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No one could see me as somehow I had just slipped through the net and now I was here in the disused kitchen garden beyond the wall. I had skipped medication after lunch and now I was sampling a new high, slipping back into reality in a beautiful walled garden turned middle English natural jungle. I had heard Sister Stella say before this was turned into an institution that it had been a fine Victorian English Country garden back in the last millennium. The part I was now sitting in was the kitchen garden and I was told, had been tended to by at least five gardeners in its day, however unfortunately they all had been called up to fight in the First World War. Not one of the poor chaps had come back, they had apparently all joined up together into the same regiment and had all been simultaneously taken out by one enormous direct hit in the Somme. What a heaven and hell contrast in surroundings they must have experienced to be here in this peaceful garden with the sound of wood pigeons in the pine trees, and then to go to that trench hell hole in France. I started wondering if their ghosts were all around me now maybe now tending to me. For now I was the only vegetable left in their old kitchen garden, yeah I was a prize vegetable alright just sitting and quivering, a complete nervous paranoid wreck who had skipped medication and was coming down to reality.

Chapter 1.

The Occupation

It all started with a new job at VonArbVG, yes VonArb Virtual Gaming an elitist Corporation which was really everything I was against. But after years of working for small graphics companies that had all gone to the wall I realised I had to go where the money was to pay off debts. As I entered the great gates on my first morning I felt like the new boy at school, on one hand I was wondering whether I was out of my depth but strangely also quietly confident in my own ability. I had been assigned as a graphic designer for the packaging of some of the latest games and this although an integral position was not considered as important obviously as the employees who designed and developed the actual software of the games themselves. These other employees buzzed by me in sleek luxury supercars like magnets to Mecca as I ambled up to the mirrored glass monstrosity of the main building. I felt like an illegal alien somewhere in Dallas, Texas, I heard nobody walked there either. Once inside in the foyer I was met by a young man from personnel who ironically looked as paranoid as I felt.

“Welcome to VonArb you must be Daniel, My name’s Piers Claybourne I’ll be your guide to settling in.” He said with a strange sarcastic twist in his voice.

So this was the weird world of virtual reality I had got myself into, in a company with a personnel man who sounded like a hotel receptionist on other planet. Funny thing was I liked him and immediately felt at ease in his company.

I greeted him shaking his hand. “Hello, You’re very efficient how did you know?”

“How did I know when you would arrive?” He cut in ahead of me. “At VonArb we have all the latest technology dear boy.” He said campily as he led me past a room full of security guards scrutinising screens of the surrounding grounds. “The thing you will notice the most though is how Americanised VonArb is. In the spring the board decided that we have to keep up with our virtual cousins over the pond. Now it’s all breakfast briefings with coffee and bagels, and on Friday the executives don sports shirts and get smartly casual. Hey! let’s do coffee now, you look like you could use some caffeine dear boy.”

He certainly had that right my bloodstream needed a whole caffeine bomb. With the first day nerves I hadn’t eaten anything and my mouth was bone dry, I ordered a cappuccino in the space age looking café, this place certainly looked after its employees.

Piers sipped camomile tea daintily from an old fashioned tea cup across the table opposite me. He was obviously a trouser bandit, but I never had a problem which side anybody batted for, as long as kept his chocolate speedway antics away from my rectum. He had James Dean slicked back hair and a 1950's collar, this guy was very clued up about everything and had me completely sussed out. But I could tell from the way he talked to me that he too was negative to all this huge corporate business rat race. His bright sparkly straight appearance was immaculate, but God I bet he liked a good spliff, it was too early to know.

“So when do I get started in the studio.” I said trying to be enthusiastic.

He smiled pouring more of the scented tea into his cup. “All in good time dear boy.”

We finished our drinks and were about to get up when two strange sinister characters entered the café. The atmosphere in the place went cold and quiet like two strangers entering an old remote inn somewhere and the locals all suddenly falling silent. One man was thin and wiry yet also strangely quite scary looking rather like a German Gestapo Officer. The other was a powerful mountain of a man wearing a priests dog collar, both were clinically dressed in grey suits with short square hairstyles.

“Who the hell are those guys, Piers?” I enquired inquisitively.

“Well, the skinny chap is Klaus Wolfgang Eisel or The Weasel as he's known. The cream of Austrian virtual game design technology and developer of BIP, that's Brain Impulse Pad. The other big fucker is the Padre, ex-army Priest and specialist in radar, they're working on some controversial game down in the lab. It's all top secret, but I think they're up to something quite sinister, I don't trust them they're like some God squad Mafia!” Piers warned.

That whole first day turned out to be a weird happy Monday, the whole corporation was full of oddball characters, mad professors and colourful spaced out geeks. The great thing about working with computers for a zombie daydreamer like me was you could make yourself look really busy scrutinising the screen of information, when in fact you could be just staring into a void and writing song lyrics in your head. The design studio were I was stationed was a labyrinth of laptops and bays where designers had made personal working areas, these crazy creative geezers and intellectual but scatty girls beaver away on hare brained ideas each in their own individual dens. When I first walked in that studio it struck me how the whole place looked like some fucked up Prep school dormitory for aliens to do their homework in. Piers showed me through what he called the ‘Mindfield’ to the Studio Director's office, he put his hand on my back as he minced along adopting a funny and sarcastic American Jim Carrey accent.

