

Dead Pan and Joe Progress



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Chapter 1

Buddha calls me an ecowarrior, but then he has a dark sense of humour. Warrior implies action. I'm more of an ecowhiner, sitting on my hairy backside complaining about injuries to my habitat but doing little about them. I make noises about the avocados with a walnut in their centre rather than a stone, though to be fair they taste very nice. And I grumble about the trout that jump from the river into any skillet placed in front of them, despite their convenience.

Only in our battle with the woodcutters have I managed some action, and even that was merely organisational. I pointed out to the woodnymphs that they are beautiful, highly-sexual creatures and the woodcutters are strapping young men, and it shouldn't be too hard to send them home each day with big smiles and no timber. The woodnymphs have a strong incentive as they can't exist without trees.

Right now I'm lying in my favourite clearing with the gorgeous woodnymph Echo reclining on my left, and Buddha on my right, in the lotus position as always. A few yards in front of us a stream crosses the open space, springing up at one side and disappearing mysteriously at the other. Although there's barely any gradient it runs fast and uneven, gurgling from end to end as the perfect stream should do. The insects are respectful too, never pestering us, just hovering above the grass like mist above a rain-soaked road. Even the breeze is selective, it blows cool across my brow like a caress, yet leaves Buddha's brow alone, as he has no need of it. Staying motionless for hours at a time, as he likes to do, can give the impression that he's furniture of a kind, and far from disliking this he feels that if he can give that impression then he's successfully removed the dualism between himself and his surroundings and has truly accomplished something. Personally I think this is a delusion too far, but we are good friends so I don't mention it.

I'm feeling peckish. I turn on my side and within arm's reach a brazil nut scurries across the grass, but I'm not a fan of the ones with legs even though they come off easily. I spot the purple lantern of a fritillary growing out of the grass. Delicious, and very few calories.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," says Buddha, evenly. His voice is rich and knowledgeable but always has a curious edge, some indefinable weirdness that steers it clear of bland. It's a voice that anybody can listen to for an hour, mesmerised and curious at the same time, always on the cusp of recognising where the weirdness comes from, but never quite getting there, and trapped by the imminent arrival.

"Do what?"

"Eat flowers. It's very... uncivilized."

How does he do this? I swear his eyes were closed.

"I didn't eat it!"

"Then where is it now?"

This is a question I can't answer. Instead I watch Echo as she snoozes peacefully. Really I should be careering through the forest on her trail, with her screeching and yelping ahead of me until I catch up with her and throw her to the ground and screw her to the point of exhaustion, as tradition demands. But this is a lazy afternoon and it would be rude to wake her. And to be honest I'm not as hot on the chase as I used to be, and the exhaustion is usually mine rather than hers, and often arrives before we've made a start on the screwing, which is not ideal. But then I am three and a half thousand years old. Echo refuses to accept my age as an excuse

and says my problem is I'm too stressed-out trying to avoid Joe Progress, which is so far off the mark I won't even talk about it. But otherwise she's very accommodating and often takes a tumble on a tree root just a few minutes into the chase, which helps, as long as my ego doesn't fall with her.

It wasn't long after I got the woodnymphs organised – and very effective it's been too – that I first heard Joe Progress wanted to see me. The lumberjacks are his and many of his building projects have been slowed by the shortage of lumber. The weird avocados and chocolate pomegranates and eager trout are his too, developed in his Workshop of All Invention and carelessly released into my favourite forest, and any reasonable god would surely have thought 'win some, lose some' and let the timber issue ride, but no, Joe Progress is president of heaven and thinks everything should go his way.

This is what I assume. I don't know for sure because I haven't taken up his invitation. Joe Progress may be keen to see me but I don't particularly want to see him. I've never been good with authority figures. Anyway, I doubt that he wants to pat me on the back and buy me a margarita.

Avoiding him is getting increasingly difficult. I can't spend five minutes in a public place without some god sidling up and whispering "The Great God Progress wants to see you," like they're his closest confidant and the holder of privileged information. Brown-nosers. His true confidants, his agents, are also searching for me. Five days ago I was standing in the audience for St George and the Dragon, one of heaven's minor attractions, and a car pulled up on the opposite side of the plaza. There are relatively few cars in heaven and almost all of them belong to Joe Progress and his crew, so I was immediately on the defensive. Out popped his chief henchman and henchwoman, Mammon and Mercedes. I'd scuttled away even before they managed to close the doors.

At least here in the forest I can let my guard down, especially when I'm with good friends. In my daydreaming mind I'm chasing Echo at this moment, and my eyes begin to close, my legs and hoofs start to twitch. In my dreams I often chase her for miles, until the dreams turn philosophical and inside them I begin to wonder if I'm more interested in running than in sex. But this time, for no reason I can fathom, suddenly I'm wide awake, and so is Echo.

"What happened?" I ask.

Buddha hasn't moved but his eyes are wide open. "Darkness," he says, enigmatically.

I look around, though I don't know what I'm looking for. Then I spot Buddha's mystery darkness on the other side of the brook, moving quickly. It's a shadow, and way above it, just below the treetops, is the pig that's creating it, a flying pig gliding just inside the treeline, forcing us to crick our necks as we follow the circles of its descent. Its wings are bigger than a condor's and resemble those of a bat, with long and clearly visible fingers in the pink web of skin. It never flaps them, and to be frank it looks ill at ease with them, ungainly, too aware that they're large and the clearing is small.

Finally it comes so close to the ground that it must land, but clearly it's no expert at this and as it turns for a diagonal approach a wing tip hits the ground. A kaleidoscope of pig and wings tumbles towards us, raising pollen and scraps of vegetation and finally water until it comes to rest on its backside in the stream, almost sitting upright, just leaning back slightly against the bank, front trotters out like a begging dog, one ear folded back, the other covering an eye.

Instinctively I've finished up on top of Echo, shielding her body with mine. She grins up at me lewdly. "Thank you."

But I've paid the price. One of the pig's wings hit me squarely across the shoulder.

Buddha hasn't flinched or moved, and predictably the cascading pig missed him entirely.

I roll on to my side and rub my shoulder. A cashew nut with a flipper tail hops across my vision and I reach out and pulverize it with my fist, which isn't polite but does give me some relief.

"That's it," I tell the world in general. "That's the final straw. I've had enough of this unnatural nature - chocolate pomegranates, brazil nuts with legs, pigs with wings but no flying skills. I'm going to put a stop to all this nonsense."

"Bugger," says the pig. "Crappy landing. You can talk to me direct, you know. I don't live in a wheelchair."

We have unusual things here in heaven, but until now we've not had talking pigs. The fact that the pig can talk doesn't improve my mood. It's yet one more example of unnatural nature.

"An apology would be nice," I suggest.

"I'm very sorry, I didn't ask to have wings."

"That's not much of an apology."

"Pan!" says Buddha, with authority. He's one of a handful of gods who can say this and have any effect. I respect him too much to ignore him. He's telling me that despite my injury I'm being too aggressive, and he's right. I try to calm down a little. The fact that the pig can talk does have one clear advantage.

"Where do you come from?" I ask the pig, in a gentler tone.

"The Workshop of All Invention. I'm supposed to be flying back there right now."

And there's the confirmation. One more piece of nonsense from the workshop of Joe Progress.

"And why are you flying there?" asks Buddha.

"Annual migration," answers the pig, without hesitation.

"Isn't that a bit strange, migrating to a laboratory?"

"Yes, I suppose it is, now you come to mention it. But it's my first time. I hadn't thought about it much."

"Have you met other pigs who've migrated and come back?"

"Er, no, I can't say I have."

Buddha clears his throat noisily. "I don't wish to worry you unduly, but you've probably noticed that many of the forest fruits now have legs, the brazil nuts and mangoes and so on. I have to tell you they're all mobile for one purpose – self-harvesting."

The pig's pink face slowly pales. "You don't mean? Oh me. Oh my. That's dreadful. That's unthinkable. I thought I'd been fattening myself up for a long flight."

"Unlikely. You can walk from anywhere in heaven to anywhere else in less than half an hour."

While the pig mutters to itself, I turn to Buddha and wag a forefinger. "I tell you, I've had enough of this. Joe Progress has made a big mistake this time. I'm going to clear this woodland of all these abominations, you mark my words."

"Don't forget that you're a lazy bastard," says Buddha, helpfully.

"Yes, I know I am. But the key to being a lazy bastard is having somewhere nice to laze. If I don't put a stop to all this, our gorgeous stretch of woodland will be overrun by flying farmyard animals and mobile fruits with disturbing flavours, if there's any woodland left to be overrun. I can't live my life without forest to run through and glades to dance in. If I have to fight to protect that, then so be it."

Buddha doesn't look convinced, but that's his approach to life in general, so not much of an indicator.

"And what about the poor woodnymphs?" I add. I should have mentioned this earlier, of course, so it didn't sound like an afterthought, but Echo smiles anyway.

"I'm not sure I like being called an abomination," says the pig, on reflection. "Do you want to eradicate me too?"

In my experience this is always the tricky part of any grand plan, the compromises brought about by emotion. My shoulder is recovering, the pig looks cute with its ears going this way and that, and the poor thing has been pre-programmed to fly to its death. Also Buddha and Echo are looking at me with big eyes.

"Well," I answer, "we have to be reasonable about this. Maybe it would be nice to have one or two er... reminders of the er... items in question. You know, just rooting around the forest looking for acorns and things."

Smiles all round. I've said the right thing.

"Om, there's one other item you might like to think about," Buddha tells me. "The small detail of power and ability to do battle – the fact that you're a wandering maverick with a set of pipes and Joe Progress is the elected president of heaven, the most powerful position anybody can hold."

Yes, this had occurred to me too.

"And politics," continues Buddha, in his same flat tone. "You'll be getting involved with politics and politicians, and you know what they say – don't fight with pigs: you both get covered in shit and the pig enjoys it."

"Steady on," says the pig.

"Sorry. It's just an expression."

"Yes, but that's how stereotypes are formed, isn't it? We're actually very clean animals, one of the few beasts with complete control over our bowels."

Buddha, Echo and I can't help it. In unison we look above our heads to see if there are any more flying pigs. There aren't.

"But in this uneven battle I can count on my friends, right?" I ask Buddha.

"Of course. If any meditation or chanting is called for, I'll be right with you."

Very comforting. But I'm going to fight my battle anyway, though I haven't a clue where to start. Chasing nymphs and dancing and drinking for thousands of years hasn't given me a great knowledge of politics.

"Hey," says Buddha, raising a forefinger. Clearly he's excited by something. "The next election is less than a month away, with Joe Progress standing for re-election. That's perfect timing. Leaders are always nervous in the run-up to an election. You could put your weight behind the opposition, maybe extract a few concessions from Progress, even if he goes on to win."

This is exactly what I wanted to hear. I know that Joe Progress is far too powerful for me to challenge outright, but the idea of pressuring him into some kind of deal sounds perfect.

"So who's he up against?" I ask.

"Doctor Longlife. That's the only serious rival for Progress."

"The Doc? Are you sure?"

I've met the Doc a couple of times and I can't imagine him as presidential material. He's plump and jolly with rosy cheeks that remind me of Uncle Bacchus. His thin balding hair is swept back straight against his skull and ends in rows of tiny hooks at the rear, like some kind of seed-pod burr. He wears a tweed jacket and cotton drill shirt with a plain tie. A stethoscope always peeks out from his side pocket. He's a most peculiar god, bumbling and distracted, surely not a strong contender for any kind of election. But when I think about it a little longer I realise that everybody in heaven likes him. He's self-deprecating and always happy. Nobody ever has a bad word to say about the Doc.

"That sounds great. Thanks, Buddha."

"Oh yes," says Buddha. "Doctor Longlife is the answer."

"And how do these elections work? How do we vote? I don't think I've ever been asked to vote."

The question causes Buddha some difficulty. Finally he says, "You won't like it."

"Try me."

"It's to do with the other world."

Hmm. I try to be tolerant towards believers in the other world. As long as their faith doesn't affect me then it's none of my business. But I refuse to have my life influenced by this ancient myth when I don't believe in it myself.

"You mean – you haven't a clue how the elections work."

This is the way with believers. The other world is their way of rationalising the inexplicable. But I'm disappointed to hear it from Buddha.

"No. I know how they work. There are billions of people in the other world. They vote with their beliefs. The post of president of heaven goes to the god who best represents the collective faith of the majority."

"Oh, come on. Don't give me this nonsense. You're talking about the human world, and it's just a myth, something we invented to make ourselves feel more secure, to give ourselves a purpose in life. Full of mythical beings who worship us, so we can feel wanted and useful. There's no evidence that it really exists."

Buddha takes time formulating his reply, knowing I'm unlikely to digest more nonsense. "We've never really talked about this before, because I know we have different views, but if you're going to fight Progress, you'll need to understand where his power-base comes from. The other world is very real. It's kind of similar to heaven but a lot more crowded, with more buildings and less predictable weather and millions of cars. They've got massive machines that can fly, and even hover, or go beneath the sea, and machines that can do incredible calculations, and others they watch for entertainment."

"You've really built up a detailed fantasy here. Maybe you ought to ease off the meditation for a while. Have you any idea how ridiculous this sounds?"

"And no woodnymphs."

"No woodnymphs!"

He has me there. I repeat this to myself a couple of times, then I realise how a fine touch of negative detail can help a mythical place sound more real.

"I'm not fooled for a moment. It's still a myth."

"The other world also accounts for which gods exist in heaven, and which gods... disappear. Your feeling of age, your lack of breath, these are consequences of how you're perceived in the other world."

"Complete and utter crap!" I'm not pleased by the personal direction this is taking. My ageing, my lack of fitness, these are down to... to something else, something I don't yet understand, but not some mythical contrivance.

"The other-worlders are great fans of Progress, which is why he won the last election. But they're keen on Doctor Longlife too. They don't live very long – seventy or eighty years – and they're obsessed with living longer. It's never clear whether they're more obsessed with progress and moving the whole species along or with living longer individual lives. I think Joe only made it by a whisker last time."

For a moment there I thought we were getting somewhere. I can see why the Doc would be a popular candidate in heaven, but I can't assess his potential in a world that doesn't exist.

"Buddha, listen, it's great to hear about the presidential elections and the candidates, but it doesn't help when you bring your personal faith into the discussion. Now can we please drop this other world thing? "

"How am I going to tell you how to get there if you don't even believe the place exists?"

"Well, obviously you can't, can you?"

"No."

We are both agitated. It's not as if I'm asking him to change his beliefs, I just don't want to hear about them. There's no way forward with this discussion and we're both wise enough to stop it.

I lie on the grass regaining my composure, and for some time I can hear Buddha doing his breathing exercises to calm himself down, until the sound stops.

"Good grief!" yells the pig. "He's disappeared! He was there one moment and now he's gone."

"Who's disappeared?"

"Buddha."

Panic over. I relax again. "Yes, he does that."

"What do you mean, he does that?"

"It's some aspect of extreme meditation, I think, or non-dualism, I can't remember which. He becomes so much at one with this surroundings that... no, I can't remember. Anyway, he disappears."

"Well, I've seen some things in my time," says the flying pig, "but a disappearing Buddha. That really takes the biscuit."

Echo hasn't moved. Both of us are used to Buddha's strange comings and goings, though I guess his disappearing act must seem strange when seen for the first time. I try to remember the explanation, but it won't come to me. And the more I think about it the more odd it seems to me too. How have I got used to somebody disappearing? Little by little, over time, through disappearance at a distance, then closer, more frequently. The same gradual erosion of reality that's happened with the cross-species fruits of the forest, leading to the flying pig, and whatever follows it.

I'm off the grass and on my feet. "I'm going to see Joe Progress, right now."

Echo looks up at me with admiring eyes. It's the same look she uses when I say something brave but foolhardy that ultimately I regret.

"I'm going to confront him and get all this cross-species nonsense stopped," I tell her. "I'll explain to him that unless he does what I say I'm going to support Doctor Longlife in the elections, however they work. Let's see what he says to that."

Echo and I hug, which is very pleasant and makes me realise how much I love the woodnymphs, Echo in particular, but all the others too. There's nothing wrong with collective love, especially if like me you're partly herd animal.

"Are you going to disappear too?" asks the pig.

"Kind of. But not suddenly. Just a gradual fading into the distance type of thing."

"Oh." He sounds disappointed.

When I've walked fifty metres down the track that leads out of the clearing I jump sideways behind some bushes, hoping that does the trick. It would be a shame to let him down.

Chapter 2

As Buddha mentioned to the pig, it's possible to walk from anywhere in heaven to anywhere else in half an hour. All you have to do is think of who you want to see and start walking – in any direction. It's a personality-based system. You can be sure who you'll finish up with, but you can't be sure where.

After twenty minutes of passing through indeterminate woodland my path descends into a shallow valley and I groan as I realise I'm approaching the smouldering wreckage of Valhalla, where presumably Joe Progress must be. I am the guilty party revisiting the scene of a crime. Maybe I should come back later when he's at a less embarrassing location. But no, I'm in the mood for confrontation, and that's the kind of mood that can't wait.

Joe Progress stands by the edge of the ruins wearing a suit and tie. On his head is a bright yellow hard hat, and the small amount of hair it leaves uncovered looks freshly trimmed. His girlfriend, Mercedes, the god of Private Motor Transport, stands next to him, overdressed in a white halter-neck number and matching strappy white sandals, cigarette in hand. In theory she's very attractive, but it's a beauty lost on me. I see a veneer of make-up and a perpetual chain-smoker. Give me a natural woodnymph any day.

Joe Progress spies my approach and gives her the gangster's nod. Before she makes way for business she gives him a brief kiss of the body-contact kind, establishing partnership matters for the audience, which is me, I suppose.

"Take a look at this place," Progress tells me, waving his hand across the debris. "It had a roof made of shields, with spears for rafters. How safe was that when the ceiling came down? Not very safe at all. First a rain of spears, then a rain of shields, not the ideal sequence. Had they never heard of building regulations?"

"I don't think there was anybody inside when it came down." I would prefer to be somewhere else, but now I'm in this position I'll be honest.

"And that's not all," he says. "This was a huge building with five hundred and forty doors, and not one of them was suitable for disabled access." His movements are graceful and he has the habit of pausing before he speaks, to check the words he is about to publish are absolutely the correct ones, all things considered. He shakes his head and hands me a yellow hard hat to wear, then whistles under his breath. "We found two hundred empty mead barrels, four hundred vodka bottles, and eighty-nine bodies with sword wounds. Some party this must have been."

He's not wrong. I can remember the singing, the dancing, the sex, and the drinking, vodka and mead, vodka and mead, and the call to arms and rushing out of the great hall, eight abreast through each massive door, but the rest of the night is only now beginning to return.

The morning after was one of the worst I've known. It was mid-afternoon before the internal refrain of 'never again' changed to 'not for a while' as it always does, eventually. And two days before I stopped smelling of woodsmoke. The great hall of Valhalla, once the most magnificent building in heaven, is reduced to ashes. All the great shields and banners, the hundred-foot tables sliced from single trees, the coats of arms, animal trophies, all gone. A few massive timbers continue to smoulder, still not quite burned through, even though Ragnarok had to be at least two weeks ago. Workmen move through the ruins with fire extinguishers. Others tune arc lamps on tall pylons to light up the devastation, as afternoon is turning into evening and the light is beginning to fade. In the background, a dozen generators hum.

"You did a fine job," says Progress, and he seems genuine. "This is prime development land, yet we could never have got permission to knock down Valhalla. Look at it now. A day with the bulldozers and there won't be a trace remaining. Did you enjoy the party, Pan?"

"The bits I remember, yes."

Progress sketches out a vision with precise movements of his hands. "This flat area over here will be the parking lot, with space for over two thousand cars. And there in the centre we're going to build the largest shopping mall that heaven has ever seen, ten storeys high, with magnificent escalators, brass banisters, a clear roof bringing sunlight down to a garden café on the ground floor. Believe me, you won't have seen anything like it."

Valhalla was my favourite building in the whole of heaven, so large and airy it hardly felt like you were indoors. I don't like buildings, generally, but this was an exception. Just the roof of shields and the spears that supported it were enough to entertain a drunk leaning back on his chair for an hour or more. And now it's about to be replaced by a shopping mall. I don't even know what a shopping mall is, and yet it's only through slow contemplation that I realise this. Progress is a charmer. He has none of the airs and graces that might belong to a president, and certainly belonged to my grandfather Zeus when he held the post thousands of years ago. I've not been criticised or commanded, I've been given a yellow hard hat to signify my membership of this club to which I don't belong. I've neglected my own values. In short, I've been charmed.

I try to put on my token yellow hat but it doesn't have space for my horns. It sits on top of them at the front and I imagine it has the comical look of a partly open lid. As we move down into the ruins, I catch workmen turning away to hide their amusement.

Progress kicks over the timbers with his shiny black shoes. The red charcoal immediately bursts into flame. "You know what the biggest disaster is? All this valuable wood gone to waste. We have a desperate shortage of building timber. If they'd asked me, I'd have knocked the whole thing down and rebuilt it in concrete, no charge, just in exchange for the wood."

Mercedes has joined Mammon at the edge of the destruction, and from there they watch us impassively. Progress is instantly likeable. I'm supposed to be set against him, but in his company it's difficult for me to remember that. Mammon, on the other hand, is a mean brute of a god, intense, powerful, far bigger than Hector. His

suit is smarter than the one Progress wears – it's a statement of superiority. Also he's balding and has grown his hair long at the back in a ponytail, so the amount of hair is the same as it would be for a non-balding non-ponytail god, simply the distribution is different. I'm not sure if this philosophy works worse with a ponytail or a beard. And finally the ponytail is ginger. Need I say more?

"Do you think Valhalla could ever have looked the same in concrete?" I ask Progress, which is hardly an aggressive question but at least makes me feel I'm being argumentative. "Surely it would have lost its character?"

"Oh no, we'd have put in polystyrene wooden beam facings, plastic shields and spear shapes in the roof space, nobody would have noticed the difference. Imagine a modern building with sealed windows and doors to get rid of all those nasty draughts, and lovely bone-dry air conditioning. Much better. With nylon carpets and metal banisters we could have had a real laugh with the static. And I was thinking about some of those fancy solar toadstools for the paths outside, you know, the ones that collect sunlight in the day and shine at night, so the drunks could find their way home. Maybe have a little strip of them leading into the well..."

I'm about to protest that he must be joking, and then I realise this might be a foolish thing to say. I look at him closely. His skin is the freshly tanned image of health, and I suspect it looks that way every day. It looks too good, objectionably good. I suppose he's good-looking in a freshly-trimmed plastic kind of way. I begin to wonder if I admire him in some unaccountable fashion.

Maybe he works this out.

"You couldn't help with the shortage of wood, could you?" he asks, as one friend to another. "I've been trying to track you down for weeks to ask you this. Every day we send the lumberjacks out to the forest, and every evening they come back with big smiles and no timber. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

This is my second opportunity to put across my own point of view, and I grasp it. "I imagine that's the woodnymphs defending themselves. When you destroy woodland you're killing them, literally forcing them out of existence. Have you ever thought about that?"

I say this gently, considering how I feel about it. The response takes me by surprise.

"Oh, come on. Don't give me that nonsense. Woodnymphs are mythical beings, they don't really exist. We can hardly stop what we're doing for the sake of some flight of the imagination, can we?"

"You've never seen a woodnymph?"

"Of course not."

"Ever been inside a wood?"

"Why would I want to? I prefer buildings and cars."

"Let me take you there, introduce you to the woodnymphs. They're lovely. Come and meet Echo and her friends. You'll like them."

"How can you introduce me to something that's mythical, to something that doesn't exist? That's ridiculous."

I have no clue where to take this conversation. No wonder Progress is unable to find a solution to the empty-handed lumberjacks. But then he's hardly likely to make the best decisions about woodland management either. Maybe I should be pleased to find that my opponent has such a clear weakness, but I'm not.

The heat is uncomfortable. I'm beginning to sweat, but Joe Progress shows no sign of perspiration. He's still kicking through the hot ashes with his smart shoes. From time to time he glances at my hooves, which might be more suitable for the job, but I'm not inclined to help. Of the shields that once formed the roof, nothing recognisable remains, the wood has burned and most of the metal has melted, just the occasional spearhead survives. Most are average in size, but now Progress unearths a massive metal head, around a foot and a half long, a reminder that the heroes of Valhalla were destined to do battle with giants, and that Ragnarok was supposed to be that final battle, not a debauched party.

"Do you remember the days when Ragnarok was a weekly attraction?" he asks, while his feet toy with the hot spearhead. His smart shoes are ruined. He doesn't care.

"Yes, I do."

"All those giants. They were mean bastards, weren't they? I'm not sad to see the back of them."

He has a point. The giants were thoroughly unpleasant and nobody misses them, with the possible exception of Odin and Thor, who saw the writing on the wall. If there are no giants, there is no need for the heroes who do battle with them.

Progress half reads my mind. "End of an era," he says. "Things move on."

"And how much did you help them move on?"

"I supported the party, supplied the vodka, and the complementary matches. Glad you enjoyed it."

It's not clear to me why he's so keen to have a good relationship with me, which he seems intent upon, but I've been careful not to reject the idea, because I have my own plans.

"Listen, Joe, there's something important I'd like to talk to you about. In my neck of the woods we've been seeing a lot of strange items recently – citrus fruits that walk, pigs that fly, almonds with legs, that kind of thing. It's all getting very disturbing. I wonder if we could talk about it for a moment?"

"Ah, yes. I thought that subject might come up. Genetic enhancements for self-harvesting. In the long run this should save us all a lot of bother with cutting fruits from trees and rounding up animals, such a waste of energy, so much more efficient if edible produce can present itself at a distribution centre."

"Well, yes, but this new system is destroying the feel of the forest."

"The what?"

"The feel, the atmosphere, the beauty."

"I don't see the problem. Some vague intangible is left by the wayside, and in return we get a more effective harvesting system that will save everybody immense amounts of effort. Don't you think that perhaps you're just an old fart who can't change his ways and refuses to recognise the advantages of new technology?"

So much for a close relationship.

"Perhaps we could have a sector of the forest dedicated to self-harvesting crops," I suggest. "And others dedicated to beauty and relaxation?"

"What a waste!"

"I'm prepared to fight you over this."

Suddenly the smoke of the still-smouldering site overwhelms the throat of Joe Progress. He has a coughing fit that doubles him up. When he stands straight again his eyes are pink and wide open, but he's smiling

"Really?" he says. "And how far are you prepared to go?"

"You're campaigning for re-election. I'll try to stop you."

"And what are you going to do? Prance around the other world showing off your goats legs and shouting 'Hey, look at me. I've got mixed genes and I'm a disaster. Don't vote for Joe Progress.'"

He seems amused by the idea.

"But you can't do that," he adds, "Because you don't believe in the other world, do you?"

He stares at my hoofs for so long that they begin to shuffle self-consciously, of their own accord. I prod a few metallic-looking bits amongst the embers, simply to disguise the movement.

"Listen..." I begin.

"Shhh."

His face has turned serious. He continues to think for a while. Whatever he's thinking of pleases him. He runs a finger across his lips three times. "I'm going to take you up on your challenge. And if you win you can have your old-fashioned forest back. How does that sound?"

It sounds terrible. "You're on."

"But you're at a disadvantage. You don't believe in the other world and you don't know where to start. So let's even things up a bit. I'll give you a clue."

He beckons to Mammon, who's there within seconds.

"Show him the newspaper," says Progress.

Mammon smiles, which isn't pleasant, and produces a fat newspaper that couldn't possibly have come from his pockets. This is a common trick in heaven. I can produce my Syrinx, my pipes, in exactly the same way, and I don't even wear clothes.

"Page sixteen," says Progress, handing me the News of the World.

I flick through until I'm stalled by a tall picture almost from top to bottom of a page. It's of me, and as usual I'm nude. My private parts are obscured by a black circle, which could be larger.

"Fame at last," says Progress. "I thought you'd find it interesting."

I can't think of anything to say.

I begin to read.

'I'm Just Like You,' Claims Half-Goat Man.

By our Science Correspondent.

Peter Alan Nesmith has the legs of a goat. And that's no exaggeration, they're real goat's legs. He has massive white hairy thighs and strong fetlocks, and two-toed feet that look like hoofs. He also has two horns growing out of his forehead.

Otherwise he's human.

Peter is a genetic experiment.

There's more, but I'm too bewildered to take it in. The workmen have stopped what they were doing and are grinning at me inanely. Have they all read this?

Progress writes something on the back of a business card and hands it to me.

"I bet you'd like to meet whoever wrote this. Her name's Stephanie McVeigh, she's a publicity agent. Here's her address. She's holding a garden party tomorrow. You should go."

Chapter 3

Most of the next ten hours I spend searching for Buddha. The regular think-of-who-you-want-to-see system fails miserably. I try all his favourite haunts: Noah and his Flood Cruises, the Mahabharata, Epic of Gilgamesh, Legend of Hiawatha Canoe Tours, but no luck. Then I'm in Faerie Lane, close by the Iliad, and out of nowhere he appears next to me.

