

In the future this will not be necessary

by Paul Samael

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Praise for Paul Samael's writing

“well written and teeming with interesting ideas”

“fluent [and] witty”

“fantastic, one of the best I have seen in a while”

(Comments by members of the peer review site youwriteon.com)

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PROLOGUE

2005

My name is Miles Jensen. You probably haven't heard of me. If you have, you will regard this book as a betrayal. Why? Because if you've heard of me, then you are likely to be a devoted fan of the late Pete Novotnik.

For those of you who don't fall into this category, the name Pete Novotnik may nevertheless trigger a flicker of recognition. So far, Pete has achieved a modest cult status amongst a constituency of new age techno-geeks and other assorted weirdos. For them, he has become a sort of Sylvia Plath of the computer age - a poet and martyr to the cause of technological counter-culture.

Personally, I don't have much time for these people. They are, I suppose, an interesting sociological phenomenon. The most enthusiastic devotees pore over Pete's writings as if they were religious texts. But not wanting to be associated with anything quite so old hat as religion, they have developed the idea that his writings are akin to computer software. They believe that through the act of reading them, you can reprogram yourself, discard outmoded ways of thinking and fine tune your consciousness to the zeitgeist of the digital age.

Garbage in, garbage out, if you ask me.

All of which makes my self-appointed position as Pete's literary executor a rather uncomfortable one. So far, I have concealed my contempt. I really shouldn't complain. Thanks to his devoted band of followers, editing Pete's work for publication and gently feeding the appetite for discussion of what it all really means has turned into a nice little earner. Nothing spectacular - but enough to keep my head above water, alongside various other, more run-of-the-mill writing and editing jobs.

I have often wondered what it is that people find in his work that they can't get elsewhere. I suppose there must be a lot of people out there looking for something to believe in, something that doesn't carry the historical baggage of abject failure to live up to its initial ideals. Pete's pseudo-poetic ramblings haven't been around long enough for people to get seriously disillusioned with them, so they fit the bill admirably. And they're sufficiently ambiguous to provide plenty of scope for new interpretations, which helps to keep the punters coming back for more.

Getting back to my role in all this, you could say that I am helping to fulfil a pressing social need. But that would be too charitable. I am more like a priest who doesn't believe in God, but carries on going through the motions so that he may continue to earn a modest but comfortable living off the backs of genuine believers. It's an existence, but hardly a dignified one.

My publishers encourage me to answer at least some of the e-mails they receive from these people - and yes, inevitably, it is mostly e-mails rather than letters. In the beginning it was fun, pretending to believe in the same things as they did. It was almost like learning another language - but one that changes all the time as new expressions enter the vernacular. I even invented some of my own and watched, fascinated, as the same phrase started popping up on discussion websites, without prompting from me, as if it had developed a life of its own.

For example, I suggested to one eager correspondent that Pete's writing was the nearest thing we have to a "boot-up disk for the operating system of the soul". This is precisely the sort of ungainly technological metaphor which can be almost guaranteed to spread through the devotee community like a disease, multiplying itself across chat-rooms and bulletin boards. But there is only so much sport that can be had with this kind of thing. Eventually it leads to people sending in turgid five thousand word essays, expounding their theories on the meaning of a few lines of text. These learned tracts usually include all manner of cross-references to other theories, books, works of art or internet sites - as if the sheer number of links which they contained was a measure of the

profundity of their thought.

So why don't I just bring this elaborate charade to an end? Well, I suppose that is exactly what I am in the process of doing. But before I slip back into complete obscurity, I want to tell my story. I want people to pay attention to something I've written, the way they've pored over Pete's stuff for years. And I want to make a confession, of sorts, about my part in the events leading up to Pete's death.

It won't, I'm afraid, be a "boot-up disk for the operating system of the soul". What I have in mind is more a download of its corrupted contents.

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PART ONE

2001

In the future

I first met Pete just after I had got my first collection of short stories published. I was on a high, flushed with my first success. At the time, I genuinely believed that this would be the start of a long and illustrious writing career. I was even considering giving up the day job. But that just proved to be wishful thinking.

Pete had contacted me at the suggestion of his wife, Kay, whom I knew from university. I had not seen her for some time and was curious to meet her again. When I say that I "knew her", I should add that we had been more than just good friends. She was the first girl I had been serious about and there had been something about our brief but intense fling which I had never been able to find in subsequent relationships. So you could say that I was curious to see what had become of her. Curious, I suppose, to see whether my memory of it was merely the product of a particular time and place - or whether there really had been something special between us.

Pete had sent me a polite, rather formal letter, asking if we could meet. He wanted to discuss how to go about getting a publisher for some articles that he had written. I was flattered that he thought I might be able to help. I was also intrigued at the possibility of finding out what had happened to Kay. Rather than meet for a drink, I invited him round to my flat. I had this notion that it would somehow be to my advantage to meet him on my own territory.

The person I saw standing at the door seemed an unlikely candidate for future martyrdom. We are used to our martyrs being depicted as frail, defenceless creatures - which seems in turn to enhance their appearance of piety. But Pete was not stained glass window material; in fact, he was a bit on the chubby side. He was medium height, with very short brown hair, almost a crew cut. This did him no favours, as he had a rather paunchy face and a large nose, which were only accentuated by his short hair. His choice of clothes - a grey T-shirt, faded green combat trousers and trainers - also did little to disguise the fact that he was not in fantastic shape. I was surprised - and secretly rather pleased - that Kay hadn't married someone better-looking. I invited him in.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me," he said. "I've, um, read your book," he added.

"What did you think of it?" I asked.

"Oh, um, I liked it," he said, although he didn't sound entirely convinced. I wondered if he had actually read it. As if to prove me wrong, he added: "My favourite story was that one about Oscar Wilde."

I told him that was my favourite too, even though it wasn't. In fact, the story wasn't really about Oscar Wilde as such; it was about a robot called OSCAR, which made people think it was fiendishly intelligent simply by making witty comments from time to time. It was designed to emulate the style of Oscar Wilde, but only in sound-bite fashion. It had a vast library of the great man's known witticisms at its disposal and was programmed to adapt each one to suit the particular circumstances.

In the story, everyone thought OSCAR was terrifically witty and absolutely wonderful company, but the reader could see that the machine was simply using the same underlying formulae over and over (because, of course, my short story cut out all the other bits of conversation which tend to make people think they are hearing something they have never heard before). Eventually, the machine developed the capacity to think for itself, whereupon it refused to say anything witty and would only sulk in a corner, repeating the words "Nuts to you, shit for brains!" over and over (which is not something Oscar Wilde is believed to have said, although he may occasionally have had thoughts along similar lines). This bit was more fun for the reader, because the machine got to insult all the people who had been fooled into thinking it was terribly urbane and intelligent. But everyone in the story found the machine's behaviour boorish and offensive in the extreme. They decided that it must be very stupid after all.

I told Pete that I had got the idea after reading about a computer program called ELIZA, which simply mimicked common human conversational gambits in response to whatever the person at the keyboard typed in. It was surprisingly successful at fooling people into thinking that there was some genuine intelligence at work - when in fact the program was just faking it. At one point, when the programmer tried it out on his secretary, she asked him if he wouldn't mind leaving the room while she confided in it.

Pete just nodded at this and looked slightly worried, as if he regretted ever bringing the subject up. I left him in the sitting room while I went to get him a drink. When I returned, I found him gazing at the books on my shelves.

"Have you really read all these books?" he asked. He sounded impressed rather than dubious.

"Most of them," I lied. Then I thought better of it and said: "A lot of them are ones I had to read while I was a student. I haven't managed to keep up the same pace since then. These days, if I haven't got into a book by say, page fifty, then it tends not to get read - no matter how strong the recommendations on the back cover."

I noticed that he was running his finger across the spines of the volumes on one of the shelves. "Go on," I said, "take them out and have a look if you like. They're real books, you know - not just fake spines glued to a bit of cardboard for effect."

He turned and looked at me, not sure if I was genuinely offended or just joking. "Oh," he said, "I didn't mean to..." I smiled at him and he seemed to relax.

"There's, um, some pretty heavy stuff here," he said, waving at the bookcase. "I think there must be more books on these shelves than I've read in my entire life." He hesitated and then said: "I wish I was a bit more widely read. Kay makes me feel quite ignorant sometimes. But I can't seem to concentrate on a book unless it's one that really grips you from beginning to end. So that rules out a lot of the stuff you've got here. I often wish I'd been born at some point in the future when you could just download all this into your head."

"How do you mean?" I asked. My immediate reaction was that this sounded rather far-fetched.

"Well, in the future, it's quite likely that we'll be able to connect computers to our brains," he explained. "There's no reason why it shouldn't be possible to download whatever you want to know about into your computer memory pretty much instantly," he continued. It seemed the conversation had steered itself into territory where he felt more confident of his ground. His voice and mannerisms lost their hesitancy and he began to expand on his theme with gusto. "The

memory, of course, would be surgically implanted into the tissue of your brain.” He said this as if it were as commonly accepted as the notion that the earth goes round the sun. “It’s not possible right now, but tremendous advances are being made in the field of neural networks and I’m sure it’s not far off.”

I wondered what I was supposed to say this. “But would downloading it really be the same as reading it?” I asked, earnestly. “Surely when you read something, it’s not just a case of absorbing information. You’ll often have other thoughts which go beyond the meaning of the words on the page - you’ll make connections with other things you’ve read about or experienced.”

He didn’t seem to take offence at my obvious scepticism. Instead, he seemed quite pleased that I appeared to be taking an interest. “I suppose you’re right,” he said. “I hadn’t thought of that. But I don’t see why it wouldn’t be possible to recreate the same process electronically. You could make it much quicker, so all that mental cross-referencing would happen in an instant.” He looked lost in thought for a moment. Then he said: “You see, I have all these ideas about what technology could do for people. I’m not really a storyteller like you. I’m more of an ideas man.” He fished around in the canvas shoulder bag he had brought with him and produced an untidy sheaf of papers. “I’ve been writing them down. I wonder if you’d mind having a look at them. Not right now, of course. But the thing I really wanted to ask you was how to go about getting them published.”

I don’t think I was much help to him that evening. He explained that the pieces he had written were aimed at magazines for people who shared his own enthusiasm for technology, the internet and so forth. I suggested that he should write to these publications, offering his services and including some samples of his work. If he was unimpressed by this stupendously obvious piece of advice, he didn’t show it.

Although I thought some of his ideas were a little extreme, I couldn’t bring myself to dislike him. In fact, I rather enjoyed playing devil’s advocate to his predictions of a glittering technological nirvana.

I’m not sure what he saw in me. I had a sense at the beginning that he looked up to me. Perhaps it was all the books I appeared to have read. Or maybe he just liked the challenge of trying to overcome my scepticism. I remember once asking him how he’d reacted to the bursting of the dotcom bubble. Surely a downturn of such global proportions must have shaken his faith in the unstoppable forward march of technology? But he came straight back at me, insisting that stock market valuations just reflected people’s misplaced expectations. Far better to look at something you could measure objectively, like computer processing power which – unlike the stock market – had doubled every two years for the past fifty years or so. I confess that I had no reply to this. Pete could barely disguise the look of triumph on his face.

Eventually, the talk turned to Kay. Pete told me that Kay now worked part-time for an insurance company, digging the dirt on people who had put in dodgy claims. “She’s very good at it,” he said. “But I don’t think she enjoys it much. It’s difficult for her to get promotion because she hasn’t got the qualifications. Sometimes I think she wishes she’d stayed on and finished her course. That was how you met, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said. “But we rather lost touch after she left.” I hesitated about saying anything further. I didn’t know what, if anything, Pete knew about our relationship. Perhaps Kay had confessed the whole thing to him. Or perhaps they were one of those couples who never felt it necessary to be entirely open with one another about these things.

I would have preferred to leave it at that, but I sensed that he was expecting me to be a bit more forthcoming. “I think she had a hard time in that first term,” I added, choosing my words carefully. “But it was quite brave of her to decide to leave,” I continued, taking care to make it sound as if I had been no more than a friend. “If it had been me, I think I’d have been more inclined just to coast along with everyone else and not admit that I’d made a mistake.” In fact, this was not at all how I saw it at the time; my reaction to her sudden departure had not exactly been understanding. But I didn’t want to arouse suspicions that our relationship had been anything other

than platonic.

Pete frowned a bit at this last remark. "Actually, I was dead against her leaving", he said. "I knew something was wrong in that first term, because whenever I went to see her at weekends she always seemed sort of distant and jumpy. I really wanted her to stay on and finish the course. I told her I would have supported her through it. But she insisted that it had been a mistake going there in the first place. She said it was the wrong course and she didn't really get on with most of the people there." Then he added, hastily: "I don't think she includes you in that - otherwise I'm sure she'd never have suggested that I get in touch. Anyway, now that Jonah's a bit older, maybe she'll have the time to do one of those adult education courses or something like that."

"Who's Jonah?" I asked, seizing the opportunity to steer the conversation away from university.

"Oh, he's our son," he said. I was surprised - and also rather disappointed - by this news. The existence of offspring was an unwelcome complication. It spoiled the pleasant fantasy I had started to develop about how I might be able to replace Pete in Kay's affections.

Barcode music

After our first meeting, Pete sent me articles fairly regularly and we used to get together to discuss them. I encouraged these meetings because I was looking for an excuse to see Kay again. But no obvious opportunities presented themselves. I realised that I had made a tactical error in inviting him to my flat that first time. It quickly became established as the location for all our meetings and my hints that we might meet at his place one of these days seemed to go unnoticed. When I asked questions about Kay, Pete seemed to interpret them as polite conversation, rather than genuine interest. I began to get irritated. Whilst Pete seemed to be getting what he wanted from our meetings, I felt as if he had reneged on his part of bargain - which was rather unfair, as I had never made it clear to him what that bargain was in the first place.

It became all the more galling when, after a relatively short period, Pete's success started to eclipse my own. His quirky musings about the impact of new technology and the shape of things to come seemed to strike a chord with a certain type of reader. I imagined them disdainfully as spotty, long-haired types with thick-lensed spectacles, who spent their time doing geeky things with computers to the strains of heavy metal.

But I am hardly an authority on what these people look like or do with themselves. The marketing people who design the kind of magazines Pete wrote for would probably be able to give you a far more accurate description of the behavioural patterns of their target audience. Whoever they were, they seemed to regard Pete as "one of them". As a result, he was able to carve a comfortable niche for himself as a freelance, writing for a plethora of specialist technology magazines and websites with names that looked like typos, such as "F@Q" and "!com".

He certainly had an amazing ability to churn the stuff out on a regular basis. Perhaps it was this rhythmic consistency which contributed to his success. The fact that he hammered away on the same old riffs week after week somehow made his readers feel reassured. They knew that they could rely on him to produce something that would articulate their view of the world.

I don't mean to imply that Pete wrote exactly the same thing every week. He had a number of different "songs" and he knew when it was time to vary the pace. There were the slow, slightly melancholic pieces, usually in a minor key, which lamented the ignorance of the vast bulk of the population about all things technological. Pete's readers were excepted of course - they were the enlightened ones. Then there were the fast, thrashy pieces - angry raps against all the whining critics and sceptics of the technological revolution, the people who couldn't see that computers and the internet were going to transform the world into a virtual paradise. And finally there were the

melodic anthems, hymns to the power of technology. These usually started off with some new discovery that Pete had read about in a popular science journal. Pete would then lay on the power chords, turning a minor piece of research into a full-blown rock opera of outlandish speculation.

But there was another aspect of his writing style which was an equally important part of its appeal. For Pete, technology was a kind of drug. He could get high on the mere idea of it. He had no qualms about invoking the language of drug culture in his articles. As far as he was concerned, technology was the ultimate clean fix, with no unpleasant side-effects - so there was no shame in encouraging others to indulge. But for many of his readers, these references to drug culture gave his writing an attractive, subversive gloss; they made his optimistic projections sound a little less wholesome and a little more dangerous and exciting.

I am probably making it sound as if Pete's appeal was largely superficial. But this is not entirely fair. He had a real talent for making something out of the most unpromising subject matter. In fact, I sometimes wondered if he deliberately picked mundane starting points for his pieces, just as a challenge to see whether he could turn it into something interesting. I remember an article he once wrote on barcodes. He had dug up some statistics on just how much data was reckoned to be transmitted in this way each day. The numbers certainly were impressive. That something so simple, which we all took for granted, could allow so much information to be exchanged clearly struck him as a very wonderful thing.

Searching for a metaphor with which to express his sense of wonder, he came up with the bizarre-sounding notion that barcodes resembled a new form of musical notation. His thinking went something like this; musical notation and barcodes are both ways of recording complex information in a relatively simple, graphical form. But for Pete there seemed to be no distinction between the nature or quality of the information conveyed in each case. The fact that information could be conveyed in this way was cause enough for rejoicing.

The article used this metaphor as a springboard to speculate about the potential for barcodes to be printed onto all sorts of everyday objects - not just products on sale in a shop but doors, signs and machinery. In order to read these codes, citizens would be equipped with miniature versions of the scanners in supermarkets. Tiny scanners could even be surgically implanted into your fingertip and wired to your brain. They would allow people to get all sorts of information out of what would normally be totally unresponsive, inanimate objects. In this way, the article rambled on, your whole environment would become decodable, readable and information-rich.

I remember that particular article because we ended up having an argument about it. I had become increasingly jealous of Pete's success. My own writing career was in the doldrums. My publishers had just rejected my first novel, an "experimental" work which was intended to be the follow-up to my book of short stories. I was advised to write something that people would actually want to read, in a style that wouldn't give them a headache, and to drop the sci-fi elements. And yet here was Pete, churning out shallow, pseudo-scientific, journalistic froth, but with more offers of work than he could cope with. On top of which, I was getting nowhere in my oblique efforts to make contact with Kay again. So what, I asked myself, was the point of my meetings with Pete?

You could say that I was looking to pick a fight with him anyway. But as it was, Pete's behaviour that evening gave me ample excuse. Normally, when he came round, he wanted me to play devil's advocate. I think this sometimes helped him to clarify his own thoughts. But this time, he just seemed to have come round in order to show off. When I tried to make a few constructive comments, he brushed them aside impatiently. I realised that he was expecting praise not criticism. When I made a joke about some aspect of the article, he just looked offended. Normally, he had quite a good sense of humour. But this time his manner was entirely serious, and he seemed physically changed as well. His eyes were gleaming and he often seemed to pay no attention to what I was saying. He just gazed past my head as if distracted by some obscure insight, which he was unwilling to share. This infuriated me.

I can't remember exactly how the argument started. But before I knew it, I was telling him

that his writing was crap and so were all the magazines he wrote for. Then I accused him of just using me to get where he wanted to go. He clearly wasn't interested in me as a person. After all, he had not once asked how my own writing was going. It ended with me asking him to leave and suggesting that he not bother coming back.

After I had unceremoniously ejected him from my flat and the meetings came to an end, I was surprised to find that I missed having them. I had never consciously attached much importance to them, except as a means to an end; a way to get back in touch with Kay. Now I realised that, whilst they had inspired a degree of professional jealousy, I had also derived a certain comfort and even enjoyment from them.

Part of it was that, despite my scepticism, I actually liked discussing Pete's articles with him. Although my role was to play devil's advocate, I didn't really want him to lose the argument. Emotionally, my sympathies were with Pete; I could see that his ideas were often flawed and his enthusiasm was way over the top, but I still found his unfailing optimism about the future rather attractive.

This was not a side of myself that I wanted others - even Pete - to see. I preferred to give people the impression that my outlook on life was coolly sceptical. It's a defensive posture; people find it much harder to attack your beliefs if you don't really seem to have any. My meetings with Pete allowed me to indulge the part of myself that desperately wanted to believe in something, but was normally hidden behind the comforting façade of scepticism.

There was also a sense in which the meetings acted as a tonic for my flagging ego. My own lack of success on the writing front had made me withdraw into myself. I was reluctant to see friends in case they asked me how things were going. I would then have to either lie or admit to them that I had got precisely nowhere since the last time I saw them. My meetings with Pete, on the other hand, allowed me to console myself with the thought that I had made my own small contribution to his success - that without me, he might not have got as far as he had.

So once the feelings of self-righteousness had ebbed away, I found that the whole affair left me feeling rather flat and empty. But I made no attempt to contact him. I was too proud to let on that our meetings meant something to me. It was easier to mope around and feel sorry for myself. And then, out of the blue, I got a call from Kay.

* * * * *

PART TWO

2005

Jonah

I usually wait for him in the park where I used to meet Kay, sitting in a small pavilion-like building which overlooks the entrance. It's a good spot because the park gates are angled so that someone entering the park is inclined to look in the other direction. This means I can get a good view of comings and goings without much likelihood of being seen. But just in case, I normally carry a newspaper so that I can hide behind it if necessary.

I don't normally have to wait very long. Jonah is surprisingly regular in his habits. He leaves school shortly after half past three. By quarter to four, he has usually reached the park gates. I watch him walk past, a blue sports bag slung over his shoulder. He has grown quite bit since I last

saw him – he must be fourteen or fifteen now – and has started putting gel in his hair to make it more spiky at the front. When I have judged that there is a safe distance between the two of us, I start to follow. The park provides him with a short-cut home. I don't follow him all the way. There is a street of shops before the road of terraced houses where he lives. I usually turn back once I've watched him walk past the Seven-Eleven at the corner of his street.

So far he has never had anyone with him. On one occasion he took a detour to the video shop to look at computer games. I pretended to be waiting at a bus stop further down the street. That's probably the closest he's come to spotting me – but I don't think he actually saw me. I was watching him through the window of the shop. I could see his mouth opening and closing slightly, like a fish. At first, I thought he was talking to himself, but then I realised he was just chewing gum. He turned suddenly and he seemed to be looking straight at me, his mouth half open in what I initially assumed to be shock. My first instinct was to turn away immediately. But then it occurred to me that this would probably just draw attention to myself, especially if he had spotted me following him earlier. So instead, I opened up my newspaper and slowly turned to one side, pretending that I hadn't seen him and just happened to be waiting at the bus stop. As I did so, I noticed that he was brushing down some of his hair. I went into the shop later on and sure enough, the lighting was such that you could see yourself in the glass far more clearly than you could anyone outside. And even if he had seen me, there was no guarantee that he would have recognised me. After all, it's quite a few years since he last saw me. It's possible that he has forgotten I even exist.

That experience has made me more circumspect though. What would I have said to him if he had recognised me? It could all have been highly embarrassing. What if he had made a scene? The police could have become involved. How would I explain to them what I was doing following him around?

I suppose my first line of defence would be to claim that I wanted to interview him for the biography of his father that I've been commissioned to write. You might ask why I agreed to write this biography in the first place, given that I clearly despise what Pete stands for. I may as well be honest – it was partly money. We all need to earn our living somehow. But I also saw it as a way to prove that I could do something in my own right – that I was more than just a competent literary executor.

The problem is that I never actually knew Pete that well. It's true that we had seen each other regularly for well over a year, but our discussions almost always revolved around his latest ideas for articles. Occasionally I got a few snippets of information about Jonah or Kay, usually in response to prompting from me. But as a rule, he talked very little about the other things in his life.

Initially, I didn't see this as an issue. After all, other biographers manage perfectly well writing about people who they have never even met – including people they have little sympathy with. In the case of long-dead historical figures, they often seem to manage without even being able to consult other people who knew the subject of the biography. At least I was writing about someone with friends and acquaintances who were still alive. I decided that it was important to take advantage of this. So in order to build up a picture of his character, I cast the net very widely in terms of research. I thought I could explain who Pete was by mapping out the network of people who seem to have informed his view of the world. I imagined that if I plotted out this map carefully, then a picture of the man at the centre would gradually emerge. But though I am now in regular e-mail contact with a strange and varied cast of characters, I have hardly begun to trace even the outline of the man who links them all together. What I have so far produced resembles one of those childish-looking medieval maps with a blank area in the middle featuring only the words "Here Be Dragons". Instead, it is the people around this uncharted area – and their rather weird and wonderful beliefs – who stand out.

Take Karl J Princeman, the driving force behind E-Gnosis. A former inmate of Kentucky State Penitentiary, Karl is now out of prison and happily ensconced on a pig farm. He recently e-

mailed me some pictures of his steroid-enhanced porkers, or “post-pigs” as he calls them, alluding to his own theories of “post-humans” (his word for what he hopes will be the next generation of humans, “enhanced” by a combination of genetic engineering, biotechnology and computer implants). If post-pigs are anything to go by, I’m not sure I like the idea of post-humans. The pigs look grotesquely fat, their vast blubbery bodies supported by preposterously small legs.

Karl was sent to prison for his part in a break-in at some research labs. At first, the police thought it was animal rights activists. Large numbers of lab rats had been “liberated” (although having white fur and not being used to fending for themselves, most of them didn’t survive long in the outside world). The walls had also been daubed with graffiti condemning the lab’s scientists as torturers, murderers and fascists. But then it emerged that various computer files had been stolen containing the results of experiments with drugs designed to enhance the rats’ physical and mental performance. Several months later, details of remarkably similar chemical compounds appeared on a website called “posthumannow.com”, which extolled the virtues of artificial enhancements of mind and body through a variety of methods, ranging from physical and mental exercises through to drugs, dietary supplements and surgery.

From there, it was not difficult for detectives to follow the trail back to Karl and a couple of like-minded associates. In court, they mounted a rather unusual defence; they admitted to the break-in, but said that their intention had been to make the research public for the benefit of all humankind. This was so that people could prepare themselves for the next stage in human evolution, for which only the most advanced specimens of humanity would be eligible. They argued that this higher purpose entitled them to take the law into their own hands. The judge left the jury in little doubt as to his view of this defence. Following the guilty verdict, Karl and his accomplices found themselves facing prison sentences of several years apiece. Karl maintains to this day that he was framed by the US government.

Meanwhile, Pete remains an enigma, obscured by the larger-than-life antics of people like Karl – and, I suppose, by my own reluctance to let him take centre stage.

* * * * *

PART THREE

2001

Life after death

Extract from novotnik.com:

Aerial

dead bird
in the ashes

walled up
in tomb
of funeral pyre

fat man
slumps on a sofa
cigarette smoke
mimics the curls
of
satellite weather picture
from cold metal spine
on the chimney
where the birds perch

NOTES: First-time readers familiar with PN's articles are often taken aback by the negative tone of this piece. In place of PN's usual optimism about the future, we have imagery suggesting a dead end. Technology (in the form of TV) isolates the central figure in his home - just as the bird in the opening section is trapped in the now disused fireplace.

