

GOD'S INFERNO

BY

KINGSLEY LLOYD DENNIS

THE LETTER

'All men whom the higher nature has imbued with a love of truth should feel impelled to work for the benefit of future generations, whom they will thereby enrich just as they themselves have been enriched by the labours of their ancestors. Let there be no doubt in the mind of the man who has benefited from the common heritage but does not trouble to contribute to the common good that he is failing sadly in his duty.'

Dante, *De Monarchia* I.1

Justin, where do I begin?

Nothing is as it seems. We have all been fed lies from the very beginning. The men who are so few stand so erect in their slime. Try to understand everything yet believe nothing. Nothing of what we are told is the truth. Question everything, and leave no crucified prophet unturned. How can we pretend to know everything when humanity has been gradually deteriorating itself?

They once told us that the Earth was at the centre of the universe, and so we foolishly believed their pious pride because we knew no better. They told us that the Earth was flat and that we would fall off into the void if we ventured further than the visual horizon, and this we accepted because their word was law. They then told us that science was unholy, and then the scientists told us that if it could not be proven by them it had no right to exist. Then they began to tell us that sex was sinful and so made the wealthy pay for their place in the Heavens. They even forced through threats that we should allow our heads to be filled with gilded myths because there was a martyr whom they had claimed for themselves, and who had died for our sins.

And then they burnt you, tortured you, massacred thousands at a time because they said you did not speak their truth. They said they were the ones who had authority from God. And we believed them. Who are the fools, Justin? The corrupt or the ignorant?

The Earth has gradually been turned into a material inferno and the minds of the weak continue to perpetuate the flames. They will never put it out so long as the heat of the flames fuel their wealthy masquerade.

Justin, there are a few things that I must tell you. Life is more than they pretend it to be. Religion has lost its place in the world. It is spiritually bankrupt and we are left with queer parrots to speak to us with their vain words. We are in the age of greed and blind obedience.

They claim to teach us love yet all they allow us is the chance to avoid the fear they create. If we revere in hesitation the unknown, we are readily open to accept those who claim to have understanding to give. We follow the false robed prophets because they have buildings from which to preach from, yet we do not measure the woodworm and decay in their pulpits.

I want to tell you how I came to be here Justin. To get it all down in writing to show how it all came about. Although I am not a true storyteller, I have tried my best to tell it as close to the truth as my memory permits me : all you have to do is to read. See what you can make of it.

Love,

Your Brother Julian.

xxx

PS. Justin, what is it?

THE TALE

'...the author has to die in order for the reader
to become aware of his truth.'

Umberto Eco

I leaned back from the typewriter, eyeing critically the few pages that I had printed before me. Did I know what it was that I was supposed to be writing about? At this moment there was a dead silence, and the bare walls of the apartment made it feel as if I was some small man inside of a box. I had little if no dedication over what I was supposed to be doing, which was to write an article on alchemy for a magazine. I lacked any morals in the work ethic ; I just always did what was required in order to get by. Morals were not my main issue. I put the few pages I had written to one side and, slumped in my chair, aimlessly stared into space. A noise suddenly breaks into the air of the room.

The door from down below slams, which is followed by a few domestic sounds of knocks and rustles, as if someone was beginning to shelve their shopping. I expect that will be Mary Margaret ; she lives in the flat below. Strange young lady, although I have only met her on a couple of occasions. The first time was the day that I moved in here, which was about six weeks ago ; we introduced ourselves and gave two smiles and one of those social gestures of the moment when both politely agree on a coffee sometime, but of course nothing meaningful every comes of such a half-hearted promise. And the second time was one evening about two weeks ago, I think it was, well sometime around then anyway. I came home totally pissed up to my eyeballs and made the usual routine of falling about the place and swearing curses to the gods etc ; then Mary Margaret just happened to spring her curly head out of her door and tell me to shut the fuck up because she was both trying to read and water the plants. An agile lady, if you ask me. And that was the last time that we spoke, or rather we didn't speak. Anyhow, I can't remember if I made more noise after she went back indoors or not ;

either way it makes little difference. It is only fair that a new tenant has to make some sort of territorial ground-marking to announce his arrival. And that is all I know so far about Mary Margaret. Well, not exactly, I do tell a lie. I know a bit more, but not a lot. I have heard her being with a man a few times. Just the domestic shouts and the occasional love-making ; nothing revelatory that could tell me a great deal about her, only that her man often calls her crazy. She seemed okay for the first brief moment I met her : slightly eccentric maybe, no not eccentric, just more.....well, absorbed in herself I suppose would be the most apt description. Anyhow, she is not what I would call my ideal woman, just in case you are wondering why I started talking about her all of a sudden. She just happened, by a canny coincidence, to have made a noise by slamming her door. But I have no wish discussing something which I have no knowledge about ; a writer's habit really, only wishing to talk about that which he is informed of, thus making him sound intelligent and sober. Get me on the subject of right-wing politics and then I begin to fake my own drunkenness rather than appear an intellectual wimp.

The air now begins to be filled with a bubbling sound, similar to that which is made by a boiling vat, which is coming from behind the desk where I am writing. It is the sound of a contained fountain of water jetting up into a compressed space. With this sound there is a smell which is of a smooth lacquer that is pleasing to the nostrils. This tells me that I must get up from the writing desk and venture into the kitchen area to lift the coffee expresso machine off from the stove, and pour myself a well-needed cup of coffee. It always makes a good break from writing an article to drag the coffee machine into use again. This time my assignment was to write a modern exposition of alchemy in general terms that perhaps even a housewife would understand ; it was commissioned by a national newspaper for their weekend supplement so it was out with too much gibberish and in with the simple terms. But what did I know? Alchemy was a relatively new subject to me also. I had come across one or two odd references to it from time to time when working upon other projects, but apart from that I knew little more than the

average reader whom I was writing this article for. This was why I had spent the last few days immersing myself both in the city library and in the university library, which I use on occasion when it comes to research work. Now my desk was piled high with about seven or eight books all dedicated to the art of alchemy in some form or other ; some are straight forward chemical expositions, one a scientific approach, one a metaphysical application to the process, and I have a few which decode what they refer to as the symbolism of hermetic allegory. Obviously, my research was at the beginning.

The flat which I have just begun renting consists of three rooms : a large lounge which opens onto an open-plan kitchen area ; a bathroom ; and one bedroom. The flat could be moderately comfortable for two people to live in, assuming they were previously used to occupying a tight space between them, yet was spacious for the individual. The large lounge, which is in an almost perfect position in the summertime (it being faced directly towards the afternoon sun), over-looks a small church hall which is used, on most occasions, for gathering groups of small kindergarten children. Behind the church hall lies a road that becomes forked at a cross-roads, the right fork being the only ensuing direction to remain visible to the eye : it leads to a late-night shop that sells everything from milk to whiskey to cans of beans.

The window in the bathroom, as would be expected, is of the frosted variety, whilst the one hidden in the bedroom behind the closed curtains leads only onto the garden of the next door flats. I always keep my writing desk beside the large panoramic window in the lounge-come-kitchen area. Besides, I don't really wish to spend too much time lingering upon descriptions of the flat which I am now renting. And the rent? Yes, that is seventy pounds per week, a calendar month in advance, with a month's rent paid as bond. All bills have to be paid for by the tenant. It's the going price for these type of flats around here, and I didn't have much choice at the time. It's the usual story ; moving around from one place to the next after a year's stint, and writing one article after the next for magazines and newspapers when I can get the work. Hard at first, no doubt about that, but its gotten easier now that a few of them know my name. Anyhow, I'm

just biding my time for the moment, getting myself a bit of money so that I can take a few months off to write a novel. I'm planning it now : it will be an erotic adventure between a drug-addicted high official - perhaps a judge or politician, I haven't quite decided - and a prostitute. Sex and scandal, that's the only thing that seems to be making money these days. And perhaps this is the place where it will be conceived.

Sipping the hot Colombian coffee I take a few moments to gaze out from the window before sitting down again at the typewriter. I can faintly hear the sounds of tiny voices from outside ; the raised monotones that must belong to the group of young children I had just seen filing into the church hall. There were, I had seen, around a dozen of these young kids ; a mixture of both boys and girls ; white, Chinese, and Negro : a small microcosm down in the path below, and it was only the beginning of the week.

Distractions are always inevitable, especially so when writing since every small sound, no matter how trivial or futile, whether it be the noise of passing cars or the shouts of mothers, or the purr of lazy afternoon cats : all such stimuli to the ear of the writer is an occasion for an interruption. Sometimes they can be used as fodder for an excuse, other times they are plain distractions. I was about to begin writing again. Then I remember hearing the shouts. These were high pitch shouts ; the kind that people scream when they have just been accused of either the absurd or the painful hidden truth. The voice belonged without a moment's doubt to the larynx of Mary Margaret, since I had come to recognise that forceful and authoritative tone that seeped through the walls into my hearing range at times. It sounded as if she was a person who was always confident that she spoke the truth. But now, as never before in the weeks since I had first moved here, did she raise that voice of hers into a howling banshee rage.

Naturally I stopped my thoughts and remained motionless, as one would do when trying hard to focus upon another person's event or crisis, and then I discerned a much lower and calmer voice in reply to Mary Margaret, and it was a voice that belonged to a man, an older man perhaps. Yet, although I still considered myself relatively new to these surroundings and the sounds of their inhabitants, I believed that I

did not recognise the voice as belonging to Mary Margaret's usual man. This interested me even further : was I the aural witness of the end of an affair here? I could only guess at a multitude of fantastical hypothesis's, without perhaps even touching the perimeter of the truth. But what is the truth when it comes to human relationships? Intrigued further, as the voices continued at their pitch, I snooped over to the door of my flat and, holding down the latch, noiselessly opened the door a fraction to let the air from the landing bring the voices clearer to my hearing. No doubt I was participating in the realm of the nosy neighbour, yet this is often how such things find their beginnings ; besides, I was harbouring a small feeling of protection in the unlikely event that the situation might take a nasty turn. So I stayed at the threshold of my door, listening closely now to the raised sounds below, which appeared to have moved from the interior of Mary Margaret's apartment and onto the landing.

'Go and kiss Christ's ass you fucking heretical bastard', shouted the woman's voice.

'And you, you know what'll happen to you, you vessel of the devil's dung. You're the original whore of Babylon and you will be cast out of the light for this denial.' This was the reply given in the man's voice.

'I only want some peace to myself. You cannot demand everything, saying it's in the name of God. You can't go around like you're in the Middle Ages anymore. This is the fucking twentieth century now. So piss off back to your holy of holies and do some divine worshipping with your hand. You men surely know how to do that.'

'You'll finally see the truth amidst the flames Mary ; only through us can you become the true embodiment of the Virgin because we are the true embodiment of Christ. God won't forget you.'

'God forgets me everytime he denies me the orgasm. And do you think that God is always watching you and Marcus's feeble efforts when you both come to stick it up me. Fuck off.'

Then the door slammed, and the next thing I heard was a scuttle of feet descending the stairs, and the noise of the groundfloor door opening and being shut. That was all I

caught : but it was enough.

Sitting back down with my coffee I was bordering between curious intrigue and perhaps that of offering comfort to my neighbour. After all, we had not properly introduced ourselves, and this could be the time to kill more than one bird with a single stone. I finished up, and slowly made my way down one flight of stairs until I came to Mary Margaret's front door. I knocked, not too loud. 'Oh piss off', came a weary reply.

'Mary. Mary Margaret, this is Julian from the upstairs flat. Remember?'

'Yes. What do you want?'

'Well, I heard a few voices. I just wanted to see if everything was all right. Y'know, just checking. Are you okay? I got some coffee on : want to talk?'

'A coffee?'

'Yea.'

The door opened after several rattles of bolts, and her face came through the crack. 'Julian', she faintly queried, 'why do people go through their whole lives doing nothing and being nobodies until they die. Do you think it is a disease, a lack of a brain, or just laziness that infests them?'

This opening was something I had not expected, so it left me in the air for a couple of seconds before I was able to compose an answer in my mind. Usually I would have answered with a sarcastic or wry remark, but this time I just said to her 'because the world makes most people that way. Lack of choice I guess.' She must have been somewhat satisfied with the answer I gave for she pulled back the door and invited me in.

She shut the door behind me and I followed her into what was her kitchen area. Mary didn't say much as she filled the kettle with water and plugged it in ; this was only the second time I had seen her in daylight, and in a natural state, and so only now was I beginning to formulate a picture of her inside my head. I guess you could say she was around the age of thirty, perhaps twenty-nine, and she had a very casual air about her ; a baggy jumper hanging over her denim jeans and her hair, whilst retaining its tidiness, was dark and in curly waves that reached her shoulders. Although only collecting cups

from the cupboard and filling them with coffee, she seemed to be totally immersed with her actions, which gave the effect that she was either unaware or uncaring over my presence. This I later learned was just Mary's usual preoccupation with her own thoughts. Pouring the boiled water, she then turned to face me, and squinted directly into my eyes. 'Julian Cross - do you take milk?'

'No thanks Mary Margaret, just black, and without sugar', I answered.

'Just Mary please. So yet again, you are the new neighbour. First time you are polite, second time you are the noisy drunk, and third time the nosy neighbour.'

'Well Mary ; just call me Julian. And first time we met you were polite also, second time you told me to fuck off, and the third time you were screaming fuck off to the whole street, and my flat included.'

Mary seemed to shift out of her distant coldness and walked over to a sofa. She laid herself back in her now almost familiar casual manner and eyed me over again. 'Julian, so what do you do with yourself ; tell me, now that we're going to be neighbours for a while.'

'I write', I said as I sat down on one of the chairs. 'I write articles mostly. It keeps the money rolling in.'

'Have you ever written about women, Julian?'

'Not directly, but I wouldn't discard the issue. Women in general?'

'How about women in religion. Did you know that the female element in religion - the Goddess - has been worshipped for thousands of years, and was the eternal divine deity before men turned God into a male?'

'Yes, I know that certain cults worshipped the Goddess in pre-Christian times, and there were fertility rites often practised along with this.'

'Broad but true. The female was the incarnation of the Divine in such times, and especially so around the Mediterranean area and in the Mesopotamia region. Sex was used as a form of worship in many of the goddess temples, such as those of Ishtar, Mylitta, Anaitis, Innini, and Athagatia. Men would come to the temples that housed the divine women and to lie with them as an act of prayer and to give thanks to all Creation.

In the act of carnal love was the man allowed, through the contact of the woman, to receive the divinity. Sex forms a favourable condition for the man to reach the physic realms of the goddess. These young priestesses were called 'virgins' : the pure, or the blessed ones. Naturally, that was before bad morality got attached to sex.'

'A house of sexual worship you mean.'

'Not exactly like that. Sex and worship was different in those days to how it is perceived now. For a man to join with a woman was then thought of as being an ecstatic union. But now they think it dirty to proclaim sex, and women have become whores under the new male god.'

'Yes, interesting', I muttered. I wasn't really sure where I was going to take the conversation from here. 'And the man that just left. Did he want to pray to God through the use of your body?'

This remark seemed to loosen Mary up and bring a crack into the tense atmosphere, as Mary began to laugh at what I had just said. 'Not quite like that Julian. Don't let your imagination start rolling in images ; he just can't separate God from sex.'

This was the point where my speech came ahead of my thinking, and I dropped myself into revealing that I had been spying upon their argument. 'Oh, I thought you had referred to you both having had sex together, or something.' Mary went quiet and frowned.

'You were listening?'

'I heard, rather than listened', I answered meekly. And Mary's answer was not something that I was expecting. 'Do you like plants Julian?'

I nodded and Mary stood up and beckoned me across the front room and into the small hallway that led to the bathroom. In this hallway, and against the large window that faced out onto the garden, were arranged a row of perhaps ten to twelve plants of an assorted variety : all deep green yet of numerous sizes ranging from the small cactus to the tall sprouting types. I was not too clued up on the names of plants. In fact, I knew very little about any plants at all.

'I have plants', Mary continued, 'because you can practise love on them. When you tell a

person that you love them, you very rarely actually do love them ; you just think you do. You think you love someone because they are attractive to you and so you fancy their appearance. You perhaps spend some time with that person and get to know how their personality works, and you share various interests and you go places together. Then you have good sex together and begin to enjoy being with that person at most times because you feel you are suited. Then you call this the greatest love you have known because you have so much fun together. But what happens if the great sex between you both suddenly ends : will things stay the same? No, they don't. Without the sex you feel there is little left between you both, so perhaps you move on to another person, or get divorced if you were stupid enough in the first place to have got married. Would you call this love? It's not. It is simply the social illusion of love or what we are told to expect from love. But it isn't love ; it is a mixture of lust and misplaced sentimentality, with a bit of good sex thrown in to glue the ingredients. That is why I have so many plants. Learn to love plants first and to care and nurture them, then maybe you will learn to love humans. Have you ever been in love Julian?"

As she said this last remark, Mary entered into the nearby bathroom and with only half closing the door behind her proceeded to relieve herself upon the toilet. I heard the sound, yet I could see nothing. I walked back into the living area, not really interested in taking in the horticultural display. 'No, I have never been in love', I shouted back down the hallway. 'Like you say, love and lust should not be confused.'

I sat down again, and took a few brief moments to look around the room. The flat was in a similar layout to my own, which was to be expected, with the kitchen area a part of the spacious lounge yet set off in its own corner. I assumed that, like my own flat, there would just be the bedroom besides this open lounge and the bathroom, but I didn't venture to ask. This main room was just full of cushions and magazines, and pictures hung around on all four walls. They were scenes that I did not recognise although a few of them could be seen to have a religious angle. Mary came into the room and sat down opposite me. She picked up her coffee and looked at me. 'Did you know', she began, 'that the legendary Temple of Solomon was dedicated to the worship

of the Great Goddess, and that the main entrance to the temple was flanked by two pillars - so called Jachin and Boaz - which were phallic representations of fertility, and also that the gateway entrance is symbolic of the female labia?'

'No, I didn't', I replied. I was being honest. I hadn't a clue.

'You can see similar pillars that stand on their own on the Thames embankment in London ; they are supposed to loosely resemble the old Egyptian Cleopatra's Needles.'

'Nothing to do with the pillars of Hercules then?', I tried to venture.

Again, Mary just seemed to be amused at my comment. I was feeling more relaxed now, and although somewhat oddly out of place with the environment that Mary had in her flat, I felt more bold in being able to approach her. I wanted to know more about the man who had been here earlier and, if possible, to ascertain any details of what the argument had really been about. So I asked her the question directly. 'Was you having any difficulty with that man earlier. If you think he will come back you can always...'

I was interrupted by Mary before I was able to finish my directed sentence. She raised her right palm and held it up with a gentle grin on her face. 'No it's alright. He's nothing to worry about. Just a man that is an acquaintance of mine. He's called Lucas James ; he is what you would call a man of God, but he's obsessed with the devil too much, or rather the devil's dung, but he's just a hypocrite really. Something like what you would call a disagreement happened between us, and it hasn't been settled yet. That's all, nothing spectacular or worthy for you to write an article about.'

I slightly protested after this remark, trying to say that I was not a journalist and I was not looking to make a story out of her affairs. Besides, I said, I was currently writing an article about alchemy and distraught relationships were not my line of work.

Mary just smiled at me whilst ruffling through her hair with her hands. She looked somewhat like a Greenpeace protester who was too casual to do anything but just sit there being absorbed with her own thoughts. 'A writer eh? Interesting.' That was the last remark Mary made before admitting to me that she had an appointment, and so must get herself ready to leave. That was my cue for leaving also.

On reaching the door Mary gave a smile and said that we should meet again

soon for another talk. I nodded an approval as I entered into the hallway once more, and just as I was opening the front door to leave I noticed a plaque that was placed above the doorway which read, in strong black lettering, '**GOLGOTHA**'.

I was hungry as I returned to my flat. I could not say that I was any better off than when I had ventured down these stairs earlier, yet at least I knew my neighbour that bit better.

I was not in the mood for doing much writing since my stomach had begun to rumble, so I just strolled over to the desk to read once again what I had written. I read the words aloud to myself as if they would mean more to me that way ; alchemy still appeared as a subject seemingly filled with obscure jargon.

1

The modern twentieth century vision of the alchemist is of a bearded man intensely immersed within a basement or cavern filled high with chemical apparatus and with fumes rising from the bubbling liquid concoctions. All this in a frenzied attempt to transmute such base metals as lead or iron into the magnificent precious commodity of gold. These men, the supposedly wise, the mystics of their day, pouring their life's hours into the production of material wealth? What order of mystic is it that strives for the attainment of earthly riches only?

This vision, this erected myth image, is a standard construction from history. History, like a laboured Mediaeval tapestry, is woven together with amorous patches, each segment composed to be pleasing to the eyes ; yet taken separately, the artificial dyes that make up each patch, run and smear into vague stains. History looks good as a whole - as it is meant to be - yet badly stitched at the seams, if you know where to look. Half the world is a myth,

based on the perpetuation of legends and folklore ; and the other half is a collection of our mistakes. These mistakes are the only part of history which can be verified by research as being real, as we know it, whereas the myths are those which we think are even more real to ourselves due to our belief in their antiquity, yet such creations serve only to hide that which is known. Alchemy is such a truth, hidden in gold.

The present form of European alchemy derived from the Middle East, since almost from the beginnings of Islam, alchemy became a Moslem science. It is probable that the word 'alchemy' is itself derived from the Arabic *al-kimia*. Yet we also have to consider the further antiquity of this science, and it may also be that the 'chem' root may come from the Egyptian name for Egypt, meaning black and referring to its black soil, and also as the black land of the Arabs. It may also come from the Greek word for fusing.

The origins of antiquity usually stretch beyond the human time scope, and into thousands of years. There are Chinese records of alchemy - the anti-alchemy laws - dated to 144 BC ; and some sources have further pre-dated Chinese alchemy to the 4th century BC. However, the Chinese form of alchemy transmitted itself within the lore of medicine. Metallurgy became the trademark of the Middle Eastern practise, which thus formed the basis of Western European tradition.

Taking a look at the external ideas about alchemy it is possible to correlate four principle views.

1st View : It is physically possible to transmute one base element, such as lead or iron, into a finer substance as gold. It is a remarkably close kept secret which has been handed down to the very few since the beginnings of antiquity.

2nd View : Alchemy is a process whereby one can purify the nature of

man. Such a process would produce an individual which, by comparison with ordinary mortal men, would possess particular advanced powers. For both political and religious reasons, such a process had to be hidden within the false science of metal transmutation.

3rd View : Alchemy is capable of transmuting lead into gold, yet this is only a process that leads to a greater secret. Namely, that during the chemical process the alchemist is in a certain relation to his crucible (his working apparatus) and so during the metallic transmutation, a parallel process occurs also within the presence of the alchemist, thus transforming his mind. He is subjected to a form of 'radiation' that issues from the operation, and the success depends upon the transformation incurred by the alchemist, with the physical formation of gold being only a side product.

4th View : An alchemist is he who has learnt the great secret of the powerful method that is needed to merge with the subconscious mind - the transmutation from 'coarse' metal (the conscious mind), to a 'finer' metal (the subconscious mind). Produced to a such an extent, this process can give rise to the formation of a true 'soul-body'. It is possible for this 'soul-body', which has properties relating to a higher order of things, to be projected on the base metal, thus ensuring transformation within inorganic matter.

Alchemy is such a closely guarded secret that no-one from outside the circle of the select few alchemists ever knows the correct truth, and whether any of the above, alone or in combination, falls within this category.

Yet it is often hinted at that alchemy is in some way connected with the Egyptian figure Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice - Greatest), and thus there may be some concealment of alchemical truth in the often quoted maxim ascribed to Hermes in the Emerald Tablet : 'True it is, without falsehood, certain and most

true. That which is above is that which is below, and that which is below is as that which is above to accomplish the miracle of one thing.'

One thing that we can be sure of is that those men who have claimed to have known the secrets of alchemy have turned out to be no ordinary men. Such men have flitted through history leaving strange tales and legends in their wake : Albertus, Paracelsus, Fulcanelli, Bacon, Lully, Jabir Ibn Hayyan, Dr. Dee, Saint-Germain. These men, under the guise of alchemy, and whether or not they gained the secret of transmutation of either metals or their consciousness, managed to raise themselves above that of the ordinary level of humanity.

Some clues however can be found within the fragments of the alleged comments and remarks placed through history, recorded and left for us to decipher. To the best of my knowledge I am aware that the following sources have been confirmed as genuine.

'The secret of alchemy is this : there is a way of manipulating matter and energy so as to produce what modern scientists call "a field of force". This field acts on the observer and puts him in a privileged position "vis-à-vis" the Universe. From this position he has access to the realities which are ordinarily hidden from us by time and space, matter and energy. This is what we call "The Great Work".....The essential thing is not the transmutation of metals, but that of the experimenter himself. It's an ancient secret that a few men rediscover once in a century.'

Fulcanelli (quoted from 'Dawn of Magic' by Pauwels and Bergier)

'The alchemical process takes place in and through the human body in the blood, changing the relation of its component parts or principles, and reversing the circulatory order so that the sensible medium becoming occult, the inner

source of its vitality is awakened and the consciousness at the same time being drawn centrally, comes to know and to feel itself in its own true source, which is the Universal Centre and the source of all things.

Alchemy is Divine Chemistry, and the transmutation of life ; and therefore that which is the medium between soul and body is changed and the soul freed from the chains of corporeity. The body is left as a mere husk. These people put on their bodies as mere coats.'

'The whole work is an action of agent upon patient, and the reaction of patient, advancing, on agent. The work is gradual, but always progressive ; each fermented spirit advances upon its origin.....The wonderful part of the process is that the spirit, becoming freed from the body, carries on the perfection and purification of her own vehicle, the soul.'

M. Attwood (in conversation with Elizabeth de Steiger)

Writing this article was merely the result of collating together research, it did not have to mean that I understood every word that I had written. All this talk that I had come across in the books I had read, all explaining the possible states or paths to higher consciousness, was just baffling to me. I did not know whether all the tales of alchemy were any more than just an influx of myths. Numerous times I had read the same things about how the body was only a vehicle for the spirit or soul, and how through certain transmutations it could become a finer body or vessel. But turning lead into gold - could they be serious? Surely it could only be allegory.

Anyway, it didn't matter. I only had to know enough to write it, for now. And it was a start. Like everything else I just wanted to get the whole thing over with ; I was what you might call an apathetic writer. Well, I was more like indifferent to things all round. I was indifferent to where I lived, who I met, and what was next. I was listless with life : it bored me, frankly.

G's I

'There is much more contained in this language than we are willing to explain, but we will say that the secret is worth the seeking.'

Madame Blavatsky

Isis Unveiled, Vol I, p256

I had decided to take a walk down into the centre of Bristol, half out of a need for some fresh air and exercise, and half out of a need to get out amongst people rather than to go back to my typewriter and continue on the alchemy article. I opted for a drink at Joseph's Bar and ordered a sandwich to eat with my drink. This was my second favourite pastime : watching people, whether they be eating, drinking, talking, or just fiddling with themselves or their clothes. I was always being told by my brother that with a stare like mine I was bound to end up in the voyeur category ; or even worse, the sad perverted man style category. He was, of course, far away from the truth ; but not too far that what he said did not apply. It was just an interest that I had in the language of other people.

Joseph's Bar, which was perhaps one of the most enjoyable places to sit for a drink - which only meant that most other places were either dire or had the wrong customers for my liking - was the kind of place that had a mixture of young people and older, more learned, folk. It was a comfortable bar where people came to talk over their glasses of alcohol rather than to get themselves pissed to loud badly picked jukebox music. Here, there was a long bar area which welcomed the bar hoarders who spent the entire time leaning over the brass rail in a continual ordering of drinks, and also a good spacing out of wooden tables and benches for those of us who like to find our own table for the evening at which to drink at. Yet it was only mid-afternoon now, and the place was relatively quiet.

Drinking my Guinness I had to admit that I was pondering over a couple of the questions that Mary had thrown out ; mostly about the female worship, or rather

especially the bit about the men lying with the women in the temple as a form of divine worship. It had to be said that such a notion was indeed of interesting value. After my drink I decided that it would be a good thing if I took a trip down to the local university library (of which I had become a member on my moving here), to see if I could unearth any books that would enlighten me upon the subject.

With half an ounce of inspiration inside of my loins I entered into the street and began heading towards the university campus, which would take me only about twenty minutes by walking. The town and its immediate outskirts was not particularly busy, except for the odd few roaming business people, students, and one or two homeless gents lazily spread upon benches or dawdling. I was soon upon the campus and heading towards the library, which was named after the famous Isaac Newton : The Newton Library. As always there were young people strolling around this area or perched upon the concrete steps that lead up towards the modern glass-lined building. The library looked like a cross between some ancient geometric construction and the famous Pompidou centre in Paris, yet without the singular grandeur of either. In fact, a modern building that had tried to retain some elements of an old library structure.

Filing inside through the turnstile and past the positioned guard who is stationed to check all library cards upon entry, reminded me of Orwell's Brother State as our freedom is gradually welched down into lavatories becoming our only edifice for privacy. Soon, no doubt, they will be forwarding a proposal to take away man's basic right to shit in peace. When that time comes, I am moving out to the country. But for now I was content in walking amongst the line of students to reach the library computer. And once seated I began to rummage, as by now I was used to, no, rather I was adept at, due to my endless days spent in research for articles, in locating the books or the subject for a book that I required. 'Sex in religion' was my first subject heading : not too much in that line. 'Ancient sexual practises' ; again, dodgy. 'The Goddess in religion' ; that was a better subject title. I wrote down the location number that the screen printed up for me. As a check I considered throwing another anchor into the library search : 'Feminine/Goddess'. The number I eventually received coincided with the one I already

had ; obviously, only one area of the library dealt with such subjects. It was on the third floor, which just happened to be what you would expect since the library only housed three floors. Taking the stairs I marched my way to the given location. Libraries in general I was quite fond of, since they gave relative peace and you would often be assured of finding a prized book or something that you were after, either for your research or privately ; yet I confess that I preferred university libraries above the rest. It was the assortment of young girls that brightened up the atmosphere. I know ; Julian, you are a real bugger when it comes to such things. But why not try and amuse yourself when all you have to look forward to is the typewriter keys when you return home. It was my own fault really. Perhaps I should have taken the advice of my friends and settled down somewhere instead of always being on the move, and claiming benefit before I was able to find any work. But life never worked that way for me.

I found the section. A handful of books on the Mediterranean Aphrodite goddesses ; references to Dionysius and to the Eleusian Mysteries ; Isis myths and Eastern Goddesses such as Kali.....the Black Goddess? Mmm, must read that when I get some spare time. But I still couldn't find anything that suited what I needed. I stealthed through the shelf below.

Ah yes, that looked like it would be more to the point. I picked up a book with a deep red spine and read the full title : 'The Metaphysics of Sex' by Julius Evola. I leafed through both the contents page and the index to ascertain the range of references. It played the part admirably. From what I could gather it tackled the ancient goddess worship through the ages and in reference to its myths also. And then it seemed to venture on into the feminine as the esoteric divinity/principle, and also the art of Tantric sex....? It was the book for me. I grabbed it and walked down to the front desk to get it checked out. As is the custom of events, the person that served me on that long desk just so happened to be the best looking young girl there was serving that day. Naturally, I gave her one of my academic smiles when passing the book over to her, as if to show that my reasons for wanting such a book was related, with a modicum of

respect, to intellectual pursuits. But overall, the young girl's perceptions were entirely her business and I did not intend varnishing them with my own. I received the book from her thin-wristed hands and headed home to the flat. It was late afternoon by this time yet the sunlight was still present, although the strength of its rays had mostly dispersed with the passing of the summer months to leave just the image remaining to imprint an autumnal gesture. I did not mind. I enjoy the sun, but even so I can tolerate other weather.

When I returned to the flat all was quiet, and the silence seemed to bring with it an edge of coldness that made the rooms of the flat look bare and severe, almost as if no-one lived within its walls. I suspected that such ambience was partly by own fault since I never was one to decorate or overly furnish my living quarters. It was not that I was trying to achieve a post-modern minimalist scenario or anything (since I already despised anything that carried the pitiful label of 'post-modernism'), but rather that I never considered it worthwhile to spend my money on furnishings for a rented accommodation, knowing full well that when I left I would have to carry my possessions with me. Anyhow, I sort of got used to such surroundings ; it never bothered me to have a fussy place to live. I only needed it to sleep, eat, and to sit at the typewriter, and bare walls are always better for the concentration.

Standing still, before venturing to move about the room, I tried to discern through the silence any possible noises coming from the direction of Mary's flat. There was nothing, so I sat down on the sofa and picked up the newly acquired book. Leafing through its pages, briefly at first, I noted that the various topics it dealt with were sensual pleasure and suffering ; the mystic ecstasy ; the female archetypes such as woman as mother and woman as lover ; sacred prostitution and holy marriages : yes, I thought, that sounds like what Mary had said. Giving away the female body for divine contact, wasn't it? And then my eye caught the line that read 'The techniques of endogenous transmutation in Kundalini-Yoga and Taoism'. What the hell did that refer to? I was vaguely aware of the term kundalini which I had associated with the Eastern

mystics' talk of the rise of the spiritual power, along, I think they called it, the line of the chakras. But sex power ; I was becoming slightly lost here within mystical-sexual jargon. Yet I had to confess, my own ignorance was only serving to spur my curiosity rather than to divert it. Beyond enjoying a skirt through some of the pages, I really didn't know why I should spend my time on this when, after all, I did have an article on alchemy to write, and therefore should have acquired another book upon the subject to help with its elucidation rather than immersing myself within sex-goddess worship. I concluded that it was all down to the distraction that Mary had offered ; her words had intrigued me, or perhaps it had been her manner that caused me to wander on foreign paths. But this was not new to me. I have always had a nature easily distracted ; always hopping from one thing to the next, reading one thing before another, and enclosing myself within one reality tunnel before another equally intriguing reality came my way. The only subject that I had always expressed doubts about was that of religion. I believed it to be the safeguard of being brought up in a non-religious family, and so was saved against any defenceless brainwashing. So I had deemed it better to steer away from the topic, and although it being fundamental to life I considered that I could manage to get by just fine without its strained presence in my life. But if sex can be incorporated into religion, I said to myself, then maybe it will be worth a brief glance sometime, albeit not a glance at the Catholic pages ; those people were rigid procreationists.

Taking a further pry into the pages I began to read experiences recounting the procedure within that of Tantric sex. It seemed that here too, in a religion that manifested itself mainly on the Indian subcontinent, was the same theme of the woman as the female initiatory. Here there were women especially trained in the art and who in the act of coitus had precise instructions within a physical union, and with the aim of the suprasensual, not to culminate in the emission of seed. The book described how an ejaculation was seen as spoiling the rise of the sexual energy, since the point of emission for a man pointed to an interruption in the union, so it was a stoppage of this

vital force. It was therefore up to the expertise of the female to not let the climax be reached, although such a union could, and often indeed should, continue into hours. Undoubtedly, I was intrigued. Such a practise was news to me ; my previous ejaculations were well before the hour mark, and that even when heavily laden with alcohol.

The new book served my curiosity well for the next hour or so, until I became hungry and thirsted after some food, yet what it had struck up within me was not some wayward desire to procure some willing karmic lady for my pleasures, but rather with another visit to my neighbour, the strange Mary Margaret. I decided that perhaps in a few hours, when the early evening light had begun to sink, that I would invite Mary to come up to the flat for a drink. I suppose that alongside a twinge of curiosity I was also seeking a thinly disguised need for some light company, since I was familiar with no other local persons in Bristol.

The clock in the lounge had just brushed past eight thirty-five when I walked past it and out onto the landing stairs. I could hear no sounds to tell me whether my neighbour was at home, yet for the past few hours I had paid no direct attention to the faint surrounding noises in the air. I gave a few knocks on the door. Nothing. 'Mary, are you in?', I half projected in a whispery voice. Then I waited a few moments. Thirty or so seconds later I heard a shuffle come to the door, and a crack appeared.

'Yeah, course I'm in. I live here, remember? Ah, it's Julian, my friendly neighbour from upstairs again. Sure, come in ; I wouldn't want you to think I wasn't a hospitable person to my new neighbours.'

'Cheers. Look, I was just wondering whether you fancied popping up for a drink. I got a bottle of Chianti ready for opening. Besides, there doesn't seem to be much else happening.'

'Chi..an.ti', Mary repeated to me in a long drawn way. 'A very expensive bottle?'

'For you Mary ; No. Nothing that I seem to buy is expensive, otherwise I wouldn't buy

it. But it doesn't mean that it isn't any good.'

'No no, I'm sure it's all right. In fact, I'm a bit of a cheapskate myself. I only get bored of the more expensive things quicker. Look Julian, I'm the kind of lady who likes to mope around here in my bare feet. No offence, but I just don't fancy being a guest in a stranger's place. It would make me feel uncomfortable. I still wouldn't mind the drink though, so why don't you bring your bottle down here instead.'

'No reason why not. Hold on, I'll only be a minute.'

I returned to my flat and grabbed the bottle that I had left standing on the side ; and after considering whether or not I should first open it, I decided to leave it intact until downstairs.

Back at Mary's flat I poured the drinks and began to walk, almost in a staccato motion, around the interior of her room. Yes, it definitely had that feminine touch absorbed within the decoration. 'Are you quite finished yet', Mary addressed me after a minute's silence, 'or are you going to write "Kilroy was 'ere" upon the walls and furniture.'

'No' ; I turned around to face Mary. 'I wasn't looking critically at anything, just more like observing, or perhaps admiring.'

'Oh, save it. Christ, I didn't expect a drink so I could get complimented on my interior decorating. Look Julian, why don't you just ease up and make yourself at home, or at my home at least.'

'Yeah', I said, making a half-hearted gesture of a laugh. 'I'll just sit here a while and relax.' I paused for a brief second before continuing and before Mary could interrupt me. 'So what do you get up to then. Anything exciting? I mean, I don't know the Bristol area too well, but to me it just looks like the normal sort of town, and it can bore anyone after a while. Do you feel all right around here?'

'Ohh, I always find things to occupy myself, thank you Julian. You may be the restless type, but I seem to fare very well. Besides, I have friends and acquaintances in the area.'

This was too great an opportunity to miss in prying once more into the earlier incident that had so aroused my hybrid curiosity. 'Friends like that guy you were arguing with, or is that just a past acquaintance now?' Mary giggled slightly, her mouth twisting like she had tasted bitter lemon.

'You're interested aren't you Julian? You have mentioned this incident before, and even then you were trying with vagueness to pry into my private affairs.'

'No, not at all Mary. I was merely worried that everything was all right with you. Besides, as a neighbour, your shouts were coming right into my flat. So, I have two reasons for querying.'

'Julian, the friendly neighbour!' Mary sarcastically retorted, yet with good humour. 'Well, me and Lucas just had a little falling out. But things are patched up again now. More wine?'

We filled our glasses, and then Mary continued to talk, looking slightly more relaxed after every minute had elapsed in my company.

'Tell me Julian, do you pray?' I paused for a moment. I knew myself that I was not in any way a religious person, but neither did I declare myself as being either an agnostic or an atheist. In some way I believed in the overall balance of the universe, and that eventually, in some way, things got themselves sorted out. I always remembered the Einstein phrase 'God does not play dice' ; similarly I did not believe in a cosmos ruled by chance or chaos, but rather it was governed by laws that were abided, within degrees, by each galaxy or area of the known universe.

'I don't pray to a god', I answered. 'Sometimes I talk to something within my head and project those things out there into anything or nothing ; but I do not pray to any god. At times it is just talking to the universe, and whatever may be within in at that moment. I don't expect anything to be heard though, otherwise that would crush my belief in any gods out there. Why do you want to know : wish to baptise me or to start praying together?'

'You're a witty one' Mary said, smiling back at me. 'Want to get any more jokes out of your system?'

'No, everything's fine now, thanks.' Smiling, we filled our glasses again and sat back, Mary on the sofa and me on a facing chair, and there seemed to be an accommodating atmosphere filling into the room. It was then that I really began to notice a pungent smell which had not been recognised by me previously. 'What's that smell?', I asked Mary. 'Oh', she replied, 'that scent is only the oil burner. It's patchouli ; a good strong yet meditative aroma. Like it?'

'Not bad. Why, do you pray?' With this question Mary began to laugh more openly and with a relaxed air. This odd yet somewhat appealing lady radiated a magnetism when she would appear amused with herself. Soon, Mary looked up at me and whispered in a seducer's voice : 'If only you knew Julian.'

As if prompted by my quizzed and puzzled expression, Mary soon elucidated upon what she meant, and leaning forward in my general direction she gave me a reassuring squint in the eyes and told me that it was her duty to help other people to pray. Filling our glasses with wine yet again I asked her just what it was that she had meant by this last remark. Although it had been the sort of remark that could innocently be passed over by taking it upon the grounds of religious assistance, to me it exhumed a differing quality as if it was meant to openly point to an ambiguous meaning. I was willing to take the offered bait.

'And how is it then that you help others to pray?' I smiled straight back into Mary's rustic eyes. As if the answer was so simplistic it had been hiding in the forest as trees, Mary casually tipped the glass to her mouth, still in its amused expression, and answered that it was perhaps because she was the divine vessel.

At this point Mary abruptly removed herself from the sofa and walked over to a corner cabinet. Within a few moments there was some foreign chanting diffusing into the room to mix with the already present drifting aroma. I couldn't make out if it was Buddhist Tibetan chanting, native tribe chanting, or some poor Dominican or Franciscan monks holed up in some monastery on an isolated clifftop somewhere. While I had been

thinking these distracting thoughts and sipping the wine, Mary had slipped out of the room and returned again with what looked like to be a pouch in her hand. She sat down once again upon the sofa and began to put together some cigarette papers.

I had guessed now that Mary had decided we were to smoke a joint before our conversation was to progress in any further direction. By this time I was feeling in a good mood from the glasses of wine I had drank, and the idea of smoking a peaceful joint amidst this music and floating perfume seemed a welcome one.

In the few minutes that had taken Mary to roll the joint and light it, my head had whirled through a viscera of images associated with the surrounding ambience. Firstly, I had travelled back half a dozen years to my final time spent at university ; here I had sat about in similar rooms which had been inhabited by similar smells and music, and with the same array of young woman all clad in their remnants of hippie clothing as if stating a reimbursement of a past free-love attitude. I could of imagined Mary being one of these young girls, seated in her mixed coloured tressled dresses with braided hair : now another ten years older with a marked line of wear beneath the eyes that told of sexual conquests and marred relationships in-between. But here she was now, sitting before me smoking a joint and seeming the older, and perhaps wiser, of us both.

Other images intertwined after this ; pictures of exotic landscapes and the warmth of human music and compassion that envelopes humanity's spirit. True, I always do feel a better understanding of the human race after a slight dose of alcoholic libation, and am soon able to drop my visage of lack of faith and hope in the world. When I am fully sober however it is a different matter again, for through my conscious eyes I begin to see once again the stupidity and ignorance that I have always felt has underlined our species on this planet. But saying that, right now I was content with many things : happy to be smoking the joint that had been passed to me ; happy to be listening to foreign chanting voices ; and happy to be smelling wafts of patchouli in the company of an intriguing woman. Yet against all this contentedness that had suddenly overwhelmed me, and in view of my initial curiosity, I managed to find the track from which I had temporarily become strayed.

'So Mary ; tell me, why are you the divine vessel?'

'Because', Mary slightly paused, and taking another sip of the wine continued, 'because certain people are able to reach God through me.'

'Certain people?'

'Certain men.'

This was secretly what I had wanted to hear, even if I had been denying such a thing to my conscious mind. I knew now that she was referring back to what she had mentioned earlier in our brief chat. At this point I tried to remember, or rather regurgitate, anything that was still in my head from the book I had picked up at the library. But I could think of nothing. All I could do was to stare blankly back at her face. At my silence Mary had leaned further forward upon the edge of the sofa ; perhaps she was beginning to feel comforted by my near presence, or perhaps she was just beginning to feel the first pulses of intellectual dominance over me. I knew that at this moment she was in control of the flow of information, and anyone who found themselves in such a position always held the ruling rod. My question now was whether she saw fit to initiate me further into her realms of knowledge. Mary opened her mouth as if to speak and I saw every minute detail of her outward dental form : she paused, as if sensing some arcane beginnings of attraction within the air, then proceeded to mouth the words.

'Do you believe in the holy union between man and woman?' I nodded a yes.

'Do you believe in the natural magic of sexual love that rises through the flesh and into the spirit? Do you understand the magnetic attraction that exists between the male and female principles, the energy that manifests through the sexuality and which has to be united, within spiritual equilibrium, to create the one, and thus to be a part of the Godhead?'

'I believe in the power of sex. And I believe in the attracting polarity of the sexes. Will that do?' Weakly, I almost stammered out the last three words of my sentence. It was if I had to force out a reply from my mouth which, as with the rest of my body, had become inert and glued to the words that issued from Mary's own mouth. I didn't expect any reply from her, yet she told me that, for now, this would do. Strangely, I felt reassured at

her soft appreciative tone.

Stubbing out the joint and finishing the final glass of wine, Mary suddenly asked, in what was a commonplace tone, whether I wanted to see something that I would never forget. In my initial hesitation she added that I would be able to see the sexual kundalini at work. Familiar with the word and what it meant I hastily accepted.

Following her out into the street I was directed towards what was a light coloured Citroen 2CV - a yellowy white - or so it appeared to me from the glow of the street. Once inside, Mary started the engine and drove off. Whether or not Mary was over the alcohol limit to drive did not seem to bother either of us in the slightest : we had the attention of our minds focused upon a different goal.

Funny as it was, as soon as I had seated myself in the car next to Mary, I had found that I had lost all means to a conversation. I was quashed for thought. And Mary, who appeared to be driving without a care, with one hand on the wheel and the other holding the newly lit cigarette which she kept continuously placing to her lips, seemed not to mind the silence that had ensued. I felt, for the fear of feeling my own self-conscious, that I had to re-enact some form of a conversation so not to look like I was just another stranger tagging along for the ride. In my thoughts I was observing the night life of the town drift by in an active haze, seeing people busying themselves with whatever they had to do for either work or fun, whilst I was here in my neighbour's car being driven to a destination that I knew nothing about. In fact, on retrospection, I had been given little, if nothing, concerning what was actually about to take place ; rather, under the effect of some wine and a joint I had eagerly agreed to what was an enticing proposition.

I looked over at Mary, who noticed my silent, perhaps apprehensive stare. 'Can you feel it?', she questioned me with her older eyes.

'What, the wine?' I somewhat innocently answered. To this reply Mary gave one of her comforting laughs.

'No, not the wine. The energy between two people. Apart from living in the same block

as each other, we are virtual strangers ; yet you trust me, enough to drink with me, smoke with me, and to be taken in a car to somewhere you have no clue about. Why do you think that is?'

'Because I'm a gullible fool?'

'Nope. Well, perhaps so, but not in this case. It's because, my dear Julian, that you are a man and I am a woman, and between the polarity of the sexes there is always an underlining bond. It is a mutual trust, a thin umbilical that exists on an etheric plane, tying man and woman together because it is the divine will that both be joined together. It is inevitable. That's why even in the schoolyard as a young kid you would always find the opposite sex fascinating and you would feel a strange desire to be with them and to explore them further. And tell me Julian, when you first kissed a girl, say when you were playing kiss-chase with your mates. Did you know then why it was that you felt a childish urge to have to kiss a young girl, even before you had discovered what sex meant?'

'I put it down to doing what I always had to do.'