"I hear you're looking for me."

I can't help my tone. "Where've you been?"

"I've been at work. Now I'm taking a nap on the sofa."

I haven't time for this nonsense. I dig the newspaper into his belly. "Look at this."

It's already open at my page, but he leafs through it to find the front. "Ah, News of the other World. Where did you get this?"

"Progress gave it to me. Well, go on, read the article."

He hands it back. "No, I might drop it while laughing. But you can read it to me if you like."

He gets my steeliest glare, which has no affect, so I begin to read aloud. "'I'm Just Like You,' Claims Half-Goat Man. By our Science Correspondent."

"Oh, you're screwed," says Buddha. "Science Correspondent? That's the tea-lady's niece, whose friend did physics at school. Go on."

"Peter Alan Nesmith has the legs of a goat," I read. "And that's no exaggeration, they're real goat's legs. He has massive white hairy thighs and strong fetlocks, and two-toed feet that look like hoofs. He also has two horns growing out of his forehead. Otherwise he's human."

"Peter is a... genetic experiment."

At this point Buddha guffaws and slaps his thigh, which I ignore.

"This half-goat, half-human is a fine musician and very sure-footed on rocky slopes. But one thing he doesn't have is a birth certificate, because Peter wasn't born, he was created by the scientists of Foxglove Laboratories."

"They took genes from a goat and a human and combined them in an artificial womb. Eight months later, out popped Peter. Yet he talks and acts just like us. See him on the street fully dressed, with a hat to hide his horns, and you wouldn't know the difference. If you live in Cricklewood, where he shares a home with an estate agent friend, you might have met him already."

Buddha stops smiling. "Hey, that's me! The cheeky so-and-so's." But soon he's back in jovial mode. "I didn't know you were born in a laboratory."

"*I wasn't!* I'm sorry, I shouldn't shout. But this is complete rubbish, every word of it. It's completely made up. It's like they've written about somebody else and put my picture there."

Buddha is sniggering. He stops for long enough to tell me, "That's fairly normal, though I'm sure it doesn't help. Please continue."

I read out more. "'I don't feel any different to a normal human being,' says Peter. 'I eat the same kind of food, watch TV and go to work, just like anybody else. The only difference is that if I get something wrong with my legs, I can't go to the doctor, I have to find a vet.'"

This doubles Buddha up.

"A vet? A vet?" I whine. "Where did they get this garbage from? I haven't said any of these things."

"And your name's not Peter," points out Buddha.

"The sad thing is," I read, "that Peter probably won't be around for long. Like most products of cloning technology, he has an ageing problem. Although it was just two years ago that he came out of the artificial womb, already he looks well over fifty. His body will be ready for a pension before his biological age makes him ready for school. And he won't be eligible for either.

"Bull-*shit!*"

I must have read this article twenty times, and each time it feels like I'm being beaten up – or at least my persona is being beaten up – and left bleeding in the gutter.

Buddha is highly amused. "I'm sure I've known you for more than two years."

"Oh, stop it. It's all nonsense. None of it's true."

"Except that you've got goats legs and horns."

"Except for the legs and horns."

"And you say Joe Progress gave you this?"

I explain about Progress taking up the challenge, even though that wasn't the outcome I'd hoped for, and about being given a clue, and I hand over the business card that Progress gave me.

"Wow." That brings Buddha back to reality. "A garden party. Do you know where this place is?"

"I haven't a... any idea. I was hoping you might help."

"Yes, I can. Do you want to go there?"

"Well of course I want to go there. I want to meet the ignorant... wretch who wrote this item and tell her what I think of her."

"Wretch?"

"I'm too mad to think of a good insult. I'll work one out on the way."

"Follow me."

At the bottom of Faerie Lane we go through the iron gate on to the promenade, a broad path with benches at the sides and flowerbeds and precisely planted trees. We pass the George and Dragon public house, with its half-timbered walls, thatched roof and smoking chimney.

We say hello to Ishtar as she hobbles past in the opposite direction, probably on her way for a drink. She's a sad case, forever pining for her lost consort, Tammuz – once famous, then obscure, now non-existent. She's much older and frailer than I remember. A few thousand years ago she was stunningly beautiful, but time has passed and so has her beauty. How old is she now? A few hundred years older than me. I get a brief glimpse of how I might be in a couple of hundred years, and don't like it.

In contrast, the next god we pass is the youngest in heaven, the god of Fashionable Trainers, who's barely of shaving age. His bicycle is propped against the back of the bench directly behind him and his legs are crossed, enhancing the display of immaculate white footwear. He has his hoodie up and his shoulders hunched forward, lost in a world of his own, tapping at the bird-noise machine in his lap. It's a tiny thing and we rarely get sight of it. He presses buttons with his thumbs and from time to time it gives out noises like birdsong – though not quite.

Finally we arrive at a small building set back from the path. It's very dull looking – one storey, few windows, a flat roof with some kind of machinery on top – and a big surprise to me.

"Is this it? Is this the place?" I ask.

"Not exactly. No."

"How come I've never seen it before? I must have walked down here thousands of times and it's new to me." Yet the building itself is clearly not new.

"What's going on?"

"You've never seen it before because you didn't believe in it. Welcome to the Axis Mundi. Step inside and we'll get you some clothes. The other-worlders are very keen on clothes."

The walls inside are barely visible beneath layers of coats, hats, trousers and shirts hung from pegs. There's no order to the arrangement, with pristine garments sharing hooks with rags.

"We really must get the costume section sorted out," says Buddha. "Ah, here we are. These should work." He hands me a loose white blouson and sand-coloured chinos, along with a short stovepipe hat, slightly crushed. They're a passable fit, though I never feel comfortable in clothing.

"You're telling me I'm going to the other world, this garden party is in the other world?"

"Only ten miles or so from where I live. You'll enjoy it down there. Take my word."

It's hard for me to deny the Axis Mundi exists when I'm standing inside it, so I say nothing.

"You look fine," says Buddha, "as long as nobody spots your hoofs."

"I like my hoofs."

"I'm sure they'll be very popular. Everybody will want a pair."

In the middle of the building is a doorway that leads into a separate room, small and entirely divorced from the surrounding chaos. Buddha ushers me in, but he stays outside. White light falls from the ceiling, one wall is mirrored and shows me sniffing around like a bear in a new cave, the others are coated with dark red carpet, divided at waist level by a shining brass rail. Above the rail is a small plaque holding a single red button.

"When you're ready, press the button," he tells me. "The doors will close and you'll feel yourself going down. It takes about half an hour."

"Aren't you coming?"

Buddha has made no effort to dress. He's still wearing his favourite orange loincloth.

"I can't. I'm already there."

Most of his nonsense I can afford to dismiss, but this time it's important.

"Buddha, you're standing in front of me. How can you already be in the other world?"

"I've tried to explain this before. Thanks to years of practice and strong meditation, when I'm asleep in the other world I can dream myself into existence here. Why do you think I can't be found sometimes on weekdays? How do I suddenly disappear and reappear?"

It's true. I've been told these things before, I just ignored them – until now.

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"I suppose so."

"Good. I'm going to wake up and I'll see you at the bottom. Don't wander too far from the exit. It's very busy down there."

He does his vanishing trick.

I could stand here for a long time and wonder what I've got myself into, whether I really should be doing this. But would it make any difference? No. Anyway, I like mysterious red buttons.

This one needs to be pressed.

"Wauugggh!"

It's no surprise that I'm feeling nervous when the room comes to a halt and the doors open. I peek out like a fox through a hedge, but the coast is clear. There's nobody around. I'm in a narrow corridor with stairs at one end and an outside door at the other. Buddha said don't stray too far from the exit, but I'm sure I'm allowed to go through that door.

The outside world takes my breath away. I'm on a busy street, and I mean busy, a hundred times busier than anything I've ever seen before. It's heaving with cars and buses, four lanes of them, moving forward in small shuffles from green lights to red, and so noisy. On the pavement, multitudes of other-worlders somehow manage to avoid bumping into each other as they walk this way and that. Oops, no they don't. The buildings are tall and elegant, with a shop on every ground floor. There's an Italian tailor on my left, a children's toy store almost opposite. Many of the other-worlders are carrying shopping bags.

It's hard to think of a scene that could be more convincing, not just through its strangeness but through its sheer busy-ness. There's too much going on here for this to be heaven. And how fascinating the other-worlders are! Their clothes, their faces, their walks! They're all different and yet so much the same. Each face and locomotion has a story to tell. A mass of stories rushing past each other, streaming rivers of tales.

I've stalled on the pavement directly outside the door, and now a man in a tweed jacket wants to get past me and go inside. He waits for me to move, yet at the same time he doesn't really see me. Strange.

When I turn to let him pass I see the gold plaque on the wall next to the door. British Atheist Society, 296a Regent Street. Ha! How clever is that? What a perfect place for the Axis Mundi.

I'm still in a daze when Buddha turns up, wearing a suit without a tie and a camel-coloured coat with a brown collar. He looks very much at home here.

"Come on," he says. "We'd better get you in a taxi. You're already late."

He steps into the street and flags down a black car.

"Richmond," Buddha tells the driver, and shows him the card that Progress gave me. Then he opens the door for me to climb in the back.

"Here, you'll need money." He hands me a roll of notes.

"What do I need money for?"

"Absolutely everything, believe me." He gives me another card. "And this is my home address."

I feel like a child being bundled off on their first lone journey. And I suppose it's true that my behaviour is childlike. As the cab sets off, I'm craning my neck to take in more of this fascinating world.

There are so many beings. There must be literally thousands of them here in this other world. I think about the election for the president of heaven, the election that I'm supposed to be influencing. What a silly idea. What possible mechanism could influence all these people?

The cab driver sees me rubber-necking. "First time in London?" he asks.

"First time in this world, actually."

He frowns and puts the radio on.

Chapter 4

My destination, Slaters Cottage, is a mansion attempting to pass itself off as something smaller. It's dominated by two storeys of sweeping brown roof tiles, including many windows, with one storey of regular wall beneath. It's a big house hiding under the roof of a little one, and I like that. I think Buddha would approve too.

In the rear garden, bordered by poplars and cypresses, at least a hundred people are enjoying the garden party. The weather is perfect. The sun hangs low in the sky, reluctant to go down. It's warm and there's barely a breeze. Half-way down the lawn, on the left, a trio in white tuxedos and dickie-bows play guitar, double-bass and drums. Their music isn't inspired, but at least it's live.

I begin to wonder how I can track down Stephanie McVeigh without sounding like a gatecrasher, but clearly my arrival didn't go unnoticed. She's on me in an instant.

"Peter! Peter! I'm so glad you're here. Joe wasn't sure you'd make it."

How nice to be in control of one's own destiny.

"Pan," I correct her, though I don't think the correction registers.

"Come and sit with me. I'll introduce you to my mother."

Stephanie has to be over fifty, but has the vitality and lively eyes of the ageless, which make her instantly attractive. Her hair is dark and loose to her shoulders and she wears a simple blue crossover dress. She is the very queen of charm, and all those scathing first lines I thought of in the Axis Mundi melt into oblivion. Not that I thought of anything brilliant, to be honest. It's not my style. Buddha is your man for excruciating put-downs.

Just off-centre in the lawn is a large gazebo with octagonal sides, and in front of it is a white plastic table where Stephanie McVeigh's mother sits in her wheelchair.

"This is my mother, Dorothy. Mother will be listening to everything we say and hearing very little. She's rather deaf."

I make an exaggerated show of acknowledging Dorothy's presence, but I'm not sure if she sees me.

Stephanie sits and waves a hand in the air like a puppeteer warming up, and within seconds a waiter appears. I suspect that nobody else in the garden could do this, and certainly not so quickly, but then this is her party. She doesn't ask me what I want to drink and orders me a glass of rosé wine, which is not what I would have ordered, yet when it arrives is truly delicious and a precise fit for the garden party and I would have been a fool to order anything else.

We spend a minute on small talk about the party, exactly in line with the dramatic confrontation that I'd planned all along. Damn. Apparently this is a regular

monthly get-together and most of the guests are either clients or have some business connection. They've already been here a while. I'm not sure I have much in common with them, apart from their clear love of alcohol.

A young man, presumably one of Stephanie's employees, appears briefly and places a copy of the offending tabloid newspaper on the table, open at the page where my picture appears and somebody similar to me is described.

"So what did you dislike about the article?" asks Stephanie.

That's very clever. I hadn't said I disliked anything, yet.

"The fact that it's untrue, every word of it."

"But Peter, I'm not in the truth business. I do public relations."

"The bit about being over fifty..."

"And how old are you really?"

Ok, I'm not going to push that one.

"And the idea of going to a vet..."

"Would you expect a normal doctor to deal with your legs?"

"But what about the quotes? I never said any of these words in my life."

"Oh, I'm sure you did, just not necessarily in that order, or in the same sentence. It's quite normal to make up quotes, perfectly normal, and it saves everybody a lot of bother with interviews."

It strikes me that Stephanie's spectacles, which she touches every few seconds, and which have thick frames and thin lenses, may not be correcting her eyesight, just her image. She lights a cigarette and leaves it in the ashtray, picking it up twice as it burns to nothing.

"But none of it is *true*, Stephanie."

She gives me her best smile, which would melt a troll's heart and which I try to avoid. She looks down meaningfully at my hoofs.

"Ok," I have to admit. "Tiny bits of it are true."

"Millions of people have read that article," she explains, "and every one of them gained a positive impression. They feel empathy towards you and hope you do well. It doesn't really matter if any of it was untrue, what matters is that you've now got the world on your side."

"Through lies."

"Through meeting the entertainment needs of our audience. One small article and we're already there, way ahead of the game. Normally it would take years to create that amount of positive feeling."

This is just a question of perspective, I'm sure. I can't exactly find a flaw with what she says, it just sounds wrong in some instinctive way. I begin to search through the paper, giving myself time to think.

"Peter, don't worry about it. People never believe anything they read in the newspapers. Nor will they believe anything they've read about you. We're just aiming for a feeling. That article merely reassures readers that they're doing fine with their genetically unmodified bodies, that all is well with the natural status quo."

I find this difficult to believe. I point to an earlier page, where the headline reads: 'Terrorist Leader Arrested'.

"Terrorist today, president of some vast African country tomorrow," says Stephanie. "Either way, very happy to be in the newspaper."

I turn to page five, to the picture of the attractive young lady wearing bikini pants, heels, a baseball cap, and nothing else. I read out the caption, "Cloe Zeeting, 19, from Milton Keynes, is a keen Tottenham fan..."

Stephanie shakes her head. "Probably from Barking, supports West Ham."

"But at least she's called Cloe."

"I doubt it."

I look at the picture for a long time, perhaps too long.

Stephanie adds, "And *they're* not real, either."

I close the newspaper, mildly flustered. "Is there *anything* in here that's believable?"

"Yesterday's weather, and the football scores - they're usually accurate. A tabloid newspaper isn't in the truth business any more than I am. If you don't know that, then you really *do* need my services."

"What?"

"I was hoping the newspaper article would show you the value of my company," she tells me. "Perhaps I might persuade you to become a client."

"Stephanie, I don't even know what you do."

After a long and impassioned explanation, I'm not much wiser. I hear a lot of abstract expressions like "fulfil a role" and "public profile" and "exploit the medium", but very little of a concrete nature, and at the end of the explanation I'm still not sure if her company sells bananas or trains blacksmiths.

"I'm sorry, but that makes no sense to me," I tell her.

"Then let me give you the abbreviated version. We make you famous and keep you famous."

"Why would I want to be famous?"

Stephanie rocks back in her chair and huffs like a tired but amused giant.

"That's original. Nobody ever sat in my garden and said *that* before."

A young girl on the verge of her teens turns up at the table. Immediately I know this is Stephanie's daughter. There's some family resemblance, but more obvious is the overwhelming affection.

"Jessica, you're covered in carpet hair again." Stephanie picks delicately at the girl's woollen top. "When are you going to learn what chairs are for? And look at your elbows. I do wish you'd come outside."

"I'm on level seven," says Jessica, proudly.

"Well done." But there's no enthusiasm in the praise. Stephanie turns to me.

"It's a gorgeous evening. All the adults are playing outside, and the children are inside working on their computer games."

Yet I'm not really listening and Stephanie isn't really talking to me. That was an aside for benefit of her daughter. I'm more interested in the three ageing musicians in their dickie-bows and white tuxedos. They're passable players but have entirely lost the enthusiasm of youth. Each tune they play – and some are quite pleasant – is de-clawed and de-sexed and house-trained. Occasionally they forget themselves and begin to enjoy their instruments, and naturally at that point everything improves, but most of the time they're earning a living filling space where otherwise silence would be, or nothing more than the chatter of guests. Their leader – the band's singer and guitarist – is most to blame. When he begins a new song I can tell how many times he's played it before. If the figure is in the hundreds then the song means nothing to him and he plays in a way that means nothing to the audience. He goes through the correct sequence of notes – I acknowledge that – but accomplishes nothing with them.

Having briefly docked with the mother-ship, Jessica runs off to rejoin the virtual indoor world. Stephanie glances at me and sees I'm absorbed. She turns to her

mother and with great feeling says, "Oh mum, I do wish they'd dance for you. I do. But we can only hire a band and hope for the best."

The old woman doesn't acknowledge this any more than she acknowledged my presence earlier. Stephanie holds her mother's hand on the wheelchair's arm, and if my heart is touched, which it is, then perhaps this is down to the contrast with the coldness on display in the rest of the garden.

Because of the music I can't easily hear the conversations between the scores of guests drinking punch or white wine (I suspect the rosé is held in reserve), and maybe that's a good thing, so I'm assessing them by body language. I read the angles of their chins, the way they hold their wine glasses, their interest in who is busy elsewhere and in whom they are talking to, and my assessment isn't complimentary.

There are very few children around. Perhaps because this is a work-related party, or because they're all indoors at their computer screens. The one child making an impact is in full bawling mode, slung against his mother's chest with his head over her shoulder, features red and contorted from the effort of crying. I think I can hear his words above the music, but what I hear is so surreal that I can't be sure.

"Gonna die, gonna die," he wails. "Don't live long."

"There there," comforts mother, patting him on the back as she carries him towards the deserted rear of the garden. "It's all right. Don't worry, it'll be OK."

"Gonna die. Seventy years. Don't live long."

This strange experience blasts me out of my daydream. Surely I've been hallucinating? Buddha told me that the other-worlders don't live very long, but I doubt their children grasp this at an early age and are upset by it.

I look across at Stephanie and see the puzzlement on her face. No, perhaps I've not been hallucinating. But the experience is too strange for either of us to acknowledge it.

"I'm so glad I took the time to have Jessica," says Stephanie.

I follow her lead and behave as if nothing bizarre has happened. "Do you have more?"

"No, just the one. And that's unusual in our circles. Half the guests here don't have any children at all. The most intelligent members of our society have lost the urge to procreate. In evolutionary terms, we're going backwards. How about that? I call it Devolution. I like to think it's our method of giving the planet a chance. Let's leave populating the planet to the poor and uneducated, keep everybody alive at whatever cost, vote dumb people into power and follow their dumb policies, and with any luck our species will be out of the way quickly and the planet can get back to some kind of reasonable balance." Stephanie holds her hand in front of her mouth. "Sorry. I don't usually do politics."

"That's OK."

I'm now sure Stephanie had the same strange experience as me. That's why she's talking nonsense.

"It's just..." she says, "I get the feeling you might be pro-nature yourself."

"You're right. I am."

Stephanie looks relieved. "Rationally, we should all stop having children for twenty years and let things settle down. But I adore mine, and I expect I'll adore my grandchildren. I'm sure everybody else feels the same. We're emotionally programmed to populate."

"That's true."

"Maybe it's a good thing that so few of the guests here have children. Most of them are famous or want to be famous, so they're unbalanced in some way. Strange, isn't it, how we idolise the unbalanced, because the balanced are too boring to follow?"

Stephanie laughs. Either she's laughing at herself or this is still the relief of passing off a weird experience. I've taken a liking to her. She's in a profession that has no regard for accuracy, and I suspect has little connection with morality or humanity, yet scratch the surface and a thoughtful person still lurks there. I can't imagine this is easy.

"And that's my less-than-expert way of persuading you to join my client list – telling you how unbalanced my clients are." This time her smile is shy. "I've booked you on TV, on the Gary Triumph Show. We need to move quickly, while people remember you, while you're still hot."

"Me? On a TV show? Why?"

"Why? To raise your profile, of course. And for the money. After my cut you'd probably clear forty thousand from your first sponsorship deal. More from the ones that follow. How does that sound?"

It's quite meaningless to me. "No. Stephanie, I've already been badly misrepresented once, why would I want to go through the same nonsense a second time?"

But the word No doesn't count for much in Stephanie McVeigh's line of business, or perhaps she hears in my tone that I don't mean it. Certainly I can see I've been unconvincing.

"Stephanie, where did you get my photograph?"

"Joe gave it to me."

This silences me for a minute.

"Didn't he tell you he'd asked me to write the article?" asks Stephanie.

I'm too confused to lie, so I say nothing. Why would Progress want me in a newspaper? Even before he took up my so-called challenge.

There's probably a clue there, something I'm supposed to pick up that will help me do battle with him, but it's lost on me. There might be others.

"Did he also make up this nonsense about me being a genetic experiment from Foxglove Laboratories."

Stephanie loses her smile. "Oh dear, I thought that was one of the truthful bits. Which company are you really from?"

"I'm not from a company at all. I'm from heaven."

Stephanie shakes her head. "No, we can't use that. People will think you're mad. Better stick with the Foxglove story. Everybody's used to weird stuff coming out of laboratories, stories about pomegranates with lizard legs and brazil nuts scurrying around like ants."

"Uh? Say that again?"

Stephanie says it again. I heard it right the first time.

"And pigs with wings?" I suggest.

"Don't be silly. Pigs can't fly."

So, I'm supposed to have been created by Foxglove Laboratories, and so are the unnatural products I'm trying to do battle against in heaven. Many of them, if not all. This is a curious turn of events.

I say my thoughts out loud. "I think I should visit Foxglove Laboratories."

"It's a secretive company." Stephanie holds her hand against her chin and contemplates this. "You could pretend to be an investor. They do investor tours. But they'll check your credentials. Are you stinking rich?"

"Odourless. I don't have a bean."

"Then you really must go on the Gary Triumph Show."

While I'm briefly lost in jigsaw thoughts, Stephanie holds her mother's hand again. "Oh mum, I'm so sorry they're not dancing."

"Does she like dancing?" I ask. The lack of dancing seems to be an important issue. Even if Stephanie did write all that nonsense about me she's been very helpful. I might be able to do something in return.

"Just to watch, it's all she can do these days. When she was younger she was a beautiful dancer. I mean truly beautiful, the Ginger Rogers of her day. Now she can barely move. It's the one thing that gives her joy, to watch, I mean. I pay a lot of money for the band, they're all session musicians, very talented, and they do their best, but I can't force people to dance."

"No, indeed you can't."

I get up off my seat and walk towards the band on their tiny podium. This is slightly rude of me, leaving Stephanie without a word, but I think she'll forgive me. As I reach the podium I produce my Syrinx, my pipes, which always appear in my hand when I have need of them, and without waiting for an invitation I step right in amongst the players.

They grind to a halt in mid-number. The band leader gives me his get-lost glare, which is feeble and easily shrugged-off, then I see him glance at Stephanie, who will be paying the band's bill, to see how he should react if he wants the bill to go through with ease. I've not been on Earth very long, but I'm learning the significance of bills and the people who sign them. Apparently I get the nod.

"What key is that?" asks the band-leader, resignedly, cocking his head at my Syrinx.

"It's not a key, it's a musical instrument."

Now he looks heavenward. Has he worked out where I'm from? I doubt it.

"Can you give us a middle C?" he asks. He speaks very slowly, like I'm an idiot.

"I don't think so."

"Good Lord. Just play a note. Any note will do."

I play a note.

"Ok, let's try C flat," he says, struggling to keep a straight face. The other two musicians appear to find this funny.

They begin to play, in a very contorted way that clearly they find difficult, and happily I play along, adjusting the tone of the Syrinx to match the weird background they're struggling with. After a minute the leader nods his head and the background music changes, and a while later it changes again. This looks hopeful. They're better than I thought. On each occasion I change the tone of my instrument to match them. On the Syrinx I can play any note that exists. Some notes are tricky, but they're all there, every one of them.

This is a surprise to the band. As we continue, the leader's jaw begins to drop and I get a clear view of his tongue. Perhaps in the other world a set of seven reed pipes only produce seven notes. I suppose this is a possibility. And now I remember where I've heard the expression 'key' before. In heaven. John Lennon used it when we were jamming together in The Three Johns. "Pan," he said, "you know it would be

wonderful if you could keep to one key for five or six notes at a time, then the rest of us musical morons might be able to keep up." About the only person in heaven who feels happy to accompany me is Mozart, who, I have to admit, is pretty good, and when we reach the end of a piece where we've flown all over the musical skies and covered every note in the spectrum he insists on stepping over and giving me a palm-smacking high-five, and has a grin that begins at each ear, like we've just accomplished something extraordinary. He's a strange fish, and no mistake.

Back in Stephanie's garden, when we get to the end of the peculiar ballad the band-leader is looking at me like I'm the creature from the black lagoon and he's the virgin tied to the post. His skin is as pale as his jacket and I don't think he's prepared to take the lead again, and so I begin with a hornpipe. We have the attention of the audience, let's make the most of it. The band follow me, sometimes at a distance. The drummer is cool, he doesn't have key problems. The tall guy with silver hair on double-bass changes up a gear, and then another gear, and finally begins to enjoy himself. He's hooting and gurgling in a way he probably last did in his twenties. After a few minutes the band-leader gives up, and I admire him for this. He's wise enough to know his limitations.

We go way beyond them. I can trill a set of reeds, I can add three notes to the trill and fit ten trills in a second. Any ear that's connected to any set of feet is obliged to dance. It's not optional. By the time we're half-way through our tune we have our audience prancing around on the grass like pagans at Saturnalia. Some of them have thrown their wine glasses into the Cypress hedgerows, others have hung on to them and have the stains on the clothes to prove it. A handful of children come out of their computerised indoor sanctuary and dance like puppets. Their parents huff and puff and jump up and down as if their feet are escaping hot embers. We are a hundred mad people tamping down the lawn, throwing our arms in the air and feeling completely and utterly connected to our ears. We are dancing.

Stephanie too has found the sound irresistible. Her daughter Jessica bounces up and down in front of her. Dorothy can't manage the miracle of leaving her wheelchair, yet her feet tap on the footrests, even though she doesn't hear well.

But I'm not looking at her feet, I'm seeing her smile, and it's the most beautiful smile I've seen for a long time.

Chapter 5

Buddha's home is a small semi-detached house deep in the suburbs of Cricklewood, and very modest compared to Stephanie's. I've been here a couple of days now and I spend as much time as I can in the rear garden, where the plants and bushes grow wild, the grass is waist-high and there are butterflies and a family of foxes. I keep hoping to see a woodnymph posing beneath one of the sycamores. No luck so far.

Buddha once waded out into the middle of the grass to meditate, but spends most of his evenings on the sofa catnapping and watching TV, which he claims is pretty much the same thing. In heaven, I can't recall ever seeing him sitting with his legs out of the lotus position, yet here in his lounge he comes back from work and shakes his shoes on to the carpet and spreads his legs along the sofa, props a cushion behind his back and sighs, clearly content.

"Ah, this is the life," he says, leaning forward from the quicksand sofa for another slice of pizza. "TV on, fast food delivered to the door, nice comfortable sofa."

My easy chair has its own quicksand habits – it's easier to enter than to leave – yet I'm not so easily seduced by the rest of suburban life. I admit I've taken a liking to Pepperoni pizza and I'm beginning to follow Eastenders, but I still have a way to go.

"There's a meditative quality to evenings like these," continues Buddha. "Here we are in a pleasant semi out in the backwaters, with no traffic noise, nobody at the door, the front garden acting as a buffer zone, plenty of shops conveniently close yet far enough away not to be a nuisance. It's a semi-detached life in all kinds of ways. I just love curling up on the sofa and watching something mindless on the box. It's as close as you can get to meditation with no mental effort. And the fantastic thing is, there are millions of people on this same longitude doing exactly the same thing. I love the collective mindlessness of the evenings. It's simply beautiful. Pan! Stop clicking your hoofs together."

"I can't help it," I protest. "I'm feeling restless. I don't think semi-detached life is for me. I want to be out there doing things, chasing nymphs, dancing, finding out what Joe Progress is up to and how to get into Foxglove." I wave a sheet of paper at him. "Stephanie managed to get me an application for an investors' tour, but the only people they let inside are fund managers and multi-millionaires."

When I've finished protesting I do as I'm told and stop clicking my hoofs, as I'm still mildly in the doghouse for eating the aspidistra in the hallway. I love the idea of snack plants spread around a house, yet apparently that's not why they're there. In heaven I tend to sleep in caves or under bushes, so houseplants, paintings and ornaments are all a mystery to me. There are dozens of shelves in Buddha's lounge and every one of them is taken up by ceramic cats playing ceramic violins.