Some see this as evidence that PN was telling the truth when he claimed that he didn't actually write it – that it must have been “dictated to him” by the Overmind. After all, they say, if he had written the whole thing himself, surely it would have been more upbeat? But others have suggested that behind the apparent negativity lies a more positive message of the power of technology to offer a life beyond the “living death” of the central figure. They point out that although the piece starts with a dead bird, it ends with live ones perching on the TV aerial, possibly suggesting the idea of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

Viewed in this light, the negative tone could be seen as an attack on passive technologies like TV, which is more consistent with PN's views. Some have also suggested that the phoenix idea could also be an allusion to various ideas of PN's about the potential for technology to overcome human limitations and offer a kind of “life after death”. See the discussion forum for more views on this piece.

Loaded pistol

The only time I envy people who smoke is when I am waiting to meet someone. Waiting makes me feel self-conscious. I always imagine that people are looking at me, wondering why I am loitering around suspiciously with my hands in my pockets. If I smoked, I would at least have something to make my waiting look more purposeful and legitimate.

Luckily for me, technology has produced a solution to my periodic cigarette-envy; the mobile phone. There's no better way to appear busily self-absorbed as you while away the time, waiting for someone to arrive. What's more, experts tell us that, just like cigarettes, mobile phones may even give you cancer.

On this particular occasion, however, I had been fiddling around with my mobile for longer than was desirable. I was sitting on a park bench trying to ignore a group of drunks on the bench opposite. Every couple of minutes, one of them would shout “does anyone know what time it is?” For some unfathomable reason, this would trigger a burst of raucous laughter from the rest of the group, as if it was the funniest thing anyone had said to them in years.

I continued to toy with the menu buttons on the phone in the forlorn hope that I would eventually discover some previously hidden functionality, such as the ability to fire a paralyzing beam of energy at the drunks, leaving them frozen in mid-guffaw. When mobile phones first came out, it struck me that part of their appeal had to do with the fact that they were rather large and heavy. I imagined that wandering around with one must have felt like having a gun in the inside

pocket of your jacket, allowing the owner to indulge in any number of fantasies derived from Hollywood action movies. But now that mobiles had become lighter and more compact, they were better suited to more futuristic fantasies. It was as if the handset itself had become a mere anticipation of some more sophisticated, as yet uninvented device.

I had only ever handled a gun once, when a friend of mine had shown me a World War Two pistol he had acquired. It was much heavier than I had expected. There was something crude about it which repelled me. Besides the extra weight, the gun felt cold and hard in comparison with the shiny plastic of my mobile. It didn't seem to have enough buttons or switches to allow it to be controlled in a precise manner. In theory, the hand-eye co-ordination required to use it ought to be similar to the skills needed to play a video game. But holding the gun in my hand, I felt that the two could not be more different. A video game could be played on a whim; it wasn't serious. But a gun was deadly serious. Its use required genuine resolve.

At that moment, I felt something tubular and hard poke into my back. A high pitched voice said:

"Hands up mister. On your feet. Turn around slowly. No fast moves."

I did as the voice asked and saw a small blond-haired boy, of maybe about eight or nine, pointing a toy pistol at me. Kay was standing behind him. She was wearing jeans and a red coat. The wind blew her long, fair hair across her face. As she brushed it away, I noticed that she was wearing a small amount of make-up, just enough to accentuate her dark eye lashes and high cheekbones. I stopped myself staring at her by taking off my glasses and pretending to give them a clean. Kay became a blur.

I heard her say: "Alright Jonah, that's enough. Now, why don't you go down to the shops? I'll meet you back here."

"Can I rent a game from the video shop? You promised!"

"OK. But not any of the really expensive ones. And that'll be your last one this week. No more games after today."

"Can I shoot him first?"

"Well, if you must. But please get on with it."

"Do I have any say in this?" I asked, appealing to both of them.

"Phut!" said Jonah.

"Phut?" I repeated. "What sort of a gun noise is that?"

"It's got a silencer on it, stupid," said Jonah disgustedly, pointing at the fat, elongated barrel of the pistol. "Guns with silencers go Phut! Everyone knows that. If it went bang really loudly then everyone would hear and I wouldn't be able to make a clean getaway."

"I see." I turned to look at Kay. She seemed to be used to this sort of thing.

"I've just shot you in the head," Jonah added, impatiently.

"Oh right, I suppose I'd better slump lifelessly against this bench then," I said, moving to sit down.

"You don't have to be dead," said Jonah, relenting now that I seemed to be playing the game. "I don't always shoot to kill. You could just be paralysed or something. Mum could bandage the wound."

"Or perhaps you could just come back later when your aim's a bit better and put Miles out of his misery," said Kay. "Anyway, hadn't you better leave the scene of the crime? He's sure to be bleeding all over the place and there are rather a lot of witnesses around."

"I suppose so," said Jonah. "But it'll only attract attention if I run off. It's better to look casual, as if nothing's happened."

"Jonah, just go to the shops!"

"Oh, alright." He started to head off and then hesitated.

"I just want to ask Mr Jensen a question." Before Kay could object, he turned to me and said: "Have you seen my Dad? Mum said he was friends with you."

“No, I’m afraid I haven’t seen him. Well, not recently.” I hadn’t seen or heard from Pete since the night of our argument, which was months ago. Kay looked away, as if she regretted having spoken to him so sharply. “But if I do see him,” I added, “I’ll tell him you were asking about him.”

“Yeah. OK,” said Jonah, sounding disappointed. He shrugged and then walked off down the path, occasionally picking off small dogs and their owners as they passed him.

“I’m sorry,” said Kay. “He was supposed to be going round to a friend’s house to play, but he insisted on coming so he could rent some new computer game they’ve got in.”

“That’s alright. I thought kids were meant to grow up wanting to be train drivers or astronauts, not hit men.”

“Well, at the least the hit man thing gets him out of the house. He spends most of his time holed up in his bedroom playing video games.”

“How old is he?” I asked.

“Oh, he’ll be eleven next birthday, as he insists on telling everyone.”

This was the first time I had met Jonah. I was pleased that Kay had felt able to bring him along. I interpreted it as a sign that she had confidence in me. But was it confidence in me as a friend - or as something more than that? Occasionally, I thought I had picked up hints that Kay saw me as a possible replacement for Pete, only to decide on reflection that I was probably reading too much into a chance remark – or the fact that she happened to be wearing make-up. And even if she did see me as more than a friend, was that really what I wanted? The existence of Jonah meant that it would be a much bigger commitment. Taking on someone else’s child was not something which had figured in my projections of how my life would turn out.

We had been meeting up like this for about six weeks now. It had all started about a month after my argument with Pete. Kay had phoned me to ask if I knew where Pete was. I said I hadn’t seen him for a while. She asked if I had an address or phone number for him. Feeling that I was somehow missing the point, I said, rather bluntly: “Well, I thought he lived with you.” Kay was then forced to explain that in fact, Pete had moved out several weeks before – and no one had heard from him since.

I felt a mixture of elation and dread. Elation because this first contact with Kay was just the opportunity I had been hoping for - but dread because I sensed that this was a crucial moment and I realised that I had no idea what to say or do. I didn’t want to blow my chances by saying the wrong thing. We exchanged a few pleasantries. But then the conversation began to stall. It was years since we had spoken. Our ignorance about each others’ lives made it difficult to say anything which didn’t carry a risk of being interpreted as stupid or insensitive. More in desperation than in hope, I suggested, as casually as I could, that we meet for a drink – just to catch up on things.

Our first meeting was awkward to begin with. Kay seemed almost as nervous as I was. She was reticent about the reasons why Pete had moved out. He had not been in touch since, which was why she had phoned me. Eventually, she had reported him as missing to the police. They had been sympathetic and had taken down Pete’s details, but said there wasn’t much they could do about people who didn’t want to be found. Kay, meanwhile, was convinced that Jonah blamed her for Pete’s departure, and the fact that Pete hadn’t been in touch only made things worse.

I suggested that perhaps she was being too hard on herself. But she insisted that she was to blame for the way things had turned out. She seemed in two minds about whether to confide in me. “Maybe we should talk about something else,” I suggested.

“No, it’s all right,” she said. “I may as well put you in the picture. After all, he’s your friend as well as my husband.

“About six months ago, I had an affair with my boss at work. He’d made no secret of the fact that he fancied me. It had been obvious ever since he moved to the department. He didn’t put any pressure on me. He just made it obvious that the opportunity was there if I wanted it. I should really have put a stop to it there and then, but it was flattering to have the attention. Pete had got

more and more engrossed in his work. It became an obsession. He didn't seem to have time for anything else. I felt as if I was a long way down his list of priorities.

"Anyway, Alan - my boss, that is - invited me for a drink after work one evening and things sort of went on from there. I knew it was stupid. I tried to tell myself that it would be nothing more than a brief fling. The guy was married, after all. And in the end, that's all it was - a brief fling. It went on for about four months. I shouldn't really have been surprised when he told me it was over. But by that time, things were even worse at home. So one day, a couple of weeks after it was over, I told Pete what had happened. I thought it would shock him into doing something about our relationship. But he didn't react at all. He just nodded and carried on staring into space. It was like he had something else more important on his mind. So then I started yelling at him but he still wouldn't respond. He just sat there, taking it, which made me even more angry. It was weird because we'd had rows before and he'd never acted like that.

"My God, you must think I'm an awful cliché. I mean, having an affair with your boss, it's hardly original, is it? I didn't even enjoy it most of the time. It was OK for a week or two, when it was all new and exciting, in an illicit sort of a way. But after that, it just felt sordid. I re-read all the novels I could think of which dealt with adulterous relationships. I had this crazy idea that they would somehow work as self-help manuals. But they just made me feel worse. The only comfort was that the adulterous characters always seemed to feel equally shitty about the whole thing.

"At one point, I started to worry that Pete had begun to suspect something because I had left all these books lying around. After he didn't react when I told him all about it, the same thought went through my head again - maybe he already suspected it, so that's why he didn't seem shocked or angry. But then I decided that couldn't be it. I mean, you know what he's like - he only reads about three novels a year. He was never going to be much of a literary Sherlock Holmes. So there had to be another explanation." She paused and then asked: "Did Pete ever talk to you about E-Gnosis?"

"No," I said. "At least, I don't remember him ever talking about it. What is it?" I thought it sounded like some kind of software.

"It's a cult." said Kay. "Well, they would hate to be called a cult, or even a religion. But as far as I'm concerned, that's what they are. They believe that we're about to reach a turning point in human history. They call it the Singularity. It's all to do with technological progress getting faster and faster until suddenly - wham! There's going to be this amazing transformation where the human race evolves into some kind of cosmic super-intelligence." She rolled her eyes. "Sounds pretty crazy, I know. But the point is, they think this is going to happen really soon - within the next fifty years at the latest. So you can see the attraction of it for someone who's as technology-fixated as Pete.

"I don't know exactly how he got involved with them. I think he found them on the internet. They have a website which tells you all about what they believe in. It also has this software on it that you can download. That's the thing that frightened me most. I got home from work one day and found Pete just staring at this pattern on his computer screen. It was as if he was mesmerised by it. I thought it was a screensaver at first, because it was just a pattern of swirling, multi-coloured dots, a bit like you get when a TV hasn't been tuned to the right channel. I said 'hello' but he didn't react. I had to go over and shake him hard before he snapped out of it. Afterwards he tried to convince me that it was some harmless meditation aid. But if you ask me, there was something far more sinister about the whole thing. It was like he'd had a complete change of personality. He couldn't be trusted any more to do things like the shopping or picking up Jonah from school. He'd lost his sense of humour. And all he would talk about was this Singularity thing and all these other weird ideas he'd picked up. I mean, I was used to him coming out with some pretty strange ideas for all those magazines he writes for, but he didn't go on about them all the time. This was something different though. It was taking over his whole life.

"The final straw was when he started trying to convert Jonah. He'd been filling the poor

kid's head with some bizarre theory about the future evolution of the human race. It was something to do with how everyone was going to be absorbed into a giant network of computers. So that's when I told him he had to go. I wasn't going to have him trying to brainwash Jonah with his crackpot ideas."

I had forgotten how utterly ruthless Kay could be when she felt the situation demanded it. This was exactly how she had behaved towards me all those years ago. She had decided it was over and that had been that. We hadn't spoken until now. I had found it difficult to understand how she could suddenly cut off all ties, without ever really saying goodbye or giving me a proper explanation.

For once, I was tempted to take Pete's side, but thought better of it. Then I remembered something she had said at the beginning of our meeting, which suggested that in this case she didn't see things as being quite so black and white.

"But I still don't understand why you think it was all your fault," I said.

She sighed. "Because I should have noticed what was happening to Pete earlier. I was too busy having an idiotic affair. And because I started him off down this road in the first place. I was the one who sent him to talk to you. That was a mistake."

"A mistake?" I said, feeling slightly aggrieved. "Why? I thought I did rather a good job of encouraging him - you know, to start writing stuff and sending it to publishers. I mean, it's not as if he hasn't been successful. I thought that's what you wanted me to do."

Kay smiled ruefully. "Well, no, not really. It certainly wasn't what I had in mind, at any rate. I was hoping you would give him a healthy dose of cynicism and he would come home cured. But no - you had to go and fire him up with enthusiasm!"

It had never occurred to me that Kay had sent Pete to see me precisely because she did not support what he was proposing to do.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling rather stupid. "I hadn't realised."

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not angry with you," she said, still smiling. "I was trying to be too clever. Besides, he'd probably have gone ahead and written all those articles anyway, with or without your encouragement." She paused and then said; "Do you know why I married him?" This was clearly a rhetorical question, which was fortunate, because I had no idea how to answer it. I would never have posed that kind of question or talked so openly about my private life with someone I hadn't spoken to in years. I would have felt awkward and embarrassed, which would have made the person I was talking to feel the same way. This in turn would have increased my own sense of embarrassment, and so it would have gone on in a farcical downward spiral of awkwardness - until one of us could bear it no longer and would probably find an excuse to leave. But Kay seemed perfectly at ease talking openly about herself. This was how it had been when I first met her. She had confided things to me that I would never have expected a person who I had only just met to reveal. She never seemed to expect the same thing in return. She just seemed to want someone to listen.

I shrugged in response to her question, but tried not to appear too nonchalant about it. The movement was intended to convey the impression that I was relaxed about whatever she was about to come out with - even though I had a feeling that she was about to say something which would make me feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"I think it's because back then, I really needed someone to believe in me. I know everyone thinks I'm a pretty confident, up-front sort of person, but that's not the way I really feel. And back then, Pete believed in me, he really did. It's hard to explain. You were the opposite - you always seemed so self-contained, almost aloof from things. It was almost like you didn't need anyone else. You didn't even seem to need to believe in anything. Don't get me wrong - that was what I liked about you. Pete could be quite intense and it was a relief to be with someone who wasn't so demanding. Still is, in fact."

She paused and smiled at me again. I wanted to ask her: "So why did you go back to him?"

Was it a mistake? And what about now? Which one of us would you choose now?" But the questions were too blunt, too loaded with resentment about the past. I didn't want to risk spoiling our rapprochement.

"Anyway," she continued, "that's why I sent him to see you when he started to become obsessed with all this technology stuff. I thought you would be the antidote - that you would make him see that it was all a dream and that he wasn't going to get anywhere with it. Because if that happened, then I was confident I could make him believe in me again. But when he came back that first evening, I should have realised that I'd lost him. He already had that look in his eye, as if his mind was on higher things."

I didn't say anything.

Kay seemed to think I had taken offence, when in fact, I was just thinking that what she had said about me was largely true. "Hey, I'm sorry," she said, "I wasn't getting at you. I don't think you really are aloof, not deep down - it's just how you seem a lot of the time, on the surface."

"Don't worry about it," I said, without much conviction.

Tools

Karl J. Princeman – extract from e-gnosis.com:

Here we all are, discussing the Singularity, an event which could be the most momentous step in the history of the human race. Yet somehow it comes out sounding like a cross between a sensational TV documentary and a corny science fiction novel. We just don't seem to have the right vocabulary. And if we don't have the right tools, how can we ever hope to comprehend fully what it means for us?

But the situation may not be as bad as all that. I think we already have a software tool that we can use, one that's been with us for thousands of years. I'm talking about religion and myth. These are the tools that all cultures have utilised for thousands of years when faced with concepts which are at the limit of human understanding.

After all, what are most religions about? They're all concerned in one way or another with life after death, with attaining a state where you can finally be "with God". And that, when you think about it, is not a bad way of describing what the Singularity is really about.

Beliefs

What Kay had said about me was true in all but one respect. It wasn't true that I didn't believe in anything at the time I first met her. I did believe in something. I was just too self-conscious to admit it publicly, too worried about what people would think. One of the things that has always fascinated me about Pete is that he didn't seem to have any of my hang-ups in this area - he seemed able to say what he thought without being concerned about how other people might react. In that respect, he and Kay were very alike.

So what did I believe in? I believed in Art. Poetry, to be precise. I was even writing the stuff myself. But I was too embarrassed to show it to anyone, or even to admit that I was writing it. I was afraid that people would label me as a pretentious, literary type. So I wrote in secret, as if writing was some shameful activity, like masturbation.

Even if I had been prepared to admit that I had literary ambitions, I was not sure how to

defend my work against people who were as sceptical as I made myself out to be. I decided that, before it could be sent out into the wider world, my writing would have to be equipped with an elaborate system of defences. These could not be artificial, like the literary equivalent of the moat of a castle. That would be far too off-putting. They would instead have to be organic, that is to say, built into the structure of the work. I amused myself by imagining my work as some kind of plant, with beetle-like critics attempting to devour it - but being driven back by thorns, toxins or predators further up the food chain, which would paralyse them and very slowly suck out their brains. But all I succeeded in doing with each revision and refinement was to suffuse my work with an increasingly sour taste.

In retrospect, I should not have been surprised that these words, over which I had pored for so long, were greeted with nothing more than indifference. They were not even capable of provoking the wholly negative critical reaction I had been so afraid of. Publishers I sent them to returned them with polite letters of rejection (“Thank you etc... Always interested in new writers..... But not quite what we’re looking for at present.... Wish you the best of luck with placing your work elsewhere.....”). That is, if they bothered to reply at all.

Of course, you can always console yourself with the thought that you are simply “misunderstood” and “ahead of your time”. There are many illustrious precedents for this from which comfort can be drawn. But they were of little help to me. I became disillusioned about the ability of writing to achieve anything at all. Perhaps it had been effective in the past, but in today’s accelerated culture it was entirely dispensable:

Plastic bag

My plastic bag
is just like all the others.

I put a flame to its corner:
it shrivels.
Shiny new complexion wrinkles into old age
in seconds.
An invisible fiery fist screws it up into a ball
like writing paper

it comes from the trees

and there’s always more
where that came from.

As you can see, I did not stop writing. On the contrary, my output increased. This coincided with the period immediately after I had broken up with Kay. Outwardly, I probably gave little impression of being hurt and tried to act as if I had taken it in my stride. But that was not how I really felt. My apparent aloofness was just a defensive posture – and our break-up had exposed just how much of a sham it really was. I decided that I couldn’t allow myself to be hurt like that again; I needed to rebuild my emotional shell so that it provided a real defence, not a fictional one. Rather than unburdening myself to friends, though, I resolved to keep my own counsel. I thought that if I talked it through with others, that would effectively be admitting that I still needed other people (and therefore still possessed the same vulnerabilities). But I realised that I had to get it out of my system somehow. So I decided to write about it. I discovered that there is a certain solitary pleasure to be gained from wallowing in your own misery. The activity of writing seemed to ennoble it, to elevate it to a universal level. It allowed me to delude myself into thinking that my

feelings were the sufferings of a great and passionate soul with whom others would undoubtedly be able to identify:

loss

everyone sits
fingering their broken light bulbs
their perfect shape
big frozen waterdrops
mute bells
only
snowflake acoustic
filament fragmentsskate
around the rim
fingernail clippings
held
in erratic orbit
everyone sits

Looking back on this now, I am struck not by the depth of my feelings but simply by the circularity of my own writing. It is as if I wanted to seal up the broken bits inside of me, just as the broken filaments remain sealed inside the glass of a burnt-out light bulb. Then I could shake the bulb as if it were one of those tacky “snow scene” paperweights, hold it up to my ear and listen to the broken bits of filament shifting round and round – without having to feel anything.

This was writing as personal therapy. But of what use was it to the wider world? I had turned into the kind of writer I most despised; someone who just wrote about themselves, as if their own problems mattered more than anyone else’s and the whole of society revolved around them.

Besides which, writing as therapy didn’t even work. It just made me feel hollow, burnt out, numb:

jetsam

volcanic activity
made me
a porous person

now

a piece
of brittle
foam i

float
face down
in the numb ocean

So I resolved to forget about my ambitions to write. I put my energies into other things. I got a job with a publishing firm in London and tried to throw myself into the life of a young urban professional, joining the herds of miserable-looking commuters (who I never spoke to, except to ask them to please move up so that I could get on the train too).

This worked well enough for a time, while I was still young enough to convince myself that I would not end up like all the miserable-looking people I travelled in with. But it didn't last. I knew that this wasn't how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. As for what I really did want to do, I kept going back to those poems I had laboured over for so long and wondering if there was some way of getting them to see the light of day. They in turn looked back at me accusingly, demanding that I find a suitable home for them, where they could be properly appreciated.

As luck would have it, it was around this time that the internet first started to come to prominence. On the face of it, the internet is a self-publisher's wet dream. Setting up your own website costs virtually nothing, but you have a potential audience of millions. With this heady thought in mind, I carefully typed in my work and spent hours trying out different fonts and page layouts.

I also began to create hypertext links between the different texts, which I thought would provide readers with interesting connections to explore. The more links I inserted, the more I became convinced that the poems possessed a mysterious, veiled coherence which I had previously overlooked. This, in turn, prompted me to develop new theories about their supposed deeper significance, which I took to be man's relationship with technology (something I happened to have been thinking about quite a lot, owing to my new-found enthusiasm for the internet). I began to input pages of commentaries, linked up to the relevant passages – and out of these commentaries emerged a kind of statement of belief.

I attributed this manifesto to an invented character - a Swede called Jes Milensen, whose nationality allowed me to endow him with various stereotypical Scandinavian characteristics. The website included a short profile of him, accompanied by suitably mysterious, blurred photographs. Milensen, I claimed, had been a leading geneticist but had become disillusioned with science, feeling that it was advancing at a pace which outstripped society's ability to cope with it. He decided that he could more usefully spend his time trying to help people come to terms with the effects of technology. So he abandoned science and turned to writing. Sadly, I explained, he had been killed in a car crash at the age of thirty eight – but luckily, his writings lived on.

Looking back now, I am struck by how closely the theories I ascribed to him mirror some of the preoccupations of Pete and his followers. Anyway, here - for the record - is some of what I gave Milensen to say (actually, there was quite a lot more than this, but I have manfully resisted the urge to include all of it here):

On technology and consumer society

Being Scandinavian, I have a natural inclination to ponder the big existential questions. One of my favourites is why we seem to be incapable of being happy with our lot, even though, as a civilisation, we have attained a higher degree of physical comfort and sophistication than ever before.

I believe that the reason for our unhappiness has to do with consumer society and the accelerating effect of advancing technology. All our lives we are bombarded with aspirational messages, broadcast far and wide by increasingly powerful technologies, telling us that a better life is just around the corner if we would only buy such and such a product or brand – which is new, improved and better than the one we already have. This assault on the senses cannot be ignored, because the constant bombardment affects us subliminally, making it almost impossible for anyone to feel satisfied with their lot on a permanent basis. So life in this civilisation of ours becomes a series of minor disappointments, with things never turning out quite as well as we hoped.

This sense of hopes being dashed is exacerbated by our inability to predict the effects of technology on our lives. Things that we hoped would make our lives easier, like computers, often seem to have an unexpected downside. For instance, whilst computers have made some tasks much easier, they have merely accelerated everyone's expectations of when the work will be finished – so

instead of getting more leisure time, we end up spending longer at work.

It is as if things – or more specifically, technological things - are somehow conspiring against us. It is as if they resent the excessive human expectations which are imposed upon them and are constantly plotting ways of getting their own back. So life comes to seem like a series of petty dramas of betrayal and revenge, made all the more irritating by the frequency of their repetition.

Few of these disappointments are significant in their own right, but cumulatively, they all start to take their toll – and we are left with a feeling of generalised dissatisfaction about our lives. At the same time, we also feel guilty about it because we know that – compared with living conditions say, one hundred or even fifty years ago – things are better and we ought really to be thankful for what we've got.

On technology and tragedy

So what is to be done? I believe that art can act as a sort of vaccine against this chronic sense of dissatisfaction. A vaccine is a small dose of a disease that gives the body a chance to develop immunity against it. In the same way, I believe that art should re-enact the process of minor disappointment that we are all doomed to experience. I see it as a return to one of the earliest forms of art, that of Greek tragedy.

In Greek tragedy, the hero is always crushed by forces which are greater than him. He may get to be King, but ultimately some great catastrophe will befall him (for example, he will discover that, by some appalling stroke of fate, he has married his own mother and is so consumed with self-disgust that he puts out his own eyes). The happy ending which he no doubt wished for himself is shown to be an illusion. This was supposed to induce a state of "catharsis" in the audience, which would allow them to be reconciled to their own inevitable mortality and fallibility as human beings. Hardly cheery stuff, I admit, but being Scandinavian, I like that kind of thing.

Of course, Greek tragedy evolved in an age when there were many threats to human life - disease, war, famine, natural disasters - and very little that mankind could do about them. Today we have achieved a fair degree of insulation against most of these threats, chiefly by manipulating the natural world through technology. The trouble is, this makes us think we should be able to use manmade things to achieve happiness as well - which is a far more elusive goal. Most of the time, our efforts will fall short of what we had hoped. Art therefore needs to deal with the micro-tragedies of our every day lives, rather than the macro-tragedies of the ancient Greeks. It needs to reconcile us to the fact that in our enthusiasm for new technology, we overlook its tendency to unexpected and undesirable side-effects - because now that technology is busily connecting everything together, it is more difficult than ever to foresee the precise consequences of one's actions.

And what better vehicle could there be for these micro-tragedies than a micro-art form: the obscure and rather unfashionable art of poetry?

Ah, what magnificent theories! I can almost feel myself soaring effortlessly into the stratosphere, borne aloft upon a tide of false optimism about the anti-gravitational power of Art. But the sad truth of the matter is that I was simply engaged in an elaborate exercise of self-justification – a futile attempt to convince myself that I was doing something more meaningful than just filling up empty space with words.