“Good Morning Gideon, this is Daniel Black, your new designer.” Piers introduced. “I trust you will have a pleasant stay dear boy.” He turned on his heel, Grenadier like and left us.

The bearded Gideon shook my hand. “Welcome aboard Daniel, its good to have you aboard with us.” He was a typical Studio Director, he looked like a old hippy art teacher in his chunky jumper. Probably not that computer literate but wise old graphic design skills of being able to look at his staffs' work and immediately know what was bad or pleasing to the eye. Everyone seemed quite easygoing and friendly and the thing I liked was everyone was an individual and able to be themselves, which was surprising in such a large corporation like VonArb.

Friday evening at the end of the week I bowled homeward out of the great driveway like my dentist had just given me the all clear, relieved that I could probably live with my new job. I just started to head up Tavern Street when Piers cried out in his unmistakable voice.

“Wait up dear boy”! He called waving frantically. “I'm just about to head up to the Reali-Tea Café, would you care to accompany me?”

“Sorry man it's been a long day and I think I'm about ready to get the hell out of reality.” I said nonchalantly.

“Well that’s exactly what I’m talking about”. He began enticingly. “The Reali-Tea Café, it’s a charming little back street Amsterdam style hang out and the purveyor of fine herbs and coffee. Come along I’ll buy you a spliff.”

God I thought, is it that obvious that I smoke ganja. I had only met Piers once but he had already sussed what a stoner I was. I immediately accepted his offer to join of course and we potted off to Reali-Tea.

The Reali-Tea Café it turned out was not so much a café but more an experience. An unassumingly normal café exterior from the outside, however once inside the crazy character of the place and the strong smell of skunk weed knocked me out. Piers was in full flow now hob knobbing with the various punters, it all seemed like walking into the bar in Star Wars to me. James Brown was getting on up like a sex machine on the jukebox and Piers was looking to get on down. He introduced me to a techno freak he knew called Ellis D who looked seriously pretty out there and twitched nervously like Hurricane Alex Higgins. I didn’t know Ellis personally but I had heard of him; he was infamous around stoners in Gippeswyk, a legend in his own liquid lunchtime. On a small stage in the corner there was a band called Jesus Solicitor playing spaced out Art Kraut Rock, they were very self indulged in their music and didn’t appear to be bothered whether or not the audience were digging them.

“Of course it’s just Jazzwank.” Said Piers bitchily as the guitarist went off on a musical tangent, clawing at odd notes all the way up the guitar neck. Ellis D on the other hand was really into the band and was also grooving along with the beat, he remarked how they sounded like Zappa and The Mothers. I liked them too, they looked so into their music and they reminded me of my days of playing in Punk bands. They looked like the classic band of different egos coming together; the show off guitarist and singer, the laid back bass player, the sensible keyboardist and of course the wild animal drummer.

Piers handed me an Amsterdam style menu of the various wares on sale, I opted for the ‘House Weed’, a mild spliff with a comfortable buzz or so the menu said. I had always enjoyed a nice spliff ever since I had first tried it when I was sixteen at College in Colchester. I had strongly supported the decriminalising of Marijuana and this café with it’s relaxed friendly atmosphere was proof of how socially people could enjoy the drug together. I mean if you walked through Gippeswyk Town Centre at midnight on a Saturday night, you would more than likely see drunken yobs trying to kick seven shades of shit out of each other, all because of drinking too much alcohol. My argument was that you would never see two spliffed up men fighting each other, more likely that they would be in friendly harmony laughing together. Also what about all the sufferers of terminal illnesses who gained relief from the medicinal properties of ganja, I don’t believe in the virgin birth but I believe in smoking Mother Earth, that was my philosophy. Pretty soon Piers was stoned on a strong skunk spliff and began to tell me anything and everything. He soon got round to the VonArb Corporation and told me about a secret file he had come across belonging to Klaus Eisel. It all involved an obsession Eisel had with Hieronymus Bosch the Dutch painter, who lived in the Middle Ages and painted hideous scenes full of deeply religious symbolism. The e.mail file Piers had come across was a document Eisel and his partner the Padre had submitted that related to a new virtual reality game they were developing called ‘The Game of Earthly Delights’. All Piers knew was that Eisel and the Padre were strong religious believers who wanted to turn around the virtual game ideals that they thought were corrupting kids, and this game idea involved Bosch type imagery. It all sounded fascinating as Piers the motor mouth leapt from one scandal to another but the spliff was beginning to give me an attack of the munchies and I suddenly remembered in my stoned state that I hadn’t eaten anything all day. I got in another round of spliffs, but Piers suggested we take them on to a club he knew.

Chapter 2. Class War and Snooker

We left the Reali-Tea Café in Cromwell Square and made off to The Fonnereau Club, a high class hangout where Piers was a member. I knew of the club but had never been there as it had a swanky reputation and wasn't really my style, however it seemed like a fun idea to go there stoned with Piers constantly gossiping away like a big tart. Ellis D came along with us too and we laughed as Piers scrutinised and criticised the way people were dressed.

"Yellow was in last year dear". He sniggered to a sour faced girl puzzled at his bitchy ranting. She had obviously spent ages doing herself up and was now left feeling paranoid about her appearance, as we walked away from the poor girl I glanced over my shoulder and could see her checking herself in the reflection of a shop window, I was still beautifully too stoned to really care. The Fonnereau Club was next to a park called Christchurch and it's great gothic fascia stood proudly overlooking the trees as if to symbolise that Victorianna still remained. But even this bastion of all things British had been dragged into the new millennium and the signs were all too clear as we approached the steps. For at the door of the club was a loud self important intoxicated character trying to argue his way past the doormen.