I've brought up the issue of ceramic violin-playing cats with Buddha, and he tells me he finds them useful for the purpose of personal centering. If by some chance he begins to feel that everything in the universe makes sense and that life has some ultimate and definable purpose, he has only to glance at his collection of ceramic cats to recognise that this is merely a passing illusion. Apparently, many other-worlders hoard ridiculous ornaments for this same purpose, and even pay large amounts of money for them to ensure that the realisation hits with full force.

We're currently watching *The World's Wildest Police Chases* on TV, which, as Buddha has already stated, is fairly mindless, consisting mainly of footage of fast moving vee-hicles squeezing between and around slower moving vee-hicles, often viewed from a helicopter, while a breathless commentator compliments the chasing police on the quality of their work, even when they're clearing fouling up. On these occasions, when two unmarked police cruisers collide with each other, when eight burly cops pounce on a driver who's already surrendered, and when the driver of a station wagon simply gets away, Buddha slaps his sides and guffaws, though I don't think the programme intends to be funny.

This is the first real TV I've ever seen. I heard of them in heaven as mythical objects belonging to the other world, along with planes and helicopters and anti-wrinkle creams, but I've never seen one before. Just as the myth says, it's very much like a window into another world, or a theatre, or multiple theatres. The myth also says they're water-powered, and from looking at the pipes plugged into the back I can see this is a possibility.

Our suburban idyll is broken by the sound of the doorbell.

"Do you mind getting that?" says Buddha.

I can hear mischief in his voice. When I open the front door, I understand why.

"John!"

"Pan! Hey, fella, nice to see you down here."

John Frum gives me one of his rib-crushing bear-hugs. It's a few seconds before I can speak. "I thought you'd..."

"Faded away? No, I just like it down here. Came down the Axis Mundi, saw my first mail-order catalogue, never went back."

I haven't seen John for years. He's a god of the Cargo Cult. Many times in heaven John and I would flatten grass into smooth strips called runways and sit together in the tiny wooden control towers he built and press buttons made of gourds and acorn caps and say thing like 'This is Bay Area Control calling A-Six-One-Niner on final approach' into freshly-picked bulrush heads. I never really expected an aircraft to land and discharge its cargo, as to me they were just mythical items from the other world, but sometimes I think John was genuinely disappointed. Anyway, it was a great deal of fun and I developed a soft spot for him.

"What are you doing in London?" I ask. "Aren't you supposed to be in New...er..."

"New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Melanesia? Nice places, sure, but if you want cargo you need to be here in London, where the action is." He clicks his fingers. "Or New York, Tokyo, but no way out in the sticks. Whew! No cargo."

John is tall and athletic, though not especially broad. Muscles on his chest and upper arms are enhanced by the contrast of his black skin and stand out like foothills beneath a rising moon. His hair is close-cropped yet still densely curled. He wears plain green combat trousers cut to mid-calf, and no shirt. He likes to go around bare-chested, and if I ever saw him wearing a top in heaven it was only ever a white teeshirt. For all I know, it might have been the same one every time.

We go through to the lounge. Buddha isn't there, but soon comes in from the kitchen with a selection of bottled beers, even though he doesn't drink alcohol. It's at times like this when I thank myself for my choice of friends.

"I thought you two might like to catch up," he tells me. "You know, there are six or seven gods living in London alone, leading quiet lives in the suburbs."

"I'm in Muswell Hill," says John, which means nothing to me. He inspects the beer bottle labels. "This one makes you witty," he says, pointing. "This one turns you into a good musician, this one makes you attractive to women, and here's one that makes your penis grow."

"That seems so unlikely," I say, more loudly than I intended.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Buddha says to John. "I thought at least one of them might make you feel refreshed and light-headed."

John takes this statement at face value and is puzzled by it.

"I'm willing to give it a try," I say, intending to move things on, though I notice I've unintentionally picked the last beer that John mentioned.

"John takes TV advertising more literally than the rest of us," explains Buddha. "You should see his house. You can barely move for crates and boxes. Washing machines, tumble dryers, multigyms, dartboards, golf sets, paint strippers, cordless drills, horse grooming sets..."

"Have you got a horse, John?" I ask.

"No."

"But it can't just be cargo that keeps you here," I say. "You can have any material item you want in heaven. You'd only have to think of them, just imagine them, and they'd be there."

"Hey, half this stuff I couldn't dream up. How about a combination kettle/radio? When the music stops you know the water's boiled. Smart, eh? There's one in the hall, though I don't use it. Or a hostess trolley that doubles as a painter's gantry. Try the front bedroom. A door that's also a six-inch wide aquarium? Can't lift it, but it looks great, even in the box. The best thing about being here is you don't even have to *think* about what you want." He points at the TV. "You see that? It tells me what I want to buy, and why I need it. They've got the whole system *totally* sorted, from beginning to end."

I recall Buddha's comment about needing money for everything. "And where do you get the money for all this?"

"Ah," says John, "I use a slightly different system. It's called credit. You'll see it advertised."

Buddha shakes his head despairingly.

"Buddha doesn't approve," says John. "Even though he's in the sharky business himself."

"I'm not in the sharky business. I'm an estate agent," protests Buddha, "at Ratcliffe's, on Cricklewood High Street. Very respectable." He's drinking bottled water. I notice that as this is a special occasion he's cracked open a bottle of sparkling.

I'm lost. "A what?"

"A realtor," says John, equally mysteriously.

"I buy and sell homes," explains Buddha.

I must still be looking puzzled, because he adds, "You can buy and sell anything here."

"But surely not homes?"

"Especially homes. Everything in this world has a monetary value - your home, your kidneys, an accident, a death, a baby, a finished marriage. It takes some getting used to."

The conversation moves on to the subject of why I've come down the Axis Mundi to Earth, and I tell John about the mixed species items in my favourite forest, about Joe Progress and the forthcoming election, about Stephanie McVeigh and Foxglove Laboratories.

John puts his finger to his lips. "Shhhh," he says. "The shopping instructions are on."

A TV ad introduces us to a car that's good for the environment.

"I'd better get one of those," says John. "All my cars make the air dirty. I should get one that cleans it."

"Om! That's not really what the advert means, John," says Buddha.

"Course it does."

"They mean it's a car that's less damaging for the environment than other cars."

"That's not what they said."

Buddha raises his eyes. He directs his explanation at me, though I suspect it's for John's benefit. "Adverts don't tell you much about products, they tell you what people want. If an advert tells you a car is good for the environment, it doesn't mean the car is good for environment, it means that people want cars to be good for the environment. You have to interpret, you have to filter."

"Ok, so a face cream ad teaches me that people like to look young," I suggest.

"Exactly."

"What about burger ads?"

For a few moments Buddha looks less comfortable on the sofa than usual, until he thinks of the answer. "People get hungry."

"I see."

Against John's protests, Buddha flicks through the channels until he comes across a program with the subtitle 'Aliens abducted my grandmother's brain'.

"Ah," he says, with satisfaction. "Reality TV."

Proud teenagers parade their grandparents and compete over whose is the most senile. Right now the TV competition is down to the final two oldies and is getting tricky to judge as neither of them speaks or responds to external stimuli.

"Isn't this in bad taste?" I suggest.

"Compared to what?" says John, who seems very happy with Buddha's choice of programme. "Compared to 'My wife is a slag' or 'My children are so stupid I've cooked cleverer chickens'?"

We're watching a carefully-monitored blinking contest. First oldie to blink loses. They've now managed four minutes and the presenter is beginning to wonder if he made a mistake. We're poised on the precipice, waiting for an ancient blink, and when it finally arrives we're all eternally grateful.

The host of the show interviews the winner – the grandson of the non-speaking, unblinking grandmother – who is ten and a computer expert, and whose current ambition in life is to own a Burger King franchise, so he can eat as many burgers as he wishes.

Buddha grimaces. I get the impression his theories on filtering and Zen TV have suffered a setback.

"I used to work in one," he says, "when I first arrived here in the other world. I worked in a Burger King on Charing Cross Road."

"Was it bad?"

"Very good for the humility, not for the bank balance."

"So you became an estate agent."

"Not straight away. I enrolled at a Buddhist monastery, but I got kicked out. The head monk said I was misinterpreting the teachings."

"Didn't you tell him you're the teacher?"

"What would be the point, if he didn't already know?"

This brings a smile to my face. Buddha may be slightly different here in the other world, but he's still reassuringly perverse.

"Anyway, there was no money in it," he adds. "They have a very fair method of distributing money in this world. If you're doing something worthwhile, they don't give you much. But if you do something fairly pointless then by way of compensation they give you shedloads. So teachers and nurses earn next to nothing, but footballers and rock stars earn millions."

"Otherwise everybody would want to do something worthwhile," I suggest.

"Exactly. My boss, for example, Paul Ratcliffe, the guy who owns the estate agency, he earns a fortune, and all he does is sell other people's houses."

"Poor sod."

"Actually, it's worse than that. Nowadays he just employs other people to sell houses for him, while he sits on a yacht in the Caribbean. A completely worthless life, so he's paid handsomely for it."

"That's Progress," says John. "Can I have another beer?"

"Sure," says Buddha. "Which one would you like this time?"

"One that helps me play football. I've got a game tomorrow."

Buddha carefully selects the correct brand.

We say nothing for some time. Buddha changes channels again and we watch a programme on fad diet plans. We learn about the cabbage soup diet, the Atkins diet, and the latest contender based around a mild dose of typhoid. My media filter mechanism is working well, indeed it's hyperactive, as I notice all that every participant in the programme is still overweight, apart from the typhoid dieters, who weigh no more than seven stone but are a disconcerting shade of yellow.

That's not the only thing that occurs to me.

"Your boss, does he come back to this country often?"

"Paul? Hardly ever. It's a peculiar system. Most over-paid people are kept out of this country by their accountants. I can barely remember what he looks like."

"So it's unlikely that anybody else would recognise him. He might happen to have wide feet and always wear a hat, for all anybody knows, and be very keen to invest in Foxglove Laboratories."

Buddha smiles and strokes his chin, thoughtfully. "Yes, I see what you mean."

Chapter 6

Foxglove headquarters is a white building three storeys high, with long dividers in its white painted metal window frames, Art Deco style, and peculiar circular towers at each corner. Directly to its left is a distribution centre with concrete ramps and loading bays, which I'm sure would charm John Frum, but is ugly to my eyes. The overall set-up looks very appropriate for a genetics company, a hybrid combining the worst of a variety of styles, a ship's bridge, a medieval castle and a concrete railway station.

We're in Bedfordshire, so the driver tells me, with Bedford away to our right and Milton Keynes somewhere to our left. A tall perimeter fence heads off towards both towns, fading into invisibility in the distance and sunken into a shallow trench to disguise its height. There are no houses nearby and it's a long time since we passed one. I would guess the isolation isn't accidental.

I climb out of my hired limousine. The driver believes I'm Paul Ratcliffe, and happily the Ratcliffe empire will be paying his bill. Our ruse was taken up so eagerly that Buddha and I ought to have been suspicious, but weren't. That's the nature of glee. Less than 24 hours after I posted off my application for an investor's tour, I got my invite for a tour the following day, and here I am.

Within seconds of announcing myself grandly at the reception desk I've been given my lapel badge, or at least Paul Ratcliffe's lapel badge, and ushered through into a corridor where I'm able to catch up with the rest of the delegates, who've already started their tour. Buddha is to blame for this slight mistiming. According to Buddha, Paul Ratcliffe is always late, and my impersonation would have been unconvincing if I'd arrived on time. Being late is a habit of rich and important people, but I fear we didn't take into account the sum of Paul Ratcliffe's wealth compared to the sum of Foxglove's, the second being a few thousand times greater than the first.

We should have been dancing to the tune of the fattest wallet, and in that respect we've failed.

There are fourteen other delegates in the pack. It definitely has a pack feel. We're all male and we're all dressed in dark suits and white shirts and elaborate silk ties. For a moment I get the feeling we're a group of schoolboys from a single sex school, grown up forty years but still in uniform. This feeling must be something I'm picking up from my companions because I've never been to school and rarely wear clothes.

Our leader is female. She's shorter than any of us and wears her own version of our uniform, with a white blouse and a skirt instead of trousers. This is her territory and she walks with confidence. Her sex is an advantage with this all-male group and she waggles her backside as she walks to make the most of it, which I'm not slow to notice.

After a few corridors we walk half-outside into a conservatory area where the plants are very tall, almost reaching the glass above them. Our leader steps on to a small platform. "For late-comers," she begins, "my name is Sherry Terrence, I'm Head of Public Relations here at Foxglove. So glad you could join us."

Sherry has an accent similar to John Frum. Her tone doesn't sound especially glad, but I've been warned by Buddha that my tour is likely to be the live equivalent of a TV advert. What I hear and what is meant are unlikely to be the same.

"This room is basic science," she says. "Pest-resistance maize over to this side. We add a gene from a bacterium, and the gene produces a protein that kills pests like the corn-borer. This is great news for the environment. It means far less chemicals are needed and yields are higher..." Sherry stops and shuffles through her notes. "Excuse me..."

My companions are patient. While I inspect them they have no eyes for anybody but Sherry. They look perfectly comfortable in their ultra-smart clothes, but I'm less happy inside Buddha's.

Buddha's best suit is a passable fit. He's a lot larger around the waist than I am, but happily the looseness disguises my legs. We even managed to split a pair of black patent shoes and force them around my hoofs, though anybody who looks in detail will notice they're excessively wide. They're strange to walk in, but add an essential finishing touch.

I'm less keen on the tie, which has all the characteristics of a noose. It strikes me that the resemblance is intentional. To wear one is to display a physical weakness, a vulnerability, and so show an extra level of civilization and departure from the primitive ways of violence.

But it's the cuffs I find strangest of all. They're very elaborate and fold back on themselves to be held together with an ornament called a cufflink. This all seems very contrived and artificial, yet Buddha tells me it's an essential part of my disguise. Apparently folded back cuffs with cufflinks are a symbol of my estate agent profession, a warning sign telling ordinary punters that I'm fond of sending out excessive bills, way beyond the value of my services. I find it touching that lawyers, estate agents and traders in financial services are all kind enough to wear these cuffs that send out warning signals to their fellow citizens. What a considerate world this is!

"Apologies," says Sherry. "Those were my notes for the corporate social responsibility seminar. I thought they didn't sound right. Here we are... kills pests like the corn-borer. This is great news for profits. We have the patent on the seed and we

have the patent on the fully-grown plant. If seed from a GM crop blows over into a neighbouring farm we can prosecute for abuse of patent, even if it's accidental. Once a few farmers plant our crops, everybody in the same district has to follow suit or risk court action."

My fellow delegates applaud. I have no clue why, but I do the same so I don't look out of place.

"And over there we have non-softening tomatoes, sometimes inaccurately called hard tomatoes. They've had their softening gene removed, which means they stay on the vine and mature forever. They're used for tomato paste in the US and Canada."

"Why not here?" asks a delegate in the front row.

"In Europe we have to write on the packaging if food contains genetically modified ingredients, which means nobody buys it. North America is a lot more company-friendly."

There's a murmur of agreement amongst the delegates and a nodding of heads, then we're on the move again, back into the building and into a regular laboratory, where scores of lab assistants are doing the lab assistant thing, wearing white coats and looking into microscopes while squeezing pipettes and twiddling knobs that might adjust the position of the continents or the speed that sound travels, for all I know.

"Here we inject the human gene for producing insulin into E Coli bacteria," says Sherry. "And that way we can manufacturer insulin for diabetics without removing the pancreas from thousands of pigs... oops, wrong script. And that means we can squeeze large amounts of money out of diabetics who will die if they don't pay. That's the most secure kind of business you're ever going to find."

Again there's a slight ripple of applause. I get the feeling my companions intend to invest.

We make our way through the laboratory and at the far end we enter a second garden, again beneath glass, but this time with the glass reaching up to the top of the building and sloping down, like we are inside half a giant teardrop. I'm expecting agricultural crops, so I'm unprepared for the beautiful orchids.

"Wow!"

Orchids are my favourites, even beyond fritillaries and aspidistra and daffodils. And these are amazing orchids in electric blues and reds and colours I'm not sure I've ever seen before. Not mere moth orchids and lady's-slippers, but parishii and rothschilds, Truly delicious!

"This is one side of genetic engineering that few people are against," says Sherry. "Pretty flowers. Some of the specimens in this room are worth thousands of dollars. Commercially we grow them in countries with the lowest labour costs, through holding companies registered in countries with the lowest taxation, ensuring that you, the shareholder, gains maximum financial advantage."

A murmur of approval all round. But I'm barely listening, I'm attempting to casually move sideways towards the biggest, bluest paphiopedilum I've ever seen.

"Do you hold the patent on the flowers too?" asks a delegate.

"Indeed we do. And if anybody cross-breeds with one of our plants, we'll also own the result of the breeding program."

I feign a slight coughing fit and it works perfectly, allowing me to turn and bring my hand to my mouth. Oh, my...is that paph wonderful. It's all I can do not to groan in delight.

"While we're in such pleasant surroundings," says Sherry, "Let's also consider our most profitable product, the Lifespan Extension program. I believe most of you are already on the program. The few who aren't, please note the 15% shareholder discount. This is very worthwhile as the program is ridiculously expensive. Extension of life is something that customers will pay through the nose for, and we really abuse that lack of price insensitivity as much as we can."

I'm moving sideways around the greenery again, with my hands behind my back, where they make contact with a bright red dendrobium. I'm drooling with anticipation.

"The program requires customers to take one injection per year," explains Sherry. "This contains a benign virus, a vector, that carries the enzyme telomerase into their body cells. The enzyme allows cells to replicate beyond the usual fifty or so divisions. End result, your body doesn't get old. But here's the best news. We estimate the cost of collecting and distributing the enzyme is only around one percent of the price we charge. How would you like a piece of *that* action?"

The response is the strongest applause yet. I'm sure some of the delegates are already reaching for their chequebooks. Personally, I'm more interested in the red dendrobium, which is going down even better than the paphiopedilum. Truly yummy!

Momentarily, Sherry looks unsure of herself. Following her gaze I watch a new arrival step into the tall conservatory. He's in his late thirties and wears a pale linen suit and tan jersey. His hair is fair and shoulder-length. He ought to look out of place, but is so sure of himself and has such presence that it's the rest of us who seem false-footed.

"We are very privileged today," announces Sherry, "to be in the company of Elliot Harmon, founder of Foxglove Laboratories and CEO."

I'm beginning to be bugged by this applause thing. Did I miss something? Did Elliot perform a trick on his way in? Does he have a special walk? I watched yet noticed nothing. Elliot raises his hand in appreciation. He makes his way through the small crowd until he's closer to me than to any other investment tourist. It's my hat that attracted him. I saw him glance around the room and make straight for my hat. And now he's checking out my feet.

Should I be nervous? It's not every day I pretend to be a millionaire estate agent with a string of properties across north London. It is not every day the CEO of the company I'm trying to fool enters the same physical space and stands next to me.

I suspect the plant behind me is still quivering from the pick, though fortunately I've stopped chewing. I open my hands to show my empty palms, which is probably a foolish gesture but I feel mild relief doing it.

"I'll come back to the Lifespan Extension program in a moment," says Sherry. "But now Elliot's here, let's have some fun." She looks up towards the top of the conservatory, at a high window in the one solid wall, close to the top of the teardrop, where a man looks down.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," he shouts.

"Then let's go."

I imagine nobody is expecting what happens next, except for Sherry and possibly Elliot. What happens next is that the man throws a live pig into the conservatory. I know the pig is alive because it's squealing like somebody's just thrown it from of a third storey window. At the bottom, we're all ducking and

covering our heads with our hands, as if they might protect us from the impact of a two hundred kilogram pig.

But the pig doesn't land, at least not yet, and when we get the courage to look up we can see why. It has fifteen foot wings, the size of a condor's, and though it's not very skilled at using them it manages to circle around inside the conservatory without much in the way of downward speed. It even flaps the wings once or twice, though without enthusiasm.

Unlike everybody else, I have a good idea what will happen next, and I move out of the way. Sure enough, the pig doesn't have much in the way of landing skills and its return to terra-firma is more of a crash than a landing. It takes out a row of orchids and finishes up on its back, squealing and looking thoroughly pissed off but physically unharmed.

When the inevitable applause has died down, Sherry says, "Early days yet, but we're in the process of developing self-harvesting plants and animals. We have pomegranates that can walk, pigs that can fly..."

I can't help myself. "But can it talk?"

This brings the house down. The investment candidates slap their thighs and crease their cheeks and point in my direction.

"Oh me oh my," says one, between convulsions. "If pigs could talk..."

Yet when I said it, I noticed the pig's eyes turned in my direction.

Elliot leans towards me. "Certainly *we* should talk," he suggests, quietly, so nobody else can hear. He's smiling, but it's not an especially inviting smile.

He's rather imposing, Elliot. I can't say exactly why I find him imposing, but I do. He's thin, almost scrawny, a little taller than me and has wild blue eyes. Inside those eyes are crackling lava flows, songbirds in flight, leopard-seals patrolling beneath ice crusts. They're definitely not empty eyes. He has a voice, too, of the kind that could charm wolves.

"In my office," he says, indicating with his hand that we should make a move.

Perhaps the others believe I'm getting privileged treatment and are jealous, for they grow quiet as the pair of us make our way to the doorway.

"Ahem," begins Sherry, now behind me. "Can I interest anybody in a few more details about the Lifespan Extension program?"

There's a murmur of consent.

"I'm going to miss hearing the details," I say to Elliot as we exit through the conservatory door.

His hair flaps as he walks down the corridor on the other side, with his hands in his pockets. I've never seen him in heaven, yet I feel he'd belong there. He has an almost spiritual presence, like Buddha or Vishnu, and it's spirituality without effort.

"Well, we can't have that," he says. "Can I borrow one of your shoelaces?"

"I'd prefer you didn't." I say, too quickly.

Elliot gives me his unnerving smile again. He says nothing but bends down and unlaces one of his shoes. He walks slower afterwards, but the shoe stays on. As he walks he picks with his fingernail at the end of the shoelace, which is brown. "When the cells in our body divide, the DNA strings get slightly ragged at the end. Eventually they get so ragged they can't divide any more and we're left with crappy old cells that can't regenerate. It's called growing old. A shoelace has the same problem. If these little plastic bits at the end wear away, the shoelace falls apart."

Here he sticks the end of the shoelace in front of my nose, in case I've never seen one before. And in a way he's right, because I've never really looked at one in detail, or thought about the plastic bits at the ends.

"Our DNA has plastic ends too," he tells me, "called telomeres, and there's an enzyme that looks after them, called telomerase. Unfortunately, it's not very active, so the ends of our DNA strings become too frayed after about 50 replications, which is why our bodies wear out and eventually fail. Under the Life Extension program, we collect the active enzyme and transfer it to a virus. We inject you with the virus, which then transfers the enzyme to your cells. Hey presto, your body stays young and virile."

"Fascinating," I say, because I feel I ought to say something.

"There's every chance you could live for 200 years."

"Really?"

"Or at least that Paul Ratcliffe might. He's on the program."

I don't know what to say to that, so I say nothing.

"Can I take your hat?" he asks, as we enter what I assume is his office. I make this assumption because even though the room is the size of a gymnasium it contains a desk.

"No, thank you."

Of course he can't take my hat. Beneath it are my horns. Buddha advised me that my wonderful stovepipe hat wouldn't go with the suit, so today I'm wearing a black fedora.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure, thank you."

"I hear the government is contemplating raising stamp duty," says Elliot "Tell me, Paul, how do you feel that will affect the housing market?"

Fortunately, Buddha has primed me for this kind of question. "Property will always be a good investment, whatever the policy of government."

Elliot sniggers. "Sorry, I couldn't resist." He motions for me to take a seat.

He sits at his desk, with his foot on the broad leather top while he re-threads the shoelace. "And we have the patent on the gene that produces telomerase, which we never use or license, it just sits in a filing cabinet somewhere, otherwise we'd only be able to overcharge our customers once, rather than every year. We have the market cornered. Life is good. You'll enjoy it here."

I'm not sure what this means, but I'm bothered by it. I try to remember that I'm a very rich person and I have my own company, I shouldn't be intimidated by my peers. This is much harder than I imagined, trying to be somebody else, trying to have their reactions, their emotions - that's the tricky part.

"And what are the social consequences of the Life Extension program?" I ask, which might be a question that the real Paul would ask, though I can't be sure, as I've never met him.

"The social consequences?" It seems to be a good question, as it makes Elliot think. "The social consequences?" he repeats, quizzically. "We're a commercial organisation, we're not concerned with social consequences."

"Oh, ok." Maybe it was a bad question after all, one that the real Paul Ratcliffe would never dream of asking.

"No, no, it's a good question. I've never thought about it before, that's all. Telomerase doesn't work so well on brain cells, unfortunately, so I suppose we'll finish up with a lot more stupid old people knocking about - driving, collecting

commemorative pottery, getting in the way, drinking flasks of tea in cars parked with a view. All the viewpoint car parks will be full. There you are – there's a social consequence."

"You're not very polite, are you?"

"I don't have to be. I'm selling longer life. I could punch my customers on the nose and they'd still buy."

He's finished lacing his shoes and is now fiddling with an empty envelope, a used envelope, tapping its edge on the desk and rotating it through his fingers while looking at me with those full eyes. "It's yours," he tells me. "This is the envelope that held your request to go on the investors' tour."

"I'm flattered."

"There's enough saliva on a licked envelope for us to test the DNA. And out of interest, we always do. At first we thought somebody was taking the piss. A goat in the mail room? Then we looked closer and found the same DNA contained both goat and human characteristics, also an abundance of telomerase, and a possible cellular history of more than 2000 years. We couldn't wait to invite you. Where the hell do you come from?"

"The other place."

"Monsanto?"

"No, no, no. The other place to hell."

He thinks about this for a moment and casts the thought aside. "Only, we're way ahead of everybody on the animal front. We even looked through our records to see if you'd escaped from one of our own labs, but we don't have any records of you. We can fix that, of course, but it's a puzzle."

I say nothing. I don't like the direction this conversation is heading. I haven't liked it for some time.

"You see," says Elliot, with his forced smile. "Foxglove has the patent on human genes mixed with goat. We have the patent on your DNA."

"I think it's time I left. If you'll excuse me."

He doesn't try to stop me, and I don't try to leave. This is what happens when you say you're leaving when really you mean something else, like, you're not enjoying what you're hearing, and you resent the fact that perverse curiosity will oblige you to hear it through.

"I don't know where you come from," he says, "but I know exactly where you're going, and that's here."

"I don't intend to stay."

I still haven't moved, but I will soon.

"Well, I thought there was a chance you'd feel that way, so I took the precaution..." He touches me on the shoulder with a brown envelope, which I reluctantly take from him.

"What is it? Your DNA?"

"An invitation to a court appearance. A writ."

"For what?"

"Claim of title"

"What does that mean? "

"We're claiming ownership."

"Of what?"

"Of you."

Chapter 7

Buddha gets home from work and he's far more energetic than usual. Rather than slobbering in front of the TV he quickly tidies up the house and when he's finished he rubs his hands together and stands in front of me.

"Are you coming, then?"

"Where?"

"Back to heaven. It's Friday, and I'm a weekend commuter. It's quite common here."

Before I get chance to apply intellect to the question, a certain part of my body points out that we haven't seen a woodnymph for five days, let alone chased one.

"Let's go."

John drives us to the Axis Mundi in his best white van. He has three comfortable cars parked in his driveway, another in Buddha's and a second van behind it, but this vehicle, he says, is the only one with road tax and insurance. It's also ideal for three people sitting side by side.

This is my fifth time on the crowded highways and I'm beginning to get an idea how the system works. From the outside, vehicles seem loud and intimidating, even in small numbers, but the solution is clearly to be inside one. From inside this large vehicle we are in control of the universe, with the exception of larger vehicles. We dodge and dive through traffic, pipping our horn and moving on at a pace, while all the time John steers and changes gear with one hand. Apparently this is an ex builder's van, and the engine will cut out if John brings in his right arm, which he's obliged to dangle uselessly out of the window. The tabloid newspaper on the dashboard is also essential and I've been warned not to touch it.

I'm fascinated by the world outside the windscreen: the mish-mash of old and new buildings, the strange materialistic artistry of shopfronts, and more than anything else the glorious mix of people – from babes in arms to weathered deadbeats, proud businessmen, strutting secretaries, couples hand in hand, families in easy-care fabrics, sullen youths in oversize jeans.

"What are those?" I point. "The buildings with the spiked roofs? We don't get them in heaven. We've passed a few and they've all been beautiful."

"Churches," says Buddha. "For the worship of Christ. The spires are supposed to connect them to heaven."

Foolishly I lean forward and look up to view the connection, then I recall that Buddha said 'supposed to'. Still, it's nice to hear that Christ is revered. He's a thoroughly nice god, even if he does have a thing about my hoofs and horns.

"In other countries there are thousands of temples for Buddha," says John.

Buddha, of course, is too modest to have mentioned this.