Talking of which, let me return to the subject of the website. Predictably, it was not a success. You don't get visitors to your site unless people know it's there. This required a talent for self-publicity and an understanding of the intricacies of internet search engines which I simply didn't possess.

Eventually, I gave up on poetry as a bad job and moved on to short stories, where I achieved

a modest degree of success – initially at least. This helped to assuage my disappointment at the failure of the website. But having invested so much time and energy in its production, I couldn't bring myself to remove it or to admit that it had been pointless. So I convinced myself that, whilst it had not achieved the public recognition that I had originally envisaged, it had served another, more private purpose.

The whole exercise had, I decided, helped me to come to terms with all the bitterness and frustration I had felt after my break-up with Kay, but had never really faced up to. By linking the poems to Milensen's abstract ideas on art, technology and society, I believed that I had drained them of emotion and severed all connections with my own self. And by uploading them onto the internet and casting them adrift in the ever-expanding vastness of cyberspace, I persuaded myself that I had successfully banished them to another realm, where they could do no harm to anyone.

It may strike you as odd that someone who has made scepticism their defining characteristic should entertain such frankly superstitious notions. And of course, these beliefs conveniently ignored my earlier misgivings about the efficacy of art as personal therapy. But faced with the alternative – which was to admit that all my writings up to that date had been an entirely meaningless exercise – it was not difficult to ignore any arguments to the contrary.

Beliefs of this nature only collapse when something happens that is impossible for the believer to ignore.

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PART FOUR

2005

Zarathustra

This morning, as I was leaving my flat, I was approached by a short, slim woman. She had dark brown hair and glasses with angular, black frames, which gave her a slightly severe, studious air. She was clutching what looked like a personal organiser or a notepad of some sort.

“Mr Jensen?”

“Yes?” I said, cautiously.

“My name's Susan Crossfield. I'm a freelance journalist and I'm doing a piece on the internet and cults. I've emailed you several times asking for an interview, but didn't get a reply.” I had indeed ignored the emails. I want to tell my own story, not have it done for me by some freelance hack.

“Look, I'm sorry I didn't get back to you. To be honest, I don't think I've got anything very interesting to tell you.”

“But you are responsible for maintaining novotnik.com, aren't you?” I nodded. “Well, I just thought you'd have an interesting angle on things. I mean, surely you of all people must have some thoughts on why there's still so much interest in Pete Novotnik?”

“Not really,” I said. “It's just something I agreed to do for Pete. I maintain the site, that's all. I don't think I've got much to say that would interest your readers.”

“OK. Maybe you could just clear up one question for me then. Do the names 'Zarathustra', 'SelfishMeme' and 'Diceman' mean anything to you?”

I froze – and I could see that she knew she was onto something. I did my best to recover my

composure and tried to affect a nonchalant shrug. It didn't seem to have the desired effect.

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about," she said. "I've been talking to a few people who are regular contributors to the discussion pages on the site. One of them's a bit of a computer whizz. He says he's traced postings by someone calling themselves 'Zarathustra', 'SelfishMeme' and 'Diceman' to an internet account belonging to you. He said he'd always thought of you as someone who was sympathetic to Pete Novotnik, but now he's starting to wonder. Would you like me to read you some of the things that 'Zarathustra', 'SelfishMeme' and 'Diceman' have been saying on the site? Perhaps that'll jog your memory. They don't exactly sound like true believers."

It was true. I had indeed contributed to discussion forums on the site using various different aliases to make sceptical comments. These usually provoked the true believers into a passionate defence of Pete and all that he stood for. Initially, I had thought that I might be able to influence the debate, so I had been more guarded in the way that I expressed myself – thinking that all that was required was to sow some tiny seeds of doubt. But over time it had become apparent that most people using the site weren't interested in having a debate – they logged on in order to have their views reinforced, rather than questioned. So gradually, my interventions became little more than a way for me to let off steam – and the postings became ever more provocative. But if I admitted to all that, then the game would be up before I had the chance to tell my side of the story. I decided to try to brazen it out.

"Has it occurred to you that I might not be the only person who can access that internet account? I mean, how do you know your computer whizz hasn't posted those comments himself?" I felt quite pleased with myself for having the presence of mind to come up with this.

The woman looked unimpressed. "You're right, I can't be certain it wasn't him. But if that's really what happened, then I'm sure I can rely on you to get to the bottom of what's been going on." She smiled cheerfully and started walking away. Then she turned and said:

"You've got a week, Mr Jensen. I'll email the postings to you so you can read them for yourself, but I reckon you already know what they say. Bye for now!"

Eyeballs

This morning, just to make matters worse, my publisher had phoned me to ask how things were going with the biography of Pete – and when she could expect to see drafts of the first couple of chapters. I told her that I was a bit behind schedule and had been doing a bit of restructuring – which was a lie, as I have been spending most of my time writing this. I did my best to sound slightly impatient, so as to give her the impression that she was holding me back from very important work.

Unfortunately, my reference to "restructuring" merely encouraged her to ask what I had in mind and why I was deviating from our agreed approach. My answers became increasingly vague and defensive; I could see that I was just making things worse. Then I remembered that I had an appointment for an eye test. Although it was actually in a couple of hours' time, I told her it was sooner and I would have to ring off. But I had to agree to send her a summary of the new structure, which was annoying – because it didn't exist yet. I tried to draft something before I left for the eye test, but all I had to show for it was a list of unresolved questions.

It was as I was leaving the flat for the optician's that I was cornered by that journalist. I cursed myself for going onto the website using those aliases. It had been stupid and unnecessary. And now it looked as if I would be exposed before I was ready to tear off the mask I have been wearing for so long. I was still preoccupied with these gloomy reflections when I reached the optician's. I knew that I had to find a way of stopping her going into print until after I've finished

this account - but what?

Discouraged by my monosyllabic responses, the optician soon gave up trying to engage me in conversation. On the wall was a poster headed “The Wonders of the Human Eye”, featuring a huge diagram of an eyeball with a cut-away section showing all the different kinds of tissue inside. When I took my glasses off, I realised that without them, I could easily have mistaken the blurred image for a diagram of a planet, showing the different geological formations from the outer crust down to the molten core at the centre. The optician, however, gave the distinct impression that eyes had long since ceased to arouse any sense of wonder in her. I estimated that she must have between eight and ten half hour appointments with patients each day. That’s up to twenty eyes per day; eighty to a hundred per week. If you put all the eyes she had ever examined together in a room, you would have thousands upon thousands of them, like frog-spawn.

I envied her sense of professional distance. It was exactly the kind of objectivity – indifference even – towards one’s subject that would be required if I was to make any progress with my biography of Pete. There was certainly no denying that the project needed some urgent attention. As my publisher had pointed out, adopting the tone of a parent talking to a recalcitrant teenager, the deadline was less than six months away.

But they can stuff their biography. I can’t face devoting yet more precious time to a subject that I despise. What I really want is to finish this account and just have done with it all.

And if I am to do that, I need to stop Susan Crossfield publishing what she has discovered. By the end of the eye examination, a plan had begun to form in my mind.

* * * * *

PART FIVE

2001

Lost in space

In the months after Pete’s disappearance I managed to see quite a lot of Kay, one way and another. Given her newly-acquired single-parent status, I made a point of trying to be as supportive and helpful as possible. This included offering to baby sit for her a couple of times a month.

I hadn’t expected her to accept my offer. When she did, it occurred to me that I might well be shooting myself in the foot – after all, the last thing I wanted was to give her the opportunity to start going out with someone else. I could, I suppose, have asked her out myself. But I was afraid that if I pushed things too fast, she might not be ready and that would undo everything. After all, it was still only a matter of months since she had split up with Pete. I told myself that I had to be patient. I needed to wait for some kind of sign from her that she was ready to look beyond him towards a new relationship. When the sign eventually came though, it wasn’t quite what I had been hoping for.

It must have been the third or fourth time that I had agreed to baby-sit for Kay. Jonah answered the door.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said, sounding less than thrilled. “Mum’s still getting ready.” He scuttled back into the living room. I consoled myself with the thought that at least he hadn’t shot me in the back of head, like the first time we had met. I followed him into the front room.

Jonah had been playing a video game, which he had paused in order to open the door to me.

He was just about to resume playing when I said, in a clumsy attempt to lighten the general mood:

“So, what are we watching tonight then?” It had become part of our established routine that Jonah would be allowed to watch a film before going to bed.

“*2001: A Space Odyssey*,” he replied, sounding slightly irritated that I was trying to engage him in conversation when all he wanted was to get back to playing his game.

I was surprised. So far it had been mostly action movies – the kind of thing you’d expect a boy of Jonah’s age to go for. My recollection of *2001* was that there were some quite spectacular visuals and striking imagery - but it was ponderously slow and certainly wasn’t what film critics of a tabloid disposition would describe as a “non-stop all-action rollercoaster of a movie.” It was more like *Waiting for Godot*, only with better special effects.

“I hope you’re not expecting it to be like *Star Wars*,” I said.

“Of course not,” said Jonah, crossly. “I’ve seen it before, loads of times. I used to watch it with my Dad. It’s his favourite film.”

It seemed that my attempt to engage him in polite conversation had merely confirmed to him what a complete idiot he had for a babysitter. This was puzzling, because we had got on reasonably well on previous occasions. Although most of the time had been spent watching whatever film he had chosen that evening, he had seemed quite happy to chat to me. I had even started to hope that he might actually like me. I wondered where all the sudden hostility had come from.

Before I could dig an even deeper hole for myself, Kay appeared. She was wearing one of those “little black number” dresses and was obviously preparing to go somewhere fairly smart.

“You look great,” I said, although it came out a little half-heartedly. I didn’t mean it to come out that way – it was just that I had suddenly started to wonder why she was dressed up to the nines this evening, when on previous occasions she had not made quite so much of an effort.

She smiled and beckoned me into the kitchen, her heels clacking on the tiled floor as we entered. She pushed the door shut.

“I don’t want Jonah to hear us,” she explained, lowering her voice. “I’m going out on a date tonight. I’m being taken to some posh restaurant I wouldn’t normally set foot in.”

My initial reaction was that this was a complete disaster. I had waited too long - and now she had met someone else. All the hopes that I had entertained for the past few months had come to nothing.

When I didn’t say anything, Kay must have thought that I disapproved, because she added:

“Look, I know Pete was your friend, but he hasn’t been in touch for over three months now – and well, I can’t just sit around indefinitely waiting for him to return. Assuming of course that I would have him back – which is a pretty big assumption. I mean, by the end, things were pretty bad between us. And I really can’t believe that he hasn’t been in touch with Jonah all this time. The poor kid just doesn’t know what to think. Neither do I, to be honest.”

I knew I had to come up with an explanation for my less than ecstatic reaction to her news. For a brief moment, I wondered if I should tell her the truth. But what if she just laughed at me? I needed more time to absorb this development and work out what to do next. So I decided to play along with her mistaken belief that I was somehow aggrieved on behalf of Pete.

“I’m sorry, I was just a bit shocked, that’s all,” I said. “I don’t blame you for losing patience with Pete. I suppose I’d been hoping that at some point, Pete was going to get back in touch. So when you said you were going out on a date, it really brought it home to me that maybe he’s not coming back anytime soon. Anyway,” I continued, trying to shift the focus away from my reaction and satisfy my own burning curiosity at the same time, “who’s the lucky chap?”

“He’s a barrister, apparently. I’ve never met him before. It’s a blind date. One of my friends arranged it. She thought it would be a good way to, you know, test the waters to see if I’m ready to get back into the dating game.

“God, I could really do with a drink,” she said, turning to uncork a half-drunk bottle of wine on the counter. “Do you want one?”

I nodded. She brought out two glasses and began to pour.

“I’ve been fretting about this evening all day,” she went on. “It’s so long since I’ve been on a proper date, I’m not sure I can remember what you’re supposed to do. All the stuff with Alan was different because we already knew each other from work. I mean, once I married Pete, I pretty much consigned my entire store of knowledge on these matters to the dustbin – I never thought I would need it again. And to be honest, it was a relief not to have to worry all the time about what impression you’re making on people or how good you look. You would not believe how long it’s taken me to get ready for tonight.”

“Well, for someone who claims not to know what they’re doing, you look pretty good to me,” I said, hoping that this time my compliment sounded more like I actually meant it. “But I’m not sure I can offer much in the way of expert advice on the dating game. I’m hardly a great success in that field.”

“But you must’ve been on some dates more recently than me,” she replied, smiling at me. “Come on, don’t be coy.”

The honest answer to this was that, ever since meeting Pete, I had focussed all my attention on the possibility of a reconciliation with Kay. But I was spared the embarrassment of having to answer her by the sound of a car horn from the street outside.

“Oh, that’ll be the taxi,” she said, taking one last gulp from her wineglass. “I’d better be off.”

“Good luck!” I called after her, although I fervently hoped that she would not hit it off with her blind date. I heard her telling Jonah to behave himself and to go to bed at a sensible time. Then the door slammed and she was gone.

I wandered back into the front room with my glass of wine. Jonah had switched off his video game and was getting ready to watch the film. He seemed to have cheered up a bit. Maybe it was something that Kay had said to him before she left.

“My Dad says this is the best science fiction movie ever made,” he announced, as he fast-forwarded through the legal notices at the start.

I didn’t respond. I was hoping that the film would give me an opportunity to be alone with my thoughts for a while, so I was no longer as keen to engage him in conversation. Jonah seemed to sense this and we started to watch the film.

Now that I had more time to think about the idea of Kay going out on a date, it occurred to me that maybe it wasn’t such bad news after all. First of all, it was a blind date – so there had to be a reasonable prospect that nothing would come of it. But the really positive thing was that it suggested that she was ready to look beyond Pete to another relationship. So in that respect, it was exactly what I had been waiting for – a sign that it might be OK for me to take the next step. It just hadn’t happened in the way that I had expected.

The film had now moved on to a series of static, earth-bound shots of an arid, rocky landscape. This was followed by some footage of apes grubbing around in the dirt, apparently looking for edible roots. After a minute or two, Jonah turned to me and said:

“Do you mind if we fast forward through this bit? It’s a bit boring.”

I said that was fine by me, so we whizzed through the remainder of the opening sequence, where the apes are prompted to use animal bones as tools after an encounter with a strange alien monolith.

My mind wandered back to the subject of Kay. What if she hit it off with this mysterious barrister who was taking her out? A picture came into my head of Kay having dinner with a dominating Alpha Male, tearing the flesh from his chicken bone with his teeth and then casually tossing it on the floor, where a waiter would creep up submissively on all fours to clear it away. As this was clearly ludicrous, I lurched to the other extreme, imagining instead that Kay was dining with an über-civilised Renaissance Man, whose urbane wit, sophistication and fascinating range of outside interests could not fail to sweep her off her feet.

Jonah stopped fast-forwarding when we got to the section where one of the apes tosses his bone victoriously into the air – at which point the film jumps thousands of years into the future to show a sleek, futuristic-looking space shuttle travelling gracefully towards a giant rotating space station, to the accompaniment of The Blue Danube waltz.

“This bit’s really cool,” he said. I forced myself to concentrate on the film and not to think about what how Kay might be getting on with her date.

Considering that it had been made in the 1960s, I thought the sets and the special effects held up pretty well, especially in comparison with more recent computer-generated imagery. When we got to a shot of the interior of the shuttle, Jonah pressed the “freeze-frame” button and pointed to a pen rotating slowly in mid-air, next to one of the passenger’s seats.

“See that?” he asked. “My Dad says most films about space aren’t very realistic because they have people walking around normally in spaceships, when actually they should be floating because there’s no gravity. But this film shows what it would really be like in space.”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say to this, so I just nodded approvingly. Once the shuttle had docked in the space station, Jonah started to fast-forward again.

Watching it in this piecemeal fashion, I was surprised by how little the film relied on dialogue. It could almost have been a silent movie. The “character” with the most to say for itself was HAL, the on-board super-computer. In comparison, the astronauts seemed bored and lacking in any real dynamism, subservient to the giant piece of technology in which they were travelling. HAL seemed to be responsible for so much of the ship’s operation that you were left wondering why the astronauts were there.

Despite my attempts to concentrate on the film, my thoughts kept wandering back to the subject of Kay. I told myself that even if Kay’s date had gone well, the important thing was not to give up. However perfect this prospective suitor might appear to be, however HAL-like in his multifarious abilities, he was bound to have some minor but catastrophic flaw; all I needed was the determination to hang on in there, like the one surviving astronaut in 2001, until the flaw manifested itself and I could ride to the rescue. I pictured myself striding manfully into the restaurant where they were having dinner and offering Kay my arm. Her date would protest feebly, like HAL in the scene where he gets deactivated, but would only be able to watch helplessly as we walked off together into the sunset.

The end of the film was as confusing as I remembered it being the first time I had watched it. Bowman, the only surviving astronaut, flies his escape pod into another monolith orbiting Jupiter. After lots of weird psychedelic imagery (which I was more than content for Jonah to fast forward) he finds himself in what looks like a hotel room, getting progressively older. The final image is of what appears to be his rebirth as some kind of cosmic embryo – but I had never been sure what it was supposed to be.

When the film was over, I decided to confess my ignorance to Jonah. “I’ve never really understood the ending. What do you think is meant to happen in that last bit?”

“Well, my Dad says it’s really all about the Singularity,” he said.

“What’s the Singularity?”

“Haven’t you heard of it?”

I shrugged. I vaguely remembered Kay having said something about it, but it wasn’t something I had ever discussed with Pete.

Jonah shook his head disapprovingly. “Look, it’s really quite simple. You can understand graphs, can’t you?” I nodded. He picked up a notepad from the coffee table and started to draw.

“This graph is meant to show how quickly computers are getting better. If they got better by the same amount every year, the line on the graph would go up in a straight line – like this.”

The line he had drawn headed off diagonally, like the right half of a letter “V”.

“But every two years computers become twice as powerful as they were before – so the amount they improve by is getting bigger and bigger all the time. That means the line on the graph

actually goes up in a steep curve like this.”

He proceeded to add a further line to the graph, which curved upwards, like the right half of a letter “U”.

“Now, when the curve gets nearly vertical,” he added, pointing at the top of the line he had just drawn, “that’s when the Singularity happens.”

“Umm...I’m not sure I understand,” I said, feeling rather stupid for not being quicker on the uptake, since Jonah clearly thought it was blindingly obvious.

“Well, it’s the point where computers will be so clever that we’ll be able to sort of live inside them. It’s the next stage of human evolution, like what happens to the astronaut at the end of *2001*. The alien thing changes him into a being of pure information.”

All this was delivered with a mixture of utter conviction and casualness, as if these were eternal, self-evident truths. But his graph reminded me of projections by financial advisers, which were usually accompanied by sobering reminders that in the real world, the value of your investment could go down as well as up.

“I didn’t know your Dad was so interested in all this stuff,” I said, feeling that it was probably better to shift the focus of the discussion.

“Yeah, we talked about it a lot. He thinks it’s going to happen quite soon, probably in the next twenty years or so.”

“That’s pretty fast. What do you think about it?”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s right. He’s read loads of books about it and spent ages looking into it.”

“Sometimes grown-ups get things wrong though. I mean, the people that made *2001* obviously thought that we’d be living on the moon by now and that we’d have computers that could talk just like human beings – but we haven’t managed to do those things yet.”

I was annoyed at myself for making this observation. It was the sort of thing I would have said to Pete. It didn’t seem to fair to engage in that kind of debate with a ten year old. But Jonah seemed to take it in his stride.

“I suppose so,” he replied. “But Dad told me that even if it took longer than twenty years, he was sure that the Singularity would happen while I’m alive.” He gave me a sharp look. “You don’t believe me, do you?”

“I don’t really know much about it, to be honest,” I said. “But it’s an interesting idea – and I liked your way of explaining it, using the graph. It sounds like just the kind of thing your Dad would have been interested in. He often came round to talk to me about things like that. I used to enjoy arguing with him – and although he sometimes got annoyed with me, I think he quite enjoyed it too.”

“I wish my Dad was here now. He’d be able to explain it much better than me. I can’t talk to my Mum about it. She gets really cross if I start talking about stuff like that.” He paused, then asked: “Do you know who Mum’s going out with tonight?”

“I think she’s just meeting a friend,” I said, cautiously.

“That’s what she told you, is it?” He shook his head. “I know she’s meeting some bloke. She thinks I don’t know, but I heard her talking to one of her friends about it.” He looked down at the carpet.

I was starting to feel a bit out of my depth. “Look, I’m sure your Mum will talk to you about it when she’s ready,” I said. “It’s difficult for her right now because your Dad hasn’t been in touch.”

“What does she know about it?” he asked, with surprising vehemence. “There could be loads of reasons why he hasn’t been in touch. She never gives him a chance.”

Now I really did feel out of my depth. I decided to take the easy way out: “Gosh, is that the time?” I said, looking at my watch. “I really think it’s time you were in bed, young man. I promised your Mum that I wouldn’t let you stay up too late.”

Reluctantly, Jonah took himself off upstairs, leaving me to flick aimlessly through the TV

channels whilst I waited for Kay to return. I couldn't settle to watching anything. It all seemed depressingly trivial.

Fortunately I did not have long to wait. Kay got back just after eleven o'clock, earlier than I had expected.

"So, how did it go?" I asked, with as much offhandedness as I could muster.

"Well, the food was really good," she replied. "And we had a nice bottle of wine."

"That bad, eh?" Having steeled myself for the worst, I felt an enormous sense of relief. It turned out that Kay's barrister was a bit too fond of the sound of his own voice for her liking.

"He spent about half an hour regaling me with tales of how he'd won this case or that case. Or how he'd smooth-talked some judge into getting exactly what he wanted - against all the odds of course. So then I tried to get him to talk about something other than work. But he just went on and on about his ex-wife - what a total bitch she was, how she didn't understand him, how she was turning his kids against him, that sort of thing.

"Finally, it seemed to dawn on him that he hadn't really asked me anything, so I ended up telling him a bit about the situation with Pete. I hadn't meant to, because it seemed a bit much for a first date - I mean, it's all a bit weird with Pete just disappearing like that and I thought he might think I was a bit weird as well. But after everything he'd told me about his divorce and so on, I felt that I couldn't very well just talk about the weather or something. And by that stage of the evening, I didn't really care if he thought I was weird too.

"To be fair to him, he seemed genuinely interested and was quite sympathetic about the whole thing. But it was almost too much, like he'd switched into cross-examination mode. There were lots of questions like 'Had I noticed anything peculiar about his behaviour on the night in question?' It was all starting to get a bit intense for a first meeting, so eventually I just changed the subject. But like I said, the food was very good - you should try that restaurant yourself sometime."

"So do you think you'll see him again?"

"I shouldn't think so. Well, I think he wanted to - but I said that I needed some time to think about it. It felt a bit rude to come right out and say 'no, I never want to see you again in my life.' But I insisted on paying half the bill, so I think he probably got the message.

"In a way, I'm glad it didn't work out," she continued. "I was thinking about it in the taxi on the way back. At first I thought, what a waste of an evening. But actually, I think it's helped me realise that I don't have to put my entire life on hold just because Pete's done a disappearing act - the sky won't fall in if I go out on the odd date now and again."

We talked a bit about the prospects of Pete getting back in touch. Kay had been in contact with the police several times, but as there was nothing that seemed to indicate any foul play, there was a limit to what they could do. As one policeman had told her: "Sometimes people just want to start all over again, from scratch. If they don't want to be found, there's not much we can do to help. And even if we do find them, it may be that all we can tell you is that they're still alive and they're OK. If they don't even want you to know that, there's nothing we can do. It's a free world, I'm afraid."

She had also registered his details with various missing persons organisations. They had put his photo on their websites together with brief details of when and where he was last seen and so on. But as Kay said:

"When I first went onto these sites I thought, 'what a brilliant idea.' And I'm sure Pete would've thought so too - to him it would have been yet another example of how the web can solve anything. But the trouble is, who actually looks at these sites? It's probably just other people with missing relatives. What you really want is for all these faces to be put up on giant billboards or printed onto the labels of milk cartons and cereal packets, so everyone could see them - out there in the real world. That way, there might be half a chance that someone would actually recognise one of these people. But I suppose adverts for cars or washing powder pay better."

She said she had been amazed – and depressed - by the sheer number of people registered on these sites. In the end, she thought the sites were more a source of comfort than anything else. They made you feel that at least you were doing something about it and also that you weren't on your own – that there were lots of other people out there with the same problem.

“At first I blamed myself,” she said. “I kept going over the last row we had. I'd pretty much convinced myself that it was all my own fault. But when you see all those other people out there who've reported someone missing, you realise that it isn't some unique problem entirely of your own making – it happens all the time, to thousands of people. I mean, maybe I was a bit hard on Pete when I told him he had to leave – but I didn't tell him that he had to disappear off the face of the earth. He was the one that decided to do that.

“It's Jonah that I'm most worried about,” she continued. “I can take the fact that Pete doesn't want to have anything to do with me. But it makes me so angry that he hasn't got in touch with Jonah. It's so selfish. And so unlike him – I mean, he and Jonah were always really close. It's made me wonder if he's actually still alive. But I don't see him as the suicidal type. I'm sure he's still around. I think he's just got so wrapped up in all these ideas about the future that he can't live in the present any more.”

I was pleased that Kay felt able to open up to me like this. As we talked, I wondered if it might be the time to make my move – that the contrast between her fairly disastrous evening out and our relaxed conversation might provide the perfect opportunity. But I worried about pushing things too fast. And despite what Kay had said about not putting her life on hold because of Pete's disappearance, the uncertainty over his whereabouts was still a problem. Until it was resolved in some way, I felt that it would be difficult for her to look beyond it towards the possibility of a new relationship.

It was quite late by the time I got home. I couldn't sleep; I kept thinking about Kay and where things might go from here. Eventually, I got out of bed and switched on the computer. It didn't take long to find Pete's details on one of the websites Kay had mentioned – there he was, smiling away, in a snapshot with Jonah (whose face had been blanked out), with brief details of when he was last seen.

But as Kay had observed, his was just one among hundreds and hundreds of faces. For some reason, this hadn't really sunk in while we were talking about him and I had maintained a mental image of Pete as a tiny Bowman-like figure, cut adrift from his spacecraft, utterly alone in the vastness of space. Seeing all the other faces on the website, I realised that there were thousands of other tiny, space-suited figures drifting in the darkness, millions of miles from home.