"Good Lord, its Clarence Samwell-Smyth, one of the old school chaps." Said Piers. "He's been a member since the old days, they won't know the poor old bastard, he rarely makes an appearance these days."

The club committee had tried to update The Fonnereau in an attempt to win back cliental who were leaving in droves for more fashionable Country Clubs on the outskirts. Much to the disgust of old members it had also let in ladies since the passing of the millennium.

"Now look here, I happen to be one of the oldest members of this club and my son-in-law Culludon Parton is Chairman, I demand to pass through". Slurred the irate Clarence.

"I don't care if you're Dolly Parton's father-in-law, we need to see your membership pass, or you don't get in". Replied the dicky-bowed doorman dryly.

"Why, I have never been insulted so much in my entire life."

"Well you should really get out more then, shouldn't you Sir."

"It's OK chaps, this is Sir Clarence, he's an old member." Piers said winking to the doormen reassuringly. They let us all through, even the shifty looking Ellis D, and Clarence gratefully began to pat Piers on the back as we entered the grand surroundings of the foyer.

"Thank you young man, this would not have happened when Jeavons was on the door. Oh no, he used to greet all members with respect, now let me buy you scotch. I take it they do still serve scotch at The Fonnereau, do they not?"

Clarence was very drunk and generously offered to buy us all drinks, him and Piers were hilarious together acting like a couple of old Lords from the early 1900's, talking so regally but also so regionally, the region being Suffolk. The situation seemed even more bizarre when Ellis D and myself found ourselves also adopting upper class accents but more in mockery of this alien splendour.

Clarence tapped abruptly on the bar to a bemused steward. "Four Fonnereau Scotches, my man, I take it you can fix a Fonnereau Scotch?"

"That's Glenfiddich, ice and dry ginger ale Rodney and we'll take them in The Snooker Room please." Piers directed the frowning steward with Clarence's order.

"I had rather have a pint of the amber nectar old chap." Said Ellis under his breath.

“When in Rome we do as the Romans do, not as the Romanies do.” Replied Clarence back down his nose, his hearing surprisingly good for an old duffer.

We went through The Regency Room to The Snooker Room, four Time Lords inside a club full of old reactionaries frozen in Victorian time. The corners of the Times newspaper folded beneath bloated fingers and these old fools staring from their leather upholstery at Ellis and myself swaggering through their little piece of remaining empire. Clarence was too drunk to be embarrassed by us but instead suggested a potential class war, Piers and himself in a snooker doubles match against Ellis D and myself.

“Prefer a game of pool old boy.” Mocked Ellis blowing cigarette smoke out over the snooker table’s green baize expanse.

“Pool my dear fellow, that dreadful transatlantic game played by sharks, no sir, here we play a gentleman’s game thank you!” Retorted Piers disgusted at the suggestion.

So snooker it was, working class verses middle class, this was to be no friendly game. Piers was an amiable bloke with his camp humour and love of intoxicants but in this case he was the opposition. Clarence on the other hand was a different kettle of fish entirely, a Thatcherite bigot slightly right wing of Gengis Khan, it was going to be fun taking him on and kicking his arse I thought chalking my cue. The only snag was my snooker which wasn’t great, no I was no Ray Readon and God we had an important game on here. The snooker table was empty of all balls bar the white cue ball as the last players to use the table had not set it up ready for the next players.

“Damn liberty, you would have been up before the chairman for not setting up after playing in my day.” Cussed Clarence.

Piers set up the reds into the triangular formation as Ellis placed the colours on their spots pausing with the green ball.

“Green, brown, yellow, just remember it as God, bugger, you. Pool playing cretin.” Advised Piers. Stirring up the pre-match tension. Then he tossed a coin on to the table.

“Heads, old bean.” Said Ellis sneering back at him.

Heads it was, and Ellis got ready to break. It was funny to see him eyeing up to break off, he was a happy-go-lucky street geezer, but he looked so serious concentrating on those reds, it was real class war. He broke off well, the white hardly disturbing the pack and returning back up to the bulk cushion. We smiled to each other as Clarence arose from his seat chest out proudly taking the chalk from his waist coat. He studied his shot for some time briefly conferring with Piers dubious of making a mistake and letting me in. Finally like Terry Griffiths he aimed up ready to take the shot.

“Anytime this week, I’ve gotta sign on tomorrow.” Slurred Ellis quietly.

“I had be obliged it you wouldn’t mind shutting up you oink.” Barked Clarence clearly now rattled.

He studied the table again in a deathly silence, and we all stood in anticipation as he again stooped to conquer. Suddenly just as he drew back his cue to strike, the bar steward Rodney came in dramatically with our beverages.

“Drinks Gentlemen.” He piped genially loudly placing a pewter tray down on a side table.

“You blithering idiot! Bugger orrf.” Stormed the furious Clarence totally miscuing the cue ball into the blue ball. “I demand to re-take the shot.” He boomed.

“Sorry old chap, no can do, house rules you see, and our free ball I believe.” Baited Ellis deadly serious, as I shrugged indifferently in the tussle.

“Damn you then, this is it then, this is war and I’ll wage you one hundred Euros we’ll still beat you.” Challenged Clarence, Piers nodding nervously in pride.