"Why don't you live where you're worshipped?" I ask him.

"Can you imagine what that would be like, living where I'm famous? There'd be..." He thinks of something that amuses him, then discards it. "Imagine how hard it would be to practice humility?"

"Maybe you could try for president yourself," I suggest. "Or Christ could try. He looks popular enough."

Buddha shakes his head. "We do fine, but ours are old faiths. It's the new gods who get the votes these days, gods like Mammon and Progress, gods who appeal across all religions. You see those spires? When those were built, they were the tallest structures on the skyline. Now look what's tallest."

I look around. "I see a giant dildo."

"A dildo or a gherkin, depending on your point of view. Either way, it's owned by a bank. And that tall square item next to it is owned by another bank, same for that tall one there, at least three of those in the distance, all dedicated to the great god Mammon, and each one separated from its neighbours by avenues dedicated to Mercedes, the god of Private Motor Transport. It's the same everywhere."

"What about Doctor Longlife?" I ask. "Where are his tall buildings?"

Buddha gives me a condescending look. "Don't be silly. You can only take a building analogy so far."

"The Doc's got buildings too," says John. "Plenty of hospitals, and they're big, but kind of tucked away, not so obvious."

John pulls up next to the British Atheist Society on Regent Street, where Buddha and I outrage the motorists behind by taking the time to open the door and step out on to the pavement. We wave goodbye to John, who isn't tempted to return even for a day, and enter through the familiar outside door.

"Will the Axis take both of us together?" I ask.

"Yes, easily."

I feel like an excited child.

"Wherever it is," adds Buddha.

He's looking at a blank wall. So am I. There were steel doors here a few days ago. Now they've gone. We check the wall thoroughly, and perhaps pointlessly, for any sign that the Axis Mundi ever existed. The wall is perfect and looks like it's always been there.

"Oh dear," says Buddha.

"Oh dear? What do you mean – oh dear? What do we do now?"

"Can I help you?" asks a young woman, watching us from the stairs at the end of the corridor.

"Er, we were looking for the lift," explains Buddha.

"Really? I don't think we've ever had a lift. I've been working here for three years. If we had a lift, I think I would have noticed it. Reception is on the first floor. You're atheists, are you?"

"Not exactly," replies Buddha.

But she's far more interested in me than in Buddha. She doesn't take her eyes off me as she approaches. "You're... are you the goat man from the newspapers?"

"I am."

"Can I get your autograph? It's not for me, you understand. It's for my sister. She thinks you're... sexy. I mean, not that I don't think you're sexy, but she's mad about you. Here..."

She scrabbles nervously in her handbag and produces a pen and paper.

"For Becky," she says.

I look at Buddha for guidance.

"Write 'For Becky' and then your name," says Buddha, quietly.

I'm about to write Pan when he adds, "Peter Alan Nesmith."

"It's not his real name," he tells the woman.

"Oh." She sounds disappointed.

I can't remember whether I'm supposed to be Alan or Allen, but I get the feeling it probably doesn't matter.

The woman thanks me, snatches her trophy and rushes back up the stairs, clearly excited.

"We'd better go, before she gathers a posse," says Buddha.

"Go where?"

"Back to Cricklewood."

"You're joking! We've got to find the Axis Mundi."

As we reach the outside door, Buddha calmly explains. "This is no accident, Pan. The Axis Mundi has been here for decades, and the week you arrive, it moves. This has been done to stop you going back. We won't be able to undo it in five minutes."

"We can try."

"Let's wander around London checking every lift door we can find. Then we can start on Paris and New York, maybe finish with Ulaanbaatar and the more developed towns of Mongolia. Shouldn't take more than a few thousand years."

I'm about to come out with an equally caustic response, possibly, though I haven't thought of it yet, when we step out on to the pavement and are immediately distracted by the sound of screeching tyres, followed by a dull thud, like a sack of flour landing in a wheelbarrow.

Twenty yards away, one of our fellow pedestrians lies in the road, a pool of rich red blood growing beneath his ear. A handful of other-worlders rush to help, some are on their mobile phones, most stand still on the pavement and watch.

"Hmmm. A sacrifice to the god of Private Motor Transport," observes Buddha, without emotion.

"Are you saying Mercedes moved the Axis Mundi?"

He shrugs. "Maybe. Or it could be coincidence. She gets a sacrifice every thirty seconds somewhere in this world."

"They must really like her."

"They do. And Mammon gets even more."

Chapter 8

I'm in the green room waiting for my turn on the Gary Triumph Show. When I told Stephanie I had no intention of going on the show, she didn't believe me, and it turns out she was right and I was wrong. Apart from anything else, I need the money.

Buddha has been very generous, yet I can't live off him indefinitely, I need to pull my own weight, and the figures Stephanie talks about for product endorsement are more than Buddha earns in a year, assuming the show goes well. It would be churlish of me not to give it a try. Anyway, it might be fun.

I'm waiting in the green room with my minder, a beautiful research assistant called Jacqueline, whose hair is held back by a ponytail band – a scrunchy I think she calls it – and explodes from behind the band in a mass of waves and ripples like clay-

fashioned flames. She's not too heavy up top and has the most magnificent derriere I've ever seen, though I'm getting to see it less now she's noticed how my eyes follow it around the room. Jacqueline has two tasks in life. One is to make sure I've been to the toilet, the other is to make sure I don't go to the bar – that I don't do an Oliver Reed, as she calls it. She's succeeded in both.

I was very happy to be led by that derriere towards the bathroom, and I'm not greatly worried by the bar ban because Stephanie McVeigh anticipated this and I've brought with me a small plastic bottle of Coca Cola with four added shots of vodka. Jacqueline is suspicious of the bottle and watches it like a mother watches scissors in the hands of a young child, but either she doesn't have the courage to question it or it's an acceptable ploy. Anyway, I'm not sure I'll finish it, as I'm not especially nervous.

She's already offered me a fresh Coca Cola from the hospitality table, which is a meagre thing holding soft and hot drinks only. There are three packets of crisps and two of peanuts, and to brighten up the offering, which looks distinctly miserly and unappealing, there's a vase of daffodils in the centre, which I much appreciate – especially when Jacqueline isn't looking.

It's Stephanie who advised me that four units of alcohol are ideal for removing pre-appearance nerves without removing dignity. She also instructed me in other aspects of the dark art of television appearance, though I suspect I'll finish up ignoring much of her advice. For example I'm supposed to wave my hands around like a lunatic, or at least an Italian, because viewers find it boring to watch somebody talking without movement. I should try not to put on a smile for long periods, even for more than a few seconds, as it can easily become more strenuous than lifting a sack of cement, and there are few things so ugly as a decomposing smile. Also I shouldn't worry too much what I say, as long as I say it with the right tone of voice, and if I don't like a question then I should answer a different one or use wit and charm when failing to answer.

It is of course also Stephanie who placed me on the programme in the first place. I'm not sure who managed to place the guest I'm about to follow, the woman who's now talking to Gary as Jacqueline and I watch the monitor in the green room. Her name is Mandy and she's a hairdresser from Sheffield. This is her most memorable feature. From the clips mixed in to the interview I get the impression she originally featured in a programme about the holiday excesses of young people, where she was a hoot and a half. Unfortunately, now she's back in her homeland and sober she's a thoroughly straightforward and pleasant person. For ten minutes Gary's been trying to make something of her, putting in all the effort required to manufacture entertainment from wet cardboard, and now he's all worn out has given up and sent her centre-stage to sing a song.

"Be good to him," Jacqueline tells me. "He really had to work for that."

Strangely, I do feel some sympathy for Mr Triumph. His camp presentation and double-entendres I find mildly tedious, but watching him do a difficult interview has given me some idea why he earns a million a year. Many people are capable of negotiating choppy waters, but it takes a special individual to keep things moving through a windless calm.

Also I recognise that he'll be very much on my side, that he's desperate to build somebody up if only they'll provide the building material. He has every incentive to make his guests appear wonderful and worthwhile, for if they don't then he'll soon be out of a living.

Mandy begins to sing, and her singing is exciting, though perhaps not in the way she intends. Frequently she picks a note and does battle with it, always coming out on the winning side but leaving that delicious possibility that next time things will work out differently and not so well. Jacqueline is watching and listening with her mouth open, also surely waiting for that same moment, and the studio audience is spellbound, for this is singing on the edge.

"Fantastic," says Jacqueline. "That makes up for it. This is great TV." It's at this moment that Jacqueline notices the headless daffodil stalks in the vase. She puzzles over them for a second and decides there's no point in asking the question as she wouldn't be able to do anything with the answer. Instead she looks at her watch. "Shit! He put her on early. Come on, let's go."

Indeed this is great TV and I'm reluctant to leave Mandy before she reaches the end of her adventure. I want to know if she gets to her destination without falling down the musical crevasse, but there's a derriere to follow and I have a natural duty towards it and so I follow its owner out of the green room and along a short corridor to an entrance with a green curtain, whether by accident or design. Now I can hear the singing real-time, through the doorway, and this is an odd sensation. What was once merely television is now real. Jacqueline places her arm across the doorway, in the manner of a starting gate.

When the applause for Mandy begins to subside, the gate lifts and Jacqueline ushers me inside. I arrive at a much higher level than I anticipated and I'm applauded for walking down the steps towards Gary Triumph, and here's the first thing I'm not expecting - the stage area is tiny. So is the audience area, together they take up a quarter of some vast space that's a production studio. It's also three times as high as it needs to be. Massive lamps light up the stage area and a small proportion of the audience, lamps strung from a ceiling so high it can't be seen. I'm walking into a universe with stars in the firmament and a small solar system in the middle, with Gary Triumph at its centre, now rising to meet me.

"The goat-man!"

"That's me."

I doubt that we're going to win awards for this fascinating opening, yet the audience seems happy. I've been very fortunate to have Mandy prepare the ground ahead of me, and I take back all those things that ran through my mind about the depth of her personality and her singing.

The steps on the way down are so well lit that I can barely make out one from another, but there aren't too many and I make it to the stage in one piece. We're bathed in so much light that it takes on its own mass and weight, in the same way that heat can do. There's plenty of heat too, and now I have a better idea why my face and brow were dusted with dull powder while I waited in the green room.

With a flourish Gary indicates where I should park my backside. When I sit down the applause begins to subside, and I'm inclined to stand up again and see if the volume returns. Perhaps it's a reckless inclination, but I follow it. As I suspected, there's a slight increase in volume, which diminishes when I sit once again. I wonder how many times I could go up and down before we all get bored, but I can see from the look on Gary's face that his heart would give out first, and so I'm a gentleman and innocently adjust my waistband as if this was my only reason for getting up again in the first place, and I'm dead cool, and there's no risk of my being a real awkward bastard in front of cameras.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Peter Alan Nesmith," says Gary, looking relieved.

It's a pleasant enough name and I've no objection to using it. The audience like it too.

"Good to be here, Gary." I've been watching Michael Caine and Sean Connery on Parkinson and similar, so I have some idea what to say.

"I've always wanted to ask you this," says Gary, as if we've met each other a dozen times at parties and in celebrity restaurants and the opportunity was always close but never quite arrived. "Can I feel your horns?"

There are a few titters from the audience. I lean forward and doff my hat, which is the stovepipe today. Stephanie circled around the subject of what I should be wearing on the show with such persistence that I gave in easily when she eventually landed for the attack. I'm wearing the stovepipe, the white blouson shirt that I adore, trousers that are slightly too tight, and underwear. So my getting up and down from the sofa might have an alternative explanation, inspired by a complaint from my genitals – I hadn't even thought of that myself until now. I'm barely used to clothes, never mind tight clothes, and this is the first time I've ever worn underwear. At Stephanie's insistence I'm wearing a thong-type affair of black satin, which I assume is what all the other-world males wear. It's not entirely comfortable. Perhaps she intends me to squirm about on the interview sofa from time to time, just to add movement.

Gary's fondling of my horns is also tempting me to squirm. They're not especially sensitive, but how much would I want a male to caress any other insensitive part of my body, for example my hair? There's always the fallback position that I'm about twice as heavy as Gary and three times as strong.

The moment I think this thought, he stops fondling.

"Ooooooh," he says. "Just like velvet!"

I suppose he has a point. They do feel velvety. I too like fondling them, and when there's nobody else around I might hold on to one for ten minutes or more, which may not be natural, but then I have no base-level to measure from.

"Do you get mistaken for the other fellow with horns?" asks Gary.

It takes me a moment to work out what he means. "Oh, no, never. He's got bull's horns, entirely different." I'm about to expand on this when I recall that Stephanie advised me to steer clear of the issue of religion and not to pursue it with any vigour if it came up.

"Is there one particular side of you that's goat?" asks Gary. "Your mother's side? Your father's side?"

"My mother's side, I think. I knew my father and he looked fairly normal. But I've never known who my mother was."

Stephanie has assured me I won't have to answer many questions about my background, and none about my age, because they'll make bad TV. Everybody wants to believe I popped out of the lab a couple of weeks ago, already aged, and Gary won't ask anything too pointed that bursts this bubble. It's an extension of what Stephanie calls the Alone In The Desert Syndrome, where one person speaks to camera about how it feels to be alone in the desert with a few litres of water, and viewers ignore the fact that there's a cameraman, sound-recordist, second grip, tealady and a truck full of equipment somewhere just out of shot, because that would only spoil the excitement.

"Oooh," says Gary, inviting the audience to feel sympathy for me. "And your legs are entirely goat-like. Is that right?"

"Yes, with hoofs." Proudly I display my hoofs. It's a pleasant change to show them off to the other-worlders rather than hide them. I've always been fond of my hoofs and the masquerade of pretending to have feet hasn't come easily.

"Good for running, jumping, climbing mountainsides?" suggests Gary.

"They certainly are. I can outrun and outjump anybody with the standard spindly affairs and five toes."

"We should have you in our Olympic team," says Gary. He strokes his chin while he thinks of something. "Do you know why Mexico gets so few medals at the Olympics?"

"No."

"Because any Mexican who can run, jump or swim is already in America."

Some members of the audience find this funny. Personally I find it misses the mark. Maybe it was the timing.

"But seriously," asks Gary, "would they allow you to run in the games, I wonder? We could finish up with winged ski-jumpers, swimmers with fish tails, yachtsmen with four arms..."

Gary decides the genetically-modified Olympics is too challenging for a lightweight chat-show and moves on. "What about eating?" he asks. "Do you have two stomachs or however many a goat has?"

"Four stomachs. I'm not sure, to be honest. But I do like my greens."

"How can you not know how many stomachs you have?"

"Are *you* sure you only have one? Have you looked?"

Our conversation continues in this lazy manner for many minutes. I wonder if Mandy is now in the green room looking at the screen and thinking to herself that I'm a boring old fart and they would have been better off with a second hairdresser from Sheffield. Even my own attention is beginning to drift. I'm looking beyond the bright lights into the surrounding darkness of this cavernous studio, beyond the audience on its terraces, and thinking to myself how much this is artifice. On the screen it looks like we're in a room with a ceiling and walls, but this isn't the case, or rather they're so distant we could fit another three audiences and stages inside, maybe another eleven we decked them one on top of the other. We're pushing the Alone In The Desert Syndrome to the extent that the desert itself isn't real. There may even be a sand pit in one corner of this cavern, with a water container standing next to it and a hundred strong yellow lamps overhead.

"So exactly where does your human part end and the goat part begin?" asks Gary, with a twinkle in his eye. "The waistline, or some way below the waistline?"

"It's not clear. It all gets mixed up down there."

"Let me phrase the question a different way. Do your lovers tend to have bosoms or udders?"

This is not a question I was expecting, but I can sense that for the first time we have the full attention of the audience.

"Bosoms, but not large ones."

I hear chuckles and murmurs of delight.

"No tendency to bother sheep, then? No sneaking around the pens at midnight? No fondness for running your hands through a beautiful soft fleece?"

"Goats have hair. It's sheep that have fleeces."

"I wouldn't know," says Gary, and the audience is amused by this lack of knowledge.

It strikes me that Gary has the hand-waving down to a T. I'm finding it unnatural to add semaphore to everything I say, and in the main I've stopped, but Gary has the balance just right, drafting out the shape of a bosom versus an udder, running his fingers through an imaginary fleece, but otherwise avoiding the more stupid movements that have made me self-conscious.

"And how would you describe your ideal partner?" he asks.

"A woodnymph. An all-round woodnymph with a woodnymph's body and a woodnymph's attitude to life." Saying this makes me realise how much I'm missing the woodnymphs. This is the longest time I've ever spent without their company. I really must get back to heaven.

"A svelte, nymph-like creature, beguiling and slightly dizzy," interprets Gary.

"Yes, exactly."

"Do we have any woodnymphs in the audience?"

Around fifteen women shout yes. I suspect the alcohol restrictions of the green room don't apply to the audience. There are of course exactly zero woodnymphs in the audience – I would have sensed if just one was present – but it's very curious that so many women are happy to pretend. Very interesting indeed.

"And would the woodnymphs in the audience be interested in seeing a nice pair of hairy goat's legs?" Gary asks the audience.

Now there are more than fifteen.

"Well, as you know," he tells me, "we like to give our guests the opportunity to do a little turn at the end of an interview. So, if you'd like to take the stage, Peter..."

I'm prepared for this and as I get up from my chair I reach into my pocket for my Syrinx, so its sudden appearance won't be too much of a surprise.

Gary waves a hand for me to put it back. "Music will be provided." And more loudly, "Take it away, maestro!"

There's no maestro, there's no orchestra, but I suppose the viewers outside the studio don't know this, or perhaps the maestro is the producer who presses the button to start the CD.

Through the monitor speakers I hear strange, slow, jazzy music. Duh du du-du du, DUH! Cymbals clash. Duh du du-du du, DUH. And so on. The audience is smiling and slowly clapping along, almost in time. Gary gets up from his chair and begins to gyrate, swinging his hips wildly from side to side, which the pretend woodnymphs like. He motions for me to follow suit.

I'm not a great one for pride and dignity, I'm more on the side of fun and dancing and screw the consequences, and so I begin to dance too, not really caring whether I look foolish or otherwise. The audience approves. "Get 'em off!" shouts a would-be woodnymph.

Gary mimics taking off his shirt, and I'm happy to play along. I unbutton my blouson and discard it, neatly managing to throw it on the sofa. After all, nakedness is my natural condition. Clothes for me are a kind of artifice.

Although the music is strange, I'm enjoying the dancing, and so is everybody else in the studio. It's nice that we've found a way to make up for the lacklustre interview. I notice there are more women in the audience than men, and I wonder if this is accidental.

Gary pretends to undo his trousers. I get the message and oblige, but not too quickly, taking time to display one hairy buttock and then the next, lowering my waistband in teasingly short bursts. Wolf-whistles follow each move. It's a while since

I enjoyed myself this much. I have to admit I'm slightly self-conscious about my modest size, which is clear and obvious beneath the black satin, but what the hell, nobody else seems to mind. Quite the opposite.

"Cor, what's that?" yells Gary, over the screaming crowd. "A packed lunch for three?"

I haven't a clue what he's talking about. I'm all caught up in the moment. The women, meanwhile, have quietened a little. Many of them look surprised.

"A round of applause for goat-man Peter Nesmith!" yells Gary. "My *biggest* guest for a long time." He's smiling and clapping his hands. We are a hit. The audience clap too. The would-be woodnymphs have livened up again and whistle and signal for me to continue. I can't disappoint them.

As the underwear goes down, bringing me to my usual and natural condition, all kinds of things happen at the same time. A huge security officer arrives at the bottom of the stage, but is assaulted by a dozen women from the audience and brought down with barely a struggle. The rest of the women are jumping up and down and whooping, staring alternately at me and each other in disbelief. The few men in the audience have all found something more interesting to look at down the aisle or on the back of the chair in front of them. Gary Triumph has finally lost control of his hand movements and is doing his impression of a windmill on amphetamines.

"Lights! Lights!" he's yelling, though personally I can't imagine that we need more light. "Jesus fucking Christ!"

Chapter 9

Buddha's house is transformed by the addition of 200 people. I hardly recognise the place. The quicksand sofa has gone, and the ceramic cats. They're in temporary storage in the shed at the bottom of the garden. Buddha is very concerned about the cats and twice he's gone to check on them. He's worried that some urban burglar will find them and think he's found Eldorado, though nobody else feels this is likely.

Stephanie McVeigh is ten minutes away at the other side of the room, close to the front door, and she's waving at me like she's drowning. We're both drowning, we're drowning in people, but Stephanie is more expert at the frantic arm-waving and I feel obliged to cross the fluid mass and rescue her.

Every few seconds I'm accosted.

"Fantastic show."

"Let me shake your hand."

"That was a cracker."

I don't feel I know many people here in the other world, but everybody seems to know me. I can't take two paces in Buddha's lounge without a hand being thrust in front of me to be shaken, or a woman leaning forward to kiss me on the cheek. After a single appearance on TV I've become some kind of public property. Even my body isn't my own, three or four times my hat has been removed without my permission for some perfect stranger to fondle my horns. When they see my expression they generally stop, and then they laugh, like something funny just happened. But I'm not complaining about the kissing, nor do I frighten off the female horn-fondlers. Unless they ask this question: "Where do you get your underwear?"

It's curious how an innocent request can turn into a test of character when heard for the fifteenth time. I've stopped smiling when I hear it, though I haven't murdered anybody yet. I'm trying to stay on best behaviour, as this grand party is in my honour following my success on the Gary Triumph Show. I didn't realise at the time, but the show only pretended to be live, when actually it was recorded, so it turns out that only the studio audience got to see me in my birthday suit, and TV viewers have had to use their imagination. It may even have helped that the show wasn't live and had the chance to pick up momentum before it was aired. Yesterday, the day after recording, the newspapers were full of stories of disgust – how indecent I'd been, how mortified Gary Triumph felt, how embarrassed the producers were – so embarrassed they brought my appearance forward by four weeks and aired the show this evening.

It was a spectacular success. Stephanie phoned her friends in the TV industry, the few who aren't here, and the rumour is that we have the highest-ranking show this week. Over 15 million people, a quarter of the country's population, watched me begin disrobing. A millionth of the population – 60 of us – watched it here in Buddha's lounge, and though everybody congratulated me, personally I think they should have congratulated the editor, whose timing was perfect. On screen I got my thumbs into the waistband of the black satin number, the one that Stephanie chose for me, and now I know why, and there was a close up of Gary Triumph's face, with his eyes wide open and epiglottis showing, a shot of the thong flying, and then a black screen and credits, with Gary's voice in the background saying "Jesus ----bleep---- Christ". It was grand entertainment. I even enjoyed it myself.

Stephanie anticipated this success and it's down to her efforts that we have such a full house for our celebration. Buddha, who is jammed into a corner of the kitchen next to the fridge, used the expression 'rent-a-crowd', though he doesn't seem upset by having them in his house, perhaps because they're a very well-behaved rent-a-crowd, more interested in complimenting each other's clothing and hairstyles than throwing up on the carpet. Some of the females are quite attractive. I know this because I'm spending so much time looking at them. If I don't get back to the woodnymphs soon I'm going to burst.

"Are you enjoying the party, Peter? Steph surely knows how to put on a party."

Should I explain to this well-dressed stranger in a cravat and boater that the last party I attended was Ragnorak, where half the gods in heaven ate roast boar and got blind drunk, and some time after midnight – none of us can remember quite when – Thor and Menalaus entertained us with an hour-long duel? A little before sunrise, after the orgy, we burned down the great hall of Valhalla, and then chilled-out watching the sun rise through the smoke and flames.

No.

"It's a fine party," I reply. "Thanks."

Above the hubbub of indeterminate chatter I can hear the sound of David Bowie's Space Oddity. "Here am I sitting in a tincan."

Buddha is a big David Bowie fan and doesn't care whether people find the music classic or contemporary or even out of date. I have a feeling that later we'll be hearing Fleetwood Mac, another of his favourites.

Finally I reach Stephanie, who's in the company of John Frum.

"You have to talk to the press," she tells me. "I've got a dozen of them outside. I don't know what's happened to the rest. There were lots more. I can't understand it. Have you already spoken to some of them?"

"No, I don't think so."

Stephanie is very clever with the press. She anticipated that many of them would sneak inside and try to get stories out of me without saying who they were. So whenever she spotted a journalist or photographer she gave them a giant drinking glass, far bigger than the little plastic ballons dished out to the ordinary punters. And the journalists have been surprisingly good at hanging on to these identifying labels. I'm confident that I've had little contact.

John shyly raises a finger. "Er, that's me. I've been talking to them on your behalf. I hope you don't mind." He shoots forward his left arm, which I notice is bearing a new timepiece, a Seiko. "Only they're pretty good on giving out cargo, for the right story."

"What have you been telling them?" asks Stephanie, frowning. "What have you said that persuades them to leave a party where there's free booze and go back their keyboards?"

John grins. "Oh yeah, it was good. I told them he molested small children."

"What?" This wakes me up. "No I bloody well don't!"

"That's right. I told them that, too. That you gave it up, turned over a new leaf."

"We might even get a front page," says Stephanie, nodding her head as she gazes thoughtfully into her wine glass.

"I can't believe this!" I'm staring at John Frum open-mouthed. Then I recall he has a habit of telling only half a story. "What else did you tell them?"

"Right, yeah. That was just one lot." He produces a hand-held computer from his trouser pocket. "For this crew, I did the military story, that really you were developed for the US military, as a superior fighting machine, able to run at twenty miles an hour, jump over barbed wire, and forage for yourself when dropped behind enemy lines, yet handle an assault rifle just as well as the rest of us."

I can't think of anything to say.

"Very good," says Stephanie. "That's some imagination you've got there."

Now I notice John has a digital camera around his neck. I point to it.

"That was for the love-sheep on Dartmoor story – you sired an entire field. They're smarter than normal but still get fleeced. Fleeced! Ha ha. Gedddit?"

No I do not get it. But I've certainly got the hump. "John, you've been selling my reputation."

Stephanie tuts dismissively and shakes her head. "No, that went with the first article we did, way back last week."

"Strange thing is," says John, "I tried telling some of them that you were the Greek god Pan, lord of the flocks and the mountains, two and a half thousand years old, son of Hermes and brought up by Olympians, but none of them would buy it."

"Too far fetched," agrees Stephanie. She looks at her watch. "Ah. Press time."

Before I get a chance to say anything rude to John Frum, she ushers me out of the front door, where I'm greeted by a firecracker sequence of flashbulbs and one piercing searchlight for a TV camera. I imagine I look like a surprised bear, freshly woken from hibernation.

I receive my first question from the nation's press.

"Where do you get your underwear?"

"I don't believe this," I mumble.

"Hold on, we'll get back to you on that one," says Stephanie, loudly. She begins to jab at her mobile phone. "Next question."

"Are you hung like a horse or a donkey?"

"What?"

"A horse," yells Stephanie, before going back to her mobile phone conversation.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

I can do this one alone. "No."

"Are you gay?"

"No, I'm not gay."

"But you live with a man."

"Only for the past few days."

"Did you only recently realise you were gay?"

"I'm not fucking gay!"

"It sounds like you hate gays. What have you got against gays?"

The glare still works, I think. I fix it on the questioner and he gets smaller and fades into the anonymity of his companions. Though the next question is no better.

"Is it true about the cows on Bodmin Moor?"

It takes me a few seconds to make the connection. "You mean sheep on Dartmoor, and no, it's not true."

"How does it feel to suddenly become so famous?"

"To be honest it's a bit of a mixed bag, like it must be for anybody else. The adulation and respect are wonderful, but there's also a falseness in the way people deal with me, and the kind of relationship they think we already have. That's all very strange."

"In one word."

"What?"

"How does it feel to suddenly become famous? In one word."

I search for that one word, but of course it doesn't exist.

"A mixed bag."

"That's three words."

Pedantic buggers.

Stephanie comes to my aid. "Tremendous!"

They're all writing it down. I can't believe this. One word, that I've not actually said, and isn't hard to remember, and every one of them is writing it down.

"I've got you a great deal on the underwear sponsorship," Stephanie tells me, quietly. "£90,000 after my cut. Are you up for it?"

This is getting more surreal by the moment. "That sounds like a lot of money."

"Tell the press you get your underwear from *Agent Provocateur*."

"I get my underwear," I announce, "from Asian Provocateur."

"Close enough," murmurs Stephanie.

"What do you think to cross-species genetic manipulation?" I hear. But the question is shouted down by other journalists before I get a chance to answer it.

"Oh fuck off, Charlie. Ask something sensible."

"You old broadsheet wanker."

"Final question," announces Stephanie.

"How come you know about the sheep on Dartmoor if they're nothing to do with you?"

"It's a long story."

"Yeah, I bet it is. Are you willing to do a DNA test?"

"End of interview," says Stephanie, and she whisks me inside with the same efficiency that she brought me out.

"I thought that went very well," she tells me, back in the relative peace of the party.

"Really? What's it like when it goes badly?"

She gives me a look that tells me I don't want to know.

"I've booked you on a more serious talk show," she tells me. "Four on four. Topical debate, that kind of thing. I'm looking into various sponsorship opportunities. Hat, sunglasses, lapel badges."

