Of course you're needed. Everybody is. But you have to do what you have to do."

Ian regretted his decision to go. He wanted Sally to order him to stay but it looked like he'd burned his boats. He looked at the body of Sally's mother again.

"Are you up to this meeting? It's due to start soon."

"No, I'm not up to it but what else is there to do? Bob looks like he's sleeping. Let's go."

"What about your mother?"

"Later. Come on."

As they walked to the meeting, a milkfloat driven by a Sudani, passed by going in the direction of Sally's flat. He's going for the body, thought Ian. He did not share this speculation with Sally.

Bob began to recover from the soap autosimulation. The effects of the soap were wearing off and Bob was regaining his composure in subtle space.

I did not kill my mother, he was telling himself. My name is Steve Arkwright. No it isn't - he's the character in the soap. I'm Bob Bowley and I work for Darling Decors Ltd. He looked around him. What was he doing in Harry's office? At least he thought it was Harry's office - he'd only been in it once, at the time of his interview for his post at Darling Decors Ltd. He went through to where his new colleagues were working. Simon Flare was a great guy. He had been really helpful in helping Bob come up with an idea for his first project - gothic kitchen utensils. And that Nigel, what a card! Bob's enthusiasm for Nigel was tempered somewhat by the fact that he might be gay. Linda was a bit of a harpy. Why was she always having a go at Simon?

The others in the office hardly registered on Bob's consciousness.

Camomile was skirting the Gates of Heaven.

He'd entered an image of his sculpture, the one intended to evoke moments of existential absurdity, into his subtle computer.

He pressed 'summer' on his joybox and in a flash of inspiration he realised that he could reach higher. Why be preoccupied with such a transient quirk of experience as the one which he'd originally intended to convey with his sculpture? There were sublimer moments, sublimer twists of experience, higher consciousnesses that could be expressed. At the same time as this inspiration occurred, the phenomenon of autosimulation kicked in. He automatically identified with the luminescent image of his ovoid sculpture rotating gently on his computer screen, finding himself inside one of the tunnels looking from within at the etchings made by his algorithm. He experienced the moment of absurdity that he'd intended and was pleased at his success.

This moment of pleasure was the first step on the ladder to Heaven. His joy at his success was the seed for an

experience of bliss, a ray of bliss that had begun its long journey from the heart of the Cosmos. Camomile began to retrace this ray, this ray that connected him with the Heart of Creation.

His sculpture became transparent and like dough being transformed into strands of spaghetti, its surfaces split into shimmering 'fibre optic' cables arching upwards in the form of a tornado and from below to form the tornado's reflection. Camomile was sitting in the lotus position at the junction. The lips of the tornado opened wider arching over to join the lips of its mirror image forming a massive doughnut shape, all the while with Camomile at the centre focusing the particular energies of this realm of abstract form the way a rod of metal focuses the electromagnetic energy in an induction coil.

The energies fed him, his form becoming transparent and of the same substance as the 'fibre optic' strands. These strands were the molecules of the Realm of Abstract Form, the realm behind and supporting the Realm of Sensory Form. Camomile spared a thought for his co-Blossom Basil. This was the 'Truth' that he was always going on about but Basil had yet to take the masterchip and so would never find his answer.

Camomile was at the edge of space. He could see the Universe of Form becoming smaller and smaller. It was a shrinking ball of light but there was something wrong. There was a blemish on the light, a black blemish. He focused on it and in doing so he changed direction. Camomile was perturbed. He wanted to wipe the blot away. It grew in size as he moved closer to it. Details were becoming apparent. There was a writhing mass around a central stable column. Camomile fancied that it was a dark reflection of himself sitting at the centre of his ethereal doughnut.

And then a moment of horror. Camomile sensed an alien presence. There was somebody else with him in subtle space! The individual forms of which the dark annulus was comprised came into sharp and sudden focus. He was in the middle of it and all around him were the writhing, oiled forms of an infinite number of naked women, moaning in the throws of orgasmic ecstasy, an inordinate amount of juice streaming from their crotches as they rubbed themselves against a huge central phallus. The phallus was coated in dark oily wax and Camomile found himself embedded in it, pressed in by the primordial energy of female groins and soaked in their lubricant. The energy was thick and dark and raw and it belonged to an ancient, saturnian consciousness.

Camomile was reduced to quivering terror, unable to breathe and just before he blacked out he felt himself ejaculate.

[Nigel didn't look at all well.

"Come on man, wakey wakey." Roy managed to shake him awake. Nigel was groggy.

"What are you doing here? How'd you get in?" Nigel and Roy were good friends, both sharing an interest in jazz. Nigel had recently introduced Roy to meditation at the Crowleigh Buddhist centre but Roy had never been to his flat before.

"Your landlady let me in. I told her it was a matter of life and death."

"What is?"