“Yeah alright man, you in Danny.”

I felt in my jacket at my wallet containing my first months pay. I took a 50 Euro note and slapped it on the tables slate bed.

“Top geezer.” Said Ellis winking and we touched fists together.

Of course after Clarence’s foul shot it was now my turn to play and I studied a possible red cut to middle pocket. I could see Clarence’s face glowing with rage out of the corner of my eye as I aimed up the cue, he was absolutely livid at being talked down to by Ellis. He made a fizzing noise under his breath like the acid of a battery being charged up. This struck me as rude considering it was my shot, so I decided to punish the old buffoon and put in 100% concentration. Funny really, often when I played snooker and took a shot I would find myself praying for some kind of divine intervention, the only other time I found myself praying was when I checked myself for testicular cancer. Before having a bath, I would cup my love spuds in both palms close my eyes and look up to the heavens. I took the shot and just clipped the red cutting it to the centre pocket it dropped slowly and safely.

Ellis winked, raising his glass to me. “Nice one maan.”

As the game went on any ideas of a nice friendly game were soon lost. Clarence was such a bad loser and as he became more intoxicated with the scotch he began to insult Ellis and everything he stood for.

“Don’t worry son I’ve slipped the old twat a disco biscuit.” Whispered Ellis to me smirking.

Oh shit this would explain Clarence’s increasingly erratic behaviour, now he was even becoming really friendly. Ellis had obviously spiked his drink with an E. Suddenly I wished I wasn’t there but instead back home with Miranda. Spiking someone with ‘Class A’ drugs was not my scene and winning would seem like a hollow victory now. Clarence was completely gone and was now hugging the astonished Piers.

“Steady on old dear.” Said Piers as Clarence slobbered over him like a big affectionate elderly St. Bernard.

“Well you beat us fair and square, what say I get in some more scotches.” Chuckled Clarence dancing about like a chimp in a suit. The E Ellis had slipped him was kicking in like a David Beckham free kick, as Clarence skipped through to The Regency Room in a euphoric state greeting the bemused old farts lounging like static slugs.

“What the fuck is going on with him.” Said a puzzled Piers looking through the door frowning at Clarence’s antics.

“Sorry geezer but it had to be done, the man was dissing me and I don’t like being dissed by upper class arses.” Said Ellis lighting a cigarette.

“Oh you fucking twat, you’ve only bloody spiked him haven’t you, oh that’s just great isn’t it. I sign you bloody scumbag in as a guest to this establishment and you slip the oldest most respected member a fucking E.” Seethed Piers as angry as I had ever seen him.

I could not just sit back unassumingly anymore I better help Piers I thought.

“Alright Piers, we’ll help you get him in a cab.” I said gesturing to Ellis who just sat there chuckling.

Clarence was greeting his stuffy bemused fellow clubbers now totally E’ed up.

“Henry you must come down to my retreat in Mustique, Lord Glenconner frequently drops in to Partee!” Quaffed Clarence looning about the old reactionaries.

“Oh no he’s totally fucking out of his box Daniel.” Said Piers now clearly worried by the raving QC.

Piers and I went through to the Regency Room where now Clarence was shaking hands and babbling to the stuffed suits who sat open mouthed. Unfortunately this was no rave party it was a Gentleman’s club and Clarence was off his nuts. We tried to calm the buzzing barrister down but he was spinning around the

Chesterfield leather chairs still circulating like a party animal. Suddenly there was an almighty crash! as he knocked over a dumb waiter and fell to the floor, The Times newspaper covering him like a shroud. He looked a happy hobo drunk laughing in his sleep dreaming of fine wine. We pulled him up to his feet and I glanced around to the old chaps who were seated around us. Who should fix me with a steely gaze but Wolfgang Eisel, 'The Weasel' from Von Arb and with him the Padre, both of them glaring at us.

"We know your face and we are watching you." Smarmed the Weasel in a sinister warning tone.

We got Clarence a taxi home, Piers said his housekeeper would see to him and we left. Piers was furious with Ellis for spiking Clarence and stormed across the road into Christchurch Park. Ellis didn't follow but swaggered off towards the town centre unremorsive.

"Hey Piers I didn't know he was gonna go that far." I said, catching up with him.

"Yes I know, I just can't believe that cretin Ellis, it's the last time I take him anywhere."

"Yeah but did you see the look on the Weasel's face in there?" I asked Piers.

"Ere just keep walking dear boy and don't look back." Advised Piers his pace quickening.

Chapter 3.

Hippy Hill

We made our way through the park, past the icehouse and up to Hippy Hill. If you ever visit the town of Gippeswyk you should visit Christchurch Park, it is an amazing place with a large lake and a great round pond by Christchurch Mansion. The mansion dates from the time of Cardinal Wolsey and once was home to The Fonnereau family, the park being the surrounding grounds.

Two beautiful girls passed us, one dark and mysterious the other blonde and bubbly looking they smiled sweetly at us. Rodgers and Hammerstein basically got it right, there is nothing like a dame and I swear even Piers was aroused. We passed the great round pond and walked up through the pine trees to Hippy Hill, at the top we both sat down overlooking the arboretum and tennis courts. It was the perfect spot to spark up a spliff but we just sat and surveyed the idyllic trees and surroundings. After all the stress of Clarence going ape in the club we needed to chill out and Hippy Hill was the perfect place. You would often find little groups or pairs of stoners chilling out up on Hippy Hill but tonight it was just Piers and I up there.