"Stephanie! I..." shouldn't be ungrateful. "I'll do what I can."

My few words with the media have left me with a raging thirst, or possibly a desire for the oblivion of alcohol. I make my way back across the sea of bodies towards the kitchen.

"Where do you get your underwear?"

But now I have an answer. "Aegean Provocateur."

And it works. My questioner looks stupefied and doesn't even bother to remove my hat and tickle my horns.

I find Buddha still squeezed in the corner by the fridge. Next to him is the unopened bottle of Liebfraumilch that Stephanie placed there, "to give the party a traditional feel". She also added four polystyrene cups and stubbed a cigarette out in the bottom of each one, though perhaps only to make herself feel more comfortable, as I notice she's one of the very few smokers. Actually the number is ideal. There's just a hint of tobacco in the air, mixed with perfume and aftershave, which allows it to smell exotic rather than stale or acrid.

I pour myself a glass of Rioja and tell Buddha about John Frum's tall tales and my curious experience with the nation's press. He listens with his usual lack of emotion, except for the bit about John Frum being unable to convince anybody that I'm a Greek god from heaven, which he finds so funny that he's barely able to stand upright. There are tears in his eyes and he hoots so loud that it sounds like part of the music. Frankly, I sometimes find his sense of humour offensive.

"And Stephanie got me a sponsored underwear deal," I add, "worth £90,000 a year."

"That's three times my salary. It must be truly pointless work. Who's it with?"

"Ageing Prevaricator. I'd feel a lot happier if I didn't see the guiding hand of Progress behind everything that's happening to me. I still can't work out what he's up to."

It's nice to become famous and it surely improves my chances of influencing the other-worlders, but it's Progress who got me started on this track, putting me in the hands of Stephanie McVeigh. In battle terms, I'm not exactly marching my troops into the heart of his encampment, more like having a solo pee against a tree in a neighbouring county.

"Be patient," says Buddha. "You still have a couple of weeks before the heavenly elections."

"I've got my court case in a few days. Foxglove versus Nesmith."

Buddha gives me his schoolmasterly over-the-spectacles look, but without spectacles.

I take another gulp of Rioja. "I wish we could find out who's ahead, Progress or the Doc."

Buddha drinks his mineral water and I down my wine. This is not a discussion we're likely to continue, as we've tested the waters before and found them cold and putrid. Or to put it another way, we haven't a clue. We've discussed the issue at length, asked other-worlders for their views, looked it up on the Internet, and still we know nothing, except this is a murky area where language fails and we're left thrashing around helplessly in a pool of muddy abstracts and intangibles.

What is progress? What items are attributable to Joe Progress? At one stage we had it neatly narrowed down to domestic appliances - vacuum cleaners, fridges, washing machines - but only because we're lazy thinkers and there's no god of domestic appliances in heaven. Clearly Progress is also responsible for electricity, sewage and international aviation. He was also once responsible for the car. But at what point did that responsibility shift over to Mercedes? And how about Penicillin? He must have been responsible for that, once upon a time, and yet surely it now comes under the Doc's remit.

Exactly what is the Doc responsible for? All medicine or just life-saving medicine and treatments that extends the lifespan? Other-worlders tell us they're living longer and are very happy about it. Just three hundred years ago the average life expectancy was in the mid twenties, not much different to a thousand years before. Then, around two hundred years ago, it started to creep up into the thirties, and now it touches eighty. But the reasons for this dramatic improvement are difficult to pin down. We hear of magnificent diagnostic machines, surgery with anaesthetic, vaccines, antibiotics, treatments for heart disease and cancer. But also sanitation has played a major role, and better diets, and perhaps even more importantly, knowledge and understanding – that cholera is carried by water rather than vapours, that malaria comes from the bite of specific mosquitoes, that aspirin is more effective than eye of newt.

The Doc is no easier to pin down than Progress. There's a chance that even if we knew what both of them stood for, and understood it intuitively – and we don't – we still wouldn't be unable to describe it in words.

Buddha rescues us from the depressing spiral of failure contemplated. "Ah! This is Vendhri."

We're joined by a startlingly attractive woman with long black hair and a violet cheesecloth dress, who stands alongside Buddha and waits expectantly until his arm goes around her waist. I swear that when his arm makes contact her waist moves towards it while the rest of her body stays still. It's excruciatingly sexy to watch.

"Vendhri is a Tantric student of mine. I'm teaching her about consciousness, the removal of cultural barriers and liberation through indulgence."

Yes, I *bet* you are. He has an extra sparkle in his eye now that Vendhri appeared. I imagine she takes that sparkle as evidence of deep spirituality. I'm so jealous I daren't say a thing.

"And this is her friend Rachel," adds Buddha.

"Ooh."

Rachel is divine. Her hair is red and unruly. She's at least as tall as me. Like Vendhri, she doesn't care much for make-up, artifice, expensive clothes, or the regular rules of deportment.

"Nice name," I say. This is a really dumb thing to say, but isn't that always what happens? The more desperate you are to say something interesting, the more banal the rubbish you eventually come out with. I was actually thinking, "I'm glad to see your breasts aren't too large," so it's less of a disaster than it could have been.

"It's Hebrew for 'ewe'," says Rachel. "Not that many people who choose the name know the language, but it's still nice to know your label has an ancient history"

"Yes it is." Oh, yuk! It looks like I'll be spouting the verbal diarrhoea of the smitten for the rest of the evening.

"We were just contemplating the difference between faith in progress and faith in longevity provided by medicine," says Buddha.

"How interesting," says Vendhri. But obviously not interesting enough for her to take the subject up. I'm relieved, and secretly I think Buddha might be too.

Vendhri takes a glass of sparkling water, and Buddha, without asking, gives Rachel a glass of white wine. "Rachel can see auras," he announces.

"Brian's is awesome, almost god-like," she says. She has lovely hands.

"Brian?" I see she's referring to Buddha. Oh well, if I'm Peter than why shouldn't he be Brian? "Oh yes, Brian."

"She can see her own, too," he adds. "You might find this interesting."

"And what's it like?" I ask her.

She smiles. "I'm a woodnymph."

"Are you *really*?"

Chapter 10

At first there's only a small patch of untouched woodland. The trees are large and beautiful but not plentiful enough to support many animals, just a few rodents and birds. Beyond this small wilderness is farmland, well-tended and heavy with crops. Electricity pylons cross the green fields and lead to a small town with industrial units and petrol stations and fast-food outlets at the edge, but very soon these products of mankind fall into disrepair, deteriorating even as I watch. Gaps appear in the parking lot tarmac, gutters fail, wires fall from the pylons and lay across the fallow fields, now growing more weeds than corn. Bushes follow the weeds, then trees replace the bushes. The town decays so fast that within seconds it's gobbled up by saplings. As the forest expands and lianas cover the laundrettes and betting shops, wildly coloured hornbills screech and fly across the tall canopy, monkeys cackle in the branches and roe deer scuttle through the floor of leaves. The background music rises to its crescendo. Slowly the camera pulls back to reveal a pattern of light green leaves in the dark green of the canopy, a pattern of words, and the words are, 'That's Progress'.

I'm asleep, yet awake enough to know what's going on. I make a mental note that I should watch less TV. I'm dreaming commercials for Joe Progress, I'm even dreaming unfiltered commercials that in the best tradition of advertising contradict reality, ending with woodland growth and more wilderness rather than loud chainsaws and devastation. It's Joe Progress himself I need to see, not convoluted adverts for his virtues.

For the past few days I've been attempting Buddha's directed dreaming, the method he uses to appear in heaven when really he's asleep here in the other world. He's tried his best to teach me, and at the same time warned me that I'm too uptight for it to work. This is mainly due to the court case, which I'm trying to ignore, and failing. Yesterday I dreamed of human heads transplanted on to the necks of placid black and white cows. The cows were on the front lawns of identical 1960s box

houses – semi-detached of course. They were taken away twice a day and milked, but instead of milk flowing from their udders I saw coins and banknotes passing along the tubes of the milking machine. The huge milk vats were labelled Mortgage Repayments, Insurance, Tax, Supermarket, Telephone Company and so on. The cows seemed quite happy about this and as they were milked they smiled and they sang, "I'm being milked, I'm being milked, I'm being milked, ho ho," in unison, like the chorus of a 1930s musical on a Saturday afternoon.

Tonight, thanks to Rachel, I'm in a happier state of post-coital bliss, and my last thought as I dropped off was that perhaps I might finally be relaxed enough to take the dreamtime journey all the way through to heaven. I'm sure Rachel is in a similar state. Perhaps in our dreams we'll bump into each other, even as we sleep side by side.

I drift deeper into sleep and end up inside the woodland near the abandoned town, beneath its leafy canopy, walking with light and insubstantial steps, barely breaking a twig. The hornbills look similar, but larger now that I'm seeing them from below. Monkey conversations blow in and out on the breeze, getting quieter as the forest thins. I leave the forest edge and stand on the side of a small hill, with a plain at the bottom obscured by mist. The place has a familiar feel to it. Ahead is a stack of debris, bulldozed into a tall pile that still smoulders. The mist, I now realise, is actually smoke. I spy a broken spear, a melted shield, and I know where I am. These are the ruins of Valhalla, moved but not yet disposed of, the forgotten waste of a hurried developer.

The new building, just a hundred yards beyond, has clearly been raised too quickly. Progress said the mall would be ten stories high, but it's complete and is barely three. It was supposed to have a clear roof, but instead has ordinary red tiles. Currently it has no front doors, so I can easily wander inside.

The interior is ugly, bare grey concrete. Most of the units around the central atrium, with its plain stairways and lifts, are empty, except for one massive shop on the ground floor, which is fully faced with all the plasterboard and lightweight tiling required to give the impression of clean solidity and hide the ducts and conduits and wires that nobody wants to know exist, let alone see. Illuminated signs glare at me in unnatural colours, in lurid pinks and magentas that arrest the eye. This giant shop is also packed with goods on display in long aisles, everything from food to socks to barbecue sets, lit by lines of fluorescent tubes. And from inside this merchandising maze I can hear the voice of Joe Progress, which I'm not slow to home in on.

"Got you!" I say.

Progress stands next to the sticking plaster and headache pill section, dressed in a white lab coat. His smart shirt and executive silk tie show through the V of the collar. He holds a clipboard in his hand. His hair is exactly the same length as when I last saw it, and again looks freshly cut.

"Ah, Pan." He doesn't seem fazed in the least.

Mercedes is with him, wearing a fancy blue pastel suit with white trimmings. She gives me a smile that could cleave diamond. In the background, Mammon chews gum and looks bored. He makes a point of not acknowledging my arrival.

"What's going on?" I demand.

"We're running consumer tests on our new supermarket," replies Progress.

"Screw your supermarket! I mean what's going on in the other world? I'm trapped there. Somebody moved the Axis Mundi."

"You're not very substantial," says Mercedes.

I imagine this is true. Certainly I don't feel very substantial. I'm conscious of the fact that I'm dreaming and the gods around me are not.

"It takes practice to become substantial in a dream," says Progress, and he sounds almost sympathetic.

"Well?" I'm not so easily sidetracked. "Why have you trapped me in the other world?"

Progress thinks about this for a moment. "I'm not sure how to say this, but aren't you getting things out of perspective? Something has happened to the Axis Mundi and you believe it's happened simply to keep you trapped in the other world? That sounds slightly paranoid."

"You fed Stephanie McVeigh with the newspaper story about me."

"Is that a crime? It's true, I like to give her a good story from time to time."

I've had enough of this pussfooting around. With my slightly insubstantial hands I grab him by the clipboard. He's not keen on this and over the next few seconds we jockey for physical position, in a semi-civilized manner I'm happy to say, with no actual blows exchanged, just a lot of pushing and shoving. My intention isn't to fight him, to be honest I'm not sure what my intention is. I'm frustrated with his manipulative nonsense and with being trapped on Earth and with fighting a genetics company over ownership of my own body, and grabbing him by the clipboard seemed to like a good idea at the time.

To my horror, I realise that Mammon might be taking our childish struggle more seriously. He raises his right hand, holding a large metallic object.

I flinch, but he doesn't bring the weapon down. He holds it steady for me to see.

"What is it?"

"An alarm clock," answers Progress.

At first I wonder if instead it might be some kind of bomb, and then slowly it dawns on me that it doesn't need to be. I loosen my grip, recognising that I'm not in the best position here.

"Ah."

"Exactly. What happens to people who are asleep when they hear an alarm call, even in a dream?"

I don't need to answer. We all know.

"Are you going to behave?" asks Progress.

I've already let go of him. My eyes are on the alarm clock like it really is a bomb. And it is. It's the perfect bomb. It will only blow me away, nobody else. Actually it's a very pretty alarm clock, with a shiny metal casing and big bells on top, but for me it may as well be a kilogram of TNT.

"I'll take that as a yes," says Progress. He takes a moment to regain his composure, or maybe to emphasize that he's in control. He looks at the clock again, this time at its face. "We're running late. If you're going to hang around, you'd better make yourself useful. Here's the deal. We need a test customer for our new fully-automated supermarket, and you would be perfect, Pan, absolutely perfect. If you'll agree to be our test subject, you can stay, and for every shopping item on the list that you collect, you can ask me one question about your... difficult situation on Earth. How does that sound?"

Mammon brings forward the clock in a meaningful manner.

"I don't really have much choice, do I?" I answer.

"Excellent. Here's the shopping list." Progress hands me a paper from his clipboard. "And here's a credit card to pay for the items. Your budget is fifteen Euros, anything above that doesn't count. We have to show some respect for Mammon."

"I'm a supermarket virgin," I point out. "I've seen one in Cricklewood, from the outside, but that's about it."

"Excellent. That's exactly what we're looking for. Thank you."

"And... I feel nervous... what with Mammon holding the clock and everything."

I imagine at some stage Mammon will activate the alarm purely for pleasure.

With one hand, Mercedes extracts a packet of cigarettes from her very tight jacket pocket, lights one and blows smoke in my direction. I'm not popular here.

"Perfect," says Progress. "A bewildered and intimidated customer. We couldn't have hoped for anything more realistic."

For two seconds I look at the paper he handed me. At the top it says 'Shopping Mission Impossible'. Without warning, the list bursts into flame and immediately I drop it. Hoofs are relatively good for putting out fires, though they smell peculiar for days afterwards.

"I hardly got a chance to read it," I complain. "I'm not sure I can remember..."

"Wonderful. Wonderful," says Progress, handing me a shopping basket. "You are just the *perfect* customer."

At least I can remember the first item on the list. It was a toothbrush, and toothbrushes are just ten feet away, in view. Not wanting to blow my budget, I look for the cheapest, which are down at the bottom of the display, close to the floor.

"Why are the cheap ones so low down?"

"To persuade you to buy more expensive ones, of course," replies Progress. "There's a lot of psychology in supermarket design. If somebody old or disabled comes in here, we can up their bill by a good 20% through good product placement."

I place a cheap toothbrush in my basket. "Ok, here's my first question. Where is the Axis Mundi?"

Progress ticks a sheet on his clipboard and checks the time on the clock. "You already asked a question. You asked about toothbrushes."

"Oh, come on!"

He smiles. "You're right. That one didn't count. The answer to your question is – I don't know."

"Then who does? Mercedes?"

"That's definitely a second question."

I huff and I puff but this is no fairytale. Next on the shopping list was bottled water, I think, but I wonder if I've remembered this correctly, as I've rarely seen anybody in heaven drinking water from bottles.

In the next aisle, where the shelves aren't quite full, I find an automated shelf-stacker, a small mechanised trolley with a single arm. Yet there's some other movement that I can sense but not see, and a mechanical hum that isn't from the stacker or refrigeration units.

Bottled water I find close to the far wall, near the wines and spirits. There's a massive array of it.

"Why so much?" I ask.

"A strategic reserve," answers Progress, more quietly than usual. "With all the er... commercial and industrial development we have planned for the district, there's always a risk the regular water supply will become less pure."

This is exactly the side of Joe Progress that I want to do battle with. I can just imagine lazing by the brook in my favourite clearing and having to bring bottled water along because the stream is undrinkable.

A half litre bottle goes in my basket.

"Same question. Who knows where the Axis Mundi is?"

"I'm not sure," replies Progress. "Maybe Mercedes?"

Mercedes shakes her head. "No, not me."

"Mammon?"

"Nugh," he grunts.

I don't believe either of them, but there's nothing I can do.

"This isn't a very rewarding experience," I complain.

"Supermarket shopping rarely is," replies Progress, as he checks the time on the clock once again.

The next item on the impossible shopping list was shampoo. I recall I passed shampoo three aisles back, close to the toothbrushes, and so I set off back the way I came, with my little cortège following me. Now I'm sure there's something going on in my peripheral vision. Also I realise it would have been more efficient for me to pick up shampoo right after the toothbrush, but that wasn't the way the list appeared in my head.

When I explain, this shortcoming seems to please Progress. "Perfect, perfect," he says, scribbling something down. I doubt that it's complimentary.

"What happened to the magnificent ten storey building you were telling me about?" I ask. "The brass banisters, glorious escalators, the garden café?"

"Ah," says Progress, wistfully. "This was a lot quicker and easier to build, but not as good, I must admit. We've had a lot of problems getting hold of wood to soften the edges and make the place feel more comfortable. We can't even get enough for the doors. You don't happen to know anybody with a stockpile of wood, do you? It's all very frustrating."

I try to hide my grin. But now it's my turn to be thwarted. I've retraced my steps to where I last saw shampoo, and although all the aisles look pretty much the same, I'm sure I've got this right, and yet shampoo isn't here. How can this be? I look at Progress for clues, but he steadfastly avoids my eyes and scribbles on his clipboard. I think he's smirking.

Where once there was shampoo, now there are lightbulbs. I look further down the aisle. What was once the toothbrush section is now devoted to cooking utensils. There's some trickery afoot.

Yet I can be a tricky customer myself. From the utensils section I pick up a stainless steel slice. It has a lovely clean mirrored surface, and in this surface I watch as in the distance, a long way behind me, two entire product displays roll gently from one place to another.

"Well how about that," I announce. "I see that canned vegetables has just swapped places with breakfast cereals. No wonder I can't find shampoo."

"Damn, that was clever!" says Progress, approvingly. "They're only supposed to move when you're not looking. That mirror trick really fooled them."

"Why do you want them to shift in the first place?"

"So that you get to see a wider range of our glorious products."

"You mean - whenever I learn where something is, you'll shift it so I have to search the building to find it."

Progress shrugs. "It's a regular technique, but in this advanced supermarket it's all automated. In quiet periods everything moves itself around."

"So where is shampoo now?"

"It's no good asking me. I only work here."

Mercedes coughs, pointedly.

"Oh, yes, sorry," says Progress. "Aisle ten."

We walk to aisle ten.

"This is children's clothes."

"Ah, yes," says Progress. "But normally I wouldn't have come with you, would I? And I'd be in uniform, and you wouldn't be able to recognise me again."

Fortunately it doesn't take me long to track down the shampoo section, as I'm finding this game increasingly tiresome. There have to be at least 40 different kinds of shampoo on display – body-building shampoo, anti-dandruff, moisturising, for dry hair, oily hair, damaged hair, coloured hair. 'With Portland cement for extra body and firmness'. How about one for unkempt flaxen hair covering most of the body? No, it would seem not. I give up and choose one with added bullshit written on the label. After all, I won't be using it.

Time for another question.

"Why do you want me to become famous?"

"So you stand a chance of accomplishing something. Also it's a reward, a kind of thank you. That may not make much sense right now, but it will later."

It makes no sense at all. I'm gaining nothing from this game. This is a dispiriting exercise and I shall bring it to a close.

"I can't remember the rest of the list."

Progress searches in his coat pocket and hands me a mobile phone.

"Go on, use it."

"What for?"

"It's traditional. Open it and say, 'I'm in the supermarket.'"

I'm prepared to make this one final effort. The phone says back to me, in a female voice, "I'm on the train."

Mercedes seems to find this funny.

"Don't forget to pick up the unsalted cashews," adds the phone.

So now I trudge around the aisles looking for cashew nuts. At one point it occurs to me that if I sit down in one of the aisles and close my eyes and wait long enough, the cashews will eventually come to me, but I'm tired and I want to get out of here.

I find cashews in the snacks section, but they're salted.

"Cashews are in three sections in this supermarket - snacks, cooking ingredients, and organic produce," says Progress.

Cooking ingredients must be a hundred yards away, or it least it feels that far. The cooking section has run out of unsalted Cashews. I make for organic produce, and once again find salted only, and at twice the price.

"I've had enough. I give up." It appears to me that I have one agenda and the supermarket has another, and only occasionally do the two coincide. I've not felt this irritable since Uncle Bacchus placed a large red crab on my head, attached its claws to my horns and called it 'pilot', and that was a hundred years ago.

"Come on," coaxes Progress. "You can do it. Just a short walk back to the snacks section so you don't blow your budget."

"This is torture! I have never done anything so pointless in my life."

Mammon holds up the alarm clock.

"I don't care. It's not worth it. Put me out of my misery. Go on, press the damn button."

I get this feeling I'm fighting a superior power, the power of Progress, and it's so superior that it doesn't even register that it's fighting me, that's how badly I'm losing.

"Let's compromise," suggests Progress, gently. "Take the salted organic cashews, and let's go to the checkout."

"You're a sadist."

"Flattery won't work. But you're due a question for picking up the cashews."

"Ok, what's your relationship with Foxglove Laboratories?"

"Ah!" This has his attention. "That's a good one." He thinks carefully about the wording. "Foxglove takes many of the genetic inventions developed by Q and myself in the Workshop of All Invention and introduces them to the other world. And you can have one more question if you go through checkout."

There are forty checkouts in a row, each manned, if that's the word, by a humanoid robot. At least that's what I first think, until I see below their waists.

"They've all got goats legs."

"It's a compliment," says Progress.

"I'm ready to wake up, please. I promise I won't come back."

I have forty checkout clones. Some are male, some are female. I approach an elderly female checkout clone, who ignores me as I place my goods in front of her and carries on talking to the checkout assistant next to her, who is a teenage male clone complete with zits. Eventually the old bitch condescends to pass my goods in front of her, past some laser thingummy.

"That will be twelve Euros, please."

Where did I put the card? Progress gave me a credit card and I'm not wearing clothes and I haven't a clue where I put it. It's not in the basket, it's not in my mouth, in the clove of my hooves, the crease of my backside. Where in heaven's name did I put it?

Progress begins to clap. "Oh, that's very good, very good indeed. The missing wallet. The last-minute missing purse. I thought you said you hadn't been to a supermarket before? This is so realistic."

Mercedes and Mammon applaud too. This is embarrassing. Mammon holds the alarm clock under his armpit while he claps. I consider making a lunge for it.

Of course! My armpit. I produce the card.

The old bat processes it. "Loyalty card, sir?"

"Fuck off and die."

"Steady on," says Progress.

I'm done here. One final question and I'm done.

"How do I get you to lose the election?" I ask Progress.

Mammon primes the clock and waits for the nod, but Progress shakes his head.

"No, I like the directness. And here's the answer. Get the other-worlders to associate me with something bad. They make emotional judgements. Elections are won and lost on the colour of a candidate's tie, how uneven their teeth are. If you can get them to make a bad association when they think of me, you're home and dry."

Even Mercedes seems surprised at the honesty of this answer. Progress may have been giving me the runaround earlier, but this is the genuine article.

"And why are you telling me this?"

"No, I think you've run out of questions, haven't you? The shopping test is over. I can't think of any reason why you should want to hang around any longer."

"Hold on a sec. Why..."

But Mammon has the nod, and is pleased to do the dirty work.

Drrrrrrrrrrring!

Chapter 11

It's late – I can tell from the light coming through the curtains. For a few minutes I'm as confused as anybody else is when woken by an alarm clock they didn't set. Do I have a nine to five job to rush off and do? No. Do I have a train to catch? No.

Order returns and the world begins to make sense. Perversely, I feel happy about my visit to heaven, although I accomplished little.

Rachel looks wonderful with her dark red hair scattered across the pillow. I'm not very familiar with morning-after procedures, as woodnymphs in heaven generally sneak away soon after sex. I think they find the company of males quite tiresome – we're only good for one thing. Yet I like the idea that Rachel is still here.

I'm fully awake and mildly charged with adrenalin, so I decide to get up and greet the world. This entails opening the curtains slightly and staring out on to the street for no particular reason. Buddha tells me it's a suburban tradition, and as I have the front bedroom with the bay window I'm required to follow it. Normally it's a private pastime, but today when I part the curtains I get a tremendous round of applause.

"What? There are *hundreds* of them!"

I'm not very good on numbers. I may be underestimating. There are so many people out in the street that there's no room for cars. At each end of the road I can see police officers at metal barriers, keeping vehicles out.

"You're standing very close to the window," says Rachel, sleepily.

Ah, yes. The windowsill is quite low and I'm not wearing clothes. Perhaps I should move back a step.

The applause subsides, and once again I have that wicked temptation to move forward and see if the volume returns, and once again I give in to it. Then a step back for the muted effect, forward for volume.

"What are you doing?" asks Rachel.

"Morning exercises. They can't possibly be here just to see me, surely?"

I take her silence as a yes.

When the excitement outside has died down I put on a dressing gown and open the window to address my fans. "This is all very nice, but there's not much point in hanging around. There's no entertainment planned, we're just about to tidy up after a party, that's all. You may as well go home."

This doesn't get much of a reaction. Actually, it doesn't get any reaction, until a lone voice replies, "No."

"But surely you've all got lives to get on with?"

Again, no reaction, and then that same solitary voice. "No."

"This isn't some kind of soap opera."

"It is from where we're standing."

Worse is to follow, as I fail to anticipate the inevitable question.

"Where do you get your underwear?"

I feel the questioner has carried this question around with him since early morning, like a bag of cement from a builders' yard, and is relieved to have disgorged it.

"I really don't remember. Usually I don't wear any."

"But you've got a sponsorship deal with *Agent Provocateur*. We read about it in the newspapers."

"Ah, yes. Then it must be true."

"What football team do you support?"

I think about this for a moment. "Crewe Alexandra." It's a memorable name. Indeed, it's the only football team name I can remember, which is why I've said it, but it doesn't seem to be a popular choice. Most of the crowd continue to stare at me blankly. A few snigger.

"What colour shoes should we wear this summer?"

"I have no idea. Depends on what colours suit you, I suppose."

"What should we do about famine in Africa? Should we give money to charity, or is charity like applying a sticking plaster to a broken leg?"

"Eh?"

"You're not being very helpful."

It's true that I'm not giving very good answers, but then I'm not being asked very good questions. It strikes me that the press is slightly easier to deal with, less demanding, more ready to sort the wheat in my answers from the chaff, indeed to manufacture the wheat themselves if I'm not able to come up with enough.

I'm not sure how to bring this stuttering dialogue to a close. What would Stephanie do?

"Listen, I have to go and help clear up after the party, now. I'll try to think up some better answers for next time. And you work on your questions."

I close the window, knowing that the multitude outside is hardly satisfied. But then neither am I. The strange dysfunctional discussion leaves me ill at ease. I need some kind of resolution, and the only person I can think of who might be able to supply one is Stephanie, so I make my way downstairs and pick up the phone in the hallway.

She listens patiently to my tale of mutual dissatisfaction.

"It's as if I gave all the wrong answers," I say at the end.

"Well you did."

"How can they be the wrong answers? I was being perfectly honest. Not about Crewe Alexandra, perhaps, but everything else was true."

"Because you failed in your duty to your followers. These people are looking to you for leadership, for advice and direction, and you didn't give any. I can't believe what you said about shoes. You should have said pink or yellow, anything other than 'depends what suits you'. What kind of ridiculous advice is that?"

"I can't be responsible for the way thousands of people dress and lead their lives."

"Hundreds of thousands. And you already are. Everybody wants leadership, Peter. Well, almost everybody. It's a big responsibility, deciding what to do, how to lead a life, what to wear. Most people prefer to avoid it if they can, let somebody else make all those big decisions and then just follow them. David Beckham gets a tattoo

on the back of his neck, ten thousand youths call in at the tattoo parlour and pull their shirts back. His wife wears furry boots, furry boot sales quadruple. You've got to take your leadership responsibilities seriously, Pan. Make a choice - Arsenal, Chelsea or Man U. You can't support some minor side, it's useless for the people who follow you. Tell them what to wear, where to go on their holidays. They'll love you for it. You have been telling them to wear *Agent Provocateur* underwear, haven't you?"

"Well, er, kind of."

"Oh, come on, you can double their sales. Then we can look around for a sunglasses deal, maybe hats. By the way, I've got you on another TV programme, Four on Four. It's a serious panel discussion, about genetics."

"I'm not at all sure about this fame business, Stephanie."

"Oh, don't give me that. You love it."

"Really, don't book me on another programme just yet, thanks."

"It's in two days. I'll arrange a car to pick you up."

"I don't want to go."

"Now then, sunglasses. I think with the stovepipe hat we have great poster potential here. I'll try RayBan first, then maybe Armani..."