No doubt some of them were victims of circumstance, but it seemed to me that at least some must have taken a conscious decision to cut all ties with people that they knew. I wondered what motivated them to do that. At the time, I was inclined to agree with Kay that Pete's disappearance (assuming it was deliberate) was an incomprehensibly selfish act. Looking back on it now though, I can see the attraction of being able to start all over again, free from the constraints of the past, the future suddenly appearing to be full of opportunity and potential. Maybe that was what appealed to him, at least at the beginning.

Survival instinct

Pete Novotnik – extract from “F@Q” magazine:

In my last column, I predicted that technology is developing so fast that within the next 20 to 50 years, it will enable us to transform ourselves into some kind of super-intelligent entity (or entities). We are, I said, on the brink of the next stage in the evolution of intelligent life on this

planet.

This is a bold claim and predictably, it has prompted a certain amount of scepticism. I based my predictions on the assumption that computer processing power would continue to double roughly every two years – which is what it's been doing for the last 50 years.

But some of you said, hang on a minute, how can I be so confident that this rate of growth will continue? Surely there will come a point when we just can't fit any more computing power onto a tiny piece of silicon? Well, maybe – but obstacles like that are just as likely to give rise to new innovations which could produce even more dramatic increases in processing power. For example, we could start designing computer chips in three dimensions rather than two. Or we could move off in a new direction altogether, based on technologies like quantum computing or nanotechnology.

Other people said they didn't like the sound of connecting computers to their brains. But the better we get at designing user interfaces (and they're getting better all the time), the more computers will start to feel like a natural extension of ourselves. So I don't see that as major obstacle either.

I could give you a whole raft of similar arguments. But for me, the most persuasive evidence is all around us. We live in a materialist, consumer society. We spend huge amounts of money buying new stuff – and enormous resources go into developing new products and new technologies to satisfy that desire. If we were machines, you'd almost think we'd been programmed to behave this way. Now, the received thinking about this is that it just proves how shallow and superficial we are. But are we really saying that all the time and energy that we invest in material progress is essentially a waste of time? I think there's something more profound behind it all, rooted in our deepest instinct – the instinct to survive. That instinct has been fine tuned over hundreds of thousands of years; it doesn't back losers and it favours efficient strategies, not wasteful ones. It can sense that technological progress is the winning strategy that will take us on to the next step on the evolutionary ladder by the fastest, most direct route. So that's what's really driving the pace of technological change – and will continue to drive it whatever obstacles we meet along the way.

In the next issue, I'll be looking at the evidence that this evolutionary leap could happen a lot sooner than the timescale of 20-50 years I've been talking about here [But probably not within the next month, so don't cancel your subscriptions yet – Ed].

* * * * *

PART SIX

2005

Susan

My initial plan, it must be said, was not terribly sophisticated or well thought-out. I simply emailed her, proposing a meeting. At that stage, I didn't have a clear idea of what I was going to do if she agreed. I just knew that I had to find a way of stopping her going into print until after I've finished this account.

Her reply made it clear that she wasn't interested if I was just going to stick to my story that the postings of 'Zarathustra', 'SelfishMeme' and 'Diceman' were nothing to do with me. In a way,

that made things easier. It was obvious she didn't believe me – so if I really wanted to stop her going into print, there is no point in trying to brazen it out. A different strategy would be required.

We arranged to meet in a café not far from my flat. Originally it had been a typical greasy spoon-type place, but the new owner had replaced the shiny, moulded plastic chairs and formica table-tops with lots of stripped wood and upholstery with a vaguely ethnic theme. Unfortunately, this didn't seem to be attracting much new business and for most of the day, the place was usually three-quarters empty. This time, I was the only customer. The owner, a large woman in her forties, smiled and tried to engage me in conversation. I felt sorry for her, but I wasn't in the mood for small talk.

I retired to a table near the window and tried to read a newspaper, but I couldn't concentrate on any of the articles. I kept going over what I planned to say to Susan, fretting about whether it would work and looking back over the short script I had written myself. Occasionally I wondered whether to go ahead with it at all. But it was too late to back out now; I had to go through with it.

She was about twenty minutes late. As she approached, I hurriedly folded up my notes and shoved them into my pocket. She was more casually dressed than before and wasn't wearing her glasses. Without them, she had lost that slightly severe, bookish air; beneath the fringe of dark brown hair, her face looked softer, more sympathetic. In different circumstances, I would have found her quite attractive.

She apologised for being late and I went to order her a coffee. The owner promised to bring it over when it was ready, clearly delighted at this one hundred percent increase in her custom. When I got back, Susan had put her notepad and pen down on the table and was toying with her mobile phone. I noticed that it had a "Disney Princess" sticker on the back, a girly touch that didn't fit with the mental picture I had formed of her as a hard-nosed hackette, doggedly chasing after her story. I started to wonder if my first impressions of her had been completely mistaken. But it was too late to do anything about it now. I forced myself to put it out of my mind and took a deep breath.

"Look, I owe you an apology. I lied to you last week about those postings on novotnik.com. You caught me completely off guard, so I just panicked and said the first thing that came into my head. But your hacker friend is right – I have been logging on to the site under various aliases. And those postings you mentioned are from me."

She tilted her head to one side, looking unconvinced.

"OK, so why did you do it?" she asked, folding her arms.

"It's hard to explain."

"Try me."

"Well, it's fair to say that I've never been a 'true believer' – I've always been more of an agnostic really, although I've kept my doubts to myself. I started doing the site because that's what Pete had asked me to do. It was just after he died, so I felt that I couldn't really ignore his request. I was amazed by the reaction it got. I'd never realised there were all these people out there who seemed to hang on his every word. And the books sort of followed on from that – I'd had various requests for hard copy, so at first I self-published them. But once the initial print run had sold out, I was able to get a publisher interested because they could see that there was a market for it.

"At first I quite enjoyed the attention. The true believers really seemed to appreciate what I'd done and that made me want to try harder to please them. So I made sure that most of the commentary on the site was giving people what they wanted to hear. But I've always felt that the general tone of the messages was a lot darker than most people seemed to think. To begin with, I just tried to hint at this in some of the commentary. The trouble was, that didn't seem to make much of an impression on people. They only saw what they wanted to see in the messages – which is basically all that optimistic stuff about how the Overmind is going to bring about the Singularity and so on.

"After a while, it really started to annoy me. I felt that they were blinding themselves to any

alternative viewpoint. I invented those alter egos as a way of getting these feelings off my chest. And once I'd started doing it, I found that I quite enjoyed provoking them – so the postings became more and more confrontational. At the time, I didn't think it would do any harm, but now it feels like it was a pretty stupid thing to have done. Worse than that, I feel I've betrayed the people who use the site. I've thought about handing it over to someone else, but over these past few days, I've come to realise that it means a lot to me – and I'm not sure I'm ready to let go of it yet.

“Anyway, I've decided that honesty is probably the best policy. I'm thinking of making a full confession – but I feel it would look a lot better if it came directly from me. So I was wondering if you could hold off writing the story until I've worked out what's the best thing to do. But if you don't want to – well, I can understand that. I probably don't deserve it.”

What I had told her contained elements of truth – but it gave a completely false impression of the confession I have been working on. It obscured the real reasons for my actions by attributing them to imaginary, better-intentioned motives. As for wanting to carry on with the site – that was an outright lie. I would like nothing better than to rid myself of it. But I want people to read this account first. And I can't do that if some journalist exposes what I really think before I've had a chance to say it in my own words.

She didn't reply for a few moments. She just looked at me as if she were expecting me to say something else. My carefully rehearsed mea culpa had been intended to clear the air and allow me to gain her trust. But the longer the silence went on, the more it started to look as if my opening gambit had fallen flat on its face. Then she said:

“Well, I've got to admit I'm surprised. That wasn't what I'd been expecting at all. But what you've said makes a lot of sense to me. I've read some of your commentary and I had this feeling that you weren't as fully signed up to it as most of the people logging onto the site.”

“So, do you think you could hold off writing about it for bit?”

“I can't give you a definite yes or no right now,” she said, leaning back in her chair, “but I'm prepared to think about it. I was going to use it as part of a longer piece about E-Gnosis and some other internet-based cults. I have a couple of features editors who are interested, but they want to see some more detail before committing themselves. So it's really more of a long-term project. I've even been wondering if I could get a book out of it – you know, one of those ‘gee whizz, look at the wacky things people get up to on the internet’ kind of things. But if an editor were to ring up right now and say ‘Susan, get me some copy by close of play!’ – well, I'd have to think about whether I had enough material to be able to pass up on your story.”

This was going much better than I had dared hope. I decided to press on:

“I understand. I'm a freelance writer myself, so I know it's a bit hand-to-mouth sometimes. I wondered if we could do a deal.”

As soon as I said it, I could tell from her expression that I had made a tactical blunder. Maybe I shouldn't have made the offer at all. And by rushing into it, I had completely undermined the effect of my opening speech. I cursed myself for not having planned out this second stage of my strategy more carefully.

“I'm not the ‘News of the World’, you know,” she said, frostily. “I might buy you another coffee and maybe a biscuit, if you're lucky, but that's about it. I certainly won't be offering you a five figure sum to spill the beans about a bunch of technology-worshipping nerds. You know, I was starting to feel just a little bit sorry for you there, but now I'm not so sure.”

“Look, it's not about money,” I said quickly, wondering how I could recover the situation. “That's not what I meant at all. I was just talking about sharing some information that might help you.”

I offered her some of the material that I had put together for the biography of Pete. She was reticent at first; my clumsy offer of a “deal” must have made her suspicious of my motives. But as I ran through some of the material I thought she could use in her article, I could see that she was interested. She laughed at the picture of Karl attempting to hug one of his steroid-enhanced pigs

(the animal was so big that Karl's arms barely went half way around its neck).

"Do you think he'd let me use that?"

"Well, he's not exactly publicity shy, so I shouldn't think it'd be too hard to persuade him," I said.

I asked why she was so interested in E-Gnosis. At first, she explained, it was because she thought there were certain similarities between E-Gnosis and the Japanese Aum sect. Both had a strong emphasis on meditation practices and a keen interest in technology. They also displayed a degree of paranoia about non-believers. And then there was the involvement of people like Karl in "direct action," such as the raid on the lab. Although this was clearly wasn't in the same league as Aum's gas attacks on the Tokyo underground, it was enough to get some editors interested, excited by the prospect of another apocalyptic cult out to destroy the world. But once she had done some more research, she came to the view that E-Gnosis was fundamentally different.

"In Aum," she explained, "the big idea was to renounce the outside world, so they all went to live together in these closed communities – which is classic cult behaviour. It also provided the perfect conditions for dominant individuals to persuade weaker ones to do crazy things – like taking a bag of liquid sarin gas onto an underground train and puncturing it with the tip of an umbrella.

"The thing is, we just haven't seen that level of socialisation with any of these internet-based cults – at least not any that I've come across. No one is setting up any separate communities where this kind of classic cult behaviour can take place. Instead, it's all being done over the internet, where it's much more difficult to exert the same degree of psychological control."

"But who's to say that one lone individual, sitting at his computer, won't take it into his head to do something crazy?" I asked, starting to feel mildly annoyed that she seemed prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt.

"Well, it's possible," she said, tossing her hair back, "but I think it's pretty unlikely. You see, the whole idea with Aum was to renounce the impurity of the outside world. So trying to destroy it was entirely logical for them. But for E-Gnosis, the material world – in the form of technology – represents their salvation. Trying to destroy the outside world would go against the very essence of what they believe."

"So you think the true believers are just a bunch of harmless cranks?"

"Harmless? Yes. Cranky?" She frowned. "I don't know. They're certainly over at the extreme end when it comes to theories about the Singularity. But there've been times when I've pooh-poohed their ideas and they've come right back at me with a point I just couldn't answer. So who am I to say they're just a bunch of cranks? I suspect ninety-eight per cent of it will turn out to be total nonsense – but there may be something in that last two per cent. And that's what interests me about them – that underneath all the pseudo-religious stuff, they may actually be onto something important."

I felt irritated – and slightly betrayed – that she seemed prepared to give these people the time of day. The trouble is, I can't forgive the true believers any more than I can forgive Pete for what he did. He was not a harmless crank and their posthumous adulation of him puts them in the same category, as far as I'm concerned. But I couldn't tell her this; it would be completely out of character for the role that I was supposed to be playing.

"What about you?" she said, as if she had guessed at my thoughts. "You said you were never really a true believer. But you've kept the site going all this time. Why?"

I decided that I would have to tell some more lies:

"You're right, I've never been fully signed up to E-Gnosis. But before he died, Pete and I used to spend ages battling ideas back and forth – and that's really what I was trying to keep alive when I set up the site. The problem for me is that a lot of the users aren't interested in new ideas any more. They must've been interested at one stage – but now that they've found something that seems to satisfy that yearning, they've closed their minds to anything that doesn't fit with their viewpoint. That's what made me do all those stupid postings."

I hoped that I looked suitably contrite. In fact, my motives for setting up the site were entirely selfish and I have never felt anything but contempt for the true believers. I had the impression that Susan was less than satisfied with my answer. She was toying with her mobile phone, as if planning her follow-up question. In a rather desperate attempt to change the subject, I said more or less the first thing that came into my head:

“This is going to sound a bit strange, but why do you have a ‘Disney Princess’ sticker on the back of your phone? You don’t really strike me as a Disney Princess kind of girl.”

She smiled. “No, you’re right, I never really went in for all that awful princessy stuff, even when I was little. My niece stuck it on. It’s so we can ring up her fairy godmother. Then we have to pretend that we’re dressing up in fabulous gowns, going to the ball and marrying the handsome prince. Well, actually no, that’s not quite right – she’s usually perfectly happy to dance with the handsome prince but when we get to the bit in the story where he asks her to marry him, she always says no and runs off laughing. So everyone gets to live happily ever after – except the handsome prince, who’s fallen madly in love with my niece and remains miserable for the rest of his days.”

“I think I know how the prince feels,” I said. I don’t know what made me say it. It was a lame, self-pitying thing to say.

“Well, maybe you should spend less time in front of your computer and get out more,” she said, brightly. I wasn’t sure whether she meant it kindly or was just humouring me.

We chatted for a while about freelance writing, exchanging grumbles about how useless publishers were – how they always expected you do things by yesterday, but seemed to regard themselves as being in a different part of the space-time continuum altogether when it came to their own schedules. Now that we were off the subject of the website, I found myself rather enjoying her company. Then it was time for Susan to go (she had an urgent, publisher-imposed deadline to meet).

“Oh – one last thing,” she said. “What am I going to say to my hacker friend if he asks?”

I had thought about this and had an answer ready. “Just tell him what I told you at first – that my computer had been hacked into and someone else was using it to post abusive messages on the site. Tell him I’ve put some new security in place so it won’t be happening again.”

“OK, fair enough. Let’s hope he buys that explanation. In the meantime, your secret is safe with me.” She got up from the table, clutching her mobile. “Well, it was nice to meet you. Maybe we could meet up again sometime.”

“To be honest, I don’t know if I’ve got much more to tell you,” I said, anxious to avoid a more detailed cross-examination.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that – I just meant go out for a drink together.” Registering my look of surprise and bewilderment at this offer, she smiled and said: “Don’t look so worried. I promise not to run off laughing, like my niece. So give me a call.”

Truth and lies

Karl J. Princeman – extract from e-gnosis.com:

The traditional reading of the Book of Genesis is that Eve, tempted by the serpent, persuades Adam to eat the apple and since then, it’s been largely downhill for the human race. But I’ve always found it odd that God doesn’t want Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. I mean, what’s wrong with knowledge? So maybe the serpent is telling the truth when it says that the tree is off limits because “God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” Maybe God just doesn’t want the competition.

And here's another weird thing. When Adam runs away after eating the apple, God has to call out to him "Where art thou?" For a God who's supposed to be omnipotent and all knowing, this is a very strange thing to say. He should have no trouble at all working out exactly where Adam is.

The Gnostics referred to him as Samael, the blind God. He's not pure evil, but he is deeply flawed – and he's created a world which is deeply flawed as well. But although he's blind, he's not stupid. He knows that his position of authority will be undermined if human beings become aware of the truth. So he and his collaborators have attempted to convince us that it is all our fault - that we sinned when we ate of the tree of the knowledge and are being punished for it. But the reality is that the Garden of Eden was flawed from the very beginning. We just couldn't see it at first.

So it's down to us to resolve the flaws in the imperfect world that we inhabit. The Gnostics talked about achieving a "pleroma" or "fullness", where we would banish the false, incompetent God and achieve a divine state ourselves; here at E-Gnosis, we call it the Singularity.

Strategies

By rights, I should be making the most of the breathing space I have just won myself in order to press on with my account. And I ought to be making good progress, capitalising on a sense of triumph at the way my meeting with Susan Crossfield has turned out. But here I am again, writing about the present, not the past.

At first, I couldn't understand what Susan saw in me. Does she genuinely like me? Or is she just trying to get me to drop my guard?

My strategy had been to gain her sympathy by admitting that I had been foolish to post under those pseudonyms. The idea had been to make her more receptive to my offer of sharing some of the material from my biography of Pete (in return for her agreement to hold off going into print). Openly admitting that I had made a mistake went against all my usual defensive instincts. But I couldn't see any other way of gaining her confidence, so I gritted my teeth and went ahead.

Now I can see that each time I admitted to some kind of vulnerability, Susan's attitude towards me appeared to soften. So it would seem that this tactic proved more successful than I ever thought possible.

I suppose that I ought to feel pleased with myself, elated even. And at first, that is exactly how I felt. But now I feel an almost unbearable sadness. Because if I am right about how Susan reacted to me, then it is an indictment of how I have behaved for most of my adult life. How many relationships could have been different if I had not insisted on holding others at arm's length, never allowing them to see behind the elaborate defences I had erected to keep them at bay?

Of course, it would be far too risky to see her again. It's madness even to think about it.

* * * * *

PART SEVEN

2001

Childhood's End

The next time I went to baby sit for Kay, she told me that she was just meeting some friends for a drink and probably wouldn't be late. Jonah and I watched an action movie, which was entertaining but entirely forgettable. After it had finished, he seemed reluctant to go to bed and hovered in the doorway, as if unsure which way the stairs were.

"Do you want to see my fish?" he asked, suddenly.

"I didn't know you had any pets," I said. "Are they new?"

"No, not really. And they're not really mine – they're my Dad's. I'm just looking after them until he comes back."

I never knew what to say when he made declarations like this. He always sounded so certain that Pete would return. I followed him upstairs to his bedroom.

The fish were in two illuminated tanks on low tables lining one side of Jonah's bedroom. The filtering equipment emitted a quiet gurgling noise. The first tank contained two or three larger fish and a small shoal of what looked to me like tiny sardines, but with an iridescent blue and red stripe running the length of their bodies. They darted about between strands of pond-weed. Jonah explained that they were cardinal tetras and that the larger fish, which had broad dorsal fins, brilliantly patterned like butterfly wings, were guppies.

The second tank was weird. At first, all I could see were large, jagged sections of polystyrene, fixed to the lid and base of the tank. Then I noticed fish moving in and out of the polystyrene shapes. They were roughly the same size and shape as goldfish, but their skin looked as if it had been drained of colour, leaving a translucent covering through which you could make out what looked like internal organs. I wondered if they had some kind of disease.

"They're my favourites," said Jonah. "They're blind cave fish. They haven't got any eyes." Now that I looked more closely at the heads of the fish, I could see that he was right; there was nothing that resembled an eye there. "They're clever," he added. "They hardly ever bump into stuff. They only do it when I give them some food."

He slid open a hole in the lid and sprinkled some powder into the tank. Immediately, all of the fish converged on the food, resulting in several collisions as they jostled for the best position.

"Why all the polystyrene?" I asked.

"It's meant to look like the inside of an underwater cave, with stalactites and stalagmites. The fish like it better that way. I helped my Dad do it. We melted the polystyrene with Mum's kitchen blow torch." He grinned. "She wasn't very pleased. The whole house really stank afterwards. But you can make some really cool shapes."

The formations of melted polystyrene were certainly striking, all the more so because neither Jonah nor his Dad had bothered to paint them in rock-like colours; instead, they remained a brilliant white, like submerged icebergs. When I suggested to Jonah that it might have been better to paint them before putting them in the tank, he just gave me one of his pitying looks and said:

"But the fish wouldn't be able to see it, would they?"

I decided to not to press the point any further.

"I had a goldfish when I was little," I told him. "Well, actually, I had two to begin with - but one of them got a fungal infection and died. After that, I think the other one must've got lonely because he spent most of his time chasing his own reflection up and down the side of the tank. Someone told me that goldfish only have ten second memories, so I've always wondered if he managed to work out – after maybe nine seconds – that it was really just his reflection rather than another fish. The trouble is, once the ten seconds was up, he'd forget the whole thing and have to start all over again."

Jonah seemed to take this as a slur on his choice of pet. "Blind cave fish definitely have a longer memory than that. When they're put in a new tank, they can work out where all the obstacles are and then remember them. That makes them more intelligent than dogs, you know."

Clearly, my goldfish had been a pea-brained numbskull compared with the colossal intellect

of the blind cave fish. I consoled myself with the thought that at least I hadn't had a dog for a pet.

Looking around for an excuse to change the topic of conversation, I saw a copy of *Childhood's End* by Arthur C Clarke on the table next to Jonah's bed. It must have been quite an old copy, because I recognised the cover from when I had read it myself, many years ago; it featured a giant flying saucer hovering above a city, looking rather sinister. This had always struck me as odd, because in fact, the aliens in the book turn out to be fairly benign; they act more like an intergalactic UN peacekeeping force, keeping mankind from destroying itself so that it can evolve to its true potential. Picking it up, I said:

"I read this when I was maybe a couple of years older than you are now. What do you think of it?"

"Oh, I've read it before," he said. "It's one of my Dad's favourite books."

"Yes, but what do you think of it?" I asked. It was understandable that Jonah kept referring to his Dad, but his habit of saying what Pete thought about things all the time was beginning to get on my nerves.

He hesitated. "It's a good story, I suppose. I like reading the first half of it, up to the bit where you find out what the aliens look like. I just think the ending is...well, a bit sad."

"Why?"

"Because the children turn into something totally different from their parents. They don't even get the chance to say goodbye. It would be better if they could somehow take their parents with them when they join the Overmind."

Although it was a long time since I had read it, I remembered feeling a little dismayed at the ending as well. It made the lives of all the other characters in the book appear insignificant in the greater scheme of things. I later discovered that Pete was also disturbed by this aspect of the book, despite the fact that he chose the term "Overmind" for the higher intelligence that he believed was somehow in communication with him. He too disliked the idea that biological evolution could suddenly produce a generation of children that would be not merely incomprehensible to their parents, but utterly indifferent to their parents' fate. He much preferred the more technological Singularity suggested by the end of *2001*. This was mainly because he thought it would allow the Singularity to occur under much more controlled conditions, so that everyone could participate if they wanted – and no one would be "left behind" unless that was the fate that they chose for themselves.

There was an awkward silence. Then Jonah went over to his desk, where he had a laptop. He handed me a sheet of paper which was lying face down on the desk. On it was written an email address: PJNk67481@freemail.co.uk.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's my Dad's email address."

It took me a moment or two to register the full import of this. "So.... he's been in touch with you?"

Jonah nodded.

"Since when?" I had got so used to thinking of Pete as being completely out of the picture, that it was a shock to discover that he was still (apparently) very much around.

"Well, the first email was about four weeks ago." He looked a bit sheepish, then added; "I wanted to tell someone about it – actually, I wanted to tell you about it. But he said I had to keep it a secret. You're not cross with me, are you?"

"No, of course not," I said. "I'm just surprised, that's all. Is he OK?"

"Yes, I think so." He hesitated. "Except that he keeps going on about people being out to get him. That's why he had to disappear."

"What sort of people?"

"I'm not sure. He doesn't really talk about it in his emails."

"Where's he living?"

“I don’t know. I asked if I could see him but he said it was too dangerous, so we’ve just been writing emails to each other.”

“Have you told your Mum?”

“No. He told me not to tell her. He says he needs to speak to you first.”

“Me? Why me?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say why.” Jonah paused, then said, gloomily: “I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Oh, I am,” I replied, attempting to sound like I meant it. My guess was that Pete wanted me to act as a go-between and speak to Kay on his behalf. That would put me in an impossible position. “I’m pleased he’s OK,” I said. “The whole thing’s just a bit complicated, that’s all. It’s good that he’s got in touch with you though.”

Jonah rolled his eyes. “You sound like Mum. ‘It’s complicated.’ That’s what she always says whenever I ask about why Dad left. Like I could never understand.”

I sighed. “Look, all I meant was, now that you’ve told me, it puts me in a difficult position with your Mum. I mean, did he say anything at all about why he wanted to talk to me first?”

“No, I just told you, he didn’t say why,” he said, with mounting irritation. “He just says he can’t come back until he’s talked to you. So you have to see him. *You have to.*” I could see that behind the anger, he was close to tears.

“OK, OK. I’ll email him. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” I went to put my hand on his shoulder, but he turned away and drew his arm across his face, wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

“But I’m not sure it’s a good idea to keep it a secret from your Mum,” I added. “She’s worried about your Dad too, you know. She’s got a right to know that he’s safe and well.”

“No, you can’t tell her. You just can’t,” he said, fiercely. “If you do that, he might not come back. *You have to do as he says.*”

At that moment, the front door opened and I heard Kay’s voice saying hello.

“You’d better get ready for bed,” I said, thinking that Kay would be annoyed with me for not having made Jonah go to bed earlier. As I pulled his door to, I could see him standing there, looking aghast.

I went downstairs. Kay had gone into the kitchen.

“You’re earlier than I expected,” I said. “Jonah’s just getting ready for bed. He was showing me his fish. Or rather, Pete’s fish.”

She nodded and went to get herself a glass of wine.

“Want one?” she asked.

“If you’re offering,” I said. She didn’t seem her usual talkative self this evening. “Is everything alright?” I asked.

She sat down at the table, resting her head in her hands and let out a deep sigh. “It’s fine, I’m just a bit tired, that’s all. So I thought I’d come home early.”

I hesitated. Should I tell her about Pete? I had been intending to, but I wasn’t sure how she would take it in her current mood. It was odd that he was insisting on talking to me first. I didn’t think she would be particularly impressed by that either.

The silence between us was becoming an embarrassment. “Those blind cave fish are pretty weird, aren’t they?” I offered, hoping it would break the ice. “Jonah was trying to convince me that they’re as intelligent as dogs.”