“Did you see the Weasel at the club tonight.” I said thinking of Eisel’s manic eyes that had frozen on me earlier that evening.

“Well I couldn’t really miss him.” Replied Piers. “He crops up everywhere like a ghastly disease. I was talking to a friend the other day who is a born again christian, God Squad Gilbert is the fellow, complete fruit cake but a nice chap all the same. Well Gilbert knows the Weasel and the Padre from going to the Bethesda Church, and he told me that they are both into some pretty full on vigilante stuff. They believe that they can combat vandalism and teenage car crime themselves like some sort of religious guardian angels. They apparently told Gilbert that they are working on some kind of car crime trap to catch joyriders who keep breaking into the Padre’s vehicles. Apparently its a transit van that locks a thief in trapping him with a specially formulated solenoid dead lock. The startled intruder once locked in is then driven to a remote spot and treated to a deafening blast of torturously loud music that literally puts the fear of God into him.”

“Christ Piers you certainly get all the latest gossip, and of course you say they are also working on behavioural changing virtual reality.”

“Yes with Hieronymus Bosch imagery it’s going to be a cutting edge extreme game. You know Daniel, here I am working for the biggest game corporation and I don’t even like technology, in fact I detest it, I’m a luddite. I’m a believer in the Victorian great thinkers and poets like Ruskin, Morris and Wordsworth. They were visionaries, they knew that industrialisation was taking the character out of people, that’s where things started to go wrong. People crushed under the wheels of industry, and now you’ve got scientists looking into people’s minds with virtual reality.”

“When I were lad this park was full of kids of an evening playing football and cricket, but where are they now, all inside playing on computers.” I said effecting the accent of old pensioner from Yorkshire.

We both started to get sentimental about our childhoods in the 1970’s. Piers talked of Swallows and Amazons style adventures on the Norfolk Broads, but for me the holidays in Sussex at my grandparents stuck out in my mind. The memories of travelling around the Sussex downs in Granddaddy Joe’s old Triumph Herald were priceless. From Midhurst we’d go for trips out to Goodwood and Brighton. That old car had such great character, the walnut dashboard, the chrome wing mirrors and even the way the wind whistled through the little side vent windows. You wouldn’t get that with a modern car these days and I felt

glad I had grown up in an age when things had character, when life didn't depend on having the latest miniature mobile phone.

"Yeah and Piers do you remember white dog shit in the Seventies?"

"Oh really dear boy, do you have to bring those golden age memories down to the gutter. Yes actually now you come to mention it you know I do remember white dog shit. God yes why don't you see it anymore?" He said asking the great unanswered question of modern life.

"Well my theory on the said thesis is that people no longer feed their dogs bones these days." I said sounding like an Oxbridge professor.

"You know that does sound feasible." Said Piers pondering for a second.

Then we both lay back on the grass laughing into the blue sky, for a moment it was like we were high on life, like we didn't need anything coursing through our bloodstreams. I looked down to my feet as if my legs were a gun barrel, the tips of my toes I imagined were the sights and I aimed up to a gangly figure walking through the arboretum rhododendrons, his bright orange T-shirt an easy target, then he started approaching us up Hippy Hill.

"Fuck me, I don't believe it, it's only old Squeaker." I said suddenly recognising the geezer coming up the hill.

It was Lenny 'Squeaker' Watts coming up like a ghost from my past. I had first met him in the early 1990's when he was a small time dealer. He had a small techno record shop that he had started with two thousand pounds from the Prince's Trust, the shop was a complete disaster but really just a front for his drug dealing which was conducted from his grotty bedsit upstairs. That was ten years earlier and I wondered if he had changed much.

"Good God if it isn't Squeaker as I live and breath." I greeted him as he reached us.

"Alright Danny it's been a long time, how are you doing?" He said shaking my hand.

"Oh you know, surviving what are you up to these days?"

"Well man I just got back from Ayia Napa, yeah I've been out there DJing all Summer. It's crazy out there, cool chicks, cool weather and some fucking cool drugs too. By the way I picked up some killer weed earlier, you need sorting out at all?" Squeaker enquired, he hadn't changed at all.

"Aren't you going to introduce us then Daniel." said Piers impatiently.

"Oh right yeah sorry, Squeaker this is Piers, Piers this is DJ Squeaker."

"A pleasure to meet you Squeaker dear boy." said Piers campily extending a limp wrist.

"Ere, yeah likewise." Said Squeaker quickly shaking hands and then backing off clearly nervous of Piers camp manner.

"Anyway Danny how do fancy this bag of top skunk weed for just 30 euros"?

I took the cellophane bag containing the weed and smelt the contents, it certainly had the strong aroma of powerful skunk weed.

"Tell me I'm intrigued, why the dragon tattoo Squeaker?" Asked Piers inquisitively about the fiery chinese inscription on Squeaker's upper arm.

Squeaker looked serious for a moment clenching his arm close to his wiry body.

"Well maan you know its kind of a symbolic reminder to me. Had it done by Fat Jack when I kicked horse."

"Kicked horse"? Frowned a puzzled Piers.

"He means when he got off Heroin." I translated.

"Yeah got off scag right, it's just a reminder there's no need to chase the dragon anymore cause he's

right here with me.” Seethed Squeaker through gritted teeth flexing the tattooed serpent on his sinewy bicep.