Stephanie carries on talking, but I don't carry on listening. This is no more satisfactory than my discussion with the crowd. Actually it's less satisfactory, since the crowd isn't on a percentage.

Despite the ragged start to the day, there's a spring in my step and physically I'm feeling better than I have done for years. That could be down to sex, but I don't think so. I have a feeling it's somehow connected with my new popularity. Maybe fame isn't such a bad thing after all.

In fact I'm so full of energy that I make the mistake of going to see my lawyer, who is desperate to prepare a case for my trial. He's sent me three letters to this effect, each one costing me three hundred pounds. His advice is clearly valuable and I should try to see him, especially before he sends me another letter.

And so I make my way to Knightsbridge, where he has an office. He also has an office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and one in Royal Tunbridge Wells, for the summer, and maybe I should be making a connection between the number of offices and the price of the letters and the cost of my trial, but I'm not, and so I roll up innocently at his office in Knightsbridge.

The contrast between the many districts of this metropolis still overwhelms me. I've already worked out that Cricklewood is a place where people come to sleep. In the evening there's a great influx of people intending to eat, watch TV, and bed down. They spend their active daytime hours elsewhere, except for the young and old and those who have the pleasure of looking after them. Regent Street is, I suspect, Cricklewood in reverse - busy in the daytime but deserted at night - and at first sight it looks as if Knightsbridge is where everybody goes to shop. But I'm careful not to draw my conclusions prematurely, and soon I realise that in fact it's a place where people go to look at shops, but not usually to buy anything, because all the goods are too expensive. Watching people not buying things is very educational, and teaches me more about the prevailing system of wealth than any amount of completed transactions.

My lawyer's office complex looks pleasantly exclusive, full of escalators and glass panels and equipped with a café-bar at its atrium and centre. Glamorous women

ride the escalators and drink the coffee. Are they models or executives? I have a scary feeling they might be both. Either way, I'm sidetracked into three circuits of the escalators and two coffees before I remember I'm supposed to be seeing my lawyer and preparing a defence for Foxglove versus Nesmith.

At first I imagined the claim of Foxglove Laboratories couldn't amount to anything. Surely they didn't have a patent that covers half-human, half-goat creatures. But the modest research I've done is worrying. It turns out that they do, and my lawyer confirms this. He tells me they're not allowed to patent human genes, so the human side of me is relatively safe, but the goat part of me is patentable, and they have such a patent, along with scores of other patents covering partial animals. If the patent is valid, they'll own me from below the waist, and unless I decide to have myself cut in two, they'll be able to order my bottom half around and my top half will be obliged to follow.

"But this is utterly absurd," I tell him, with some passion.

"Clearly you are not familiar with the law," he tells me. "Otherwise this would seem to you to be merely a minor example of absurdity."

Oddly, he reminds me of a cross between Joe Progress and Mammon. He has the unctuous charm of Joe Progress, along with Mammon's love of statement-dressing. His pink silk tie probably cost as much as my entire wardrobe, and his pristine chalk-stripe suit could have been made yesterday. For a while I wonder if it really was made yesterday, but this is mental overrun and I block it out.

"So how are you going to defend my case?" I ask.

"Oh, very easily. On the grounds of non-utility. Animal entities are only covered by patents if they have some clear use - some utility. The first patent of this nature was for an oncological mouse - or oncomouse - a mouse that has a genetic tendency to get cancer, so it's particularly useful for medical research. And there are other, later examples. For example a naturally asthmatic guinea-pig - clearly useful for studying asthma. But I don't believe you have any such utility."

"You mean, the basis of my defence is that I'm completely useless."

"Exactly."

Some mental gymnastics are required here, but I'm able to comprehend that despite the ridiculous direction this is going, any defence is better than none, and so I give my lawyer my blessing and get up to leave his office.

"I'll need some kind of deposit, of course," he tells me. "Genetics patent cases are notoriously expensive."

"A deposit?"

"Yes, against legal costs."

"How much were you thinking of?"

"Three hundred thousand should do."

Momentarily I forget to breathe. "Pounds?" I croak.

"Oh no. Guineas. A re-mortgage on a house will usually cover it. You do own a house, don't you?"

It's at this point that I notice my lawyer's collar and cuffs are white, while his shirt is blue, and his cufflinks are exceedingly large and elaborate.

Chapter 12

Although I didn't know it at the time, it turns out that I was the generous host for the party after the Gary Triumph Show and the bills exceeded my appearance fee and were deducted from my account with McVeigh and Associates, and none of the sponsorship money is due to come through for months, and though I am famous I am broke. When I explain this to Buddha and tell him how much my trial will cost, he immediately offers to remortgage his house to cover my legal bill. How generous can a friend be?

He points out that Foxglove will spend millions on the court case and I'm very likely to lose, because justice is just another commodity, like raw steel or pork bellies, and the more money you have the more of it you can buy. As Buddha explains, if this was not the case then all lawyers would charge the same fee, when clearly they do not. And the reason why people pay more for the expensive ones is that they stand more chance of winning. It's a fine example of the free market in action.

Despite the poor odds he still offers his house, and in return I feel obliged to look into the unthinkable – withdrawing from the case and handing myself over to Elliot and Foxglove. If I'm really not going to win, there's not much point in going ahead with the battle and I can't justify risking Buddha's home. I might even find that life as a Foxglove product is rewarding. Hmm. Buddha is against even contemplating giving in, and we argue over the issue for an hour. The only compromise we can reach is that I should investigate what kind of life I would lead under Foxglove. He's sure I will find it unacceptable, but I try to remain open.

I've no intention of asking Elliot what his plans are for me, as I fear he's reached the level of business where truth, lies and corporate slogans merge into a single mass and even Buddha might not be able to distinguish one from the other. Something more sneaky is required, and so I find myself once again on the way to Bedfordshire and Foxglove Laboratories, this time in John Frum's best white builder's van, with his arm out of the window and a fresh tabloid newspaper on the dashboard. We try a tabloid edition of the Guardian but the engine coughs and sneezes and eventually we have to give in and go back to The Sun. Last time I did this journey I wore a suit. This time I'm in normal clothes and not intending to wear them for long. Also Buddha is with us to lend his moral support and in case any meditation or chanting is called for.

Twenty miles short of Foxglove we pull off at a motorway service station for a rest and to wait for the sun to go down. I don't intend to break in to Foxglove, but I might need to break out, and that will be easier in darkness. We visit the service station's industrial-size toilet, purely to avoid raising suspicion, and search the shops for anything edible and affordable, as we have plenty of time.

In the main shop there's an aisle devoted to expensive Belgian chocolate and another devoted to over-priced teddy-bears. Surprisingly, there's also a complete aisle devoted to ceramic cats playing the ceramic violin, which has Buddha skipping along the floor like a happy hobgoblin.

I owe Buddha a cat, and had no idea the opportunity to replace it would come so soon. After the party, when we were moving stuff back from the garden shed to Buddha's lounge, we formed a human chain in the back garden, or at least a partly-human-chain, including Vendhri and Rachel, and our chain passed items along the garden path, such as Buddha's thrillers and war novels, his ceramic cats, and my text books on genetics.

"Models for Cross-species Fertilisation and Propagation," said Rachel, reading a cover. "Cambridge University Press. A bit of light holiday reading?"

The question was aimed at Buddha, but was for me to reply.

"That's mine. I've been doing some research."

"What, in case I get pregnant?"

It's at this point that I dropped one of Buddha's ceramic cats. I was standing on the stone patio at the rear of his house and the china cat didn't stand a chance. It smashed and spread like a handful of dropped gravel.

"Oh shit."

"That was Xepharia, the universal creator cat," said Buddha, plaintively, "out of whose loins the universe was born, and continues to expand even as we speak, assuming the universe will survive the smashing of its creator."

The thick base of the cat was still in one piece at my feet, the label intact. "Made in Vietnam."

Buddha sniffed. "Fifteen pounds, Blackpool seafront. You have no idea how difficult it is to come across something that ugly and overpriced. We could be talking years."

But happily we are talking days. Buddha is torn between two ridiculous cats on sale in the service station and I buy them both, for just seventy pounds. That leaves me with one pound twenty-three pence as my total other-worldly wealth, but I think it's the right thing to do.

We take our over-priced take-away food and over-priced china cats and retire back to the van, as each part of this service station is as ugly as the next and we may as well spend our time somewhere that's at least familiar, even if it's equally uninspiring. The inside of the service station was full of pinks and yellows and jarring colours, perhaps with the aim of waking up sleepy drivers. From the outside it's no more appealing and by comparison makes Joe's new supermarket a beauty pageant winner. The landscaping is also functional and rigorously banal. Outside the confines of the service station, a set of electricity pylons passes through scrubby trees. Through the middle, six lanes of highway carry loud trucks and fast cars in unceasing streams. Once this area would have been rolling woodland with the occasional glade, now it's grand example of how other-worlders can get things entirely wrong. In a way it's a celebration of my death, a mausoleum to the dead god Pan and ignorance of all things natural.

As I researched genetics and patents in preparation for my court case, mainly on the Internet, I got sidetracked from time to time, and I admit that I Googled myself repeatedly. Pan: Greek deity associated with Arkadia; father Hermes; mother anybody's guess, and everybody does guess, often with disturbing confidence, so on five different sites I have five different mothers. Also, according to the Internet, Echo was killed when I became angry and persuaded a group of shepherds to tear her apart. I'm not sure how Echo will take this news when I tell her. You don't even have to be part of this other world to suffer from its unreliable press. But the most interesting thing I discovered is that I too am dead, "Great Pan is dead". I am Dead Pan.

This all seems to have started with the Greek historian Plutarch, who casually wrote the idea that I was dead into some tale as an unconfirmed rumour. The idea might have stopped there if it hadn't been resurrected by influential writers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, such as Ezra Pound, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Oscar Wilde. I also get a mention in the works of Keats and Shelley, and most peculiar of all in Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows*, but on these occasions I'm

not yet expired, which is a relief. Shelley doesn't see me as dead, just a morose pipe player. Wrong! Now I think about it, I'm sure I've seen Shelley in heaven in The George and Dragon, observing everybody intensely while looking pale and insignificant. He's a morose character himself and that must be how he came to his misjudgement. Yet I had no idea he could write such fabulous poetry.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning I've not met, and I'd like to punch her on the nose if I do. She goes on and on and on and on about my being dead until it must become tiresome even for the most tolerant reader. After Plutarch, I blame her most for my death, or at least the promotion of it.

Oscar Wilde I fancy I've seen in the gutter on Faerie Lane, smiling gormlessly up at the stars. I don't blame him for anything. How could I criticise anybody who write such lines as:

"O goat-foot God of Arcady!
 Ah, what remains to us of thee?
 Ah, leave the hills of Arcady,
 Thy satyrs and their wanton play,
 This modern world hath need of thee."

This is from his poem 'Pan – Double Villanelle' which is a request for me to visit this other world because humankind has abandoned nature and lost its grip on the natural order of things. And here I am! And where are you, Oscar Wilde? Gone to heaven, you bugger, where I should be.

Oscar Wilde's last words: Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.
 Nice.

Elizabeth Barrett 'Broken-Nose' Browning didn't come out with any special last words. She saw my death as a metaphor for the replacement of polytheist paganism by monotheist Christianity. I'm not sure she'd put it that way herself, or could pronounce it if she did, but that was her general drift. Yet Christ and I get on perfectly well. And at the same time she's right. It's no coincidence that the Devil has horns and hoofs. And it's no coincidence that I'm seen as the god of nature and animal flocks and I just happen to have turned up in this other world at a critical time, when mankind is beginning to fiddle with nature in yet more devious ways.

Earlier fiddling has changed the planet beyond recognition. The potatoes I saw earlier in the fields by the roadside were brought by explorers from the Andes, wheat from the Middle East, sheep ultimately from Iran. Cows are almost on home territory, though different to the aurochs from which they were originally bred, and which didn't take to domestic life and so are now extinct. The oak and beech forests that once grew everywhere, including here, have been chopped down for fuel and replaced by specialist grasses, by wheat for bread and Italian Ryegrass for pasture. Apart from the occasional wild woodland, pretty much everything I get to see every day in this other world has been orchestrated by mankind.

I once asked Buddha about mankind's relationship with nature. He said it could be summed up in one word.

Golf.

The sun goes down and the giant highway that passes through our service station turns into a string of crawling white headlights and red tail-lights, making it much prettier. We move off towards Foxglove Laboratories, feeling very conspiratorial. I

take off my clothes, as I need my legs on view. As the lead commando of this expedition – actually the sole commando – I get the urge to put all my affairs in order before the dangerous part begins. I thank Buddha once again for the offer of his house

"That's OK. I don't think it was doing me much good anyway," he says.

"Property ownership – it's not good for my head. I was mad to get involved in the first place."

John Frum now offers to add his house to my legal fee fund, but according to Buddha it turns out that John Frum doesn't actually own his home. In fact it's a house for sale on Buddha's list at the estate agency, which has somehow avoided ever getting a house for sale sign outside or any prospective buyers, and which John Frum has lived in rent-free and in all innocence until this very moment.

"Aaah, bollocks!" says John Frum, summing up his view on this new development. It's not a very American expression, but then he's been sounding less American of late. Like me, he's been in this part of the other world too long.

Finally I'm dropped off outside the strange Foxglove headquarters building with its metal Art Deco windows and turret towers at each end. We've timed our arrival well. A few stragglers are still working late inside the building or trudging out to their cars, but the vast majority have finished prostituting their time for money and have already gone home.

On this occasion I don't go into the main entrance, instead I walk down the concrete ramp to the delivery area and loading bays on one side, taking care that I look confident, giving the impression that I belong here, despite my lack of clothes.

Now comes the trickiest part of my plan. As I come close to the loading bay platform I'm spotted by a security guard and his German Shepherd dog.

"Oi!" yells the guard. "What the hell are you doing here?"

I give no answer. He approaches and glares at me with undisguised aggression, particularly at my legs.

"Can you talk?" he asks.

"Yes, of course."

"Well get back inside the fucking building! You can't hang around here. Somebody might see you."

Perfect. In common with most of the nation's journalists and half its population, he thinks I'm a Foxglove genetic experiment.

"Get a move on," he growls, "or I'll set the dog on you."

This is a very optimistic threat, as currently the dog has his front paws stretched forward, his tail going like a windscreen wiper in a storm, and is whining and throwing his head from side to side in a desperate attempt to get my attention.

"Rex, you soft bugger!" says the guard, despairingly. "He's not usually like this, you know. Tear you apart, he will. Eh?"

"I'm sure."

I bend down and tickle Rex behind the ears. His tongue lolls out in gentle ecstasy. The guard sighs. He takes hold of me by the elbow and leads me to the delivery entrance. We make a start on a long corridor that takes us deep into the heart of Foxglove. On either side of the corridor are tiny windows in plain white doors, and through them I get the occasional glimpse of workbenches and scientific apparatus.

"Did you watch the Arsenal match last Saturday?" asks the guard.

Is this light conversation? I suspect it is.

"No, I missed it."

"Shame. Even the wife enjoyed it. Makes a change from Reality TV. Rex!"

Rex tugs hard at his lead and is as awkward as a dog can be, until the guard gives up and passes the lead to me, which solves the problem. We've now passed scores of plain white doors on either side. I suspect there are hundreds more.

"Do you watch the Gary Truimph show?" I ask, hoping to keep this odd conversation alive.

"That fucking arsehole!"

"Just asking."

But the cannon is primed and off it goes. He's a talkative one, and now he launches into a diatribe about his wife's taste in television, his in-laws, and somehow steers the monologue through his teenage daughters and finishes up on his telephone bill. I grunt from time to time, but it's not necessary for me to say anything.

Meanwhile our corridor becomes less sterile. I can smell animals and I get the occasional glimpse of a cage through the small square windows in the doors to either side. I can also smell animal faeces, and as we continue and the odours become stronger I can smell death. It's only because I'm partly goat that I can smell this, and it's not the smell of mass extermination but of selective slaughter and the fear that precedes it. Needless to say, it's not a pleasant smell.

The corridor transforms messily into a covered walkway between what look like separate outbuildings, though everything still shares one roof. The animal smells are much stronger.

"Here we are," says the guard. He opens a door. I dislike the place immediately. Inside is a sheep pen and two sheep. One looks perfectly ordinary, the other gulps down hay like a mad beast and has the regular head and two forelegs of a normal sheep, but joined to three rumps and six rear legs. It's cross-shaped, with one front quarter and three behinds. I recall that humans have a fondness for meat from the rear, while meat from the front is of low value. But this is one ugly-looking animal.

I hand back Rex's lead. The guard holds it and watches me while he fiddles uncomfortably. It's difficult to know what he is waiting for, but I'm getting the hang of how other-worlders think and I take a guess that perhaps I don't look sufficiently sheep-like for him to leave me here, so I get down on my hands and knees. My hoofs no longer touch the ground and I look and feel ridiculous, but it does the trick. My friendly but confused guard stops shuffling and playing with Rex's lead.

What weirdness is going through his head right now? How does he reconcile my posture with our conversation about whether I watched Arsenal play? There's no TV here in this disgusting sheep pen. Does he expect me to eat hay and ruminate on his daughters' excessive use of the telephone?

And then he does the typical human thing and fractures my arrogant thoughts by going over to the cross-shaped sheep and tickling it behind the ears.

"Ah, Nelly. Always having to eat, eh? My poor dear. What monster did this to you, eh?"

Compassion! Given freely and for no reward. The company he works for produced this sheep, and he dislikes them for it. I should be hugging this man, not criticising him. Clearly he doesn't have the imagination to deal with me as partly human and partly goat at the same time, so he's doing the best he can, treating me as wholly human one moment and wholly goat the next - or wholly sheep, as he's unfamiliar with goats. I feel like apologising to him for causing so much confusion.

I absolutely hate this sheep pen. It holds the stink of death. This environment is making me stupid. I was even more stupid to think that I could tolerate becoming

part of Foxglove. Buddha was right all along and I'm doubly stupid for doubting him. I feel sick. I want out.

The guard says nothing more to me and I know better than to speak, as he's currently viewing me in sheep mode. He goes back to the door, turns off the light, and closes it behind him.

There are no windows but it's not dark inside the pen. The other sheep, the one I thought looked perfectly normal, gives off a lurid blue fluorescent glow, easily enough to see by. This is something else I read about in my genetics books, adding the fluorescing genes of a jellyfish to mammals. It was a rabbit I read about, but clearly it works on sheep too.

And I can hear a slight hissing sound. There's a water trough at the far end of the pen, but that isn't where the hissing comes from. It comes from a high-pressure airline running overhead. I wonder if this is used for shearing machinery. While idly thinking this thought, I run my hand through the fleece of the fluorescent sheep.

"Ah! Shit!"

I'm badly stung. I thrash my hand around in the water trough for a while, cursing the genetic engineers of Foxglove Laboratories.

The security arrangements for our sheep pen consist of a door handle, which sheep can't turn but I can. The door opens. I don't know or care which direction I run. Only when the smell of death has gone do I stop and look around.

I'm at a division of pathways paved across grass, between outbuildings beneath a single clear roof, and a two-armed sign offers me Pig or Pool – Pig to the left and Pool to the right. I opt for Pool, and the sign is accurate, for the next building I come to houses a swimming pool. It's very bare and bright inside and uncomfortably warm. The pool is round – no, it's elliptical – and on every side is a ledge of tiled floor. Some activity beneath the water keeps it turbulent and uneven. In the middle is an irregular rocky island, worn flat in places.

Two bronzed and glittering shapes leap from the water and twist to land perfectly on the island. They're mermaids. They have tails covered with blue and red scales, ending with a mammal-type fin – horizontal rather than vertical. They have immensely long brown hair that immediately settles into ringlets, which might annoy them but fascinates me. I also notice, quite incidentally, that they have perfect breasts with large maroon nipples.

At first they don't notice me. They're more interested in a well-worn magazine which they dig out from a crevice in the rock and flick through at speed.

"Too much yellow."

"Wrong shoes."

"Oh, she looks gorgeous in that."

I think it's a copy of Vogue, but I can't be sure. Certainly there's a picture of a glamorous woman on the front, though that doesn't do much to narrow things down.

Finally one of them notices me. "Look," she says, "there's a man with hairy legs and no clothes."

They stare at my groin and giggle, but in moderation, so it's fetching rather than annoying.

"Are you a guardian?" they ask.

"No, I'm a product. My name is Pan."

"I'm Melissa, this is Tracy. Did you bring any sweets?"

"No."

"Waterproof make-up?"

"No."

"Magazines?"

"No."

"Shoes?"

"No."

"You're useless. Go away."

Tracy's interest returned to the magazine after the first question, and now Melissa joins her. I'm ignored. The only difference I can make out between the pair of them is that Melissa has a slightly heavier build. Seen apart, I wouldn't know one from the other. They're surely sisters.

"Why would you want shoes?" I ask.

"For when our tails fall off, silly. When our tails fall off we'll have lovely long legs like the models in the magazines. What happened to your legs? Did something go wrong when your tail fell off?"

"I...er, yes, something like that."

I don't know quite how I feel about these two, except that I like them. At first I felt something sexual, but mentally they're too innocent, too adolescent, and at my age when women are like that I tend to slip into uncle mode, which is where I am now.

"Who told you your tails will fall off?" I ask. I've looked at their tails for some time and been through the genetics involved, and I get the feeling somebody has misled them.

"God."

This too might seem unlikely, but I have a theory.

"What does God look like? Shoulder-length fair hair? Very svelte, a little taller than me and with gorgeous blue eyes?"

This gets their full attention.

"You've met him!"

"You know God!"

I nod. Yes, I have met Elliot Harmon, founder and CEO of Foxglove Laboratories. And I don't think he can be trusted with the welfare of these two lovely creatures.

"Have you ever thought about escaping?"

They look at each other and frown.

"Why would we want to leave?" asks Tracy. "We have everything we could want here and lots of nice people to look after us. It's the perfect place to wait until our tails drop off."

"Don't you get bored?"

They look at me expectantly, waiting for further explanation. But I'm not going to be able to explain boredom to them any more than I'll be able to override Elliot's careful programming and tell them their tails are unlikely to fall off and reveal legs like the models in the magazine.

I begin to wonder if they have more than one magazine, and it's such a suffocating thought that I have to discard before it makes me feel nauseas.

"Race you five times round the pool!" shouts Melissa to her sister, giving her a playful slap on the shoulder.

"Who won last time?" asks Tracy.

"I don't know. I can't remember."

And they don't bother to try. Instead they run the race again. And I'm sure they enjoy it, though I leave before the first lap.

I go back to the Pig and Pool signpost and this time choose Pig. The building to the left is a pigsty, and inside it, just as I'd hoped, is the pig I saw when I visited here as a potential investor – the pig with wings. Currently they're folded by its sides, and I'm curious to see how similar this beast is to the one that crash-landed in the forest when I was with Buddha and Echo. The pig doesn't seem either timid or intimidating, and he watches me with a pink piggy eye while I lean forward to touch the hard and hairless dark red shoulder of the wing where it joins the body.

"Can I help you with something?" he asks.

My hand jerks back like it's been stung again.

"You can talk!"

"Not only can I talk, but often I manage to avoid stating the obvious. I assume from your legs that you're a product rather than a guard. My name is Radius. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Pan."

"It's nice to have somebody to talk to. I don't often get the chance. I'm not supposed to talk."

"Why not?"

"If I talk then nobody will want to eat me, will they? It's very offputting behaviour for food."

"Do you want to be eaten?"

"Not me specifically, of course not, but as a species, yes. I'm basically a domestic pig. If I don't get eaten I won't be bred. The flying pig product will be discontinued. End of species."

"Hmmm, that's a tricky one."

"This is a human world, and if you want to get by you have to offer something valuable to humans, either food or entertainment. Either you're lovable or worth making a documentary about or you taste good. That's the bottom line."

I've never thought about this before, but the pig is right. Humans protect species they find cute, interesting or like to eat. The rest, like the horned aurochs I was thinking about earlier, fall by the wayside. Some tasty ones fall by the wayside too, like the dodo, but that's through plain mismanagement.

"Wait a minute," says the pig. "Check this out." He unfurls his wings slightly, shuffles from side to side and sings, "Mamee, how I love you, how I love you, my dear old mamee."

It sounds terrible. I shake my head. "Better stick with the food angle."

"Shame."

"Hold on. If humans won't eat a pig that talks, why did they produce a talking pig in the first place?"

"They're not really sure which part of the brain is responsible for flying skills, and they gave me the wrong attributes. I'm great on philosophy but can only glide."

I recall my conversation with the flying pig in heaven. "And the wings are there so you can fly to the slaughterhouse?"

"Hmmm." Radius moves his snout close to my ear. "Between you and me, I'm only pretending I can do no better than glide. Actually I can fly like an eagle. I'm just waiting for the first open window or chance to go outdoors, if you know what I mean."

This pleases me immensely, though a few seconds later I realise it also confirms my worst fears. "You wouldn't want to stay in Foxglove, then? You wouldn't recommend the place?"

The little piggy pink eyes open as wide as they can. "Are you mad? Have you no sense of smell?"

He's right, of course. And my visit here has fulfilled its purpose. I would find life at Foxglove intolerable, and possibly short. I have to win my court case.

I can hear Rex barking outside the pigpen, and the voice of the talkative guard.

"Rex! Rex, what the hell's got into you today? What's wrong?"

Rex has picked up my scent, and is loudly telling me where he is.

"You need to get out," whispers Radius, urgently. "If they catch you here, the Pan product will be discontinued. Use the back way."

Radius turns his head to show me the back door. I make it just in time. As I close the rear door behind me I hear the front one opening.

"I thought I heard talking?" says the guard. "And you know pigs aren't allowed to talk, don't you, Radius?"

"Oink," says Radius, and he doesn't grunt the word, he enunciates it very clearly.

"Very funny."

Chapter 13

My second TV appearance, thanks to Stephanie, is on the influential panel show Four on Four, chaired by Lark Morrison. We'll be discussing genetic modification. My enthusiasm for the programme has gone up since visiting Foxglove. I'm keen to maintain my public profile as a famous freak so I can earn money through product endorsement and fund my lawyer's extravagant lifestyle. I really don't want to become a Foxglove product. Doing battle with Joe Progress will have to wait, though curiously I feel the two issues are pretty much one and the same. Foxglove is a kind of manifestation of Joe Progress on Earth, and my battle against the company is an extension of my original fight against genetic modification in heaven.

Once again I find myself in a TV studio, on a tiny island of light and structure inside a man-made cavern that's far larger, with a constellation of suns above, lighting and heating the stage to the limit of bearability. There are maybe 200 people sitting in the angular curved terrace overlooking the stage. From where I'm sitting I can see the top of the scaffolding holding up the seating area, but magically it never appears on camera. One thing I can't see is the 30 foot projection screen the audience is now watching. The four of us on the panel – and in the middle, Lark Morrison, our chairperson and master of ceremonies – can't see the screen as it's directly to our right. Instead we watch a couple of feeble monitors suspended amongst the upside-down forest of lights above.

We're watching the introduction to the programme on videotape, or VT as the producer calls it. Asamah Bulamaya is an attractive Asian reporter in her mid-twenties. She's standing by the company sign at the entrance to Foxglove Laboratories, by the silver letters etched into grey marble lit by a small spotlight in the ground, as it's night-time. Here in the studio it's late afternoon, but the programme will go out at night, so an introduction filmed in darkness is appropriate. For a moment I wonder when this footage was taken, how many days ago, and whether I

might have been sneaking around in the background buildings while the camera rolled. It seems unlikely, though the thought is a curious one.

My escape from the laboratories wasn't difficult. The fences were designed to stop humans getting in, not partially goat-like creatures getting out. Yet I surprised myself with my agility. Life here in the other world seems to suit me well. I feel much fitter than I did just a few weeks ago, despite the smelly air. To be frank, I'm fairly bursting with energy.

"...ability to take genes from one species and add them to another," continues Asamah. "Through this technique we get crops containing their own bacterial defence against pests, and plants containing useful chemicals such as insulin, which can be harvested and distributed to diabetics. But have we gone too far? Scientists at Foxglove Laboratories..."

Here Asamah pauses and glances sideways at the entrance sign, just to make sure we all understand why she's standing like a lemon by a corporate sign in the middle of the countryside at night.

"...have gone a stage further. Rather than inserting genes, they've been working on maintaining the genes we already have. Keeping these in good order could extend the human lifespan by two hundred years."

This is not entirely correct, the planned extension is a little over one hundred years, bringing the total to around two hundred, but Asamah is on the screen and in millions of homes and I'm not in a position to correct her.

"This comes at a price," she continues. "Nobody will say exactly how much the lifespan-extension treatment costs, but our secret research reveals a price tag of over one hundred thousand pounds a year. If you want to live a long time, you'd better be rich."

The videotape ends. I wonder how extensive the secret research went. Did it, for example, go further than the journalists' table in the pub? Lark Morrison now takes over the reins. He's an affable guy with white hair and a quick sense of humour, but his greatest asset is his voice, which manages to combine authority, undeniability and somehow at the same time humanity. His voice is unquestionably the key to his success. And he has sparkling eyes. Those always help.