'Yes Julian. Very blasé and lazy of you. It was because nature, in her womanly wisdom, was working inside of you before your own consciousness had figured out what the score was. The positive goes with the negative, south with the north, yin with the yang, black with the white, what goes up must come down....'

'According to Newton, that is', I interjected.

'Yes', Mary continued, 'and according to another law, man must be united with woman. Right?'

'I had never thought otherwise. Where would we be without it?' I thought that by this time I was getting myself wisely into the conversation, and beginning to understand the drift of it.

'There are many names for it under its various guises. But I believe that love is based upon the magnetism of energies.'

What Mary was talking about seemed to me to describe lust rather than its distinguished

counterpart of love. Anyway, the conversation once again fell into a silence and I had no wish to argue with her determined theories.

We had driven out of town now and were heading through into the suburban areas, with streets full of parked company cars and lights dimly lit in first floor windows. The effect of the wine and the smoke was wearing off now and I was beginning to wish that I had another bottle of wine somewhere, at least so that when we eventually arrived at where we were going I could dull my sober reticence.

After driving for another ten minutes or so, which made the journey about half an hour in total, Mary parked the car in what looked like just another street of houses. I looked around at first to see if I could spot a street name which would possibly give me some bearings, yet I could see nothing from where the car had stopped.

'Lets go and meet some friends of mine', Mary said as she glanced casually over at me in the passenger seat. As she got out I followed her, almost obediently as a disciple would, more so in a fear of losing her close contact in this alien place, and walked behind her as she strolled up to a small black iron gate and pushed through onto a narrow path that lead to a normal looking semi-detached property. On the side of the white wooden door was a painted knocker in the coloured mould of a coiled red serpent, which seemed to be metalically eating its tail. Mary knocked three times using the coiled serpent. We waited in silence for a moment. Soon I could hear the sound of footsteps approaching the door from the inside. Standing beside Mary, either as her guest or as a form of intended victim to god knows what prank or sinister event, I felt myself to be outside the circumference of a circle, beyond the perimeter of some elite group, like the small child chided at school for not fitting in. I was the foreign agent here, in open view amongst the unknown 'invisibles'. I was alert when the door finally opened.

'Ah, hello Mary', came a voice that I instantly recognised, even if I was unfamiliar with the owner's visage. It belonged to the arguing voice that had proclaimed the liturgy about the devil's dung : such a tone of voice I could not forget ; it tinged upon the verge of being hoarsely camp. Almost a weak tone with a gravel pitch that meandered along

the ridge of being sickly after several minutes exposure. The person who owned such a voice, and who had by now politely turned his attention upon myself, was a short stumpy man with a round face and thinning hair, and who appeared to be around the late thirties and who had two small dark dots for eyes. Mary introduced me as a close friend, who was interested in attending the gathering.

'Hi there Mr. Cross. So good to have your company for this fine evening. My name is Lucas James, but you can call me just plain Lucas. After all, you are a good friend of Mary, and she is also a good friend of mine. Why don't you both come on in, things have not yet begun.'

I rendered my thanks and followed Mary into the hallway of the house. I was not particularly at ease with the atmosphere that I was walking into, especially since I had found our host to be comparable with a reptile. Yet I left such opinions to myself, for now. On entering I had shot an anxious expression over at Mary's direction, hoping that she would recognise my initial unease at being the uninvited guest, but all that I managed to receive by way of assurance was a brief girly smile as if telling me to keep my eyes open and enjoy the proceedings. And since in the situation at hand I had little choice as to my future actions, I decided, in an almost submissive gesture, to just let things take their course.

Lucas, who was playing the perfect gentleman, ushered us towards a door on the right which was further down the hallway. The door, which was opened for us both to enter, was decorated with the emblem of a peacock's tail. Mary walked casually into the room as if it were a room within her own flat, and sat down upon the nearest available chair, which was one of the last ones still unoccupied for there were already a number of people grouped in light chatter upon an assortment of collected chairs, obviously gathered for the occasion.

'Everybody', came the effeminate gravel voice of Lucas, 'this is Julian Cross, he will be joining us as a guest for the evening. Please make him welcome.'

On this note, many of the people previously engaged in chatter turned around to face me

and proclaimed their hellos and welcomes. As a format of social intercourse I returned their graces with my own verbal assortment of thank you's. Then, as if momentarily distracted, the figures in the room turned back to their discourse. I was thankful ; I did not want polite shadows of conversation. I was happy to sit unnoticed in my own space, taking note of the room that I had been introduced into. It gave me a sense of slight disappointment to soon realise that the room I was in was like any other room. It had hunting pictures on the wall, several framed photographs on mantelpieces, and the decor was summery and light, almost a pastel shade of colours that adorned the fabrics and furniture. It was the interior of a house that could of belonged to a thousand people of the second generation. But why had I expected it to be any different?

For the first time now I became aware of a rather strong aromatic smell that was present within the room, and with a short moment's detection I found that the odour was emanating from a vessel that was perched upon a table in the corner, and which had a small lighted candle beneath it. With a straining of the eyes across the room, it could be seen that wisps of smoke were rising from this crucible to be diffused into the atmosphere, and to be subsequently breathed into the lungs by everyone present. And as to those who were present, I must admit that I paid little attention to them. To me they were only passing strangers, and I did not wish that either them or me should become imprinted upon each other's memory. I just wanted to come here and to be able to finally slip away unnoticed, and a face soon to be forgotten amidst the countless other souls of the world.

After several minutes of waiting I sat back and absent mindedly counted the bodies in the room. Apart from myself, and including Mary, there were a total of ten people, with there being a mixture of two men to eight ladies. Lucas would make the arrangement to number eleven.

After further several minutes of silence had ensued on my part, my head bursting with chaotic thoughts that I could not still by any meditative force, I heard the sound of a twelfth voice. Mary turned around and grinned at me, saying that it would be soon, as

the person who owned the twelfth voice entered into the room, just slightly behind me on the right.

'Yes Lucas. No problem there', the man uttered before he turned to face the almost crowded room before him. 'Ah, glad to see that everybody is here once again, on time and ready to receive the divine into their veins.' The man, who in contrast to Lucas, was tall (perhaps 6' 3'), slender, short cropped head of hair, who was perhaps in his early forties and exhibited a dark chin beard, not too far distant from the existentialist hair growth. After this short address to what were obviously familiar faces to him, he immediately turned to face me and looked directly into my eyes. Walking over to me he held out his arm and with a strong grasp introduced himself, with formality, as Marcus Solomon. Then, almost with reverence, he proceeded to kneel down on one knee before me and humbly held my hand. Now his voice had turned from an authoritative tone to one of friendship.

'I want to tell you', began Marcus, 'that the human body is the temple of God. Do you understand this?' I nodded my assent. I had no intention of disrupting his flow of thought, and since I was still a guest in this man's house I deemed it safer to agree and to go along with what he was saying. Besides, I felt that I was not sufficiently informed to debate against this man. So I returned his gaze directly into his pupils and waited for him to continue. None of the people around us, not even Mary, were the least bit interested in what was concluding in this corner of the room.

'Good', he continued, 'and do you also know that the strongest force within this temple is, after the hunger and the thirst, the firmament of the sexual desire? Well let me tell you Julian, that what you may not be aware of is that there are countless numbers of religious sects of all nations and races that give the full and proper recognition to this abiding truth, and that instead of repressing such a thing, as is so wrong to do, they give it the full expression that God declares. Let us not forget that even in India certain devotees of Krishna meditate while in the act of copulation. And there are fertility rites that abound in all the ancient lands, and even now in this modern age there are those who have sexual intercourse in the fields to ensure God's grace for their harvest,

because God looks kindly upon the sexual spirit. And such a spirit dwells within the Hindu temples, with their outer walls carved with the figures of gods and goddesses entwined together in holy union. Also consider the worship of the Shiva lingam with its symbolism of the God's sexual organ. In fact, there is this type of symbolism predominant throughout the world in various guises.

Do not forget that the cross itself was an ancient sexual symbol. It was only when the Church took its stranglehold of the Christian creed and introduced its own forms of Puritanism that the Agape, or 'love feast', of the early Christians was finally banned at the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. Yet these pagan rituals still survive and the Church cannot wipe out that which formed the basis of its own foundation. The architecture of the churches themselves are abound with pagan fertility symbols. I have seen alters that have scribed in stone the phallic penis, denoting the instrument that will spend the holy sperm of the divinity. The ancients knew this secret well : for in copulation the holy spirit enters our own temple and manifests within us. During the sexual union the man is the embodiment of Christ and a woman can become the vessel for the embodiment of the Virgin Mary. Do you see, Julian?'

The man spoke with an approachable yet insistent tone as if assured of his own truth, as indeed it seems that most men are, since each who speaks believes his words to be true. Yet since I did not know upon which ground of argument to confront this man upon, I decided again to be carried as a participant in his knowledge. I could fake anything upon the outside and so to nod in an acknowledgement of this man did not seem a hard falsity to incur ; I would still be able at all times to keep their delusions to myself if need be. Also, strangely enough, I felt a willingness to go along with the whole thing for it had succeeded in sufficiently arousing my curiosity to a high degree.

'Yes Marcus. I had always believed in the power of the sexual energy inherent within us, and I have often suspected that such a power has a spiritual base and serves other than for simple procreation.'

'Yes, exactly', Marcus returned somewhat more enthusiastically, 'it is the spiritual

driving force that streams through your body to call it unto God. Do you wish to feel the full power of this energy?' I nodded that I did.

It had always been a vice of mine to be tempted to try anything at least once, if only for the sake of experience, or even, if I admit it, for the sake of my own selfish indulgence. Now I had put myself into a more relaxed and receptive mood, for my initial apprehension had been swept away and replaced by my own eager and heightened curiosity. I wanted to be a part of what it was that was about to take place. Feeling a kinship now with Mary I leaned forward from my chair and placed a hand upon her right shoulder ; a soft grasp. In return, Mary stroked my hand and winked at me, as if denoting in her demure way that I might enjoy what was at that moment to begin.

It was then that Marcus, signalling over to his counterpart Lucas, gestured that we were to follow him out of the room. We were led back out into the corridor and towards a door at the end which opened to reveal a set of stairs leading down into what was a spacious, yet dimly lit, cellar.

There were few decorations. What seemed like an altar, or ceremonial table, was situated at the far end, with there being a huge golden coloured cross placed upon its centre. As before I noticed a deep smell that penetrated the whole of the cellar room, this time it being pungent rather than aromatic, and on initial ingestion by the nostrils it made the head feel a slight dizzy sensation. It was a claustrophobic smell that one was unable to escape from whilst in this room. On the back wall at either side of the altar was hanging a sun and moon respectively. In the corner to my left was several chairs that seemed to be draped with a multitude of white dresses or perhaps cloaks.

Upon a spoken word from Marcus the crowd of people who had filtered in with me all walked over to the corner of chairs, and undressing to nakedness then garbed their bodies with what were white cloth tunics. Mary turned, and motioned for me to do the same. I was at first embarrassed to undress not only before a bunch of strangers, but more to the point, to reveal my sacred nakedness to Mary Margaret. It was an idle desire

in the back of my mind that if I should have to appear bare to Mary, then perhaps it could be within the form of some sexual relations, and not just to dress up as a cellar druid of some kind. Yet neither could I stand alone in this close cellar ignoring what was obviously the protocol : I obliged, and soon I too was robed in this white tunic. The women of the group then gathered in the centre of the room and held hands together to form a circle, and inside their perimeter stood us four men (the other two strangers, myself, and Lucas). My hands were subsequently grabbed by the other men and within the circle of eight was our small circle of four : the male circle within the female.

'Praise the Lord Kristos that he has saw fit to bless us here in our temple' orated Marcus as he stood before the alter with his right hand raised to the heavens.

'Bless the Kristos', came the chanted congregational reply.

'Praise the Lord Kristos that he has seen fit to bestow our bodies upon us so that we may become an embodiment of his divine essence'. Marcus was slowly rising his words up now with a gentle heat.

'Bless the Kristos', again came the communal reply.

'Praise the Lord Kristos for giving us the grace of the holy union between man and woman so that we may be elevated to the holy union within God, and so may the serpent eat its tail to become One. Amen.'

'Bless the Kristos. Amen.'

Now I suddenly found myself being pushed along in a rhythmic, almost dance-like, skip as our small circle was ignited into movement. 'We must move in the direction of the sun', whispered Lucas into my ear as his beady dot eyes pointed towards the sun that was placed on the wall behind the alter. I did not know how they had managed to formulate which direction the sun was indeed pointing when stuck in a house cellar, yet I wisely kept my silence and continued my participation in the circular movement. Marcus, in full view of everyone, was standing still with a rapturous expression upon his face : the face of either a sublime monk or that of a delirious Fu Manchu on amphetamines.

The female circle had sprang into movement now and was circling us yet was doing so in the opposite direction. I must have looked slightly confused at this for once again Lucas, who had by now a firm grip upon my right hand, leaned over and whispered to me that the women must turn in the opposite direction to the sun. At this point I realised that it was futile to try to form an understanding or reason to what was going on, and thought it best to ask, or facially express a desire for, no more questions and just to go with the dance : 'dance, dance, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the dance said he', an old hymn once sung at school that suddenly decided to spring itself once more into my surface memory.

The dancing became faster with increased vigour and moved with more of a frenzy rather than a rhythm. Although the male circle had begun to speed up its pace, it was the larger circle outside of us that was beginning to turn at a tremendous rapidity. It was becoming so that I was unable to clearly define any singular faces but just a whirl of heads and hair. It was like a circle of ecstatic dervishes or energised children, giddy and tumultuous in their rapture, caught up in the movement of a physical bliss. This was kept up for perhaps ten minutes or so, to the best of my remembrance. Shortly afterwards screams started to emanate from their collective voices. If my hearing still had some faculty remaining I could say that they were screams of passion, ecstasy dare I say?

Then the outer circle broke away. This was when it happened. The eight women, now engulfed within some delirious passion, tore off their tunics to reveal their sweating naked bodies, and then began to lunge. Marcus, as if it was the custom, was the first to be dragged, willingly it seemed, to the floor by two of the women, where his own tunic was tore off him and he was subjected to lustful sexual relations with both of the women. Before I was able to witness anything else I was grabbed from the side by Mary and pushed down onto the floor to have my own tunic ripped from my body by this lady now unrecognisable to me. I could not deny that I was physically aroused by the whole thing for I was, and this was shown by the rapid reaction of my groin. Mary spared no

hesitation and was soon above me with myself inside of her.

Yet the women within the group greatly out-numbered the men, and if I had not fully appreciated this realisation before, I did so now, for as soon as the relations with Mary had finished its course, I was subjected by an obligation of duty it seemed, to fulfil the lust of the several loose bodies drifting near. In this way, and in the course of the proceedings I was bound to the male role on three occasions.

After an indeterminate length of time there came a command that issued from Marcus, instructing us all to end our activities. For this I was almost grateful, for by this time my own energy was spent, and the drive of my initial desire was becoming dry with exhaustion. It had not been the normal state of affairs in such matters, but was a union that was manifested with a vigour I was unaccustomed to. The women had appeared unsatiable in their appetites as if the whole godly legion would not have been able to satisfy them. They had seemed craving, and ravenous for continual deep penetration and my ardent thrusting had only impelled them to scream for a greater depth. It could be said that these women's orifices had temporarily widened to incorporate the universal sphere within their moistures. But now everything, from Marcus's word, had come to an end.

As if nothing had happened, all the other members of the group suddenly raised themselves from their positions off of the floor and dressed once again into their white tunics. As with the other men, I followed suite. It was then that I caught sight of Mary who had continued to remain naked. I was about to call her to question when Marcus beckoned her forward towards the alter. Once there Marcus blessed a kiss upon both her cheeks and handed her a bunch of what looked like some fruit. Turning around to address us Marcus raised his voice so all could hear clearly what was about to be spoken. 'Listen hear', he clearly intoned, 'at this moment our exalted Virgin Mother stands before us within flesh. She offers us here this sacrament as a blessing to our faith. Eat and be joyous within the temple of our Lord. Amen.'

'Amen', responded all.

Mary then approached us all and bade us each eat of a dried grape.

This over, we all changed back into our normal clothes and ascended from the cellar. Once upstairs we all said our polite goodbyes, as formal friends, and stepped towards the front door to reach the outside air, passing beneath a sign as we did so, that read : **'RETIRE MOI DE LA BOUE'**.

Nothing was said between Mary and myself on the drive home. All was silence. As the car was being parked outside of our flats I turned to Mary, who thus far had paid no attention to my presence. 'Who are Marcus and Lucas?', I asked. 'They', she began to reply in a slow emotionless tone, 'were once priests. But they came to realise that God does not dwell in the Christian Church, for it was the Church which drove God from his true contact with man. They buried the true teachings of our Lord under their wrath for power and wealth. And only the pagan roots of the Christian Church hold any remaining truth. God is not doctrine. God is life.'

We stepped out from the car and into the building. Without saying goodbye we went our separate ways.

I slept fast that night.

'So the last will be the first, and the first last.
For many are called, but few chosen.'

Matthew 20 : 16

2

The first translation of Alchemical texts (from Greek and Coptic) were said to be made in the first half-century after the death of Mohammed, on the orders of Khalid, son of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I. By the 8th century there were many Arab scholars who were able to read Greek, and thus the transmission of learning from the past became more widespread. A major name in alchemy associated to this time is that of Jabir Ibn Hayyan. His style of writing which was intended to be enlightening to those who were also initiated into the secret code of alchemy, yet obscure to those ignorant of its such secrets, became known as the Geber style - which in due course came to give the English language the term 'gibberish', for such things incomprehensible. It was the deliberate intention of Geber to hide many secrets within a framework of ambiguous language, thus to distract the less hardy in their search. There are covert references made to this employment in Geber's treatise 'The Investigation or Search of Perfection' :

'Therefore, let the *Sapient Artificer* studiously peruse Our Books, collecting Our dispersed *Intention*, which We have described in divers places, that We might not expose it to Malignant and Ignorant Men.....Therefore be Studious in them, and you will find Our whole *Science*, which We have abbreviated out of the *Books* of the *Ancients*.'

It is little wonder then that to the majority of people alchemy has remained a

mysterious oddity with its own profundity of language. Yet all alchemists speak of the elements of nature, and their relation with certain base metals. What is the connection here? Geber's outline of the elements included the four basic principles of earth, air, fire, and water ; yet into this he included the terms of hotness, coldness, dryness, and moisture. Within the presence of these elements, and under planetary influences, metals were supposedly formed in the earth by the action of sulphur and mercury. Geber states his belief that the combination of sulphur and mercury, being of absolutely pure quality, and in certain proportion, would give rise to gold. Further to this, in various degrees of impurity and in various proportions they would give rise to all the other metals. So, was it after all just a transmutation of metals that the alchemists were seeking to achieve? By the authority of their own words it would seem so. And by the evidence afforded us by all the other well known alchemists of history, with their constant and rigid language of metallurgy, it would appear that the whole phenomenon was centred around the achievement of producing gold. As stated at the beginning of this article, this image of the old men around their furnaces is the typical picture that their works afford us. Yet we must take a look at history here. The art of alchemy goes back centuries, and traces of the work appear in the centuries preceeding Christ. Would history have maintained, within the minds of all the wise alchemists, such a longing for this material wealth? Once again, let us look at the words of the alchemists themselves. From the hand of one of the most famous men of the art, Theophrastus Paracelsus, in his treatise 'The Book of the Revelation of Hermes' we have witness to a most revealing paragraph :

'When the philosophers had discovered it, with great diligence and labour, they straightway concealed it under a strange tongue, and in parables, lest the same should become known to the unworthy, and the pearls be cast before swine.'

Immediately, this focuses our attention to the words of Christ when he said, in the Gospel according to Matthew : 'Do not give what is holy to the dogs ; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.' (7 : 6). Is this not an admission from both parties to keep that knowledge which is holy from the ignorant?

If this is so, then we can perhaps rightly assume that the whole facade behind the 'gibberish' of the alchemical language is due to a wish to keep concealed those secrets that should not be available to the ignorant, but rather only to those with 'continued and frequent diligence of Labour, and great Study equivalent, not without profound and serious thoughts' (Geber).

And to end their treatise, the alchemists, again using subtle reinforcement, declare the truth of their words : 'That all the Words are true, which are now (by us only) written in our Volumes' (Geber) ; 'I testify before God that I lie not, although it appear impossible to fools, that no one has hitherto explored Nature so deeply' (Paracelsus).

Thus, they may speak the truth then, but under which words - the literal or the allegorical?

It is the belief of this writer that whatever the alchemists believed to have achieved, or believed was capable of achievement within nature, was concealed within allegorical and coded language. All that remains to be surmised, within this article, is - what was the zenith of their achievement, and did such an achievement actually exist?

The next morning all I could bring myself to do, as to occupy my many distracting thoughts, was to work upon the commissioned article, which I still had time to complete for the end of the month deadline. So I set down a few more details upon the subject of

alchemy which I had so far managed to find through my rooting of the various books before me. But now my mind was active again.

It was a similar feeling to waking up after a night on the alcohol ; not the times when one drinks to excess so as to incur a pounding deathly head in the late morning, but just enough alcohol so as to give you that slight clouded head that makes you wish to make the most out of the day ahead and to participate in some worth of action, knowing that lethargy will be the worst thing for you in this clouded state. It was a feeling like I had to get out ; almost like I wanted to discover something new and exciting to bring some momentary worth into my day's existence. And I had done enough writing on my alchemy article for one day. Was it that something was distracting me?

I put another pot of coffee on the stove and leant upon the kitchen work surface. It came to me that so far I had looked for nothing in my life other than scraping a living together and not to get myself tied down within any obligation. I had moved on from a couple of places solely to escape from women whom I felt were closing me in. Looking at things in that light I suppose it could be said that I was the sort of person who was always running from things. Yeah that's me, I thought, always dipping my toes in the water to test the heat, and when it gets too hot I'm off faster than a leper chasing a cure. Yet somewhere in the recesses of my mind there was a thought that had stayed with me throughout all of my wanderings, remaining there as a light of inspiration as though letting me think that there was a reason for all the things that I was doing ; a sort of plan, a predestined outcome that saw things not as always running away from things but rather as leaving things behind because I was running towards something. Inevitably, to move forward into the future, one must leave the past behind. But I couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was just my Julian wishful thinking that was telling me that I wasn't running away from anything, that I was going towards something instead. You can never really trust your head until the time you believe that you know what it's thinking ; until then it is just a maze that releases a thread once in a while.

Whilst drinking the coffee and looking from my window out onto the little

church hall below, the word 'paganism' suddenly appeared within my thoughts ; that word that was uttered several times the evening before, both by Mary, and I think by Marcus also. What did it really mean? I knew that it referred to some kind of Christianish worship that the Church had tried to stamp out as not being in line with their orthodox views on God : other than that I was a lost lamb. Having the afternoon to myself I decided to do some checking up on a few terms, to find out just what had been the meaning behind the previous evening's frivolous activities. Up until now I had attempted not to really think about what it was that had happened with Mary within that orgiastic cellar with her strange cultish friends : I had been baffled by the experience (and I must admit also somewhat pleased with the sexual contact), yet I had no desire to start becoming embroiled any further with these weird people. An experience yes ; devotion, no. But who can deny curiosity? I concluded I would take another trip down to the university library to see if I could root out some literature on 'paganism'.

The day was slightly overcast yet the atmosphere was heavy with a close humidity that was warm. It was a pleasant walk down to the university campus, past the few sauntering female students that caught my interested eye. I was attracted to several of the young girls that passed me once I was in the grounds, and I must admit that I found their youthfulness and their worldly innocence appealing, yet my mind was elsewhere. I had come up with a better idea than just roaming through the library. I was, after all, right in the middle of a seat of learning : why not make use of this learning?

I called to one of the students passing to direct me to the faculty building of the religious department. I was pointed to a location on the other side of a group of buildings that was in view from where I was standing near to the library. It would not take me long to reach them.

Once through the door I was at the end of a long corridor and undecided upon where to go next. I began to walk along this corridor until I reached the foot of a large staircase at the end. I could see no-one in sight whom I might ask to direct me to someone who would be capable of helping, so I ascended the stairs to reach the first

floor. Here again was another long corridor which was dotted with unevenly spaced doors along both sides. I walked up to one of the doors and peered inside through the glass. There appeared to be some students working at tables who were oblivious to my moronic face at the door window. I silently stuck my head into the room. 'Excuse me, but could anyone tell me where I might find the head of the divinity faculty. I have an appointment with him?' Of course the last bit had been a blatant lie, but they weren't to know. A young man in his early twenties stood up, walked over to the door where I was standing, and smiling gave me the directions to a room that was situated on the floor above me. It was there that I would find John Simon.

I traversed one more flight of steps and soon found myself outside a door which had the title 'Professor John Simon : Head of Religious Studies' plaqued onto it, black letters on gold. The thin strip of elongated glass within the door showed a room that was dark and which appeared to be empty. I knocked for certainty : no answer. On the opposite wall to the door was a row of five comfortable chairs, so I sat down and preceded to wait. I had no overall plan nor any great reason why I had compelled myself to come here, other than it seemed a good idea at the time to go straight to the top if one wanted to know things. And besides, right now I didn't feel like doing much else except satisfying my newly acquired questions.

Luckily for circumstance it wasn't long before my man arrived. I did not know that he was a professor from his dress - black corduroy trousers and deep green shirt, open at the collar - yet assumed he was my prize when he shoved his keys into the lock to open the door into the once empty room.

'Professor John Simon?' The man abruptly turned to face me as I approached the door to enter the room. 'Hello, I'm Julian Cross. Can I speak with you for a moment.' On hearing my introduction the man's face changed into a friendly smile ; it was the smile that belonged to a man in his early fifties with a bald head on the summit and greying at the side edges. Oddly, the face of this man felt reassuringly familiar.

'Ah, we have a Mr Cross to see me. Well, actually Mr Cross, it's Dr. not professor ; and

since you are already halfway into the room you might as well come and sit down young man. Now, what is it. You're not one of my students are you? I must admit, I have no recollection of ever seeing your face. Am I correct or am I just growing senile?'

'No, you're correct Dr', I replied humbly, somewhat apologetic for my rushed intrusion and false address. 'I'm not a student, I'm a freelance journalist. I am really sorry to be bothering you like this, but I have a few questions on a religious subject that I needed answering and I wondered if you'd mind helping me with a couple of answers. It's for my own private research. I thought I would ask for your advice ; is that okay?'

'Oh, why not. It's only time, and I've abused my fair share of it in the past. Now, fire away Mr. Cross and I'll see if I am able to help you with any of those questions of yours. I hope there isn't any tricky ones?'

'No, nothing really. It was just a point that I wanted clearing up ; something to do with paganism.' A half-cocked smile began to sprout like a crescent moon upon the old man's face. He motioned me with a nod of his head to continue.

So I began upon a course of weak lies that told of my commission to write about the peak of paganism and how it eventually declined under the weight of the new church of Christianity. As I was retelling this hash of lies, my eyes were on a continuous sweep of the room, trying to form an image of what type of person would inhabit such a room. It was a studious room, little doubt about that, with what looked like several rows of theological books, some with very old leather binding, stacked inside an oak viewing case that was perhaps five feet high. The desk at which Dr. Simon sat, as well as the genial demure of the room, gave the impression of one who was meticulous within his own organised chaos : the man who knew where every scrap of paper was hidden beneath all the countless other piled scraps : the room of a Dr. of theology.

When I had finished my excuses I stopped speaking and turned my attention towards the Dr. He seemed an amiable man, carrying with him a grin of humour that appeared to always remain with him. His open necked green shirt, somewhat ostentatious, revealed a thick and sturdy neck with the grooves of strong gland lines. In my silence I observed

the amusement that had come over the Dr's face.

'Mr Cross. That's very admirable, all that interest in the whys and wherefores of paganism. But will we ever know the truth of such a thing so long as it remains overshadowed and suppressed by our mighty father religion of Christianity?'

'You tell me', I smiled back at him, 'you're the Dr of theology.'

'Quite right. I am. And let me tell you Mr Cross tha..'

'Please, call me Julian', I interrupted, with an insistence that could of been termed rudeness on my part. The Dr. just chuckled to himself again ; I did not know if he found my attempts at extracting some knowledge from him amusing, or whether this was just his general light-heartedness upon the subject since he had to spend every waking day within its academic folds.

'Julian', he continued, 'let me tell you that the cross-over between paganism, and whatever else there was, into the new realm of Christianity was not as smooth and clear-cut as religion likes to make out. And ancient god worship will never be wiped out entirely because there will always be those who will carry on its memory, whether in spirit or in the material world. And paganism is still very much alive today ; it was even alive when the great churches of Christendom were being built, alive within the minds of its builders who wanted to leave lasting proof of its existence.

A man named Professor Gregory Webb - a real professor - of Cambridge University was also the secretary of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, and at the end of the war, around 1946, was appointed by the government to survey ancient churches in Southern England which had been damaged by the German bombing. So, off he went to survey the damaged churches to estimate the cost of their repairs. And what did he find?' I shook my head dumbly, as if I were just another college pupil being baffled by facts.

'Well, what he found Julian was that within some of the damaged alters he came across were carved stone effigies of phallic penis's : a blatant pagan symbol. So, our Professor Webb did some more checking, keeping his eyes out for any more pagan influences. His survey concluded that 90% of all Pre-Reformation churches built before the outbreak of

the Bubonic Plague at the end of the 14th century contained pagan symbols in their stonework and altar masonry. Altars which had long hidden numerous fertility and phallic symbols which belonged without doubt to the pagan world. The men who built these churches, just like the many great masons who built the mighty cathedrals of Europe, were far wiser than most of those people who came to preach within them. The teachings may have been Christian, but many of their 'temples' were decorated with the pagan religion.' He sat back with an assured grin over his face. 'Surprising isn't it?'

'It's interesting' I agreed.

'Oh, more than that. It's wonderful. It's like the pagans sticking their fingers up and having the last laugh.'

'Why do you say that', I said somewhat puzzled, 'are you not an advocate of the Christian Church ; that's why you chose to study theology was it not?'

'Ah, now don't get me wrong too soon Julian. Religion is not just one thing and one thing alone : to learn about religion means that you learn about the multiplicity of faiths and forms. It is not just the one Christian Church. You see, true religion is that which is inside of us, that spark of faith that we all feel in those times of need and comfort ; but religion that we see around us in all its exoteric, outward forms is just the structure that human hands has given to it. The definitions, doctrines, and dogmas that man has tried to trap the faith within ; they are guides with each preaching a different path to the top. Some are good guides, and many of them are not. But it is not faith that makes them become bad guides, it is the human hands who are behind the reigns. Humanity is fragile to greed and corruption : give men faith and some of them will turn it into a religious institution ; and give men religious institutions and some of them will turn it into a power base for its own material wealth - so long as it can still be used as an idol for promoting faith.'

'Isn't that a bit harsh?' I asked

'The world has seen to it that it is harsh' replied the Dr as he leaned back comfortably into his chair. 'And one must learn that theology is not necessarily the study of religion from a biased religious viewpoint, but rather the study of the rise and development of

religion : its foundations, its truths, and also its lies and hypocrisy. I am interested in the fact of religion, not just its commercial propaganda.

'And paganism?' I asked. This was, after all, the question that I had come for.

'Paganism ; that is the old religion with its many gods, goddesses, and deities, which was virtually wiped out by the coming of the new religions. It involves a polytheistic worship, anything other than the big father religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. It incorporated many of the old myths, the great matriarchal myths that are now sadly dying away from us. And religion, like a fever, spreads its own intolerance : "As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed", The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, chapter one, verse nine.' He sighed. This last sentence was uttered with a serious tone of sadness. Then, as if springing back to life, Dr Simon looked up sharply and smiled directly into me.

'You're not going to quote me on any of this are you? I would be branded a heretic', he added in a sarcastic tone. Knowing full well that an article was not in the making, I shook my head to confirm that his identity would remain secure.

'Good. Then I won't mind telling you Julian that Christianity is redundant.'

'Redundant? How do you mean?'

'I mean quite simply that human folly has taken its toll. And what began life nearly 2000 years ago has now become a shadow of what it formerly was ; and is a shadow of its former spirit also. It is now just a redundant outward form. Hollow and shallow Julian. Does that startle you?' The Dr. leant forward slightly as if waiting on cue for an affirmative reply to his damaging words.

'Well, yes and no really. It was never a personal conviction of mine, but to hear it from you just kind of seals its fate I guess. In me at least : you just affirmed in correct words what I already felt.'

'Good', and looking at his watch Dr Simon stood up from his chair and struck out his hand for me to shake. 'And now time has caught up with me once again, and I have work to get back to. So if you'll excuse me I will have to adjourn this fruitful talk. It was

a pleasure to meet you Julian and I have this feeling in my gut that we will meet again along the way.' With this he made the action of patting his belly as if it were an oracle he relied upon, and on giving me another one of his friendly grins we parted amiably.

I was soon walking back down the staircase, along the corridors, and out into the open air. I walked to the snack shop that was situated on campus and bought myself a sandwich. I was not yet ready to head for home ; I wanted to stay away from the four walls of my flat for that bit longer. The sky, which had become overcast, looked as if it would soon be spilling a few watery drops down from the heavens.

I began to walk in the direction of the university library since this was a shelter for me and a place where I knew I had official access to. Once inside and upon the third floor I found a large empty table that was tucked away at the back of one of the reading rooms, and I perched myself here for a rest.

I was the voyeuristic cat amongst the pigeons, just sitting in my corner comfortably surveying anything that happened to pass before my vision. There were several rows of studious tables arranged with young people, heads bowed, that stretched back alongside the stacks of bookshelves. The interior of the library had an institutional air of studiousness, seriousness, and scholarly intent : it was a dry atmosphere that could easily have become stale very fast if it wasn't for the library ventilation systems. Every now and then a head would come around the end of one of the book stacks and then disappear again into the next aisle, the person never seeming to look up but completely immersed within their bibliophilic search. And then like stray rain dogs lost after the downpour has washed away their scent for home, students wander in various compass directions either eyeing out for the familiar faces of friends or keeping a count of the heads that lay open and attractive to them. Myself, I was egotistically placing myself high on a crag overlooking all this ; not an academic part of the realm yet temporarily observing their world. I too had been a student once, yet that was a past history that I didn't care to re-enter into. I had enjoyed the time taken in study and the adventures of carnal youth, but nothing else of exceptional clarity remained with me ; and whatever I

had possessed, in terms of talent and ability, was still lying dormant within, as though it was either too lethargic to budge under my present lifestyle, or was abiding its patient time. Anyhow, I had concluded that whatever it was it would solve its dilemma in its own time and not mine, so I went and got on with trying to make a reasonable living using an inherited sense of English coupled with a constant childlike curious mind. My nature had never been one of bitterness, but had recently become merely bored and listless with the way things had a mundane and earthly predictability about it. Life, it seemed, was incapable of changing its course, or of developing its own self-awareness of its rigid patterns.

'You don't mind?' A young figure was pointing a hand towards a chair at my table. Did I mind if they sat here? No, I didn't mind.

'No, go ahead. It's free.' The young girl smiled and placed her bag on the table and took out a folder. She then disappeared into the stacked rows of books. I had only caught her features for a brief minute, yet I immediately found her countenance pleasing to the eyes.

The young girl returned within five or so minutes, and sat down opposite me placing two books before her. Unobtrusively I peered at the spines of these books as she was rummaging through her bag. I could only catch the title of one of them ; it read 'A Brief History of Gnosticism'. I didn't bother to catch the name of the author. It was easy in my position to feel somewhat out of place, since this was a library where people came to study books, and here was I sitting at a table with an open space before me, and with not the slightest intention of reaching for any academic distraction. It had merely been a concrete sanctuary that I had come within : I did not wish to fashion any pretence by going in search of pseudo reading material. The young girl who was seated opposite me had taken no interest at who the man was who was sitting bare at the other end of the table. No doubt she had more lucrative things to indulge herself with. I could see that she worked with a seriousness upon her, as the horizontal movement of her eyes never seemed to leave the printed page of the book she was immersed within. I noticed her short dark cropped hair almost immediately, and other than her pretty pool blue eyes

and her pale passive skin, she was like most other young girls of her age.

I leant forward over the table in the direction of the girl until she finally lifted up her head to catch my eye. 'A history of gnosticism?', I said to her and smiled with a conversational welcome, or perhaps it could of been a grimace, I was unsure. She smiled and nodded back to me. I continued with my approach : 'gnosis means knowledge doesn't it. The knowledge of religion?'

'Something like that' ; the young girl said when she finally acknowledged my question. 'It is a religion in itself. It rivalled Christianity in the early centuries ; one might call it esoteric Christianity. It's really quite interesting when you read about it. Do you know anything about it yourself?'

I smiled in an attempt to project an intelligence. 'Well, I am only briefly aquatinted with it. I know that it deals with some sort of philosophic duality, but I know little else. That's why I'm here ; you see, I'm researching material for an article on early Western religion. Kind of from paganism into Christianity. I'm a freelance journalist. But so far, I haven't done much research.' This, I felt, constituted a lie ; but I was willing, as before, to go with it to the hilt.

'That's interesting to hear. I'm trying to do research on the Christian religion as well. It's for my final year dissertation ; I've chosen to chart the development of Christianity, but I thought I would read a small bit about the Gnostic religion just for background knowledge really. I thought this whole thing would be pretty boring, being all religion and theological discussion ; but it's turning out, from what I've read so far, to be a pretty interesting topic. I hope you have your fun with it.'

At this last remark I was immediately struck by what was a simple, ingenious, and yet totally spontaneous idea. Perhaps, I thought, this meeting had somehow been pre-arranged by such uncanny divine influence, for it sure was a fluke that I was to bump into an attractive young girl at a cornered table who just might have some information that would benefit me. I had no intention of writing any article on religion or its origins, yet my curiosity had over the last twenty-four hours been suddenly aroused upon this topic of what religion really was, especially with all the recent

references to paganism. I concluded that it might do me some good, or at least it couldn't do me any harm, to spend a little free time delving into a few areas of religion and its off-shoots. I could, after all, use such information at a later date if need be : when you have to write articles for a living, knowledge and information is always worthwhile and valuable to have no matter if it is needed straight away.

'Say', I said as I once more leant in the direction of the girl opposite me, 'we could perhaps help each other out here. You need information for your dissertation and I need the same information for my article that I'm gonna write. So why not pool ourselves together? We could do a bit of work together and pool our information ; and if I use anything that you have found, I might even credit you for it at the end of the article. What do you say - good idea?' The girl looked up and threw a shrewd glance at me.

'A man who I have never met before, and who is sitting totally alone at a library table asks me to work with him on doing some research. How do I know that what you are saying is true. You could be just another mature student trying to use his years to hit upon a young girl because he thinks that she will fall for him just because he spins some yarn about being a groovy journalist. You could be studying for an HND in geography for all I know.'

'True. I could be. But if you had any intuition in you, you would realise that I'm not, and that this could be a great opportunity for us both to get some needed information for our work ; perhaps even double the information in the same time. So, what do you reckon?'

'Meet me here at 10 am tomorrow morning and we'll see what we can come up with, and I'll bring my notes. Okay?'

'Yep, that sounds fine.' I pushed the chair away from beneath me and was prepared to make an exit when I suddenly realised that I had not asked this young girl what her name was. 'Oh, by the way, my name's Julian Cross.' I stuck my hand out towards her rather formally as if to cement this verbal agreement we had just made. 'Susannah. Susannah Simon ; but you can forget about the last name', she said as she briefly took a slight grasp of my hand before pulling it away again. 'See you tomorrow then', I called as I parted from the table and made my way directly through the library, and once

outside I headed back to my flat.

The walk home was a slow and ponderous one in comparison to my other walks home. There were bodies of people filing past me ; young people with their bags wrapped over their shoulders ; old people meandering along in rigid movements with their eyes fixed before them ; and day workers in their suits always appearing to be in some sort of business-like hurry as if late for a boardroom meeting or else had taken a sneaky extra five minutes more in their lunch hour. They all serenaded past me, making me feel almost similar to that red-herring dodgem car that is placed in the middle of races not to win but to just be a distraction to other drivers : like I wasn't actually taking part in anything yet still had to remain within the race. I had always believed the world of men to be a strange and fickle world, and never more so than now, as I walked back through the streets of Bristol to where my accommodation rested. I was almost living for words and little else.

It was a relief to reach the street which was temporarily my own.

*'G-d is alive. Magic is afoot. G-d is alive. Magic is afoot. G-d is afoot.
Magic is alive. Alive is afoot. Magic never died. G-d never sickened.
Many poor men lied. Many sick men lied. Magic never weakened.
Magic never hid. Magic always ruled. G-d is afoot. G-d never died.
G-d was ruler though his funeral lengthened. Though his mourners
thickened. Magic never fled. Though his shrouds were hoisted the
naked G-d did live. Though his words were twisted the naked Magic
thrived. Though his death was published round and round the world
the heart did not believe. Many hurt men wondered. Many struck men
bled. Magic never faltered. Magic always led.'*

'Beautiful Losers' by Leonard Cohen

There came a soft knocking against the door. My watch said it was nearly half-past seven ; early evening and the orange sky still filtered like dye through the window.

I opened the door to find Mary leaning against its frame as if she was waiting in some endless eternal queue. 'Hi Mary, why don't you come on in.' No sooner said and Mary was through the door, still without yet opening her mouth, and flopped her spread easy body onto the sofa.

'Got a coffee Julian?'

'Yeah sure.' I wandered over to the stove to put the fresh coffee on, then sauntered back to where Mary was sitting. I was just about to open my mouth and put a question to her when I saw that she took some papers from the top pocket of her loose cotton shirt and began sticking them together, as though she had other intentions beyond that of a cigarette.

'Second thoughts Julian ; you haven't got a bottle of wine you could open have you? I'm feeling a bit shaky.' Once again I replied in the affirmative, and after taking the coffee off from the stove, I went and fetched my last bottle of red wine.

'Sorry but it's gonna have to be some cheap Hungarian stuff. I'm all out of anything decent. But a drink's a drink.' Mary didn't say anything to my last comment, so I

continued to pour out two large glasses and handed one of them to her. 'So what's up then?', I queried.

'Can I ask a favour of you. If I request something, will you grant it, but just as a friend?' Mary's voice was deadpan and unemotional, as if she were talking about a purchase to a salesperson.

'Sure', I ventured, 'if I can'.

'Okay then', Mary continued as she looked directly up into my face for the first time since entering the flat. 'Will you fuck me?' On hearing this I could not help myself from letting out a muffled sound of laughter. The question had appeared as a slight shock to me, yet its impact had not been fierce since my only response had been one of not taking it seriously. But Mary had not seemed deterred from her steadfastness by my comical outburst, so I tried to straighten myself up to rectify any gap. 'You want me to sleep with you. But why?' , and in a rather casual manner I added 'but haven't we already done this once before in the cellar. Wasn't it good enough then?' This last comment had seemed to ruffle Mary in her composure.

'Stop being stupid. I'm not talking about anything before. Besides, you wouldn't understand anyhow. But the thing is, if it isn't you it has to be either Marcus or Lucas again'. She emphasised this last word with a heavy stress, as though the very thought of both Marcus and Lucas repelled her in the flesh. I sank back in my seat and ran the proposition through my mind.

If anything it was a healthy proposition, and the calmness which had taken over the room seemed to reflect this. I stood up and put a tape into the tape deck, then made my way over to the window whilst Mary continued in the mechanisms of building a cannabis cigarette. I looked down onto the empty church hall below and sipped from my glass the eastern graped red wine as it ran through the gullet and into the stomach. I didn't really mind if anything happened ; I wasn't in the least bit bothered by one proposition or the next, almost as though if something were about to happen then I might as least go within the flow, somewhat reminiscent of an orphaned twig upon the ripples of some stream, just being moved along on the water. The idea of sex had never bothered me, nor had it ever been a hindrance : it was simply something which

had occurred several times in the past and was mostly always pleasantly enjoyed ; and if Mary saw fit to engage in sexual relations with me, then I couldn't see no reason why I should refuse. I stood around to face Mary now as she sat on the sofa with the hurried joint in her mouth, ready to strike the match and light it. 'Sure, why not', I answered affirmatively to her as I moved around to face her once again and sat down.

'You probably think of me as some type of floozy or loose woman ; you not really knowing things and all.' This Mary said after she had drifted the white smoke out of her lungs and into the clean air of the flat. 'Ahh, this Mary', she continued, 'she was this neighbour who I thought was this nice prim little virgin, and now I get to know her she turns into some kind of whore.'

'No, it's not like that at all', I interrupted her. 'You have you're own strange quirky reasons why you do things. I know that. And I'm not too sure what is going on with that gang of yours, but if I am to play some part in it for your welfare, then that rests okay with me.' I returned to the glass of wine, and Mary followed suit as she lifted her own glass to her smoking lips.

'We're all empty vessels anyhow Julian. Just masks wearing a second mask and trying to remember our lines. It doesn't seem to make a whole lot of difference in this world how we use these vessels we were given for our use, since we're all trapped inside them for now.' Mary passed the lighted joint over to me and I accepted with an air of indifference, then standing up she began a slowly move around the room, eyeing with her female sense the bare decor that was my environment.

'You don't have any plants Julian. Don't you like them?'

'Not really. I don't seem to have either the time or the attention for any plants'.

'Ahh', she murmured with a wry nod of her head, 'you like to spend so much time in your head that you forget what it's like to feel'.

'Feel what?' I wasn't too sure if I had liked the tone of voice that Mary had used in the slight accusation of my non-feeling.

'Just feel. To touch and to feel. Like a man to a woman, and a human to a plant. Everything has feelings.'

'Oh Mary, give it a rest will you. Do you have to go into this ranting just because you've had a small toke on a joint. Come on, sit down.' I offered her the joint in an effort to get

her to sit down once again and to resume her mind to other matters. If we were going to have sex, I wanted it to be without too much airy prosaic fuss. So I decided to bring the talk back round to the reasons in hand. 'Well then Mary, you say that we have to have sex together so that you won't have to be forced into having it with either Marcus or Lucas - right?' She nodded her head silently as she smoked. 'But why must you necessarily have to have sex : is there a reason why it must be now?'

'Yes, there is a reason. An important reason, and I'll show you why later. But for now, please just let it be. I promise I will make it good for us both.'

'Doesn't any of this worry you Mary?', I asked her, somewhat mystified at the casual way in which she seemed to view the whole sex saga, and especially with me.

'How does what worry me?', came the confident reply that I should of guessed Mary would come out with.

'All this sex stuff. What with your little candle-light rituals, and then coming up here and asking for sex, which, I must say, isn't a thing that really bothers me.'

'Then what does bother you Julian', Mary interrupted.

'Well, come on', I said, wanting to sound both serious and yet relaxed at the same time as if I was only merely throwing a loose idea into the shared air. 'This is the twentieth century you know, God doesn't want people to enjoy themselves so easily anymore. That's why pleasure is riddled with diseases, and there are shelves full of creams in the chemists for men with scratchy balls, and women with rashes. Free sex is having a price on its head, what with the Aids virus and everything. How do you know that I'm not clean?' I finished what I was saying, hoping to make it at least slightly poignant sounding, and waited for Mary's response. It was not long in coming.

'Julian', came her now usual carefree voice, 'sex is a thing of the spirit : it is a gift of the holy union. It's a celebration. If we enter into the spirit with the right frame of mind and focus, such material drawbacks do not harm us. We see sex for what it is ; disease is purely a carnal outcome. It is of the flesh, from an indulgence solely of the flesh ; but we are more than flesh. And that is what I have learnt, and come to believe in.' She finished with a delighted look upon her face as though whatever she had been told

within her pagan gang had imbued her with a sense of the immortal. Myself I was not too sure, since I knew that whatever Mary's spiritual aspirations might be, she was still living on a material earth, and man cannot defy his pedigree, nor can he defy such laws that put his feet on the ground in the first instant. But I was silent. I let Mary have her glorious argument, and I went with it. I joined it : not because I was weak and didn't have the strength to pull away, but only because I realised that nature's pull of the temptuous is greater than the average will.