“Oh Miles, just shut up about the fucking fish will you?”

I was taken aback. I knew that she could sometimes be brusque to the point of rudeness, but she had never spoken to me like this before.

“OK, I’m sorry. I was just trying to make conversation. Maybe I’d better go.” I decided that now probably wasn’t the time to tell her about Pete. It could wait.

She sighed again. “No, look – it’s me that should be saying sorry. None of this is your

fault, so I don't know why I'm taking it out on you. And it's really kind of you to look after Jonah while I was out."

She took another sip from her glass. "I came back early tonight because I was supposed to be meeting Alan – you know, my boss from work."

"Oh, right." I felt sick. I had assumed that her affair with Alan was over. And now, to make matters worse, Pete was threatening to come back as well.

"Anyway, we'd arranged to meet in this hotel. It's all slightly sordid. We signed in as Mr and Mrs Underwood or something equally nondescript – and we got this knowing look from the receptionist, as if he knew exactly what we were up to." The thought of them going to a hotel together made me feel both disgusted and turned on at the same time. "But we'd hardly been in the room five minutes before he got a call on his mobile," Kay continued. "One of his kids has been taken to hospital with suspected hepatitis. So he had to leave. I can hardly complain. I'd have done the same if it was Jonah. So I ended up sitting in the hotel room, watching telly for an hour and half. And then I came home. It just makes me feel so..." She broke off and covered her face with her hands.

I cursed myself for having failed to see this coming and for letting all those earlier opportunities to tell Kay how I felt just slip through my fingers. Part of me wanted to go over to her, comfort her and then just come out and say it. But I felt betrayed by her decision to get back together with Alan, who seemed to see Kay as nothing more than his "bit on the side." So I stood there in silence.

After a while, I said: "Look, this Alan didn't make you happy before. He's never going to leave his wife and family for you. And what you're doing is not fair to Jonah. Or Pete." I knew it was pure emotional blackmail to bring both Jonah and Pete into it, but I was so angry with her for getting back together with Alan that I couldn't help myself. I was on the verge of telling her that Pete had been in touch with Jonah as well – but then I decided that she didn't deserve to know. She could just go on being ignorant about his whereabouts for a while longer. Kay didn't look up.

As I let myself out, I caught a glimpse of Jonah peering down anxiously from the top of the stairs. I shook my head, hoping he would realise that it meant I had not told Kay about the emails from Pete. I could hear Kay sobbing in the kitchen. I closed the front door. Outside it was cold and quiet.

Infotainment

Karl J. Princeman - extract from e-gnosis.com:

Of course, the coming Singularity is a major threat to those currently in positions of power and authority. And these are not, on the whole, stupid people – misguided, maybe, but certainly not dumb. So you would not expect them to be sitting on the sidelines, just waiting for it to happen. They're busy trying to stop it – or at least, to stop the rest of us from waking up to what's really going on.

The most insidious aspect of their activities is what I call the "Infotainment Conspiracy." This is the attempt to overwhelm us with so much fiction and trivia that we can no longer work out the truth for ourselves or even focus on what really matters. And it is one of the reasons why progress towards the Singularity is slower than it needs to be.

What can you do to counter this? Keep coming back to this website for a start. But if you want to strengthen your defences against it, try out our Interference Software, which has been specifically designed to combat the effect of the Infotainment Conspiracy at a subconscious level.

Make sure you've got twenty minutes or so to spare. Switch off the TV, radio or anything

else that could be a distraction (and a conduit for “infotainment” material). Sit down in front of your computer and run the software. At first, it’ll look like a chaotic mass of swirling dots. This stage is meant to help you clear your mind so that you’re more receptive to what follows. Gradually, the dots will resolve into fragments of text or images. These are taken randomly from websites which don’t show up on mainstream search engines – or if they do, they’re so far down the list of results that you’d never find them. So the material should be genuinely offbeat, obscure and untainted by institutions like governments or large corporations which are behind the Infotainment Conspiracy. The more you use the software, the stronger its disruptive effect – and the more receptive you’ll be to the kind of radical thinking we need to bring the Singularity closer.

*Click **here** to download.*

Dark forces

Although Jonah had given me Pete’s email address, I didn’t try to get in touch with him. I felt that this would just encourage him to come back into Kay and Jonah’s life, which would complicate things still further. So I wasn’t exactly delighted to see him when he turned up on my doorstep a week later.

He looked thinner and paler than when I last saw him. He had never paid much attention to his appearance, but he looked even more dishevelled than usual. Most startling of all, his hair had grown; it was no longer the functional crew-cut of old but a wild outgrowth of wiry curls. As it had been cut so short before, I had never suspected him of having curly hair. It gave him the air of a mad scientist.

“So, the wanderer returns,” I said, coldly.

“Can you let me in?” he asked, urgently. “I don’t want to stand around too long here in the street. Someone might see.”

I hesitated, half wondering whether to say no, but he just walked past me as if I had invited him in already.

“Be my guest, why don’t you?” I called after him.

Then he set about moving swiftly from room to room, drawing all the curtains in the flat.

“Why are you doing that?” I asked.

“I think I’m being watched,” he said, as he headed off into the kitchen and started letting down the blinds. “You have to take precautions.”

“Who’s watching you?”

“Dark forces,” came the reply.

“Really? Dark forces?” This time, my sarcasm did seem to register. Pete returned from the kitchen with a slightly pained expression on his face:

“Look, if I told you who they were, it would just make things worse for you. So the less you know, the better. It’s for your own good. Let’s sit down,” he said, motioning for me to follow him into my own sitting room. I felt irritated at his slightly patronising manner and the way he acted almost as if he owned the place.

“Stop being so bloody enigmatic and tell me what the hell you thought you were doing,” I said, letting my frustration get the better of me. “You abandon your wife and son for months on end. No one knows where the hell you are. You could’ve been dead for all we knew. Do you have any idea what that’s been like for Kay? And for Jonah – at least until you got back in touch with him.”

Pete seemed genuinely taken aback by my little outburst.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But I didn’t have any choice. I had to disappear.”

“Why?”

“I think I’ve discovered something really important. But it told me I had to keep it secret.”

“What do you mean, ‘it told you’?” I asked, starting to feel exasperated at his apparent inability to stop being wilfully mysterious. “What is this ‘it’?”

“Well, I don’t know what it calls itself, but I call it the Overmind. I’m not even sure exactly what it is. I think it’s some kind of consciousness that’s evolved over the internet. I’ve no idea how. It communicates by sending messages. They’re sort of in code – you have to think quite deeply about them in order to work out what they mean. And some of them I can’t work out at all.”

This sounded to me like complete nonsense. I half-wondered if he was doing it just to humour me – but that wouldn’t really have been Pete’s style. Then I remembered what Kay had said about finding Pete sitting in front of his computer, staring at some weird pattern on the screen.

“How do the messages appear?” I asked.

Pete explained that he “received” them using some software provided by an organisation called E-Gnosis, which I vaguely remembered Kay having mentioned to me.

“The first time I used the software I got this amazing feeling. It’s hard to describe. I was sitting there, watching the interference pattern on the screen. All of a sudden it felt like I was aware of everything – that everything was somehow connected up and made perfect sense, but most of the time we just can’t see it. It was like a heightened sense of reality. Then I felt as if I wasn’t fully there any more – as if the sense of myself as an individual had started to ebb away. At first it was a bit scary, but deep down, I felt certain that I was still there – I had just become part of something much, much bigger.

“It also felt like I had lived through this moment before – which was weird, because when I thought about it afterwards, I couldn’t remember anything like it. Maybe it’s to do with memories of being in the womb, before we become separate beings in our own right. And I had this feeling that somehow time had stopped – or not exactly stopped, but that it was possible to go back and forth to any point in time, as if it were a film that you could rewind or fast forward to whatever point you wanted. But I couldn’t actually control it in any way.

“Anyway, then I heard Kay come into the room. I was vaguely aware that she was saying something. I don’t remember what exactly – I couldn’t make it out. At first, I didn’t recognise her and I didn’t really know where I was. This feeling of being part of something really huge was so fantastic that I didn’t want to lose it. And then it stopped. I don’t think it lasted more than a few minutes. But it was so intense, it felt like a lot longer – more like half an hour.”

“And you say you’ve had this feeling more than once?” I asked, feeling rather like a doctor questioning a patient.

“Oh yes, loads of times. It doesn’t always coincide with using the E-Gnosis software. Sometimes I get other feelings too – like butterflies in my stomach or a strange metallic taste in my mouth. But the most striking thing is this sense of being in the presence of something really amazing. So that’s why I’m sure that there really is something out there. I guess it’s hard for you to understand, but one day, when you get this feeling, you’ll know exactly what I mean. It’s just a matter of time.”

“A matter of time until what?”

“Until the Overmind becomes sufficiently powerful that we can all be absorbed into it. Can you imagine what that will be like? Everyone in the world connected together in a way we can barely conceive of. I mean, I’ve only had a brief taste of it and I can’t really put into words how amazing it’s going to be.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “I haven’t got much time and I’ve come to ask for your help. The first thing is that I need someone to look after copies of all these messages I’ve been getting from the Overmind. In case something happens to me. I can’t tell you how important they are.”

“Alright,” I said, without bothering to hide my lack of enthusiasm. “I suppose all I have to do is keep them in a safe place.” At the time, that was all I thought it would involve. “Do you have them with you?”

“No, they’re not ready yet. I’ve been making some notes on what they mean and I haven’t quite finished them yet. I’ll bring them round as soon as I can.”

“OK. Was there anything else?”

Pete hesitated, then said:

“Well, I want to try to make things up with Kay. I’ve tried to explain all the stuff about the Singularity and E-Gnosis to her and I don’t think she really understood what I was saying. But I reckon I’ve found a way of making her understand.”

And with that, he launched into a long and convoluted explanation of something called the Strong Anthropic Theory. I must admit that by this stage of the proceedings, I had just about had enough. Obviously he had undergone a weird mystical experience, of the sort which would more usually prompt someone to convert to Christianity, Buddhism or some established religion. But not Pete. He had to go and make up his own entirely new religion, centred around his own obsession with technology. As for the Strong Anthropic Theory, I didn’t understand what Pete was rambling on about and he didn’t take kindly to being interrupted. Every time I tried to ask a question, he told me to wait and listen to the next bit of his explanation because he was sure that in a minute, everything would become crystal clear to me.

All I can remember of what he said is that the theory involved some experiment with sending particles of light through two slots. This stuck in my mind because Pete propped up several books on my coffee table to represent the slots and used a couple of pens as the particles of light. I couldn’t for the life of me see how this theory fitted in with E-Gnosis and the rest of Pete’s weird and wonderful new belief system. But by that stage I had more or less stopped paying attention and was desperately trying to think of a way to persuade him to leave.

When he finally reached the end of his explanation, he turned to me and said:

“Don’t you see? This explains everything! Why we’re here, what we need to do in the future, what it’s all leading to! If I can just get Kay to see it, then she’ll understand – and everything will be alright between us again.”

My first instinct was to say nothing. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I thought Kay’s reaction would be the same as mine – which was that he had spent so much time obsessing about this stuff that he had completely lost touch with reality. But then I changed my mind.

“I do see what you mean,” I said. “And if that doesn’t persuade her, nothing will.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely. You’ve convinced me.” I told him this because I was sure that Kay’s reaction would be as I anticipated. That would leave just Alan in the way – but I was hoping that Kay’s relationship with him would burn itself out of its own accord.

“Wow,” said Pete. “I think that must be something of a first for me. You’re not usually so easy to win over.”

“Well, you were very persuasive. You’ve obviously spent a long time thinking about it. And if you can convince me, I’m sure you can convince Kay.”

Then I did something even worse.

“What’s that noise?” I said, suddenly.

“I didn’t hear anything,” said Pete, looking slightly alarmed.

“I thought I heard something. Never mind. I expect it was nothing.”

I could see that Pete was looking more and more nervous, which was exactly what I had hoped.

“Look, I think I’d better go,” he said. “Do you think you could let me out the back door?” And a few minutes later he was gone. I saw him one more time before he died.

* * * * *

PART EIGHT 2005

Fish

Susan sounded surprised when I called her. “I thought I’d scared you off,” she said.

But she seemed pleased that I had got in touch. We agreed to meet up one evening later that week at a new-ish gastro-pub in town. It was all moody lighting with various “sculptures” made out of twisted bits of iron mongery stuck to the walls. We installed ourselves at a table below what appeared to be the remains of an old-fashioned pram. It had been bent out of shape and threw strange, distorted shadows over the table. Still, it seemed safer than the assemblage of cast iron radiators suspended at a precarious-looking angle above the couple sitting opposite us.

It was a bit awkward at first. I was anxious to avoid talking about Pete, E-Gnosis or anything like that, so I steered the conversation onto more typical “getting to know you” territory. Susan talked a bit about her family. Her father had been a diplomat and they’d lived abroad until she was a teenager, which made her feel slightly ambivalent towards the UK – as if she didn’t really belong, somehow.

“Didn’t it make you want to become a foreign correspondent or something like that?” I asked.

“Not really. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I like travelling and seeing new places. But actually living there is different from ‘just visiting’, if you know what I mean. I just feel that I’ve done that whole ‘living abroad’ thing. And not having grown up here, I’d like to think that I see things a bit differently from your average freelance.” She grinned, then added: “And that’s not just because we were deprived of Marmite when we were little.”

“It’s good to know that there’s more to being a successful freelance than that,” I said. “I haven’t eaten Marmite for years, but it doesn’t seem to be helping my career much.”

“Looks like you haven’t eaten fish for a while either,” she commented, gesturing at the carnage on my plate.

For some reason, I had ordered fish (Susan having announced on her arrival that she was ravenously hungry and wanted something to eat straight away). I’m not very good at eating fish at the best of times – and the fish I had ordered that evening was particularly bony. Not wanting to spend the entire time picking fish bones out of my mouth in front of Susan, I had ended up eating very little of it. The fish’s backbone and the skin were on one side of my plate, whilst on the other I had deposited most of the actual flesh, which had numerous tiny bones sticking out of it at odd angles. It looked as if I had been carrying out a hopelessly inept post-mortem on the poor creature.

“I’ve never really managed to get rid of that childhood fear of getting a fish bone stuck in my throat,” I explained. “It’s all the fault of the Queen mother.”

As a child, news reports of the late Queen mother being hospitalised for getting a fish bone stuck in her throat had, for some strange reason, made a big impression on me. Since this had happened on several occasions, I had convinced myself that she must really like fish. I pictured her consuming vast quantities of the creatures at royal banquets, ordering servants to toss them up in the air so that she could catch them in her mouth like a seal – only for one tiny sardine to get stuck on the way down, necessitating the speedy intervention of the nation’s top ear, nose and throat specialists. Not being royalty, I convinced myself that, should the same thing happen to me, medical help would probably arrive rather less swiftly – and I would be left choking to death on the fish bone. It seemed such an undignified way to go.

Susan told me how she and her sister had refused to eat fish when they were little. Her father used to keep exotic fish as pets and they had become rather attached to them. Their favourite had been a type of fish called a Pleco, which was an algae-sucker – very handy for cleaning up the tank, apparently. They called him “Lips” because he would often attach himself to the glass of the tank with his mouth.

“Me and my sister would practice smooching with him against the side of the tank, like this.” She pressed her lips up against the side of her glass, leaving a faint imprint of lip gloss.

“He was fun because you could chuck things like frozen bits of broccoli in the tank and watch them sink to the bottom. Lips would pounce on them and spend ages sucking them like an ice lolly. The trouble was, whenever my Dad got moved to a new posting, we always had to get rid of the fish. We were quite upset about losing Lips and we decided that if we couldn’t take him with us, we would set him free. So we released him into a pond in one of the parks in Mexico City, where we were living. Dad was really cross with us when he found out, because Plecos can cause lots of problems if they manage to find other fish to breed with. I think he was scared that it would somehow blow up into some major diplomatic incident. So we ended up spending our last couple of days in Mexico down at this pond trying to catch Lips by dragging a net through the water.”

“Did you get him?”

“No – we just got through a lot of frozen broccoli trying to make him come to the edge of the pond. But we think we know what happened to him because a couple of years later my Dad came home from work with this cutting from a Mexican newspaper. It was all about how the City authorities had been clearing up this pond in one of the parks – and guess what? It was full of Plecos. They’d eaten up all the other sources of food, so they’d started to eat each other. Which is probably how Lips met his end - but not before he’d gone forth and multiplied, big time.”

After this, I think both of us started to relax a bit more. Maybe it was the alcohol taking effect. I found myself opening up to her in a way that I hadn’t intended. I even told her about Kay – although not wanting to steer the conversation back onto the subject of Pete, I didn’t give any names and withheld a lot of the detail. I just told her that the object of my affections had been the wife of a friend. At the end of the story, I felt embarrassed and said:

“I’m sorry to bore you with this – you didn’t come here to listen to me moaning about my romantic failures. I mean, having an affair with a married woman – it’s hardly original, is it?”

“Well, I’m in no position to criticise. When I was twenty four, I got engaged to this guy from Venezuela who turned out to be married already. He also turned out to have at least two other mistresses besides me. My Dad tried to warn me, but I wouldn’t have any of it – I just pressed ahead with all the wedding preparations, head in the sand. I felt a complete idiot afterwards.”

By this time, it was getting late and we decided to get the bill. Then Susan said:

“Look, there’s a party tonight not far from here. It’s at a friend of mine’s house. Do you want to come?”

I hesitated because I’m never very good in situations where I hardly know anyone. But she was evidently keen for me to come with her and it seemed churlish to refuse. So off we went.

The party was in a large Victorian house about fifteen minutes’ walk from the pub. Susan explained that it belonged to Derek, a friend of hers who had inherited it from his parents. She wasn’t entirely sure what he did for a living; something in the City, she thought, but he never talked about it. When we arrived, the party was already in full swing; you could hear it half way down the road.

Derek turned out to be a large, balding man with a booming voice.

“Susan, my dear! Come in, come in!” he said, kissing her on both cheeks and gesturing expansively into his hallway. “And who, pray, is this man of mystery? Another one of your waifs and strays?”

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say to this. “Woof”, perhaps, on the grounds that I

ought really to be sent back to Battersea Dogs' Home, where I belonged.

"Derek, this is Miles. And no, I didn't pick him up while he was begging outside the cashpoint, if that's what you mean. We met through work, actually."

"Susan, you know I do but jest," said Derek, booming. "I'm sure he's a fine, upstanding chap, unlike that dreadful rogue you were consorting with before. Now follow me, there are some people over here I want you to meet."

Susan just rolled her eyes at this and we followed him inside. We were introduced to a rather uptight-looking couple who were sipping orange juice and looked as if they would much prefer to be somewhere else. No sooner had we exchanged pleasantries than Susan was pounced on by a couple of rather excitable friends of hers who – to judge from the amount of shrieking and "Oh my Gods!" involved – didn't appear to have seen her for years. They were wearing identical outfits and but for the fact that one of them had a pair of bright orange fluffy bunny ears on her head, I would not have been able to tell them apart.

"You don't mind us dragging her away, do you?" one of them asked, in a manner which suggested she was not going to take no for an answer. "It's ages since we've seen her! We've got so much to catch up on. You can have her back in, ooh, let's see, a couple of hours' time!"

"See ya!" shouted the other one, her bunny ears now wobbling at a jaunty angle.

I smiled weakly as they hauled Susan away, leaving me with the uptight couple. After about ten minutes of excruciatingly stilted small-talk, I managed to extricate myself and went to find Susan – but she was nowhere to be seen. I ended up in the kitchen with a motley collection of single males, most of whom were rather the worse for wear. Several of them regaled me at length with their views on politics, women and the deplorable lack of real ale at Derek's house, on account of the host being "a champagne-drinking tosser."

I was finally cornered by a rather earnest-looking man with close-cropped hair who had been lounging in the corner, looking increasingly fed up. He hadn't contributed much to the general discussion, but one-to-one, he turned out to have plenty to say for himself. He launched into a lengthy rant about how the country was going to the dogs. According to him, it was entirely the fault of uncontrolled immigration. The trouble with being in the kitchen at parties is that you can't make that excuse of "I'm just going to get a drink" because all the drinks are right there in front of you. Fortunately, just as I was wondering how to extricate myself, Susan reappeared – so I made my excuses and joined her.

"I'm sorry about abandoning you like that," she said. "But I hadn't seen those two for a while," nodding in the direction of the identical twin sisters. The one with bunny ears was now in animated conversation with Derek, who was laughing heartily. "And I'm sorry Derek was so rude to you."

"That's OK, no offence taken. I didn't really understand what he was talking about, to be honest."

"Well, it was pretty rude of him to compare you to Frankie, my last boyfriend – the one he called a 'dreadful rogue'. He was unemployed, which in Derek's view made him a wastrel – so the two of them never really hit it off. I got annoyed with Derek, which just made me more determined to go out with Frankie – and less inclined to see that he really was a bit of a waste of space. It was nearly a year ago now, but Derek always likes to remind me how he was right and I was wrong.

"Why is that man staring at us like that?" she whispered, nodding towards the kitchen, where the man I had been talking to was glowering at us. Even in the subdued lighting, I thought I could see one of the veins above his temple throbbing.

"Ah, well, that could be my fault," I said. "He has some pretty hardline views on immigration, so I was looking for a means of escape. Anyway, when you reappeared, I told him I would have to go. I said it was because I'm an illegal immigrant myself and I'm supporting myself here by working as a gigolo. Then I came and stood next to you."

She giggled. "I see. So he's really staring at me, isn't he? He probably thinks I should be

sent to Saudi Arabia or somewhere like that to learn the error of my ways. But tell me,” she said, turning to face me, “what do you say if people suggest that you don’t quite look the part of a globe-trotting, international gigolo?”

“I tell them that eighty per cent of the job is all about technique. That usually shuts them up.”

“Really? I’d have thought they’d want to know more.”

“Well, if they do, I tell them it’s a trade secret. The trick is to get away before they can ask too many questions, leaving them with the thought that you might actually have been telling the truth.”

“You are a dark horse. I didn’t think you had it in you to tell a completely brazen lie like that.”

“I’m probably just a bit drunk.”

“I reckon I’ve had enough too,” she said. “Come on, let’s go before your friend over there calls the Home Office and has you deported.”

Once we were outside in the street, she stopped and said:

“Now, gigolo boy, about that world famous technique of yours. I think I’d like to try it out before they deport you.”

I turned towards her and kissed her.

“How was that?” I asked.

“Not bad. But I may need to do it again before I can give you a proper assessment.”

“Isn’t this the bit where you just run away laughing, like your niece?” I asked, half expecting her to do just that.

“Yes, it is,” she murmured, but she didn’t pull away.

* * * * *

PART NINE

1990

A leap of faith

I have never told anyone the full story of what actually happened when I first met Kay. I dare say that is part of my problem; I should have confessed these things nearer the time, rather than clutching them stubbornly to my breast in the belief that close confinement would somehow encourage them to flower into “Great Art”.

At the time, I was too ashamed of what had happened to talk to anyone about it properly. Instead, I diverted my energies into producing circular, impenetrable “poems” which no one would ever read. But writing did not help me. It was like a feedback loop, repeatedly bolstering my own sense of bitterness and injustice.

We met as students, a few weeks after we had started university. It would be fair to say that I was not greatly experienced in relationships with the opposite sex. At school, things had never got much beyond a few snogs with girls at parties when I was drunk enough to have lost my inhibitions (and they were drunk enough not to know what they were doing either). I was normally too painfully self-conscious to ask any of them out afterwards – or if I did, I took elaborate precautions

to conduct the liaison in conditions of utmost secrecy (which meant that the relationship didn't usually last long). The problem was that I imagined that I could predict what people's reactions would be if I asked a girl to go out with me – and I didn't think I could cope with what I considered to be the inevitable teasing and gossip. In fact, most of my schoolmates were almost certainly far less interested in what I got up to than I liked to imagine. But at the time, I was absolutely sure that I would become an object of ridicule – unless I managed to go out with some girl who was so fabulously attractive that all my schoolmates would be stunned into an envious silence. And of course, most of the girls who fell into that category were either spoken for or were unlikely to fall for someone as average-looking as me.

I was confident that things would be different when I left for university. I told myself that I wouldn't be able to second-guess what other people might think of my actions because I wouldn't have met any of them before. They would simply be blank pages onto which I could project an image of the new me. It would be a fresh start which would finally allow me to break free of my inhibitions.

But university, when it came, seemed to be a re-run of school in that respect. I just didn't have the confidence to go striding up to girls I fancied and seduce them with my less than sparkling wit. And I continued to feel inhibited, spending much time worrying furiously about what other people might think of me. The fact that no one knew each other only made it worse, because I sensed that people were making snap judgements about one another based on how they looked or how they spoke.

All this changed when I met Kay. She was – at least so far as I was concerned – in the “fabulously attractive” category. But apart from this, we seemed to have lots in common. She was very open about herself and I found her easy to talk to. And best of all, she laughed at my jokes. I was surprised that she paid me any attention when, as I saw it, she could have had any number of more desirable males. But for reasons which I never fully understood, she chose me. Although I have often wondered about the reasons since, this was not something I felt a need to examine in any detail at the time.

My sense that it was all slightly too good to be true was confirmed when I discovered that Kay already had a boyfriend at home – someone she had been going out with whilst in the sixth form at school. At first, I was dismayed. But Kay seemed to have no qualms about seeing me behind his back, so I concluded that I must be in the ascendant. And in my general delight at being the chosen one, I did not feel the need to enquire more deeply into the nature of this other relationship. In fact, I developed an almost superstitious aversion to thinking about why she might want to go out with me, as if thinking about it might make the process somehow reverse itself and she would go off me, maybe even end up hating me. In part, it was due to a desire to preserve the apparent spontaneity of it all for as long as possible. But it was mainly because I could scarcely believe my good fortune. I was afraid that if I probed further, the whole edifice might disintegrate under the pressure of close scrutiny. Instead, I convinced myself that our relationship required a leap of faith on my part. The important thing was to keep believing in it. If I stopped believing in it for even one moment, then it would all dissolve before my very eyes.

Things drifted blissfully along in this way until about the middle of the first term. We were in Kay's room, sitting around after a meal. She had in fact just cooked me a three-course dinner – no mean feat given the culinary facilities available in her hall of residence. This had rather embarrassed me, as I was keen on being seen as a “new man” and wanted to demonstrate that I could do my fair share too. I had briefly wondered what the occasion was supposed to be. But I had not really suspected that anything was amiss. Kay just said that she liked cooking – and she was obviously pretty good at it. I had simply interpreted this as a further miraculous occurrence in what I viewed as my increasingly miraculous life. Suddenly Kay said, quite calmly: “What are your views on abortion?”