"Thank you, Asamah. And here to discuss the moral and social aspects of genetic modification, I'm joined by our panel of experts. On my left, Dr Teresa Hartley, a retired GP and author of the book, "Give Up Gracefully," advocating euthanasia, and Charlton Montblanc from the pressure group Biogenetics Halt. On my right, Rosalyn Cornwell from the Centre for Ethics in Biogenetics, and Peter Alan Nesmith, a mixed-species genetic product of Foxglove Laboratories."

My ego gets a nice starting boost – I get far more applause than any other panellist. The others are non-entities of course, but it's still nice.

Only when I think about the seating arrangement do I realise I've been parked on the "pro" side of this debate. Everybody assumes that because I'm the product of genetic modification, I must be in favour of it, though actually this isn't the case. Buddha and I have discussed the implications of the 200s program and we're in easy agreement that it will be a disaster for the planet and for every other species apart from humans, because people will stay alive longer, rather than shuffling off to make space for the next generation, and human overpopulation is the underlying cause of most of the planet's problems.

However, I already know enough about TV to recognise that it doesn't really matter whether I sit on the pro or anti side, as long as I'm entertaining.

I've not had a chance to talk to my fellow conspirators. Our paths overlapped occasionally in the prelude to the programme, but never for more than a few seconds, and I get the feeling this was intentional, that it's policy before a contest to keep the gladiators apart.

"So without further ado, let's get the ball rolling," says Lark. "Let's have the first question from the audience. In the middle over there, in the black jacket, no, to the left. Yes sir, what is your question?"

Naturally the man in the black jacket begins his question before the microphone arrives, but he's clever enough to start again when he realises what's happened.

"Tom Daley from Birmingham. Are we going to finish up as a race of super-humans, with the eyesight of eagles, the running speed of cheetahs, and the strength of gorillas? It seems inevitable, doesn't it, if we start taking genes from other creatures?"

"Eye of newt and tongue of toad," says Lark, for no reason I can fathom. "Dr Hartley, what's your view?"

"Yes, the Olympics are going to become tricky."

This is all she says. I think she's slurring, but she has a very posh voice that makes it difficult to tell. The words sound like they have to struggle past some huge obstacle on their way to freedom, and it's not clear if the obstacle is alcohol or class. Yet of the panellists this is the one I like the most – just from her body language. She slumps in her chair as if she's watching a Western and eating pizza on a Sunday afternoon.

Lark is nonplussed for a moment, but soon recovers. "Rosalyn?"

"Though it's nice that we'll get the opportunity to add to our abilities, I think the most important aspect of genetic improvement is that we'll be able eradicate genetic weaknesses. No more Down's Syndrome, no more Parkinson's Disease, no Crone's, Alzheimer's – these are the things we should be celebrating. Mankind has been going through a brief phase where we've maintained and kept alive every combination of our genes, even bad combinations. We're now looking at a future where we can eradicate bad gene combinations and live healthier, longer lives."

Personally I think she makes some good points, but she gets no applause. Perhaps her tone of voice isn't good enough. It's too even, bland and sanitized. Or perhaps it's something to do with her posture. She sits rigidly upright in her chair, which may be due to nerves but certainly does nothing for her image. It leads me to coin a secret name for her. I call her Rigid Rosalyn.

"The strength of a gorilla?" says Charlton, who clearly doesn't need to wait for an invitation to speak. "How about the spirituality of a rabbit? We were made special, in the image of God, and now we're about to spend billions of pounds on making ourselves ordinary, mixing animal genes with our sacred human ones, until we finish up with the intelligence of a computer and the soul of a cockroach."

Charlton does get some applause, but then he has terrific delivery. He could be a preacher. I start to wonder whether he once was, and I suspect Lark is wondering something similar. I think he's giving Charlton the warning eye.

I'm not very keen on Charlton. He's fat, with a triple chin and small facial features huddled together in the centre of his face, and at the same time he's driven by nervous energy. The two in combination seem unnatural.

Lark now looks at me expectantly. I have nothing much to say about this. I'd like to correct the inaccuracies of Asamah's introduction, and ultimately I'd like to

explain that I'm not really a product of genetic experimentation at all, but Stephanie McVeigh has advised me that on TV everybody is expected to move things forward, and going back to correct inaccuracies is generally a mistake.

"I'd like to apologise for eating the flowers in the green room. But they were daffodils and I'm afraid daffodils are my favourites."

There's a one second pause – I can almost hear all those neurons firing – then a ridiculous roar of appreciation. Whistles, cat-calls. This is all very silly, but strangely addictive, I have to admit.

"An interesting selection of views," says Lark to camera. He turns back to the questioner. "And what is your view on the forthcoming super-human, Tom?"

Tom grins. "I hear that lions sometimes screw for days."

"Thank you, thank you," shouts Lark, above the noise. "Can I remind members of the audience that this is a recorded programme. If you say anything too outrageous it will simply be cut."

Tom still grins. His girlfriend, next to him, is giggling. They've had their fifteen seconds of fame, even if it won't go further than this audience.

"Time to move on to the next question," says Lark, consulting his crib-sheet. "Douglas Riffen, from Belfast."

Douglas is identified and gets the microphone. "I hear that Foxglove Laboratories has created a pig with wings. Is this true?"

"Rosalyn?" asks Lark.

"No, this is complete nonsense. The Centre for Ethics in Biotechnology has close links with Foxglove Laboratories and there is no such thing as a flying pig. That's a categorical no."

"If there is, I hope it has good bowel control," slurs Dr Hartley. "Can you imagine that? One moment you're happily walking down Regent Street. The next..."

I still can't tell if she's drunk. It's quite distracting.

"Another abomination," preaches Charlton. "Does it matter if it exists or not? The fact that we're contemplating the idea is surely bad enough."

I don't need a prompt to answer this question, but I'm trying to work out how to answer it in a manner that will be honest to Radius, the real pig with wings. How to be honest to him and not endanger him – there lies the problem.

"I heard that an investors tour of Foxglove was shown a flying pig only a week ago," I say. "Actually it couldn't quite fly, it could only glide. So technically it's a gliding pig, not a flying pig."

"I'm happy to learn that," says Lark. "Whoever heard of a flying pig?"

Rigid Rosalyn isn't so happy. Although we're supposed to be on the same side she's now giving me the sniper's eye, which is a couple of clicks above the warning eye.

Lark adjusts his wayward hair. It took the make-up lady, Denise, twenty minutes to bring the correct degree of waywardness to that ageing forelock of fine light dead protein. It may have taken her longer than usual because she couldn't help glancing in my direction every few minutes. She perpetually eyed my hair and my beard from the moment I walked in, as a mountaineer might stand on the foothills and stare up at K2. When she finished Lark, she moved to stand in front of me and smiled broadly in my face, assuming this friendly action would annul whatever she did next. And it's true that I wasn't especially concerned when she removed my hat. She looked at my horns with the kind of face that doesn't change because it can't decide which direction to go. Should it be upset, astonished, should it cry? It can't make up its mind.

She replaced my hat. "On second thoughts," she decided, "the hat suits you." And that was the end of the issue.

"Let's have another question from the audience," says Lark. "Madam, yes you, no, in blue, on the lower row."

"I have a question for Peter. Where do you get your underwear?"

I should have seen this coming of course, but it's like a stealth missile, and when it lands I'm as shell-shocked as everybody else.

"That's quite enough sexuality for one day," says Lark, and his pointing finger begins to traverse the audience again.

But I'm feeling mischievous.

"I'm not wearing any. I rarely do."

Lark hits me with a brief narrowing of his eyes, but there are a hundred women in the audience whooping and clapping and he's not about to do battle with them. He's a professional and deals with the loss of control gracefully, with a wide grin. "Well, now we've dealt with the important matters, I wonder whether we can get back to the trivial issue of genetics and mankind?" He looks at his notes. "Mister David de Briar, you have a question for us?"

David gets the microphone. Despite his fancy name he's clearly Welsh. "Obviously we'd all like to live to two hundred, or three hundred if the figure in the intro was right. Why should we even question whether it's a good thing? We want it. We should do it."

"Well, we have a question and answer there. But let's see if our panellists come to the same conclusion. Dr Hartley?"

It's not clear whether Lark is approaching Dr Hartley first because it's Muggins' turn in a rota of fairness, or because he wants to dispense with her slurred commentary and get to the heart of the matter. Either way he's in for a surprise.

"Yes, let's make an existing problem worse. The one item we haven't discussed yet is mental decline. Brain cells aren't maintained in quite the same way as other body cells, so it seems likely that all those people using the telomerase technique are going to end up as very fit and old vegetables. This is a ridiculous way for society to go. We have enough problems with our ageing population as things stand. You have no idea how much of our health system is dedicated to keeping old people alive. When I worked as a general practitioner, around two thirds of my surgeries were taken up by people over 60. It's the same for referrals. A very small proportion of our health system is used to repair relatively healthy bodies, and the majority is there for the benefit of old people. Add in this life-extension system and we're going to become a society of old idiots. Imagine driving, imagine what kind of governments will be voted in, imagine trying to find a parking space with a view over a valley, or just an empty park bench. We should be looking at the opposite kind of treatment, some genetic time bomb that rips apart our DNA the day after our seventieth birthday. Let's do the world a favour."

I hear the sound of young hands clapping while old hands slip out of sight beneath withered thighs.

Whether I agree or not, her viewpoint is an interesting one. I was beginning to think this programme would stay in the shallows of trivia for its duration. Then I get the shocking realisation that Lark's gentle admonishment was valid. I am the guilty party here. I've done more to trivialise the programme than anybody else. My mere presence has trivialised it.

"I think you misunderstand how the telomerase treatment works," says Rigid Rosalyn. "The idea is that you start this treatment as a young adult, and the period of your life that is extended is healthy adulthood, not old age. Artists, scientists, great thinkers - they usually come up with their best work around their mid-thirties. It's this golden age that we'll be extending. Just imagine how fast our society will be able to develop if talented people stay in peak condition for ten times as long. Imagine if Einstein had spent a hundred years in his thirties. Where would science be now?"

"If God had intended us to live for two hundred years, he wouldn't have given us seventy year lifespans," says Charlton, with his own kind of gravity. "We shouldn't meddle. We should leave well alone."

Maybe this is too much God for Dr Hartley. Although she's sitting next to him in the "anti" camp, and although they appear to roughly agree on the ideal lifespan, she turns on him.

"If you use any medicine at all, then you're a hypocrite."

Lark does nothing to quell the rebellion. Actually, he looks very happy.

Charlton is glowing red. I suspect it's anger rather than embarrassment.

Dr Hartley jabs a finger at Rigid Rosalyn. "And you're just a mouthpiece for the biotech industry. You get almost half your funding from Foxglove Laboratories. How can you have the cheek to turn up here and claim to be from the Centre for Ethics in Biotechnology, as though it's some paragon of objectivity, when it's basically funded by the industry we're discussing? It's ridiculous. Of course the biotech industry wants to charge for life-extension, whether it works or not. What a fantastic way to get money out of people." She points at Charlton. "At least we can tell he's a plain old God-squadder, whatever organisation he claims to come from. He wears his heart on his sleeve."

"I'll tell you something, young lady," returns Charlton, although Rosalyn isn't especially young, and she's not responsible for his anger, but nevertheless it's her that he's addressing. "If Christ was around today, there would be an eleventh commandment - Thou shalt not meddle with thy genes."

Now the young people sit on their hands while the old applaud. But I'm half lost to my surroundings. My head is light and empty and I can sense a tidal wave of thought on the cusp of arriving to fill it. It's a very physical sensation. I'm thinking of Christ writing an eleventh commandment, though I don't recall he had much to do with the first ten, which were just between God and Moses, but I'm following Charlton's muddled train of thought and thinking about the Christ I know and wondering how the new commandment would be written. In this day and age it would have to be written as an email. It would be quick, cheap, and in the blink of an eye it could be transmitted to a quarter of the world's population. But I can't recall if Christ has any keyboard skills, or if he's a computer ignoramus, like me. Does it matter either way? He knows absolutely nothing about genetics. Why should he have anything to say on the subject?

And yet these humans here in this studio, not all of them, but a reasonable proportion, are trying to form their view on genetics by interpreting a doctrine developed two thousand years ago, just after mankind left the iron age, if it ever really left it.

Strangely, this doesn't devalue their faith in my eyes, it strengthens it. If they can go through the massive convolution of trying to view modern science through a two thousand year old doctrine, it must be an incredibly important doctrine.

And then the tidal wave arrives. I realise that Christ is very fit and well in heaven because of this belief on Earth. The faith of all these people is what sustains him. And exactly the same applies to Mercedes and Joe Progress. They're the new icons of belief, they're the new gods in this modern world. And there's only one reason why I've become much fitter and healthier since arriving here on mortal Earth – and that's because of my fame, because of my popularity. Meanwhile, back in heaven, Isis and Horus are increasingly ignored and they age and decay, and Frigg and Maal have been consigned to the scrapheap and unless the faith in them is resurrected here on Earth they'll never live again.

Not surprisingly, this revelation hits me hard.

I, and all my colleagues in heaven, we are products of the human imagination. We are dependent on human faith. If the faith goes, we no longer exist.

I realise that in the studio nobody is saying anything, and they're all looking at me. Oh dear.

"Yes," I say, because it's a word for all circumstances.

It works well and I'm applauded, though I haven't a clue what the question was.

Chapter 14

Discovering that I'm merely an item in a collective imagination seriously rattles my clipboard. I can hardly keep this revelation to myself, and inevitably I find myself discussing it with Buddha while we sit in comfort in his living room and watch 100 Great Sporting Accidents.

He nods, solemnly. "Yes. I'm sorry, I didn't know you were ready for that kind of knowledge, otherwise I'd have told you myself."

I'd been hoping he would refute the idea, tell me it was flawed and not to be so silly. I'm doubly rocked by the confirmation.

"But, but, surely, I mean, our whole existence is undermined. What's the point of us if we're merely products of human imagination?"

"Steady. You're throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The fact is, humans *need* us. They're much happier with us around. We explain the inexplicable, we offer the possibility that death isn't permanent. It's a much happier other-world with us around. We perform a useful role, so don't worry about that. If we were all suddenly wiped out or forgotten, humans would just dream us up again. It's in their nature. We're needed. Essential."

I'm relieved to hear it. But my over-active imagination has already taken the scenario one step further – perhaps a step too far.

"But what if the humans themselves are just a product of some other species' imagination? What if they're dreamed up too, in the same way that we are, but by some other beings that we can't see, or can't recognise?"

Buddha turns his eyes away from a spectacular Formula One crash to face me. "I'm glad you said that, because it's very close to the way I view this other-world. All the physical things we see here, all the beings, are in some ways an apparition, a manifestation of energy, and intertwined in more ways than they think, but not entirely real."

He looks into my face for a long time, and I think it's an honest face, properly showing my emotions, because after a minute he adds, "I'm not helping, am I?"

"No."

He turns back to the TV. "Forget it. Here's a better idea. Have you noticed how the humans block things out – things they don't want to know about? They do it with abattoirs, hospices, third world sweatshops, food additives. All you have to do is block out this collective consciousness thing the same way. Just go back to how you thought things were before you had the revelation."

"I'm not sure that's going to be so easy."

"It's not hard. Just imagine you have a really strong faith in one god or one set of gods. To do this you have to block out the fact that all the other gods exist, that billions of other people believe in something entirely different. If you can manage to do that, you're home and dry. The idea of gods as a product of the collective imagination becomes nonsense."

"I, er, hmmm."

On the day of my court case, for some reason most of the major players turn up in fancy dress, wearing curly white wigs and long gowns. For a moment I wonder whether I've stumbled across the filming of some historical drama and I'm in the wrong room, but if that's the case then my lawyer is also in the wrong room, and so is Elliot Harmon, the CEO of Foxglove.

My lawyer advises me that the fancy dress is traditional. I suppose it might be viewed as intimidating by those of us who don't get to wear it. Alternatively, it could be seen as highly comical, and it's no surprise which way my own reaction goes.

The judge is female, I think. At least her voice is female, and she has no Adam's apple, otherwise she's neuter.

"Mr Nesmith?"

"Yes, your honour?"

"Are you on drugs?"

"No, your honour."

"Then will you please stop smirking."

"Yes, your honour."

What they need here is little signs on the walls showing a pair of smiling lips with a red line through them and the words, No Smirking. This thought does not help my composure.

"Mr Nesmith."

"Yes, your honour."

"I'm warning you. No smirking."

I notice she's brought with her a single book, which she places on her desk, slightly to her left, and while the council for the prosecution is shuffling his vast portfolio of papers, I quietly ask my lawyer what the book is.

"Case law, probably," he says.

"I don't think so," I say. "It looks too slim."

"Can you read the spine from here?" he says. "My eyesight's not so good."

I turn my head sideways and struggle to read. "The Trial, Franz Kafka. Is that a good sign?"

"Not especially."

We go through most of the early stages at speed. My lawyer accepts the wording of the patent and the fact that it applies to partial goats, and pretty soon we get to the crucial issue of utility, or lack of it – the fact that I'm entirely useless and therefore the Foxglove patent can't apply to me.

The prosecuting lawyer and Elliot Harmon consult for two minutes. Elliot is the scariest figure here in court. He's tall and slim. His shoulder-length hair is freshly brushed and he's wearing a tie. He does not smirk. If he was placed in front of me in a police line-up – any line-up – I would point to him and say he was the hit-man.

"We suggest to the court," says the prosecuting lawyer, when they've finished their huddle, "that the defendant would be useful for the purpose of dietary research. We suggest he offers utility in this area, as he has a weakness for eating flowers, especially orchids and daffodils."

"Does the council for the defence concede that the defendant has a weakness for eating flowers?" asks the judge, and she is definitely smirking. This is not fair.

I'm desperately clearing my throat and raising my hand and trying to catch my lawyer's eye, but he's having none of it.

"No, your honour."

"Thank you. Clerk of the court, I wonder if you could pop out to the florist and buy a nice bunch of daffodils? They would do so much to brighten up the courtroom."

One of the secrets of the other world that I'm now privy to is that if you want to buy the best flowers, wear a wig and gown when you purchase them. The clerk of the court returns with the most fabulous daffodils I've ever set eyes upon. The stems are literally flawless, and the yellow of the blooms is as pure and powerful as the sun. The smell makes me weak at the knees. I get to inspect them in great detail, as the judge insists they're placed on the witness stand directly in front of me. This will work out fine, as long as she continues to watch closely.

The council for the prosecution waffles on about the oncological mouse and its usefulness to society, and the value of asthmatic guinea pigs, and pretty soon nobody seems to be paying attention to anybody else and the inevitable happens.

"Mr Nesmith?"

"Hmmm?" I need a moment before I can speak properly.

"Mr Nesmith, what happened to the flowers?"

I raise my hands in a gesture of innocence.

"Clerk of the court, did you see what happened to the daffodils?"

"The defendant ate them, your honour."

"The defendant will now rise to receive the judgement of the court"

I will say this for the other-world justice system, it's not as slow as people make out. We've been in session for barely two hours, my lawyer has barely said more than ten sentences, and already we have a decision.

"Mr Nesmith," begins the judge, "Foxglove Laboratories is a rich and powerful company, an essential part of the economy of this nation. You, on the other hand, are merely a troublesome individual with a propensity to smirk. In fact you are not even a proper individual, as you have horns and hoofs and hairy legs. You are in truth a transgenic organism. Under questioning you have failed to identify characters in major soap operas or otherwise prove yourself to be a regular human being. Nor do you have a mortgage or a driving license as any normal person would have at your time of life. You have been described in the newspapers and on the television as a

product of Foxglove Laboratories, and you have not refuted this connection, indeed you have played upon it for your own advantage. You have a demonstrable weakness for eating flowers, which could be useful in dietary research. The company has spent more money on this court case than you have, and has better lawyers. All in all, I have no hesitation in upholding the case for the prosecution. From this moment on, you are the property of Foxglove Laboratories. Do you have anything to say?"

"Yes, your honour. Although I may have lost my freedom and may spend the rest of my days with electrodes plugged into my head as part of some gross and unnecessary experiment, I feel it was all worth it. Those were the best daffodils I've ever tasted."

The crowd in the public gallery is ecstatic, though I can't figure out why. Surely this is misplaced emotion.

I am a transgenic organism. That is going to take some getting used to.

Elliot Harmann moves across the court and gently takes hold of my elbow. What is it with these Foxglove people and elbows? Now he is smirking.

"Where are you taking him?" demands my lawyer, steadfast to the end.

"We're taking him to his new home, of course," says Elliot, "to Foxglove Laboratories. He belongs to us now. What business is it of yours?"

"I need to know where to send his bill."

Chapter 15

It turns out that Elliot has no intention of attaching electrodes to my head, or even confining me to a sheep pen. He's a consummate businessman and is keen to capitalise on my popularity, and to my surprise he invites me to work in the Public Relations department of Foxglove, dealing mainly with the press. He gets a surprise in turn when I launch myself wholeheartedly into my new role. My knowledge of genetics is already substantial, and in the space of a few days I learn everything I can about multinational business in general, and Foxglove Laboratories in particular.

Like any other multinational, our starting point is to produce goods in poor countries where we can pay a pittance and ignore the few regulations that may exist. If a country gets uppity and introduces labour laws, we move elsewhere. Currently we have production operations in Cambodia and Ecuador, where we grow GM seed cereals, including maize, and where we harvest insulin for diabetics. We also harvest other genetic material in these countries that may not be entirely legal, but we're good contributors to local political campaign funds and nobody seems to care.

At the other end of the chain we market these cheaply made goods in the rich countries of Europe and North America, pricing them according to how much money people can afford, rather than what they're worth. The mark-up between production cost and retail price is roughly a factor of twenty-five – the goods are sold for twenty-five times the cost of production – and apparently this puts us in the same league as most of the multinational food and clothing companies.

This healthy profit margin of around 96% allows us to spend large amounts of money on magazine and TV advertising. For example we have an anti-wrinkle cream called Silky Fox that we advertise heavily. Theoretically it's gene-based, and this is its major selling point, but I'm now in a privileged position and I've checked out the

ingredients and apart from a few genetic waste products I can't see a gene connection. Yet it sells very well.

Naturally we pay almost no taxation in any of the countries where we produce or sell. We're registered for tax purposes in the Bahamas, and the amount of tax we pay could be drawn from a bank in \$100 bills and would fit inside an average briefcase. A company vice-president earns more in dividends than we pay in taxation. But I'm very cool with all this new information and I don't discuss any of it with the press. They like me. They like me a lot. They like phoning a PR office and talking to somebody famous. We get ten times the amount of press coverage we had in the months before I joined.

Elliot is very happy with my performance, but he's still not sure whether he trusts me. For this reason we spend a lot of time together. Much of our time is spent on training, so it doesn't appear to be wasted. I'm probably the only person in the entire company who gets his computer training from the CEO.

"Have you seen one of these before?" he asks.

"Yes." I've seen a computer before.

"Do you know how it works?"

"Water-power, I believe. That's what all the pipes are for."

"Whoever told you that?" says Elliot, smiling. "Of course they're not water-powered. They have a tiny hamster inside. Listen. If you put your ear close to the casing, you can hear its little wheel spinning round."

I put my ear close to the casing and indeed I can hear a spinning wheel. "The hamster must be very small."

"That's genetics for you. And although the cables do supply water, there's only a limited amount of food, so after a few years the hamster runs out and the wheel stops spinning and the machine doesn't work any more."

"Fascinating. I didn't know that."

Elliot teaches me the operating system, which is called Fenestres, and which works well sometimes and other times is a dog, depending on the mood of the little hamster.

But Elliot is not entirely a font of joy and compassion. On the positive side I'm given far more freedom than I could ever have imagined after the court case. I have a small flat within the laboratory complex. I'm not supposed to leave it at night, but inevitably after a few days I sneak out and wander around the long corridors with doors on each side and small square windows and I make it unnoticed into the smelly area to visit the pigsty and say hello to Radius, my favourite pig.

There's still a pigsty, but there's no pig.

Beyond the signpost showing Pig or Pool, the elliptical building with water and a rocky island still exists, but in the pool there are no mermaids. It would be nice to think their tails have dropped off and they're happily walking around Milan or Paris on long legs and high heels, but I'm doubtful.

I ask Elliot about Radius the next time we're together for computer training.

"The pig?" he says. "It turns out he could fly much better than anybody thought. We took him out to the orchard one day and he's never been seen since."

I make sure I don't smile.

"And what about the mermaids?"

"How do you know about the mermaids?"

"Er, I've heard stories."

"The mermaid product has been discontinued."

Now I'm not sure if I'm going to throw up. Certainly it's a battle. I bend down to ease the nausea and try to show interest in a computer keyboard and screen, but I can't claim to be feeling well. I know Elliot is watching me. This moment, beyond anything else, is my real test.

"Non-commercial?" I suggest, without looking up.

"Absolutely. We couldn't find a way to make a profit from them. I'm proud of you, Peter."

But somebody else is not. I host a major press conference for the release of our new anti-obesity genetic fix, which is yet another re-branding of indigestible cellulose and is a complete sham, but is also the first televised conference that Elliot has trusted me with. I guess Buddha watches it, because a few minutes after the broadcast I get an email on my corporate address, written mainly in shouting capitals.

"WHAT IN HEAVEN'S NAME ARE YOU DOING? Mr B."

I don't reply. My emails, I'm sure, are monitored.

My discomfort is rewarded quickly, and in the best possible way. Next day Elliot calls me to his office, which is tediously minimalist, having half an acre of carpet and big windows yet containing nothing more than a desk and a few chairs. Does he think this is impressive? I think he probably does.

"Peter, I must say I didn't imagine things would work out so well. I had you down as a loose cannon, needed tethering to the deck, but since you've been here we've been in the newspapers and on TV every single day. I'm impressed."

"Thank you. It's a privilege to work for such a good company. I hadn't thought things would work out either, but you've given me a great opportunity and I decided to make the most of it."

Maybe I've overdone the arse-licking, but no, he receives this nonsense as if it's perfectly true. He's lost in the deep waters of corporate hubris, and no submersible can go down far enough to rescue him.

"We have a huge product launch coming up," he tells me. "And a re-launch too, so big that it's almost a rebirth for the company, and I'd like you to take charge of it."

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"Don't thank me too much. All this has to be done in a few days. We launch on the 7th. I want five or six hundred of the world's press here. I want a fleet of coaches bringing them to our doorstep, I want the motorways full of our coaches. I want representatives of all the world's major TV stations, translators, pundits, everybody who can carry our message. I want them here on the 7th. Have you got that?"

I've just been given a pump-it-up speech, so it's only right that I should appear pumped up. "Yes sir!"

This is all working out very well. My court case was the turning point in my battle with Joe Progress, but not in the way I anticipated. I had to lose it to get to this position. What did Joe Progress say, back in the supermarket? "Foxglove takes many of the inventions developed by Q and myself and introduces them to the other world." And here we are on the verge of a major change in Foxglove philosophy and new product launches, all scheduled for the 7th, the day before the heavenly presidential elections on the 8th, when the collective views of the other-worlders decide who's in charge of heaven. Coincidence? I think not.

Most important of all, I've got myself in a position where I'll be in charge of that Foxglove press conference on the 7th, with its worldwide coverage on TV.

It turns out that the details of our major Foxglove commercial initiative are more impressive than the general concept. How often is that the case? Foxglove intends to get into the general retail business, especially food and drink. We're about to launch a range of cereals, meats, drinks, waters (Waters? How many waters can there be?) – all our own brands and all sold through the major supermarkets. This is the business to be in, apparently. People spend a huge amount of their income in supermarkets. I recall that Joe Progress was developing a supermarket when I last saw him.

And our re-branding is an equally big deal. We're taking the 200s life extension program and bringing the price down so low we'll have half the planet signing up. Well... half the rich part of the planet, anyway, but we're talking hundreds of millions of customers. There are more than six billion other-worlders, and even five percent of six billion is... a very large number.

My days are taken up with the aggravation of organising a large press event. Elliot wants this press conference to be held outdoors at the entrance to Foxglove Laboratories, within camera-shot of the grey marble company sign. I wonder if he was mildly annoyed by the introductory footage from Asamah Bulamaya that preceded my Four on Four TV programme and he wants a rerun – this time under his own control. It's a possibility.

I hire contractors. I have terraced stands built. I arrange catering, coaches, toilets, generators, lights, sound systems. Thanks to my privileged position, I also get fully involved in our new advertising campaign. I liaise with Aaron Paulerton, the account manager from our advertising agency, CHF, Chaille Henley Forne.

The first thing I notice about Aaron is that he's very young. His hair is so heavily gelled that it looks like he's just got out of bed, and his tie has the flat kind of knot that old-fashioned entertainers tied on glove-puppets. I also notice that he wears extravagant cufflinks.