Mary stubbed out the joint after her lengthy possession and stood up, walked over to where I was seated opposite her and took my hand. She led me into the bedroom.

I was like a mute child as I watched motionless as she undressed me, then as she stripped herself naked. She was silent through it all. She let her hair swing back into its natural length, and I saw, or rather realised, for the first time how youthful she could make herself appear. True, it was like she had said : an apparition that wavered between the image of being both the virgin and the whore, the rose and the cross.

She laid me flat on my back as she placed herself whole upon me, as if my body was an empty vessel that could be filled with whatever spoils she wished to secrete. Mary gripped me as I penetrated and arched her body forward like an arcane creature. She seemed to be withholding and yet giving as though the paradox sat comfortably within itself. Although still slightly feeling the mild effects of what I had smoked, it was Mary that had shifted me into a passivity that made me lie as if in a numbness within a water-bed of placid thoughts. I was an inert body, rendered to the tastes of another person's fleshy goal. I was the vehicle both which Mary could act through me and also that which I was being allowed to act within her, as though what can be accredited to the holy ghost was working its means throughout our physical bodies. Anything that was within Mary's juices would be taken onboard and shared by my body also, like a commitment made between two tunics of flesh, and carried on until the end of the skin's life.

I could have been lying at Lourdes ; I could have been lying under the pulpit ; I

could have been lying in a manger ; I could have been lying within the divine womb. In sexual union, her sweaty loins straddled over my pelvis, we were playing at being miniature gods.

There is not a great deal else that can be put into words. The translation between sense and description often being very poor. Yet we laid together, Mary and I, for some time, until the deed was done. And it had happened neither with love yet not without feeling. It wasn't a bargain that had been struck, but rather a temporary commitment that had been sealed by each partner.

It was later in the evening and both Mary and myself had dressed, and were sitting together in the lounge of my flat. It was a curiously relaxed atmosphere and Mary had just finished telling me a few details about her past life history. She had, apparently, spent a few years living down in the South of England with an older lover who was a somewhat eccentric painter, and who had used Mary as a model for several strange abstract nude portraits. Mary had told the story with some relish, with descriptions of her ex-lover's manic behaviour and how he would often paint Mary's bare flesh just so as to provide him with a little divine inspiration. After about three years the man had woken up one morning with the desire to pack up and roam around Italy, and he had decided to go alone. He had left that very afternoon, leaving Mary with the responsibility for his flat and his belongings. So Mary had taken all his paintings and sold them down at the local market before packing up herself and deciding to move to Bristol because this was where she had used to come as a young girl in the summer to stay with her aunt. Mary had moved in with the aged aunt who was by this time senile, to look after her in the place of the home help, only to find that she died not much more than a year later. With the money that her dead aunt had left to her Mary had acquired herself this flat where she has continued to live alone ever since. And this was as far as she had got. The present circumstances involving her friendship with the pagan clan had not been arrived at when Mary halted her talk.

'Tomorrow', she suddenly began again, 'we will have to meet up. Then you will see the

result of this evening's union. Be ready for about 8 pm. Yes?'

I nodded an affirmative, and with that Mary showed me what was a cheeky grin and a womanly wink before getting up and heading for the door.

'Will I be rewarded for my favours?', I shouted to her from where I was sitting in the lounge chair. 'You'll find out, my chosen one', yelled back Mary as she shut the door behind her on leaving.

I ran the water for a bath while I listened to Leonard Cohen on the stereo. 'Like a bird on a wire', I said to myself, 'like a drunk in a midnight choir, I have tried in my way to be free.' But freedom is indeed a two-edged sword as I remember someone had once said to me in conversation. But what I didn't know was which side was the sharpest.

I also knew that tomorrow morning I had an engagement to keep with Susannah at the library.

I laid in the bath and immersed myself in the water. It was like being a baby all again.

'Gurdjieff once asked me : "Do you know who has the most vanity?" I said, "Actors, film stars, high officials?"
He said, "No, *angels and devils*."

C.S. Nott, 'Teachings of Gurdjieff'

Susannah was already there at the table when I arrived. It was the same table as the afternoon before, situated in the corner on the top floor of the library, perhaps as private as is possible within a place of communal gathering.

'Hi', I said as I approached from the rear. Susannah turned around at me and gave off a short, serious smile. 'Hello again', she said in a soft voice, then added 'being doing any research yet?' 'Ah well, I tried to get around to a few things last night but you know how one thing leads to another, and before I knew it the whole evening had gone', I replied, as the words casually rolled off my tongue as though I was a born liar.

'Never mind. I did a bit of reading into Gnosticism. Some interesting stuff there.' By this time I had sat myself down opposite from Susannah, and after having taken off my jacket and placed it on the back on the chair, I was all ears to what she had to say.

'Well', she began, 'I don't know a whole lot yet, but from what I gathered from reading last night, it seems that the Gnostic influence had a lot of credibility at the beginning of Christianity. It eventually became a source for such varied religions as that of Manichaeism, Bogomilism, and Catharism, which are the most well known ones. And like you said, it does work upon a principle of dualism, with the world of matter being the creation of the false god, the demiurge, who was one of the fallen ones, supposedly anyway. But its central doctrine is not of too much importance to us, since what we need to know, for our research into the rise of Christianity, is the inter-relatedness of their sources.'

'The interrelatedness', I said. Up to now I had been quiet and just let Susannah spill all the information. 'Is that a word : the interrelatedness?'

'Of course it is. Anyway, does it matter?', Susannah harked back at me in a slightly

irritated tone. 'At least I did some reading last night ; now do you want me to continue, mister journalist?'

'Sure, I was only messing around. Nothing serious. Okay, I'm interested now. It was just some of my morning inertia coming out.'

'Morning inertia', Susannah repeated with a frown on her face. 'But it's ten-fifteen, soon be midday.' The way she had said this last sentence was like hearing it from a mother who was scolding a child for a late awakening. It seemed that this young student whom I had partnered up with had an air of academic seriousness about her. Yet I liked the look of her ; had in fact been attracted to the way she looked the very moment she had sat down at the table with her books yesterday. It was the short hair, the large rounded eyes like creamed globules of colour, and the typical englishness of her skin that gave her the appearance of being both a girl of average characteristics yet the demure belonging to that which rests comfortably above average. This was partly the reason why I had suggested the co-operation in the first instant. Perhaps I was secretly hoping that something else could come out of it, besides a degree of academic illumination. 'Alright then Susan, go ahead.'

'Susannah please. Okay then. I looked at how, and from where, both religions took their inspiration. Although, like I said, it wasn't what you would call a thorough piece of research, since such a thing would take ages and more than one night, I did come up with one or two interesting pieces of information. As you would expect for around the time of Christ, both Gnosticism and Christianity took their knowledge from the biblical texts. Yet where the great difference lies, and this is why Gnosticism has often been called an esoteric form of Christianity, is in that Gnosticism did not always accept the literal truth of the Bible, but instead rejected the canonical gospels in favour of the unorthodox ones, or rather I should say those gospels that were previously rejected by the church.'

'Gospels rejected by the church. What do you mean? The church embrace their gospels, they never rejected them, did they?'

'But this is the interesting thing', Susannah said in an excited voice. 'It's not what you

think. Everything turns out to be so different when you happen to look at it more closely, like nothing is ever what it really seems.' Susannah paused in speech for a moments reflection, as if a process of thoughts were rising up in her mind from some neglected depths : one of those instances when some idea, or piece of knowledge, reveals itself and the meaning it once concealed. 'Ahh', she finally said, and then continued, 'I bet that's why my father asked me specifically to take a look at Gnosticism. He knew I was doing my dissertation on the church, in fact it was with his encouragement that I started it in the first place, yet he would never tell me anything that he knows about it, or lend me some of his notes.'

'Your father into this kind of thing as well, is he?' I inquired after hearing Susannah's last sentence.

'Yeah, big time. He's really into all types of religion. And he's made it into his job. He works here in fact, in the theolo..'

'Wait a minute', I sharply interrupted. 'Oh, yeah, it never clicked. You said your name was Susannah Simon, didn't you?' Susannah nodded her head shyly, as if she knew that I had stumbled onto her family identity. 'So then your dad is Dr. John Simon, head of the theology department here at this university, right?' Susannah let a small demure chuckle whisper through the lips of her mouth. She then looked at me head-on, and for a brief moment it seemed that a warmth was radiating from her face, as if she was letting slip from her personality a small amount of friendliness between us.

'Hey, Susannah, howya doing', came a man's voice suddenly. 'You started on the big one yet? Knowing you, you would have. So how far you got?'

'Oh, hi Jason, yeah I've just started it. Haven't done much yet though.' The young man who had suddenly walked over to our table had completely ignored my presence and was instead focusing all his limp attention onto Susannah. And it had begun as a lame conversation. The type of conversation that is started by fellow students who don't have any idea about what to say as an introduction to someone they like so they immediately find a common ground within the world of assignment work. This young man, who apparently was named Jason, was of similar age to Susannah, with longish, light brown

curlyish hair with an indiscriminate bland accent. Both his hands were placed on the desk and his upper torso was leaning forward towards where Susannah was seated. It was at this point that I gave up trying to listen to the conversation between them both, but instead just sat back in my own chair, now and again throwing an observer's glance in Susannah's direction.

After several minutes Susannah pointed Jason in my direction and introduced ourselves. We shook hands.

'So you're a journalist then? What newspaper do you work for?'

'Well, I'm what you would call freelance. I work for whoever is willing to pay me for a few lines', I responded in a rather blasé way, not bothering to put any effort into the conversation.

'Can't be much money in it, if it isn't steady work then', inquired Jason in an effort to continue the polite introductions.

'Not really, but when there's a lot of money involved you tend to stay in one place. I prefer to move around.'

'Ah, I see. Well, I'm in it for the money. I aim to set up my own business when I finish here.' Jason, from what I sensed, was extremely proud in his financial ideals.

'Yes, you and a million other people', came my last sentence. Jason ignored the comment, and turned to say a few more words to Susannah before leaving.

I looked across to where she was sitting. It seemed that she was showing facial signs of relief now that her tiresome student friend had departed. I gave her a frowning grin from across the table to which she responded to with a feminine raise of her eyebrows.

'Look', I said, 'this place is full of people you know, friends or otherwise. I'd like to hear what it is that you've got to tell me. So why don't we get out of here. Go somewhere else?'

'What about the refectory? It's usually empty around this time, and we could get a cup of tea or something.' It was a great idea I said, and so we got our things together and headed out of the library, walking down the three flights of stairs, out the front door,

and towards another set of buildings on campus.

I let Susannah stand before me in the queue, coffee in hand, whilst I stood behind her figure, which was about an average 5'7", yet balanced and sturdy, like the uppermost part of a church's spire. 'Who would of guessed it', I whispered to her while we stood in the queue, 'that your father would of been the university's foremost authority on religious matters, whom I had met only yesterday, and yet he won't even give you any info on the subject.' We walked away from the cashier.

'It's not really like that. He did want me to look into the church, but by myself so that I wouldn't inherit any of his own judgements or opinions. He says that understanding is something that each person must arrive at by themselves, by their own routes and diversions, and so it would only make things worse if he tried to pass onto me those things which he knows.'

The refectory, as Susannah had predicted, was almost empty save for a few lonely souls pouring over their folders of printed pages, nervously tugging at hanging cigarettes, or chocolate bars. I took a few healthy sips from my cup. 'So where exactly were we?' Susannah looked up and gave a girlie laugh.

'And you call yourself a journalist. You sure lose your thread quickly enough. Have you lost interest already or what?' I assured her that I had not, but had merely been distracted and wanted to put straight by her unfaltering wisdom. With an unbelieving look, Susannah got a book out of her bag.

'I was talking about the gospels, and how some of them had been initially rejected by the church.'

'Oh yeah, now I remember. Carry on then. So which gospels were these?'

Susannah straightened herself in the chair as if she was getting ready to face some Mastermind questions or the Holy Inquisition. Then she squinted her eyes in a fashion of one who is focusing into a narrow stream of thoughts the ideas that are lying in the mind. 'To start with, we must try and place these things in some sort of context. I don't want to start to getting too detailed just yet, because this is just throwing some ideas around. The serious bit will come when I have to start writing the dissertation', and then

she threw a glance at me, 'or when you have to write your article. But for now we will just try to place it in our heads.' This initial warm up introduction reminded me of the sort of one given in a lecture room. Whether she liked it or not Susannah was already turning into an academic product of her father's gene pool. I nodded for her to continue, showing an eagerness to hear the details of her story.

'Well, we must remember that it has been shown that the beginnings of Christianity were not smooth. It wasn't just a case of "oh, Jesus was here, and now Christianity rules the world and no other religion has a chance". It wasn't like that. The Christians had to constantly fight with the Romans to keep a hold onto their faith.'

'Hence the coliseums where the luckless ones were thrown in against the lions and the gladiators. I guess the Christians thought of it as just being a short cut to the splendours of heaven.'

Susannah pressed her lips together and turned a slight smile at the corner of her mouth. She was mildly amused, but I suspected she wanted my attention rather than my glib quips. I remained silent. 'And it was not until the 4th century', she continued, 'that Christianity finally became declared as the state religion, by Constantine in 324 AD. Then a year later, in the June of 325 AD, the Council of Nicaea was convened - which is now a place called Iznik in Turkey - where 318 bishops came together to argue whether or not Jesus was a part of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost : a vehicle for God or part of three gods in one. A man of the church named Arius questioned the idea whether Jesus was the same as God, since can a son be the same as his father? This happened to be the burning issue of the day. Also, they came to reject the present pagan beliefs, and to present Jesus as a God incarnate rather than as a human spiritual teacher. You see, they needed divine authority, and if Jesus ever came to be accepted as a mortal human, regardless of his healing gifts and his wisdom, the church fathers would never be able to assert their right as continuing the line of God's chosen representatives on earth. Anyway, eventually, after much debate and heated arguments, the Nicene Creed was established ; this was important, because if Christianity needed to survive as the state religion then it needed these firm foundations for its power base.' Susannah

handed a book over to me and showed me a passage that dictated the Nicene Creed. I glanced over it, reading the words that had now become firm doctrine. I began to read some of it aloud : *'by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things on earth ; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down and was made flesh, made man.....'* I stopped reading and handed the book back to her. 'For us men and our salvation- what about the women, did the church forget to mention them or something?' Susannah laughed at me in a sort of tone that indicated that I was both correct and ignorant at the same time.

'You don't know too much about the church, do you Julian?'

'Not a lot', I replied. 'It was never my favourite subject. But from what you said about that holy ghost trinity argument it seems that the church officials were spending their time pissing around with useless language games based upon their own literal misunderstandings in the first place. No wonder they never had any time to get around to thinking about serious issues, like that of women.'

'Well, women were never the church's favourite subject either ; and this has always bothered me deeply about Christianity. They claim they offer salvation for all, and that they can offer the means to this salvation through Jesus who died for our sins. But they never wanted women to play much of a part in this. I know about this because my father did say a few things about it. He could never like this part of the Christian religion. He said it reminded him of what a bunch of old farts the church fathers really were. Did you know that it was not until 1545 that the Roman Church finally agreed to officially recognise that women had souls, and that was only decided by a majority of three votes!' 'What happened to all the glory of the Goddess worship eh?', I remarked, remembering some of the things that Mary had said. Susannah made a gesture of disbelief with her arms, obviously ruffled by this notion of women having no official souls for so long.

'Mmm, yes, it's all very interesting', I added, 'but does this in some way lead to the question of the gospels that we were talking about?'

'Yeah, I'm getting there, mister impatient. I was just trying to set some scene, before we

started, of the kind of disarray there was at the time, and of the atmosphere of disagreements that the Christian Church was established within.'

'Well I'm surprised that a church managed to get established at all. What with everyone arguing about whether Jesus was a part of the Holy Trinity or not. It's just a complete waste of time. There were the Romans killing off the Christians left, right, and centre..'

'Which some of the Christians didn't mind at all', interjected Susannah.

'How you mean, they didn't mind. What, were these Christians asking to be killed?'

'No', she laughed, 'they obviously didn't want to be killed - nobody actually wants to die do they?'

'Except those with suicidal tendencies', I harked back with some wit.

'Okay, except the sad suicide cases. But what I mean is that since most Christians held rigid the belief that Jesus died a martyr's death for our sins, then it was an honour, or though some of the early Christian's felt, to die in the name of Jesus, for then they too were giving up their earthly life in the name of God.'

'Oh Christ', I muttered, 'sounds like the Christians were a mob of martyrs, all jumping onto the deathly bandwagon just to secure themselves a place in heaven. I think I would prefer the hypocritical paying for a pardon routine to secure my seat in heaven, rather than jumping onto a Roman's sword.' I was lapping it up, all this silly behaviour that the early Christian's were getting up to. Susannah shifted her position on the seat, and took another gulp from her mug.

'Yeah', she then continued, 'there was a lot of killing going on at the time. After the Nicene Creed had been established, and thus ruled against Arius, he and his followers were subsequently murdered in their thousands. But anyway, to continue with events, there then was born Jerome in 341 AD, who later was made a saint, and he became secretary to Pope Damasus in about 382. It was he who was commissioned to bring together all the various Christian texts into one single book that would reflect, or rather represent, the orthodox Christian belief. And this is where we come to the other gospels.'

'Well, now we've finally got around to the subject of the other gospels, it won't matter if

it can wait for another couple of minutes while I get myself another drink. Want a coffee?'

'Actually, a hot chocolate if you wouldn't mind Julian. It helps me to think.'

I left Susannah at the table, still leafing through her book, whilst I went and fetched the two drinks from canteen machine. I had enjoyed listening to her talk, the way she became engrossed within her subject. She had the air of a true researcher, or perhaps more aptly, one who was an investigator : she took it all so seriously. And I was enjoying it all, observing the pleasure that she seemed to take in knowing things ; knowledge that was both useful and new to her, as if each time she filled her brain with new information she was adding extra minutes to the duration of her mortal life. And for my part ; well, for most of it, I listened intently. I was not one who really cared for theological discussions, especially ones that took an historical bent to them, yet I had to admit that in the last few minutes I had become genuinely intrigued to hear more. It seemed to me that the early history of the Christian Church and all its religious wrangling sounded more like a television soap opera rather than the foundations that Western thinking had been based upon : it appeared to show that the present way of human thought was dangerously close to being revealed as based on a spiritual mess.

I returned to the table with the drinks. Susannah did not look up as I sat down, so she did not notice while I stole a quick thief's glance at the folded material of her blouse as it fell around her chest. She appeared to possess a young body, small featured, yet still within its geometric proportions. I slid the hot chocolate over to her. I received a thanks and a direct glance in the eyes for my effort.

'It makes me so mad you know, reading all about this. I feel betrayed, duped ; I even feel cheated, as if they had no right to manipulate us in this way.'

'The Church has always manipulated us Susannah', I said, 'that's how it's had such a monopoly for so long.'

'Yeah, maybe, but at least you'd expect the Bible to be the truth. But from what I can gather it's just another text that has been messed around with, edited, and added to, just

like a popular novel.'

'How do you mean?', I queried. I was not getting the exact drift of what she was saying. But I did not have to wait long for Susannah soon jumped back into her exposition, eager to reveal the information she had found.

'Like I said, it was Jerome who was commissioned to bring together the varied Christian texts into one authoritative book. Hence the Bible.'

'So what's wrong with that? We all know that the Bible is the Old Testament of the Jews with the later addition of the New Testament of Jesus Christ and all his gospels.' I hadn't yet heard anything revelatory, but I somehow sensed that Susannah had not finished when I had untimely interrupted her.

'Yes, but listen. I once thought that it was all kosher, all so religiously sacred, this culmination of the great book. But they're all as bad as the rest of us. It seems that no human is free from corruption. Did you know that Jerome, who was now assisted by that wretch Augustine, shifted through 13 Gospels, 9 Acts of the Apostles, and 31 Epistles before finally choosing which ones would be suitable to represent their orthodox codes. Did you know that?'. Susannah went quiet and just raised an eyebrow in contempt.

'The greasy bastards!', I spluttered out. 'Ha, they weren't so fucking dumb after all. Man, they sure knew what they were doing. They weren't no churchmen, they were bleeding politicians.'

'Don't you see Julian. It was the church who created the orthodox Christian values themselves. They picked and choose only those gospels that suited the doctrine that they wished to expound, and which suited them.'

'As if to portray that which could strengthen their own religious control?' I proposed this last question with some relish. 'Exactly', Susannah replied, a little ruffled at her own news. 'Isn't that just the biggest shit!'.

I was enjoying this. I had never paid much heed to western religious orthodoxy, never with a realistic argument, but just out of a knowing that they hadn't got it right. But now

I was learning something material that would lend credence to my suspicions. 'So why did they choose the 4 gospels that are in the New Testament then?', I further added.

'Well, from what I can gather, those four all deal with Jesus' life and his ministry in a narrative form, telling more about his heroic acts rather than what he spoke. The New Testament only contain a very little of Jesus' actual words when you think of all that he was supposed to have done. Now the other gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, or stuff like the Acts of John, contain what is reputed to be more of the actual sayings of Jesus.'

'But I would of thought that the church would of wanted his actual sayings more than his narrative life, because wouldn't his real words create more of a religious creed?'

'Not these words', Susannah replied. 'Some of the words he spoke in the other texts were a lot more mystical. They pertain more to the self, about understanding the true self rather than laying your faith onto an external entity. And this is where Gnosticism took much of their inspiration from, which was one of the points I began with. You see, this was where the original clash between the two rival religions occurred. Christianity wanted, it seemed, to create their own hierarchical structure on earth with them at the controlling head : thus, the reliance upon an external factor that they could lay claim to have earthly contact with, or be the earthly representatives of. But Gnosticism, on the other hand, took as their sources those words of Jesus that indicated that it was within the selfhood that God was to be found. But if everyone could find and reach God within themselves, then what would be the use of the church?'

'There wouldn't be one', I easily surmised.

'Exactly! Now listen to these two passages from the Gospel of Thomas. It appears so apparent when you read them in this new light. Sure made me realise I got to get out of Christianity.' Susannah showed a brief facial sign of sadness at this last statement. Perhaps it was a slight melancholia of realising that she was to leave her early faith behind ; or it could of been a regret at having been so easily led for so long. No-one wants to be a sheep, let alone come to the understanding that they *are* a sheep ; especially not someone of Susannah's intellectual pride. But beliefs, if anything, have to

be constantly modified in the light of persistent new knowledge. Susannah ruffled through a few pages of the book she had in her hands and read out a couple of extracts in her young woman's voice : 'When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realise that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you will dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.'

'And also listen to this', she continued : 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'

There was a small space of silence. I was intrigued by what I had just heard. It had sounded like a wise piece of mystical philosophy rather than anything that belonged to the religious pantheon. 'Did you say that was from the Gospel of Thomas?' Susannah nodded her head with a smile, triumphant that my attention had been truly captured. 'Well, all I can say is that I wished that those buggers had introduced the world to this Jesus instead, he would have made for a much better martyr figure', I said in a slight sarcastic voice. 'Better for us, maybe ; but not for the church.' That was now evident. Then Susannah giggled : 'whoever this Jesus was, he was also quick-witted. Listen to this.' Once again she turned a few pages of the book, which I could now read was one about Gnosticism, and brought her voice up again. 'When one of the disciples asked Jesus if circumcision was beneficial, do you know what he said?'

'No, enlighten me', I sneered.

'He said "if it were beneficial, their father would beget them already circumcised from their mother". Isn't that great?'

I could not help myself from letting out a loud laugh, not so much because of the wit in Jesus' reply, but because all of a sudden an image had come into my mind of all those deluded Jews who had thought that in was in Jesus' wishes for them to be circumcised. The poor sad souls all had the fleshy ends of their dicks cut off because they thought it was the right and proper thing to do. I looked straight at Susannah. 'Well, the religious argument is out the window then, and no matter what they might say about the health

benefits, I reckon a man should stick to his original flesh. If we were meant to have a bold end, then like Jesus said we would have been born that way.' Susannah laughed with me, yet somewhat more self-consciously.

Susannah then looked at her watch and frowned. 'Look Julian', she said, 'it's now midday and I have to get some things together for class. We'll have to leave it there for now. Anyway, you take this book on Gnosticism with you and have a flick through it when you can. You might find some other interesting bits in it, like the stuff about the ritual dance that Jesus did. So you take that with you, and I'll see if I can get any further stuff to do with the early church, probably the Bible. I think I will just take another peak into my father's library : that's where I can get most of my sources from. Lucky eh?' I nodded and agreed with Susannah's words, but what was on my mind was not so much the gathering of our sources but rather the where and whens of our next meeting.

'Can we meet again tomorrow?' I casually suggested. 'It would be good for both of us to get as much done on this while we can.'

'Well, actually tomorrow is my free day', Susannah remarked. Without waiting another instant of air in my lungs I leapt at the idea. 'Great', I said, 'then that means that you can come to my place for dinner. How about it?'

'Not in the evening. I can't', she replied in a hesitant, shy tone. Noticing her becoming slightly more reserved in her composure I quickly added, 'okay then, I'll make us some afternoon lunch together, and we can do some work afterwards. Will that be all right?' After a slight pause Susannah nodded her agreement. I took the piece of paper that she handed to me and scribbled down the directions to my flat. It was within easy reach of the university, and the directions I gave with the inclusion of road names were simple enough.

After saying our friendly goodbyes, almost professional like, against my own wishes, Susannah and myself parted from the surroundings of the university refectory and went our separate ways. Myself, I headed for home. I needed to get a sandwich, and perhaps then I would spare an hour or so to rummage through the book on Gnosticism that

Susannah had so kindly placed in my care.

Once inside I put a pot of coffee on the stove and slumped myself on the sofa. There was light enough in the room, with the afternoon clear sky showing through the two bay windows : a day that was bright and transparent enough, but which also unfortunately signalled that the next season to arrive in a few months time would be that of winter. So now, for me, the weather was pleasant yet ominous of the chill yet to come. I turned my head to look at the typewriter that I had sitting at the desk in the corner. 'Oh man', I sighed with a carelessness. 'Got to get some work done Julian. Got to get that assignment finished before the end of the month.' At least I knew that I would be able to send the first part off, to keep the magazine happy for the time being. I also knew that what I should be doing right now was getting stuck into the article once more. But somehow, I did not have the motivation.

I poured the coffee and opened the book that Susannah had leant to me. I wanted to learn something, no matter how small, so that I would have something with which to approach Susannah with the next day. After all, a professional journalist like myself could not appear to be irredeemably lazy. I pulled a cushion up behind me and manoeuvred myself into a comfortable reading position.

'And the whole process tends towards a curious conclusion.
For it becomes increasingly clear that the more we know,
the less we can believe.'

Peter Lemesurier, 'Beyond all Belief'

It wasn't until about 7.30 pm that I suddenly realised that I had promised to see Mary around eight. She would soon be here and I was not in the slightest bit ready for her arrival. Neither did I have any idea what it was that she wanted : but an arrangement is an arrangement, and I did feel a soft spot for the eccentric ways of my neighbour. After all, we have had sex on two separate occasions now - that must count for something.

I washed in the bathroom sink and put on a change of clothes. I then ran some water through my hair, and as I was applying a small palmful of aftershave, I heard several irregular raps at the door. Without doubt, that would be Mary.

She waltzed into the flat and stood eagerly before me. 'Ready, Julian Cross?', she said in a grinning voice. But I am not the type of person who likes to feel as if he is being rushed, and since I had only managed to get myself ready at the last minute, I did not wish to be greeted by a knowing guest who looks as if they have your next several hours mapped out within their schemes. I was lost, as ever, to Mary's purposes ; but I smiled at her greeting, and asked her to wait a few moments.

'So where are we going then?', I inquired as I grabbed my keys.

'Today's a special day, didn't you know that?' Again, Mary was just throwing her brand of cryptic riddles my way.

'Why, is it the Queen Mother's birthday?', I answered in a sarcastic tone, hoping to disturb her blasé equilibrium. Yet she didn't seem to take my comment at any level other than that of being humorous.

'No, silly boy, it's that time when night and day are twins : when dark and light are equal.'

'Y'mean it's some more religious stuff about God and the Devil being equal.'

'Nope, wrong again Mr. Cross. And to stop you from crucifying yourself any further, I'll tell you that it all depends on the time of year. Which is?' I took a look at the date on my watch.

'It's September 23rd', I answered.

'Correct!', sprang Mary's voice. 'Now, come on, we'll get in the car, and I'll tell you what that date means.'

'What the hell', I thought to myself. Might as well join in the fun and games. Whatever was going to be would at least be a new experience, knowing Mary's antics ; after all, a man who tries to write for a living is always after new experiences, for they are what makes his bread and butter one way or another.

We got into the car and drove away. I did not say anything at first, but sat silent besides Mary as she drove one-handed whilst puffing away on a cigarette. For the type of older carefree woman who is always seen walking about barefoot, talking to plants, wearing denim jeans and scrappy T-shirts or loose blouses - in fact, one who could almost be said to be the vegetarian New Ager type - Mary was extremely distracted, and not in the least interested, it seemed, in such issues as her health. At first meeting Mary, I thought that she was probably working for some local activist group, on some humanitarian grounds, so limited and quick was my judgmental impressions. Now, after some strange interaction between us both, I wasn't sure whether she was a happy-go-lucky free spirit or a disguised witch. After several minutes Mary turned around and informed me that we had some spare time on our hands, and suggested that we stop somewhere for a drink first. I agreed.

We pulled into the car-park of a pub that had a sign of three balls swinging above the front door and the name 'The Pawnbroker' in large golden letters. We entered the lounge and Mary sat down at a corner seat after first letting me know her desired choice of beverage. I guessed that Mary did not expect herself to be buying the drinks. Standing at the bar I noticed that the pub had more of the local feel rather than one of

those places that is home to a constant influx of youngsters, strangers, or passers-by. It had the usual mahogany decorations that the traditional pub is known for, and it being a free house, the draught choice was good. I assumed that Mary must have been at this place before, since the drink that she had mentioned was a guest beer, and one that is not usually found as a standard in most brewery pubs. Perhaps, I thought, she often passes along this way and sometimes stops for a drink herself.

I sat down at the table with the drinks. Mary, after lighting yet another cigarette, and then taking two or three large gulps of her pint, once again brought up the question of the date.

'Look', I said, 'all I know is that it's the 23rd of September. Anything else is beyond me. So what is it, all this about night and day?'

'Ah Julian. You see, today is the autumnal equinox, where we get equal amount of both the day and the night. You only get two days like this in the year ; one now, in September, and the other - the spring equinox - in March'.

'What's the equinox really mean?' I asked. I had certainly heard of the equinoxes before, and I knew that each year had both its equinoxes and its solstice, and that some of these were times for various cults, such as the Druids, to gather for ceremonies. But I wasn't exactly sure what an equinox was.

'Well, basically, the truth is just that it means it's the time when the sun crosses the equator. So, it's a sort of calendar of the sun's path, and it's this celestial path that some of us celebrate'. Mary stopped, rather hesitantly, and sipped her drink again. Then she looked away. I was not totally convinced. Yes, it was no doubt the time of equal day and night due to the sun's path over the equator, yet somehow Mary had not been a hundred percent forceful in her exposition. I had the feeling that Mary was not too sure herself what all this meant. Then I was reminded how I had first heard that argument that she had with that Lucas guy. She had not been totally convincing then. Was she, after all, just a hanger-on in such matters. Was Mary in full possession herself of what things she was involved in? So I leaned forward to her : 'Mary', I whispered, 'what is your view of God and religion?' This question brought a raised eyebrow to her

forehead, then a smirk. 'Why do you ask', she replied.

'Well, I want to know your motivation for whatever it is that you do, whether it be sex or just what you get out of life.'

'Do you want to know what Irenaeus says?', inquired Mary. I nodded for her to continue. 'He says that the soul shall never get free from the angels that made this world, but that the soul of a person must be continually reincarnated until it has committed every deed there is in the world'.

'That sounds to me like something the Marquis de Sade would say', I blurted back. 'But I'm not interested in what others say. What about you?'

'But I agree with Irenaeus. He was a wise man, and wise men must always be listened to, because truths, wherever they may be, are always revealed in small doses. Thus, we may pick up a little of everything here and there ; so we must be prepared to look in the strangest of places for each little bit of truth. And I know that the soul can either make it out of here after death, or not. And living inside these bodies is like a hell on earth, and I don't wanna be coming back if I can help it. So I gotta do my time now, while I've got the chance, cause everything that I do now will be a little something working towards my soul, and each fragment goes a way to making the whole. Right?' I paused for a drink.

'I guess so', I finally said. 'So let me get it straight. You think that by committing every physical deed that you are able to here on earth, will go some way to purging your soul, and thus to benefit your everlasting life. That's what you're saying, isn't it?'

'Mmm, kind of, yeah'.

'So why do you hang around with this paganish group of yours then, and Lucas and, er, what's his name..'

'Marcus?', interrupted Mary.

'Yeah, Marcus. Is it that these little group gatherings help to purge you towards eternal living : at one with Godness', I added dryly. Mary did not hesitate in answering.

'Oh well Julian ; we do what we can don't we. If sex was given to man to enable him to complete the microcosmic union here on earth, and so be able to express in our own

small way the grand macrocosmic union, then shouldn't we not do it? And if we want to endure such a physical existence by alleviating it with our ecstatic dances and union, why not? Is it not better than spending your whole life doing some miserable job where you never use your brain, and you go through life knowing nothing more than hardship and manual work. At least I'm trying to strive for something that goes beyond this life.'

I was now almost sure that Mary was a sponge for spiritual theories ; taking in this theorem and then taking in whatever else came her way, until she no longer had any clear idea or goal about life but instead was wandering around inside her own internal labyrinths of pagan concoctions. If you dazzle the eyes with too many lights then your sight can become blind to the true colours and instead only registers a blur to the brain. Maybe I had been right : perhaps Mary was a New Ager. Like the rest of that lot she didn't recognise pseudo-trendy theories from actual true knowledge. Sitting there as I was, drinking my beer, I could picture Mary as a fluttering bird, flapping her wings as she tried to escape in every direction at once, yet staying in the same spot since every attempt to fly in all directions simultaneously only cancelled each other out and the equilibrium caught her as if unmoving.

I enjoyed being in the company of Mary, yet now my impressions were beginning to cement. Although still somewhat attracted to her eccentricity and her casual elder years, I was forming the perception that perhaps she was just one of those drifting women who cling from one perch to the next, thinking each time that they had found a spiritual nest for their material longing. And like waking up the morning after a one-night stand, the image of the woman now begins to fade from the previous evening's picture, and you only see them as hanging around, as lingering onto a moment that, for you, has elapsed, and that they are finally over-staying their welcome. Now, I was slowly seeing the flaws in Mary's character. Yet every character has flaws, some more than others, and the time it takes to eventually see such cracks depends upon the strength of that person's mask ; or alternatively, the amount of veneered coating on their facade.

I guessed that we all like to immerse our personalities within a varied spectrum

of characterisations and likes and dislikes : yet sometimes the mosaic can become so multi-coloured that the whole picture, with its true representation, does not get seen amongst the mess. Mary had first appeared to be a straight no-nonsense type of woman who, with her various quirks, was interesting and amusing. Now, after listening yet again to more of her talk, I was getting impatient with her airy ramblings. Perhaps she was the virgin, only now wearing a strange uniform ; perhaps she was even the whore, the strumpet of Magdelene, who was braiding her body with her physical wins, like a victorious magpie. But in the end it didn't really matter. All I knew now was all that I needed to know, and that was not to take all this pagan shit seriously. I was looking for answers if I was lucky enough to find them, but I wasn't about to be a new cult recruit to keep my hunger going. There is a very fine line between understanding and being told. 'Are you telling me that you'd like to come back to the earth next time around?', Mary suddenly asked me unexpectedly.

'I would go wherever my soul wished to take me', I answered, and this was followed by a brief silence. We drank up.

Back in the car Mary indicated that we were to meet some of the group from last time because, so she said, she wanted her favourite neighbour to be able to witness this special equinox gathering. Besides, she had said, it would be fun. I had nothing to say to that. We drove for a further fifteen to twenty minutes.

The roads had developed into country lanes, as we had escaped the byways of Bristol's centre, and were heading out to the less densely populated areas. 'Same place as before?' I inquired. Mary responded in the negative. 'No, last time it was at Lucas's place that we met, but this is a bigger one, so we're going straight to where Marcus lives.'

'So you could say that Marcus is the main man, right?', I said, making full use of its implied jargon.

'Yeah, you could say that.' Mary was fumbling for another cigarette and managed to light it whilst still holding the wheel. 'He's the intelligent one. Lucas just does most of

his running around, or bumbling around : sometimes he can be sweet, when he wants to, but most of the time he just irritates you like shit.'

'And yet you have sex with him?' The answer to this question intrigued me. Mary pulled hard on her cigarette and slyly looked at me through the corner of her left eye, before turning her cheek away completely.

'In the middle of the body's ecstasy, you'd do anything. I even did it with you, didn't I?' This was followed by one of Mary's self-indulgent cackles. Maybe it was just her way of loosening things up, or maybe it was just a plain dig. Either way, I ignored her crude wit. 'And Marcus', I followed, 'how do you find him?'

'Oh Marcus, he's okay. Like I said, he considers himself to be an intelligent man, and I guess he is.'

'You guess he is. What - don't you know?' I was feeling slightly like Lucifer's advocate now, interrupting Mary on such small points. This was only because I now considered Mary to be not totally sure herself of all the things that were happening to her, and so I presently saw her as being readily available for attack.

'No no, he is, he knows alot. Marcus is quite an sober man, and he's straight. But it's just that sometimes he gets this thing for me, a kind of crush I guess, which is why he always chooses me for the ceremonial rites, for embodiment....and then for the dried grapes as well!.' Mary seemed amused at this final insertion. 'But tonight's not the night for him I'm afraid.'

Mary said little else upon the subject following these few words, until we arrived at our destination. It was a small village that had been about thirty-five minutes drive from the flat. It was very definitely within the countryside, yet not far enough away to be considered as rustic. Rather it was what is often referred to as the city dweller's countryside ; the suburban man's outposts. We drove through the main street of the village, which was one long winding road adorned with the single pub, a couple of convenience stores, and the local church. What seemed to be the end of the road (or had we previously taken a side road?) was abruptly ended by a wooden gate. It was shut. I volunteered my services, and got out the car to open the gate, which led onto a

small gravel courtyard, which was already nearly full of several cars. I was ordered to shut the gate, thus leaving it exactly as we had come upon it.

To my surprise, or rather to the surprise of my imagination, the property that stood before us was not as I had expected. Perhaps it had been the result of watching too many Hammer Horror movies where the sinister location is a large looming mansion which belongs to a mysterious Charles Grey type character ; yet here I was looking at a modest sized bungalow which, I estimated, was little more than of sixty or seventy years heritage. Mary rang the doorbell. It was no brass knocker nor any cleverly sculptured object. It was a modern plastic bell : black plastic case and a white button to press. Should I have expected anything else?

The door was opened and the two of us were greeted by the recognisable face of Lucas. It was the round face, the cheeky face of a man who has grown old according to the laws of nature yet whose depth of character had sadly left him in the early years. It was a sly welcome that greeted both Mary and myself ; Mary especially. Then it was my turn.

'Well hello again. Came back for another experience with us? You'll soon be getting a taste for our way of doing things. But, less talk, come on in both of you. Come on.'

With these words the fatty hands of the man Lucas waved us into the hallway of the bungalow and ushered our bodies along into the kitchen, where a small congregation had already gathered. I had noticed on my brief walk down the corridor that the interior was sparsely decorated, and the interior of the kitchen only served to confirm my initial impression. There were no ornaments, only the practical appliances needed. It was a white kitchen with a pine breakfast table placed away from the centre. On one of the walls were two painted wooden hangings that depicted both the sun and the moon. Other than that, the white walls were bare. The kitchen had about eight people standing around drinking from glasses and engaged in conversation. They looked up from their talk upon our entry and greeted Mary with warm nods, smiles, and several affectionately spoken words. It appeared to me that the crowd were in good form. Mary,

in return, waltzed over to the congregation and delved herself into their verbal folds, leaving me dangling at the door like a lonesome maggot on the end of a fishing line. Nevertheless, I much preferred this state rather than having to deal with sets of polite introductions and clammy handshakes. I was not the ideal socialiser at the best of moments. Slinking inwards from the door frame, and after seeing Lucas wobbling off down the hallway into the immediate distance, I noticed the large punch bowl sitting in the exact middle of the pine table, which was set off to the side, my side, in order to make room in the centre of the kitchen. I grabbed for a spare glass that was also on the table and without waiting for any generous salutes on my behalf, I filled my glass to the brim with the pinkish coloured punch. I smelt it first : it had an unrecognisable alcohol smell. Unrecognisable in that I could not decipher from its elements the exact nature of its parts, yet it unmistakably had the aroma of an alcoholic drink ; and you don't necessarily have to know the specific source of its bottle to register the smell of alcohol that can be given off. I took a look around first : the congregation were immersed within their own shared experiences and spawned chit-chat. Nothing to lose. I didn't even wait for a cautious tester to send back from the taste-buds an initial appraisal. I just gulped greedily the contents of the glass into my gullet.

The liquid followed a burning racetrack through my insides and into the pit of my belly. It was potent stuff. Can't deny that it warmed me up. It even helped me to ignore all the other personages within the room. It was the perfect cure for the isolationist. So I filled another glass and drank again. It was definitely a strange concoction, similar to an aniseed punch but with a tropical fruit flavour thrown in for extra sunny spice. But the taste is only of an incidental import. When the body desires for some alcohol within its blood capillaries, the flavour of the packaging is an aesthetic issue : the alcohol percentage remains the same, it is only the taste buds that you are pampering to. Quench their desire, and any alcohol will do the required job. And right now this pagan concoction was fulfilling mine.

I was about to reach over for the filling of a third glass when I noticed Mary had

returned to my side. She even looked sweeter than her usual appearance. But as I was well aware, liquid eyes create their own illusions. I offered my filled glass to her whilst I reached over for another one for myself. We both drank within a moments silence. I was now beginning to wonder why I had agreed to come here in the first place, or whether I had had any will in the decision. Was Mary an acute manipulator? Had I just been smoothly coerced into thinking that I was making a conscious decision to accompany Mary when in fact I had been brought along? Did I care?

I gave Mary a short smile and raised my glass to indicate where my immediate interest laid ; then after gulping I filled my glass once again from the punch bowl.

'Like that drink?', Mary asked me, sprouting a grin that she was obviously proud of.

'Well, I wouldn't buy it myself but it does the job when you're in a room full of strangers.' This was true, and it made me feel better for not socialising.

'You're not amongst strangers Julian. Hell silly, look over there.' Mary pointed to a group of three people that were talking together in a corner of the kitchen. There were two women and a man ; both the women had long hair, one with a red head, and were in their early thirties from what I could guess.

'Look familiar Julian?', Mary interjected. I turned to face her, not really in the mood for intellectual mind games.

'Should I?'

'Maybe you should. The woman with the dark hair, Marlene, said you were not a bad fuck.'

'And how was she then?'

'What you asking me for. You were the one who jumped on top of her. You must have been feeling the religious ecstasy.' At this Mary giggled to herself, and I took her comment as being a sarcastic jibe.

'Well, it's you lot who claim it to be a religious thing. You give it a mock religious pretension, dress yourselves up in stupid robes like a bunch of high priests ; then after saying a few muted words you pretend that some divine spirit has taken refuge in your body. Then you get down to screwing everyone in sight. And you claim it's some pagan

shit religion.' I finished my speel and gave Mary a raise of my eyebrows as if to signify I was awaiting a return defence in reply - but she just stood there continuing to smile and be pleased with everything. Perhaps she agreed with me. Maybe she didn't believe in the religious mask any more than I did.

'Religion is religion', Mary finally said. 'It can be used for whatever pathway you wish to travel along. It can justify anything whether it be inside or outside of you. Right now we're using it for sex. Some of us know this, and a few really think it is an alternative religion. But it doesn't really matter either way ; you get out of religion whatever you need or wish to get from it, and as long as it serves that purpose then it's okay. Right Julian, or does it go against your ethical morals that you were taught at school?'

I was about to begin to formulate some cocky answer in my mind to throw back at Mary when a throat behind me coughed to clear its channels which supposedly indicated an approach of words. I turned around to see Marcus, his lean stature finely clothed in the doorway, raising his hand to silence the room. This was the last thing I needed : some official garb to further cloak the ceremony. I finished my punch hastily so as to refill in time for whatever it was that Marcus was about to say. I didn't want to hear his words with an empty glass, a dry throat, or a sober mind. Not this time.

Marcus smiled at the room about him ; all faces were eagerly staring back in adornment, or whatever it was that they cared to call their smug expressions. Marcus, the oratory showman, raised both his hands, palm out, slightly into the air as a greeting and, like everybody else in the room, offered the world a smile. It kind of reminded me of a preacher seeking converts. Not me.

'Welcome everyone. This is an important time for us ; the autumnal equinox has come around again, and I am so very glad to see all the familiar faces that I had expected, not to mention the stranger once again.' Marcus turned his head slightly towards my direction and gave me a sly nod, indicating his approval of my presence. Then he continued.

'It is at times like this that we must be forever aware of the entrapment of the human

condition. We are living our earthly lives within an inauthentic mode of existence, and to escape from this mortal prison demands a sustained mental and physical effort of awareness and sensory experience...'

'I think he means sensual experience', I whispered across to Mary. But she pressed her finger to her lips and screwed up her eyes. She was intent on hearing out Marcus's words.

'This effort that we can make is one of a definitive choice and allows us this freedom which is a unique human gift - the choice to freedom - and this means a relentless revolt against the forces in life that forever try to constrain the human individual. We must be strong and courageous in our desire and need to forever be breaking away from the suppressive forces of life, and we should be practising our right to both mental and physical freedom. The human individual should no longer allow himself to be trapped in an existence he is unsuited to. So we will deliver both our minds and our bodies up to God, and when we receive his holy spirit we will rejoice in the uniting of our earthly bodies as a microcosmic enactment of the macrocosmic universal union. Now drink up brothers and sisters and we will venture out under the stars.'

I didn't need a second prompting. I had already finished my glass by now, and my eyes had been dubiously scanning the punch bowl for I could see that its liquid level had dramatically fallen and, as far as I was concerned, was soon to approach a danger level. So I dipped my glass into the alcoholic mix first, being as I was right next to the table. I was its protector, the guardian of alcohol. Naturally, I would get there first. I was getting a few friendly faces trying to be polite to me with their expressions, as if wishing to express some sort of solidarity since we were all on common ground. But I was having none of it. I just raised my glass to everyone who on approaching the bowl nodded to me, yet I did not speak a single word to them. Let them keep their pagan delusions but they're not suddenly going to be regarding me as one of their brothers.

I turned around wanting to find the presence of Mary for some spark of half-familiar company, but she was gone. So too was Marcus. Just me and a crowd of older

people, and there could be no clues as to whom would end up fucking who. So I drank. Nothing else to do.

The rest of the people in the kitchen began to file out. I watched them place their glasses on the table and disappear through into the hallway.

'Are you coming?', one of the men asked as he walked past me.