"Now, man, you've got to listen to me and you'd better listen good. I've got something really important to tell you." Nigel stared at him expectantly.

"I'm listening."

"Emm, look man, you've got to look after yourself."

Nigel waited for Roy to say more but he didn't.

"Is that all?"

"It seemed more important than that. I thought that there was something more but I guess that was the basic message."

"Uh, well, thanks Roy."

"Okay, man, I'm glad you're okay but I'd better split. Me and the guys are putting a new set together for tonight's gig. See you there?"

"Sure, sure."

Nigel accompanied Roy downstairs to the front door. "Eh, go easy on the weed now, okay?"

"Sure man, sure. Ain't nothing I can't handle."

Nigel watched Roy walk down Barrister Row. He felt calmly appreciative of the street and experienced a peculiar presentiment that it shouldn't be there. He made a mental note that this presentiment could be conveyed in an isomorphic redaction, perhaps in a sculpture. This was something to bear in mind for a future project. He suddenly felt very tired and went back upstairs, lay down on his bed and fell asleep.]

A few moments later, in another universe, Camomile rolled over and sat up. He took two nutripills and swallowed some water. The water bottle was now empty. Like a sleepwalker, he walked to his kitchen tap, filled the bottle and placed it on his bedside table before returning to his bed.

Simon Flare had been taken off the drip feed and moved to a giant ward. He was lying on an army camp bed in one of the converted warehouses by the canal. By his bed was a nutripill dispenser and a bottle of water. Under his bed was a chamber pot. This was where Simon Flare's body was but as far as his mind was concerned, he was sitting with his team in the windowless office of Darling Decors Ltd.

[Although it was only mid-morning Simon had had a few from his hip flask. He was feeling at peace with the world and was idly playing with his new black and gold desk nameplate. He liked it. It befitted him as one of the shakers and movers. He was a man of action, one who looked to the future. Take this new chap, Robert Bowley, for example. He needs nurturing. He'll benefit from Simon's experience. Simon had helped him decide on his first project - gothic kitchen utensils. It was an idea that he could have used himself but Simon regarded it as more important to give Robert a leg up. Young Bowley had been lost at first but now Simon had got him up and running.

In an unguarded moment, Simon looked up only to be met by Linda's glower which was directed on him at full intensity. With looks like that, words would soon go out of style. Simon

felt his composure slipping away. He picked up one of the management magazines that was lying on his desk and flipped through it but that provided no refuge. He went to the gents and helped himself to another shot from his flask.]

As far as Sally could tell, the meeting had gone well but she had found it difficult to take an interest. She felt that she was running out of steam. Her motivation was fuelled by anger but the problem was now too great and her anger was beginning to dissipate.

They'd taken her mother's body. What was she going to do with it anyway? She'd have had difficulty disposing of it by herself. She heard a noise in the kitchen and a spark of hope ignited - Bob wasn't in his trance! She dashed through and almost collided with him. He didn't see her. He was clutching his water bottle and returning to bed.

She'd seen this before. The plantees had reduced to a minimum the time they needed to spend in the gross world. Their point of contact with the physical world had been reduced to the basic functions of drinking, urinating and taking the nutripills. They allocated minimal consciousness to these tasks so they appeared to be sleepwalking.

This was, however, when the plantees were in most contact with the gross world. It afforded the best opportunity for making contact. Sally blocked his way and grabbed Bob by the shoulders. His eyelids were almost completely closed, showing only the whites.

"Robert Bowley, listen to me! You are living in a dream. What you are experiencing is not real. You are wasting away. If you don't wake up, you will die." She shook him vigorously. "For God's sake, Bob, wake up! Wake up!"

There was a frown on Bob's face. Was her message going in? She got out of his way and he went back to bed.

The phone rang. It was Chittalily. Both Meghaclematis and Camomile had gone into comas and been taken to a makeshift ward in the warehouse by the canal.

Sally tried to get through to Bob by phone. There was no ringing tone. The gross telephone network had just given up the ghost.

We've been cut off entirely, she thought. It was now no longer possible for a prim to contact somebody on the subtle level. It hadn't been unexpected but how was she going to get through to Bob now? Was he in the plantee coma? He looked just as bad as Simon had looked when she and Nigel had discovered him in his apartment. The only difference was that she had watched Bob's deterioration gradually but there was no doubt about it. Bob was in the plantee coma and what was she going to do about it? She thought of her work for the CCI. What had the CCI achieved? What had *she* achieved? She thought of her resolution - if there was one person that she was going to save out of all this, then it was going to be Bob Bowley. If she couldn't at least save one person then what was the point in the CCI or carrying on even?

And if I can't get through to you from the outside, Mr Bowley, then I'm going to get through to you from the inside. She found the other masterchip that the Sudani had left

behind. Hesitating only to think of her cats, she told herself that she'd be back, and without a further thought she knocked back the masterchip with some water.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A new peace had come with the end of the world. It wasn't only the lack of physical noise but also of subtler noise. Electromagnetic transmissions were now negligible and the psychic pressure from the rest of humanity had all but disappeared.