Aaron manages to appear exceedingly polite while at the same time making it clear that he hates dealing with a corporate rookie – i.e. me. He teaches me the basics of advertising, using a patronising tone of voice that never changes. He teaches me that adverts must claim to provide whatever consumers want. This is far more important than actually providing it. It seems that Buddha's view is reflected on this side of the advertising fence – adverts really do tell us more about society's desires than about the products on offer.

I learn there are just four types of advert: plain product info or price, product glorification, testimonial, and association. The trickiest is association, where the customer is invited to feel empathy with the product or a philosophy that goes with it. But it's also the most subtle and effective, and it's the one Aaron suggests we take on for our new mass-market 200s product. He says that society's main concern, its theme for the era, is ecological awareness, and what we must do is show how our product is good for the environment.

"Actually, Aaron," I explain, "our product isn't very good for the environment. It'll keep a lot of people alive a lot longer, and that means more population pressure for a planet that's already overstretched. In fact it's probably the most harmful product for the environment that anybody's released for decades. At a stroke we'll add hundreds of millions to the number of the most polluting species, and all in the rich, heavily-polluting countries."

Aaron's face lights up. "Then it's doubly important that we get the opposite message across, isn't it? That we show just how wonderful the 200s program is for the

environment. We don't want people wandering around thinking it's bad. That would be a terrible idea!" He settles back in his chair, looking pleased that he's been able to present his case so clearly.

I'm not convinced. "Are you telling me that people are going to watch an advert and think that the 200s is good for the environment, even though reality is the exact opposite?"

Aaron laughs. "Well I certainly hope so, otherwise I'm out of a living."

Once again, it strikes me that Buddha's view of advertising is remarkably accurate.

Aaron proposes that our advertising campaign concentrates on the good works people can do if they live longer lives. We'll show conservation volunteers at work, wildlife wardens, even gardeners, and make a connection between the time they're spending on these positive environmental acts and the extra time the 200s program adds to their lives.

Naturally we don't intend to cover the time they spend driving their cars, flying in fuel-guzzling airliners, or producing garbage.

"It just doesn't seem very realistic," I complain.

Aaron agrees. "That's true. Even with the drastically reduced price, your 200s product is going to be well out of the financial range of people we'll be showing. No way could a mere conservation volunteer afford it."

"So according to your logic," I say, when I've thought about this, "if they can't afford the program, it makes it doubly important that the adverts show they can."

"Peter, you're a fast learner."

Fortunately, when the proposal reaches Elliot, he takes one look at it, laughs, and throws it in the bin – literally. This doesn't faze Aaron for a moment. I'd say he almost expected it.

Five minutes later, we leave Elliot's vast office with our new advertising campaign, as dictated by Elliot. It will be a straightforward product-information type campaign, based around the funky catchline: "Would you like to live a long time?" It's irresistible. But then we're fortunate with our product.

During one of the rare lulls in Aaron's bullshit, when the fence is lowered slightly and I get to see a glimpse of a real human being beneath the bluster, I ask him if he thinks advertising really works.

"Well of course it does, otherwise there wouldn't be so much of it about, would there?"

It's a compelling argument. I also ask him if he believes it has any long-term affect on society.

"Forget it," I add, when he still hasn't replied after a minute.

"No, no. I refuse to forget it. I'm still thinking. Yes, I've got it. There are two affects. One is that we see half-truths, minor deceptions and manipulations as commonplace, not worthy of commentary. The other is that we accept the commercialisation of everything as a natural state of affairs, from logos on teeshirts to naming football grounds after products, from ads being 40% of content in a news-stand magazine to 20% of our viewing on TV."

"So you're admitting that the long term affects of advertising are bad for society?"

"Of course," he says, astounded yet again at my naiveté. "It's very harmful. Why do you think we all get paid so much?"

Curiously, we only intend to advertise the 200s life-extending product. There are no plans to advertise any of our brand new range of food and drink. This makes me suspicious and secretly I look into it. What I discover is more damning than I could possibly have hoped for. It becomes my most treasured knowledge, the ultimate weapon held in reserve for what I now recognise will be my final play.

My workload is so great that it begins to affect my health, despite my new-found youthfulness, but I'm perpetually reminded that hard work is necessary if I'm to give shareholder value. Perhaps the corporate item I have most difficulty with is this concept of shareholder value. I'm supposed to give shareholder value. Elliot has drilled this into me time after time. Shareholder value. Shareholder value. As far as I can see, shareholder value means it's fine for us to screw our employees and our customers and even ourselves as long we keep our shareholders happy. Elliot confirms this interpretation is correct. I note from the company records that he's the company's major shareholder.

It's a relief when the 7th finally comes around. Coaches and cabs arrive throughout the morning. Journalists from around the world are given their little red goodie bags containing a selection of gifts from Foxglove Laboratories, and are herded into the lunch tent with its 50 metre long bar. Not only do they get a goodie-bag, they also get a free tryout of the 200s program. My hired team of nurses takes care of the injections. Each injection should give its recipient at least one year of extra life. This little gimmick has made us the most popular press conference of the decade. We have seats for 1000 and many journalists are going to end up standing. Every TV news channel in Europe and North America has turned up, with no exceptions.

I've tried to bring some order to the arrangements on the terraces, so when it's question time I have an idea of the kind of journalist I'm dealing with, according to where they're sitting. On the extreme left hand side I've placed the rabid journalists from the mad dog papers, fond of foaming at the mouth, such as the *The Mail* and *News of the World*. Already they're asking me if there's an alternative word for telomerase, as it sounds "a bit too technical".

Over on the extreme right I've placed the pro-corporate journalists from the pro-corporation magazines, such as *Newsweek* and *Time*. These are perfectly happy with the word telomerase, and will also be very happy with anything positive I have to say about the free market, or any compliment I can make about American foreign policy, if I can possibly squeeze one in.

Between the two extremes I have the rest of the wolf pack, ready with their notebooks and dictation machines for the gems to trip off my lips. I'm nervous, I have to say it, but then I have a special reason why this should be so.

Happily, the hard work of the previous few days pays off and the event goes like clockwork. I take the podium facing out on to the crescent of terraces, which reminds me of the TV studios where I've been filmed, but this time our ceiling is the sky and we have no walls. Our studio is the world. I begin with the relatively mundane business of presenting our new range of drinks and foodstuffs. They're packaged in the lilac colour of the common foxglove flower, *digitalis purpurea*. It's a very peculiar range, as it concentrates on food and drinks with an element of genetic modification - usually containing tomatoes or maize corn, or using GM feed for animal products. It's all clearly labelled as genetically modified, from the corn-based cereals to the tinned meats. The press is not especially impressed, but then I'm not today's headline act, so it's no big deal.

It's Elliot they're waiting for. He's a grand showman. When I'm done he climbs to the podium in silence and plays our top 200s advert on a giant screen. It shows an evening in the life of a young couple. They're 25 and beautiful, with flawless skin and boundless energy. They meet friends and have a meal together, then go to a club, though it is a middle-aged ad-man's view of a club, as it appears to be buzzing at 10pm and our couple leave by midnight. Then they go home and begin what's clearly going to be a marathon session of sex. There's no nudity but plenty of giggling and movement under the bedclothes and nobody over the age of eleven can fail to understand what's happening. While the same noises continue, the scene changes to an arthritic old lady climbing from her wheelchair into bed. And finally our marvellous catchline arrives - "Would you like to live a long time?"

It's a film in miniature, with a beginning a middle and an end, and gets a great reception from our audience. We're selling youthfulness, not just a long lifespan, because ultimately that's what people want, and we're in the business of fulfilling wants, not selling products, so Elliot tells me. Personally, I think the transposition of the old lady with the catchline is confusing and makes it look like we're selling long-term infirmity, but I'm a lone voice in the wilderness. Aaron says it's good to have something questionable in an advert, as it makes it memorable. I have a feeling Aaron says whatever's necessary to keep Elliot happy and get the bills paid on time.

Elliot now tells the assembled multitudes about the reduced cost of the 200s program and how great it's going to be for society. Einstein gets a mention, and so does conservation – the one tiny element of Aaron's original idea that's made it through. Elliot doesn't actually give the new price of the 200s but instead teases his audience, getting close to naming the price without ever quite doing so. Finally he turns to a curtained area of the wall behind him. There are drapes and drawstrings in the manner of a memorial plaque. Elliot winds up the audience for a few seconds more and then pulls on the tasselled rope to draw the curtains back.

And there is the price. £10,000.

Immediately I can see which journalists are the haves and which are the have-nots. Our corporate friends on the right are perfectly happy, they'll be able to afford this. And our rabid bloodhounds on the left seem contented enough. Many of them are named columnists and earn ten times this amount each year. But in the middle, and especially amongst the younger ranks, there's some despair. They've got their freebie injections and these will be good for a year, but next year the price will be beyond them. If I'm not mistaken, many of them have stopped thinking about how they're going to write up today's events and are already wondering how they're going to earn the extra cash.

But one thing we've got across the entire terrace is full interest. Nobody is nodding off, nobody wishes they'd gone to the new BMW launch at Docklands Arena instead. We have their attention.

"Ok," I say. "Questions?"

Now I'm getting really nervous.

Elliot takes the first. He's asked by one of the younger journalists if there are plans to bring the price down further in the future. He replies that there's a chance, especially if some of the richer countries relax their restrictions on genetic research, which would bring down Foxglove's costs. This is pretty much nonsense, but the questioner has no way of knowing that and will probably pass it on to a few million people.

I field the second question. What do we expect the announcement to do to our share price? Well of course this isn't something on which we can comment, I say, but we would be surprised if it went down. There is a ripple of polite laughter.

And here comes the big one.

"It seems odd," says Fiona Wright, a financial journalist with a small magazine called Scotland Now, "that you're spending so much money on advertising the new price 200s program, but nothing at all on your range of GM food and drink. Surely it would make more sense the other way round?"

I've primed Fiona with this question, and although my mouth feels dry I think I'm ready to give the explosive answer.

"It makes perfect sense, and here's why. When we give you a 200s injection, we don't just put telomerase in the syringe, we also add a gene, a very small gene that gets absorbed in your DNA, like a little bit of spyware that comes with an Internet download and finishes up on your computer. And this extra gene makes you like our GM food. Imagine that! No advertising budget, we don't even have to make the food tasty, you'll love it anyway. Once you've had that first injection and got the gene you'll spend the rest of your life eating any old crap that we can turn out. Isn't that just the best marketing you've ever come across? It's not even illegal, because the law is way behind on genetics. In the long term it's going to make Foxglove the richest company in the world. We're going to be bigger than General Motors and Microsoft combined. We're going to alter everybody's genes and make a fortune from it."

There. It's done. This is the culmination of my work here in the other world. I've given the world's press the ammunition it needs to take Foxglove apart, to unseat Elliot Harmon from his throne and hopefully take Joe Progress with him.

My revelation is greeted with silence. With mounting horror I realise it's not the silence of incomprehension and disgust, it's the silence of awe.

"That's brilliant," says a voice from the pro-corporate side.

On the opposite side, the mad dogs doze peacefully. "Your grub's great," says one, in response to my desperate, manic stare. Perhaps he's a headline writer.

"Shit!" I say. I'm done for. I've fired my broadside and the shells have turned out to be blanks. Every one of these journalists should now be yelling, pointing accusing fingers, showing us the tiny puncture marks from their injections and screaming for their lawyers, shouting bloodthirsty copy down their mobile phones. The terraces should be a chaos of moving bodies.

"Steady on," says a friendly voice from the BBC, in response to my swearing.

"Can we get shares?" asks a lady from the centre. "They're going to be worth a fortune."

"You'll find some in your goodie bags, in the breakfast cereal packs," says Elliot, from somewhere close by. I've lost my judgement of distance and space, as well as my judgement of what will cause outrage. I daren't look at Elliot.

Everybody is waiting expectantly to see what I have to say next. But I've nothing more to say. I've reached the end of my script. My one chance to change everything here on Earth and in heaven has been and gone. I've blown it. I am a complete idiot. I want the ground to swallow me up.

"Can we ask where you get your telomerase from?" asks a lady from the Sydney Evening Herald. "Only there are rumours of human embryo farms in China, lines of test tubes with fertilized human eggs inside them and people sucking out telomerase with pipettes."

Really. And strips of wire with sparks flying between them in the background, no doubt. But the question brings me back to reality. Maybe I can escape from this. Maybe I can pretend nothing happened, that I just skated close to the edge and got away with it.

"I'm afraid the answer is more mundane. We extract our telomerase from waste products that have no other use. The highest concentration of telomerase is found in the most vibrant form of human growth, which is the malignant tumour. So that's where we get ours, from the by-products of surgery."

"You mean, from surgically-removed human cancers?"

"That's right. Mainly from black people in the third-world."

The entire terrace seems to rise as one, and it's not an ovation of thanks. Everybody is shouting at once. The mobile phones are out. The corporate journos to our right are ordering up helicopter-borne squadrons of no-win no-fee lawyers. The rabid dogs to our left are taking off their jackets, rolling up their sleeves and climbing on to the podium. Who says the pen is mightier than the sword?

I'm still by the microphone and perhaps I should be explaining that the procedure is perfectly safe and we're just extracting the one chemical, surely this is a perfect example of gaining something of great value from something otherwise valueless, but I doubt that anybody is going to listen, and actually – do I want them to listen? Anyway, I wouldn't get to complete the explanation because in about five seconds I'm going to be lynched.

Foxglove security guards arrive in force and they manage to get a cordon around us before we're attacked. As a unit, we shuffle backwards off the stage area and through a rear door where Elliot and I are bundled into a security van and driven off rapidly to the main Foxglove building.

"Congratulations," says Elliot. "First the pig, now you. I wouldn't have thought you could fool me, but you did." I've never heard him sound so bitter.

I try innocence. After all, I really didn't know what I was doing. "I think I still have a lot to learn."

"On the contrary. It's me who needs to go back to his schoolbooks, and it looks like I'll get the chance. But there is one final experience that I'd like us to share together. Let me show you."

I'm not sure that I want to go along, but we're still in the company of many Foxglove security guards and it looks like I don't have a choice. As a group we disembark from the van and make our way into the heart of the Foxglove complex, along the corridors with their small square windows and scientific apparatus inside, into the area that smells of animals, until we reach the sheep pen that was my temporary home for a few minutes when I sneaked around here many days ago. The sheep with one head and three backsides is busy eating. The fluorescent sheep with the stinging fleece is there too, looking harmless in strong light. Elliot fiddles with some machinery, plugging it into the compressed air line that crosses the pen.

"This is hardly the time for shearing," I suggest.

Elliot feeds ball bearings into a Perspex tube. "I agree."

When the tube is full, he loads it into the device connected to the airline, which I now recognise looks like a machine-pistol. He lifts the gun, points it at the fluorescent sheep, and fires a ball bearing into its skull, killing it instantly.

"The Pan product is discontinued," he says, turning on me and raising the slaughterhouse gun.

"Now hold on a minute," I say, holding a hand in front of the pistol in useless defence.

I've watched enough Hollywood films to expect a gloating speech, a justification, but I get none. The gun jerks. I feel an impact in my chest that stops my breath, like a scaffolding pole has been inserted there. I smell blood and soil. Odd, but it's unquestionably soil. I begin to go down. A second tube enters my head, cracking my skull on the way in. I hear the cracking noise. And then darkness.

Chapter 16

It's difficult to tell which one of us is more surprised, Joe Progress or me. He inspects me like I'm a brand new sculpture

"You're not dreaming," he says.

"No, I've just been killed."

"Well, that's one way of getting back."

And now I'm sure which one of us is more surprised. It's me. I'm standing at the bar in The George and Dragon, the pub in heaven that Buddha led me past a long time ago, and I have a giant Margarita in my hand and I haven't a clue how I got here, apart from the lethal assistance of Elliot Harmon, but the rest is a blur.

The bar is heaving. Father Christmas is playing pool against Vishnu, and although they're well known as a pair I've never seen either of them here before. Rapunzel is at a table with Einstein, probably discussing unified field theory, as I've heard she has a few ideas on the subject. I can see Homer, Theseus and St George himself. For a couple of seconds I wonder if this party is for my benefit, to celebrate my return to heaven, but my adventures on Earth have left me less naïve than I once was and the delusion doesn't last for long. In any case we have the wrong selection of gods for that. No Hector, no Achilles, no Uncle Bacchus. A few feet to my left sits the God of Fashionable Trainers, who's hardly likely to attend anything for my benefit. His hoodie is up and he's furiously tapping at the tiny keyboard of his mobile phone. Mammon, Mercedes and Quetzalcoatl are on stools at the bar. It's many years since I last saw Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec plumed serpent. He's well known as being part of Joe Progress's crew, one of the backroom boys in the Workshop of All Invention. He doesn't look much like a plumed serpent, having broad body features and a large and somehow rectangular head with massive eyes, but he has the aggressive attitude of a snake and wears beads in his hair in a way that might suggest a plume.

Mammon and Mercedes look especially happy. Mammon is actually smiling from time to time, though it's not a pleasant smile and makes me wonder if we might find a heap of tortured cats in a nearby yard. Mercedes throws her head back and laughs joyfully between pulls on a series of cigarettes.

"I keep to my deals," Progress tells me. "What was it? No more genetically modified organisms in your neck of the woods. That was it, wasn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

Yet another god approaches Progress to shake his hand and congratulate him. I think I have some idea what's going on here, and I don't like it. Above the hubbub of

indeterminate chatter I can hear the sound of David Bowie's Heroes. "We can be heroes, just for one day."

Dreams. I have dreams or vague memories circling inside my head like debris after a tornado. I'm walking along half a mile of corridors in a dull concrete building with thousands of other-worlders, many of them old. There are window-like openings in the walls but nothing distinct on the other side of the windows. We're all nude, which doesn't bother me in the slightest but seems to disturb my companions, who try to cover themselves with their hands and look around at each other as if something important is riding on how many people see them undressed. Our corridor opens up into a great hall with a single line of desks across it. At each desk is a figure of authority, and we have to join one of these lines and take our turn at answering questions.

Reality intervenes. My turn at the desk is interrupted by somebody snatching my Margarita from my hand and placing it on The George's bar. I'm about to protest when I'm enveloped in a bear-hug that squeezes the breath out of me. It's Buddha.

"Pan, Pan, Pan! What happened? Where the hell have you been my munchkin?"

He lifts me off the ground, twirls me round 360 degrees, puts me down and ruffles my hair, which is a very annoying thing for him to do, and requires skill to avoid the horns, but I let it pass.

"Elliot Harmon killed me," I tell him.

"Yes, I know that. But where have you been since? I've been looking for you for ages."

"How long have you been looking for me?"

"At least a day."

"Hmmm. It looks like I'm missing a day."

Buddha tells me what's happened since Elliot Harmon killed me. The press conference certainly drew plenty of coverage, almost all of it negative. Foxglove Laboratories lost two thirds of its share valuation in one day. Elliot Harmon came on TV personally to say I'd taken my own life using the slaughterhouse gun in my sheep pen, which pretty much everybody believed, apart from Buddha and John Frum.

The 200s program was pilloried by newscasters throughout the world, changing public perception and having great influence on the heavenly election that followed a day later. Unfortunately, the public at large associated the 200s program with Doctor Longlife, not with Joe Progress, so faith in the Doc was destroyed and Joe Progress romped home.

"What!"

Joe Progress is still next to me, listening to Buddha's explanation. I turn on him.

"You can't get away with that! You lied. You told me the 200s was your invention."

"No, I've been very careful never to say that. I told you that Foxglove takes most of the inventions from Q and myself and introduces them to the other world. You made the assumption this included the 200s. But it didn't. The 200s program was developed by the Doc."

No wonder Progress was so keen for me to go down to mortal Earth and interfere! I've been doing his work for him. Buddha was right, I'm not cut out for politics. I've been played like a fool.

"Things worked out very well," says Progress. "Not only did I get re-elected, but we also managed to kill off the 200s program. I've always been dead against it, and now it'll be decades before anybody dares to bring it up again."

To be fair to Joe Progress he doesn't say these words in a gleeful way that I might find offensive, more like a boss congratulating an underling, as if we're both on the same side and things have worked out very well for both of us. I was never a great fan of the 200s program myself, so I don't mourn its loss, but it puzzles me that Joe Progress was also set firmly against it. How can a god who is at the very forefront of invention and change take a strong dislike to the latest scientific development? Surely there's some paradox here?

My muddled head returns to vague memories, to the great concrete hall with the line of desks. I'm standing in front of a desk and the questions begin.

–What is your religion?

–I don't have a religion, I am a religion. I'm the god Pan.

–Please state the good things you have done in your life, and the bad things, and you will be judged according to the rules of 'religion-I'm-the-god-Pan'.

My questioner wears a peaked cap that shades his face. I lean closer to take a look. The other-worlders at nearby desks seem petrified and wouldn't dare do such a thing, but I'm suspicious.

–You're a machine! You're an automaton!

–Judgement complete. Please take the corridor to the right.

I join the stream of other-worlders entering the right hand corridor. Its walls are pink and featureless and it has sharp bends. I haven't gone far when I'm plucked from the crowd by two uniformed guards.

–Are you the one who claims to be Pan?

–That's me.

–He certainly looks like Pan.

I'm taken out of the corridor to an office where I get to meet a real figure of authority rather than a machine.

–You say you're Pan?

–That's right.

–We already have a Pan in heaven. We don't need two.

–I think you'll find the one you thought was in heaven is missing. We're one and the same.

–Really? If you're Pan then what's your surname?

–Sinoeis.

I wait a few seconds.

–Aren't you going to ask me how to spell that?

–In my own time.

Back in the bar in heaven, Buddha is shaking me. "Pan? Pan? What's wrong with you?"

My head comes back to The George. "I think... I think I have some idea where my missing day went. Do we have something in heaven that's like an arrivals hall for other-worlders who reach the end of their mortal life?"

Buddha gives me a puzzled look.

Joe Progress answers the question without looking at me directly, "If we do, then it's not something we talk about."

I'm desperately trying to hold on to this memory, because I feel it's an important memory and I want to keep it, yet it's behaving like a dream. It's passed

through my mind just once, and now it refuses to be remembered again. I can sense it slipping away. And now it's almost gone. I have a big hall, a line of fuzzy desks, a flash of pink and nothing more.

Joe Progress, I sense, knows this has happened.

"Well, I must say you're looking well, especially for somebody who's dead," says Buddha, more to break the hiatus than for the value of the observation.

"Thank you."

"You look a thousand years younger," says Progress.

I don't thank him, but that's about as rude as I intend to be. I should hate him for manipulating me so expertly, but, as Buddha once said, I'm a lazy bastard, and hatred is an emotion that requires dedication and a great deal of energy.

"How did you get back to heaven?" I ask Buddha. My mind is very mixed up. I should have asked this the moment I saw him.

"The Axis Mundi is back in position at the atheist society," he tells me.

"Whoever moved it returned it." He glances at Mercedes, but doesn't say her name.

"John Frum is still in the other world. He's got a new Argos catalogue."

Noah arrives to pay his respects to the freshly re-elected president of heaven. He is the oldest god here. He hugs Buddha briefly and nods a greeting at me.

"Ah, Noah," says Progress, "there's something I've been meaning to ask you. What's the Ark made of?"

"Wood," says Noah. This isn't a difficult question. I suspect Progress already knew the answer. It's like asking Noah if he's interested in animals and sailing.

"You know, there's an acute shortage of wood," says Progress. "And the Ark must be very difficult to maintain and keep waterproof, especially with it being so old. I have a suggestion. How would you like a new Ark made of steel or glass-reinforced plastic? A straight exchange for the old one."

"No thanks. I'm very happy with the Ark as it is. "

"But I'd really love to have all that wood," says Progress, "It would come in useful for my new supermarket project. I could offer you a brand new steel ferry in exchange."

"Make it a ro-ro," says Mercedes, turning towards us to deliver these few words and then going back to her conversation with Mammon and Quatzalcoatl.

"I do not want a steel ferry," protests Noah. "I like the ark as it is!"

"Gas turbine engines, twin propellers, bow thrusters, satellite navigation," offers Progress. "That's a lot better than just drifting around hoping for the best."

"The ark is guided by a higher power," says Noah. "And I'm too long in the tooth to start using all this fancy technology. I've said this before and I'll say it again – I'm far too old to change the way I do things."

"I was thinking of a compromise," says Progress. "Maybe you'd be prepared to part with the upper structure of the ark, the top deck, roof, walls, and in return I'll give you a new topside in steel or GRP, and stop sending you pairs of transgenic animals."

"Transgenic?" says Noah. "You mean those abominations like the crocorabbit and the frog-shark? Oops!" He holds his hand to his mouth.

"I'd be happy to make that deal," says Progress.

Whether Noah accepts or declines is lost on me, because my head has gone on one of its journeys again. One thing I'll say for my recent adventures is that I've changed from being an unthinking layabout into a much more perceptive being. I doubt that Joe Progress could fool me into blindly doing his work a second time. I've

just worked out why he was against the 200s program, and it's almost as interesting as my earlier revelation concerning the collective imagination.

Here's the way it comes to me. Noah is complaining that he's too old to change his ways, and indeed I can't see him picking up the instruction manual for a satellite navigation system or a bow-thruster. Then I wonder how keen I'd be on these things myself. I suspect I might cope with the bow-thruster but I'd have some trouble with satellite navigation. And who in our present company would easily deal with both? Look no further than the god of Fashionable Trainers, who must surely have calloused thumbs and failing eyesight by now, he's so busy with his mobile phone and it's so damned small. But he's an expert with it and I'm sure he would soon become an expert with anything else technical that came his way. Indeed, if he was in charge of the Ark he would demand that it had satellite navigation and bow-thrusters.

And what's the difference between us, what is it that determines these attitudes to items new? The answer is age. Noah is ancient and he can't cope with the new. The god of Fashionable Trainers welcomes the new with open arms, and I'm somewhere between the two of them both in age and attitude.

And this is why Joe Progress doesn't want the other-worlders living to 200 years old. They'd all become Noahs. Not in a literal sense, of course, but far too many of them would take on Noah-like attitudes. Joe Progress would send down his latest invention and ninety percent of the population would say – No, I've been around too long to start changing my ways now.

In a larger sense, progress with a small p relies on youth, it relies on youthful attitudes. The old don't drive progress, they inhibit it. Joe needs the other world to be full of young people if he's going to prosper. The old are not his friends.

And in a broader sense still, this is why the other-worlders die. They have to die for their society as a whole to progress. If they stop dying, their society will stagnate, or at least move forward at a snail's pace. The old tend to be richer than the young, and more powerful. The only way to get them to stand aside and make way for the new generation is mortality.

See how slowly things move forward here in heaven? The heavyweight gods are thousands of years old. A few lightweights pop up, last a few generations and are gone. And nothing much changes. Joe has his work cut out even trying to get us to drive rather than walk, or to shop in supermarkets. He's far more successful down in the other world, because they have shorter lifespans.

Death and progress go hand in hand.

Chapter 17

On the shelves in the supermarket – and I think it's the same supermarket where I found Joe Progress – I find genetic pills. They're tiny but the packs are large, like those that hold garden seeds, as otherwise there wouldn't be enough space for all the marketing information. Each pack makes its promise of fantastic genetic change for the other-worlder who buys it, an improvement in intelligence, a change in hair colour. The old bleach-in-a-bottle aisle of the supermarket is deserted now, instead there's a shelf of genetic pills for intelligence, a shelf for muscle and athleticism, the

top shelf for sexual stamina, another for hair colour, eye colour, even extra height, conveniently placed lower down. Different brands make outrageous claims and warn against the horrors of cheap competitors.

Not that any of the punters here are in need of gene therapy. All the shoppers I can see look perfect. They have fantastic cheekbones, piercing eyes, hair that grows to a perfect length then stops. I feel very out of place with my straggly beard and hoofs, until finally I see a cow with a human face wandering down the aisle and I realise with relief that I'm dreaming.

By the time I get to the checkout, every shopper is a cow with a human face, and every checkout is a milking machine. Coins and banknotes flow down the clear plastic pipes and into the cashiers' tanks. All the cashiers, I notice, have goats legs.

I look in my own basket and find that I've chosen two genetic pill packs, one for growing larger horns, in the blue packaging of the Gene Fairy brand, and one for sexual stamina, in the red packaging of the Mammon brand. There's even a picture of his ugly mug on the front, as some perverse kind of product endorsement.

Since I learned Buddha's directed dreaming technique my dreams have taken on more significance. Is this one trying to tell me something?

I doubt that's it's to do with Mammon's pills. I've been back in heaven a few days and Echo has already discovered that my new-found youthfulness isn't superficial.

All in all, I'm quite happy with my adventure in the other world. I may have lost the ultimate battle of unseating Joe Progress, but I'm a lot wiser, full of energy, and best of all Joe Progress kept to his word and my favourite woodland in heaven is now free of walking fruits and winged pigs. Though I did like Radius. I'm told he flew from the orchard at Foxglove to the New Forest, where he took up with a tribe of wild boar and is mixing genes in the traditional way. The current generation of other-worlders might find the results disturbing. But the generation after, with its perfect teeth and eyes and hair and extended lifespans, will find nothing strange about pigs that can fly.