'Yeah sure, as soon as I finish this drink.' I raised the glass to my mouth, pressing its sides gently against the flesh of my lips, and swallowed the juice. I hastily refilled my glass again for a final time and knocked back the alcoholic solution in one. I left the room.

I walked behind the guy who had just spoken to me, and followed him out as he passed down the hallway and into what looked to be some utility room. He then proceeded through a door that led to the outside of the bungalow. As I was about to pass through this outside door I noticed a sign, written in fine black paint upon a white board, that read : ***TERRIBILIS EST LOCUS ISTE***. Once outside I joined the man, who was in his forties and dressed casually with slack trousers and an open shirt, and found myself again as a part of the initial congregation. There was no sign of Mary however.

'Hi. Hey tell me, did you see that sign above the door just as you came out?', I whispered, as lightly as I could, to the man.

'Yes, that sign. I've seen it many times.'

'So what the hell does it mean then?', I asked in a rather impetuous alcoholic voice.

'It means that this place holds many secrets', and after hesitating for a moment he continued, 'and the custodian of these secrets is Asmodeus the limping devil.' He paused, then turned to look at me.

'Well mate, I'm afraid that all means bugger all to me. And I ain't never seen no devil whether he's fully fighting fit or got a diseased limp or not.'

'Have you ever seen my wife?', the man replied with a slight grin.

'Nope, can't say I have. Why?'

'One night with her and she'll make any devil limp. I can arrange it if you like. Care for a bit of my wife, she's a real bronco billy?'

'Why is she into this religious pseudo shit as well?'

'Na, not her. That's why I come here. Life with the misses is just a living hell. So this is my religion : this gives me exactly what I need. Who cares whether you have to wear a robe or not and listen to some mumbo-jumbo from a high priest's lips - not me. And so what's your excuse ; has your woman put the clamps between her legs?' I gave the man a quizzical stare for a brief moment. It seemed to me that this whole thing was just a concoction meshed together to cater for the needs of sexed crazed people.

'I just couldn't tell yer man', I began to slur. 'I just got kind of dragged into the whole thing. Fuck knows really.'

I looked around me and saw that people were beginning to get undressed and putting on their white robes. It was an enclosed patio area with a couple of wooden benches and a large sized wooden table. Somebody, perhaps it was greasy Lucas, had dumped a pile of robes onto the table and people were pulling them off one at a time to suit their needs. The man I had been conversing with stepped forward, grabbed, and came back with two robes.

'Here', he said, 'put one of these on. It won't be long yet ; soon you'll be having a choice who you want to dive on.'

'Jesus man', I exhorted. The man laughed a long trickle laugh ; the kind of laugh that sounds like the noise of escaping gas, the letting loose of a compressed air.

'Hey', he nudged me, 'it ain't got nothing to do with Jesus. Sorry to tell you about this but he died nearly two thousand years ago, and he won't be coming back. The only second coming that we'll be experiencing will be through our dicks.' With this he burst out into a contorted whispered laugh. Great man, I thought, I'm stuck here with a lot that's as bad as the fundamental Christians. I don't know who's worse, those who stupidly mis-use it or those who blatantly abuse it.

I felt a hand upon my left shoulder. I turned around, it was Mary. I stared at her

face for it was near to mine ; it had remains of streaked tears and a light dampness. Yet I felt no sentimentality for the woman, nor any great feeling for her. She too just smiled back at me as if she had suddenly forgotten that tears had once rested upon her face, and then jerked away to reach for a robe. By this time I had managed to undress myself and naked underneath I was now wearing one of their ritual robes. Luckily, for all concerned, it was a mild night and there was no discernible breeze. Mary began to undress and I saw, again yet more clearly, her body. It was a pale flesh, still young but not perfect, and her breasts had a balanced hanging weight to them. I just stood by and watched.

'Hey neighbour', Mary said as soon as she had finished undressing and had robed herself. 'Marcus is real pissed.'

'How do ya mean?' I answered casually.

'Well, it's because of that business of me sleeping with you last night.'

'And?'

'And', she continued, 'I should have waited for tonight's equinox. You see, I am the one who Marcus says is the best to become invested with the divine holy mother's spirit. And naturally, he's the one who gets the Jesus spirit inside of him ; so that makes us both eligible for a union. In short Julian, he wanted me, just like I thought he would. But I didn't save myself : I had you instead.'

'But isn't that a kind of incest?', I sneered mockingly. 'Y'know, the holy mother and the Jesus spirit getting it together. That's what you would call the son screwing his mother, right?' Mary laughed at this comment.

'Yea, you could say that. But you got to remember Julian that this is religion, and things work differently in religion. You can get away with anything if it's got a divine reasoning to it.'

'So why is Marcus pissed again?' I had totally forgotten what the reason was that Mary had given. I was not paying too much attention to the tiny details. In fact I had not been paying much attention to anything, for when I took a look over my shoulder I realised that the outside patio that we were standing in was now empty. Everyone else had

moved on.

'Fuck it', I said to Mary. 'If Marcus is pissed off cause he cannot have you, just because you seduced me last night, then fuck his precious ceremony.' Mary giggled again. Obviously she must have had a few gulps from that pagan punch also, and her movements and gestures were becoming to a younger girl, as if manifesting that old adage that every woman has a young girl inside of them. I stood still and turning to face Mary head-on I gave her a long look into the eyes. Her overt girlish charm was far more desirable to me than the image of her being some carefree older woman : I was more on a level with her when she exhibited this childlike essence within. I leaned forward and put my arm on her shoulder.

'Y'know what they say?'

'What do they say neighbour?', Mary smirked.

'Enter thee as little children into the kingdom of Heaven, or something like that isn't it?'

'Yeah, something like that', Mary replied.

'Well, we're little children now, and this kingdom of Heaven that ole what's his name Marcus is offering is not the one that we want. His heaven's got holes in it. Why don't we find ourselves another one and leave the high-priest to his equinox orgasms?'

Mary nodded at my suggestion and then gave me a peck on the cheek. I grabbed her hand and jerkily pulled her with me as we entered back into the house through the door we had first come through, and headed down the hallway towards what we guessed was the front door. Unlocking the inside bolt we stepped outside and onto the front driveway. Immediately Mary began to skip around in a circle waving her hands about, then waltzed off to the end of the drive where the gate was.

'C'mon neighbour, let's go', shouted Mary as she swung open the gate. I stepped towards the 2CV that had driven us here and pulled at the door.

'The keys!', I shouted, 'where are the bleeding keys?'

'Here, catch.' Mary flung a bunch of keys through the air.

I turned the keys in the ignition and started the noisy growl that is synonymous with all of these French shells. Then I reached for the gearstick. It was then that it dawned on me that I had never driven one of these cars before. 'Oh fuck. One of those bastard foreign gearsticks. Shit, what do I do? Mary! Mary!' The driver's door suddenly opened and there was Mary laughing hysterically.

'You stupid idiot Julian. Did no-one ever teach you to drive a 2CV?' I put on a silly pouting face.

'No. No-one ever taught me that.'

'Go on, move over then', Mary insisted. She put it in reverse gear and turned the car around. Just then we noticed that a robed figure had emerged from the front door of the bungalow. The figure raised its hand and shouted something. It was then that we realised it was Marcus. He then turned himself towards the gate and began to start into a jog. It was too late. Mary had already pulled the car into first gear and was accelerating through the gate by the time Marcus had reached it himself. I looked behind as we sped off and saw Marcus cursing us with fist shakes and a torrid movement of the mouth. But I couldn't care less for that man or his eulogies on divine spiritual sex.

Mary drove the car for a while, although I had no precise idea how long, nor in which direction we were travelling. One thing I was sure of was that we were still in the country. The sky had turned into a darkness now and was a blank black field above us. There were no other lighting on the country roads other than our own headlights, and being able to see nothing except that which was illuminated in the car's beam made me feel akin to an insect flying in the torrent of the night's darkness.

Without warning of speech Mary pulled the car to a halt in what appeared to be a lay-by at the side of some narrow stretch of road. Then she climbed into the back of the car and proceeded to undress.

'Well if we ain't going to do it in a field after chanting prayers we may as well do it in the back of the car. It makes no difference to god where we decide to fuck.' Without saying a word I fumbled with my ritual robe whilst still in the passenger seat, and when

I was naked I did my best to climb in the back.

Mary was naked and waiting. She had shaved her pubic hair, and again she gave me the impression of being just a little girl. She didn't hesitate, and what could be best described as accidental positioning Mary found herself comfortably placed above me.

'What about wearing something?' I stammered.

'No. Flesh to flesh my dear neighbour. Besides, I'm infertile!' With this Mary began to move her body in the best rhythm she could find, and I complied with her movements, since I found myself unable to offer any further resistance or debate. It was at this point when Mary was shifting herself upon me that I realised how much that punch back in the kitchen had affected me. I was without the slightest doubt very drunk now, as though its effects had a way of increasing in their potency rather than laying down with time. Perhaps, I thought, as Mary continued to clasp herself upon my erection, that the punch contained some special herbs or drugs that spun around inside of the person's blood with the alcohol ; racing through the veins and around all parts of the body until the person became a walking, talking, manifestation of that drug. And Mary was very wet.

When I came I could imagine the transmission of my seed enter into the body of Mary, an image of the divine mother, who was infertile and thus could not conceive by nature. Perhaps it was a two-way transmission, a sharing of something unwanted or desired in the molecules and atoms instilled in our juices, unknown to us both. And then I remembered some remnants of the parable that spoke of the seed falling onto stony ground, and I laughed out loud. Mary began to laugh with me, inspired either from my laughter or from some private thought of her own. Mary cupped my sticky genitals in her hand and stroked my penis.

'Good little dicky', she pronounced in a childish voice, as if one was talking to a baby or young child. 'Did you like mummy's hole? Did you find god in there?' Then she kissed the mouth of the penis and rolled back into the seat.

Still naked I jumped into the drivers seat and turned the engine. I clunked the gear-stick into a position.

'No stupid, that's second, not first', Mary called from behind me as she was now leaning upon the back of the chair.

'Doesn't matter', I said half turning my head. 'Enough acceleration and this baby will shift in any gear.'

I pulled in the handbrake and the car jolted forward, and we were once again on the road. Mary brought her hands around my body and passed over the seatbelt. 'If you're gonna sit in the driver's seat and drive my car then you're gonna wear this pissing seatbelt.' I didn't argue or resist. I just raced the car down the roads, aided by Mary's instruction to the gears until I eventually found fourth. There would be no need for any other gears for a while. Mary screamed and hollered in my ear as the car tanked down the narrow roads. I kept on driving, thinking this was freedom ; driving madly, naked and drunken, and with a woman. I thought it was good. I thought that this was very definitely me. This was freedom. There were no other cars in sight, and our light was the only light we could see, so I just kept on following my own light for a while thinking that perhaps it would lead me to somewhere. Lead us.

Then there was more light. And then the noise came. Everything came. It came like a flood. It swamped me.

Then all the light vanished. And the noise too. Then there was nothing. And I was still naked, but I could not remember.

'He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.'

Revelation 2 : 11

They were all sighing and weeping, burning their tunics of flesh in the flames. They had diabolic creatures standing upon their shoulders as eternal weights, biting into their necks and backs, tearing away huge scraps of skin from their bones. And they were all sighing and weeping, crying 'Why do we deserve this? What mortal sins are we guilty of?'

And the black carcass devils roared out in shrieks of thunder 'You are guilty of God you fools. Your sin was missing the mark with your weak minds and ignorant natures. You thought you had the right to invent a god for yourselves and to massacre those who would not follow your stupid reasoning. And you thought that god listened to you!'

You fallacious creatures, you deceitful souls, your flesh will curdle in pain for your falseness!

You thought you had the right to claim mortal words in God's name. You believed within your petty and dried hearts that wise words within flesh was the emergence of the divine. And then you created your own earthly games with your asinine follies of martyrdom and hierarchies and rituals. You dress like freaks you insipid monstrosities - and then you believe that you have the right to claim providence with God.

For that unholy mire of merciless foolishness, we are here to bring you eternal torture both in your spiritual bodies and for your mental agony. You will never again allow the name of God to be uttered through your lips, you celestial failures.

You are God's abortion, and he abhors your very existence!'

And I passed beyond the sighing and the weeping, through rings of darkness that stunk of human shit and piss. I could hear the drifting of moans from within the black air, and

then gradually, like the dispersal of human disease, I could discern through the dense atmosphere a line of hollow figures. They walked within perpetual moans, their sunken eyes fixed rigid upon the forever distant horizon ; they wandered as dead herds.

On seeing me one of these human shells turned his body and made speech in my direction : 'You who are alive, look here and see the dead flesh of a passive man. Here is a man who played his mortal existence in submission to nature and life. I believed in a god who gave you a destiny through life's circumstances, and so I never pushed for anything that was not allotted to me. I was a lazy man. I accepted that which was thrown at me, and I did not stand against the flow of nature. I wasted my mortal time, and now I must pay for this with an eternity of wasting time.

I have to spend the rest of creation walking in continual boredom. I was doomed from my submission, and now I can do nothing but submit.'

And the figure left me, embracing his shadow life in moans. So I looked around me and I saw light in the distance. I moved towards it like a child towards the flesh of the nipple.

Light engulfed me. Voices surrounded me. I could feel tugging upon my body, and then a lifting sensation as if I was being transported without moving. I thought that I could recognise some of the voices that were all around me, yet I could not comprehend where they were. Suddenly I began to feel drowsy, and my eyes became heavy ; all was fading around me : voices, light, awareness. I was slipping into a nothingness, where all did not exist.

There was the body, and there was the spirit.

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, 'My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.' Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate.....If you carefully investigate these matters you will find him in yourself.

Monoimus

I awoke at dawn, my body cold and shrivelled against the night's earth. I was lying beside a hedge, still naked. My flesh and bones ached and my mind was a continual run of blurred and hurried thoughts, desperate to make a coherent train of my circumstances. There was a dampness in my ears and a taste of rot in my mouth. I lifted up my arm to look at the watch I had strapped against my left wrist. It was 5.43am. My arm had several cuts scratched into its soft flesh. I rolled over onto my back and looked directly up into the sky of the new day ; it did not appear to be any different : no more benevolent or welcoming than usual. It was always the same, but it was just the eyes of the seer that made it different. This morning it seemed to be the blank face of a god that neither saw, heard, nor spoke ; thus no evil could be recognised as if everything that went against man, nature, and god was ignored as though it never happened. A thing can only exist if it is recognised, otherwise it exists solely for the victim and the victimiser and no-one else. It was a feeling of worthlessness that lay on my chest that morning. I was a tiny mollusc of flesh, a slug of humankind. A universal bunch of cells, each group living its cycle as a part of the whole yet nothing beyond this length of living.

I sat up and my chest gave a yawn of pain. I was bruised. I looked around to grasp some indication of my bearings. It was a small overgrown garden ; I recognised a familiarity about the place. I turned my head further and a feeling of delighted surprise entered me when I realised that it was the front garden to my flats. I had arrived back home, and for the first time since waking a small stream of hope entered into my organs. A pile of

clothes were set down a couple of feet away from me. I reached for them. They were my clothes, the ones I had worn the night before and which I had hastily discarded when with Mary. Mary? Where was Mary? I suddenly realised why I was bruised. It had been the car last night. I wanted to think back like a calculated computer tracing its programming, yet my mind could not hold a still thought for more than the length of a spark.

My keys were still in the pocket of my jeans. I did not bother to get dressed. I just slipped my boxer shorts on and made my way back to the flat. I only wanted to be home again, and safe. I walked up the stairs feeling as if my back had been bent by the weight of elephants, or else I had acquired the stoop of an aged crop picker. My ribs felt bruised, and my head accompanied this by a foggiess of mental bruising.

I threw my clothes onto the floor and walked into the bathroom. I ran the tap and placed my hand beneath the gush of water : it was cold. I retreated to the bedroom and lay upon the bed.

I don't know what time I woke up, but I faintly guessed that it was around mid-morning. My senses had picked up a little since my earlier awakening. I knew that by now the water should have come on and heated itself up. Besides the thought of having a bath I did not want to engage my brain into any other mental activity ; I wanted to leave it alone, to give it its rest.

I ran the bath water. I did not need to undress for I was still unclothed, save for my underwear. I poured some washing-up liquid under the rush of the tap to ensure that I had a mass of bubbles to soak with me - I was all out of any fancy bubble bath bottled perfume.

I closed my eyes and let myself slip beneath the skin of water. I had no idea where I was going. I was just turning about endlessly, caught within some feeble current that I had so far not resisted. I was endlessly turning, molecules within a whirlpool, being twisted into contortions and shapes that formed a life : that formed my life. I was swimming in a torrid dry reservoir. Underwater ; my face was under the water. My body

still ached, yet I came to understand that you pay for your excesses in life by your flesh. I deserved to ache. I deserved to be just another man within the multitude of men, living and dying like all organic creatures : with goals, dreams, desires, joys, hates, loves, ambitions, and loss. I deserved to be all this, like any other man. But somehow I also wanted more. I wanted a reason for living ; a reason for there to be a god. I didn't need any more religion, that was just humans messing around with their own mis-guided concepts and human frailties. I needed to know something beyond, that went deeper inside and reached further in all directions.

But I felt dull. And I knew that besides all this fun and games I was indulging in, I had real work to get done. I needed to get my article finished : I had a deadline.

Alchemy is the art of becoming conscious
of God with yourself.

Paracelsus

3

Before we continue, let us firstly give a definition of alchemy in its basest form.

Alchemy is the art of transformation. The work of the alchemist is to bring about gradual changes upon the material he is operating upon, transforming it from a gross, unrefined state, to a perfected, or purified, form.

The external expression of this art is within the physical realms. Yet we have suggested that the true work of the alchemist lies beyond this, within a more spiritual realm. Whether the physical transmutation of base metals into gold is possible is seen as a by-product or as being the manifestation upon one level. If we remember the words of the 20th century alchemist Fulcanelli as quoted earlier : *'The essential thing is not the transmutation of metals, but that of the experimenter himself.'*

So the true work of alchemy can be seen as that which acts upon the alchemist himself. Thus, in its true form, it is a spiritual discipline. This principle of the alchemical operation works upon three levels of being at once - on body, soul, and spirit. The Great Work, as this continuing operation is referred to, is the process of bringing to a perfect balance these levels of being within a man. Namely, this is the breaking down of existing barriers which society and culture has nurtured in us (thus making us ignorant of our true being and so making inert and latent man's potential), and activating the integrated, balanced and perfected man. This integration is fulfilled by aiming to free the soul and spirit of matter and to reunite them with the body in a new exalted form. With this integration, or balance of the levels of being, man is able to reach a greater

spiritual understanding of his place and function within the universal scheme, and his intuitive faculty places him higher within the rungs of mortal existence.

The alchemists believe that man is made in the image of God and contains the seeds of soul and spirit within him. These are imprisoned within the body of normal man and must be awakened so that they can grow to perfection through the will and effort of the operator. The body is not rejected entirely, yet it must be encouraged to loosen its blind hold and attraction upon the inner being so that a transformation can begin.

This is begun by the strict discipline of alchemy itself. The student must commit himself to the work unceasingly, and with utmost patience and concentration. It requires a great amount of *attention*. Although within philosophical and hermetic understanding, man evolves himself towards greater consciousness as part of a natural process, yet the process is usually too slow or gradual for individuals to perceive and experience. It is the aim of alchemy to accelerate this change and to bring about the personal transformation of consciousness within a lifetime. The alchemical process, on all levels, is considered irreversible, which is why many alchemical texts speak of the seeker to be courageous and sincere in his endeavour, for he takes a risk in his search and no results can ever be guaranteed. Results in the transformation of man are not concrete nor received mandatory, but are relative to the heart and will of the seeker. An alchemist may spend a lifetime, may sacrifice all his material wealth and time, to the pursuit of alchemical spiritual transformation, and still not succeed. However, the gradual labours of the seeker will continue to activate his faculties to greater or lesser degrees.

If eventually a transformation in the whole being of the individual does occur, then it is the greatest wealth that the gods can ever deliver upon man. The attainment of man's true being has been coined under many labels : the

philosopher's stone ; the elixir of life ; the gold of the Sages ; the Divine Wisdom. Even the term 'the Holy Grail' has been linked with this mythical attainment.

It is the assertion of this writer that alchemy is an ancient discipline for the transformation of man's being into a balanced whole that incorporates the conscious whole of the body, soul, and spirit.

Such a discipline is not new in mankind's fragmented history. Teachings have been prevalent throughout civilisation and they have all, in one form or another, sought to teach the transformation of man on to a higher level of being and consciousness. Its forms are many and varied, stretching from such disciplines as magic and occultism, the Cabala, the true esoteric teachings of Jesus, Sufism, and even such latter-day teachings as have come over into the West as those of Mr. G. I. Gurdjieff.

Alchemy then, like the majority of spiritual teachings, serves to raise man's awareness and to give him a knowledge of mankind's place in the cosmos through an understanding of his own being. It is not a religion for it is not taught to a mass audience but must instead be approached willingly by the practitioner for it requires a sincerity of heart and a diligence of mind ; yet its rewards are great. Alchemy rests upon a science of knowledge.

3023 WORDS

I had been commissioned to write a three thousand word article to appear within the pages of a Sunday supplement, and I felt that I had done my job. It would do. It wasn't brilliant nor was it wide in its scope. But what can you do with only 3000 words?

I would fax it off to the editor down at the office shop on the corner of my street

and then wait for the final payment. It would not be much, but it would be something. I had not been given much opportunity to go into greater detail in the exposition of alchemy, for I would have preferred to have been able to comment upon its symbolism of metals. I had all I needed in way of books before me, but I had decided with a somewhat lazy attitude just to write a basic outline. After all, it was only a Sunday supplement and so I knew that anything further would only serve to confuse. Yet before venturing to read upon the subject of alchemy I had preconceived my own personal ridicule towards the subject because I had, like most people, believed alchemy to be the endeavours of mis-guided men who wanted only to find material wealth in endless gold; just like the talent of that enigmatic Rumpelstiltskin. Upon my hours of study I came to understand that alchemy was a spiritual discipline, and I had become suddenly interested in it.

I didn't like what I had written after reviewing the article, but then again I rarely ever did like what I had written upon its completion. But now it was finished. Maybe I would pursue the subject of alchemy further in my own time, yet right now I was concerned with the next step.

Concentrating upon the writing had been a good way of taking my mind off recent aches. The bath had helped also. Somehow though, I still wasn't clear about events. Now that empty space was once again on my hands I had to think about how it was that I had arrived in the garden of my flats when my last memory was driving into lights down a country road in Mary's car with her in the back seat. There was an obvious gap somewhere in the middle, as if the sandwich filling had been erased and all I had to eat with was the dry bread. What happened to the cheese - where had it gone? Who had taken it away?

Who had stolen the goddamn sauce?

'In the twinkling of an eye Justice will decide
whether one goes to the Inferno or to
Everlasting Life.'

Elizabeth Van Buren

I knocked three times upon the door : *knock, knock, knock*. I waited for about forty seconds then knocked again. It was like waiting in the wilderness. I wanted an answer. I wanted to see Mary's smiling cocky face answer the door with a cigarette hanging from the flesh of her lips. I wanted her to say 'Yes Julian, and what does my neighbour want this time? Fancy a joint? C'mon in and sit yourself down. Coffee or wine?'

But the stupid woman never answered the door. She simply did not answer. Maybe she was on the toilet, heaving and extracting. I don't know.

I poured the coffee into the cup and sat back on the sofa. I had put some monk music in the cassette player to calm things down a bit. I was seeking a more relaxed frame of mind.

It was not long before I heard the front door to the flats being slammed. Ah, I thought, that will be Mary coming back from shopping perhaps. Then I halted dead my track of thoughts. No, it didn't have to be Mary, it could be a number of people. Why should it have to be Mary?

I turned the music off and stood in a silence waiting to hear the downstairs door to Mary's flat being opened. But that particular sound never came. Instead, a different sound continued, and it was approaching. Footsteps upon stairs, ascending. A knock. A hard and rapid raspy knock, twice upon the door. It was for me. Someone wanted to see me. Who could it be? It had to be someone who had a key for the front outer door. The landlord? The police? No, not the police, surely? Who then?

Nothing for it but to accept the answer.

'Hello again, impetuous stranger. You have a lot to answer for.'

'Ah, Marcus.' I hesitated. 'You better come in.'

'Yes, I think I should. And how is the bruised body?' Marcus spoke in an affirmative and sturdy voice. He was no doubt trying to make his voice sound like it came from an authoritative man : a man in charge, a man above me, who knew more than I did and whom held the answers to what I was needing. Perhaps he wanted me to acknowledge this hierarchy that he was trying to project into the space between us. But I didn't care. It mattered not to me if this person standing in my flat was the Pope or the bleeding Queen. When it comes down to it everyone shits, pisses, smells their own farts, and scratches their genitals - and you can't tell me that the Pope doesn't get sexy thoughts once in a while. So we were all flesh and blood, and no need to organise a ceremony or a pedestal to slouch upon.

'Yea, so what is it Marcus. And how was the dancing frolics last night?' I was playing at being the unconcerned and lousy host. Well, the lousy host bit was true.

'You should not be so laissez-faire my young man. You have been involved in some drastic tragedy. And let us not forget that you are the sole perpetrator in this affair. You are the sole destructor, and the responsibility of burden must be placed upon you.'

'Well of course Marcus, my honourable priestly friend. I bear all responsibility for your little twisted rituals.' Marcus stood firm and erect looking at me as if he were the perfect phallic statuette.

'Yes. You may find yourself to be cocky now, but I am sure that you are not fully aware of what has resulted from your actions. Are you not a little distressed to find yourself waking up in a garden, naked, and with a bruised body, when you were last speeding through the lanes with Mary?'

'Mary'. I uttered her name under my breath as if listening to its sound in my head, yet I spoke loud enough for Marcus to hear the word also.

'Yes, Mary.' I took a seat on the sofa, and by a mechanical action invited Marcus to sit on the chair opposite. If he had something to tell me, then I might as well oblige his

usefulness. Marcus sat in silence, and cleared his throat rather dramatically.

'It seems from where I am seated, that you are not fully aware, or conscious of, the events which have preceded you. Can you tell me what happened to you from driving the car last night until this morning?' I hesitated.

'No', came my final reply.

'Yes, I thought not. That is why I deemed it best that I came here to, what you might say, enlighten you upon the matter. So let me tell you now, straight and to the point, that are beloved friend Mary is no longer with us.' I remained staring into Marcus's eyes for a brief silence.

'Wait a minute. What do you mean - not with us?'

'Gone Julian. Dead. You killed her. Your driving was the cause of her untimely departure from this realm.' I let out a drastic exasperated nervous laugh.

'Departure from this realm', I repeated in a mocking tone. 'She isn't dead ; what the hell are you talking about. Another set of your bloody riddles or what?'

'No. This is it Julian. No riddles or games. Your car hit a tree at the side of the road. One of our brothers spotted the car whilst returning home. Naturally we came as soon as the news was relayed to us. When we got there all we found was you unconscious, still strapped in the driver's seat, while what was left of Mary's body was outside of the car.'

'What was left of her body. Why, where did it go?'

'Not very far I'm afraid. She couldn't of been strapped in the car as you yourself wisely was, for she went through the front windscreen and crushed her skull against the tree, face on, just like hitting a brick wall with your head. Instant death, and a mangled brain.'

'Oh come on Marcus', I protested, 'stop all the details and all this matter of factness. I can't tell if your playing one of your fucking games on me as a sick pagan joke.'

'Oh, don't use that word so loosely, you'll defame it.'

'I ain't bothered about your semiotics Marcus : I just want the truth.'

'Ah the truth! No, we can't have that my dear Julian ; we are only mortals after all. Yes?'

'Look, lets stop all this shit right? Just tell me what really did happen or get the fuck out of my flat.' I had begun to get annoyed by even the mere sight of Marcus, and I wanted

rid of him as soon as was possible. I just wanted to hear what he had to say and then I would be packing him off without wasting anymore time.

'Okay Mr. Cross.....Julian. I will give it to you as it is, so listen. You and Mary, both of you had too much to drink of that punch that was generously offered to you at my house. You went off for a drive, for whatever reasons that were your own. You began to drive fast along the country roads and for some reason you lost control of the car and crashed into a tree. You managed to survive with only a few scratches, but unfortunately Mary was not so lucky and she died upon impact with the tree, an oak tree. We found you some time later. You were dragged unconscious from the wreckage and taken home to where you found yourself this morning, along with your clothes.' At this, Marcus coughed gently into his hand before continuing. 'Then we took what remained of Mary's body and we gave it a proper burial as was the custom she would of wanted. The car was towed away and has subsequently been satisfactorily disposed of. There is no evidence remaining and so that shall be the end of the matter. And for your benefit Julian I would forget everything.' He stopped talking. The room filled with a silence.

'And that's it?', I asked rather lost at the whole thing.

'Yes, that's it.' Marcus's facial expression did not change.

'But what about the police. We will have to inform them of Mary's death. Someone will know about her.' My voice had contained a hint of worry within its pitch.

'No, not at all ; now listen to me. You can't go to the police Julian because your body was so pumped full of drugs from that punch that you so liked. Mary will not be missed for she has no family, and her flat downstairs has been paid in my name for the past eleven months, and I will continue to pay it. There is no evidence of her whereabouts, she is as good as vanished, just like the many other thousands who disappear into anonymity every year. You won't say anything, otherwise you will be charged for murder, or at least it will be a charge of manslaughter, depending upon how the prosecutor sees the drug angle. So there it will be forgotten. I only hope that your conscience will be your punishment for you in this lifetime. I wish never to have any further contact with you Mr. Cross ; you have caused enough trouble to last a score of

equinoxes. Goodbye.'

Marcus stood up without waiting for any reply or movement from myself and made straight for the door. He opened it and walked out ; his head did not turn around as he filtered into the corridor and down the stairs. I heard the outer door slam shut.

I laid down upon the sofa and closed my eyes. I could see nothing but blackness. 'I gotta do something with this life', I whispered, my ears listening, as I sank into the nothingness that was in my head. I could find nothing with which to eulogise Mary. I could conjure up no sentiment or regretful emotion : I was empty towards her. There was an emotional emptiness in myself for Mary's death. I could see her as nothing else besides being a beacon. A beacon that is placed along a racetrack to tell you how far you have come : I had nothing to show for the amount of distance I had already travelled. I had somehow missed the view. This had come as a sullen shock to me. I felt like I was a paradox, a living paradox that is the embodiment of the ultimate paradox of living. Everything contradicts, especially human nature. I lay there.

I lay lifeless for a while, wanting to feel what it was that steered the body into life. Trying to decipher the nature of different stimulants that triggered the spirit into operation. What was it that the senses were reaching out for? Had my entire being gone on a fast, starving itself hysterically naked?

If all this spirit and soul stuff resided within the person, then what's with the body? I just had to sink into the sofa with these thoughts. It seemed to me that people were playing games with themselves either through the medium of the soul or through the excesses of the body ; and if they were lucky they managed to get a hybrid concoction of both. Some people had only thought and no action, whereas others had only action and no thought. Either way, everyone you meet is eating from one end of the pie and they assure you that the whole pie tastes good : how would they know if the other end of the pie tasted like rat shit if they were only munching on their own end, or similarly if the other end was a damn sight tastier?

'Oh, who fucking knows anyway!'. I was feeling the tedium of this circular argument. I knew nothing. Perhaps Mary was indeed dead like Marcus had said. Or perhaps she was alive and kicking like myself and shacked up with the grubby fat fingers of Lucas roaming through her pubic hair like a desperate grandfather. Who knew anything these days? Who proclaims the truth when everyone is misguided? Love? Love? Where the hell had that famous feeling gone?

I made myself a cheese and pickle sandwich and turned on the television. All that was available were the useless afternoon programs that are time fillers for bored housewives or drunken dolelies. I was out of place within this afternoon scenario yet the media alienation was numbing to me. I wasn't really watching anything ; that is to say my eyes were receiving the upside-down coloured impressions from the TV screen, yet the bridge from the eyes to the brain had been temporarily suspended and I was receiving no mental awareness from the flickers. I was a child before a barrage of outwardly meaningless adverts. I was watching the space before me yet I was not listening to anything directed at me.

I was thinking : not about death or any guilt that may be upon me. I felt no burden on that account. I was just lost within my own internal memory stream. Thinking back to the events and times of my earlier youth. How, starting out with so many questions you search and hunt with a manic enthusiasm because you are sure that somewhere along the line the answers must be revealed. Then, after the world has begun to imprint itself upon you with its etiquette's and niceties and social rumblings and material needs, you forget. You forget everything you were once hunting for, as if the smell of blood had suddenly evaporated or the taste had disintegrated upon your tongue ; and then you are left with nothing. Nothing but having to make a secondary survival : having to find other means to somehow secure that blurry and distant end that you keep promising yourself. And you just go with the body - feeding it, nursing it, sexing it, washing it, hurting it, tiring it, neglecting it. And you keep on going until the warranty runs out or until you fail to pass the MOT.

And then other times, whether you be bored or busy, contented or melancholic, those self same questions from your innocence come back to you, and they tap once again upon your temples. The answers are never there. Never. You just start to ask again. You return to the prodding, as if something has to be discovered and now's another time for it. You may wish to fall back into the sleeping man again, under the hill for another age. Whatever, it pokes at the skin, and you can't leave it hanging around for any god to cure.

I splashed some water onto my face, crouching over the bathroom sink. I had two weeks left before the rent was due. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to head out into the late afternoon for a drink.

'It is an essential facet of human nature that, sooner or later in life, there will be experienced an inner urge, a spiritual yearning, a need to formulate a personal philosophy by which material existence can be measured and, hopefully, justified. Shallow thinkers will parasitize the beliefs of others..the more intuitive choose to think with their own minds.....'

Roy Norvill, 'The Golden Understanding'

It was daylight.

I faxed off my alchemy article at the local office shop and then walked through the streets leading into the heart of town. I watched the faces of people as I passed them, seeing the focus of their eyes and how they had nothing to look for so they spent their gaze onto trivial things ; like parked cars, admiring the colours, or the waste paper upon the ground as if for that brief moment they inhabited ecological values : people will even incessantly look at their watches or scratch their noses, tweet their ear-lobes, comb their eyebrows, check their feet. They will do anything, absolutely anything to give their eyes or brains something to focus upon as if they needed constant external stimulus to keep the machine ticking over. Perhaps it was because they had nothing inside of them in which to turn to, almost like watching a blank television screen. They would get bored looking into the dry well inside ; so they bore themselves with the little things on the outside instead : a smaller death is always better than a larger one.

I walked into Joseph's Bar and ordered a jug of house red. It was seven pounds fifty for the jug, which I never considered was too bad a price to pay in a bar. And it was never often that I ordered the jugs. I noticed an empty table squared neatly into the corner of the room. The place wasn't busy, as would be expected for around four o'clock, which was how I preferred it to be at this immediate moment. The large table, which was comfortable for at least four people to sit round it, had as its seats those large church pews at both ends. It could perhaps be said that it gave off religious overtones, yet I

thought that would be stretching the association a little too far. They were, when said and done, only wooden benches on which to sit the ass down on.

The bar had some music wafting over through the air which I could not discern, or even bothered to ; preferring instead to let all noises just drop into a background cacophony that whistled into the far ceiling corners or into other people's ears. What day was it? Perhaps it was a Thursday afternoon. Are Thursday evenings busy? I don't know. So I just poured and drank.

If there was one thing that I did not wish to think about then it would be the silly episode with Mary, Marcus, Lucas, and fellow foolish friends. That whole happening was where the mire of human chaotic behaviour belonged, with its absurdity and desperate reasoning. If they wanted to play at letting the divine manifest in their bodies before jumping into the orgy, then let them appease their grooved minds with bent notions. Everyone has a right to worship whatever form of twisted deity they wish. Let them keep their holy minds ; right now all I was interested in was feeding my body with the liquid alcoholic juice. I wanted to immerse myself within the earthly pleasures : God has his time and place, and humans have theirs.

The wine was flowing easily into my gut, and I didn't mind the solitude. Solitude is always an easy thing if you have the patience and temperament. Solitude is never an emotion, it is a state. Lonesomeness is the emotion, which can be followed by melancholia or self-pity. But solitude is fine. It enables you to drink alone, perhaps pass a few thoughts over the insides of the temple, or to listen to those drifting conversations that disperse into the air to be channelled into. Right now I was channelling my lazy attention into the general murmur that had gradually arisen to atmospheric level in Joseph's Bar. That is, several more people had recently arrived and their talk had contributed to the din.

The human form comes in various sizes, contortions, and curves, while the personalities likewise come in numerous polite smiles, arrogant reactions, smarmy thinking, and slow reasoning. I had no intention of being one of those dull analysers

who sit back in contentment watching what they call as body language or human behaviour : I wasn't an expert at such things. Basically, I just wanted to drink with my eyes open. I had nearly finished the jug by this time, so I roughly figured that I could get about eight good glasses out of each. I had enough time by myself to imagine the pathways that the wine would take when inside the body. How the alcohol would wash like bodily fluid through the veins with the blood, and how the liquid remains would collect with the rest of the body's waste solution in the bowels, all ready to be pissed out when the pressure time came. I could feel it inside of me now, so I went to the bar and ordered myself another house jug.

Offices had closed now. The security guards were locking the doors and securing all entrances. Smart people were saying quick formulated goodbyes to each other, and Joseph's Bar was filling up. But I remained with my seat. It was one of those times, which usually occurs during drinking, when the mind can race along within its own track, never becoming bored or lost for a side-track, yet nothing is consciously being thought of. No major idea or vision is being formulated. It is like an agreement between body and mind where the body goes off on its physical indulgences, thus letting the mind know that it too is free to wander in its own space. And that's exactly what it does. Like an old friend who walks away to give his comrade some time upon his own, it weaves along upon its own path, each letting the other alone. So now it had gotten to a stage where my mind was just ignoring my body, perhaps perceiving it as a little child which needs its indulgences, and so giving a loose grip to the reign. But like I said, I wasn't too much into the analytical stuff ; anyhow, that was when I was more sober. Alcohol, like feminine poison, changes events. And alcohol is another great oblivion. Was Mary truly dead? Was I going to get another commission for an article, especially after my alchemy piece? How much longer could my cash survive? What next?

Doesn't matter, I had the alcohol this evening and I was entertaining a neglected body. Nothing else mattered for the next few hours. Everything can wait until another time ; make life into an endless storeroom of tomorrow's and sometime soon. It would

be easy, so very easy.

'Mind if we sit at this table?' The question was directed at me. I looked up to see two young women awaiting a reply with open faces. I reacted almost mechanically with a raise of my left hand.

'Sure, go ahead, it's okay.' I didn't pay much attention to the two ladies as they sat down on the bench opposite, not wanting to witness their movements with my eyes. I did not wish them to feel uncomfortable by sharing the same sphere of space as myself, so I remained fixed with my drink as the two women began to chat away.

I made a deliberate point of not listening to their conversation, which isn't an easy thing to do when such voices are carried over to your ears. Instead, I concentrated upon the diminishing level of the wine jug and revelled in the pleasurable effects it produced and the thoughts it provoked. Soon I could not decide whether I was a crude man or not, or whether my life up until now had been spent in moderate politeness. I was not even able to tell myself whether I sincerely liked my personality or not. This is a serious question and one that can really strangle you if asked at the wrong time. Was now the wrong time?

The argument erupted and one of the women opposite slammed her glass down with a last defiant gesture and swore useless angry words before standing up and leaving. At this point I looked across the table to see the woman she had left behind, sitting confusedly and staring at her near empty glass.

'Drink up and I'll pour you another', I exclaimed across to her. She looked up at me, first showing no visible sign of verbal recognition ; then she slowly began to consciously respond with a slight nod of agreement, and knocking back her remaining few drops of her drink she held her straight glass out for a shot of red wine. She immediately brought the edge of the glass to her lips and tilted her head back to receive the red juice into her gut and head, blood and tissues. She felt it trickle inside of her like a sun ray.

'I'll get another', I said as I stood up to make my less than balanced way to the bar. Luckily, I was not too far from the far edge of bar, and the young barman with short

cropped hair always managed to catch my eye as if knowing that I would make returned visits at that precise spot at regular intervals. It was at this point that I was somehow glad that barmen got to cultivate their sense of serving intuition. Sometimes they ask you dumb and probing questions, and then nod their head as if to show that they have heard the same explanation a hundred times before yet better told. But at other times, like now, they often knew how just to shut up and get on with what was important, namely the speedy serving of drinks.

I returned to the table and sat down as before opposite the young woman. She was a brunette with a friendly average face that was framed by straight cut hair. I saw that she had already finished the drink that I had poured her, so I immediately poured her another without speaking. Then I poured another one for myself.

'Thanks', she said. It was her first direct words to me. Not the best, but I was contented with them. 'Are you here on your own?' she continued. Again, not the best.

'Yeah, I just popped in for a few drinks and somehow I've stayed here since. It must be the red wine not allowing me to leave. But it needs a good home. What about your friend, missing her mother's cooking or something?' She laughed ; perhaps it was because she was loosened up enough to find what I said funny, or perhaps she just wanted to show me her shiny white teeth. As if everybody didn't have teeth!

'Awh, don't worry about her. She's just sensitive about certain things.'

'Like what things?', I asked. I wanted to get the conversation rolling on some account.

'Things like men.'

'And what's so sensitive about men?'

'No', she giggled, 'it's not the men that are sensitive. No, not at all. It's that she was sensitive about me and her boyfriend.'

'Her boyfriend and you?'

'Yeah, we had a little thing together. Only for a couple of nights though. It was when she was ill, and her boyfriend just came over to me for a bit of fun.'

'Oh well. And what's so wrong with that? She must have been a real sensitive girl. I guess you never can tell which way things will blow.'

'Nah, I guess not. But what's the point when all there is between being born and dying is the bit of fun in-between. I mean Christ, I only slept with her man ; it's not as though I didn't give him back.'

'Ah, don't you worry about such things. The Lord will forgive you on judgement day', I said in a mocking tone. The brunette just laughed in agreement and gulped another mouthful of wine.

'Do yer know what I think?' She leaned her eyes across to me as if in temporary drunken examination.

'Nope. Go ahead and tell me.'

'Well, I think that women are more intelligent than men. We women are more flexible, have more important uses, and live longer than you men.'

'More intelligent uses?' I was intrigued.

'Of course. If any man tried to give birth he'd split his ass cheeks trying, right?'

'Right on sister'. I raised my glass in a toast and she imitated the gesture with me.

'Us women are more caring', she continued, 'and we have more respect for the world around us and we can be artificially inseminated, and soon there will be no need for you men!'

'And', I harked back hastily, 'you women have great bodies too.'

'Yes, and that too', she said whilst pointing her finger up in the air at me.

'So who are you then, the granddaughter of Germaine Greer?'

'Naw, I'm Lucy. Just Lucy to you.'

'Well Just Lucy, I'm Only Julian.'

'Hello Only Julian.' We raised our glasses together and toasted 'fuck all'.

The jug of wine had been finished off and I was pissed. It was late evening and Just Lucy was pissed as a rude boy fountain. We got a taxi together and drove to my flat. The stair climb I do not particularly remember.

Once inside I opened another bottle of wine and put on some mellow night music. Tom Waits growled away as we stumbled into the bedroom like two drunken

fawns or pissed spirits. Her breasts were of average size and with average yet warm nipples. Just Lucy's breasts were spongy and slightly pale like soft dough before the baker's oven. I neaded them with my senses.

She cupped me in her mouth and I could feel the warm saliva. We were on the bed naked. I kissed her ; my head was soon below.

I climbed behind her and told her when Only Julian was inside that I had no condoms. Just Lucy did not decline. I rocked back and forth, between the flesh and inside the grip. I heard slurps, perhaps she did too. She was laughing, and so was I.

In my abstract mind I was not achieving the goal but only the body's pleasure, yet the sole sensations were enough. I could feel her juice seep into my length in penetration ; my erect tissues absorbing her body's own emissions, whether waste or disease or comfort. We turned over. I on top. Face on face yet drunken eyes on pillow and ceiling. More noises and deep inside.

I pulled out and lifted my load onto her belly. She dripped between her legs onto the sheets. The whole night was still there yet I wanted it to end. There would be no morning for Just Lucy and Only Julian together. The deed was done. The body bloody, and the illusion before the committed act vanished like Macbeth's daggers.

We wiped ourselves clean and I went downstairs to call for another taxi. I wanted sleep. Deep sleep. I didn't say much. Just one of those things. It wasn't a matter of thinking. Quite the opposite : it was a matter of non-thinking. Of letting it be through circumstance and then letting it pass through time. It came, it occurred, it went. Some decisions on life come as big great whoppers that strangle your mind for conscious thought ; others come because life brings them along our way and we are just too weak to resist. Every small action could be signing your death certificate, because the future exists within everything no matter how small or large, and we should not let ourselves be deceived by appearances of size. Men are easily fooled : that is our mistake. I said goodbye. That was Just Lucy. I was Only Julian. Storytelling names, pseudo labels designed to hide. Crouched like Rumpelstiltskin we were afraid of letting our identities

be known. No.

I looked at the mess of the bed. I was tired so I pulled off the quilt and dragged it into the front room. I laid down upon the sofa and draped it across me. I closed my eyes. I was Julian. I am Julian Cross.

'...they've been told that God is mysterious, unfathomable, so to them incoherence is the closest thing to God. The farfetched is the closest thing to a miracle.'

Umberto Eco, 'Foucault's Pendulum'

I greeted the new day feeling stupid. I had no idea what to do next. So I took care of my body first and made breakfast. I sat down at the table next to the bay window overlooking the church hall and bit into my honey toast. I lowered my eyes from the view and caught the sight of a book upon the table. I picked it up to read its title.

'Shit'. I banged my fist onto the table. 'How could I have forgotten. It's that bloody book on Gnosticism that Susannah lent me to read. Bollocks - I was supposed to be making her afternoon dinner yesterday. And where the fuck was I?' I paused and looked at the book. 'I was getting fucking pissed in Joseph's bar ; that's where I was. Bastard.'

I had missed the meeting with Susannah and now I had no way of getting in touch with her again. I did not know her address, nor where she would be at any particular time. It was a mess. And I did truly want to see her again. It was true that I wasn't really doing an article on Christianity, but I had to admit to myself that working with Susannah was interesting for me ; both because her ideas stimulated me and also that I found her demurely attractive. Yes, I did like Susannah. She was an intelligent lady. It was then that I had the idea.

I jumped up and hurried to get dressed. I made my way to the phone downstairs, the same one which I had rung from to order the escape from Just Lucy. Now however it was being used for good practical purposes. I rang the number from my little book. It took four rings for the phone to be answered.

'Hello, Peterson here.'

'Hi Mike, this is Julian Cross.'

'Ah, hi Julian.'

'How's everything going then? Did you like the article on alchemy that I faxed to you?' I waited for the answer.

'Yeah, well it was okay. You kind of emphasised the spiritual side of alchemy rather than the transformation of metals.'

'But that's what real alchemy is about. It deals with the transformation of the self but it uses allegorical language in which to disguise it, like that of metals.'

'Yes, I understood that. It was fairly well informed Julian. And it was brief enough to be understood by the general reader while not going into too much detail or waffling, but perhaps it could maybe of been more concise. Anyhow, we have decided to run it. It should at least spark some interest. It's not your usual magazine article you know.'

'Yes, I figured that. Look Mike, I've got this other idea for you to consider.'

'Ah Julian, has the article on alchemy spurred you on to other similar topics. What are you proposing we consider this time. Oriental magic?'