His eyes looked manic and crazy and for a second with his chiselled stubble jaw he looked like Lee Marvin. Talking about his old habit was like opening a nasty old wound and I quickly sought to change the subject.

“Oh well, hey show Piers how you got the name Squeaker, go on this will kill you Piers.”

Squeaker eager to demonstrate why then turned his back to Piers like a showbiz impressionist about to go into his act. He bent forward slightly then without warning, he broke wind fiercely emitting a high pitched squealing fart across the park that was like nothing on God’s earth.

“Get out and walk Donald.” Squeaker commanded to an imaginary cartoon duck.

“Lovely, there you go then, now you know Piers.” I said to a speechless Piers cracking up.

Piers and I both fell about laughing uncontrollably. Poor Lenny had to have some sort of cyst removed from his anus and unfortunately the surgeon messed up the operation and severed a muscle or something. The result had left him with the nickname Squeaker after his amazing party piece.

Squeaker was obviously bored now with his party trick, and sold me the grass and then trudged off to meet his connection. What did I really need the bag of weed for I thought as we laughed away together like playground enfants, nevertheless I decided to skin up.

“Pass the skins you old queen.” I said to Piers.

Piers sighed and looked down, his smile dropped.

“Sorry mate only joking.” I said getting up and grabbing the Kingsize Rizlas.

“No it’s not your fault, it’s just sexuality is a sore point at the moment. You see my old boyfriend Jasper has just found out he’s HIV Positive. And now I’ve got to have the test myself and,” he paused. “And shit Danny I’m scared, I’m really fucking scared.

“Sorry man.” I said, not knowing what to say next. I put the Rizlas away, and hugged Piers. His face had turned white and he was shaking all over.

Chapter 4. Curry still for tea?

I got home and the house was in silence, just the sound of a thump upstairs as Buzz my cat jumped of the bed and ran down to greet me. I went through to the kitchen and got a cold beer of of the fridge, I rolled the icy cold bottle over my forehead back and forth as Buzz rubbed against the back of my legs, hungrily meowing. I got out the cat food and fed him a large bowl of the pungent meat with biscuits, his furry ginger head purred loudly as he got down to devour the food, looking more like a large bear than a domestic cat. I took the beer upstairs and looked in on Miranda, as I knew she was still in bed, I whispered to her to wake up, but she just sighed acknowledging me but somehow half asleep in a lucid dream like state. I was worried about her lately as she had been living nocturnally and sleeping all day, she was missing the best of the Summer days, like her life was just drifting. A month ago we had an embarrassing experience when we got caught having sex in public on a deserted Suffolk beach, and although quite innocent the shock had left her introverted. It was a totally spur of the moment thing as we were having a quite picnic at a place called Shingle Street near Woodbridge. It's a windswept part of the east coast where you can go and be alone to think, it is totally quiet and uncommercialised. It also has a strange history as supposedly during World War II the Germans tried to land there and the story goes that they were thwarted by flame throwers leaving them as charred corpses, but the whole incident was hushed and covered up.

But anyway on this hot Summer day Miranda and I lay together on a picnic blanket and started to get real close. She asked me if I had or would ever make love on a beach. It was like she was daring me in some erotic way and we stripped off and began having sex under the sun.

“Oi you perverts, stop that.” Shouted a broad Suffolk accent from the dunes.

The local bobbie had rumbled us, he must have cycled all the way from Hollesely Bay and now the old killjoy was hurrying down the beach trying to take off his bicycle clips, stumbling as he hollered at us. Firm but fair the old rozzer let us off with a caution thank God but the whole thing was quite embarrassing for Miranda, I thought she would see the funny side in a few days but after a month she was still very quite. That picnic had been my idea for us to get away somewhere where we could talk in peace and then that went and happened.

I kissed Miranda's forehead and the princess awoke.

“You've been out all evening again where do you go after work?” She asked sleepily blinking at the clock.

“Oh, I had a game of snooker and then went for a smoke with Piers.” I said sipping the cold Stella beer.

She just rolled over and went back to sleep so I decided to take the air out in the backyard, I got an ice pole out of the fridge to suck on. I always had one after smoking a strong joint as it seemed to settle my stomach and relax getting high. Being a small terraced house I only had a backyard, not really the garden I wished for. Ever since I had hit 30 years old, I seemed to overnight, become more homely and green fingered, and not just from all the gear I was smoking. I found myself listening to Radio 2 as on certain shows the DJs were playing really great real music that just isn't in the charts anymore. Yes I was getting older but at least I wasn't walking through Marks and Spencer and thinking oh that's a nice cardigan, well not quite just yet. Anyway what I am trying to say is, I was at an age where I was mellowing out from my acid daze twenties. Even though I just had this tiny bloody little back yard to sit out in and smoke, and ponder, I had tried to make the best of it. Out in the yard it had been all paved over with slabs and I had put various potted plants along by the fence, some were the plants my grandad had left when he died. So here I

was keeping them going in his name, he would have loved that as he had lived for his garden. I had a small almost ornamental fish pond lined with large flat stones which I heisted from Newquay rock pools. It was out there in the yard that I sat on the bench and relaxed on that warm Summer's evening, I felt a fat joint bulging in my pocket which was made from the grass Ellis had sold to me earlier, I thought of his gaunt rattus norvegicus face squinting at me as I lit it.