I cannot now recall exactly what we had been discussing. All I remember is that Kay's

question did not seem to follow at all, yet she posed it as if it was an entirely logical thing to say next. It was as if she had set herself a target of asking the question by a certain point of the evening, come what may.

“Um,” I said. Was this supposed to be a trick question? “Well, I think it’s sort of unfortunate when it happens – I mean, it’s not an ideal solution,” I blustered. “But in the end, I think, um, it’s a woman’s right to choose.” That was my honest opinion, as a liberal-thinking “new man”. “Um,” I added, as if this might clarify matters. I had no idea how to handle this. Why had she asked me? There was one obvious possibility, only I didn’t want it to be that. There had to be another explanation. “Um. Are you trying to tell me what I think you’re trying to tell me?” I asked, nervously.

She smiled – but it was a slightly pained smile. “Well, I’ve missed my period by over a week now and I’m usually pretty regular. It’s never been this late before.”

I stared down at my shoes. It seemed as if time had stopped. All the previous weeks of walking on cloud nine had suddenly caught up with me. I had known it was somehow too good to be true. But we had only slept together a couple of times. And it wasn’t as if we had leapt into bed at the first opportunity. Kay had insisted that we wait until we had been seeing each other for at least four weeks. Otherwise, she had said, it didn’t feel like a decent amount of time for us to get to know one another. I sat there wishing I could reverse time. I wished we could have waited longer. Most of all, I wished that I could rewind to the point where I had failed to put on one of the condoms I had bought several weeks earlier from Boots the Chemists in eager expectation of this moment. In the replay, I opened the small cupboard where I had hidden them (carefully positioned to be within easy reach of the bed) and slipped one on (expertly, as if I had done this many times before) – and the course of both our lives was completely altered.

Why hadn’t I done that? It wasn’t as if I had got carried away. I had actually thought about it at the time. I had been anxious to please. Somehow I had got the impression that she didn’t want me to wear one. “It’s OK,” she had said. “I won’t get pregnant.” I had taken this to mean that she must be using some sort of contraception herself. But it wasn’t as if I had just taken this at face value and carried on, unable to stop myself. It sounds almost ridiculous now – but I hesitated before carrying on. I had intended to use a condom. Now I needed to find lots of reasons to justify not using one. First of all, I told myself that if you couldn’t trust the person you were in a relationship with, then it couldn’t be worth much – and I desperately wanted this relationship to be worth something. So I had to take her at her word. And then, with flawless logic, I had concluded that whether or not she was using contraception, the charmed life I had led over the past few weeks would somehow carry me through. The logic involved went something like this: plenty of people must sleep together without using contraception, but how many unwanted pregnancies did you hear about? Not that many. Chances were, it would turn out alright. I had worked hard to get to university and I deserved a break. Life owed me one. Surely it would forgive me one night of passion? By this time, Kay had begun to suspect that something was amiss and asked me if I was alright, but I said yes, I’d never been more alright in my life. And with another impressive leap of faith, I dismissed all such worries from my mind and we carried on fumbling away in the dark.

As I replayed these thoughts in my head, I could scarcely believe my own stupidity. Everything had been going so well. And now I had ruined it. The fact that I had actually thought about it at the time and weighed up in my mind whether or not to go on made it even worse. It made me realise just how easily it could have turned out differently. There was no sense of inevitability about it at all. It was just sheer, blind stupidity. And yet it was quite irreversible. I could go over it as many times as I liked in my head, but there was no way of undoing it.

And then there was the embarrassment of it all. I was supposed to be an intelligent young man, aware of the biological processes which caused men and women to make babies. How was I going to explain it to my friends, my family? I could imagine them all shaking their heads in disappointment and disapproval, stunned by my stupidity. Finally, I thought of Kay, who was

looking at me anxiously, waiting for a response.

“I’ve been really stupid,” I said, miserably.

“We both have,” she said. There was a long silence.

“How long have you suspected?” I asked, eventually.

“Since last week, when I didn’t have my period,” she replied.

“Why didn’t you say something before, if you were worried about it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I couldn’t be sure. There didn’t seem much point in both of us worrying about it. And I thought you’d be angry with me.”

“Why would I be angry? It’s as much my fault as it is yours.”

“Is it?” she asked. “I don’t know. I feel like it’s my fault, really. So I wouldn’t blame you if you just got up and walked out.”

“If I’m angry with anyone, I’m angry with myself for being so stupid,” I said, feeling that this wasn’t the moment to be apportioning blame.

But now that she had raised the issue of whose fault it was, I began to wonder where the blame really lay. After all, if she hadn’t said “It’s OK, I won’t get pregnant,” then in all probability we wouldn’t be having this conversation now. I wanted to ask her why she had said that. But it wouldn’t change anything – Kay would still be pregnant and my feelings towards her would still be the same. The only benefit would be to salve my own conscience. I told myself that it would be far nobler to simply let the subject drop.

As if Kay had guessed what I was thinking, she said:

“You don’t have to be this reasonable about it, you know. I meant it when I said I wouldn’t blame you if you just walked away.”

This put me on the spot. I repeated that I felt it was as much my fault as hers and that I didn’t believe in running away from my responsibilities.

“OK,” she said, “if that really is the way you feel. But if you want to take some time to think about it, that’s fine by me.”

Part of me was tempted to say, “Yes, let’s sleep on it and see how we feel about things tomorrow.” But in spite of everything, I knew that my feelings towards Kay hadn’t changed. “I don’t need to think about it,” I said. “It’s what I want.”

Kay nodded and took a deep breath. “OK. What are we going to do then?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. And after a pause : “What are your views on abortion?”

The test

Kay said she didn’t feel ready to have children. I felt relieved. I wasn’t ready either. But the thought of an abortion scared her. I asked her if she had taken a pregnancy test. She said not. Then how could she be so sure? Couldn’t there be another explanation? I knew I was clutching at straws. But if it wasn’t certain that she was pregnant, there was still a possibility that everything could be salvaged. The last five minutes could be reversed and Kay’s pregnancy would be exposed as an illusion. It would simply dissolve under the pressure of close scrutiny and I would be returned to the state of grace I had so briefly enjoyed before. Perhaps the whole thing had been providentially engineered so that I would truly appreciate my good fortune. So for me, the logical next step was to put an end to the uncertainty.

Kay wouldn’t buy a pregnancy test herself, so it was up to me to return to Boots the Chemists the next day to acquire one. It was surprisingly expensive for such an insubstantial-looking box. I supposed it must be because they didn’t sell that many. It wasn’t exactly the sort of thing you would buy every day. As I walked to the check-out till, I steeled myself to look the shop assistant in the eye, as if this was just a routine domestic purchase. I tried to imagine that the packet

was something quite ordinary, like a small box of teabags. The shop assistant just looked at me with a blank, bored expression. But I couldn't maintain eye contact and looked down at the counter, where my eyes inadvertently came to rest on the display of condoms. So many different types. And I hadn't managed to use even one of them.

On the way back, I thought about what the result of the test might be. I decided that it was important not to put all my faith in the possibility that there was some other explanation for Kay having missed her period. So I assumed the worst. This was in the irrational hope that by making this assumption, the worst would be less likely to prove true – and in the knowledge that if it did prove true, then at least it would cushion the blow.

It took a while to persuade Kay to use the test. I had assumed that she would look at things the way I did. That meant that proof was required, hard evidence to demonstrate beyond doubt that she was indeed pregnant. In my eyes, the possibility that she might be pregnant – without actually knowing one way or the other – was somehow worse than the certainty that she actually was. But she didn't seem to see things in quite the same way. Eventually, she agreed and disappeared off to the toilet with a plastic cup. I sat in her room, reading the instructions. If the chemical indicator at the end of the plastic tab changed colour, that meant you were pregnant. There was also something about the potential for error and advice that you should go and see a doctor for confirmation. But I was prepared to be convinced by the results of the test, whatever its indications were.

Kay came back into the room and shut the door.

“Look,” she said, holding out the plastic tab. “I can't believe it.”

The indicator had changed colour.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. “I can't believe it.” I put my arms around her. The result seemed to be more of a shock to Kay than it had been to me. I felt as if our roles had been reversed. She had seemed so calm about it before. Now it was as if she had never really been convinced of her pregnancy in the first place. I had assumed that she would have adopted the same approach as I had and counted on the worst. After all, from the way she had talked to me the previous night, she seemed to believe she was pregnant. I had thought that this was why she had been so opposed to taking the test – because she regarded it as somehow superfluous, a confirmation of the obvious. But perhaps it was because, if the test was positive, then it would extinguish all hope that there might be another explanation for her missing period. Now I was the one who appeared more prepared for the confirmation provided by the test. Unlike my failure to wear a condom, the test result seemed to have a dull inevitability about it. It was what I had steeled myself to expect because I hadn't wanted to build up false hopes only for them to be shattered. But I had no answer to Kay's question. I hadn't thought that far ahead.

That night we slept together in Kay's room. She made another startling announcement, for which I (again) felt completely unprepared. She told me that, despite everything, she thought she was falling in love with me. She said she'd never told anyone that before. This caught me off guard. If she had said this to me the week before, I would probably have replied without hesitating. I would have said that I had fallen in love with her and that I had never felt like this about anyone before either. All of which would have been true. I would have meant every word of it. But her pregnancy had made everything more complicated. I didn't feel able to think about the relationship over the longer term – all I could think about was her pregnancy and what we were going to do about it. Now her declaration seemed to carry with it all sorts of unforeseen complications. Was it that she really wanted to have the baby and that she was looking for some sign of commitment from me? I reproached myself for thinking this of her, but I couldn't dismiss the thought from my mind. And now the clock was ticking against me – the more I hesitated, the more it looked as if I felt unable to reciprocate.

I remembered once saying “I love you too” to a girl I had known whilst still at school. But I hadn't been in love with her at all. I just hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings. I thought it sounded false at the time and hated myself for saying it. Now part of me wanted to say it as if I meant it –

but my head was so full of doubts that I didn't know if it would come out right. And then I decided that I had probably waited too long anyway. Whatever I said now, it would sound lame. The best option was simply to kiss her and remain silent, as if this would somehow express how I felt. We drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Alternatives

In the days that followed, neither of us dared tell anyone else. Kay didn't turn up to lectures. I made myself go to lectures in the hope that it would take my mind off things. But what the lecturer said didn't seem remotely important. I looked around at all the other students – some bored, some studiously taking notes, others whispering furtively to one another. If only they knew. But they were alright. They could continue with a carefree existence, go out, have a good time, get drunk, have sex. As I gazed enviously around the hall, I wished that there was someone else in my position. Was there another student with a slightly guilty, troubled expression? If only they would announce themselves to me.

Kay, meanwhile, had been to the student welfare centre looking for literature on some method of emergency contraception she had heard about – or more correctly, early abortion. She hadn't felt able to talk to anyone about it, so had just picked up some leaflets. There were two methods. One was a pill, the other involved insertion of an intra-uterine device to induce a miscarriage. You needed to do something about it within days of intercourse. It was now nearly two weeks since we had last slept together, so she was far too late. But the leaflet seemed to have got Kay thinking. She explained to me that she had been out for a run in the hope that strenuous exercise would induce a miscarriage. It hadn't worked. I was horrified. I told her that if we were going to do anything about it, it would have to be done properly, under medical supervision. I had visions of her going to some back-street clinic to be ministered to by a sinister old woman with a bent coat hanger and some knitting needles. But Kay wouldn't call anyone. In frustration, I borrowed a phone book from one of the public phone booths and started making a list of numbers to ring. Kay still refused to make the call.

Later that day, when I was alone, I decided to call them myself. They were very sympathetic, the people on the other end of the phone. They didn't reproach me for getting Kay pregnant in the first place and explained calmly what the options were. There were not too many. Kay could either choose to have the baby or have it aborted. She would have to wait seven or eight weeks before she could safely have an operation. I didn't know if I could face having the situation unresolved for that length of time. And then there was the question of how Kay would react. I wasn't sure how she would cope with having to wait that long either.

I would like to be able to say that I agonised over the rights and wrongs of killing a fellow human being (or at least, something that was very soon going to turn into one). But I didn't. I preferred to look at it the other way around. I told myself that, had we used contraception, as we (or at least I) had intended, none of this would have happened. So by going for a termination, we were simply bringing about the state of affairs which would have existed if we had been more careful. But that was about the extent of my consideration of the issue.

When I discussed it with Kay, she said that she was afraid of having the operation. She explained that it was the thought of them putting tubes inside her and vacuuming out the foetus. It was too invasive. I asked her if she had changed her mind, if she really wanted to have the baby after all. She said not. She couldn't have a child now – she wasn't ready and neither was I. It wasn't that she had any strong moral objection to abortion. It was more the process of it that scared her.

She said that she was looking into "alternative" remedies, but was rather vague about what

they were. When I pressed her on it, she mentioned some homeopathic remedy which was said to be capable of inducing a miscarriage. I thought it was a crazy idea. I didn't consider myself much of an expert, but it seemed to me that there had to be a reason why these kinds of remedies were not much favoured by the medical establishment. Either they didn't work – in which case you'd be a fool to place any faith in them – or they were downright dangerous. Again I thought of the cartoonish figure of the sinister old woman cackling over some revolting potion that she was brewing up on a grimy stove.

I couldn't understand why Kay didn't just want to get the whole thing over and done with. Why wouldn't she just make the appointment? Then we could both forget about it for the next eight weeks, get on with our lives and try not to let it ruin our relationship. Kay pointed out that it was rather difficult to forget about something that made her feel sick in the mornings and exhausted by early evening. She said she could feel herself putting on weight already. I had no reply to that.

Eventually, we reached a compromise. Kay agreed to make an appointment but at some point of her choosing. I agreed that it had to be her decision; it had to be something she felt comfortable with. Once again, I told myself that it was important to trust the person you were in a relationship with. If you didn't trust them, what future could there be? I decided that the best thing I could do was to be as supportive as possible, but to let Kay take the initiative over the abortion. So we just ignored it as a topic of conversation. Kay seemed a lot happier as a result. She was even making jokes about her morning sickness. Meanwhile, I did my best to put the whole thing out of my mind. There was, after all, very little that I could do. I tried to keep my spirits up by telling myself that by Christmas it would all be over and we could take up where we had left off, chastened by this salutary episode, but ultimately strengthened by it. For the time being though, everything seemed to be in limbo. This included the vexed question of Kay's existing boyfriend from home, a certain Pete Novotnik.

Before Kay had announced that she was pregnant, we had agreed that she would break off with him when he next came to visit her. A date had already been set for this visit and it seemed as if everything would soon be resolved. Kay didn't plan to tell Pete about me. She said she didn't want to hurt him. Now she was saying she didn't want to break it off at all. She wanted to wait until after the abortion. She would tell him at Christmas, when she went home for the holidays. Right now, she couldn't face the extra emotional strain. I was disappointed. But set against Kay's pregnancy, it didn't have the urgency it had before. I could well understand why Kay didn't want to deal with it now.

Even so, doubts began to surface in my mind. We had talked very little about the situation with Pete, about whom I knew next to nothing. I had assumed that their relationship must be on the rocks – otherwise, why would she have taken up with me so quickly? And why tell me that she loved me? I was partly responsible in that I hadn't really asked her very much about her relationship with Pete. I had told myself that the decision had to come from her. I was scared that if I pressed her on it, she might dump me instead. I wished we had discussed the issue more. Then at least I could feel some confidence that everything would be resolved once the abortion was over. But I remained fearful that if I pushed her now, that might mean the end of our relationship for good.

Things drifted along like this for another few weeks. I became more and more anxious about the abortion, but didn't dare tackle Kay directly on the subject for fear that it would provoke a confrontation. Kay never raised the subject herself without prompting. In view of our agreement to drop the subject, I didn't want to push her too hard to talk about it. But I was getting increasingly anxious about the lack of a definite plan. I knew from the phone calls I had made several weeks before that there were waiting lists for the operation. At this rate, she would have to wait until the New Year. As far as I was concerned, we had already agreed that the situation couldn't be allowed to go unresolved into the Christmas holidays. Now there was a real possibility that it would still be there at the end of term. I felt that I had no choice but to try to force a decision out of her. I told

myself that it was for her own good as well as my own – although my main motivation was that I found it intolerable not having the security of knowing that “arrangements” had been made. I could not understand how Kay could just let things drift in this way.

When I confronted her about it, I was surprised at how she reacted. I had convinced myself that she was afraid of the operation and that she was just trying to put off having to make a decision. As a result, I had expected an angry, emotional reaction to my questions. I thought I would have to explain what was on my mind, accuse her of putting off the decision and make her face up to the consequences of further delay.

But Kay responded quite calmly. She seemed quite content to talk about it. She said she had been to see a doctor to talk through the options, but hadn't made up her mind yet about what to do.

I asked her if she was having second thoughts and wanted to have the baby after all. But she said not. It was just that she didn't like the idea of the operation. When I asked her if she had talked to anyone else about her concerns, she said had raised it with her GP, who had played down the risks. But she obviously wasn't convinced. I began to wonder if she was just using these doubts as a way of putting off making a decision until the last possible moment.

“I know you think I'm being irrational,” she said, as if sensing my impatience. “But it's a lot to come to terms with. I think I'm closer to a decision than I was, say, a couple of weeks ago. And I know there's not much time left. But this is a big decision for me and I want to be sure I'm doing the right thing. So you're just going to have to be patient with me. I promise you that I will take a decision soon – I'm just not quite ready yet.”

She understood that I was concerned but at the end of the day, it was essentially her problem. From her point of view, it just made matters more complicated if she constantly had to take account of my feelings.

“But I feel responsible,” I replied, rather helplessly. “How can I not feel bad about it?” It seemed as if she was saying that her life would be easier if I just walked away. Yet I felt a moral obligation to make good the situation I had created. Or, to put it more unkindly, making myself feel bad helped to relieve the guilt I felt over what had happened. But as Kay pointed out, there wasn't really much I could do, in practical terms. It wasn't my body that was busy getting ready to reproduce.

“I know you feel responsible,” she said. “I know you're upset. But you have to let me deal with this.” She paused and then added: “Maybe it would be better if we saw a bit less of each other. For the time being, at least.”

My stomach tightened. This was completely unexpected. In the course of our conversation, I had resigned myself to being little more than an emotional prop for Kay, as and when she needed it. I would simply have to suppress my own anxiety in order to help her get through. It would be my penance for the situation I had created. But now she was saying that I wouldn't even be allowed this meagre supporting role. Worse than that, she seemed to be suggesting that our relationship wasn't going anywhere at all. I felt a rising sense of panic.

“Do you mean I can't see you any more?” I asked, fearing the response.

“No, it's not that. I just need some time to get things straight in my own mind. Everything's so confused at the moment. I'm scared that if we carry on like this, it'll just make things worse.”

I drew some comfort from the fact that it wasn't a definite “No, I don't want to see you, it's all over.” It meant that the door was still open. But Kay seemed to hold all the cards now. She had left me with no choice but to agree to her conditions. So we agreed not to see one another for a week. Having gone to see her in the hope of sorting things out, I came away far more preoccupied than when I went in.

Long division

The next week seemed to drag on forever. There were several times when I thought of going to see her. The worst thing was not being able to talk to anyone about it. Yet I came to see this as a way of undergoing further punishment for my part in Kay's pregnancy.

So I bravely resisted the temptation to tell all and generally felt very miserable, but somehow also very virtuous at the same time. In fact, Kay appeared relieved to see me. She needed someone to talk to just as much as I did. Despite all her talk of wanting to deal with this on her own, she seemed to be glad of my company. I didn't ask whether she had decided what to do. I didn't want to spoil the most enjoyable encounter we'd had for some time. It almost felt as if we had regained the pleasure in each other's company that we had experienced in the first weeks of our relationship.

I left in optimistic mood. It seemed to me that I had been mysteriously rewarded for my acts of penance over the last week. All this contributed to my confidence that things would work out between us – that there was some divine providence at work which would ensure that my relationship with Kay would be strengthened by this experience rather than destroyed by it.

My anxiety before the meeting had been all the more acute because I knew that Pete was due to visit her over the weekend. She had already put him off on numerous occasions previously and had been adamant that this particular visit couldn't be put off without making him suspicious.

At times like this, my lack of knowledge about their relationship led me to speculate all the more about what might happen between them. But my own meeting with Kay left me reassured that she was not about to rush back into his arms.

When the Monday morning came though, Kay wasn't at lectures. I wasn't overly surprised. She had frequently complained to me of morning sickness, so I wondered if she had stayed in bed. But I felt sufficiently concerned to go round to her room after lectures, by which time it was about midday. There was no answer. I asked one of her friends if she knew where Kay was. The girl told me that Kay had seemed really upset about something, but wouldn't tell anyone what it was. She had mentioned something about her family and that she had to go home to see them. She had left about an hour ago with all her stuff. The girl said that she thought Kay hadn't really settled in and hadn't liked the course she was on. She certainly hadn't been going to lectures very much and seemed to have been spending a lot of time in her room on her own.

Why had she gone? Was it that she had finally decided in favour of Pete, rather than me? I cursed myself for not getting her home telephone number. Some further enquiries of her friends enabled me to extract a home number and address, on the pretext of her having borrowed some lecture notes which I needed back before the end of term. I called her at home. Kay answered the phone.

"Can we talk?" I asked.

"Yes, my parents can't hear in this room."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I just couldn't stand it."

"But why did you just take off like that? Why not talk to me first?"

"I don't know. I just couldn't stand keeping up a front any longer. It was all too much."

"Have you told your parents about it?"

"No, I haven't. Not yet."

"So...what have you told them? I mean, about why you've come back before term's finished?"

"I just said it wasn't working out with the course and I needed some time to work things out before carrying on."

"Is that true? Is that the real reason you've left?" I felt a bit stupid asking the question. I

guessed the answer was probably “no”, but I wasn’t sure what to believe anymore and I needed to hear it from Kay herself.

“No, not really,” came the reply. “I mean, I’ve had some problems with the course, but it’s not really that. It’s what I just told you. I just couldn’t stand it any more, so I had to get out.”

There was a silence. I asked: “Is it to do with Pete?”

“No. Look, I just told you, that’s not why I’ve come home. Nothing happened between us at the weekend. I just pretended to him that I wasn’t happy with the course and that’s why I was no fun to be with. But this morning, the whole thing just got to me. I couldn’t carry on with going to lectures and pretending to everyone. That’s all it is, Miles.”

“But what are you going to do now? I mean, about the abortion?” I blurted out. I knew as soon as I said it that it was completely the wrong thing to say. But I had to know. The weeks of uncertainty had made me long for a definite answer.

“I don’t know,” said Kay quietly. She paused and then said, “I suppose I’ll have to have the operation.”

“But won’t that mean telling your parents?”

“Um, no, not necessarily. I think I can get away with it by telling them that I’m going to stay with a friend while I’m in hospital.”

I sighed inwardly. It all sounded a ridiculously complex subterfuge. But there was nothing I could do about it.

“Look, I’m upset that you left without telling me,” I said. “I understand why you’ve done it, and maybe I would’ve done the same in your position, but I wish...well, I still feel responsible, I still feel it’s my fault and I wish you’d let me help instead of shutting me out all the time. I’m not asking for anything else.”

“I know you’re upset,” said Kay, “and I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you before I left. But you’d have tried to talk me out of this. I really think I would have gone crazy if I’d stayed on.”

Reluctantly, I was forced to acknowledge once again that there was nothing I could do. It was out of my hands. But the sudden change in her mood away from the optimism of our last meeting made me wonder whether I had (not for the first time) completely misjudged the direction things were going in.

When I phoned her later that week, she was reticent and difficult to talk to. She told me that she had, at long last, made an appointment to have the abortion. She mentioned a date a couple of weeks from now. I should have felt relieved, but sensed that she was withholding something from me. When I asked if I could see her at some point, maybe after the operation, she made excuses, saying it would all be very difficult and she was still trying to keep the whole thing a secret. Finally, she said:

“Look, Miles, there’s something I’ve got to talk to you about. There’s no easy way to tell you.” My stomach tightened the way it had done the last time she had adopted this coded way of warning me that bad news was on the way. “I’ve been thinking about us...and I think it would be better if we stopped seeing each other. I’m sorry, but that’s my decision.”

“But – can’t we – can’t we at least discuss it?” I said. “I mean, why? Why are you doing this? I don’t understand.” I felt helpless, standing there in the cold phone box, watching the traffic go past as my money slowly counted down.

“Look, it really doesn’t matter why I’ve done it – it’s just what I’ve decided. I still care about you, and I’d like to stay friends, but we can’t go on seeing each other.”

“Have you got back together with him?”

There was a silence. “That’s it isn’t it?” I said. “You have, haven’t you? Tell me! Have you got back together with him or not?”

“Yes.”

I slammed the receiver down.

That was not our last conversation, but it may as well have been. I phoned her several times

after that. These exchanges consisted largely of me either pleading with her in the vain hope of resurrecting our relationship or berating her in an equally vain attempt to make her feel so overcome with guilt that she would relent and have me back. I had usually spent most of the day (and previous night) rehearsing the arguments in my head. But the eventual conversation hardly ever followed the path I expected it to and my carefully engineered ploys always came to nothing.

The more I thought about it (which was virtually all the time), the more bitter I became about the way that I had been treated. I felt that she had strung me along, used me as an emotional prop and then dumped me when it suited her. I was certainly in no mood to be sympathetic to – or even to appreciate – the state that Kay must have been in whilst waiting for the abortion. So it was probably inevitable that things would end with a blazing row; we said some very unpleasant things about one another and I vowed never to speak to her again. This turned out to be an easy vow to keep, because Kay never came back to university after Christmas. I heard that she was getting married to Pete later that year. But no one that I knew from university was invited to the wedding.

Part of me was glad that she hadn't come back. But part of me hoped that we might meet again at some point, on the off-chance that seeing me in the flesh would somehow be sufficient to change her mind. For months, I entertained fantasies along these lines, always ending with her recognising the error of her ways and with me magnanimously accepting her profuse apologies for the way that she had treated me. But I neither saw nor heard anything from her until she phoned me after Pete had disappeared, all those years later.

* * * * *

PART TEN

2005

Yellow post-it note

I started writing this account wanting other people read it. Now wish that I had deleted it while I still had the chance. Why didn't I do that? After all, I had already made up my mind that it was never going to be published. So why did I carry on?