'Nah, nothing so exotic as that. This is more general and closer to home. Look, what do you say to another three part serialised article that deals with the advancement of religious thought. It will deal with the ancient heresies that were around at the birth of Christianity, such as Gnosticism and Paganism, and it will go on to chart the progress of religious thought, through the Middle Ages, up till the present time and how religion is perceived nowadays. It should be a great informative read for your readers. What do you reckon then, should be worth doing?' Another pause.

'Mmm. Could be. You're getting heavy Julian. What happened to the days when you wrote that article about teenage courting rituals. Now that was fun.'

'I guess you could say that I just grew up. Happens to us all y'know Mike.'

'Sure, sure. It may happen to us all but please don't tell me that your gonna stand for the archetypal man ; I wouldn't want to think that my kids are going to be measured on your achievements. Anyway, why the religious article?'

'Oh, it just kind of came about at the right time. So what do you think. Want to go with it? Could be interesting you know. I will deal with todays present religious climate and how it stands with the developing secular age. So?'

'Okay okay, you've sold it to me. But it has to be interesting, and more in-depth than the alchemy piece. You can't just touch lightly upon religion ; it has to be done properly. I'll give you three, three thousand word segments to appear in consecutive weeks. Listen Julian, the first three thousand words have to deal with early Christianity and its rivals, right? The second slot will deal with its survival during the dark ages and its wave of persecution and the Inquisition. Lastly, leave the final piece to religion in the modern age. Got it?'

'It's etched on my brain Mike, like a tattooed tear.'

'Oh please, spare the song lyrics.'

'Okay then I'll get to work on it. And the pay?'

'The pay will be the regular per words amount. You know the score Julian.'

'Only too well. You'll suck us writers dry you people will.'

'Then don't be a writer Julian. Find yourself a better paid job, it's your choice.'

'No, writers don't have choices, they only have a life.' I hung up.

I walked down to the university and entered the library, showing my external reader's card to the doorman as I passed the turnstile. I walked up to the third floor and took a look around. I could find Susannah nowhere. I looked a second time then left, checking each successive floor as I descended. I walked out onto the courtyard, no better off for my search. Susannah was proving elusive. There was only one place left where I could go, knowing that at least there I could gain some information on how to get in touch with her. We were, after all, research partners, or something to that degree.

After five or ten minutes I was outside the door which had the once before encountered plaque of 'Professor John Simon : Head of Religious Studies'. I knocked three times. No answer. I knocked a second time. I waited. I gave a third and final knock, and paused. Still no answer. I took one of the seats in the corridor and proceeded to wait.

It must of been about twenty or so minutes later that I recognised the open-collared middle-aged man approaching, and he too recognised me.

'Well, Mr Cross isn't it?', he greeted me cheerfully as he approached.

'Hello again Professor Simon. Can you spare a minute?'

'I can spare two. Come on in.' He unlocked the office door and we entered. He motioned for me to sit whilst he sorted out the papers he was carrying. I approached the conversation first, eager to assert my reason for visiting him.

'Professor Simon...'

'Call me John', he amiably interrupted me.

'John. As you may know, your daughter Susannah and I are involved in what could be called mutual research together. She and I are both involved in work on religion, her for the dissertation, as you are no doubt aware of, and I for an article I am writing, as you may also be aware of from our last visit.' The professor sat down and smiled at me.

'Go on', he prodded.

'Well, I think that it is important for both your daughter and myself to get together for some serious research, but unfortunately I am at a loss of how to reach her again.'

'Since your last failed appointment you mean?' the professor said in a wry grin.

'Yes', I said in a humble voice, 'since our last unfortunate failed meeting.' I looked up at him and tried my best to give a reassuring smile as if to return his own habit.

'No problem!' The professor scribbled onto a piece of paper and handed it across the desk to me. I read it. It was an address.

'Tonight we'll get together for tea. You, I, and Susannah. Seven-thirty okay with you Julian?'

'Yes, fine' I uttered, somewhat taken aback by his generous gesture.

'Good, I'll be seeing you tonight then.' We shook hands and I wished him well before departing.

Once more I was outside in the corridor. I hesitated no longer : I walked out of the university and into town for a sandwich. I wanted to sit in the park for a few minutes, then head back home to spend a few hours reading through the book that Susannah had lent to me. I did not want to turn up completely clueless, especially after my last

dishonourable performance. I walked.

After a couple hours of reading in the afternoon I closed the book and stripped naked for a shower. I wanted the water to be lukewarm : neither too hot nor too uncomfortably cold. I wanted a balance ; to be without the extremes.

I dressed and stared at myself in the mirror. 'Another average guy', I said to my reflection, then winked, knowing full well that the ego always lies to try and cover up for vanity. But staring at my own reflection was not something that I had overly indulged in before. I didn't like to see myself staring back at the features that constituted my appearance since it always gave one a new perspective upon things ; one that made me doubt, or question, or revoke in dismissal. I put on several dabs of my favourite obsessive aftershave then went into the lounge to grab my jacket. I then picked up Susannah's Gnosticism book and left the flat.

Once outside I began walking. I knew where the Simon household was situated yet I kept the address in my jean pockets to verify the actual house number. I think it was something like 14 ; anyhow, it was a low number.

A little over a half an hour and I had arrived. It was 7.22 according to my watch, but I knew that earliness would be greatly more appreciated than lateness, so I knocked thrice upon the door. A few seconds later and I heard feet approaching from the inside and the handle turn.

'Hello stranger ; the man who can't keep appointments.' It was Susannah, standing there before me at the door, dressed not in her usual jeans but in an adoring small deep burgundy skirt with a short cropped T-shirt to match. She was indeed much finer than I had given her credit.

'Ah, Susannah. Sorry about yesterday. I feel really bad about that, especially since I promised that I would treat you to a bit of lunch.' I put on a suitably apologetic face.

'Yes', Susannah responded in a deep patronising tone as she invited me into the hallway.

'Would you like the truth or a lie?'

'Oh, just a tiny bit of truth would do, if you are feeling guilty enough to offer me an explanation.'

'Well Susannah, I was in a bar getting pissed yesterday afternoon and I forgot all about our meeting.'

'Yes, that's believable.' Then she gave a slinky smile, half to herself and the other half for me to witness, as she ushered me into a front room.

'Is that you Julian?', came the sound of a man's voice which was obviously that of Susannah's father.

'Yes, it's me John', I shouted back in a friendly voice, hoping to get myself on quick informal terms with Susannah's old man. This was always the first rule : get yourself well liked by the parents ; it always makes things easier.

'Dad's doing the cooking', Susannah informed me. 'He's a great cook. You'll love the food.'

'Yeah, smells good', I replied as I sat down. 'And you mother willingly sits back and lets your father do all the hard work?'

'I don't think so. She's dead.' Susannah said this in a completely calm and rational voice.

'Oh', I said, 'I didn't know that.'

'Yes, well you know now. But don't worry about it. When the time comes we all have to go. It's just another fundamental law of life, and nothing we should carry around with us like handbags.'

'Handbags....yes', I said. I had liked the image. 'How did your mother die, if you don't mind me asking?'

'No. I don't mind you asking Julian. She died of cancer. Cancer of the womb. It was painful for a while. We even thought that she had escaped from it after her therapy, but it came back to reclaim her. Perhaps it was something she did in her past life that maimed her in this one.'

'Yes. Perhaps.' I was stone cold in any reply that I could give to Susannah's comment.

'Has any of your family died Julian?' I paused.

'Er, no. No, I don't think so. Not apart from great, great grandparents. I've still got my immediate family if that's what you mean.' I smiled, but I didn't know why, since we were talking about the death of loved ones.

'So what are your parents doing now then?'

'Oh, they run a small guest house on the South coast. A bit too cosy for me. But they like to meet people.'

'And you don't Julian?' Susannah looked at me fixedly, as if knowing when a lie was coming or when the truth was being told. She had a very matter-of-factness about her.

'People are okay. But I'm not into love thy neighbour.'

'And quite right so Julian.' Simon, Susannah's father had just entered the room with a bottle of wine in his hand. 'All this Christian nonsense about loving everybody ; just doesn't work y'know. Do you know that most people do things for the wrong reasons, and that's as bad as not doing them at all. The Christian doctrine says love everybody, love your neighbour, but they haven't a clue what love is. So most of these people that call themselves Christians go around helping people, offering them what they consider love, because they either think that it is their Christian duty and so doing so automatically makes them good Christians ; or because it bolsters their pride and makes them feel good about themselves, which is pure vanity. But they don't realise that it is impossible to love everybody. Love is a sacred feeling, and you can't just give it out to any old Harriet or Tom. And many Christians can't even give an ounce of love to anything because first they have not learnt to love themselves. No-one can give love out without first having discovered it within themselves. After all, Jesus did say that the kingdom of Heaven is within you. But what happens - nobody understands. They just read a few words and go away falsely contented. A glass of chilled white wine Julian?'

'Please.' He poured both myself and Susannah a glass of wine then turned and exited from the room. A shout came back : 'make yourself comfortable, the food will be ready in a few minutes.'

I was sitting on the sofa with Susannah lounged next to me. I turned towards her as she

sipped from her glass ; her lips lightly touching with parted mouth and tip of tongue showing. I was beginning to feel very attracted to her. She tilted her head towards me, noticed my eyes, and smiled to herself as she looked away again.

Shit, she knows it, I thought. There goes my upper hand.

'Let's make our way to the dining room Julian. The food is going to be served any minute now.' Susannah held out her hand in a gesture to bring me on my feet from the sofa. I took a hold of it, but once standing she let the grip go. That, I thought, was a wee bit unfair of her.

I sat down at the small mahogany round dining table, and drank from my wine. It was an intimate yet informal setting, and the wine was dry and crisp. I felt comfortable, and a good bit hungry : I usually ate around six-thirty. But the wait was a necessary one. I took a casual glance around the room that we were in - obviously the dining room. It had a dark feel to it ; almost a studious air. All the furniture that I could see was of dark wood and the wallpaper was a rich scarlet pattern with cream borders and skirting. The ceiling was likewise painted in a deep hue of red. I could of been sitting with a family in Victorian times where the women wear corsets and the men button themselves up to high heaven. But no, and I was glad that most young women these days didn't need corsets to flatten their navels. There were a few ornaments around the room, yet nothing ornate or typically English in the way of porcelain or silverware. Just one or two collected ornaments that come from places or people. I noticed three pictures on the wall that all depicted religious scenes, with women and babies and divine rings and coloured robes. All the theological art stuff. There were a some scattered books that...

'Julian?'. Susannah directed her voice straight towards me.

"Yes?"

'Why were you getting drunk yesterday afternoon?' She waited solid like a matron for an answer. This girl wanted to know everything.

'Well', I paused for a moment. 'There are always reasons for everything. Nothing in life is done without a reason, and then each reason has tens of other reasons built into it. So

in the end you don't do a thing for one reason but rather because it is the sum of many other reasons...'

'And?' Susannah impatiently interrupted, knowing that I was swimming around within loose excuses and not wanting to give a definitive answer.

'And', I continued, 'I was at that stage, that reasoning, where I didn't know what to do. And I was bored with thinking too much, so I decided to numb the brain for a while to give it a deserved rest.' I smiled, thinking triumphantly.

'Ohh, you are a martyr Mr. Cross. A grown guy like you being so generous as to get pissed just so you can give your poor weak brain a rest. I must congratulate you.' She gave me a cheeky smirk and turned away back to her wine glass. I felt a little stupid. Perhaps my self-justification wasn't so clever after all. I needed to reclaim some ground before I lost what footing I had altogether.

'So what does that make you then Susannah, the good girl?' This caused her to laugh, finding it amusing in some way.

'Neither. Everyone does things that are both good for themselves and bad for themselves. And everyone has a bit of both good and evil inside of them ; it all depends upon how much of one they have and how little of the other. But what can be good for one person can appear to be bad in the eyes of another. Just don't fool yourself when you're being bad, and just accept it.' Her grin returned again, yet composed as always. I thought about what she said ; it had possibilities.

'Okay then, dinner is served, look lively!'. The call approached us as the professor whirled his way into the room with a tray of bowls in his hand. 'First course is the soup. But it's not hot, so it won't bite your tongue.' He placed the bowls on the table before us. 'Ah, a mild soup. It looks good', I commented, looking vaguely at the creamy white fluid.

'When he says it's not hot, he means it's a chilled soup', Susannah informed me.

'That's right Julian. Tonight for starters we are having chilled advocado and lemon soup. It's a speciality of mine, so you better like it, right?'

'Right', I answered, in an ironic tone to let the professor know that I was not taking his

words seriously. I tucked into the soup as my glass was being refilled with wine. I had Susannah seated to the left of me with the professor on the right. During the soup the professor began to talk about the quirks of working as a university lecturer. He talked about some of the idiotic students that he had dealt with in the past and also a few anecdotes about other university lecturers and their trials with students. He even briefly passed onto the subject of teacher and pupil relationships which he said were mostly doomed from the start. I listened attentively, drinking the wine and sipping the soup at the same time. Susannah remained quiet throughout the first course. I threw one or two glances in her direction during her father's odd thoughtful pauses, but all I got were a brief sight of her eyes before she playfully and knowingly turned them away.

I congratulated the cook on the fine chilled soup when we had finished. He cleared the plates and disappeared again into the kitchen. I turned to Susannah. 'Lovely soup. Your dad seems to be a great cook.'

'Yes, you could say that.' She went quiet again. 'What is it that you really do Julian?' She appeared to be asking this question with a depth of true penetration. I hesitated for a moment, trying to find an answer that was good enough for her. I also wanted to try to find an answer that was good enough for me too. I thought for a while. I wasn't sure how much I liked the question. It was simple yet it required more than a simple answer. Finally, I had a few words in my mouth.

'You see Susannah, I....'

'Hope you like Salmon Julian.' Susannah's father strolled into the room with two plates for both Susannah and myself. 'This is fresh Scottish salmon grilled with buttered herbs.'

Susannah disappeared from the table and returned shortly with several bowls containing new potatoes, peas, and green beans. We all three sat down to eat the second course. I was surprised at the effort that had been produced on my part. Susannah spoke as if anticipating my question. 'We don't always eat like this, it's just that now and again he likes to display his culinary skills so we often get people invited over for dinner.'

'Sometimes colleagues', interrupted her father, 'other times friends ; even students on the odd occasions that I find one that I enjoy further company with. But it's all done for the love of food and conversation. You see Julian, when I was younger my parents never had too much money, but one thing we never went short on was good food. It's an important thing to get people together over food. It brings families together, and even strangers sometimes ; what you might call a communal meeting place, where drink is drunk and talk exchanged. Don't you think?'

'Sure', I responded. 'It's a good way of bringing people together.' I looked over at Susannah who gave me a dry shake of her head in comedy.

'Do you like fish Julian?'

'Yes thank you, I do. I like fish.'

'Thus one who hears the word 'God' does not perceive what is accurate, but perceives what is inaccurate. So also with 'the Father', and 'the Son', and 'the Holy Spirit', and 'life', and 'light', and 'resurrection', and 'the Church', and all the rest - people do not perceive what is accurate, but they perceive what is inaccurate....'

Gospel of Philip

Interesting. How intensely they are looking at the tomb. But what does the inscription say? It seems like a painting of such mysterious quality, as if it is hiding in the shadows of the hands so much more than the eye can possibly deduct. The arrangement of the colours of the three shepards - white, blue, red - and the yellow and blue of the shepherdess appears as if revealing some elements. It is almost as if it is trying to tell you something, if only you had the key to decipher its symbolism. Why is one shepard standing with his foot on the stone? Whose stone is it? Anyhow, I like it. Yes, I like it a lot.

'Like the painting Julian?'. John (I had been calling the professor by his first name all evening) was sitting in the chair across from me and obviously watching my gaze. Susannah was sprawled on the sofa on our right. 'That's a painting by Poussin, Nicolas Poussin, born 1594 and died in 1665. He's recognised as being the leader of French classical painting. He painted some wonderful religious scenes, absolutely astounding. And he was quite a character himself. Wore a very strange ring. It was symbolic of something ; can't quite remember what I heard about it though. I think it was some sort of pyramidal design. But that print of his famous 'Shepherds of Arcady', the second version, has an almost secondary character to it, a transcendental message you could say. That's why I've always admired it. I have heard it rumoured by some researchers that the tomb represents the Sleeping King, situated in the Valley of God, the Valdeieu ; perhaps in line with the empty sarcophagus which rests in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid at Giza. But who knows? One day I would like to find out more about it,

and about Poussin himself. I'm sure he had more up his sleeve than he was ever allowed to reveal.'

'And what makes you so sure of that?', I replied.

'Because Julian, men of a higher quality than us naturally have a higher understanding of things. But to reveal all would be a gross misconduct since such wisdom cannot be understood by all. Thus, by placing certain things within the allegory of symbolism duly cuts out the normal man from the vision yet leaves the way open for those who have the knowledge to interpret such signs. Have you read the Bible?'

John reached over and topped up my glass. We had opened a bottle of red after dinner, and this was only my second glass of Chianti. I didn't want to drink much more than that, especially after my last performance with red wine. And besides, I knew that I might need to keep some faculties open for conversation.

'Well, I must admit that I've only read the four Gospels so far, and that was just because I had to revise up on some of Jesus's words once. But I am familiar with a few of the stories from the Old Testament although I haven't read it.' I looked across at Susannah. She wasn't saying a word ; she was leaving all the talking to her old man. Obviously, she knew what he was like when he began to talk. So I guess she was just sitting back and enjoying the show.

'Great literature is like great art Julian', commenced John, smiling at me in a friendly paternal manner.

'In what way?', I said, prompting him further.

'If you don't mind listening to what I've got to say th..'

'No John go ahead. Always good to listen to your views.'

'Oh why thank you', came the mock reply from the sofa from where Susannah was lounged. We both looked at her to which she became silent. John and I turned to each other and he continued.

'Yes Julian, what great art or literature has in common is that it is an attempt at the expression of something divine. All great human expression is a way of trying to fathom

or come to terms with what it is inside of us that gives us life. It is an attempt to reveal ourselves to us, whilst revealing that which is higher than ourselves. Every human has a part of the divine within them whether they are aware of it or not. It is that part which is the truth ; the conscience ; the love ; the being. Yet we can't understand it fully. And all great art is trying to reach this area, reach this understanding. It does not have to do it directly like a religious painting or a biblical work of literature. It can be something such as a novel about people in life, living their normal daily lives. Yet these books, if they are truly great, will seek to find or dig out those special moments in people's lives where it matters - where something is revealed, like an epiphany in life. It is searching for those expressions of the sense that life is special and unique : even that is divine. And all great work strives to reach to the heart of something : it may be God, it may be yourself, it may be life, it may be people, it may be thoughts. But it strives to elucidate something. And that Julian is the pinnacle of all great art.'

'So why did you ask me if I had read the Bible. Is it because that is a great work of art?' I wasn't sure if by this stage I was reversing back further than the professor's immediate memory could remember, so full it was of branching topics.

'No no. I know why I asked you that now. I asked you it because we were talking about Poussin, and what I wanted to say is that the Bible is similar to Poussin's great painting 'The Shepherds of Arcady' because both are allegorical. Now look at me Julian ; I am head of religious studies at the university. You would perhaps expect me to be a fundamental Christian who believed literally in the Bible and all that is written down as the word of God. Nonsense. I'm not as gullible as that. Much great work is allegorical too, and the Bible is one of those works.

Julian, the Bible was never meant to be taken on face value. It is a masterpiece of symbolism, allegory, and fable. That dream of Jacob's ladder in the Old Testament. Remember? Well that is a portrayal of the ladder that man must climb on his struggle in the evolution of his higher consciousness. Even I can spot that one. But the thing that upsets me is.....do you want topping up Julian?'

I looked at my glass. True, it was empty again. Should I? Would it be rude not to? The

real question I should of been asking myself was whether I was feeling the wine in my head at all. But I had to admit to myself that my flesh is weak, especially when it comes to such pleasures as alcohol.

'Fill me up please dad.' Susannah leaned forward from the sofa, decanting her glass slightly to catch the flow of the bottle that her father was pouring. 'That's enough thanks'. She leant back on the sofa and gave me a sly wink. I felt that she was leading the way, showing me that if she was able to have another drink then I should follow suit. I put my glass under the bottle to catch another cup full.

'So what is the thing that upsets you dad. You were just about to tell Julian. Is it about sinning again?' She sat upright to hear the rest of her father's conversation.

'Yes, this does concern sinning, but much more besides.' He took a couple of long gulps from his glass. It was apparent to me that John was accustomed to the drinking of his wine. He paused as if in thought for a few moments then crossed his legs as if to continue. He appeared to be showing signs of tiredness in his face. I took a quick peek at my watch : 10.47 PM.

'It's all to do with translation you see. Much of the biblical corpus at the beginning of Christianity was translated by the Greeks. It was their translations that helped to spread the word. Then you had it translated another time into Latin for the Western world to absorb, thus helping further for the doctrine to spread. Then, and lastly, us lot over here had to have it broken down into English so that the general mass could appreciate it. Things are bound to have got lost or misinterpreted along the way. And yes, what Susannah said about sinning, that gets thrown in there as well.'

'So what is wrong about sinning. Shouldn't it exist?' This could mean a revelation for me if it was disclosed that sin did not really exist. Would that mean that I could be free if there were no longer any guilt trip hanging over us? But I suppose that if there wasn't the notion of sin to give you the feeling of guilt then something else would have to be invented to give the human race the need for their own guilt. John laughed to himself at my naive questioning about whether sin should exist or not.

'Oh no my dear Julian, sin will always exist in one form or another. It's just that how

Christianity portrays it is different from its original intended meaning.'

'Which is?'

'Which is', he began, as he got up from his chair and began walking to the door, 'which is that the original meaning of the notion of sinning is to *miss the mark*. To sin is to miss the mark, not quite get it right, just like most people do with the Bible.' These last few words were shouted out of visual range as the professor had gone through the door and into the hallway. I turned towards Susannah who was finishing off her glass of wine.

'Miss the mark?' I raised my eyebrows as if throwing curiosity in her direction.

'That's exactly it', she responded. 'I've heard that several times now. He keeps repeating his favourite revelations, so you get used to it after a while. Then they stop being revelations and become sentences instead. But I learn just by listening. He often talks to himself you see. In order to understand a principle or some idea he begins to talk to himself as if he were in conversation with somebody else, as if he were explaining the idea to them. It helps him to understand things if he can hear his discussion out loud. So at night when he's in here, or in his study, I just come in to sit down and listen to what he's saying. He does now and again use me for the conversation. But I think he knows now that I'd just prefer to listen so he ignores me and carries on with his one-man conversation.' Susannah laughed at the expression on my face. I must have been giving away my thoughts.

'You don't think he's going a bit in he head do you?' I said as I tapped my head in a visual display of what I meant.

'It doesn't matter. There can be little difference between sanity and madness sometimes. Perhaps madness, or what people say is madness, is preferable to the boredom of sanity that everyone expects. At least you can be your own person when you're a little mad, and it saves you the hassle of having to explain yourself as well.'

'So you're not mad too then? I mean, madness can be genetically inherited.' Susannah leaned forward with a deadpan expression on her face.

'Why, would you like me to be mad?', she asked, in a rigid and freeze-dried voice. Before I could give an answer to Susannah's question her father returned with another

bottle of wine held firmly in the grip of his right hand. No-one objected as all three glasses were filled up again with the free flowing wine.

'Most of it is all symbolic. Such a mess nowadays. Even the priests are without the knowledge now and these supposed men of God are missing the mark completely these days, and it's getting worse. They're becoming low ; lower than us. They start off with their chaste notions, which is a wrong condition first of all, and then they develop onto peering at the choirboys. Next thing you know is that the man of God has got the choir boy down in the crypt and if he's not performing some twisted black magic ritual then he's bugging the boy senseless in the dark.' John seemed to be amused at his own harsh words. He leant back in his chair and cleared his throat as both Susannah and myself waited patiently and silently for him to continue.

'I was at a conference the other week Julian and, it was a religious meeting as you can guess ; anyhow all these bigwigs were debating about women in the Church. Yawn, what an issue. Did Susannah tell you about the 1545 Roman Catholic official recognition of women's souls? Yes, she did. Anyhow, we were there discussing the future implications of women in the Church, and afterwards I got talking in conversation with this Bishop from further down South. He was mentioning all the trouble he had had with women parishioners in the last year and he actually said that God should not have made Woman from one of Adam's rib, but instead should have sold the patent design to the Acme company, so that every time God decided to create another woman he could just send one down all boxed and packaged with ACME printed on the sides in big bold black lettering. "Women made to order and sent down in boxes", those were his words. Said it would all make things easier if you could fold them away and send them back from where they came. And this was a high ranking Bishop. No names mentioned mind you.'

'Mmm, that's surprising', I added. 'Anyway John, tell me, what does the Bible really mean?' The professor put one of his scholarly frowns upon his face as if I had just asked him the billion dollar question.

'What does it mean? It means many things Julian. Are you listening Susannah, you

might be able to use all this in your essay you're writing.' Susannah nodded and sat up once again. He continued. 'The Bible, Christianity, religion, all true religions and spiritual teachings and writings : they all mean the same thing. And that is the inner transformation of man to become a purer being. A higher man. Religion means that man has a potential to rediscover himself, and to work on himself to be a better person, and to therefore be closer to God. But religion is the middle man ; the teacher, the instructor, the human guide. Its language may get twisted and deformed yet the essential core message remains because it has a value of the real truth, and that truth can never be destroyed. But religions need great men for their impetus. Look at the Old Testament - who was the great instigator there?'

We all went quiet. 'Moses', came Susannah's knowledgeable voice.

'Exactly', cried John. 'But what do we truly know about him? Only lies and mixed fable. All this biblical rubbish about him being found in the bulrushes. Utter fairytale. Moses was a true Egyptian initiate.'

'Initiate?', I spurted. 'What exactly do you mean by that?'

'I mean, Julian, that he was knowledgeable in the Egyptian Mysteries. It was obvious, he had to be. And it was from this wisdom that he created the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, which included Genesis, that allegorical account of humanity's cosmological beginnings.'

'But how far does Egypt come into this John?' This line of thought was completely new to me and suddenly I found myself more curious than before. I wanted to listen, and intently, to what it was that John had begun to talk about. Right now it seemed as if the room we were in no longer existed. All that remained was three seats and the figures occupying them ; everything else was dark. In fact, I had noticed that the whole house had a dark feel to it. A deep aged feel as if the walls and furniture contained their own experience, absorbed and ingrained in their being. The light overhead was shining for our talk, and that was its prime goal - to give us light whilst words floated on the atmosphere and drifted off to slowly disintegrate within curtain fabric and the texture of the wallpaper and the rugs on the floor. We could of been anywhere, the three of us, and

not necessarily in a room. In the desert ; in a tepee ; in a cave. It didn't matter. Only the words had a life to give.

'Egypt, yes. Many things have a history in Egypt, Julian.' The professor had found another topic on which to engage both himself and us upon. And although he had been talking for some time now, and the hour had grown late and the wine had distilled itself within my mind, I was still focused upon the words as they were spoken. John had spoken all night with an intensity that displayed his need to have information and knowledge on matters close to him ; and it was this information he had retrieved that was now filtering down to the other people in this room.

I returned from yet another visit from the bathroom and sat back in my chair. I could tell that the wine was influencing my thoughts now because I had been gradually prolonging my stares over in Susannah's direction, and beginning to care less about what I should or should not be doing or displaying.

I suddenly pulled back. I closed my eyes and stopped all wandering thoughts. I began to focus upon the conversation before me once again.

'So what has the history of Egypt to do with Moses then? I have heard you mention Egyptian mysteries before but not in direct connection with Moses. Will I be able to use any of this for my dissertation on religion?' Susannah's voice spoke what appeared to be quite clearly, although I thought I could detect a slowness of thought as if she was deliberately and consciously focused on each word being spoken, indicating to me that I was not the only one feeling the flow of the evening's alcohol.

'Yes, yes my dear, possibly. You see, everything ties on to religion in the end. All knowledge, if it is true knowledge, is that which is manifested, hidden, or passed on down the ages, through religious teaching. Religion, you see, is the human vehicle in which to carry the essence of spiritual knowledge. And I just happen to believe that the Christian path, whilst having much twisted and misrepresented outward forms in its state today, is one of the best ; no, rather, was or has the possibility to be, one of the better vehicles for this expression. Sadly, this possibility has been decaying gradually for the past fifteen hundred years. But esoteric Christianity carried further these

possibilities in the early years ; the great European gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages carried on this hereditary potential with their symbolic architecture and structural messages. Now today - what do we have left? The teaching has gone under so far that its true message cannot be revived. The priests and the preachers are no longer men of true human spiritual knowledge. So what's left?

'Nothing?', I added. The professor gave a slight tragic smile.

'Nearly nothing', he continued. 'Just the possibility of a re-interpretation remains. To go back to square one and to understand what is being told in the Bible by its allegorical teaching. Otherwise the knowledge will be lost completely.'

'And what if it is lost completely?', asked Susannah, who was now obviously glued to the direction of the discussion.

'Then we will have to wait, my dear. Have to wait until those who know see fit to send another one among us who can continue the line, and inspire the human race again. But who knows when that time will be.' John fell silent.

'You mean like the biblical second coming then?' This was how I had interpreted John's words.

'No, not a second coming. They've been coming for a long time Julian. Knowledge never dies and there will always be the messengers who will come. Yet they are few compared to the mass of the ignorant and not all truth falls upon open ears. We are a very stupid lot unfortunately, and that is our misfortune.' He yawned. It was an open display of his obvious tiredness. He looked at his watch. 'Ohh, late as that already. Words always seem to have a way of speeding up the reality of time. We should really wrap things up for the night. Before we do I shall just briefly finish off what I was going to say about Moses and Egypt.' He lifted up the wine glass to his lips and sipped the remaining pool of alcohol liquid. 'The Egyptian priests have always maintained their power through their knowledge, and it is this that was responsible for the prolonged existence of Egyptian society. And it was this priestly elite that instigated the truth of the One-God religion. The Truth is of the Absolute : the Divine Consciousness. It is not many gods as in the previous pagan religions. These many god systems are

representations and symbolic principles. The truth is of the unity of the one. And this is what the Egyptian Mysteries taught. It was Amenophis IV, I think if I recollect correctly, who is known to most of us as Akhenaten - after he adopted the name Khu-N-Aten - who was the man who moved the capital city of Thebes to El-Amarna in Middle Egypt, and attempted to instigate a One-God religion. The priestly brotherhood built a temple there, which just so happened to be in the shape of the cross, to further their teachings. When Akhenaten died around 1362 BC I believe. Wait, let me think. Yes, I believe it was 1362 BC. Anyhow, when he died the court moved back to Thebes and reinstated the multi-gods religion. But the brotherhood remained in El-Amarna to continue with the teaching of their mysteries and their knowledge of the One-God principle. And this is where Moses eventually comes in.

Moses was a member of the Egyptian elite, and so naturally he had privileged access to the ruling priesthood. And so if accepted as a candidate, he would be allowed into the teaching of the Mysteries. Moses was in fact allowed in these teachings and became a full initiate, and eventually an Adept. Through whatever circumstances I believe that Moses found himself to be burdened, whether through an internal revelation or an externally imposed mission, to instigate a spread of the One-God religious truth. So, there we have it. He took the mass of the Israelites, many of whom were just bands of warriors, and led them into that great Exodus in the desert. There were disputes and quarrels and fighting, yet the only way that Moses could impose the authority of the One-God law into these people was through fear. Thus we have the image of the fearsome and vengeful God in the Old Testament. By the time that Jesus came along the impetus of the One-God supreme divinity had already been imposed, and so the foundations had been laid, and everyone was awaiting the foretold prophet. And so all Jesus had to do was to jump into these ready made shoes with his own Essene teachings and preach the truth of the One-God with his love and faith. This was the New Testament. But them both together to show the continuation of the Lord's religion, and the word was spread all across the world. And it all derived from the Mysteries, which are themselves true in all forms all over the world. Finally, the spiritual knowledge of

the Divine Unity, which had been sacred and hidden knowledge for so long amongst the initiates, was allowed to surface into the psyche of all humanity and its preceding generations. This is one reason why I like Christianity. But now the impetus has died and we have been left with only a dry skeleton with no calcium for its spirit.' He paused. 'And I have to teach it!'

The professor made a polite excuse for his retirement and bid me to spend a last few moments with his daughter Susannah for any discussion upon our work. My watch read 11.51 PM. We were alone. I had spent most of the evening listening to John's talk, and now it felt good to be left in the room with Susannah. It almost seemed as if the professor had been some automatic mouthpiece, spurting out religious anecdotes and tales as if it was his job to do nothing else, which perhaps it was. Unfortunately, to me this made John seem little more than a walking man of knowledge ; all he did was talk and I could not gauge the presence of a full man behind his words. He appeared to be one of those characters who have interesting things to say and yet their lives do not match the inquiry of their speech. The professor was likable and amiable, but he didn't do much else for me. Maybe I was just being too critical of other people all the time - a trait that took the burden away from myself.

'Want to finish the wine off?', I asked. 'It's only got a few glasses left in the bottle. No sense in leaving it I guess.' I poured out two more glasses and looked at Susannah. Did I want her? Does she have anything to do with it?

She was attractive now ; perhaps more than ever. Was this true, or had my vision been altered? Reality never seemed to be a constant thing, more so as the body grows older.

I sat down next to her.

'...Man operates through the conscious mind alone. For all his supposed intelligence, he is no more than an animal, conscious only of his bodily desires and elementary instincts. He has no conception of the divine element within, the

subconscious, that which we call God.'

Roy Norvill, 'The Language of the Gods'

It was sweet. A fresh fruity smell with a hint of something spicy. But definitely very clean, as if she was obsessive with hygiene and washed all parts each day.

I pulled away from Susannah's neck.

'You have a clean taste Susannah.'

'Stop talking shit Julian. I've listened to enough talk tonight. I don't want more words from you, especially when they sound like you're just recycling old phrases.' I leaned over towards her lazy body and placed my hand on one of her breasts. I figured that I had nothing to lose. If it didn't work then I could apologise later for being drunk. And if the worst came to the worst, then we just wouldn't see each other again and we'd forget this whole working together nonsense, which was a kind of nonsense in itself anyway. So if Susannah didn't want any more words then I'd give her only actions.

I think she must of been drunk as much as I was. Well, no, it wasn't that bad. We weren't pissed or anything, it had only been about three bottles of wine ; it was a kind of tired alcoholic drowsiness with some lazy lust bubbling about in-between. But Susannah did not object as I slipped my hand beneath her top to put my palm upon her flesh. No, she did not object in the slightest. She was warm. Snug.

I pulled my body close up to hers, with my other hand on her neck, and we kissed. After several minutes, with still nothing being said, I moved my hand over her top and down the centre line of her chest, passing over her inward navel, and flatly disappearing under the band-line of her skirt. I probed around, straining my reach under the tightness of her skirt and knickers, finally finding the pubic hairs. I pushed down further than extra inch to part the top of the flesh folds. I stroked my finger along. I was thinking of nothing else ; kissing mechanically ; holding her face like I had held

numerous faces before ; meaning nothing but a grip. My mind was only working towards an imagined picture of her cunt. I had a stiff erection, yet the alcohol was holding back any chance of being premature. I slipped in two fingers. I turned my body so that I was leaning more above her ; a sort of angle of forty-five degrees between two bodies. We spent several minutes like that.

Then she pushed me back. But she pushed me back softly, and undid the belt on my jeans. It did not take her long to unclothe my erection. She closed her mouth over it, and I grunted. As Susannah's mouth moved up and down the length of my erection, all I could think about was the final penetration. I could only think ahead, needing more. I wanted to escape from lengthy foreplay into final action. I wasn't being the best lover. I did not want to be. It was my body being selfish yet again.

Susannah stopped and came up. I rested her down upon the sofa. I was above her. My hand began to pull up her skirt. My jeans were still at my knees and my damp stiff dick was against her leg.

For the first time one of us spoke. It was Susannah. 'Do you have condoms on you?'

'No', I answered in a soft midnight voice.

'We can't then.' Susannah's answer came firmly.

'We can, it'll be all right. Nothing will happen. I won't get you pregnant.'

'It's not that Julian. Not any more. Are you clean?' Her voice resounded firmly again. Her tone was short.

'Clean? Oh yeah. Look, I won't be giving you anything. I haven't got anything. I'm clean. I know I am. You've really got nothing to worry about Susannah.'

'Julian, it doesn't have to be like this. It can be anytime.' I grunted. I looked away for a brief second. I was searching for words to employ as my emissaries.

'Come on Julian. I want us to be safe together ; to be sure. Let us not miss the mark. We'll wait until we can.'

'But we can right now', I insisted. 'What are you afraid of : Me?' I had grown limp as I waited for an answer.

'Not you Julian. I'm just afraid of making the wrong decision at the wrong time. A decision has to be for life. Life hinges on each decision at each time. I want to make this one later Julian. When we can be safe.' Susannah had a sympathetic adjusted tone of voice and her features now represented her thoughts. To look at her now I could see that she had an air of seriousness and solidness. She was somebody that existed beyond a moment.

Susannah dressed herself. I did likewise. I could see that I would have no chance in penetrating through her own decision. It did not seem like it was a special moment in life for me. It was obviously one for Susannah, yet I never really considered that such small moments had their place in history, or in the future. Small moments had always remained small moments for me. Susannah treated everything as equal in worth, and equal in decision. At times these things just usually happened, destined by fate or circumstance. I had always let such things be. I had never wanted to stop or control them before ; to divert them.

I knew it was time to leave and I wanted to get out of there. Whilst Susannah was in the bathroom I downed both mine and her glasses of wine, then pouring out what was left at the bottom of the bottle I gulped down the last. Now it was time to leave. Sleep on it. Better than nothing, and next time I would bring some bastard condoms with me.

I stood up as Susannah returned. She looked clean again. I appeared shabby and dirty. As I was being shown to the door I must have seemed to Susannah to be saddened by her rejection, for she put her hand on my shoulder and pecked my cheek. 'Remember what father said earlier about religion as a vehicle. What he means is that God is inside of us all whether we know it or not, or whether we believe in religion or not. So don't worry about anything, tonight or ever, because we are all divine and special in our own way.' She opened the door onto the chill dark air. 'Will you be all right for getting home?'

'Yeah, no problem', I mumbled. She gave me her phone number and asked me to ring

her to arrange when we would next get together. I took the slip of paper and kissed her goodbye smack centre on the lips. I walked towards the gate.

'Goodnight Julian. Thanks for tonight', I heard the voice of Susannah call as I turned out onto the street and away.

I walked under the streetlamps. There were a few cars that passed me, one every five minutes or so, but no great noise. I could walk generally undisturbed.

I was beginning to think that Susannah had been right. Perhaps I was just being the cunt who wanted more. To always take, to always fulfil and satisfy some thin longing as it temporarily arose. I was inclined to take each desire as something permanent and truthful, whereas in fact it was just some weak speckle of emotion that had been aroused by some small outside notion. I had been treating everything as real, but in fact it had all been unreal. Weak perceptions.

Walking home I was beginning to feel things for what was the first time. A tiny trickle of understanding was starting to be nurtured. I turned my thoughts back to what had been the last few words of Susannah ; how the divine was inside and not in religion. All we needed to do was find it.

I looked at my hands. Could the divine be in my hands? No, if it was there then it had to be an intuition, a feeling, a knowing. Did I want to find what people call God? Was it necessary? Could it help me? What would I be without it?

I was dangling these thoughts before me like a fisherman. 'Things happen', I thought to myself, 'but life is the essence and not just the thoughts.'

I continued my hobble home, immersed within my new thoughts. I began to chant to myself, almost becoming the picture of the drunken hobo : 'I am the essence, I am the divine.' I repeated this silly sentence over and over out loud and with a rhythm. I looked at the trees as I passed by, trying to grin at its branches, thinking that there was life inside its green veins. I was looking at the ground as I walked, observing the cracks of the cement, and I remember thinking how wonderful the cracks were because they

showed that the concrete had lived, but more importantly they showed the onslaught of life. I was trying my best to see life in everything ; wobbling and chanting as I made my way home. I even began to clap my hands at one point, building up the rhythm within me. I was feeling vibrant life now. I may have been somewhat affected by the evening's constant flow of alcohol ; I may have been rejected by a young woman that I desired moments before I could have had sex with her. But hell, now I was enjoying myself. Now I was having fun and feeling the best.

I began to dance, lifting my knees up as I staggered along. 'This is life man!', I thought as I felt a euphoria of the moment swell up inside. I was living for the moment now ; I was living for life. 'Hello God!', I shouted out to an empty street. 'I'M WITH YOU NOW GOD, I'M WITH YOU NOW.'

I was jiggling like a testosteroned leprechaun now. I was only two streets away from the flat. I wanted to get home and make a toasted sandwich and a mug of hot milk. I crossed the junction near the end of my road.

I didn't look : my head was in the clouds. I just remember hitting something and that was all. Nothing else. It seemed to come from nowhere.

I didn't ask for it ; it just appeared. I hit the ground.

'Nature does not open the door of the sanctuary
indiscriminately to everyone.'

Fulcanelli

It was dark for a while. I saw in the distance a radiant sparkling silver six-pointed star. I looked above my head and saw the arrows of a copper compass. I was standing in the West, with the shining star to the East. I walked into the light.

I was now standing before three rose windows. The first one was dull and black with no light. The second was so resplendent with burning white light that I had to shield my eyes. The third and the greatest of the three windows shone forth with a deep ruddy hue that reminded one of the rays of a setting sun.

A figure came to greet me. His presence I could discern although his appearance was not made manifest to my eyes. Yet I could converse with this figure, perceiving him by an alternative sense. He spoke to me of the stone that the builder's rejected, upon which one's great church is built, and thus the first matter begins. I was told that the ground cross on which I stood was the crucible for all work. 'The Church is this crucible', he told me.

I was told that I had returned from whence I came, yet must return once again into that substance which the Absolute had sealed with its own hand. I would not remember this, I was assured, just as I had not remembered it before. All light memory is lost in substance, and the stone must be built from first cornerstone if the gift is to be returned. I was told nothing more could be revealed.

'Listen to the Language of the Birds', was his final words. I descended from the luminosity, away from the cradle of light, out of the epiphany and into the darkness

once more.

I awoke. I was in a room that was new and strange to me. I felt pain. I instinctively looked for the physical manifestation of this pain. My right arm was enclosed within a cast. I could also feel a low throbbing in my head. I lifted up my left hand, which was free, to touch my forehead : that too had a tight bandage around it. I lay there awake for some time, motionless and silent, attempting to focus on my bearings which were still unclear to me. There was pale light showing from beneath the thin yellow coloured curtains. I was feeling hungry and thirsty. I needed some fresh cold water ; to gulp it down and feel the freeze of the trickle dampen my throat and leave its cold mark down my inside's tunnel. I looked up ; I rang the bell behind me, and waited. I did not have to wait long.

'Ah, Mr. Cross, and how are you feeling this morning?' A tall thin clean-shaven man wearing his white doctor's cloak and carrying a bowl of breakfast cereals in his hand had entered the room.

'I've felt better. But I need some water, I'm thirsty. Cereals are no good for me.' The doctor displayed a comforting laugh.

'No, Mr Cross. These cereals aren't for you ; this is my breakfast.'

'What happened to me : my arm?' I had needed the doctor to explain everything all at once and in the least possible number of words and sentences.

'Well, it seems that you were the unfortunate victim of a hit and run accident. When we found you, after an anonymous caller had rang in, you were lying unconscious in the road.' The doctor's voice suddenly turned more grave. 'But how do you feel Mr Cross, apart from having a hang-over no doubt?'

'A hang-over?' I was trying to locate within my own senses what I had actually been doing the night before. I needed more time to remember fully the events.

'Yes', the doctor interrupted. 'We found an excess of alcohol in your blood level.' He then looked at me with a blank expression as if waiting for some great revelation from myself. 'And that brings me to another matter which I need to seriously talk to you

about, we have no records of you ever...'

The doctor's conversation was suddenly halted by the entrance of a young female nurse.

'Oh, excuse me Dr. Lang. Ah, I see that our patient has woken up ; I knew it would not be long, the injuries were not serious.'

'Not serious, then what's my arm doing in this sling then? That seems pretty serious to me y'know.'

'But it could of been a lot worse' the nurse reproached in a reassuring voice. 'You are lucky Mr. Cross that no serious or permanent head injuries were incurred. All that you got, which believe me is enough in itself, is a bang to the head which you will feel continuing to hurt for a while, and a broken arm. Now, what would you like for breakfast : we have grapefruit.'

'Well, it's not just a broken arm', the doctor interceded. 'The right arm is broken in three places and you have a shattered wrist and several broken fingers.'

'A shattered wrist? Broken fingers? But I need that arm for writing. I always write with my right hand ; that's my job. I need it. How long will I be like this for?' For the first time now I was slowing becoming aware that I was not just lying in a bed with a groggy head, but in fact the present situation was foretelling graver consequences for the future.

'I'm sorry to hear that Mr. Cross, and we will do our best to heal the bones in your right arm, but we cannot at this stage give you a hundred percent assurance about your wrist. You see, the broken arm should heal properly given time since it was fractured in clean breaks.' The doctor paused. He looked at his notes, and his mouth began to twist. I felt a surge of impatience.

'And the wrist? The fingers? Are they clean breaks doctor?' I looked down at the sling which held the whole of my right arm and hand in an immobile grip. I could feel an overall sensation of humming pain, yet could not discern one specific localised area of this pain. A sudden thought jumped into my mind, as if it had been waiting in the depths for its question to be finally asked. 'Will I be able to write again?' The doctor's expression changed to one of uncommittal.

'That I cannot say Mr. Cross. It will all depend on time and how the bones eventually heal themselves. I would like to be optimistic though and say that there is a good chance, but you must understand that such healing will take time and is not just an overnight process. The problem with wrist and finger bones is that they are a collection of many small bones and are therefore more delicate. From your injuries it would seem that the driver of the vehicle in his process of escaping the accident scene, drove over your right hand. You are comfortable with me telling you this? We can discuss this later if you wish.'

'No doctor, it's all right. I want to know everything now. So my wrist got crushed, is that what you mean?'

'Yes, briefly that is what happened. The wrist bone became splintered, and you have several crushed knuckles on the right hand. Everything will heal eventually. There is no question that your hand will heal ; the only thing that I have to warn you of is that the hand may heal yet not to its previous exact shape.'

'A deformed hand you mean. Oh great, I'm a fucking freak now. How can I try and write with a freak right hand.' The doctor seemed eager to interrupt me.

'No, it's not like that. You mustn't think of it as being a freakish hand. This is the twentieth century now and not Victorian England. The right hand will probably heal a little off centre, to put it as simply as I can. It will just, in all probability, appear slightly askew or twisted as oppose to the straightness of the arm. The fingers also may be twisted.'

'But will I be able to write?' I insisted. I looked directly at the doctor. He was moving his head side to side as if in thought, and this was accompanied with a pursing of the lips. Either this man, I thought, was trying to think how to soften the blow or else he, like me, wasn't sure of the answer to this question.

'You may have difficulty gripping a pen in the future, because of the loss of inflexibility incurred in the fingers. This isn't to say that you will not be able to type, although it could mean that you will be forced down to using one letter at a time since your fingers will not have the range of rapid movement that typing requires. But you can still

certainly write both with a pen and type if you begin to work on using your left hand. With practise your left hand can soon become as proficient as your right.' The doctor then made a few comments on other more general matters before making his departure, with the excuse of needing to see other patients. I was left alone again in the room.