These were the thoughts occurring to Ian as he sat on the wall outside the Meditation Centre where he was waiting for Chittalily to drive him to Buxmead. The quietness stirred a nervous excitement in him. It was as though the voice of the world could be heard now that the babbling of humanity had stopped. He felt anxious about such feelings and thoughts. Shouldn't he be feeling bad about all the people who were dead and comatose?

"Do you think that all these people are really dead?" he asked Chittalily as they drove along."

"You mean like the PPI director was saying? He seemed really far gone, didn't he? But if you think about it we don't have any evidence to contradict what he was saying."

"And all that stuff about Heaven...Jesus, do you think that the Plant Plant Inc was the front for some doomsday religious cult?"

"That's a frightening thought. The only way that we could find out is by contacting somebody who worked for the PPI."

"Couldn't you get through to somebody on your phoneplant?"

"I don't have access to the masterchip network, only the gross telephone exchange and that's no longer functioning. I guess that all communications are being handled by the masterchip now. What difference would it make anyway? Unless you think that there's some way of undoing what's been done?"

Ian was silent. Part of him still thought that things would soon be back to normal. It was like being on holiday in a foreign country. Everything is different and a bit of a strain but then you get back home and everything is cosily familiar once again. But this wasn't going to happen. How could the situation possibly be reversed? All he said was,

"Why did so many people die? What made the masterchip so deadly? It seemed harmless enough. I was even going to take one myself."

Ian didn't expect a reply but Chittalily did his best to provide one in any case.

"I don't think that there was anything deadly about the masterchip in itself. It was more the psychological impact that it made, especially if you hadn't taken any of the biochips that preceded it. If you hadn't had some experience of the subtle world then the shock might very well kill you outright. As it is, even if you were already a plantee then the power of the masterchip could easily send you into a coma.

"The main culprit seems to be the psychological mechanism of autosimulation."

Ian knew what Chittalily was going to say but he let him continue. "You see, we are continually in a state of identification with something, even if it's only with our thoughts, to a greater or lesser degree. Autosimulation happens when you're falling asleep. As you drift off you

experience a rapid flow of images known as hypnagogic visions. The moment of autosimulation happens when you mind attaches itself to one of these images and before you know it you're lost in dreamland. "It's total identification and self-forgetfulness. It's analogous to the identification that happened when you used to watch television. You identify with the drama and then you forget yourself for as long as the program lasts, or even longer in the case of some people.

"The same thing happens in subtle space except that it's far more vivid. I experienced it when I tuned into the radioplant. I was completely transported, as though I was actually in the radio drama. There was a problem with coming back to myself afterwards because it was a twofold effort. I would have to retrieve myself from the drama, that is, I would have to establish myself in subtle space before establishing myself once again in the gross world. That was the path you had to follow. You had to make the effort to come from the autosimulated state to the subtle level and then you would have to make an even greater effort to get from the subtle to the gross. I imagine that was why so many people went into a coma - once they'd pulled themselves together after the autosimulation they'd forget how to or couldn't make the effort to return to the gross world."

"But you're talking about the subtle level as if it is a coherent reality."

"It is. Especially with the masterchip. It bypasses the sense organs and generates its own internal reality."

"You'd think that it would get awfully lonely in there."

"You're forgetting that people are in communication with each other. Or at least their masterchips are. Richard was telling me about it as he's followed the development of the biochips quite closely. It seems that the masterchip can generate a personality matrix for each individual that can interact with other personality matrices in the context of a reality based on a kind of average of all the interacting masterchips."

This was new to Ian but he was finding it difficult to conceptualise. "So you think that they're all living in a reality similar to this one?"

"Yes. I'd guess that the subtle reality that they are all living in is much the same as this one only the time period might be different. My guess is that they're living in a time before the biochips appeared on the scene."

Something caught Ian's eye. "Look!"

They were approaching Troward Heath, a village about halfway between Crowleigh and Buxmead. There was a jeep parked by the road and by it some militiamen were cooking food over a camping stove.

"They weren't regular army," said Chittalily as they drove by. "I don't like this."

Chittalily's tone worried Ian. He had a very bad feeling, a feeling accentuated as they approached a roadblock just outside the town of Buxmead. The roadblock was manned by armed militiamen. Chittalily slowed down.

"Look, Chittalily, I don't want to go on. I've changed my mind. Let's go back." There was desperation in Ian's voice.

"It would look suspicious if we suddenly turned round," said Chittalily. "We're going to have to go through with it."

Coming to a halt, Chittalily wound down his window and addressed the armed uniform that had appeared.

"What's happening?"