"This is only the strong Nepalese hash that Howard Marks gets caned on." Ellis the salesman had said.

The bad news Piers had told me was quite a shock and I needed something to calm me down. I lit the spliff and drew back, the potent smoke billowing from my nostrils and hanging like grey green cumulus clouds in the warm evening air. My head fell back on the bench and I looked up into the Gippeswyk dusk sky, I could see swifts darting about catching flies. I began to feel a lot better when all of a sudden I heard an awful ripping blast. Burpppppppp! Oh no, it was Rani the cornershop owner, who was just feet away over the fence in his medieval outhouse shitter. Again the serene silence was interrupted as he belched out, sounding like some ancient instrument chanting a call from a far distant Eastern Pavilion. He wasn't a bad old fella really, even if the chocolate oranges he sold were out of date, buy one get one free he would say. Listening to him relieve himself was not pleasant though, and as he then began to clear the groggy phlegm from his throat I thought enough is enough, so I coughed loudly back hoping he would bugger off back inside the shop. He did but my moment of nirvana had now gone and I was staring at a spiders web on the fence. I took the butt end of the smoking joint and stubbed it out flicking the remaining roach into the web, immediately the spider ran out to encapture the baiting butt. The spider encased the butt in thread totally fooled into thinking it was an insect, it soon realised this marijuana morsel was not for eating, ejecting the bundled up butt from its web and returning to its corner. The yard just wasn't big enough to really relax in and get my artistic juices flowing with inspiration, I bet Rupert Brooke didn't have to listen to somebody belching as he wrote poetry in the Old Vicarage garden at Grantchester. 'Stands the church clock at ten to three, and is there curry still for tea?' Maybe it could have been oh so different had he lived in Withipoll Street, Gippeswyk.

I decided to go in at that point and went up to the spare room where my trusty imac computer was, I sat down to surf the net and, still with the effects of the joint coursing through my head I began to think about what Piers had said about the Weasel's obsession with Hieronymus Bosch. Intrigued, I typed Bosch into the Sherlock program to activate the search engines. Various website addresses came up, Bosch PSR96 VES Drill/Screwdriver was the first exciting site. I looked down the list and found a site H. Bosch the life of, I began reading up on the Dutch medieval painter and I started to see how the imagery might tie in with what the Weasel was creating in virtual reality. Born about 1450 in Northern Holland in a town called S'Hertogenbosch near the Belgian border, his paintings depict a deeply religious medieval mind with almost a contempt for the lower classes. I was familiar with Dali's paintings and I could see some shades of surrealism as I scrolled down the screen through the images of Bosch's paintings. I read on and it seemed he had led a comfortable life as a wealthy burgher in a prosperous market town. This religious character seemed complicated though by the fact that he had obviously had an amazingly creative imagination along with his skill as a painter. He very much targeted the evil of the deadly sins in his work, being scornful of beggars, pilgrims, whores and vagrants. Moving down the site I began to wander into the fantastic scenes of his paintings. The Conjuror, Death of the Miser, The Ship of Fools and The Temptation of St. Anthony were all titles of his work that seemed to be obsessed with moralistic issues and religious symbolism. But it was the horrible scenes of hell and torture that seemed so fascinating, especially in the The Last Judgment. Bosch's view of the eternally damned being tortured in Hellfire with weird demon creatures dismembering

and frying the sinful humankind. Then I noticed a painting which Piers had mentioned was the influence for the Weasel's virtual game, The Garden of Earthly Delights. The painting was a triptych consisting of three scenes; the earthly paradise on the left, the garden in the centre and on the right panel a powerful awesome depiction of hell. In the centre was a scene that can only be described as a biblical theme park, this being the garden of earthly delights. On strange dream like beasts the males encircle a lake in which naked females display themselves enticingly. By contrast this garden of Eden next to the hell scene differed like ebony and ivory and the virtual reality game the Weasel was cooking up had to be something completely out of this world.

My clock radio went off at 7am and the sound of Lou Reed's Satellite of Love came wafting over my sleepy head from the tiny tinny speakers. Although half asleep I remember thinking how strange it was that Radio 1 should be playing such cool music for a change, a little thing like that seemed such a good omen on a grey Monday morning. Although I always set the radio alarm for 7am I would only get up at 8.30am, this gave me one and half hours lay in every day to get my head together. I had to be at work at 9am and a half hour was just enough time to dress, wash, feed Buzz and eat a banana, and then just get to Von Arb exactly on 9.00am. I always went to work on a banana it was easy to digest quickly and healthily high in Potassium I heard somewhere. It always amazed me how I made it to work on time in that half hour, I'd be walking down Tavern Street and still be waking up. I guess I did look a bit of a wreck as I would notice passers by smirking, then I'd get paranoid that I was still stoned from the night before and they could spot this a mile off. As I walked up the driveway to the Von Arb Corporation I had a soundtrack of music in my head it was 'Welcome to the Machine' by Pink Floyd. If you had to set this corporate utopia to music then those industrial Seventies synthesisers and lyrics of paranoia fitted perfectly.