I'm fucked. I'm really fucked this time, I thought. I could do nothing now but begin to regret all that had happened to bring me here. I had by this time, after the initial dislocation of waking up had dispersed, begun to piece together the remnants of the evening before, where I had been staying for tea at the professor's house. The image of Susannah suddenly forced itself into my mind, and then I realised how I had walked home, somewhat rejected, from her house with droplets of red wine still dancing in my head. Then I had danced off the bonnet of a car. And now I was dancing no more. I was instead only staring dejectedly at my body in this hospital bed with my entire right arm holsted in a white firm vice. It was, I concluded, a strange twist on circumstances. It was a result of the freakishness of nature itself.

Soon the nurse arrived with my breakfast. She was attractive and my immediate response was to try to let some smooth words roll off the tongue in which to greet her with. Yet I looked into my mind and I was dry. My will and my imagination were barren: only my desire still showed signs of life. I was only capable of some small movement of the body as if, in some paradoxical and ironic way, only the physical part of me was able to respond to my emotional wants, whilst my intellect remained lethargic and uninterested.

All I could say was a thank you as she placed the honeyed toast and coffee on the table beside me. She smiled, bolstered my pillows, and left. I was left bored.

I had all the spare moments in the world to think. All those times when you were busy and all that you wanted and needed was just a few minutes of silence to feel and absorb the space around you ; to soak in a few instants of that eternal time. If only to feel immortal for a second ; to feel human and to exist in the here and now. To be able

to say 'I AM HERE'. Sometimes you were so pre-occupied with what you were doing that you never had time to stop and think and be aware that you existed, or that you were existing at that present time.

And now I had all the time that I wanted. I had space and moments to be. Except now I felt that I wasn't being. That the path in one direction was beginning to close. What if I could never have the use of my right hand?

How was it that nature had the power to open the door to some people, and then to close it from the eyes of others?

Why should a person be given what they never asked for? Was I paying for something?

Maybe I didn't want to write again anyhow. Perhaps this was a way of telling me that my destiny lay elsewhere. Maybe, yes just maybe that all this that was happening was some great plan in the divine scheme of things. I could be okay for now. This was only a temporary hitch in things. My leg began to itch. And then it hurt.

My eyes focused on the line where the two walls meet at right-angles and I followed it upwards to where it meets the ceiling at a small junction. I stayed there for a while. I remained at the painted junction of lines, waiting.

I could hear the noises of the hospital.

'Modern man seeks pleasure without happiness,
happiness without knowledge, and knowledge
without wisdom.'

Edouard Schure, 'The Great Initiates'

The corner of the ceiling had some wispy cobwebs dangling like Ariadne's thread. I hadn't cleaned this place since I moved in. Besides, why should I, it was only a temporary place that I rented. No reason. Especially not now. Why should I make everything shiny and clean when I would only be passing through?

I just don't fucking understand it sometimes. I had always tried to be a good man. I was beginning to have faith. Who had I pissed off?

I reached for the bottle and poured another glass of Southern Comfort. I could still remember the doctor's conversation from a few days before with clarity. I did not know how to react, like I was a corpse under inspection. It was like being handed your final meal before execution. The plate is placed before you but instead of having something you desire it just holds stale remnants of all the things that once touched you. 'Sure', I shouted out loud, 'I didn't mind the fucking broken arm, and the wrist and the bloody fingers ; that would of been okay. But c'mon, who ya kidding with this one eh?' It had been okay doing the waiting in the hospital, believing that all you were waiting for were a few hints of advice about the broken arm and then a 'see you later' and you would be off. But this was a different kind of waiting. I still had the broken arm slung at my side, lifting the spirit glass with the left arm : but this waiting had no conclusion. This was worse than being in hospital ; this was an infernal hospice. This is where you never grow well. What had been the point of staying alive if this is the card you are dealt with?

I gulped down the straight liquid spirit. At least the alcohol was pure, I thought. I was glad that I had gotten myself away from the hospital and back to the flat. I could

not stand to remain there any longer than I possibly had to. If I had stayed any longer I would have probably never found the energy to remove myself, but instead I would of resigned myself to the four walls of whiteness with yellow curtains until my body had withered away.

Do you know the questions that they asked me?

That Dr Lang had returned late in the afternoon accompanied by another doctor, called Dr. Scariot or something similar, yet equally untrustworthy sounding. Some foreign bloke. Then he approaches me and asks if I know about my affliction.

My arm hurt. There was nothing I could do about it, yet somehow this physical pain that I was suffering seemed so inconsequential, like it had no reason to have to hurt anymore since it would be serving no purpose. I had the music blasting out in the flat over the airwaves now ; disrupting the breath with its words : *'If I have been unkind / I hope that you can just let it go by / If I have been untrue / I hope that you know it was never to you / Like a baby stillborn / Like a beast with his horn / I have torn everyone who reached out for me'* My flat was vibrating with the self-pity that was emanating from me, shedding off like droves of false skin.

All I kept remembering were those doctor's words and what they now meant for me.

'Are you a practising homosexual Mr. Cross?' The face of Dr. Scariot remained fixed and firm.

'A homosexual?' I thought about this question for a while before saying anything. Were they joking? What did they think I had been doing when they found me unconscious - screwing the car's exhaust pipe? 'No, I'm not a homosexual ; nor have I ever been. Why?'

'Have you at any time involved yourself with the injection of illegal and harmful narcotics?' Again, the firm face. I looked at Dr. Lang ; his face seemed like a concoction between the half-way house of seriousness and sympathy. Then it clicked, like a

fisherman's hook had suddenly hitched in the roof of my mouth. Shit, had they discovered some traces of the marijuana I had smoked, still in my blood?

'No', I said blankly. 'I've never bothered with drugs like that.' How much should I have to lie? Then.....but how much has that to do with being a homosexual? Then the good charitable Dr. Scariot threw the final question at me like a high speed discus.

'Do you lead a promiscuous sexual life Mr. Cross?' I did not hesitate.

'Not really. Not what you would call.....look, what are all these questions? I just got run over by some stupid prat in a car who was probably pissed at the time. I don't have to say anything about my private life. So why all these questions?'

The September breeze blew like a mother's breath through the open yellow curtains and I was suddenly reminded of my youth in my child's bedroom. I used to stand at my window looking out over the fields that I had at the back of my house in the autumn sun, and wish that I was far away, in some foreign exotic land where everyone spoke in curious tongues. It was the utopia of my imagination. Being the stranger amongst foreigners ; mingling with their lives, observing their clothes, their manners, their play. I was like a ghost among them, tempted and guided by smells that can be tasted like sweet odours. I always wanted to get away from it all as I stood against my window as a young child. Then I would nearly always be dragged back down to the real world by the sound of my mother's voice, calling me for some reason or other. But I never wanted the views from the real world : life was real only when I could escape into the world where nobody knew you.

I was looking at the bottom of the yellow curtains sway upon the invisible call of nature's air, as I was pulled suddenly back into the reality of the hospital room by the sound of the doctor's voice again. I responded numbly, as if I was still a stranger in an exotic land.

'HIV positive? What do you mean? I can't be. I mean, I haven't....what?' My eyes returned to the corner of the ceiling where the walls meet at the junction. I could see a crack now which I had not discovered before. The room was relatively bare : a couple

of chairs with brown covering and oak arm rests were facing me, empty like sarcophagus's, waiting for a body to fill them. There was a hospital table between these two chairs, standing like man has stood for centuries, neither burning nor freezing. Nothing else was worth the eye recording. It was a room that illness co-habitates with the will to recovery ; sometimes one dweller wins over the other.

Was this Dr. Scariot's job, to inform of death upon people?

I didn't want to remember anything else of the conversation. Those words that are dispensed with like cheap medicine were no cure for the disease that had infiltrated my body as mould into food. It had all seemed so untrue. One moment I had been drinking wine with an educated professor and his seductive daughter ; the next I was lying in a hospital bed being told that I had an incurable poison roaming within my delicate insides. Where had been the leap, the gap, between one instant and the next?

It was almost as if it had been a realisation that man is a machine to be given orders. You have a life, and then when they feel the time is right they pull you into the pit-stop, as I was there in that hospital, and decide whether you are fit to continue or not. Where had been my choice in the whole thing?

I had returned home, several days later, in the early evening. I had only suffered a slight moment of unconsciousness when I had hit the road ; the rest of the time while they were bringing me in I had been in a state of concussion and semi-drunkenness. With my head only suffering from a slight throbbing, and my arm suitably encased within the mould, and with persuasive arguments I had convinced the doctors of releasing me until a further check-up. There was no point in staying still when even life becomes your enemy alongside time.

My thoughts since that moment had been blurred. I was not thinking clearly. My mind was continually wavering between the wish for optimism and the realistic pessimism. I had, after all, only the virus in my body. It did not mean that I was going to die ; I could be only a carrier, never to manifest the disease personally. On the other side

of events, I could develop symptoms at any moment depending on circumstances. So my only immediate conclusion was to return home and get drunk. I had bought a bottle on the way home especially. There was no need to conserve money now : the need to live transcended any material limitations.

I don't know what time it was when I hit the first pub. I chased my first Southern Comfort with a pint of Guinness. It was the nearest pub to my house and was one that was occupied predominantly by the locals. It had the old-fashioned interior : deep panelled wood ; dark coloured plastic leather-look coated seats ; small rounded tables ; old men standing at the bar or seated on bar stools ; animal hunting pictures on the walls or the imitations of past advertising. It was a place with a sombre atmosphere. This was where beaten men came to comfort themselves in the only escape affordable to them.

I reached a corner seat, upon the dark plastic behind a small round table, and I observed the line of aged bitten men raising their ale to their thirsty, tired lips, to drink. These men were alone. Perhaps they had wives which they wanted to forget about in the evenings, or something about themselves which they did not want to bear for any more daylight hours. Maybe, they just wanted to drink and be amongst friends. That was a common pleasure.

My heart sank with another striking burst of self-pity. How small a thing - to drink and be with friends? Yet how important such a small moment was in life. Those events of stature, or importance, where something memorable happens : they come once, and you remember it. You keep it stored and retrieve it when an occasion demands, to think back and gorge for a brief time on the feelings you had at that specific instant. Then you forget about it for some more months or years, and gradually its meaning becomes less important as you develop away from your past. These great times were singular and only lived within the life given to them. But the foundation of life was built upon the continual run of the small delights ; instances that were not immediate gestures or quick flashes, but instead constituted the person that you are by the things that you identified with. And the thought of missing those small things that I

had always taken for granted without realising how important to me they really were, it saddened me greatly : so I drank to drown or numb.

I finished my drink and hobbled slowly out of the bar beyond my years and searched for the next one along the line, like a hunter following the trails of hoofs in the snow. The next place was a modern pub full of students in various states of disarray. Again, two drinks I ordered to chase. My movements had become solidified into automatic motions as if I no longer needed to spend time or energy thinking about how to move the muscles or when to or for how long. It was all being done for me, as if my moving part of my body was working by itself and under its own laws. Yet the obsession of my mind was upon the internal path of the poison ; trenching its way within my blood stream as if it owned the territory : 'trespassers will be prosecuted'. Yet how do you prosecute a disease?

The inside of the pub was decorated in deep green colours. Nothing had dawned on me yet. I could not fully comprehend any notion of what had really occurred to me. So far it had only been a bunch of words spoken by some men in white overalls with some test samples that they said proved positive. How was I to do know what was positive or not? They could of shown me some results from a dead animal and I wouldn't of known any better. Were these doctors' infallible? Did they love their wives? Were they faithful in their marriage or did they screw all the young nurses as the hospital parties? Everyone is human. What makes one person believe the words of another - because they say they are an expert on the matter? Expertise can still lie, it is still subject to the same human laws. Can a life be so drastically changed by the hearing of a few words?

These were the thoughts as I drank the Guinness and let it enter my body to chase away the HIV demons from their fleshy nest. I had no idea what to do : I was a mess. I was rambling in my head, dashing from thought to thought as if in a tiger mind. I was in my own self-pity, enjoying it there. But who could I tell?

I finished my drinks and left the pub to find a pay phone. I pressed the numbers

with as much accuracy as was possible. Second attempt I got through. She answered the phone, and I was glad for that.

'Hello?' The voice sounded clear yet strangely unfamiliar as if the telephone wires had altered her voice to what it wanted to hear itself.

'Susannah? It's me, only me again. Are you okay?' I mumbled in a speedy drunken voice.

'Julian, it's you? Are you drunk again?' She had a tone of mockery in her voice as if she was amused by me.

'No.' I paused. 'Yes, of course I am. But I 'ave a reason this time you see, that's the only reason why I got drunk. It ain't just for nothing. Not like that always. You listening?'

'Yes, I'm listening.' The voice returned to me calm and with clarity. I could hear her resonance as if I was standing within the same room as her. I could not discern to what degree I sounded drunk to her since to me it was in a complete coherence to my state of thoughts.

'Things have happened y'know', I continued, 'things have changed....'

'You mean', she suddenly interrupted, 'because of us, of what happened?'

'No no, no, not at all like that. It's just that.....I've been in hospital you know.'

'Hospital! Why? You're not joking with me are you Julian?'

'No Susannah, I'm not messing around. Anyway, don't worry, just a few cuts and bruises. But that ain't the problem, I can deal with that.'

'So what is the problem then. What happened to make you go to hospital?' Susannah's voice had a marked concern within it. I wanted to say something truthful, something of worth, yet I could not put myself into the position of saying the ultimate truth since this would mean that I would have to believe it fully myself and I was not sure whether I did or not. I wasn't sure of anything enough to let it be absorbed into my whole thinking.

'Oh, well, it was just this twat in a car that bumped into me and I banged my head. But it's all right now, just some throbbing like a bad headache.' Susannah's voice came back suddenly and harsh.

'So why the bloody hell are you getting drunk then you idiot! That's only going to make

your head worse. Get yourself home and get into bed or otherwise your head will be twice as bad in the morning.' I did not seem to be getting anywhere with the simple talk. I breathed a deep breath.

'Look Susannah, it's not like that. Well, I'm not like that but life is like that. You know, you think you know about it and yourself and about what is going on, and sometimes you think you 'ave it sussed. Then what does it do? It springs things like this at you and life changes itself completely like some kind of pissed cam-eel-lion, or whatever that creature, well you know what I mean. Life just spins around and spits in your face. Why does it change without warning, eh Susannah?' Things went quiet at the other end of the line ; I could almost hear a few cogwheels turning.

'No Julian. Life never changes. It can't because it simply just is. It's always you that does the changing. You and how you see the world, that is what changes. Everyone has the power to change themselves, and then how you perceive life will be changed again to something new. You can't always blame life Julian. It just keeps on going, like you should.'

'But how can I keep on going', I shouted, 'if the fucking world keeps doing these things to me, eh?' Susannah seemed to be getting irritated at my drunken gruntings, with her tone when mentioning my name becoming slightly wearisome as if the word 'Julian' meant one of a stupid delinquent child.

'Look Julian, stop talking like that. You must understand that everything happens to everybody.'

'Everything what?', I retorted. 'What is that bleeding supposed to mean - we all get the same shit in life?'

'No Julian, listen. Understand what it means when I say', she paused, 'everything happens to everybody. Now does that make you feel better?'

'Not fucking much!' I slammed the phone down. I had acted like a real cunt. I was sorry and I knew it, but I had acted and it was too late now. Besides, did I even have time for regrets anymore.

'What a self-pitying little bastard you are Julian', I said as I slapped my own face. I

decided to keep on walking, to find the next watering hole.

I must have looked like a man on drugs, or else an escaped psychopath with a staring problem. Being very pissed meant that for long periods of time my eyes and whatever they saw were separated from any connection with the brain. The eyes continue to stare blankly like two cold beach stones, yet the mind is not aware of watching or seeing anything. Then, at certain moments, you experience a quick shock, almost similar to that felt as one is drifting into sleep and you suddenly wake yourself up with a jump before entering full slumber : like that I would suddenly awake myself to realise that my vision had been numbly staring before me yet I had remained nothing more than an anaesthetised patient.

I can offer no more descriptions of place ; I am unable to digress into my surroundings. That would only be pointless rambling. The state of mind in my case was the more important event to record, and not whether the pub I had found myself in was decorated in baroque red or pastel peach, or if the wall hangings were appropriate to the ambience and what theme did they encompass. How should I know, I was as fucked as a whore's fanny.

I had started drinking very early, and now it was very late. I had found a night-club ; one that I had visited once before, although I had to admit that such places were not to my liking since I never cared much for the loud sounds of chaotic dance and scribbled music. But night-clubs had always been that final option open to the person who needs to continue drinking after the pubs have shut down. On this night, I was one of those people. I needed the drink, although women were the last thing to be on my mind ; besides, I had already closed my mind this evening and all late-comers were turned away. I could handle no new thoughts.

I didn't dance. I think my arm still hurt, although I am at a misty loss to know if at which moments I was conscious of any pain or throbbing in my arm and wrist. I had to drink with my left hand : unusual at first yet necessity breeds new habits. So my stance

during the evening was one of slouching on stools if good fortune brought me the luck of finding a free one that was away from the bullshit of kissing couples ; or else I lounged like an aged rustic against any wall that had space enough to support my frame.

In honest truth I am unable to tell you at which point I managed to get into conversation with a woman, nevertheless the seeming inevitable did find its way back to me.

The dance rhythms reverberated like echoed war sounds in all directions, which helped to further block the vision since one impairment of the senses helps to degenerate the others. I had walked around the dancefloor several times, bumping into numerous people with a dumbfounded ignorance, unaware of small or transient details yet only keeping my movement based upon a clear path between the people before me. I was taking no involvement with the music ; even disregarding the beat of the lights. I was walking through hell. I almost had the mind several times to stop at various people along my travels and to ask them their names and with what vice had they been sent into the underworld. Had they come through avarice or greed? Had they been heretics and pagans? Procurers and seducers? Hypocrites and thieves? Traitors and falsifiers?

'And what about you?', they would ask. 'Why are you here?' And I would answer them in the only truth that I knew : 'I am here because I have bought my hell through promiscuity.'

'Does it really matter?' I had somehow found myself talking to a young lady beside the steps leading up to the bar area. Our voices had become raised with one another for us to hear the words above the deafening pulses of the dancefloor music.

'Does what matter?', she asked in return to my vague words. Somehow it wasn't really important about how things were being said since the both of us were visibly very pissed, and we obviously knew it both in ourselves and in the other person.

'Does anything matter ; I mean, *really* matter?' I fumbled these words out of my mouth like a puppeteer.

'No, I guess not. Not really. It's all the same in the end. You do this, and you do that, but

I guess it's all the same in the end. Right?'

'Yeah, everything goes to the same ends.' I took a few gulps from my bottled beer. I had lost count as to my rate of stupid consumption. I was in the land of the liquid gluttonous. 'That's right, all the rivers lead into the same sea.' I burped. It seemed to amuse the young lady.

'So where do you plan to be in ten years then eh? What do ya reckon?' She had obviously, through whatever influence, decided to hit upon what she considered to be deep subjects.

'Oh, dead probably', I answered in a vague tone.

'No seriously', she lashed out comically and slapped my shoulder. Luckily it was not my injured arm.

'Well, in that case', I added with a prelude to a lie, 'I think I would probably see myself as a self-made novelist living somewhere in Europe and writing great books that everybody reads.' I gave an ironic smile.

'Awh, you dreamer', she harked. Yes, I knew I was dreaming ; but what a good one it could have been.

Outside, we sat on the floor. Wasted, as they say.

'We should...er.. probably, we should get a taxi soon. Yeah?' I turned towards the young girl. She was nothing but a youthful feminine creature that nature gave life to in this world. It didn't matter if she had tried to sound intelligent when she obviously was not ; it didn't matter that this young girl was draped all over me when we had only known each other for an hour or so. It didn't matter because when it came down to it we are all the same, and we would all do most things if we were given half the chance, and no-one is eternally good who has truly lived. So what could I do? I felt my own mistake, that was all. I understood my own error, and within my drunkenness it appeared to me with an internal clarity that made me begin to swell within the corner of the eyes. But I didn't let the tears fall ; I couldn't. I was still playing the role of being a man. I knew that I was dying now ; sunk in for the first time and yet I still could not cry because I had to

continue for as long as I can to play the role that was expected of me : namely, of being a man. I was stifled. In a mental and moral straightjacket.

I was slowly dying with my own disease and I still would not allow myself to be me. I must have been dark inside. Missing the mark.

'Hey.' I lifted up the girl's head from my shoulder. I looked into her surface eyes. They were just eyes : more alive than mine yet perhaps just as dead, as if life lived within a multitude of levels and one man's death could be equal to another person's life ; or an internal death whilst still physically alive was more harrowing than any death with the worms.

'Hey', I said, 'it's best y'know....for us both if you go on home.'

'Home... what my home? You want to come back to my home?'

'Thanks little lady, but no. I made a wrong turning before with a woman.'

'What...you mean with an ex-girlfriend? Are you still grieving about the absence of your girlfriend, eh? Are you one of those who can't stop talking about who they once loved?'

'Yes.' I paused for silence, and I felt sombre and with spirit all at once. 'I am one of those, who still craves and.....desires for what he loved.'

'What? Sounds like sentimental fucking shit to me. Do you want to come back or not. Make your mind up, I need a taxi.' The young lady was getting impatient now, and she had removed her head from my shoulder. I stood up.

'Hey. You're sweet, but I'm going home alone tonight. See ya.' I walked away. I heard several moans and curses in the background but these I could easily ignore. I just walked. So pissed I knew not what a straight line looked like or whether a straight line was truly a curve in discreet disguise.

I sensed the fellowship of the streetlamps as I meandered my way home amidst the dark. I was not sure how to think. Nothing was real ; everything was a verisimilitude : an appearance of reality. I did not know which vision or truth I was to absorb, yet somehow I knew it was true that I was going to enter into the pathway of dying - of leaving. I did not want to leave, but now choices were becoming thin on the ground.

I began to love all that I had not noticed before in my life. I loved the concrete of the pavement that I fumbled along. I loved the sky with its dark and impenetrable mystery. I loved the hedges of houses that I passed and I would of loved everybody sleeping inside of these houses if I had the energy. I loved the insects on the ground that went their merry instinctual way. I loved the skin that encased my body. Maybe I loved myself : but I was a mess. Sorry Lord. Sorry World. But I fucked up. I did not know how to handle myself. I had received perhaps the worst news that a man could be given, and yet still I could not absorb its deep, wounding penetration. I had reacted much like I had reacted all through my life ; I could not fully understand the significance. I knew that I could easily of infected Susannah that night, yet now this meant little to me because I could not appreciate that which was further than two inches from my face. I had no morals for the lives of other people : to me, that had always been their concern. And now, this was mine.

I entered through my gate and collapsed in the garden, beneath the hedge where I had woken up those few days before after my adventure with Mary and the car. I had woken up with her death : perhaps it was time to live with mine. An eye for an eye I guess. The karma had decided to pay its debt. It always does, in one form or another.

I lay there motionless, looking up at the stars. Oh fuck, how they were beautiful. I did not want to think of the thoughts that were entering into my mind. I had never really truly and honestly thought of God within myself.

Now I was turning the gaze onto me. In my drunken state I was beginning, as the stars shone in the vast and uncompromising universe, to be conscious of that which was me. 'God does not exist', I whispered, 'if he is anywhere not inside of you. But the world's made it a mess. God is yourself. God is you. We are al.....'

I fell into a crashed sleep. I would be ready to meet the dew.

'...God created humanity ; [but now human beings]
create God. That is the way it is in the world - human
beings make gods and worship their creation. It would
be appropriate for the gods to worship human beings.'

Gospel of Philip

I had just returned from faxing a letter to Mike, whom I had promised over the phone to write an article on religion. Somehow, I did not feel up to it. I did not know what religion was anymore, besides a tradition of words and rituals that seemed lost of any spiritual centre to me. How could I have faith in something external when it had no understanding to it? What is a God in the universe when these things happen to our physical bodies here on earth? Everybody is saying different things to everybody else ; telling of who Christ really was, that perhaps he was an Essene who had been given special spiritual teaching ; or that Moses was really an Initiate of the Egyptian Mysteries; that the Bible is allegorical and holds much more knowledge than most can discern ; or else that Jesus never really lived ; that the resurrection was a concocted myth ; that Jesus never really died on the cross and instead he got himself married and raised a family ; that Jesus travelled to India and died there in Kashmir an old man. They say all these things and spent countless energy trying to persuade others of their great discoveries and revelations. Yet what does it ultimately mean?

Does it matter if we found out that Jesus in fact never lived? The vehicle has been created. I don't like it. In truth I find it to be redundant and spiritually bankrupt. It ceases to give anything : it hooks you on the end of a line in which you must keep a constant hold onto if you wish to retain the faith. You are not the fisherman in any organised religion ; you are the fish in the sea that relies on the line being thrown in for you. You require them for the faith. It is always external influences which are trying to define and categorise.

I sat down at the lounge table and wrote on a piece of paper.

I've searched in many statues
In concrete, in marble, in slate,
for an answer that art continually
believes it has found
or science believes it has navigated
or religion believes it understands
and propagates
and hereditary passes on in blind teaching
until all knowledge is no knowledge
and the world believes to love itself.

I gave no title to the words. Perhaps I was just confused. How was I to know anything if I was still distant from the child inside. All that I was sure of was that my present way of life was now no good to me, and that things had to change. I now had Time on my back ; I could not afford to sit around waiting for the odd commission to come from past editors and their ilk. I had told Mike in my letter that due to personal family health problems I would no longer be able to carry out the assignment that we had informally discussed over the phone. Sure, he'll be pissed off with me, but what does it matter? I can't carry another person's angry thoughts with me over to the other side.

I would not be able to see either Susannah or the professor again. They had been good company to know, with each to offer intelligence and beauty, yet my acquaintance with them had to be severed like a mooring rope. Everything that is the past must remain the past, or else the present cannot be fully appreciated and enjoyed, and this will subsequently endanger the future. Everything, it seemed to me, was connected in a

domino sequence and each next step is minutely defined by the one you are just leaving, as if the left foot that is stepping forward is defined by where the right foot has stood. I could not miss the sight of Susannah, for I had no room for that sentiment within me.

And as for that pair of Marcus and Lucas : that indeed was history. I can only vaguely remember their faces. Silly men deserve no headstones or words.

Mary Margaret. Dead or alive? I can say nothing. Perhaps it was my intimacy with her that brought the infection into my life : maybe it was Mary who changed me irrecoverably in this life, and just for living below me can one person alter the course of events.

But I have no-one to blame for I did nothing that I did not wish to do. And if my will and flesh were weak, it was only because they were so under my weak control.

I sat down at my typewriter and typed out a letter. I would always send a letter to my parents every couple of months or so, just to let them know that I was well and alive and to share any news or gossip that I had. So today I did the same, only at a much slower pace since I had only my left hand with which to singularly type the letters. So naturally I lied.

Dear Mum and Dad,

How's it all going with you? Work still okay? Hope so. It was good to hear that the dog is well now that he has had that eye operation done. Vets are expensive aren't they?

As for me, things are as usual. Quite busy with work actually. I finished the article that I had to write on alchemy. Now that's an interesting topic! And straight after that was completed I got a commission, from that Mike guy again, to write a long article (which will be split into a three weekly series) on the development of organised Christian religion to the present day. Or rather it will deal with the advancement of religious thought from the early heresies, through the Middle Ages, and up to the present day (Western religious thought that is - I can't include the whole Eastern corpus!).

Anyway, I haven't really been doing much besides writing that alchemy article. Bristol is a lovely town, with some great pubs. I think I might have to take a break for a while though. This new religious article that I will be working on will need some proper intensive study, so I was planning on spending some time, if I could, down at the monastery of 'Our Lady & Saint Bernard', which is just on the outskirts of Bristol. Pretty handy, eh!

I'm going to get in touch with them and use the influence of the name of the magazine to see if I can get a period of residence with them so that I can talk to their monks!?, and get first-hand experience of the role of religion today.

So I want you to know that I might be out of contact for a while if I get to do this thing. If I don't get the permission here then I will probably travel elsewhere to get into a monastery. So please don't use this address until you hear from me next, since I hopefully won't be around to collect any mail.

I just wanted you to know that, as usual, all is okay with me, and don't worry if you don't hear from for a while - I'll be looking out for God!

Hope everything remains well for you, and give the dog a few chocky biscuits from me. My best wishes.

My love,

Julian.

xxx

White lies have to be executed now and again. I didn't like to do it, but I had only enough pain for one person.

I looked at the letter, and then suddenly halted my reading. Perhaps it had not been such a great lie after all. Maybe 'Our Lady & Saint Bernard' did have something in the idea. Good ideas usually come when you least expect them, and in other disguises. What I had written in the letter to my parents about visiting the monastery had been pure fiction solely intended to be an excuse for lack of contact for a time. Yet now the

words of 'Our Lady & St. Bernard' resounded within the walls of my skull, knocking their morse code against the bone. Yes, I needed something different as temporary stimulus.

I made a cup of fresh coffee and slumped down on the two-seat sofa. I could feel a lethargy in all areas : in tissue, muscle, and mind. I was beginning to feel only dreariness for the flat now, as if its initial welcoming warmth had died away like it too had been infested with a disease. I knew that a change of circumstances had to appear from somewhere for I felt that there was nothing more that could be offered to me at present. I used to always harbour some fear over changing the situation that I was in, as if the change would bring new circumstances into my life and old habits would have to be modified. Now all that rigidity had died away and had been replaced with its opposite ; namely, my fear now was of not changing, a fear that old habits would remain and stick with me as a leper's skin and deny me an alteration of present things.

'I need a break ; a sojourn of some kind', I said aloud to myself. Everything was beginning to bore me, and I could almost feel the dullness starting to develop at the edges. I knew that I must give it a shot, so I finished the coffee and got myself smartened up for a visit out into the world.

I had walked into the centre of Bristol town, still feeling that everything was somehow a game and we were all the little pieces being moved around by whatever invisible hand, like insignificant mortal pieces who all thought they had souls. I wasn't sure or not if I was rapidly losing mine ; I was feeling thinner now and as I walked past the people in the centre of town it felt as if I myself was becoming invisible, or rather I was losing that sense of presence that people possess in varying degrees.

As usual the shops did not interest me, and I paid no attention to all the dressed windows that tried with glam and glitter to attract your gazing attention to their goods. I passed by a young man, in his twenties, who often sat in the same street begging for money with his straggled hair and greying dog. I always used to walk straight past him, thinking him a lazy bastard for not bothering to do anything for a living. But now it

seemed to me that such things are not an easy black and white, and there are many individual factors that when brought together as a mosaic of circumstance, determine the path of one's present situation : I gave him some money. It was not out of vanity, thinking myself good for helping another ; neither was it charity thinking it was the Christian thing to do for a fellow man ; nor could it of been out of obligation or a way of paying for my own good karma. The easy way to describe it is by saying that I 'bushed' in with him ; I empathised and understood that nature is never simple nor straight nor deservedly dished out in equal measures.

Around the corner from where I had left the young man I arrived at where I wanted to be - the tourist office.

'Our Lady and Saint Bernard?', asked the balding man behind the counter. 'Yes, I think we have their details on the computer somewhere.' He went off and began to tap on the keyboard, perhaps glad that someone had finally asked of him a question that needed some work to it instead of the usual dreary lot of directions. The printer began to click into action and after only a couple of minutes the balding but friendly server returned to the desk with a sheet of paper in his hand. He smiled at me. 'Yes, this here is the address and phone number of the monastery you want, but you will have to contact them yourself. I believe it is the only working and partly open monastery in this area. There aren't many places like this left around you know. Any particular reason why you fancied visiting Our Lady & St. Bernards?' The old man stood motionless with a television smile. I smiled back in automatic functioning.

'Just curious really. I wanted to see how a real monastery works, but thanks for your help.' I took the sheet from the man's hand and left the tourist office. Once outside I read the printed details. It was, as the man had said, just an address and phone number.

'At least this is better than doing nothing', I said to myself as I folded the sheet and placed it in my pocket. I was frustrated at something I could not quite grasp. Maybe I was secretly hoping, within some back realm of the mind, that a short stay in the silence of a monastery would clear a few things up for me, help me feel the situation I was now in, namely that of change or decay. Perhaps I was only clutching at the air in

the hope of finding something more real, or something more real than me.

I found a public phone box in the centre of town and dialled the number. It rang for a long time before the receiver was finally picked up, and the ringing tone replaced by the sound of a solemn voice.

'Hello, Our Lady & St. Bernard. Can I help you?'

'Hello yes. I was given your details by the local tourist office. I was lead to believe a while back that you are a working monastery which allows guests to come and visit you. I wonder....' I was interrupted.

'You will have to speak to Father Thomas if you are interested in staying as a guest. I will bleep him for you. Hold on.' Bleep him? I had wanted to get around to asking him about staying not so much as a guest but just as a casual observer, in order to write a magazine article, which was to be my cover. But everything seemed to be happening so fast. Why had I wanted to come to this monastery in the first place? What had been my intention in wishing to stay : to get away from it all? Perhaps I was just running out of immediate options and I was reaching out to grasp at whatever ropes were in view. Or perhaps it was that I had this feeling that somehow a short stay in a monastery would do my soul a bit of good. Either way, I was doing it now, even if I was going ahead under false credentials. I guess I believed that my unknown ends would justify my means.

'Hello, this is Father Thomas', came the sound of yet another expressionless voice.

'Hello Father Thomas, this is Julian Cross. I would like to speak with you a moment and ask for your assistance.'

'...I saw seven golden candlesticks and in the midst of
the candlesticks One like unto the son of man, his breast
girt with a golden girdle, his head and hair white as purest
wool, his eyes as a flame of fire, his feet like unto fine brass,
as if they burned in a furnace, his voice as the sound of many
waters, and he had in his right hand seven stars and out of
his mouth went a two-edged sword.'

Umberto Eco, 'The Name of the Rose'

Et in Arcadia ego. I turned up at Our Lady & St. Bernard's with my one bag packed. I had been allowed, by permission of the Abbot himself (Father Lawrence), to stay for up to two weeks, which was the maximum length of stay for any outside guest. The taxi had driven me up the long concealed twisting driveway to arrive behind the monastery at a large adjoining building that was signposted as the Guesthouse. The gardens rose up on either side of the building with their rockeries and numerous religious figures interspersed amongst the heights. Virgin Marys and Calvary were in direct view as I walked up to the large oak door whilst the taxi turned around in the courtyard and sped away. I rang the bell as instructed and waited several minutes.

I was greeted at the door of the guesthouse by a spectacled man my own height, who introduced himself as Father Thomas.

'Hello Mr. Cross. I am Father Thomas, Guest-Master to this abbey. I am here to look after the needs of travellers and guests. Anything you care to know please ask me. I will show you to your room.' He led me up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor, pointing out like a proud guide the location of various amenities and washrooms.

'This is your room here Julian. It's the room of St. Edward. We give all our rooms names of saints, so in that way people will remember easier which is theirs. People do tend to get lost in this guesthouse sometimes.' He smiled a meek and amusing smile. 'The timetable is printed on the wall, so you know when dinner is served. You will not be eating with the rest of the monks ; we eat separately, and you would probably not

like our food. We leave people to their own ends here. People come for many reasons : some to simply get away from it all for a few days ; some for a time of prayer and to gather their thoughts ; some even come to rest after a particularly traumatic time in their lives.' He smiled a second time and turned around to leave. On reaching the door he turned back again and looked at me. 'I am told that you are here for help with your article on our religious state?' I nodded. 'Well, I wish you good luck, but you must remember that many monks here wish to keep their silence and do not converse with visitors. Only those that come to the guesthouse wish to speak with guests. You must be careful not to disturb the others.'

'Yes.' I nodded again to show my understanding of his words. He then left silently. I looked at my room ; it was decent yet sparse. There was one single bed lined up against the wall ; a desk against the opposite wall ; two chairs ; and a sink with towel in the corner. It was more than adequate. The window at the end of the narrow room looked directly out onto the gardens and my view gave me the distinct sight of Calvary, the crucified Jesus upon the hill. I turned around to face the room once more. It was then that I noticed the wall hangings, which were hung upon the rusty orange painted walls. Above the bed was the expected wooden crucifix which depicted the suffering of Jesus the man. Above the head of this saviour were those universal letters of INRI : Igne Natura Renovatur Integra. This was nothing special, only a Christ blessing.

On the wall opposite, hung on a rusty nail above the desk, was a picture that I recognised from seeing it reproduced in a book that I once flicked through. It was called 'Virgin of the Rocks' by Leonardo da Vinci. I had read the blurb that accompanied this picture and remember that it had been stated that da Vinci had painted two versions of this picture : one in a more fiery red and then this one which was a watery blue. I did not understand the picture yet I admired its quality. There appeared to be something very meaningful about it, with the two babies, two brothers, seeming to represent something more than just two bodies. But I could discern nothing from just looking at it, although it was a beautiful picture. It was very blue and golden and shimmering. I sat down at the desk below the picture, getting myself acquainted with

the structure of the room, and then noticed the list, a printed piece of paper, lying up in the left-hand corner of the desk top. I picked it up and read it :

HORARIUM

3.30 am	Vigils
7.00	Lauds
8.00	Community Mass
8.50	Breakfast
10.30	Coffee
12.15 pm	Sext
12.30	Dinner
2.15	None
3.30	Tea/Coffee
5.30	Vespers
6.00	Supper
7.30	Compline

Lock up at 8.00 pm.

The list was obviously for the benefit of the guests since we were afforded the luxury of coffee breaks throughout the day, something which I was certain was not included in the daily schedule of the monks. I also knew that the times designated for eating were meant for the guests alone since we were to eat separately from the monks. As to whether we were expected to join them for the prayers throughout the day or not, I was unsure. Yet since Father Thomas had said that the guests were left to their own devices I figured that it was our choice or not whether we got our ass into the monastery for the numerous prayers. I would leave it up to how I felt at particular times.

I had missed afternoon coffee, which I was glad about since it was not my

intention to begin mixing with others immediately. I hung my jacket on the back of the door and again looked out of the window, out at the rocky hill of Calvary. I was not sure what to make of the whole thing. I still thought that I had arrived here on an impulse, as if driven from one moment to the next by the appearance of sporadic ideas that I knew not where they came from. Nothing had been truly decided upon ; it just arrived.

I left the room and walked down the main stairs, passing a small room on the way that was designated as the library. I did not bother to stop and investigate since it seemed to me to be more of a reading room than a library. Down at the bottom of the main staircase was the visitor's lounge to the right, which appeared empty at this time, and the outer oak door to my left.

I entered into the outside and strolled towards the gardens. There was a chill coming into the air now, and the garden floor was coated in a layer of light brown colouring as the leaves had drifted down from the branches to support the season of autumn. There were a couple of cars parked in the driveway which obviously belonged to the other guests at the abbey. I took my path to the right and walked past the side of the church, through a small grilled iron gate, and started along the path which took me up the hill to the crucifixion above. There were numerous sacred groves positioned along the path as it ascended. Half way up there was a hut stationed at the side, which upon inspection housed the colourful pairing of the dead Jesus lying beneath the weeps of his holy virgin mother. All very regal and divine, I remember thinking to myself, but since Jesus was known to have worn during all the time of his missionary only a plain simple gown, then why did every religious statue stand in an array of dazzling colours, with gilded gold and deep reds. What the fuck did they think they were doing? It seemed to me like nothing more than simple human idolatry, the same as which has been going on for humanity's lifetime. I was thinking back now to the time that I had those pagan experiences with Mary and the gang. They all claimed that they were worshipping the divine, or something close to it. I just couldn't understand it. Everybody says that they are being faithful to the Lord, and yet they all dance around to a different

tune ; they all claimed to be dancing to the music of time yet why did they always screw the whole thing up with their fanciful human images of Christ richly robed in their gaudy colours and then stick a hundred different rules to the worship? It was beyond me. Never before had it interested me so much. I had just left the religious to their religion. But now it seemed that I was finding myself increasingly in the thick of its influence ; and now that I was looking for some... I don't know....just some *thing* to make sense amidst this whole fucking disarray of a fleshy world - I kept getting speared by the overall nonsense of this religious stream. I was damn sure that God was certainly not a Christian ; nor was he a Catholic or a Protestant. He wasn't Islamic either, or Buddhist or Judaic. In fact, all I knew was that he was nothing that we humans could comprehend or put into words : so why the endless arguments and deaths and dogma and repressions? People, I concluded, just did not know what they were doing, so if they made their way in an approximate direction and called it the Lord's Way, then they would be half way there and they could release the burden from their own shoulders. Besides that, it was all shameful politics and the reign of control. Smells kinda bad really.

I reached the top of Calvary : Christ's cross cemented into a concrete slab and placed on a hill : and that was sacred. I looked down on the whole scene from on high, and I felt good about being human. It didn't matter to me what the hanging man before me was thinking ; I just, for a short moment, felt good about being human, and being alive. Life did not necessarily mean to last for me, but for now, it was fine. I sat there for a while, alone, amidst the leaves and the chill of the late afternoon wind as its molecules lashed against my face. If I wanted to feel good then it would have to be about myself, and not about somebody else who died like many men did.

The bells shortly sounded and I looked at my watch. It was 5.30pm : time for Vespers, if I remembered rightly. Down below there was the figure of a man, dressed in normal clothes, making his way towards a small door at the side of the church. I stood up and slowly made my way back down the path and towards the bottom, intending to enter the

church by the same door I had seen the young man enter, assuming that he too was a guest.

Once inside I took a seat on the back bench. There was silence. A large candle was burning inside of a glass cylinder which was suspended from the roof and hanging about ten feet from the ground. Above where we were seated was a stained glass rose window, its colour being a dominant deep blue. It reflected rightly the grey walls surrounding us inside. Then amidst the silence began the chanting of prayers. It was a solemn chant ; the chant of men's voices in reverence and subordination at the same time. It was the sound of submissive serenity. It was appealing to the senses, yet it came also with a slight odour. I too bowed my head in silence, in a form of physical separation from all that was going on around me.

'What did you think?' The young man asked as soon as we had stepped outside after the service. I say young man, whereas in fact he was several years older than me and perhaps in his early thirties.

'Not bad', I answered rather vaguely.

'Wasn't it something to hear those voices?' he again approached me in an enthusiastic voice. He had the manner that one would crudely associate with a religious youth worker. True, such people always mean well, yet to me their idea of meaning well had always gotten lost amidst their own lack of direction as if they were trying to do good whilst not always knowing where the end would be. And doing good for the wrong reasons was just as bad as doing nothing ; or worse, as achieving something bad itself.

'Yea, the voices were okay', I answered.

'Oh, what happened to your arm, if you don't mind me asking. It looks like you damaged it bad, all wrapped up like that. Is it serious?'

'Yeah, kind of ; well, serious enough. You could say it was just a bad accident with a car one night, and I was the victim.'

'Ahh, that sounds so bad. I'm sure it will heal though, given time.' The usual advice.

We both strolled back towards the guesthouse for it was now six o'clock and time for

our supper. I walked in an air of mostly silence while the man next to me, dressed in shirt and jogging bottoms, told me in eager detail how he had been here four times previously, and how it gave him such peace and inner spirit to be amongst its surroundings. He talked as if God himself was pissing inside of his bowels, and all he was doing was spewing it all out again from his urethra. Yet I listened because it was a light patter of vowels to take me to dinner with, and I did not wish to walk into the dining hall alone for the first time. This way, I could quietly slip into a corner seat with the eager man, and disperse with any further introductions for the time being.

Prayers were said, and the food was served. There were about half a dozen other people here as guests, all chatting away with cheerful gestures and wagging tongues. I observed them as best I could yet somehow the whole scene appeared shallow, and less real than the people you see on the street or in bars on an evening. It was almost as if these gay people had traded in a part of their human selves for an ounce of faith that they believed God could give them, and now their whole views, thoughts, and reactions all worked from this superficial centre without once questioning the truth about anything. It was like watching some music hall facade.

'Are you a Catholic?', the man who I had sat beside asked me, turning as he did with his mechanical smile.

'No, I'm not', I returned. I gave a smile back.

'An Anglican?'

'No.'

'A Buddhist then?'

'No, I'm none of them.' I knew that this man's curiosity had to be satisfied otherwise he would never give me any peace with his prodding questions. 'Actually, I have no religion', I finally replied. The man hesitated.

'So why are you here then?' I ate my potato.

'Because I came for the ambience.' I sipped my tea.

'Tell me then', he continued, 'what do you believe?' I too paused for a brief moment.

'I believe in life and death ; in good and evil ; in sexuality ; and I don't believe in

names.'

'But what about God?', the man stuttered, as if he was lost without an identity or name himself ; perhaps fearing that without his God inside him he would just be another nobody.

'God?'

'Yes, God.' He waited for an answer.

'Oh, the spirit resides in everything if you can find it ; that's why life occurred. But what is God if you can't find the spirit within yourself first?' The man looked at me, and made an open gesture with his hands.

'But God is love!' I didn't answer him. I had no time for his whimsical treatises on love. He probably thought he could love : compassion maybe, but not love. Put such a man in the arms of a woman and he comes out loving God : where is the human in that?

I retreated upstairs to my room after dinner. The monastery so far had been like a large church built next to some sleeping quarters, populated by a herd of robe wearing old men with good intentions but no knowledge.

The room was small and stuffy so I went for a brief walk until the bells tolled for Compline at 7.30pm. I walked to the church for the service ; there were several faces there that I recognised from the dining room. Again there was the singing of psalms and the kneeling before the effigy of the Virgin Mother. I noticed during the course of the service that there were two young men amongst the monks who were not wearing the white Cistercian habit as were the rest. These two men walked behind an older monk, one who was heavily bearded with a worn face and who moved in slow fragile steps ; they followed humbly as would a dog behind his master. Yet the old man was paying no attention to the steps of these two younger men who walked behind him. I watched them as they disappeared back into the monk's area of the church which was hidden from the view of us guests.

'Are you okay?' the exuberant young man asked me as soon as we had all left the church after Compline.

'Yes, I'm fine. Why do you ask?'

'Oh, I just wondered. You seemed so distant in there.'

'I am always distant', I replied nonchalantly.

'Anyway', he carried on, 'we have not been introduced. My name is Michael.' Finally, this man had assumed an identity for himself. He began now to have very definite features, almost like an overgrown schoolboy with wavy shoulder length dark hair and a clean shaven fresh chin. He was also wearing a pair of glasses, which he continuously kept touching with his hands as if to remind himself that they were forever resting upon the bridge of his Roman nose. He was around 5'8", yet he walked with long strides as if in a boarding house military march.

'Hi. I'm Julian Cross.' We shook hands. We had formally introduced ourselves to each other and now our identities were both known to the other man.

'I loved the Salve Regina ; didn't you?' I assumed that he was referring to the psalms being sung during the ceremony. I agreed with him. We walked back into the guesthouse, which was now strangely dark.

'Anyhow dear chap, it is now eight o'clock and lock up time, so I'm going to be hitting the sheets now to get my sleep for the Vigil service at three-thirty am. Will I be seeing you there?'

'Maybe', I answered non-committedly. I think he registered the vagueness of my answer for he tried with a final persuasion, before retiring, to incite my curiosity with talk of the beauty of an early morning service with chants filling the fresh air. I left him with a smile and a goodnight.