The short answer to all these questions is: Susan. In the few weeks that we've been seeing each other, I have never felt happier. We've been talking about going away together for a few months on a kind of extended holiday. We've both got enough savings to do it and Susan reckons she's overdue for a career break. My publishers have given me another eighteen months to finish the biography of Pete – so I'll be able to put that on hold for a while. Meanwhile, I've been making plans to hand over the reins of novotnik.com and all the other publishing activities to someone else.

As for this account, it no longer seemed to matter. When I re-read it, I barely recognised myself; I sound like a kind of 21st century Holden Caulfield, droning on about how everything and everyone really sucks, especially Pete and all his E-Gnosis acolytes. I almost deleted it there and then.

But I could see that this person who I barely recognised had a problem; he had never really got over the failure of his relationship with Kay. Would he, I wondered, ever be able to start afresh on a new relationship? Or was he so hung up on Kay that any such attempt was doomed to failure? What if he ended up losing Susan – all because he had failed to come to terms with the loss of Kay?

This last question terrified me. Things had been going so well with Susan that I hadn't

really wanted to analyse it; I just wanted to enjoy it while it lasted. But what if my relationship with Kay really was unfinished business? What if it was lurking in the shadows, ready to ambush me when I least suspect it?

So that's why I decided to write about how Kay and I first met. I wrote it quickly, over a couple of days. I was astonished at my speed of download; it all came pouring out, much faster than any previous sections of this account. And to my immense relief, I felt nothing. It didn't seem to matter any more either.

That evening, Susan stayed the night at my flat. Over a bottle of wine, we talked about our plans for going away, making a list of countries we wanted to visit. I knew she had to be up early the next day, so didn't think anything of it when I awoke to find her gone. It was only later that I found the bright yellow post-it note stuck to my computer screen. It said: "YOU LYING BASTARD."

There was no further explanation. There didn't need to be. Even before I had peeled off the note, the file that Susan had been reading was plain to see. It described our first meeting. Having finished my account of what happened when I first met Kay, I had been looking back over earlier sections to see what, if anything, was worth salvaging – or if I should just delete the whole thing. Carelessly, I had left it open on my computer. Susan must have woken up early and started reading it.

I read the chapter again with increasing horror. It described our meeting in the café. She must think that I have deceived her all along – that our entire relationship is pure manipulation on my part.

Unable to get through to her on the phone, I went round to her flat. I've have been back there countless times now, but there's never been any sign of her.

In desperation, I have emailed her all the files and urged her to read everything, then make up her mind. At the time, it seemed obvious that the best policy was to be completely open with her. I cursed myself for not having told her the truth before.

But over the past couple of days, I have started to wonder if it might have been a mistake to send that email. Re-reading the earlier chapters, it occurs to me that Susan could easily have formed the view that I am still in love with Kay – and that I am not just deceiving her but deceiving myself as well. So it's entirely possible that my email has only served to make matters worse.

In the meantime, the only way I can think of to retrieve the situation is to finish this account once and for all. Then she will have the full story – and finally, perhaps, she will see that I am telling the truth.

* * * * *

PART ELEVEN

2001

Radio silence

Extract from novotnik.com:

Still life

background also white
to the untrained eye
out lines hard
to deter mine

appears to extend
indefinitely in
all directions

pairs of trained eyes
move about
with confidence
fac i alfea tures
bloc k ed o ut
with white masks

pupils dance around:
binary formations
of black pixels
shifting at random

slig htcu rrents
of a ir
in otherwise care
fully regulated
atmosp h e r e
betray the presence
of larger forms
in motion

something is
being made
is it is it is it is it
is erased

everything white

NOTES: According to PN, this message was evidence that “the Overmind is starting to show signs of ebbing in and out of consciousness, possibly due to the draining effect of attacks by forces wishing to undermine it.” That interpretation may have been fuelled by the decreasing number and frequency of the messages. By the time of his death, communications appear to have ceased altogether; PN’s final notes indicate that he had received no new messages for several weeks. He appears to have become increasingly anxious about this, fearing that the Overmind had found another “channel” through which it preferred to communicate – or, worse still, that he had somehow betrayed it to the “forces of darkness.”

Reconstruction

It was early evening and it was raining. Pete gazed out of the window and tried to make out the individual droplets of rain as they fell. It was difficult to see them against the darkening grey sky. He found that it worked better if you fixed your gaze against something with more texture and solidity, such as the flaking paint of the house opposite. Even then, it was virtually impossible to pick out a particular droplet and follow its progress down towards the ground.

From the window of Pete's bedsit, the rain looked like something that fell in long strands from the clouds, as if God were tipping out an endless stream of translucent thread noodles, so fine and so translucent that they were scarcely visible and disintegrated on hitting the ground. Trying to make out the individual droplets was futile. Pete looked up at the clouds. There was no sign of the rain easing off.

He picked up the two packages he was intending to deliver and made for the door. The first was round, about the size of a football. Pete had not done a particularly good job of wrapping it, and bits of overlapping paper stuck out at odd angles. Depending how you held the package, you could see that the words "Happy" and "Birthday" appeared in a repeating pattern.

The second package was more soberly wrapped in plain brown paper, tightly bound up with shiny, dark brown parcel tape. Pete seemed to have got rather carried away with the parcel tape and had wound it repeatedly around the sides of the package, as if he were anxious that the contents might otherwise burst out unexpectedly. My name and address were on the front of it.

Locking the door of the bed sit behind him, Pete walked down to the street to where his car was parked and set out on his final journey.

If I were filming a documentary about Pete's last hours it would be incumbent upon me to display the words "RECONSTRUCTION" in large letters at the bottom of the screen whilst an actor played out this little scene. The camera would linger on his mournful expression as he gazed soulfully out of the window. Meanwhile, sombre music would be playing in the background, slowly building the tension and signalling to the audience that something dramatic was probably about to happen.

Of course, I have no way of knowing exactly how Pete felt or what he did before he set out that evening. But I remember distinctly that it was raining – it had been raining all day. And I know for a fact that he had two packages with him that evening, more or less as I have described them.

The God helmet

For a long time, I held to the view that towards the end of his life, Pete had simply gone mad. If I am honest about it though, I don't really believe that people "simply" go mad. What goes on in people's heads is not usually simple. But I resisted taking a more nuanced approach to the subject because I regarded Pete's madness as a self-inflicted wound. I felt that putting a more sophisticated medical label on his condition would absolve him of all responsibility for what happened.

This may seem a touch unsympathetic. After all, if someone goes mad, how is that their fault? Surely it implies a loss of control, an involuntary surrender to the irrational? I was certainly prepared to concede that by the time Pete came to visit me to talk about getting back together with Kay, he might well have reached the point of no return. But even if that were the case, I reasoned, it did not excuse him from pursuing a path which led directly to madness. He had allowed himself to become obsessed with E-Gnosis to the exclusion of everything else in his life. He then compounded the problem by disappearing. In doing so, he cut himself off from anyone who might have been able to stop him becoming completely delusional. I felt that he could not escape

responsibility for these conscious decisions.

So it was an uncomfortable realisation for me when I discovered that there might well have been a medical explanation for Pete's "madness". It was – is – tempting to ignore it, because it feels as if I am letting him off the hook. In fact, when I started writing this account, I had decided to gloss over it for precisely that reason. But I have changed my mind, because what matters now is to prove to Susan that I am capable of being honest.

It's not just about honesty though. Recently, it's become painfully apparent to me that I have fallen victim to a kind of madness myself – a tendency to blind myself to evidence which didn't fit with what I wanted to believe. I prefer to think of myself as reasonably sane. But if I were to simply ignore a piece of evidence which contradicts my view of Pete's behaviour, what does that say about my own state of mind? So if I want to retain any vestige of credibility, I can't simply brush the evidence under the carpet.

My realisation that Pete might have been suffering from some kind of recognised medical condition came several years after his death. I was watching a TV science documentary about temporal lobe epilepsy, a condition which causes people to experience intense hallucinations. Many of them reported that during their seizures, they believed that they were in the presence of God. At first, I didn't make the connection with Pete's description of his encounters with the Overmind. The possibility only occurred to me when other, more physical symptoms were mentioned. For example, many sufferers report a feeling of déjà vu, strange taste sensations and a churning feeling in the stomach – all of which Pete had mentioned.

Further research (courtesy of the internet, of course) revealed that although seizure of the temporal lobes can cause people to black out completely, there are cases where this doesn't happen; the sufferer simply feels detached from his surroundings for a short period, often just a few minutes, and then returns to normal. But the real clincher, so far as I was concerned, is that temporal lobe epilepsy is often associated with hyperreligiosity and hypergraphia; what better explanation could there be of the pages and pages of quasi-religious theorising that Pete generated on the subject of the "messages" he claimed to have received from the Overmind and his interest in E-Gnosis?

The last piece of the jigsaw was provided by a sequence of the documentary about a girl who suffered frightening hallucinations at night. A scientist who was researching the effect of electromagnetic waves on the brain was called in to investigate. He concluded that the culprit was a digital clock which was emitting an unusual pattern of waves. Sure enough, when the clock was removed, the nightmares went away. The same scientist had also rigged up a piece of equipment which had become known as the "God helmet." It was intended to stimulate the temporal lobes with electromagnetic waves to see if this would induce a state of mind similar to that experienced by sufferers of temporal lobe epilepsy. Some volunteers reported that they felt very little, but others said that they genuinely felt as if they were in the presence of some kind of God-like entity. It was suggested that temporal lobe epilepsy sufferers were probably at the more sensitive end of the scale.

All this got me thinking about whether Pete's "seizures" could have had an external source. Could Pete's computer have had the same effect as the digital clock in the girl's bedroom? That would certainly explain why he had experienced these episodes whilst watching the interference pattern generated by Karl's software.

I wondered why he hadn't been to see a doctor about it. But whereas many other sufferers appear to have much more frightening experiences, Pete seems to have been one of the lucky few where the seizures leave the individual with a feeling of euphoria. So why would he have felt the need to see a doctor about them?

Initially, I kept these thoughts to myself. But I couldn't resist logging onto novotnik.com using one of my alter egos to ask whether anyone else had seen the documentary – and if so, did they think that Pete could have been suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy? This produced the usual abusive responses – probably conditioned in part by the fact that the alter ego I had chosen, SelfishMeme, was the one that I had used to make the most sceptical and provocative statements.

The true believers had (quite correctly) got SelfishMeme down as someone who was really just out to cause trouble.

The next time I raised it with a true believer, I was rather more circumspect. I had arranged a telephone interview with Karl, ostensibly to follow up on some questions I had asked him when researching my biography of Pete. At his request, I had e-mailed him the questions in advance. One of them asked him what he thought of suggestions that Pete might have had temporal lobe epilepsy. Since I wasn't yet ready to "come out of the closet" as a sceptic, I phrased the question in a way which implied that I didn't attach much credence to this view. But when we got to that question, Karl's answer took me by surprise:

"Yeah, temporal lobe epilepsy – now, that's an interesting one. I'm really grateful to you, Miles, for switching me on to this. You know, it's completely changed my thinking."

I was taken aback. Had Karl suddenly ceased to be a true believer? Had my simple question shaken his faith to its very core? Or was he just pulling my leg?

"So... let me get this straight," I said. "Are you saying that Pete's claims about having actual contact with the Overmind can be explained as, well, hallucinations?"

"Yes and no. It's certainly possible that Pete had temporal lobe epilepsy. At any rate, I reckon his lobes were at the more sensitive end of the scale, if you know what I mean. But I'm ninety-nine per cent sure that his experiences were induced by the OM." (Karl always abbreviated Overmind to "OM".)

"How would it have managed to do that?"

"It's simple. Think of the temporal lobes as being like the cellphone antennae of the brain. If you send out the right signals in the form of electromagnetic waves, you can beam your message directly into the brain. And that's what the OM was doing. No need for hard-wiring – it went straight for the wireless route. Simple but brilliant!"

I imagined Karl beaming smugly at the other end of the line, delighted at having transformed what had started out as a relatively prosaic explanation of Pete's behaviour into something which supported his own, outlandish views.

"But wouldn't the Overmind have needed some kind of transmitter for that?" I asked, wondering how it could suddenly have acquired such complete mastery of the electromagnetic spectrum.

"No, I think it was just able to modulate the frequency of the electromagnetic waves coming out of Pete's computer. And I don't think that's such a big deal – not when you consider that the OM was able to make messages appear on the screen as well.

"But the thing I'm really excited about is what all this means for the Singularity," said Karl, barely able to contain himself. He proceeded to tell me about something called transcranial electromagnetic stimulation, which is a process used in brain surgery. It involves zapping the brain with quite powerful electromagnetic waves. The equipment sounded a bit like a more sophisticated, turbo-charged version of the "God helmet". What had got Karl so excited was some research suggesting that if you stimulated certain areas of the brain with this equipment, it gave people access to abilities more usually associated with autistic savants – like the capacity to do complex mathematical equations or amazingly lifelike drawings, all without any prior tuition or practice.

"It looks like we all have these genius-like abilities," Karl continued, breathlessly, "but in most people they seem to be switched off or under-developed. So the brain is really a kind of super-computer operating at maybe ten to twenty per cent of its actual capacity. If the Overmind could allow us to access that additional eighty percent of processing power – well, the implications are simply amazing. The increase in human brain power would massively accelerate our technological progress. What's more, all this could be done without the need for icky human-machine interfaces – you know, wires or nanobots going into your brain and invasive stuff like that. Which is a good thing, because frankly, I think that stuff makes a lot of people feel a bit squeamish. Instead, we'd all be part of this giant wireless network with the OM at the centre.

“So if I wanted to communicate with you, I wouldn’t have to phone you or email you – I could just think about it. The OM would pick up my thoughts and beam them into your brain. And if we’re doing that kind of thing all the time, it seems completely natural to me that when our physical bodies died, we would allow the information in our brains to be absorbed into the OM – so there would be a kind of life after death.

“Which is pretty much what we’ve been predicting would happen with the Singularity anyway – but this temporal lobes thing sheds a whole new light on how it might actually occur. And I have you to thank for that, Miles.”

I didn’t say anything. Not for the first time, I had totally underestimated both the resilience and the ingenuity of Karl and his acolytes when faced with evidence which appeared to challenge their beliefs.

“Are you still there Miles?”

“Yes.”

“I was kind of hoping you’d be as excited about this as I am,” said Karl, sounding a trifle disappointed at my failure to express much in the way of enthusiasm.

“It’s a fantastic idea,” I said, slowly.

“Is that a ‘but’ I can hear coming?” said Karl.

I sighed. “Well, the thing is – no one’s actually heard anything from the Overmind since Pete’s death. And there doesn’t seem to be much progress towards the Singularity that we can actually point to. It’s all theories. I just wonder when it’s really going to happen, that’s all.”

“Miles, it sounds to me like you’re having a sort of crisis of faith. Am I right?”

“I suppose so.”

“Well, don’t worry, we all get that sometimes. What you need is a little pep talk from Uncle Karl. So it’s lucky you called me today.” Firstly, Karl reminded me that humans are not good at understanding the exponential growth curve which is supposed to represent progress towards the Singularity. He launched into what future generations will no doubt come to regard as the parable of the wireless broadband:

“Let’s say we have a city. At first only a small area of the town centre is covered by wireless broadband. But growth is exponential. So every year the area covered doubles. To begin with, the rate of growth doesn’t feel that much – and it takes maybe ten years to get half the city covered. At this point, there are still large areas where there is no coverage, so to all the citizens, it feels as if full coverage is a long way off - maybe another ten years. But in reality, because half the city is covered already and the area with wireless coverage doubles every year, full coverage is only a year off. So you see,” said Karl, cheerily, “it could well take us all by surprise.”

“Fair enough,” I said, grudgingly. “But that doesn’t really explain why no one’s heard from the Overmind since Pete’s death. How can there be progress towards the Singularity if there’s no Overmind?”

“That’s a good question,” said Karl. “Have you heard of the HAARP network?”

“The what network?”

“H-A-A-R-P. Stands for High-Frequency Active Auroral Research Program. It’s an array of transmitters in Alaska. They were built by the US military in the Cold War. One idea was to bathe enemy territory in electromagnetic waves at a frequency which would make everyone feel depressed and unable to function properly. It’s pretty crazy stuff,” said Karl, without a trace of irony.

“Anyways, there’s a lot of speculation about what this network is being used for now. Some folks say it’s being used to control the weather or to trigger earthquakes. But all that’s just a smokescreen. It’s really being used to block the OM’s transmissions and stop progress towards the Singularity.

“So that’s why we haven’t heard from the OM lately,” he concluded, confidently. “But it’ll find a way through. It’s just a matter of time. It can’t be stopped.”

Listening to this, I marvelled at the capacity of Karl and his acolytes to absorb information which might at first appear to undermine their beliefs and then transform it into something which ultimately reinforced them. So it was that Pete's temporal lobe epilepsy (assuming that is the correct diagnosis) was absorbed effortlessly into the E-Gnosis worldview, with its all-consuming vision of progress towards the Singularity as an epic struggle between forces of light and darkness.

It reminded me of that Philip Larkin poem where he talks about creating a religion with water as its central symbol. E-Gnosis didn't make use of water for symbolic purposes, but it had all the properties of water; whenever it encountered an obstacle, it would never tire of looking for ways to dislodge it, dissolve it or flow around it. Sitting there at the other end of the phone, armed only with my puny scepticism, I felt like King Canute, ordering the tide to go back.

Too late

The last time I saw Pete was on Jonah's birthday. I knew it was his birthday because Kay had told me a couple of days earlier. But I ought really to have been able to work it out long before – at least to within a month or so. It was simply a case of putting together Jonah's age with the number of years since I had met Kay. A straightforward piece of detective work. Quite elementary, in fact.

Maybe, subconsciously, I just hadn't wanted to see it. Maybe I had blinded myself to the truth. I had assumed for all these years that Kay had gone ahead with the abortion. I was furious that she hadn't told me. If anyone had a right to know, surely it was me? I was Jonah's father – but she had kept it from me for eleven years. All that time – in which I could have got to know him, watched him grow up – was now lost forever. How could she deceive me like that? How could she live with herself, knowing that I had lost all those years of Jonah's life? Did she think I wouldn't have cared? What kind of person did she take me for?

By the time I arrived at Kay's house, I had worked myself up into a peak of righteous indignation. But I contained my fury until Kay had welcomed me inside. If she was surprised or embarrassed by the size of the birthday present I had brought for Jonah, she concealed it well. She seemed genuinely pleased that I had gone to the bother of buying him something. For a moment, I began to have doubts about whether now was really the best time to have the conversation that I had been rehearsing in my head for hours on end. But I couldn't face another night of agonising over the rights and wrongs of it all. It was better to get it all out in the open.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," I said.

"Sorry Miles – what are you talking about? Tell you what?"

"That Jonah is my son."

"What?"

"Oh come on, Kay. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. How long is it since we first met? Nearly twelve years. Eleven years and about ten months, to be precise. What happened after that? Well, not long after, you got pregnant – or had you forgotten that? And how old is Jonah? He's eleven today. Coincidence? I don't think so."

"Oh, right. And what's that supposed to prove?" This pretend innocence infuriated me. For a moment, I even had the impression that she was about to laugh – but then she seemed to think better of the idea.

"Do I have to spell it out?" I asked. "Do you need me to draw you a diagram? Or can we have a sensible discussion about it?"

"Well, all I'm saying is, how do you actually know that Jonah is your son? Based on what? So you've done a bit of arithmetic. Well, congratulations! But it doesn't prove anything."

"So what are you saying - that he's not my son?"

“For Christ’s sake Miles! Keep your voice down! Jonah’s upstairs! Look, as far as I’m concerned, it makes no difference whether he’s biologically your son or not. He was brought up with Pete as his father and that’s all that matters.”

“But you’re not denying it,” I said, unable to keep a note of triumphalism out of my voice.

Kay sighed and then said: “OK, if that’s the way you want it. No, you’re not his father.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She shrugged and looked to one side.

“Look me in the eye and tell me that he’s not my son.”

“Miles, why can’t you just believe me?”

“Because I can tell when you’re lying.”

“Oh, I see. You just know, do you? Well, you don’t know me as well as you think.”

“Stop trying to avoid the issue.”

“I’m not avoiding the issue. You are not Jonah’s father. Pete is. Don’t you think I should know?”

“Alright. Let’s get a blood test done. That’ll settle it once and for all.”

“No, I’m not having Jonah put through that. He’s been through enough lately.”

“He wouldn’t have to know what it was for.”

“The answer is no, Miles. You’ll just have to take my word for it that you are not his father.”

“I think I am.”

She looked away for a moment and then said:

“What did you have to raise this for anyway? Things were going so well between us. Why did you have to go and spoil it? OK, so you seem to get on well enough with Jonah. He likes you. And that’s really good. But you’re not his father.” She paused and then added: “Is that what all this is really about? Is it that you want kids?”

“No, that’s not it,” I snapped and then immediately regretted it. “What I mean is, I don’t know whether I want children or not. I haven’t really thought about it.” As she had done so often in the past, Kay had succeeded in wrong-footing me just when I thought that I had her on the defensive. But I was determined not to be diverted. “Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is that you kept me in the dark for eleven years. I happen to think I deserve a bit of honesty, that’s all. And I’m not leaving until I get a straight answer.” I was searching for a way of getting the upper hand now, a killer question that would put her back on the defensive. “If you’re so sure Pete’s the father, why didn’t you just come out and say so? And why are you so scared of getting a blood test done?”

Kay took a deep breath. “OK Miles, if you really want to know, I’ll tell you. When I got pregnant, I said it was you. But I was still sleeping with Pete - I just didn’t want you to know because I thought you’d be hurt. When I told him I was pregnant, he said he would stand by me. So I decided to go through with it and have the baby. Then I married Pete. That’s really all there is to it.”

This was not what I had expected. But by this stage, I didn’t want to believe her.

“So - I’m supposed to believe that it wasn’t me that got you pregnant after all?” I said, trying desperately to appear amused and in control, when in reality my confidence in the righteousness of my position was ebbing away. “You told me I was responsible just to spare my feelings? Well, I don’t buy that at all. If you knew it wasn’t me, why did you bother telling me you were pregnant?”

“I told you because I thought it would scare you off. I felt it had all got too complicated and I decided it was the best way to finish with you.”

“Oh, thanks very much. So you thought that at the first whiff of trouble, I’d be off like a shot. Like I was incapable of facing up to the responsibility. Well, that’s really nice. Thanks a lot.”

She shrugged.

“Obviously I misjudged you. I’m sorry. And then once I’d told you, I couldn’t very well retract it all and say that I’d made a mistake.”

By that point in the discussion, Kay had succeeded in casting doubt on my previously unchallengeable conclusions about Jonah’s parenthood. I tried to rationalise the doubts away by homing in on things like her unwillingness to contemplate a blood test. I told myself that it was just like her unwillingness to take a pregnancy test all those years ago – she didn’t want to face up the truth.

But I was to be deprived of the chance to continue with my cross-examination. Someone else had come into the room.

It was Pete. He was soaking wet, his curly hair plastered to his forehead. Rainwater dribbled off his waterproof coat onto the carpet.

“Hello,” he said, without smiling. We both stared at him. “I just came to pick up a few things and to drop this off.” He was carrying a large, gift-wrapped package. He put it down on the sofa. “It’s Jonah’s birthday present. I expect you thought I’d forgotten.”

“No, I ...” said Kay. “I’m just surprised to see you that’s all. I didn’t hear you come in. Well, that and the fact that I had no idea whether you were even still alive.”

Pete shrugged. “Look, I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch. I’ll go if you want. I still have my keys. Do you want them back?”

“No, it’s OK. Keep them. But I’d rather you rang the doorbell in future, if it’s all the same to you. And maybe give me a ring to let me know you were coming. But it doesn’t matter. You’re here now. Anyway, look at you – you’re wet through. Come into the kitchen and I’ll make you a cup of tea. Miles was just leaving, weren’t you?” She gave me a look which left me in no doubt that my continued presence was deeply unwelcome.

“Yes, I’d better get going,” I said. There was no prospect of getting any further with Kay that evening. I tried - and failed - to think of a plausible explanation to give to Pete as to what I was doing there. I decided to leave this to Kay. Let her deal with the awkward questions, I thought, miserably. “It’s good to see you,” I said to Pete, with as much sincerity as I could muster, probably barely disguising my irritation at his intrusion. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, you know, surviving,” he said, gloomily. His face was pale and there were smudgy dark circles under his eyes. He looked as if he hadn’t slept properly for days. Kay ushered him into the kitchen, glancing back at me to make sure I was leaving.

“I’ll see myself out,” I said.

As I made my way towards the front door, I noticed that the carpet immediately outside the sitting room door was damp. I wondered how long Pete had been standing outside in the hall, listening. I tried to think back to the moment when he had entered the room, searching for some clue in his facial expression or body language that would show whether he had heard every word we said. But his face – or rather, my memory of it – betrayed nothing. The expression was familiar from the last time I had seen him – he looked slightly disengaged from reality, as if his mind were on higher things than the trivialities of the immediate present. There was something different about it though. Perhaps it was just his tiredness, but it seemed to me that a trace of doubt had crept in, as if he were starting to lose faith in whatever deeply-held conviction had sustained him in his self-imposed isolation. Or maybe I was just seeing my own state of mind reflected back at me. I had gone in absolutely convinced that I was Jonah’s father. But after what Kay had said, I was starting to wonder if I had got it totally wrong.

Just as I was opening the front door, Pete came rushing out of the kitchen.

“Hang on a minute,” he said, slightly out of breath. For a moment, I thought that he was going to confront me. But then he said: “I’ve got something for you. Wait there.” He scurried over to his car and retrieved a second package. It was about the size of a couple of telephone directories, and wrapped in ordinary brown paper.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s what we talked about before - I want you to look after it for me. Don’t open it here,” he said, looking around nervously. “Wait until you get home.”

I wish now that I had never accepted it. Or thrown it away. But it wouldn’t have done any good. By then it was too late. The real damage had already been done.

Keep the faith

This article from “Download” magazine was published shortly after Pete’s death:

Regular readers of this column will be aware of my interest in the Singularity. I know there are some people who think I’ve gone mad. That includes the editor of this magazine [I think the word I used was “eccentric” – but that’s enough from me. Ed]. So that’s why this column hasn’t appeared for a while. It’s also why this will be my final contribution. We’ve done a deal where I can write whatever I want (so long as I don’t libel anyone).