"Welcome to the world of Paragonia, dominion of Buxmead. Papers please and state your business."

Chittalily looked at Ian. Ian leaned over and said, "We want to speak to Mitchell Paragon. Um, we don't have any papers. We were invited to Buxmead."

"Step out please."

To the right of the roadblock was a large open tent. On the left, on the other side of the road, was an open truck filled with Sudanis. They'd obviously been rounded up. Ian thought that there was something familiar about one of the soldiers guarding them.

Inside the tent an officer was sitting at a table with papers piled on top of it. Behind him, propped up against the back of the tent was a large framed photographic print of Mitchell Paragon accoutred in ridiculous, over-the-top regalia. He had a massive crown perched on his head.

"I don't suppose that it's possible to see him," said Ian meekly as the officer scribbled away on some forms.

"King Mitchell the First is in Angola on state business."

"Ahh."

Ian and Chittalily had to fill in several pages of forms. One of them was stamped and returned to them.

"You may proceed."

"Actually," said Ian, "we wanted to see Mi-, er King Mitchell the First but if he isn't here then there isn't much point."

The officer ignored him. As they walked back to the car, Ian suddenly recognised the soldier guarding the Sudanis. He walked towards him.

"Jim!" It was Jim the gardener that he'd met on his first retreat. "I didn't recognise you with your hair cut off and the, er, the uniform."

"How you doin mate?" said Jim, unsmilingly.

"What's happening?"

"It's the spiritual kingdom, innit? It was preordained and now it's come to pass."

Ian didn't know what to say. He looked at the Sudanis and wondered what was going to happen to them. He thought it better not to ask. Almost as an afterthought, Jim said,

"We'll be in Crowleigh in a couple of days."

Ian was stunned. What did that mean? Again, he thought it better not to ask. "Yeah, right. Uh, see you then."

Jim saluted him as he went back to the car.

"We'll be in Crowleigh in a couple of days, we'll be in Crowleigh in a couple of days," Ian repeated to Chittalily as they drove back to Crowleigh. "They're taking over for God's sake, they're taking over!"

"What's your problem? A couple of hours ago you wanted to join them."

Ian stared at Chittalily in disbelief. "Yes, but a couple of hours ago I wasn't convinced that Mitchell Paragon was

stark raving mad. Did you see that portrait? It was in the style of all tin-pot dictators - gaudy colouring and obviously touched up. He's set himself up as king! It'd be funny if it wasn't so frightening."

Chittalily looked solemn, like he was having difficulty holding himself together. His dark eyes were sunk so far back in their sockets that they had almost disappeared from sight.

"Yes, it is looking bad. As if things weren't bad enough. We could probably have adjusted with what has happened but now we have a madman who wants to take over."

"Jesus, Chittalily, we've got to warn people in Crowleigh. We've got to try to get away."

"And go where?" Chittalily let out a bitter laugh. "London? Whatever authority exists there will probably only be too happy to give in to the Survivalists. And whatever remains of the armed forces will only be too happy to pledge themselves to a new leader, especially to one who not only predicted recent events but has also planned for them." Chittalily cracked.

"I suppose that we could fight, set up an armed resistance. What do you think?" Chittalily turned round and gave Ian a mad look. "Hah!"

"Okay, okay. So what do you think we should do then?"

"I'm not sure what planet you're living on sometimes, Basil. Let me spell it out. THERE. ARE. NO. OPTIONS. We're just going to have to wait and see what the Survivalists are up to. It looks like your decision to become a Survivalist was irrelevant. We're all going to become Survivalists now whether we want to or not."

Ian felt his relationship with the Universe had fractured. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. He'd always felt that the Universe was on his side even in times of adversity. He felt his sense of space rapidly constricting, like an animal that after a brief experience of freedom was about to be dropped back into its cage.

What was the Universe doing? Where did Truth lie now?

METALOGUE

Sally sat bolt upright on her bed and let out a yell, startling her two cats. She'd made it! She had to save Bob. But what was that noise? It was her invalid mother's bleeper. She rushed through to her mother's bedroom.

"Are you all right, mum?"

"I'm fine, luvvy. It's you that I'm worried about. What was that dreadful noise?"

"Oh, I just remembered that there's something very important that I must do today."

"Are you sure? You look a little drawn."

"No, I'm fine, fine, never better in fact. I'll get you your breakfast."

"Mrs Brown brought round some of her delicious jam yesterday."

"I'll bring some up with your toast in a mo."

"Lovely." As Sally left her mother's bedroom, the two cats attempted to wrap themselves around her ankles.

"Okay, okay, breakfast will be served as soon as poss."

Sally felt something breaking inside, as though her gut had been twisted until it had snapped. She felt as though she was grieving for an unknown loss. She finished her morning duties as quickly as possible and, instead of the bus, took a taxi to work.

She had to warn Bob. It was a matter of life and death.