I took a swig from my hipflask of Southern Comfort and sat on the bed. There was nothing else for me to do but to try my best to get drunk. I had brought the hipflask along as a precaution, and now I was glad that I had wisely done so, for I had not known that lock-up would have occurred so early. I thanked my foresight for bearing me fruits on this occasion, and for helping to make a tree tipsy with nature's juice. Okay, so I was in a monastery, but my life had to continue. And since time is the deciding

factor in everything, I had decided to fill my time with the things that gave me pleasure in life. These walls may indeed cater for the life of the spirit, but if one wishes to stay in life, which I did, then one had also to cater for the physical body - otherwise what would be the point of eating? And the menu for the physical body can come in many various courses. I drank to my first course.

It was like living in Rome on the Pope's birthday : bells everywhere yet not a drop of sleep. They were ringing for the beginning of Vigils. I took a peak at my watch : it was 3.25am. 'What the hell!', I thought. 'I'm awake now. I might as well experience this great early morning chanting.'

I hurriedly dressed and slipped out of my room, down the darkened staircase, and out into the coldness of the black air. There were no lights outside of the guesthouse ; only a crescent of the moon was able to guide me wearily around the side path to the right, and up to the small door which led into the visitor's part of the church. I entered with a creak, and found only one other person present. It was my friend Michael, who on seeing me appear from behind the outer door, smiled and beckoned for me to join him. I did so, for one is unable to argue within a place of extreme silence.

It was a dark and solemn atmosphere, yet the suspended glass cylinder which held the lighted candle, let off a human glow into the church, and made visible the immense wooden cross which also hung from the ceiling yet was suspended further down towards the alter. I could just barely make out a gilded flat depiction of Christ crucified upon this wooden symbol. It hung still and silent like the crucifixion was taking place at this very moment, yet all everyone could do was to stand back in shameful reverence and let the death of someone else pave the way for the omission of their sins.

The service lasted for a long time. There were the standard talking prayers also and the 'peace be with you' obligatory handshake towards the end. It wasn't until a quarter to five that Vigils finally finished with the tolling of the bells, and although it had been a pleasant experience to feel the presence of prayer fall upon the cold body

within a brooding monastery, there was no reason to wish to repeat the experience. If the monks were looking for God, then fair enough ; and if He does indeed exist then it was my assumption that he couldn't care less where you did your kneeling and praying. In fact, He probably couldn't even recognise a Cistercian Abbey from a silent shit strewn pavement. After all, a place is just material, and the prayer always comes from the same place, right?

Michael and myself left the church together. We did not say much in the morning chill. I looked at his side profile. For a man who claimed to have found God within him, he sure had the countenance of a troubled mind. His brow was deeply furrowed and his thoughts, for once, were not upon questioning me. When he was overt in friendliness, he displayed his youth and his gay eagerness. When in times of godly contemplation he showed the signs of a worried child. In the daylight I had been exposed to his personality ; now, in the darkness of the human, alone with himself, I was witness to the shape of his essence, and to me he appeared as lost, without knowledge and under false truth.

We reached the interior hall of the guesthouse whilst still remaining in silence, and there we departed with whispers back to our beds. Once inside my room I climbed back underneath the thin sheets that covered my hard mattress and closed my eyes. I knew that it must of been five o'clock by now, and that in two more hours the bells would be once again ringing for the start of Lauds. I thought that I would be able to sleep yet after ten minutes or so I realised that my body had assumed that the day had already begun and so had called up the energy necessary for its daylight survival : my body had been duped by the monk's bells.

A haze of morning light was spreading itself across the fabric of my curtains, and infiltrating into my room. There was no longer any need for me to squint into the unfocused darkness. Light was approaching. I stepped out of bed and moved towards the window. If anything, I might as well view the beginning of dawn. I parted a thin gap between the folds of the curtains and peered out. There was someone there. I looked again, harder. Yes, there he was. The figure of an old man was standing motionless in

the middle of the garden, seeming to be looking up at the cross on Calvary. From the back I could not recognise who the figure was, although I knew from his attire that he was one of the community of monks. I watched for a couple of minutes yet the scene did not change. I could only conclude that one of the monks preferred to come out into the garden for his contemplation rather than stay within his cell.

I was about to leave the window and return to my restless bed when an unexpected sight unravelled before my eyes. The old monk, who had previously remained rigidly still, suddenly lifted up his habit over his head and, fully naked, knelt regally upon the grass. There he remained, his face up towards the crucified figure and his hands clasped in a gesture of prayer. I could not believe what I was witnessing. A naked monk displaying himself openly right before me. In my curiosity, rather than my interest, I continued to watch this monk, by this time realising that the culprit in question was the aged monk whom I had seen earlier in the church being followed by the two unrobed young men. And now here he was displaying himself like a naked ape. After a further several minutes the monk, by this time finished in his strange adoration, robed himself again and calmly walked away. I slipped myself away behind the shelter of my curtains to secure my anonymity, and then after checking again to see if the old monk was out of view and no more, which he was, I closed the curtains again and sat back on the bed. I laid down with this funny image of the naked monk in my head and rested my eyes. I thought I might lie here and wait for the morning to arrive.

'In love, acts are carried out without thinking,
and its mystery is evident only to a tiny minority
of human beings.....In the numberless crowd of
beings having a human countenance there are
very few men ; and in this select company there
are very few who can understand the meaning
of love.'

C. Mauclair, 'La Magie de L'amour'

I must have fallen asleep for I woke up at eight-thirty. Not even the bells for Lauds had disturbed my eventual slumber. I was still lying above the bed sheets where I had first rested in the early hours. Breakfast would be soon, in about twenty minutes, so I drowsily erected myself and put on some clothes. I had a brief wash in the bedroom sink and then wandered downstairs, after first stopping off for a morning piss.

Faces were milling around. I recognised the features of several people yet I spoke to no-one ; instead I preferred to find a comfortable seat in the communal lounge until the breakfast gong would be struck.

Voices were quiet during breakfast. Either people were generally tired or else nobody had anything to say. I was in the last category. After the breakfast table had been cleared I took myself outside for a morning walk, since there was little else to do at this retreat. The rest of the morning was spent just roaming the beautiful gardens and enjoying the peace. I was undisturbed, and not a single sight of Michael. It almost made me forget that I was somehow dying faster than most people. Almost.

At ten-thirty I returned to the guesthouse lounge for coffee, and was immediately approached by the figure of Michael.

'Hello Julian. Haven't seen you yet this morning.'

'I was at breakfast', I replied.

'Yes, yes. My body didn't seem to make it. I went straight back to sleep after that lovely

morning service. Did you go back to sleep?'

'Yea. I was knackered.' Michael laughed, as though he was amused at my vernacular.

'Have you been here before?', he asked.

'No. This is my first time. I just came because I wanted to experience a working monastery.'

'And that's the only reason?', he inquired further.

'Actually, no', I admitted. 'The main reason I am here is because I am writing an article for a magazine on religion and I was hoping I might talk to a few monks while I was here.'

'You mean that you are hoping to gather some material for your article?' Michael seemed surprised at what I had said.

'That's about it, yes.'

'Wow, that's really great Julian. I wish you all the best in your gathering material. You know, if you ever want to talk to me about some things I would be delighted to help with your article.' Again, in the daylight hours, he seemed overly enthusiastic.

'Thank you', I said, 'but I will probably be talking to the monks as a first priority.'

I finished my coffee and left the room. I wanted to find a few monks that I could talk to. Well, to be more specific I was hoping that I might find that old monk that I had seen praying naked in the garden earlier that morning. I stood on the outside step and viewed the light drizzle as it drifted down from the overcast sky. A very light shower.

'Isn't it wonderfully fresh', came a voice behind me. Christ, it was Michael. He was becoming like a leech on wounded skin. I did not particularly wish to talk to him, yet at the same time I had no desire to be rude to him or to dismiss him. He was simply there, and when he was you had to put up with it. After all, it was I who was on his godly territory. He raised up his arms in a gesture as if feeling the weight of the fresh air upon himself.

'I love the air when it is fresh like this. Don't you?'

'It's okay, yeah', I replied dryly.

'Fancy a walk ; it is only a little rain. It will do us good. Yes?' I had nothing better to do, and I could see no-one else around who would of provided better company so I accepted the offer. We walked together up the rocky path that twisted around the hilly gardens, dotted with various sacred lady shrines and ornate flowers. Finally we came to a bench at the summit of the path that was relatively secluded in a corner of large walled rocks. He offered that we sit down.

'So are you interested in religion then Julian?', Michael immediately inquired once we were seated.

'Mildly. But mainly from a subject point of view rather than personally. It's interesting to say the least.'

'Ohh yes, that it is, that it is. But it also has many faults you know Julian.' Michael looked at me intently.

'Yes, you can say that. It has a whole barrel load of faults.' Once again, my expression seemed to amuse him.

'What do you think are its main faults then?' I paused for a brief moment.

'Well', I began, 'the main thing seems to be a lack of objectiveness and a general narrowness towards other opinions.' Michael nodded his head in agreement.'

Yes, narrow is the way. There are things that the church does not fully understand. I have certain views that the Catholic faith does not seem to understand or want to acknowledge. Yes, certainly, narrow is the way.'

'So what views do you have that the church does not understand then? I asked him. He gave me one of his strange intense looks through his glasses for a short moment.

'I will discuss it later with you Julian if you wish, but for now it is time for my Bible read in the library. Would you like to join me?'

'No thanks, I think I will stay here for a while.' I said goodbye to the odd guy and watched him as he consciously made his way back down the path towards the guesthouse. For my part I descended also but instead made my direction towards the front of the abbey where the monk's farm was situated.

The main driveway which brought the traveller to the public front of the abbey, rather than to the guesthouse quarters and the monk's residence at the rear, was forked into two pathways. The first took the route to the public entrance of the church, in case any such persons wished to be included in a service, whilst the second path led to the community's farm. I took this path and ventured through the gate into the working farmyard smells. They had their own herd of cattle, mostly cows, and a separate yard full of scattered chickens at the rear. I walked along and peeked into one of the barns : I was surprised to see a fully modernised milking set-up. Why should I have been surprised, monks after all had to come into the 21st century like the rest of us. Things always died away if they did not change with circumstances. I could only hear the sounds that matched with the smells ; nothing else. I walked further, keeping against the monastery wall all the way. I had the suspicion that guests were not allowed into these working areas, so I aimed not to make my presence a discernible one. Shortly I came to a gate in the wall that was partly open. Looking through it I could see a small cluster of outhouses, or brick sheds, that formed another courtyard, this one being closer to the actual abbey building. I walked through, catching a tiny clatter of sounds as soon as I was in the courtyard. I walked to the nearest shed and humbly stepped into its atmosphere : it was a working pottery. There were a couple of monks inside, busying themselves with their labour. One of them looked up towards me yet made no gesture of recognition, preferring instead to lower his gaze and continue with his instruction. It was then that I heard a call.

'Young man, what are you doing here?' It was a voice belonging to a monk that I had not seen before. He came towards me in a brisk pace.

'Oh, I was looking at the farm cattle and I came to see where these sounds were coming from', I said while displaying a face of false sincerity.

'This place is not open to visitors, it is strictly for the community only. You should not be here. You must make your way back.' He finished his sentence and looked at me firmly, although with placid eyes.

'I'm sorry Father, I didn't know. I will return back now ; sorry about that.' I put on a soft voice to compete with his. He bowed his head as in an offer to accept my apology and remained silent as I made my way back through the gate and across the farm until I had come once again to the front of the church. Dinner time was approaching. The bells rang for Sext. I entered, and sat myself through another short service of sung prayers, wondering why these men had devoted all their time and energy to kneeling before a stone effigy of a woman holding a baby. 'If she was a Virgin', I muttered to myself, 'then I'm Jesus Christ.' Perhaps not the wisest thing to say within a house of God, but then again I was pretty sure that he had better things to attend to than my sporadic utterances.

After dinner I approached the guesthouse master, Father Thomas. 'Do all the monks work manually?', I asked him.

'No, not all of them', he replied. 'We have two different kinds of monks in this abbey. There are the choir monks, who spend most of their time in the abbey church, and also studying, writing, and reading. The choir monks are the more scholarly among us. Then we have the lay brothers who are responsible for the manual work about the abbey. It is they who concentrate on the farming, the growing of food, and other such things as the pottery works, the printing press, and the various up-keep of the buildings ; as well as contemplating God, of course'. He smiled at his last sentence.

'Could I speak with some of them?', I asked him, eager for an affirmative answer.

'Sadly, that will not be possible. You see, many of them do not wish to converse with strangers ; that is why we have a guesthouse master like myself, with my assistants, to look after the visitors, so that the other monks can continue with God's work undisturbed. If you want to speak to any of us about our religious views, then me and my assistants shall be happy to share them with you.'

'Thank you Father Thomas. Perhaps soon. Oh, by the way, you have an old monk amongst your community ; I saw him with two unrobed men in church earlier. Do you know who I mean?'

'Of course. We all know each other in this community.' He smiled again, somewhere

between godly sincerity and brotherly love. 'That is our Master of Novices, he trains the new monks in our ways before they are to take their vows. He is training two of them now. He is the most competent teacher we have ; that is why God has given him that role. That is Father Bartholomew. He has been in God's service for a long time now. He studies a great deal. Spends much of his time pouring over his books in the cloister. A man of much knowledge is Father Bartholomew.'

I left Father Thomas and spent the rest of the day aimlessly wandering around amid their gardens and rockeries. I managed to locate the cloister, which was situated behind the chapter house, yet the door had been locked when I tried it. I concluded that for the time being the place was empty.

It was my second day here and I was becoming bored. Early nights and endless days to ourselves. Perfect if you want to sit around on your ass and contemplate the ways of God, but rather wasteful otherwise. I did not want to entertain the idea that I was perhaps wasting the precious time that I had remaining, yet the thought did slip into my presence on the odd occasion. Why had I come here? What had driven me to this refuge? I certainly was not here to fulfil any obligations as regards the article. That commission had been cancelled ; so I could, if I wished, leave any time I desired.

Later that evening, after the last service of Compline had ended, I was in the guesthouse library searching through the shelves for any useful reading material, when the figure of Michael stepped in.

'Ah, hello Michael.' I raised my eyes to meet his. There was a change in his countenance. He had the face of someone troubled by his own thoughts. He sat down in the seat beside me and stared at me as though he wanted to treat me as someone to confide in. I remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

'God is difficult to please. He asks for so much', Michael began in a dead-pan voice. 'I can feel his presence inside of me, making me alive, yet He asks so much of me. And I know I must adhere to Him for he is the supreme Creator.' The way he was speaking it

sounded like he was confessing in a sci-fi movie. I didn't know what to say.

'Hey, just live your life man. Don't worry so much about what you think God wants ; I'm sure he's a fairly easy going guy.'

'He might be, but those that speak for Him down here aren't. I'm always trying my best, but I can't change that which I am. Godly love is not the same as human love, and I don't know if I can live with both of them within me. Certainly the church has its views about our human love, but God made us what we are. Everything that manifests inside of us is God's work ; surely they can understand that instead of denouncing certain loves as evil. Religion and God.....' He paused, then took a deep breath. 'This might be blasphemous Julian, but sometimes I wonder if religion is always on the same level as God.' Michael's eyes denoted a deep sigh. I wanted somehow to cheer him up.

'Hey', I said, 'if religion were on the same level as God then it wouldn't be involved with politics would it?' It brought a brief lived smile upon his face but little else.

'Yeah maybe. Anyway, I'm going to my bed now. I'll see you tomorrow Julian. Goodnight.' He left the library and I heard his steps fade down the hall. It wasn't long before I retired too : the abbey was a dead place at night. A human graveyard.

I had enough in my hip flask for another night, and that would be all. I drank it slowly, to savour the saviour's nectar. I had with me a copy of the Bible that I had borrowed from the library. I opened it out at the Book of Revelations, and read. I soon came to that infamous passage so often quoted. I read it aloud to myself : *'Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man : His number is 666.'* I was intrigued. What was it saying? It read clearly that the number of the beast - or the Anti-Christ, as others like to name it - is the number of a man? Is man our own beast? Our we the tool of our own destruction, our own final fall of man? It wasn't a hard hypothesis to accept, given our usual fondness for fucking up our existence immeasurably. Maybe, yes. If the beast was to finally come to cleanse the earth by fire, then it would be in the uniform of man with his finger on the bright red button.

I finished the Southern Comfort and sat numbly at the desk. I turned my neck to have in full vision the wooden hanging man. 'Jesus Christ', I thought, 'religion sure loves its wounded soldiers. Die for a penny and we'll give you a pound.' Yes, I was tired.

I was woken up at three-thirty by the bells of Vigils. I closed my eyes and moaned. There was going to be no prayer for me just now. I ignored the echoes in the early darkness ; they were not ringing for me.

I opened my eyes again and took a look at my watch : four-thirty and the bells were still ringing. They must be signalling the end of the service. I was about to haul my head beneath the sheets when I suddenly had the image of the naked old monk in my mind. Perhaps he would appear again this morning to do the same ritual. I rolled out of bed, making sure that I kept the room in darkness, and slipped towards the curtains to pull back a thin slit between its meeting folds. There was no figure there to be seen. I sat back on the bed and waited in silence for a few minutes. Again, I pulled back the narrow slip and observed the green lawn directly in front of me. The monk had arrived. Naked and kneeling he raised his head in adoration and his hands were gestured in prayer. It was cold in these morning hours, yet he performed his duties with precision loyalty. I watched him. The thin ridge of the spine bent to his movements : how the skin looked pale in the speckled shine of the shrouded moonlight. I could see the top of his ass cheeks as he stooped his head low in the final worship ; the soles of his feet raised to the sky like flesh dolmens. I watched him acutely as he departed from that open space. Old man.

I was spreading the Marmite evenly upon the toast as the lady seated across the breakfast table introduced herself. She was an oldish lady, in her fifties and with bushy greying hair, wiry and messy. She had a dark shawl draped over her shoulders and spoke with an accent that had traces of Polish still remaining in it. She was accompanied by her equally similar daughter.

'Father Thomas says you writing article on religion for magazine?' She peered forward with a friendly smile.

'Yes, that's right', I said in a consciously clear voice, not wanting to murmur in case of sounding illegible to her.

'Ah, young man, there is nothing without religion. You cannot analyse or criticise it. God created man ; and then he graciously created woman. We owe everything to him. Me, you, my daughter Anna ; all nature. You agree, yes?' This was not the sort of conversation I wanted to get into during breakfast. Having a good heart is one thing, but annoying the fuck out of someone is entirely a different fruitcake. I lifted my head up from the cup of tea I had been sipping.

'Well', I said in a calm low voice, 'if religion exists then it can be both criticised and analysed because questioning is what makes us human, and if we cease to question then we cease to exercise our freedom. Nothing should be immune.' The lady closed her mouth, which was a good thing since her teeth were in a fairly bad state, and I was still munching on my toast. As for her sprog Anna, she remained silent in her mother's shadow like a conquered child.

I was getting sick of all this. All this godliness and smiles that was accompanied with little else. They just smiled at you all day long like mutant machines working through an indoctrinated program. Couldn't any of them discuss things seriously, intelligently, without leaving everything to the work of God. What kind of child leaves all the work for his father? Poor bastard must hate us lazy humans.

In a numbness I left the breakfast room and walked straight outside. There was either the outside gardens or the inside walls of the guesthouse, so it was like choosing between two fatty whores, neither of them appealing.

I walked up into one of the corners of the garden where a bench was standing beneath a sheer rock wall. About ten feet up in this rock wall was a natural alcove, so the abbey had found it appropriate to stick in this rock shelter yet another stone idol of the Virgin Mother. You had to accept it since the Cistercian monastery was indeed

dedicated to 'Our Lady'. Personally, I think they could have made Mary's blue a little bit darker. Perhaps it was the natural elements that had been responsible for lashing away at her fine gilded colouring. Either way, she stood there like a graceful guardian and the universal mother.

I sat down upon the bench. It was probable that I would not be staying here the full two weeks. I was seriously considering the termination of my visit when I noticed on the path below the figure of the old monk, walking alone towards the front of the guesthouse. My immediate impression was that I wanted to speak with him, yet he had not seen me. Was it the done thing to call out to a monk? There was only one way of finding out.

I raised my hand and shouted out a soft 'Excuse me!', that increased in pitch at the end. The old monk turned towards me, and seeing me beckoning him made his way towards my bench. I remained standing to greet him. He came towards me with a gentle smile.

'Hello. Father Bartholomew?' He nodded his head in recognition to his name. 'Sorry about that sudden outburst, but I've been meaning to speak with you.' He spoke sooner than I had anticipated, and with a tone that was low yet level and clear, as if he had thought about every word leaving his mouth.

'And you are Mr. Cross, the man come to see if he can write anything about religion. Perhaps you have come to the wrong place my friend.' The slow words lingered after their exit.

'The wrong place? Does that mean there is a right place to find religion, and that's not in a monastery?' I wanted the sentence to sound both intelligent with a slight slice of humour, because for some reason the old monk had an air about him that made me wish not to disappoint him in my answers. He looked at me with his bagged eyes.

'The right place for religion only occurs when in conjunction with the right time. There can be no religion until a person is ready for it ; that is how religion works Mr. Cross.'

'Please, Julian is fine. So you mean that religion relies on people's weaknesses, waiting for when they are in need of some faith, like in times of grief or loneliness, or

something similar?'

'Yes, it can work that way. But that's just the politics of the church. That is organisational religion, which relies upon its power of fear for its strength. Real religion deals with that aspect of the divine within everybody ; and when I say a person can only receive it when he is ready for it, I mean, Julian, that it can only enter into their very soul when they have reached their own understanding.' He paused, looking at me. I made no movement so he continued. 'Love. Do you know what love is Julian?'

'Sometimes I think I do.' The old man chuckled to himself, obviously amused by my pathetic reply.

'Well Julian, don't think that you can ever love anybody until you have first loved yourself. And I don't mean emotional love or mechanical love ; I mean a love that fills you with an understanding and a unity inside of you. How can one possibly think they are able to love another human if they have not first learnt to love themselves?' I nodded. 'And so religion is like love : how can you expect to find what you need from religion until you have first found a place for religion inside of you.' Father Bartholomew took in a few breaths, squinting his eyes slightly as if in a moment of contemplation. 'But religion', he continued, 'is just the shell. It should not be confused with what we are talking about.'

'God?', I interrupted.

'That is another name for it. What I mean is faith. God is a way for people to be able to focus their faith ; and so likewise religion is that structure which allows humans to comprehend and make sense of what God is. If it weren't for religion, then the idea of a God would be an abstract one for many people. Human minds are weak, they like to have things presented to them in a framework, so they can see the whole finished picture.' He stopped talking and directed his gaze straight ahead. I was not sure what he was looking at, yet his stare seemed to me to be intense. Perhaps he was waiting for me to speak.

'So God is about finding that which is an understanding within ourselves?' I was not sure whether I was being wise or naive.

'Every man can be his own God, Julian. We are all capable of inner development. That is what being human is all about : we must understand that we are incomplete as we are, and so must find the force within ourselves for progress. And in order to progress we must first come to understand ourselves - who we are, our true essence. Then we must find extra strength in order to push our being into a greater awareness of understanding. It is from this heightened perception that one is able to understand things about themselves, and about their position within the cosmic scheme of evolution. Then one is able to comprehend the nature of God.' The old man paused again. I observed his features closely, to see or not whether he was stopping through exhaustion, yet his words had arrived with such an ease of pace, and without being hurried, that they seemed to have been produced with the least amount of energy. 'And here Julian is where one needs faith, for one must search for that reservoir of energy to push themselves : they need to focus. Have you been witness to the sense of life that many people exume once they claimed to have found God?'

'Yes. They all seem so contented and happy', I replied.

'That is true. It is because they have found something special inside of themselves through the focusing of faith - this is the energy and will that should be used for further development. But people are lazy. They say it is only because they have come closer to God, yet in reality they have not moved an inch. They will move nowhere unless they can direct their new force of will. They have not truly understood themselves ; they claim it is all down to their God, and so they sit back and do nothing. They are all beaming with happiness, yet they know nothing. They have no knowledge about life, but just walk around with this fanciful image in their heads of being friends with the all-great creator. It is all just illusion Julian. God is that part of our own undiscovered spirit, and not something to envisage as a separate entity.' He bit his lip, then turned to me grinning, showing a youthfulness I had not before perceived in his manner.

'Why are you telling me all this. It could be construed as being blasphemous.'

'I cannot be blasphemous Julian. And I am telling you this because I can see that you are a seeker.'

'A seeker?' What did the old monk mean by this?

'Yes my friend. I can see it in your eyes. You want to find something, but you don't know where to look. You are like a stray cat lost after the rain.' I was perturbed for some reason. I was not sure whether I wanted to accept what he was saying, it had after all only been a few minutes into our first meeting.

'And you can tell all this after only a few minutes?' Father Bartholomew smiled to himself and made an exaggerated breathing motion as if vacuuming the air deliberately into his lungs with the air of a pleased man. Was he being arrogant or funny?

'That's my job dear boy.'

'What?'

'They say I am the best Master of Novices this abbey has ever seen. And that is because I teach all the new monks what is right, before they let all this nonsense go to their vulnerable brains. That way the knowledge of this monastery will never die away. Many leave to spread their knowledge elsewhere, and a few remain to keep such a presence here. There are a few of us in this place that go beyond blind worship. If it was left to the rest of the old boys, the rest of our days would be spent just nodding in prayers, and then the faith that is God would eventually die away. God moves around with the different ages, yet we must always understand how to reach the faith energy needed for our development. We live in a subjective world, and we must learn not to be a subject to it.

'Too late', I whispered. The old man's head turned. 'Too late because God in his wisdom has already decided that I'm on my way.' He raised his eyebrows in a questioning manner, as if waiting further explanations. 'I have the HIV virus. I caught it from a woman. Call that fate?' I was silent. Had I just sounded like an idiot?

'Have you not been listening?', he retorted in his most severe voice yet. 'Who slept with the woman, you or what you like to think of as God?'

'Me', I answered meekly.

'Shut up then', he replied. 'It wasn't God's wisdom ; it was not fate either. It was simply your own stupid fault. Too much listening to that thing between your legs. You made a

mistake, an error of judgement. Life is no place for second chances ; it plays as fast as you can run, and sometimes faster.' He shook his head. 'Something happens in this world and everybody screams that it's God's fault. God is only a word, a concept for what people have no way of ever understanding. They are mostly just simple people, ready to call on anything for an excuse. The universe is ordered Julian ; it runs by its own laws. Some of them laws we experience here on earth - in science, in nature, in biology : other laws we have no concept of. To the universal scheme of things, mankind is nothing. If you live or die it means nothing. But it can mean something to you, if you are willing to work at it. Unfortunately, you have made for yourself less time. That will mean more concentrated effort. But you must be ready for it. You are a seeker after truth. You would do well , in time, to make yourself ready for the Sarmoun.'

'The Sarmoun?', I interrupted like a confused schoolchild.

'That is something which you may, or may not ever, know about. To you now that is just a word. But you are still as a child, clutching at your thoughts as you would a mother's nipple. You must understand more, then I can teach you. You must want it bad enough to return. You must desire the change yourself. Otherwise you will be free to believe in God with a beard and be mechanical until you die.' He stopped talking, his lips pursed together as if his words were now done. I stared closely at his side profile, unsure whether he did look his years or not. He certainly did not sound like his years, his voice was like a separate entity to his body. His words had seemed youthful, or rather they had a concentration to them that you do not always associate with the talk of old men. His head was nearly completely bald, with a few white strands sliding across his scalp, east to west, like ley lines.

Father Bartholomew excused himself with a solid politeness, yet with a suggestion that we should meet again before I departed. He too knew that my stay would be that of several days as oppose to the full two weeks. Perhaps he did believe that I would return, I don't know. After he had walked back down the gardens and onto the path I suddenly remembered that I had wanted to approach him on the subject of his strange early morning ritual. Yet talking to him had somehow wiped out all other

thoughts in my head, as though his speech was a form of hypnotism and I had listened attentively like a student of Mesmer.

I too left the bench and walked on down to the front of the church. This time, instead of passing by in favour of the farm, I entered by the huge arched door and stood in the nave of this huge building. The architecture was very plain since it was, in religious terms, a relatively new building, dating from the beginning of the nineteenth century. There were no golems or gargoyles as one is used to seeing laden around the famous gothic structures of the Middle Ages. There were no symbolic bass reliefs in this house, just solid brick walls with little ornamentation, except the odd statue placed around in various locations. I looked straight ahead towards the altar : in the east it was, as if walking towards it you had to walk to where the sun rises, giving its light to the world: such stone crosses always faced the east.

Soon it would be Sext ; that short yet sweet service that told the secular man that his dinner would be arriving in a short time. And there were no serpents in this den of thieves.

I waited around, seeing no-one, and after the service, which was attended by several familiar faces which required nods of recognition from both parties, I headed for the dining room for lunch. Again, the guesthouse master Father Thomas said prayers before eating. I just lowered my head as a way of accepting the ritual yet not identifying myself with it. I took a glance around the room. Yes, the Polish woman with her daughter was still here ; the couple with the handicapped son were present ; the old Irish couple were seated smiling as ever ; the fat schoolmistress who adorned a woman's moustache was looking up from her potatoes ; the quiet middle-age lady, who was on her own, was keeping herself to herself ; but where was Michael. Not present again?

I ate my potatoes, my peas, and my lamb chop. Not exactly holy food, yet the monks ate their meals in silence and separate from us ; I had learned that their food was what you might call meek and humble, bread and cheese, and the like.

On the wall to my right was a small framed print of a picture that I had hitherto taken no notice of. Now, for some apparent reason, I became suddenly aware of the

deep mourning colours that sprang out from the image. My eyes, during lunch, were constantly diverted to this picture. After I had eaten up, and was ready for leaving the room, I walked over to the picture and peered my nose close to its depiction.

It showed the dead body of Christ lying on the floor, his skin depicted in a greeny grey tint, and his head resting on a cloth of deepest red. Five figures are seen lamenting beside him, and the one which had caught my eye was the woman dressed in a robe of, what I can only describe as a blue of darkest brilliance. It was a forboding picture ; a background that was sombre and destructive.

'Do you like it? It's called "The Lamentation over the Dead Christ". It was painted by, er, let me think now.' Father Thomas had paused in mid-thought, trying to locate some area of his memory. 'Yes, that's it. It was Nicolas Poussin. It's rather a dark picture isn't it?' I agreed that it was. 'But I like it all the same', Father Thomas continued. 'I have another one by him somewhere, but I think that it is in the private quarters of the abbey. Never mind though. The other one is even darker than this one. It's called "The Deluge" I believe. Anyway, it deals with the great Flood as written in Genesis. Yes, painting is a real talent, a real art. Do you paint at all Mr. Cross?'

'No Father Thomas. I do not have the talent for such things.' I smiled and parted. It seemed that the art of smiling was something that these monks were well versed in. It was fast becoming an addiction ; maybe I had stayed here too long already. Again, I began to doubt my presence here. True, I had made the acquaintance of an intriguing and interesting man, Father Bartholomew, yet little else had occurred. Was it supposed to? To my knowledge the monks of this abbey had just assumed that I had come here to see and experience the atmosphere of a working monastery so that I could say in my article that the religious faith was still holding strong at the end of the twentieth century. So they were just leaving me to my own devices, clever chaps. I could leave any moment if I wished to ; so what was keeping me here?

I tried to think back to the words of Father Bartholomew, how I had to work on myself if I wished to develop in this short time. Also, how we must first find the god in us before anything else. Was this just some more theological hog-wash?

I retired to the library to find the fat comfortable chair that rested in the corner of the room : I wanted to think about leaving. I hadn't been sitting down for more than a couple of minutes when the door opened and Michael came in.

'Ah, Julian, I've been looking for you', he said in a grave tone. 'I thought you might be here. I went to your room first, St. Edward's isn't it?' I nodded.

'Why, what's the problem?' I asked him, seeing by this time that he had already placed himself on the chair beside me.

'Well, you're a writer ; you have an open mind to things. You see, I came here for a reason, a real reason this time ; not like before when I just wanted time alone and to be with God. This time I came hoping to think certain things through.' He looked across at me to gauge my reaction. I remained perfectly still, as if giving him his cue to continue. 'We are born through God into what we are, so why should we have to feel bad about ourselves. I came here feeling happy at first, thinking that I had worked things out, but now I know that I haven't. Some things have started my guilt off again. Seeing people..', he paused, 'seeing you ; it's made me realise that I am who I am. My parents have always been against it, banished me from the house when I was a teenager, saying I was an evil person. But it was through God that I found solace and understanding. Now even the church is against me. You know Father Thomas right? You've spoken to him haven't you?'

'Yeah, I've had one or two words with him - why?'

'Well, I was speaking to him earlier and he wasn't very comforting. I just don't know what to do.'

'I don't know what your problem is, but maybe it's something you've got to sort out between what you believe and how you want to believe it', I said, hoping to console him with the advice.

'But my faith is tearing me apart!' he began to sob in a somewhat melodramatic fashion. He began to lean himself towards me, much like a man finds solace near the breasts of a woman, but then suddenly jerked himself up as does a fool the split second before his actions will give himself away. Michael stood up and without saying a word quickly left

the room. It was very odd behaviour.

But now I was feeling odd. I was out of place myself, literally. There was no need why I should have to linger around here any longer. I decided that I would leave after breakfast the next morning.

I went to my room and packed my clothes - what little I had brought with me - and put everything into my one bag. I did not want to linger around for afternoon coffee so I went into the gardens instead, seeing if I could find the strange Father Bartholomew so that I could be polite enough to say my goodbyes to him. I could find him no-where. I made my way to the cloister for I knew that it was here that the monks did their studying. The door was open so I peeped in. I saw three monks inside, although none of them was Father Bartholomew. Two looked up at me but said nothing, instead just turning their gaze back to their work and ignoring my presence. I left them to it.

I walked around to the front door of the church and entered : the place was deserted. It smelt like claustrophobic prayer : dry prune faith. I could see no-one. I left and walked up to Calvary and slipped away from the footpath and climbed up a few rocks to find myself a seat higher than that of the cross. But it didn't really matter how high a person was or where they were ; all space seemed relative to me. I sat there and surveyed all that my vision could give me. Now I felt like I was really dying. I felt insignificant ; no, worse than that : I felt a sense of worthlessness. I felt as if it all meant nothing, that our lives was just a nano-second in the life of evolution, and that our personal lives - our loves, our griefs, our moments of joy and pleasure, our times of tragedy, our greatness, and our wars ; it didn't really mean a thing. We were all just some insignificant part of what was going on in the universe. Our lives did not mean anything to anyone but ourselves. God is not a guardian : God is just a culmination of laws that makes sure that creation gets created, and death comes to everything. I did not know what to think.

The bells rang for Vespers. I sat there motionless, legs crossed like a West Coast transcendentalist. In another half and hour it would be time for my last supper. I was

ready to welcome it.

I sat down at the dining table. I poured the old couple next to me some water, and passed the bowl of mashed potato over to them. We appeared to get potato in some form or other each day. A good stable diet I presumed. After about five minutes of eating, Michael walked in, slouching like a hunchback. He sat down at our table opposite me and gave me a look direct in the face. He was still wearing his mask of a troubled soul. I poured him a glass of water and passed him the bread from the plate. He managed to smile at me, but that was all. The rest of the meal was ate in silence. I was glad when it was finished since throughout the eating I had Michael sitting across from me who would do nothing but throw intense glances my way. In fact, you could say that at times his glances lingered into stares, but I did not bother saying anything to him for fear of starting off another guilt-trip reaction of some godly kind.

After supper was finished I quickly left the room. I did not want anyone to follow me. I went into the porch and out through the front door of the guesthouse. Like a parent that guesses at a child's needs, Father Bartholomew was seated on the very same bench as earlier. Eagerly I approached him.

'May I?' I beckoned towards the seat. He nodded his head for me to sit down. As soon as I was seated I turned to him immediately.

'Father Bartholomew, would you mind if I asked you something, even though you might find it personal?' As before, without saying anything he just nodded his head as a sign for me to continue.

'Accidentally the other night, or rather early morning, I saw you from out of my window on the lawn here, doing your prayers. Why do you pray naked?' A grin appeared to spread across his face.

'People are afraid of themselves, so they clothe their bodies. They are afraid of the naked form, as if man should not be naked. When I pray it is not like the other ones here, or those of blind faith ; I pray consciously. I pray with my whole being ; and it is not to one abstract God that I direct my will but to the aim of my work.

And when I kneel, I kneel as Jesus would have been on the cross - naked. Even in the divine, people are afraid of the body. When Jesus was crucified, he was not garbed with attire to hide his body ; he was strung up naked, for everyone to see the bare flesh of this man. And yes, I say man : for he was not some physically immortal holy spirit, he was a man like you and me. We are all sons of God. We can all reach the spirit ; the seed is inside of us all, yet we are lazy. *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?* My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' Father Bartholomew looked directly into my eyes for a second, and then continued. 'Jesus cried out as a man suffering, when he was dying. Does the divine spirit cry out like a man?' I did not answer him. He turned his face to look directly in front of him once again. 'He was tempted like a man ; tempted by greed, tempted by power, and tempted by the flesh of a woman. He was a man of conscious humanity, yet still a man. He had a prick like all healthy men. He probably used it several times, or perhaps he didn't. It makes no difference. So why cover up his genitals all the time when he was so clearly naked upon the cross?'

'I don't know', I replied blankly. 'But I thought Jesus was crucified in a loin cloth.'

'No Julian. The church gave us the loin cloth, to protect their martyr from the gaze of the masses, and to retain what they claim to be his dignity.'

'Well', I replied, 'perhaps the church is just afraid of displaying sexuality?'

'The church, my dear Julian, is so very afraid of human sexuality, for its power, if rightly used, can raise us to the gods. Sexual energy is a most potent force, and it can destroy nations and topple kings. So when are you leaving?'

I was struck dumb by this last sudden remark. 'Oh, er, tomorrow morning I was planning.'

'Yes, good. There is nothing here for you just now. You must arrive out of your own desire and not just from a confused whim. When you do so, I will help you. Not here, but another place. Now there are a few things I would like to speak with you about before you leave ; something to work your magnetic centre upon.'

'My magnetic centre?'

'Let us talk. Listen my friend. We are still existing, here in Europe, on the current that

was reunited as a force in Spain, before it became dispersed in a variety of forms. It was an important operation to get certain knowledge over to the West. The Christian pilgrimages, originating from the form established by the Cluniacs, and the Crusades helped to open a line of traffic. We had the Troubadours, wandering players, the Grail quest theme, the mystery plays and the medieval court. It also came in alchemy, the Rosicrucians, and Freemasonry. It all has the same roots. The influence is over here in the West now and we must make use of this opportunity, for.....'

Father Bartholomew talked to me on that bench until the bells rang for the final service of Compline. Of the things he spoke of, I am at no further liberty to divulge at this stage.

Eight o'clock. Lock-up time. I retired to my room early. My head was full of many new thoughts from the talk received earlier. My only aim now was to get some rest and leave this place in the morning.

I had written a few notes down casually into a book, more for my own personal record rather than anything else, and then had begun to read a few pages of the book I had brought with me, which was just a Bukowski novel that a friend had bought me a year earlier for my birthday. I remember taking a look at my watch a few minutes earlier and seeing that it was approaching a quarter to ten, when there came a gentle knocking on my door. I waited in silence, my ears pricked, and the knock came again.

I opened the door, unsure of who the calling guest could be. Michael was standing there, looking coy and sheepish.

'Err Julian, sorry, did not disturb you did I? You weren't in bed or anything?'

'No Michael, I was just reading.' He remained there, standing upon some distant ceremony. 'Want to come in?'

He did not hesitate upon the invitation but marched straight in like a man defying his captors. He walked to the end of the room then turned about to face me, somewhat apprehensive about taking a seat.

'If you want to sit down you can' He let a weak grin form upon his face.

'Not drinking tonight Julian?'

'Nah, I've unfortunately already drunk my small supply. So it's the dry life for me now.'

'Y'know, I do have a bottle of wine that was given to me before I came here. I just brought it along in case I should have reason to open it. If you like I can bring it down and we can have a few drinks?' He waited for my answer, as if it could signal either the beginning or end of the night's conversation. I was, however, feeling weak enough to accept his offer to wetten my throat. So I accepted, and with that Michael quickly left the room and was gone for only a few minutes. I left the door ajar for his return entry, and sat upon the bed thinking of the nectar gliding like a love beast down my oesophagus.

'Ah, I realise that I did not bring a corkscrew with me', he blasted out as he walked into the room, carrying one glass that he must have taken from his room.

'It's okay, I have my Swiss Army knife with me ; that's got one on. Always bring it with me in case of times like this - it's good for opening tins of tuna as well.' Michael still gave off an air of uneasiness. I took the bottle from him (a Merlot), and plunged out the cork. I got my glass from the sink and poured out two measures. Michael began to talk.

It was rambling at first, like listening to a mild man about his memoirs, recalling instances with family and friends that he says had marked him and his character. One or two anecdotes managed to creep their spidery way in, yet apart from that it was largely uninteresting : I remained listening though, repeatedly filling my glass up as he remained upon his angelic first. Then he suddenly stopped his verbal helter skelter.

'Have you ever seen an angel, Julian?' His eyes locked onto me steadfast.

'Mmm, no, can't say I have Michael. I must have been out when they called.'

'No, no, I'm serious', he insisted. 'I have seen an angel you know, and they are waiting for me. They will guide the transmigration of my soul to the next world. I know all about it : that's why I don't fit in here.'

'You might not fit in here', I said, 'but that's no reason why you should want to hurry

your exit. Life is, after all, about experience.'

'But the representatives of God will not accept me in this world.' He remained silent for a brief period, as if twanging some sensitive chord in his spirit. 'Even my own parents do not accept the man I am. But you do, don't you Julian? ; you can understand.'

'I can?', I replied with a bemused tone. I had all of a sudden lost his thread. His conversation had brought me to the centre of the maze, and now he had gone off on a tangent. What was he going on about now? 'I understand what, Michael - the trouble with your spirit?'

'Yes. And maybe you have that trouble too.'

'I do, do I?'

'I think I know Julian ; that's why we became friends so quick.' He went quiet again, waiting for my words to hit him. But I just drank up and poured another. Now he really was losing me. We had not suddenly become friends ; in fact I did not even consider him my friend, and if he had not offered to share his wine with me then no doubt I would have turfed him out by now. I figured that he was just a lonely guy who liked an audience to confess to ; and I was willing to listen to his rantings since he had supplied the refreshments. That was the whole equation in my book.

'We are like David and Jonathan', Michael repeated with a defiant air. 'We uphold the great spiritual bond as told in the Old Testament.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Do you mean you are not aware of that great story?' I replied that I was not. 'Well, briefly, it's about David, who slew Goliath, and Jonathan, the son of the ruler Saul. Now Saul was jealous of David because of his popularity with the people and his ability to succeed him as king. In the first book of Samuel, Saul attempts to kill David, but he fails. Now Jonathan loves David, and David loves Jonathan, despite Saul. And here is the great part, at the beginning of the second book of Samuel, in the first chapter, where David has learnt of the deaths of both Saul and his son Jonathan, he makes a speech. And in verse twenty-six he says, when speaking of Jonathan, 'I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan ; You have been very pleasant to me ; Your love to me was

wonderful, Surpassing the love of women'. Don't you see?' Michael was a face full of cheer now, as if happy that he had finally said what was in his soul, even if it did take an interpretation of the Bible.

'See what?', I returned rather vaguely.

'That the Bible says that love between men is higher than that obtained with a woman. It sanctifies love between men. So we do not have to feel guilty anymore.' Michael tilted his head when looking over at me. Like an alarm bell on Monday morning I was awoken up to the realisation. All the facts began to congeal together like beads of fat. It all made sense now, so much so that I could see Michael's viewpoint, and I could see the pace at which he was gathering his speed.

'Hey Michael, let's not jump the gun here. There's no need for all this 'we' business. If you have some conflict inside yourself, then that's okay and I wish you all the best in trying to sort it out, but there's no need to drag me into it. I'm not suffering.'

'What? Of course you are. I can see it too. Admit it Julian, don't be afraid. There is no guilt in it.'

'Guilt in it?', I interrupted hastily, 'what do you mean about admitting it? I have nothing to admit. I have no guilt about whatever it is. I have no David and Jonathan love for men.'

'Yes you do, you do Julian.' Michael was pressing his words upon me now, and becoming increasingly more insistent. I realised that I would have to make myself clear.

'Look Michael. Let's be straight about this before any misunderstanding occurs. I have no problem with any feelings of sexuality. I do not have a love for men....'

'But what about tonight?' he interrupted.

'Well, what about tonight?'

'Y'know, you inviting me in here, and us drinking this wine together. This is all very sexual, two men being so close together.'

'Hey, hold on now!' I was beginning to raise my voice as I felt an irritation filling me.

'For one thing, I only invited you in because you came knocking on my door, and there's nothing wrong with two people drinking together. Men drink together all the time, and it

doesn't have to mean that they are gay. Right?'

'Awh, come on Julian. I know you are gay too.'

'No. Shut up Michael for Christ's sake. Get it into your head ; you're the gay one here, not me.'

'But you seemed delighted at the idea of us drinking wine together.'

'That's only because I was dying for some alcohol ; it wasn't because I wanted to spend the evening with you.'

'Ah Julian, you bastard!' Michael forced the sentence through his teeth.

'No, I'm not being a bastard, I'm just telling you the truth. Don't see me how you want me to be.' Michael clawed at his hair in a feminine manner, as if vulnerable to each molecule of air that was coming into contact with his skin. He felt open now, like an empty oyster shell where the pearl of great price has been taken from him.

'You're all against me, all of you!', he screamed as he rushed past me and out of the room.

Silence fell. There was nothing else for me to do - I poured the last glass and threw the empty bottle of red wine into the bin. I raised my glass in the air as if to toast all and everything. 'Here's to fuck!'

I reeled back onto the bed and lay with my eyes transfixed upon the crucifix. I knew that I had not given Michael a chance. Like everyone else, I had denied his presence. I had not felt any guilt in my actions. I had acted the only way I knew - by a rejection. Maybe he had wanted true help rather than just to sleep with me : I didn't know. I pictured the guy in my head ; he wasn't all that bad, only a little twisted inside by his contradictory faith and sexuality. I felt a little pity for him, but not much. In a way we were perhaps more similar than I had first realised. Michael apparently was unsure of how to love because of this conflict in him ; and I just did not know what love or emotion meant, anymore than a split-second of some passing feeling, before it vanished once again. Love did not seem to be in my field. It's just that I had never wanted to do much about it. I obviously was not as tortured as Michael in my passion. Perhaps because I had no

faith.

I kicked my shoes onto the floor and turned myself on the bed for sleep.

'Love is a fire
It burns everyone
It disfigures everyone
It is the world's excuse
for being ugly'

Leonard Cohen

It happened after breakfast. I was in my room gathering my few belongings along with the bag I had previously packed, when I heard the commotion : raised voices calling out to the Lord for mercy and the heavy clamouring of sandaled feet upon the stairs. It was like standing back and hearing the sounds from some movie, and where you were there was just silence. All the noise came from another place. I did not belong to the noise, and yet I felt some connection to its occurrence.

I walked out of my room locking the door behind me. As I descended the stairway to the main front hall I was passed by the hurried and worried looking figures of monks in their black and white habits. I carried on walking down the stairs until I reached the bottom. A crowd of anxious people had gathered, whispering amongst themselves as do children with sexual rumours. I stood for a while. I was deciding whether I should stay to hear the news or to pass it on by as if it were a painting.

An old couple approached me. 'Hey young man, have you heard the news?' I shook my head. 'They found that other young man hanging in his room this morning. They say he hung himself on purpose ; that it was suicide. And here in the monastery as well ; in the house of the Lord. Ohh, it's just terrible.' I did not respond to the old couple. I knew who the young man was, and besides, their words irritated me.

