

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 HEAVENs 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.