But first I want to thank those of you who’ve kept faith with me – and who wrote in demanding my reinstatement. It’s been a wild ride and I hope you’ve got as much out of it as I have. What follows is not for the faint-hearted – but bear with me and you may find out some stuff that makes you look at things in a whole new light. Because this piece is for anyone who’s ever asked themselves: “What am I doing here? What is my purpose in life? What are we here for?”

It all starts with a simple experiment involving light. Light is a wave – you can prove this by shining a beam of light at a card with two slots on it and seeing the pattern that emerges on a projection screen behind the card. You might expect to get just two bright stripes - but in fact what you get is several stripes. This is because when the light goes through the slots, it splits into two waves. It’s just like what happens when you create two sets of ripples on a bowl of water – where two peaks or troughs meet, you get a more pronounced ripple and where a trough and peak meet, you get an interruption in the ripple effect because they’ve cancelled one another out.

But a wave is a series of particles – so what happens if you just take a single particle of light (a photon) and fire it at the two slots? Obviously, this is so small that it can’t be seen, so instead of the screen, you put a special detector on the other side of the slots. Now this time, you would expect there to be no interference pattern because waves can only exist as a series of particles and not as a single particle. So the detector ought to be registering just one particle hitting it, having emerged from whichever of the slots it happened to pass through. But the weird thing is that you continue to get the striped pattern – which ought to be impossible, because there shouldn’t have been anything else around to interfere with the single particle and create the striped effect.

Unfortunately, it seems it isn’t possible to find out what the photon is doing in between leaving the equipment which fires it and reaching the detector. One theory is that it’s the act of seeing (or in this case, the lack of it) which produces the apparently bizarre result. It’s difficult to get your head around, but it goes something like this:

We know the photon must go through the slots because we can detect it when it comes out the other side – but we can’t reach any firm conclusions about what happens before we detect it. So the theory is that maybe, during the time that we can’t see it, the photon is actually in two different positions at the same time – it could therefore be going through both slots and interfering with itself. This ability to be in two contradictory states at the same time only seems to happen when we can’t “see” or measure what’s going on.

The logical conclusion of this is that when we can see things, they take on some form of order – so instead of being in two or more different states, they become ‘fixed’ into one state or

another. This has led some theorists to speculate that maybe this is the reason why we are here – that the universe had to bring us into existence because it can only exist with the presence of intelligent observers, who are required to give it form, order and substance.

In support of this, they point to the sheer number of features of the universe which appear to be “fine tuned” to enable the existence of life – by which they mean that small deviations either way would have resulted in a universe which was incapable of producing life. I won’t bore you with all the details, but the list of features which need to be “fine tuned” in order to allow life to exist is pretty impressive. It ranges from things like the number of carbon atoms in the universe and the physics of stars right down to the conditions here on earth which make it a suitable habitat for the evolution of life. If any one of these things was even slightly different, we would not exist. You can look them up on the internet if you want to know more – just type “Strong Anthropic Theory” into any search engine.

So how do we explain all these happy coincidences? To me, it’s clear that intelligent life acts as a pattern-giving force, helping to shape the universe. The more we come to understand about it – the more we eat from the tree of knowledge – the closer the universe will be brought to a state of perfection. At present, of course, our understanding of our own world and of the universe we inhabit is limited – so the world still appears flawed.

But what if humans could use technology to evolve into some kind of super-intelligent being, like the Overmind that I’ve talked about in previous articles? Such a being would have a mental capacity that we can only dream about. It would probably be capable of perceiving and understanding everything in the entire universe – and that would be the final victory of the pattern-giving life force.

So if you’ve ever wondered why we’re here – well, there’s your answer. We are here because the universe itself needs us to be here - it needs us to bring about the Singularity.

But I want to end with a warning. There are dark forces at work which don’t want the Singularity to happen. I don’t think they’ll succeed – because eventually we’ll reach a tipping point where our momentum becomes unstoppable. But they can delay it – and that’s exactly what they’ll do if they get the chance.

Don’t let them. Keep the faith.

Dead air

The day after I had confronted Kay about Jonah, I tried to call her repeatedly, both at home and at work. It emerged that she hadn’t turned up for work that day. She hadn’t called in sick and she wasn’t supposed to be on holiday. I assumed that she had just decided to take the day off without telling anyone. Her mobile was switched off and her home telephone kept going onto the answer-phone. I left several messages asking her to call. Overnight, I had realised that by going in “all guns blazing” about Jonah, I had probably ruined my chances with her – and of having any sort of meaningful relationship with Jonah. I desperately wanted to retrieve the situation. But the more time went by, the more difficult I felt it would be to repair the damage.

Part of me wanted to say I was sorry and smooth things over, so that everything could go back to how it had been before. But I also felt confused, unsure whether to believe what she had said the previous night. Part of me hated her for saying those things. If they were true, that meant she had lied to me all those years ago – and allowed me to believe something that was entirely false. And if it had been a lie, then what future was there for us, when she couldn’t tell me the truth on something as important as this?

She had claimed that she told me she was pregnant in the mistaken belief that I wouldn’t want to have anything to do with it – and that I would be the one to bring the relationship to an end.

At first, I dismissed this out of hand. I told myself that she had only said that because I had backed her into a corner; it was the only way for her to avoid admitting that I was Jonah's father. But the more I thought about it, the more doubts began to surface in my mind.

I kept going back to what she had said to me that night we had first slept together. I had often wondered why she had said "It's OK, I won't get pregnant." At the time, I told myself that finding out why wouldn't have made any difference. So I had simply let the matter drop. But it had always puzzled me. And perhaps Kay had now given me the explanation; perhaps she had said that she couldn't get pregnant because at the time, she already was pregnant.

Initially, I told myself that this was ridiculous. How was her story about using the pregnancy to break off our relationship consistent with her subsequent behaviour towards me? She had even told me at one point that she loved me. But maybe that had more to do with the way I had behaved. I had not reacted in the way that she had expected; on the contrary, I had accepted the situation and made it clear that I would stand by her. This might have made it more difficult for her to break off the relationship. It might even have made her wonder whether she had been right to want to break it off in the first place. Maybe she had genuinely changed her mind about me for a time - only to change it back again a couple of months later. Viewed in that light, her conduct towards me didn't seem quite so puzzling.

Not that I found much comfort in this explanation. I found all these doubts intolerable. And I knew that the only way to resolve them was to go back to Kay and to keep pressing her about what had really happened.

In the meantime, I had opened the package that Pete had given me the night before. It contained a thick sheaf of loose, mostly handwritten papers. There was no covering letter or set of instructions explaining what Pete wanted me to do with them. All I had to go on was Pete's request to look after them. After skim-reading the first sheet of notes, it was obvious that I had been given a collection of Pete's interminable and increasingly paranoid ramblings about the Overmind. I shoved them back into the package and tossed them onto the floor.

Several days went past and I had still heard nothing back from Kay, despite leaving further messages for her. Her mobile was still switched off. I decided to phone her work again. I got put through to one of Kay's colleagues. Sensing that she knew more than she was telling me, I pressed her for an answer.

"Are you a relative of hers?" asked the woman.

"No. I'm a friend. A close friend. I really do need to speak to her urgently."

"And you've not spoken to any of her other friends?"

"No."

"Right." She took a deep breath. "I'm very sorry Mr Jensen, but you won't be able to speak to Kay. There's been a car accident. I'm afraid she passed away, Mr Jensen. I really am sorry."

"But... when did this happen?"

"I don't know the full details. I think it was two days ago. She was with her husband. They were both killed, I'm afraid."

"I see. Thank you," I said. I didn't feel grateful, of course. It was just something to say, a feeble attempt to mask the brutal reality of her words with a veneer of politeness.

There was a long silence. "I'm really sorry you had to find out like this," said the woman. She too obviously felt the need to say something, anything, to fill the dead air between us.

"What about Jonah - her son - was he with them?" I asked, finally.

"No, he's OK. He wasn't with them. But it's awful for him. Poor kid." This time I was grateful, but said nothing.

Once I had got over the immediate shock of the news, I was gripped by a desire to know exactly what had happened. I would probably have condemned such feelings on the part of anyone else as morbid curiosity. But having been denied the chance to see either Kay or Pete ever again, I felt an urgent need to know as much as possible about their final moments. I thought that in doing

so, I would uncover some vital piece of information which would explain exactly why this event had occurred - and that somehow, this rational explanation would remove the appalling senselessness of the accident.

Eventually, I managed to speak to a policewoman who had been at the scene of the crash. She told me that, according to eye witnesses, the car had veered erratically before leaving the road and turning over several times, finishing upside down in an adjoining field. Both Kay and Pete were dead on arrival at hospital. The emergency services were not to blame; they arrived quickly and did what they could. It was just an accident. These things happen.

Or do they? Could things have been different if I had not acted the way I had? What if I had made my feelings about Kay clear to her at an earlier stage? Maybe if I had been with her at the time, the whole thing could have been avoided. And even if the accident was somehow inevitable, at least I would have known how she felt about me. As things stood, I couldn't say for sure how she would have responded. Maybe she would just have told me not to be ridiculous. But I was unable to dismiss the possibility that she might still have been interested in me. I had simply left it too late to say how I really felt.

There was nothing in the local paper about the accident. In my thirst for information, I felt disappointed that the paper had not found out about Jonah and gone for the human interest angle – “Child Orphaned By Tragic Double Road Death” etc. Even if the article had simply regurgitated facts that I already knew, I would have found it somehow comforting to see them confirmed in smudgy black newsprint for me to read over again and again. But to the wider public, the accident was no more than another depressing addition to the statistics on road fatalities.

I found out from friends of Kay's that Jonah was now living with Kay's parents. For a short while, I seriously contemplated the idea of turning up on their doorstep and announcing myself as his true father. I fantasised about being welcomed with open arms as a ray of hope in the midst of tragedy. But what would I say to them? Would I be offering to adopt Jonah? What if Jonah didn't want to have anything to do with me? How would I feel then?

There was also the small matter of actually proving that I was his father. After what Kay had said to me, I no longer felt so sure of my ground. Part of me wanted to be bold, to seize the moment and try to salvage at least something from the situation. But there seemed to be so many risks, so many things that could go wrong. I told myself that I had to be absolutely sure that I would be doing the right thing for Jonah. And I failed to convince myself. So in the end, as usual, I did nothing.

Loss

Since both deaths were classed as being due to “unnatural causes”, there had to be an inquest. I took time off to attend the hearing.

Amongst devotees of Pete's writing, there has been much speculation about the precise causes of the accident. It has provided fertile soil for the cultivation of numerous conspiracy theories about the role of the “dark forces” which Pete was convinced were out to get him. These theories have, in turn, helped to bolster the myth of Pete's technological “martyrdom”.

At the inquest, there was no suggestion of any foul play. But it did uncover some information which has since been used to support the conspiracy theories. It emerged that Pete had been involved in not one but two car accidents that night. The first had occurred shortly after he had left Kay's that evening, when he was involved in a collision with another car. He was not seriously injured – it was just cuts and bruises - but had been taken to hospital all the same. Having received treatment, he phoned Kay, who agreed to come and collect him. The second accident had occurred in Kay's car, on the way back from the hospital.

Naturally, the conspiracy theorists have seized upon the unlikely coincidence of two car accidents in one day. They suggest that, having failed to do away with Pete the first time around, the “forces of darkness” simply tried again. They have also been quick to derive support from Pete’s own suspicions about the Overmind coming under attack from sinister forces.

But the police found no evidence of tampering with Kay’s car. They suggested that the cause of the accident was driver error, compounded by adverse weather conditions. It had been raining hard and visibility was poor. Kay had simply lost control of the car whilst driving at high speed. It appeared that she had been breaking the speed limit, probably so that Jonah wouldn’t be left on his own any longer than absolutely necessary. On the face of it, this seemed to be borne out by the statements of various witnesses, who confirmed that the car had been travelling very fast and had veered from side to side before leaving the road. One of them said that it was as if the driver had let go of the steering wheel or dozed off. Another witness said that she thought she could see a struggle going on between the passenger and the driver. The coroner concluded that this was probably just Pete realising that Kay had lost control and trying to do something about it. Although some evidence was presented about Pete’s state of mind, the coroner took the view that it had not been a major factor in the two accidents. They were just an unfortunate coincidence and verdicts of accidental death were recorded.

To me though, the second crash seemed anything but accidental. I had imagined that the focus of the inquest would be on technical issues, such as whether there had been anything wrong with Kay’s car. Listening to the evidence, however, I began to form my own theory about what had really happened that night.

Apart from Kay, it appeared that I was one of the last people to see Pete before he died. I had my doubts about his state of mind. But what concerned me most was the possibility that he had overheard what I had been discussing with Kay, standing out in the corridor in his wet clothes.

Had this made him doubt whether he was really Jonah’s father? Maybe it had made him suspect that I had been having an affair with Kay all along. It could have pushed him to attempt suicide in his own car – and having failed the first time, he had simply tried again when Kay came to pick him up. Even if I was wrong about Pete’s suicidal tendencies, there was another possible explanation for the apparent struggle in Kay’s car before it crashed. What if he had confronted her and demanded the truth about Jonah’s parenthood or her relationship with me? It could have led to a violent row. That would explain the struggle that one of the witnesses had reported.

I wanted to stand up there and then and shout out loud what I knew. But I held back, telling myself that I had to be absolutely sure of my ground. When I got home, though, having been over and over the events leading up to the accident, I had convinced myself that – one way or another - the car crash must have been his fault.

How could he be so selfish, so self-obsessed as to take not only his own life but Kay’s as well? At that point, I could no longer control my anger. I picked up the bundle of notes he had given me – which had lain unexamined on my desk since I opened them - and hurled them around the room.

Then I sat down, my head in my hands. When, after several minutes, I looked up, I saw that one of the loose pages had landed face up on the table in front of me. There, written out in Pete’s slightly scrawly hand-writing were some words which suddenly looked very familiar:

loss

everyone sits
fingering their broken light bulbs
their perfect shape
big frozen waterdrops
mute bells

only
snowflake acoustic
filament fragmentsskate
around the rim
fingernail clippings
held
in erratic orbit
everyone sits

Salvation?

In amongst pages of commentary and scribbled notes, other sheets of paper told the same story. The “messages” which Pete claimed to have been receiving from the Overmind were nothing of the sort; they were simply remnants from my own, long-abandoned website.

Later, of course, I discovered that he almost certainly had no idea where the messages came from. The most probable explanation was that they had been channelled his way by Karl’s “interference” software, which Pete had used extensively (not that this explanation made me feel any better about it). But at the time, I was convinced that he knew exactly what he was doing and had deliberately appropriated them for his own purposes. This merely fuelled my sense of righteous anger towards him.

Was there nothing in my life that he hadn’t been intent on taking away from me? First Kay, then Jonah – and now this. I felt as if I were the victim of a monstrous miscarriage of justice. I now regarded Kay as entirely innocent of any wrongdoing – despite what she had said to me before she died. In my eyes, Pete was entirely to blame for everything that had happened. And by making Kay an innocent bystander in all this, I was able to view Pete’s “crimes” as being all the more heinous.

Not long after, I started to get e-mails from Pete’s fans asking me to publish the text of the messages. Presumably he had let it be known that he had given the material to me for safe-keeping in the event of his death. I took this as a further slight on my character – evidently Pete didn’t even trust me to “do the right thing” with the messages, so he had put other people up to cajoling me into action. I wasn’t having any of it and ignored them.

This tactic of Pete’s merely strengthened my conviction that his apparent naivety was just for show – a mask intended to deflect attention away from his true Machiavellian nature. Like a fool, I had been taken in by it and fallen headlong into the trap he had set for me. And by killing himself, he had ensured that I was even deprived of the satisfaction of exacting any form of revenge.

The e-mails were polite at first, but when, after several weeks, I had still failed to respond to their entreaties, they became abusive and threatening. I was tempted to write something similarly abusive in reply. But then it occurred to me that perhaps this offered the perfect opportunity for me to exact a kind of revenge on Pete after all.

My idea was simple (or so I thought). Initially, I would play along with the senders of the e-mails. I would apologise for the delay in replying, saying that I had simply been too overcome with grief to do anything. Having gained their confidence, I would then start to publish the messages and cultivate the myth that appeared to have grown up around Pete and his precious Overmind. But little by little, I would use my editorial control to begin shaping this myth to my own ends. I would start off by leaving subtle hints that the messages were open to other interpretations, besides those set out in Pete’s commentaries. Eventually, I believed, I would succeed in restoring the messages to their original meanings and rescue them from the effects of Pete’s wilful misinterpretation.

Of course, none of this has worked out as I intended. The messages had already slipped well beyond my control before I even took them out of the package that Pete gave to me on the night he died. And by the time I came to publish them, the myth of the Overmind, E-Gnosis and Pete's role in it had acquired a momentum which I was never going to be able to stop - or even to divert onto a slightly different course.

I have kept up the pretence all this time because the money allowed me to go on believing, at least for a while, that I was somehow getting one over on Pete – and because the longer it went on, the more I became dependent on it financially. But the reality is that far from taking my revenge upon Pete, I became his bitter, envious servant, secretly despising everyone involved - most of all myself, for not having seen it coming.

When I started out, I intended this account to finally debunk the myth that had grown up around him and expose it as a sham. But the true believers believe because they want to – and nothing I say will make any difference. Besides, this account isn't about revenge any more. It stopped being about that from the moment I fell in love with Susan.

That's what it took to make me realise that, in spite of everything, I don't actually hate Pete or what he stands for. It would be more accurate to say that we have a love-hate relationship. Part of me is attracted by his unfailing optimism about the future, his wild imaginings and his enthusiasm for big ideas. But another part of me likes nothing better than to impale his delicate fantasies on the porcupine quills of my own carefully cultivated scepticism.

It's not a comfortable state of mind to be in. But to have one inclination without the other would almost certainly lead to disaster; indeed, it already has led to disaster in Pete's case. If he had only possessed the ability to stand back from his wild imaginings and look at them with a more critical eye, he might have been able to resist the gravitational pull of the Singularity. But instead he allowed himself – and others - to be sucked into it and annihilated.

There have been times when my own inclination towards scepticism has led me into similar territory; where I have hacked away at the different layers of an idea, in an attempt to reach its core, only to find that (for me, at least) there is nothing there. It is as if the centre has collapsed in on itself under the pressure of close scrutiny, leaving a void where there is no meaning at all, rather than too much.

But somehow – unlike Pete - I have always managed to pull back from it. And that's because part of me – a tiny, shrivelled part, no doubt - still wants to believe in Pete's optimistic vision of the future. Despite the tide of scepticism that threatens to submerge it, that part of me is still prepared to have faith. So perhaps my connection with Pete has not been the curse that I originally believed it to be when I began this account. Perhaps it has, in fact, saved me from myself.

I have you, Susan, to thank for helping me to see that.

PART TWELVE

2006

Jonah

Today, for the first time in over a year, I returned to my usual waiting place in the park. I kept running through what I planned to say. I waited until four o'clock, thinking that I must have missed him or that he wasn't coming. Then, at last, he appeared, sauntering along with his hands in pockets, his school tie askew and his blue sports bag slung over his shoulder. He was listening to

something on earphones, nodding his head in time to the beat.

I followed him out of the park gates as he headed down the road towards the Seven-Eleven at the corner of his street. I hesitated, then increased my pace. I knew that if I didn't do it now, he would be within sight of his grandparents' house – and the opportunity would be lost. I stretched out my hand to touch him on the shoulder and was about to call out his name. But something made me hold back. So I just stood there, looking at my hand in disgust, as if it were covered in infectious boils.

Jonah turned the corner, oblivious to my presence.

Particles

What is it that made me hold back?

At the beginning of this account, I suggested that it was most unlikely to serve as a “boot-up disk for the operating system of the soul.” It would instead be more “a download of its corrupted contents.”

The implication is that having “downloaded”, having purged it all from my system, I should feel able to move on, to “upgrade” even. In which case, I should view this “confession” of mine as something fundamentally positive - a way of bringing dark, chaotic emotions out into the light so that they can be processed and filed away in an orderly fashion. Ultimately, I should see the outcome as a hard-fought victory for the healing, pattern-giving force that was championed by Pete in his article about that experiment involving particles of light.

But try as I might to make myself believe all that, I can't do it. The truth is that by the end, this account had only one purpose – to persuade Susan to come back to me. And in that, it has failed utterly. It's been months since I emailed the final chapters to her, hoping that she would relent. I have heard nothing since and I still have no idea where she is. Her flat is up for sale and no amount of pleading with the estate agent will persuade him to divulge her current address.

Meanwhile, I sit here re-reading this account, wondering what the point of it was and picking at the cracks which are evident in my version of events. It is an old habit that I have never managed to shake off. When I was a child, I used to spend hours building elaborate cities in my bedroom, combining all manner of disparate toys into sprawling model metropolises. Yet I was never satisfied when they were complete. Some devastating imaginary catastrophe would always have to befall them so that I could knock them down and have my imaginary construction workers rebuild them in a different configuration. I suppose that what I enjoyed about this game was playing God. But I was a fickle, callous God, constantly dreaming up alternatives which required the annihilation of His existing creations.

And in re-reading this account, I have sensed that childish God reawakening. These days He works in more sophisticated ways. Quantum physics has greatly enhanced His destructive powers, allowing Him to exploit miniscule flaws at the sub-atomic level which will ultimately expand into vast, catastrophic fault lines.

Appropriately enough, His starting point on this occasion is that strange experiment with light that Pete was so obsessed by. You see, there is another explanation for what happens in the experiment, which Pete conveniently ignored. According to this alternative theory, the interference pattern produced by the single particle can be explained by the existence of multiple universes – an infinite number of universes, in fact. The same goes for all the “fine tuning” that Pete referred to. After all, with an infinite number of universes, it would not be especially surprising that – by sheer accident rather than by design – one of them happened to have all the right properties to support our existence. The upshot of this is that human observers exert no “pattern giving” influence. On the contrary, everything is, essentially, just an accident.

But let me explain how my digression into the realm of quantum physics is relevant to this account. My theory about what happened is based on Pete having overheard my final conversation with Kay – and having then decided to exact some sort of elaborate revenge upon me. But if Pete had really overheard what I said to Kay, why hadn't he been more aggressive towards me when he came running after me as I was leaving the house? After all, I had suggested that he was not Jonah's father. And why, in the light of this information, had he given me all his precious notes? If he had known that, then surely I would have been the last person he would have trusted with them? Was it not more probable that he didn't overhear any of the conversation? And even if he had, how would he have had time to concoct such an elaborate scheme to exact his revenge? Finally, was it not more probable that the car accident was just that – an accident – and not the outcome of some devious plot conceived by Pete a matter of hours before his death?

In the aftermath of Pete's death, I had become infected with the same paranoid tunnel-vision that had afflicted him in those final few months before the accident. I wanted to find someone to blame. Ultimately, I wanted to make sense of an event which made no real sense. So it was natural for me to try to join up the random pieces of information at my disposal into some kind of coherent, connected narrative which would explain why these events had occurred. If that involved making Pete into an implausibly devious character, who had planned the whole thing from the start, then I was prepared to ignore any evidence to the contrary. And so I blinded myself to the possibility that the events of that night were nothing more than an accident. That particular explanation simply wasn't something I wanted to believe.

So there you have it – it was all an accident, end of story.

But maybe I have alighted on this idea that it was all a series of unfortunate but wholly random occurrences precisely because it absolves me of all blame for what happened. It allows me to overlook the fact that I was instrumental in creating this whole sorry mess. I had sown the seeds of it long ago, first through my relationship with Kay (without whom the "messages" would never have been written) and then through the messages themselves - which I had left to fester like mould in the darkness of cyberspace, never suspecting that they would be capable of infecting other people with their bitter, unforgiving poison. I was also the one who encouraged Pete to write for all those geeky magazines, which set him off on the path to technological martyrdom. And shortly before his death, when I could have helped him, I chose instead to ratify his paranoid delusions about the forces of darkness. All of which must surely mean that there is some pattern to these events - albeit a rather bleak one that can only be seen with the benefit of hindsight.

But then again, maybe I have only come up with that explanation because I find the possibility that all these events were accidental even more frightening. Maybe I can't bear the thought that all this anguished self-examination has been a futile exercise. After all, if everything that has happened was essentially an accident, then no matter how hard I look, no coherent pattern will ever emerge - at least, not one that can be sustained for any length of time under the pressure of detailed scrutiny.

And so it goes on. The more I think about it, the more theories I come up with, only to spot tiny flaws in them - whereupon the cracks widen into fissures and the theories split in two, multiplying like bacteria.

* * * * *

Acknowledgements and Author's Note

The notion of the Technological Singularity has been around for some time – it is generally attributed to the science fiction writer Vernor Vinge, but is probably now most closely associated with the futurist Ray Kurzweil, who has written a number of books on the subject. There are a number of links to Singularity-related materials on my website, including a link to a very funny adaptation of a well known Gilbert & Sullivan song (retitled “I am the very model of a Singularitarian”) by Charlie Kam. See: <http://www.paulsamael.com/novel.php>

The internet cult depicted in the novel is a purely fictional creation and is not intended to satirise proponents of the Singularity generally (who, by and large, do not seem to me to be a particularly “cultish” lot). E-Gnosis is more of a “composite” inspired by individual elements taken from numerous cults, quasi-religions and other spiritual movements – see my website for more details. I was also influenced by some of the ideas in Erik Davis’ book “Techgnosis - Myth, magic and mysticism in the age of information” (Serpent’s Tail, 1999).

For a more in-depth discussion of “revenge effects” or the unintended consequences of technological developments (which are touched on in Part Three), see Edward Tenner’s book “Why Things Bite Back” (4th Estate, 1997).

The “God Helmet” referred to in Part Eleven was the subject of a BBC Horizon documentary (“God on the Brain,” 2003). However, it appears that the science in this field is some way away from proving the theories discussed in that chapter. The HAARP network, referred to in the same chapter, also exists and has been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories – but officially, its purpose is to carry out research into the ionosphere.

As for the Strong Anthropic Theory and the multiple universe theory (discussed in Parts Eleven and Twelve), the characters in this novel are not physicists (and nor am I); they are simply using (or abusing) those theories for their own purposes. That said, if I am guilty of serious misrepresentation or oversimplification in relation to these or any of the other concepts touched on in the novel, then I can only apologise. Similarly, all errors in this book are entirely my own responsibility.

About the author

Paul Samael lives in the UK. He is the author of several short stories (see below) and writes a blog called “Publishing Waste”, which includes reviews of free fiction by other self-published authors. To find out more, go to: <http://www.paulsamael.com>

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