Perhaps he got the last laugh after all, I thought to myself. They raise dead people, now they can clear them up.

Father Thomas came solemnly down the stairs with his hands in prayer. 'It is so sad', he

announced to the waiting congregation, 'that a young man like Michael should die without the love of God.'

At these words I felt a sudden rush of sadness enter me like heartburn. I felt as if we were all guilty of some crime, and that we should be thinking of shame instead of God. My mouth opened and I heard some words for the first time that sounded new to me :

'Maybe we are all guilty, Father Thomas, for not understanding love, and so we deny it to others.'

I left a contribution and walked out the front door.

'There was once a man who fell over a cliff. His clothes caught on the branch of a tree which was growing on the cliff-face. He hung there, halfway down, in imminent danger of falling into a river foaming far below.

The man looked up to the heavens, and called out in his fear :

'Is there anyone up there?'

A voice immediately answered :

'What do you want?'

He replied :

'Tell me what to do!'

The voice said :

'Let go and fall!'

The man thought for a moment, looked down again, and then cried heavenwards :

'Is there *anyone else* up there?'

At that point the tree's roots separated themselves from the earth.....'

'Alternative' - A Sufi Tale

I was getting sick of religion ; I wanted to blank it out for a while. It was just too many uneducated people saying too many things and claiming they have authority on it. True, I was no authority either yet I knew what I didn't wish to hear.

I was back at the flat now, staring numbly at the wall like a diseased wingless pigeon. Something had inflated in me for a brief time, and then it had deflated as if punctured on stained glass. I had believed that after my initial drinking bender I was feeling a new life inside of me ; a new inspired sense of aim. And then for some reason I had arrived at St. Bernard's. Was it some instinctive turn after learning of my virus?

Anyhow, my short time there was enough to show me that the way of the monk was not my variety of food. Yet the words of Father Bartholomew had remained in my head like the insertion of fixed ideas. He himself had said that religion could not give what it was that both myself and mankind needed ; then he had virtually sent me packing, telling me to return to him on my own greater volition when I felt the time required it. I just didn't know what to make of it all : it was like a story with no middle

or ending : a catacomb of lost characters. I was not even sure if I wanted to remain any longer in this flat, in this city, or wherever. I was longing to see familiar faces. Unfortunately, the first set of faces that I would be seeing would be that of my doctors, since I had promised to return for a check-up shortly after the first diagnosis, and for them to look at the healing of my arm and wrist. Honestly, I had no idea how I had managed to cope until this far ; necessity maybe. I had never really been one to moan, but then again things had not been like this before. Now, on that immediate and ironic thought, the world seemed suddenly to become as heavy as the gall from Lady Macbeth's breasts ; that thick bitchy bile. It was like a downpour of oppression. I may be dying now, and what do I have to show for it? Who am I to die as a nobody, twisted into some eventual physical form by a fucking virus? I wanted to remain in a perfect physical body for longer, like Apollo or some other iconic Greek statue with small balls. But the plaster was evidently not made for my mould, or else I had smashed the original cast by my own foolish actions. Stony paths will always damage shoes.

I spent the day doing nothing, immersing myself either in reverie or moments of sporadic self-pity. I ate and I drank coffee. I looked at all my possessions to date, and how small they were and yet how much I had identified myself with them and with their dated sentimentality. It was like having a register of emotions that were trapped and kept inside objects, to be given out at intervals of sudden remembrance, like of a place, moment, or event with someone or something that represented the said object.

I no longer wanted to be owned by objects, to be kept in life by them, to be defined by them, or to have to be responsible to their worth. Perhaps I had been lingering too long upon a past and was denying a future for myself. Maybe I was just lingering too long, full stop. It is somehow easier when you don't have freedom because you know what to do and you have to do it. It's as if the human machine is not capable to handle their own freedom, for when it comes to us, what do we do with it? We are afraid of freedom, as if the insecurity and the adventure will kill or cripple us. Sometimes, even though we will fervently deny it with all our will, we prefer not to

have choice, or rather we prefer to think that we have choice even though the reality is that we do not. Choices just seem to make us more muddled and confused like newly borns.

I made an appointment to visit the hospital.

In between time I began to pack together the few belongings I had scattered around the flat. There was not much to collect, since I was always one who, wary of the temporaryness of my stay, always preferred to live within sparse surroundings. I had no pictures upon the walls, except that of a free calendar that I had once picked up, and I had always been rather adverse to dainty, trivial pieces of ornamental decoration. Basically, I had my typewriter and my portable stereo cassette player ; a small black & white television set ; some books ; one African head ; my clothes ; and a few personal items. Other than that my presence was unknown within the flat. It came fully furnished and all I had to supply was that which I needed around me for short times - not much. I had applied several times for magazine and newspaper work overseas as a foreign reporter, yet had never had any luck on this score. Perhaps this was why psychologically I had always made sure that I lived amongst the smallest material belongings necessary, so that if need be I could be ready within a phone call to get rid of my things and go. So a flat to me was not a home - never has been - but instead was just a temporary stopping place until something else came along, like a change of mind perhaps. I liked to wander a lot, but I never sang songs for my living.

It is difficult to pack things with only one hand at your disposal, yet I felt that since I was unable to write properly until my wrist healed, it was useless for me to hang around this place. I was also aware that my bank savings were running incredibly low, and that in another ten or eleven days my month's rent would be due again. I had to make arrangements to end my lease. Luckily, there was no fixed agreement date since this was on no short lease hold. Besides, it had never been a great flat ; just adequate. Still, I needed my bond returned - all £200 of it.

The next few days were spent sorting out these domestic issues. I went to ring the landlord to tell him the news, and to arrange both a moving out date and a time for inspection of the property in respect of my returned bond. I then had to ring my parents - something which does not happen frequently - to tell them that two boxes of my belongings would soon be arriving, via courier, on their doorstep. The only things that I kept with me were a suitcase of my clothes. My typewriter, my books, and all other belongings were soon packed and ready to be on their way.

During the next ten days I did very little. I was more interested in getting away than in exactly what I would be doing as soon as I left the flat behind me. Perhaps I was just looking for some alternative to something I had not yet discovered. I just felt that I needed to exploit some more of the physical life since all this recent theological talk had been drying up the calcium in my bones, and my senses had been under-nourished. I fancied some indulgence while I still thought I had the time. If things were going to get serious, then I needed a few ounces of sugary fun first.

I paid the driver and stepped out of the taxi. The oppressive building of the hospital stood erect before me. It was the morning of my appointment with Dr. Lang. I walked into reception and gave my name. The receptionist smiled politely at me : was she a Christian?

Around me were just rows of nondescript seats, some of them filled with equally nondescript people, all moping around as if they were rehearsing for a role in the living dead films. The whole place smelt of sleep ; of permanent sleep, and of weak acceptance. White - all hospitals are white ; and they have that obsolete geometric presence too. I waited, patiently, talking to no-one ; catching the eyes of no-one. Just watching porters push wheelchairs past ; sometimes empty, sometimes filled, the porters' expression was always the same. It was only a job, nothing else. It did not require too much of your personal life to be given into it. It was like another form of acting, except the world does not see or recognise you and the perks are slim.

'Ah, Mr. Cross, good to see you again. If you'll just follow me and I'll take another look at how you're doing.' I followed Dr Lang into his partitioned area. I sat down and he carefully examined the broken fragments of my arm.

X-rays were taken and compared. Blood sample was taken for tests. The Dr. gave me an indication as to the progress of the healing of my exterior. He then went on to talk about the psychological difficulties of dealing with the HIV virus : he questioned me upon it. We talked. I could think of nothing except that for every minute I remained here talking with the Dr., I was losing a minute of potential living time. Perhaps I would never manifest the virus but be a carrier instead, he told me. Or maybe I would have no effects for a few years and then it would just suddenly come. He mentioned a few possibilities, whilst I responded with nods and the odd eye contact.

I was told that in future, as to the virus and not the arm, I was to be referred to Dr. Scariot, whom I had been introduced to earlier, since he was a specialist upon this matter and more qualified than himself. All this was spoken, and I listened.

To me, it was all words. It was just sounds of syllables strung together into flimsy sentences, supposedly to ease a life. To me, I believed it all existed in attitude. I had a crude faith that the mind and body were intertwined and so one could influence the other. A healthy mind, which I believed mine still was, could be capable of keeping the body in check for a while longer. If things changed - if the body changed - then that would just be the way life decided to be. Nothing else : no great man's handiwork. I did not desire artificial guidance.

'Anything you would like to ask me now?', inquired Dr. Lang in a sympathetic tone.

'No doctor, thank you.'

I was handed a prescription for some medicine and given a check-up sheet for my own records. I walked out. I really did hate such places ; there was no defiance in the air. Such places belong to people who spend their whole lives behind the same doors in the same streets and with the same language of tongue. I left, throwing the screwed-up prescription note in the bin as I reached the outer door. I was out.

The rest of the time slipped by as if out of sorts. I did very little. I had no acquaintances in the area, which at this moment came as good news. So I was just able to slither away when events here came to a head.

My bond was returned to me. The belongings sent home to my parents in boxes. All I had was a suitcase and a thinning bank balance. I was now living upon past earnings. Now I know why I had written those shitty housewife articles in the past. It all came useful at some time.

I closed the flat door behind me. I walked out into the street. An October breeze was catching the side of my face as I walked, with humble pace, to the nearest taxi rank. I was getting a ride to Temple Meads train station. After that, I would have to decide on the moment. Nothing felt like it was fixed in me, but instead everything was floating around inside my system like dust mites.

Anything was possible. I just had to look for an alternative, or else try one for a while.

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER...

'Hence, says Plato, summing up his theory :

"The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole is called Love."

And, as far as I know (admitting freely, of course, that I don't know much), I really do think that Plato has touched the spot.'

Frederick Rolfe, 'The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole'

'These past few months I have been loving alcohol, marijuana and whores. And Amsterdam is where I am to be found. I have been finding love within the strength of sensations. I just wanted to pursue something different, to see what could be found there; to see if it could satisfy me. I say it's been a few months, but I really have little idea about the exact amount of time that I've been here so far. Well, not in days anyway. Yet with every day that does go by, another day of money is spent. I haven't been working here, just living as cheaply as I can, although I'm not doing too good to tell the truth. The savings I have are running thin.

I come back to this hotel room every night. Sometimes I puke before crashing out ; other times I make it to the bed before my mind closes itself down till the dawn.

The room is quite bare, just as I like it. There is a wardrobe, some bedside drawers, a table with two cloth-bitten chairs, and I have an en-suite which has a toilet and bath. This is one of the better rooms actually : I could have gone cheaper and got a room where the toilet and shower are down the hall. I guess I just didn't feel like going that far. My arm and wrist still bothered me for a while, but I don't have to worry about that feeling now.

The view I have from my room is of a narrow street that has one Chinese take-away restaurant on it called 'Fung Yew', which I thought was kind of funny when I first arrived, although it no longer amuses me in the same way ; a couple of small bars (one of which sells the famous Amsterdam green grass) ; a couple of other basic hotels much

the same as mine ; and then what look like several back entrance doors. That's it for the view. Not too many people come walking down the street ; if they do it is usually as a way of getting across to the parallel street which is more livelier. As ever, I have no plans upon a permanent stay.

I only have a bath about once a week, perhaps twice if I am in the mood. It's because my plastered arm used to make it so awkward for getting a decent wash. Besides, once a week keeps you clean enough.

The best thing about this place (I mean the country, not the hotel), is that you can get into a way of living here where you don't need much else besides some basic food, and then beer and dope. This must without a doubt be the easiest place to get stoned in - and all the native people speak such good English as well, which makes for absolutely no language problem. And it's also not a bad place to get away from it all for a while. A guy can really crash out in a lifestyle like this - he can want for nothing more once he has the money in his pocket. When I first arrived here, I spent many of the first days just wandering around the canals of Amsterdam and down all the cobbled streets, taking in the clean views of endless bridges, whilst dodging not only the constant stream of bikes but also the yellow trams with their dinky warning bells. It was fun and somewhat free ; different from all that stuff back home. I would spent mostly every afternoon in coffee shops or bars just getting mellow with a few joints, watching the rain come and go, and people strolling by. Very definitely a European city, with its mix of nationalities that perhaps all come here for the same reason as everyone else. If it ain't the dope then its the whores. And I've had a few whores as well.

God, my head is fucked man. My sleep is really out of any kind of pattern. I wake whenever I happen to wake, and you can bet that there isn't much of the morning left to get a grip on. No, the early afternoons are always my breakfast times. I get dressed and go out into the street to grab a sandwich from a delicatessen or a similar place. Then maybe I will stroll into a coffee shop for a strong black and perhaps roll a morning joint

to stimulate the brain into some sort of muted action. So I have wasted endless afternoons in this way. And I didn't mind doing it : it was all about having fun and enjoying yourself. All those previous questions that I had tried to think about when everything started to happen at once. I thought that there was some great mystery or meaning to it all. So when I arrived here I just wanted to let it all sort of hang loose and forget that there was supposed to be any mystery to life. Things just come and go so quickly that you begin to distrust in all the ideas that rush into your head. So different pleasures in life took a greater priority.

It's just that you can't see the spirit, or whatever name it has, because it lies invisible. So why should I be trying to feed an invisible child? It has always been said that you look after your own first ; so what I know, and what I can call my own, is that which I can touch, smell, and see. Father Bartholomew might of been right when he whispered to me that I had lost connection with my higher part - but what exactly does that mean when you have to worry about eating, sleeping, and generally looking after yourself in this world. Pleasure is that which you can measure by the excitement it produces within the alcohol blood, in the grass brain, and upon the used skin. If death is what comes to us as the final answer, then as with all equations the end result depends not so much on getting it right, but rather that you've shown you did the working out. And I arrived with a head full of equations : I've just been trying to do a bit of working out ever since. For me, that has been done easily in a place like this.

Yeah, when I first arrived I got offered dope from all street corners. They could tell that you were a tourist by the way you had to dodge the trams and the bikes like a novice, so they would always make a direct line over to where you were walking. 'Hey mister, need sorting out? Skunk, sensimille, hash, cocaine?' Sometimes, if they were seated on their bikes, they would ring their little silver bells to get your attention. 'Hey, hey man, listen to me ; I can get you anything you want. What do you want man?'

But you just brush them away with your hand and a quick 'No thanks man', and keep on walking. I didn't need it : you can buy all you want in the bars and coffee shops.

Anyhow, I soon managed to find the bars that suited me ; usually the cheapest ones where you sit in a booth in front of the pool table.

Yeah, my first week there and I met these two American guys playing pool in this rock bar : shit music but cheap beer and good skunk. They offered me a game of pool, then they realised that I had one arm bandaged and that just seemed to crack them up. They thought that I was some injured cripple. Anyhow, I still managed to roll a decent joint since I could work the fingers on my right hand by this time. So they bought me a drink, we had a few smokes, and then we ventured down to the red light area. What were there names? Something like Travis and Randy? Naah, only kidding. It was Jack and Kyle. It was a good night. We hopped into all the bars on the way down there, so by the time we got down to the area, which was as busy as a Sunday market, we were all staggering like shot grouse. These guys were telling me how they were on a world cruise after they had inherited their parent's fortune because they had died in an accidental car crash. So here they were, walking in together into an oriental whore's chamber for a double number. That was the last that I saw of them. I remember that was the night I picked Natalie up and brought her back to my room.

Natalie stayed for just over two weeks. We just stayed in mostly every night with bottles of wine, or sometimes vodka, which was her favourite. She used to sit there listening to me reading out poems by Charles Bukowski. It was fun at first. She was a good smoker too, and been around a bit. I told her straight off about the HIV. She seemed pretty cool about it ; just made sure that I always wore a rubber. And she liked being on the top best. But the thing about Natalie, well one of the things, was her incessant talking during sex. It would be all the time.

'How's that my baby. Do you feel it? Like the way I move, yeah?' And she would be there squirming herself upon me and throwing out all that crap. And then, further into it, she would start reeling off her shopping list, like 'ah yeah....gotta get some more deodorant spray...remind me Julian to get some of that summery flower spray, the one in the thin blue can : and some spray for me hair....yeah..ohh, gotta get spray for hair.

Remind me won't ya, tomorrow, yeah?'

I suppose the truth of it was that it didn't bother me too much ; it was kind of fun to hear her wavery tone of voice. But that's the least of it. After about seven or eight days her tentacles gradually came out to get a better grip. She first started it that afternoon we came back from getting stoned and drunk in the park. As soon as we had walked through the door her rattle began.

'Hey Julian, I know it's only been a short while but we're good together. We are suited to each other. Why don't we tie the knot and then go off to Europe. We could go to Paris or somewhere like that. And when the money runs out you can get a job baby. Your arm will be better by then. We don't need too much money.'

'Oh Natalie, cut it out will ya. Christ, we've only been with each other a few days. Besides, I came here not to get tied down. Next thing you'll know is you'll be wanting kids.'

'And what's so wrong with that? It's all right for you men, you don't give a shit. It's us, always us women who have to sort out when to have babies. You men are so lazy that if it was left to you, you'd never get around to populating the race.'

'Ah, don't exaggerate. I'm sure there'd be enough accidents to keep the world in check. Anyhow, how can I have a baby, eh? Think about that.'

'Well, what about if I had a baby by another man.'

'Go ahead then. Find another man.'

'No, I didn't mean like that. I meant you could still father it ; I'd just get another man to get me pregnant.'

'Fuck off.'

And that's basically how it went. Anyhow, poor old Natalie didn't last long much after that. Her cute but straggy 6' frame, with her dyed blonde curls, was always shaking with nervousness and insecurity. The only time she would be quiet and still was when I would read the poetry to her. I think I probably liked her best then. That was it really. I kicked her out soon after.

Things didn't change. I carried on drinking, smoking, and visiting the whores from time to time. The good thing about the whores here are that they are clean. It impressed me. They take you into a back room which has a bed and a sink, and they automatically put a rubber on you as soon as you get hard. They don't mess about - no raw skin touches their soft hard flesh. And then when you are done they offer you both a tissue and the sink to get washed up in. And most of them are quite friendly. They always ask you the straight-forward questions like :

'So where are you from then?' And you'll say 'England'. And that will make them laugh, so they say with a smile, 'yes, but where in England?' Then you'll get to talking of different places in England, and the whore (who sometimes you ask their names), will tell you the places where her past clients have come from. Then at the end, when the talking and action is over, she'll politely put her hand out for the money. Like I said, it's all done very cleanly.

But now that I'm running short on cash I'm increasingly spending my evenings staying in the room, always with a bottle of something though. At first I was always buying bottles of Southern Comfort ; that worked a treat. Now though it is bottles of red wine more often than not. I sit up on a night, smoking a few joints of grass, and reading the books of Bukowski that I buy from the local English bookstore (actually, it's called 'The American Bookstore'), but that still means it's in English, and not Dutch.

I haven't read a newspaper for about seven weeks now. There could be a nuclear war in progress and I wouldn't know about it. That's kind of ironic when you think about it. I mean, the reason I'm here was that I wasn't ready to start thinking about a spiritual learning, and the main thing that worried me was that by accepting a teaching I would have to withdraw from the world, and from everything in it. So what am I doing now? It's funny how alternatives can have a similar effect but in a different way.

Even when I'm drinking, smoking, or screwing, I get this feeling like I'm pursuing something. It's an immaterial object ; something I cannot grasp, like it may not be there at all. But I'm driving myself like this for a reason. I'm just not sure what it is.

At times it feels like I'm being given time off for this indulgence, as if waiting for the time that I will wake up from whatever it is. Is it that I am walking narrow on a wide path or too wide for the narrow path?

Oh man, I remember that time that I nearly fell into the canal, and this black guy came along and helped me out, and then he pulled a knife on me and took what money I had left. And that's true. I was making my way home from one of the bars, and I'd gone for a piss behind one of the trees on the embankment. So I stepped back to button myself up and I tripped over one of its raised roots and fell flat on my back, with my head gradually sliding further towards the edge of the canal.

'Give me you hand mister', says a voice. So I hold my hand out, too drunk to do much else, and he grabs me and pulls me up. I was just about to walk away when he demands something for his services. Naturally, I gave him a tip : I told him not to go pissing behind trees. Next thing I know this guy has this small blade pointed at my belly. 'What the hell' I think ; give him the god damn money. I didn't have much on me, only about 15 Guilders, which is roundabout £6. So I just handed it to him and carried on home.

Like I said, you can get what you want in Amsterdam, so long as you don't ask for too much. Then again, every place has things that are the same. Everywhere has beer, wine, and other things if you have the money. I guess a room is a room. I could be anywhere, sitting in a room just like I am now, with a bottle before me, some cigarette papers, a bag of dried leaves, and an open book of printed words. Maybe Susannah was right : maybe the world never changes, it just *is*. She said that it was us that changed, or had to change, and that the world carried on as ever. Well, it was something like that anyway. Besides, best not to think about any of that past now. That was the first time that Susannah's face had returned to me since I left that place behind me. Don't think of any of the others now. Just Father Bartholomew ; I only think of him because of those words he said to me. He said it would catch up with me some day, and maybe I would know it and perhaps I would not be able to recognise it if it was wearing the face of my mother.

Yeah, my parents. I haven't spoken to them for a while, or written them a letter. Ohh man, the more I sit here and read in this room the more I just end up drinking and then crashing out at some ungodly hour. And if I go out, which I've been doing too frequently since I got here, then I just stagger back fucked off my face and with another cashless empty pocket.

I tried writing a few things but nothing good came out. I got this pad with me and a few pens that I have lying around the room, so sometimes I try to write a few ideas down. Some nights I write poetry, but then when I look at what I've written in the morning I realise that it's just drunken, stoned bollocks. I've had a couple of ideas for a novel, which would be good if I got around to writing that. I wanted to start writing a novel when I was living in Bristol, but things just got in the way and I never got around to starting it. I keep telling my parents back home that I'm soon going to begin my magnum opus ; maybe it's something that I should start now.

I got this title for one. It's called 'The Butterfly's Net'. The brief storyline so far is that this middle-aged bloke, who is a divorcee from a loveless marriage, and who is fairly unbalanced within himself, goes out and kidnaps an attractive young woman who is, lets say, in her early twenties. He takes her back to his flat and after stripping her naked, ties her to his bed and while he doesn't do anything to her, physically anyway, he just keeps her tied up so that he can look at her. Anyway, the story goes that the young woman and the bloke strike up a rapport between one and another, and she, being a clever woman, begins to realise this man's dejected state of mind. And the bloke, who observes the personality of his victim, begins to empathize with her. Eventually they begin to see each other's side of the story and, most importantly, the bloke comes to see himself through the eyes of his victim and begins to evaluate himself from another person's point of view. It's sort of a psychological study of human behaviour and the working of human relationships when placed in extreme circumstances. I've had the idea for about five weeks now but so far I haven't written anything. Maybe I should do more about clearing my head up.

I think this is what I wanted. This is the real living. Here I am in a cheap hotel, buying cheap food, and experiencing what life has to offer. I don't question every day as it comes, I just try and live inside of it. Now that the bandage has been taken off my arm I have a lot more mobility. Yeah, it was about time it came off. I went to a hospital here in Amsterdam and had it removed after they had checked it. That took some out of my savings. The wrist and knuckles on my right hand are still weak so I have to be careful when use I them ; have to gradually introduce them to the usual jobs they do, and besides, the bones in my finger are still not exactly straight, but they will do. That's my main reason for not starting any writing. I have to wait until they are properly healed, otherwise I could just damage them further.

Y'know, I got to admit it, I don't go out into Amsterdam much these days. Sure, it was all interesting and new when I first got here. I mean, getting lost within all those cobbled streets, especially when every bridge looks the same. Yeah, it was kind of fun to see a new place with all its people. But this country, despite having liberal laws here in Amsterdam ; it's still sort of boring. The people are fairly straight. I don't think I'd ever want to marry a Dutch girl. Christ, have you seen them! They're all thick and sturdy as tree trunks. All got good bodies on them mind you, and they do keep in shape ; got to give them credit for that. But they are sure some sturdy women. Mostly blondes as well. Ah no, Natalie wasn't Dutch ; she was an American. American women are easier to say 'fuck off' to because they're used to hearing it all the time from their own stupid jocks - so what difference is my fuck off gonna make?

Anyway, all I have to do now is to decide what I want to do next. Luckily I haven't exhibited any signs of manifestation from the HIV virus yet. Maybe there's still time to do a few things first.

What I'm thinking of doing is moving into a cheaper room, one that has the toilet and shower in the hall. That will probably save me some money for the time being. If it

comes down to it I can always get a job whilst writing the novel in the evenings. Maybe even I could find a cheaper hotel altogether. The ones nearer to the other side of town, near to where the red light area, perhaps they'll be cheaper.

You know, looking at a bottle of wine it's amazing the technique and method that's been perfected over the decades, no, more than that, it's probably over the centuries; I mean, every era has shown the growing and drinking of wine. Remember that famous story in the gospels where Jesus changes those barrels of water into wine. Yeah, wine has always been about. It's a part of our culture. Just take that bottle of wine I have in my hand before me. How many years has that had to mature in it's barrel?

What?, shit ; well, I guess one year is better than a few months. But take expensive wine. Yeah, I'd love to get my hands on that. A good decent bottle is worth something these days. If I had the money I'd like to start collecting wines. Maybe when I'm older.

Hell, I might not even be around when I'm older. Anyhow, living for now is more important. To live as a human, as a physical human, and to experience the pleasures that a physical body can experience. We were made prone to these sensations. We were made to lift up the glass and to be able to feel the alcohol trickle down the throat as if it was heaven's juices. Why do we spend so much time worrying about God when we don't even know what it's like to live like a man and to experience that which being human means we are able to experience? We should indulge in our lives, live like.....'

I put the pen down. It was all a lie, and I knew it. The noise in the street, now that dusk had fallen and people were out in their polished clothes, was rising through the open window and disturbing my solitude. Things had been going from bad to worse. I started out trying to live the romantic life : the live for today ethic that so many glossy annals of history are filled with. I began to drink heavily, and then I started to smoke a lot. I had been after sensations ; a physical reality, in case this was the only one.

I finished off the glass of wine I had in my hand, went to piss in the toilet, then

left the hotel room. I needed a walk : some nights I need to get out.

The narrow streets between bars were crowded as ever, with people walking in numerous states looking for the next place to rest. If you looked in their eyes briefly when passing you were able to see whether they had filled themselves up with either beer or drugs, or sometimes both. I had been in that 'both' state many times. I had walked catatonic through the byways of Amsterdam without knowing the roads that I was walking ; not knowing the bars that I was entering into. Several times, and quite unexpectedly, I would find myself, as if suddenly waking up, in the midst of the flashing strobe lights of some dance club. How I had managed to get in there I don't know.

But now I was just walking along, with only alcohol in my blood, keeping to myself like a stray man. Couples passed me in their conversations and I could snatch brief words away from them and make them a part of my world, as if I had stolen a fragment that did not belong to me. The fragrance of perfumes was another thing I stole as I touched past the shoulders of women who were following the lines of a different direction.

I was realising now, as I trod the path of aimless feet, that I had lost the aim that I needed in my life. I had by-passed it, thinking it perhaps could be disguised under something else. It was there, I had felt it earlier, yet I had doubted it, fearing that it was not me I was listening to. But things were still churning up inside of me, like I had neglected to feed some internal hunger. It had been calling for a while. I was trying to live the life of a wandering romantic, but so far I had achieved nothing. I needed to know, and not just to watch. If I stand still, being the same man that I always was, then life will not be able to give me any more. Life doesn't change ; it doesn't have to. I passed a fast food shop where you cook your own chosen meal in a wall of microwaves. The place was full. I was standing in the midst of a microwave food hungry nation.

It was starting to rain now. It was going to be a heavy one. You could hear the initial droplets begin to hit the shop canopies. I continued to walk. I did not want to

duck into some shop doorway only to find that I was squashed against another dozen people all trying as hard as me to keep dry, and all our separate smells mixing like gaseous elements. So I walked a little faster, but not much.

'Hey! Watch out, oi!' There came a crash and one or two voices belonging to strangers suddenly raised themselves. I turned around and saw the buckled wheel of a bike spinning ecliptically ; its driver thrown onto the concrete road. A drunken man lay howling and cursing on the pavement, nursing his leg. The young man whose bike it had been was sitting on the floor, with a small group of people crowding around him, blood running in lines down his face. He was stung from the accident and made no sound. I looked at his face : it still displayed the shock of finding something unexpected in his path. The drunken man should not of been there. But somehow he was.

I saw now the unexpected nature of things, and I walked on.

'Earthly fame is nothing but a breath of wind,
Which first blows one way and then blows another,
And brings a fresh name from each fresh direction.

What greater name will you have, if you are old
When you put aside your flesh, than if you had died
Before you had given up baby-talk and rattles,

Once a thousand years have passed?'

Dante, Purgatorio, XI

I opened the door wearily and walked in. I had just returned from working in a factory packing boxes of fruit. I needed a beer and something to eat. I took my coat off and threw it onto the nearest chair.

'Did you pick up the vegetables?' Julie called from the bathroom. I could hear the sound of one or two clicks. It must mean that she's sitting on the toilet cutting her toenails again. I realised that I had forgotten the vegetables.

'No, sorry, I just plain forgot.' I did not have to wait long for her reply. It was as I expected.

'Oh Julian, how could you! I've been waiting for those vegetables. We need them to cook for tea. You could of at least remembered!'

'Bloody hell Julie, I've been working all day, and it's starting to piss me off. Just standing there packing boxes all bleeding day in the freezing cold. Why didn't you get the vegetables, you only work half days.'

'Because I asked you to, and you said okay. What if I had bought some vegetables and then you'd come 'ome with some as well. We'd 'ave wasted some money then. If you'd asked me to then I would of picked them up.'

'But you couldn't be arsed to pick em up, that's why you asked me', I shouted back at her.

'That's only cause I thought it would be easier for you to pick them up. If you didn't want to then you should 'ave said. I'd pick them up instead.'

'Yeah sure', I replied sarcastically.

'Not need to get like that', Julie bellowed back. It's your tea were talking about anyhow.

'What you mean, it's my tea?'

'I've already had a little snack earlier. I'm not too hungry right now.'

'Oi, what did you eat?' I was getting irritated now at Julie's smug answers.

'I had a cheese and humus sandwich about an hour ago.'

'Did you use up the last of that humus?'

'Yeah why? There was only a small bit left anyhow. Only enough for one sandwich.'

'I know there was only enough left for one sandwich', I replied in a cynical voice, 'that's because it was supposed to be for my sandwiches for work tomorrow. I saved enough on purpose so I could have it tomorrow. You know that humus is mine.'

'Well its all gone now!', Julie shouted back.

'Bloody hell Julie, you're just fucking useless sometimes.'

'Piss off yourself, fuck-face.'

I walked over to the other corner of the room where the fridge was located and grabbed myself a beer. I looked out the window ; it was already dark now and I could see nothing except the odd glisten from the light reflecting off the patches of snow on the ground. I don't know why I was drinking cold beer when I was already cold inside. I needed a good cooked meal inside of me. Julie had been a real pain today. I sat on the brown striped sofa, sipping the beer, thinking about how it was only another two more days to the weekend. I had no plans ; perhaps it would just be the usual, me and Julie going down to the local for a drink. The landlord knew Julie's real age, but he liked her and didn't mind. Besides, she did look older than she was, and would probably pass for eighteen. Julie was actually only fifteen. I had met her whilst I was staying in Amsterdam. She was at the supermarket counter buying only a loaf of bread, which cost about 1.40 Guilder ; she got the change out of her pocket and then happened to drop a

few small coins on the floor. They rolled underneath the counter and she was unable to retrieve them, so she was a few bits short. I could hear she was English by the accent of her swearing. I gave her the money to buy the bread, and that was about that really. I never thought she was fifteen at the time ; I would of said more like seventeen. Anyhow, we had a couple of beers, a smoke, and had a good time. When I found out that she was sleeping on this guy's floor whom she hated I offered her to stay with me. And we've been together since.

We moved to London about eight weeks ago, and I managed to get this job in a fruit warehouse. Shit work, but we needed the money. Now Julie has got this part-time job doing baby-minding.

'Aren't you going to cook yourself something to eat?' came Julie's voice through the closed door of the bathroom.

'What do we have in?' I mumbled back.

'We've got some potatoes and beans in. You can have jacket potato with beans, or even beans on toast if you want.'

'How long do jacket potatoes take in the oven?'

'Er, probably about half an hour ; maybe forty minutes.'

'Ah, stuff it then, I'll have beans on toast. Still got some HP left haven't we?'

'Yeah, there's still some left in the cupboard.'

I walked over and put a clean pan on the stove. I got hold of the rusty metal can opener and opened the can of beans. I was ravenous.

It had been Julie's idea to move to London, since we had both gotten bored with Amsterdam and wanted to get back to the English scene, and to the good old English pub. The thing that attracted me to Julie was that she had an independence about her, and her thin frame, which on first looking appeared fragile and brittle, proved to be resilient and resourceful. She was slender indeed, and I was attracted by her small breasts. But she could still be as stubborn as hell sometimes, and had a temper like a

man's. When I first met her Julie had her dark hair cut short ; now she was growing it long. I told her about the HIV early on, so as to get it out in the open before anything started. Her first question was whether I was bi-sexual or not. This amused me, and told me that she still had a bit of the fifteen year old in her. But to be fair she has been alright about it. Well, she has been more than alright.

I stirred the beans and checked the toast. Julie was still locked in the bathroom. Either her nails were proving to be real hard bastards to cut, or else she is suffering from constipation. This flat was real dull though. It had that musty feel to it, like the walls and floors hold the shit from all the past tenants, and no-one has ever bothered to clean them, so they just fill up with grime and mustiness until a perpetual odour is released like dusty perfume into the air. And it is very definitely a brownish/beige type of flat. Julie has done her best to brighten it up though, what with buying a couple of plants and a small second-hand coffee table. She's also done some pictures (she said she wanted to be an artist but after rejection from art college she has neglected it). Some of them are pretty good, colourful and lively. We've just stuck them on the wall with drawing pins. There's one above the fridge showing the bar that we used to always drink in while in Amsterdam. When I see this picture, it just wants to make me drink more ; so I keep returning to the fridge to get more beer, and then I see the picture again so I just keep on drinking. I won't let her take the picture away. She tried to take it down once after she heard my excuse for drinking, but I wouldn't let her.

Why is she taking so long in the bathroom?

'Hey Julie'

'What?'

'Just checking that you haven't fallen down the toilet or anything. What yer doing in there anyway - the Times crossword?'

'Oh shut up Julian. I'm busy in here.'

'With what?'

'Wouldn't you like to know.'

'Actually I would', I shouted back eagerly.

'Well, you might very well find out soon.'

I left the conversation and poured the beans over the buttered toast. I smeared the HP all over like a brown cascade. As I sat down with the plate on my lap I could hear the sound of sirens passing beneath the window in the street below. The thing about living here was that you constantly got interrupted with such sounds ; the only contentment in this was trying to guess to which emergency service the sirens belonged to. But after a while you get wise to this game also. But noise does not so much interrupt anymore as integrate. You learn to absorb your surroundings instead of always fighting back against them.

But as I was saying about Julie. She was very understanding of the HIV thing. She said that it was just a part of life : you pick some things up, you lose some things, and some times you also get lucky, and that was it.

When she said that she'd fallen in love with me she insisted that I no longer wore any protection. Of course I was strongly against this. I thought it was ludicrous that she would want me to be inside of her without wearing anything. And worse than that - if you can call it worse - is that she wanted me to come inside of her as well. Julie was taking the pill at the time, but it was the case of my infecting her that was the major concern. I told her that I would not be able to put her to such risks and that she should forget about it. So she did - for a while. Then she suddenly came back to it whilst we were in bed. She was engineering the whole scene ; she knows that a person is vulnerable when they are naked in bed, exposed and sentimental. Why be with me if she could not be with me in the total flesh?, she argued. Julie claimed that if I had the virus then she would be willing to share it with me. Total insanity. Julie is something of an obsessive, that much I have learnt.

The toilet flushed and I heard the ruffle of jeans being pulled up over the bare flesh of the thighs until they covered the groin snugly. A few seconds later and the bathroom

door opened and Julie appeared, looking serious and awkward, her T-shirt hanging limply outside of her denim jeans ; her young face was marked with too much introspection for a young lady : grooved forehead that creased her plain skin. She walked over to where I was finishing up my last few beans and slouched on the sofa next to me. Her head turned in that child-like fashion, and I could see that she had washed her face.

'Not been crying have you?' I asked sympathetically.

'Might have', she responded flatly. I was quiet for a while, but Julie remained fixed in her position, the eyes looking inwards as if trying to recall the features of her greatest memories.

'So what's up then? Something must be on your mind.'

'Mmm..' Julie pursed her lips. 'I got a letter this morning. It arrived just before I was gonna leave.'

'And?', I prompted.

'It was from a girlfriend I knew in Amsterdam. You remember Alice, the one with the long scraggy brown hair ; the one who you said was screwing that barman for free drinks.'

'Yeah', I laughed, 'I remember that one. Out of her face most of the time. So what's she up to now - screwing the Lord Mayor for his privileges?'

'It's not funny Julian!', she burst out almost in a rage. 'You always take the piss out of everything. But it's not funny what my friends have to do to survive out there.'

'Whooh..... hey, calm down, I was only joking.' I briefly paused before speaking again.

'Anyway, what did the letter say then?'

'She said that....Julian, remember that guy with whom I was staying with ; y'know, I was sleeping on his floor when I met you?'

'I remember. That was the guy who you didn't really like.'

'Well, I didn't like him at that time, but we were good friends once.'

'Yes, and? What has he got to do with anything?'

'Alice has just told me that he died from an overdose last week. He OD'd on heroin, the

stupid fuck.'

'Mmm....bad shit eh?

'Yeah, shame. But that ain't the least of my worries. I'm also pregnant.' I turned in a state of silence to look at Julie. She raised her eyes as if questioning, also in silence, the immediate situation. She almost looked like a gorgeous fish.

'I've just done the home test in the toilet, and it came out positive.'

'But you haven't been off the pill for long!'

'I guess you just have potent sperm Julian. And we have been going like the clappers recently.'

'Yeah, well that's the boredom of work for you. Packing boxes of fruit all day just gets me horny. So you're really pregnant then?', I asked as a final check.

'Well, according to the home test I am, but I'll have to get a doctor's appointment to make sure. What do you think?'

I frowned, deliberating on the options and trying to be both sensible and practical about the whole thing.

'There's always the option of an abortion.'

'You fucking cunt!' Julie screamed like a branded stallion, flinging the sofa's cushion into my face. 'You fucking wanker. Is that all you can say? Get a fucking abortion! Jesus Christ Julian.....'

'Hey, anyhow, how long 'ave you known about this. You never said anything to me about your suspicions.'

'I wanted to be sure ; that's a woman's prerogative.'

'Oh please, don't give me any of that woman's shit. You're like a race with your own language sometimes.'

'Well you're just a plain misogynist sometimes.' Julie liked to sound forceful by using such words. It made her feel older than her tender years.

'But you're only fifteen still.'

'So, I still want the baby.'

'But what about all that stuff we talked about earlier, eh?'

'What stuff?', she replied nonchalantly.

'Y'know, about my virus. The kid could be born already being HIV positive. What about that?'

'Well at least we'll be giving it a chance for life. What chance our we giving our child if we kill it first?'

'Stop calling it 'our child' will yer. It's not even a child yet, it's just a piece of congealed flesh - a globule fused from my sperm and your egg. It's nothing yet.'

Julie started to cry. 'You're so insensitive sometimes. This is our child, and I want to love it. And I want you to love it too. I want us to be a family. This can bring us together. The baby, our baby, will make us stronger. Oh Julian, please say that you want it.'

I lifted up Julie's loose T-shirt and patted her belly. I kissed her flat flesh. 'Are you sure your little opening can cope with giving birth to a baby?' I asked teasingly. Julie grinned her cheeky schoolgirlish smile. 'Well, if I can take you inside me after you've been drinking, then I'm sure my tiny cheeks can squeeze out a small sprog.' I kissed her. 'And the HIV?' Again Julie just smiled : 'I'm sure we can all live with that.'

That next week I went looking, during my lunch hours, for better work. If I had to support Julie whilst she stayed at home in the last couple of months of her pregnancy, and then to support a family once the baby arrived, then I would need a higher paid job. The fruit packing job I had just done because it was offered immediately and it was ready cash. Now it was perhaps time to flash my earlier credentials : to get back on the road of life. I had a degree under my belt ; I was a published magazine writer ; I had experience of travel. All I had to do now was to smarten myself up and go job seeking.

The idea of a family began to gradually appeal to me. Maybe it was time to start settling down. Although I could not be wholly convinced at this stage, I was curious about where this type of life would take me. Yet I was still assailed by those other thoughts that nightly tugged at me : was I really doing the right thing? Would I regret

this path when I was older, when it would be too late?

Luckily, Julie had not entered marriage into the equation. I had squared this issue with her early on, and I was relieved to find that Julie had the same thoughts. A baby did not necessarily have to automatically mean marriage. This is, after all, the twentieth century.

Julie had been like a glowing angel from that moment onward. The idea of a family sparkled in her like God's dew, and it all helped for the days to go smoothly. Sometimes I was apprehensive ; other times I was elated. I was hoping that I could enjoy this for a while, and when a few weeks later I was offered a job working as a librarian at one of the County Council's major central libraries, the ambience of things seemed to be smiling. Perhaps the job could also serve as a means for acquiring the research I might need if I was to begin writing that belated novel I had always inspired to.

I arrived home from my last day at the fruit packing warehouse. Julie had cooked a special dinner for us both, with candle light and red wine. It was an Agape feast : a love feast like a Last Supper. It was good to be like this ; to be in a room with a partner, sharing something between two.

We raised our glasses in a toast : 'to whatever life, in her wisdom, may bring for us'. The glasses clinked. 'And what is your choice for the baby's name?', asked Julie in a womanly tone. I paused for a while. This same thought had been roaming around in my mind for some time now. 'If it's a girl', I said, 'I would like the name Ophelia.'

'And if it's a boy?' Julie said in an eager interruption.

'If it's a boy, then I would wish to call him.....Julian Jnr!'

This turned the love feast into a laughter feast. We both got very drunk that night. And very passionate.

'Everything happens to Everybody'

G.I. Gurdjieff

Not many people attended the funeral.

They burned the body as if it were firewood. I could, as I was standing, hear the nauseating sound of the crematorial music. I wished there to be silence.

A few friends gathered around in gesture, each lamenting only that small part of her which they knew. I was branded the killer. Dressed in black, I knew the world went on its way like some enormous self-generating steamroller, not aware of each tiny cell that it destroys in its path, just as we are not aware of the cells that die within us daily.

The words spoken to aid her passing fell like dead fleas from a stray dog's back, and I heard them hit the ground, loud as hydrogen balloons bursting, stinging me as fallout rain.

I left the crematorium before the last note had faded. I walked out of its quiet corridors and through its oppressive doors. I was not running away from anything, but only detesting the distaste of sterile formality and gilded ceremony. I knew Julie would think the same way as I. She was a fool. She had once been a brave fool. Julie had done everything by emotion : thought by emotion and acted by emotion.

Julie had a miscarriage. She had wanted this baby beyond anything else I could have given her. It was not long after that Julie discovered that I had indeed given her something lasting, and the doctors soon confirmed this. She had asked me for a life ; so I provided her with some death instead. She never forgave me for allowing her young mind the right to make such a choice. I was blamed for giving in to her emotion.

Julie had stained the bath red with her blood. Her wrists had smiles like you see on dead fishes. Her eyes did not know where to look, and her hair floated as dark loose seaweed

caught in a rock pool. It was three weeks before her sixteenth birthday.

Three weeks later and I was no longer a librarian. Books somehow lost their flavour. I blew out the sixteen candles that stood in the pink icing, but I did not make a wish. Wishes should only be for that which lies within the realm of the possible.

Another life had vanquished before my eyes, as if by my own immoral actions I had caused these such things to occur. I could no longer speak to myself, unsure if I was worthy of the conversation. I could not permit me to go further like this, caring little for those around me as if each person was a separate entity and unattached to the world outside. People were connected on a greater level than I had ever had thought to realise. I had been a bastard ; perhaps that was why I was dying like this, from the inside out.

I raised my glass of milk and toasted the world through the window. Even in death, another can find life.

THE FINAL LETTER

'Things which have to be tackled have to be done at the right time. That time is generally soon.'

Jalaluddin Rumi

Justin, how do I finish?

It is hard having to write the final letter. Yet you must hear the truth from my own words. I have told you how I came to be here : perhaps I have not fully completed my own story for you. Let me finish.

After the death of Julie I needed some time alone. I did some further roaming, aimlessly, and also much thinking. I needed to look at my life anew ; to see my mistakes and the morality of my actions. I must admit to you that my inner thirst had never settled itself. Wherever I was, whomever I was with, I always was accompanied by this struggle within me - between the 'yes' and the 'no'. I realised that all my life I had been living with the 'no' winning in me. I had been going wrong, yet never seeing this. Aimless is the best word that I could have used to describe myself : like an ant without a found task.

We are all going to die in the end Justin. We will all be lying one day upon our backs with the last of our breath seeping through our teeth, and those things we have accumulated in life we cannot take with us. How would you like to feel with your dying breath : a man of wealth? ; a man of corporate success? ; a man well liked? ; a man of society? ; satisfied? ; contented? ; fulfilled? ; aware? ; conscious of both your life and death? : you must choose your own. I have finally chosen mine. Life is so finitely short : my life will be shorter still, for I continue to carry the HIV virus. I do not know when it will show itself, yet I am beginning to finally come to terms with my illness. I cannot

tell you the great sadness and depression that hit me upon the first clear realisation of my position. There is no lightheartedness or forgetfulness in disease - only a gradual hope. I must use the remaining time wisely : the days of my foolish excesses and careless attitudes are over - it is truly painful to see in oneself the shape of a shallow man. But I have now chosen to endeavour to change.

How could I wish to die like the man I was?

I finally decided to return to Father Bartholomew and to ask his advice, just as he had once promised such help if I ever returned. He kindly gave me an introduction to this school. The name of this school and where it is located I cannot say. I have been allowed this final moment to explain things to you, because I will be gone for some time. I hope to return to everything I once knew, although not in the same way that I once did know it, yet I cannot say when this will be. Please explain things to our parents: they would not understand such things by my words alone ; I ask of you to help them understand by your own words. It may be ten years, it may be twenty, or I may end my shortened life here - but I will return if I remain alive, and god willing. And no, I am not here in a religious sense. I can now appreciate what religion is striving for, yet there is knowledge and understanding beyond religion here : this is not a place for the worldly confusion of tongues.

Life is a miracle Justin. Being able to breath, to talk, to see the beauty of the world each day that we awake. Just being able to smell, to touch, to taste : to be able to love and to sense and to know. This is all a miracle, yet we all live our lives without ever knowing the extent of our own miraculous being. We must learn to open our eyes.

And then we must learn to open them further ; to go higher in search of the miraculous. We must learn to understand the different qualities of life, and to know that we all live as caterpillars when we should be aiming to one day become butterflies.

I am not claiming that I have done what needs to be done, only that I now know where the faults lie. I just wish that I have time enough to rectify that which I have undone in myself, and perhaps to others. I want to be in life.

G's I

I want to become a new man. I hope you will understand.

May you find that which you need, and may you never be lonely in your life. My thoughts will be with you always, and with all those who deserve them.

My Love,

Julian.