My workplace was a weird place on a Monday morning, the mood was usually quite sombre in the studio as if the party of the weekend was over and everybody was faced with getting their heads around the inevitable anticipation of five days till the next one. I immediately made for the Kenco Coffee machine; coffee was a major factor that kept me going, my life blood in the work place. The funny thing about working at a computer is that you can make yourself look busy when really your mind is in the stratosphere and you can think about anything whilst looking into the screen, what did Lennon say about surrendering to the void? As I poured myself a coffee I could see Brian Monk the studio director, and my boss brooding in his office. I needed to talk to him about a graphics account I was working on but I was hesitating as I wanted to know what mood he was in today before I bothered him. If he'd had a bad weekend he might decide to take it out on me and burden my already hectic workload, and I really wasn't about to risk that so I turned to take the coffee back to my desk. There was a sharp tap on the glass, Monk had seen me and peering over half rimmed glasses he beckoned me into his office.

"Shit." I smiled through gritted teeth, his look was ominous. Great I thought, he probably had a huge order for me to produce to an impossible deadline.

"Come in Daniel, did you have a good weekend; still playing golf, hey what's your handicap?" Charmed Monk buttering me up for the inevitable workload.

"Oh well I don't really have a handicap yet, you know apart from the nineteenth watering hole." I pleasantly played along, as Monk laughed loudly his split personality suddenly slipping into work mode.

"Right there is a new game just going into production its called 'Ram Raid Allstars', you're on cover design packaging and I'm putting Gideon on advertising, oh and Daniel we need these proofs quickly like yesterday."

He took me through the basics of the game on his laptop computer so I could get an idea of the concept,

I tried to look enthusiastic and interested but I realised I was missing the point of it all. Ram Raid Allstars was a virtual reality game for the blank generation where negativity is the norm, and nobody is surprised at juvenile crime because society itself is rotten to the core. Players would get points for stealing cars and joy-riding, then more points for using the vehicles to commit crimes especially ram raiding shops to steal goods. I went back to my desk to begin work on designing the packaging, the design had to say this game is cool and appeal to teenagers; but I couldn't get my head around the idea. After a weekend of mellowing out this job was going to be tough and my mind began to wander at the thankless task before me. I started to think how, in a subtle way I could create a design that would take the piss out of the cyber geek purchasing the crap game.

Chapter 5. Points for decadence

At ten thirty I sloped off to the toilets and decided to have a smoke, smoking was of course strictly prohibited at VonArb so I went into a cubical and opened the window. I felt for my cigarettes in my jacket and I felt the joint Ellis D had given me last Friday at The Reali-Tea Café. I had forgotten about that little number, and I then thought that it might give me some divine inspiration for the design I was working on. What the hell, I lit it and sat back to relax on the white throne. Soon after I heard footsteps and voices as two men entered the toilets deep in discussion, their voices echoing around the porcelain urinals. I kept deadily silent quietly stubbing out the joint under my foot and hardly breathing. One of the voices sounded with a German accent and I knew instantly it was the Weasel, the other was broad Yorkshire and very deep, that had to be the Padre. They were discussing the virtual game they were working on, and I realise now it was The Game of Earthly Delights. I just sat there eavesdropping and smiling away wiggling my ear like a radar dish, picking up the conversation when, suddenly my lighter fell off my knee onto the floor, dropping like a stone onto the tiles. Immediately they stopped talking and the place fell silent, slowly the cubical doors were all pushed open down the line until footsteps stopped outside my door. The door slowly creaked like a hanging rope around a condemned neck and I found the Padre towering in the doorway like a statue of bigotry, the sinewy figure of the Weasel peering in behind him.

“Well Wolfgang I believe we have our guinea pig.” Said the Padre grinning, his jaw closing slowly as the steely smile turned to a grey serious stone stare.

The Weasel smarmed back, “Ya, he should do nicely, I would say in fact a perfect experimental specimen in mind and body Padre.”

“Right, excuse me gentlemen I’ve got work to do I really should be getting back to the studio.” I dismissed them and began to brush past the Padre.

“Not so fast, we have work for you ourselves, do not worry I shall notify Mr Monk in the studio that you are assisting us with important company work immediately.” Said the Weasel confidentially dialling a small mobile phone.

“No you don’t understand, see I have tight deadlines to meet on designs for ‘Ram Raid Allstars’. Sorry chaps but I can’t spare the time.” I retorted naively thinking I was about to walk right out of there.

The Weasel chuckled as he dialled the phone “Ha, ‘Ram Raid Allstars’, that is a minor sideline project. No I think you will be helping us, it’s Daniel isn’t it, yes Daniel Black.”

I didn’t believe for a second he really was actually calling Monk and anyway even if he did, Monk I knew was not about to farm out my services. Then the Padre started sniffing around in the toilet cubicle where I had smoked the joint. His nostrils huffed and puffed like some great bloodhound taking up the scent.

“I believe I can smell marijuana Herr Eisel, yes I can definitely smell waccy tobaccy here.” Piped up the Padre looking up smugly.

“No shit Sherlock.” I said under my breath.

“Ya Padre, I detected it the moment we entered the urinals. And I do believe that possessing and using narcotics on Von Arb premises is an offence which warrants instant dismissal, ya Daniel.” Smirked the Weasel Holmes.

“Ya.” I nodded, as hope wafted out of the window in the skunk haze.

Shit I was fucked, the bastards had me by the short and curlies and I had no option but to go with them or be sacked. So they led me down the elevator to their laboratorial lair, a clinical room more suited to a

hospital operating theatre than a virtual games complex. I felt as if I were trapped in some futuristic film about to be used in some weird experiment by the leaders of an evil federation, and really I could not have been more right. The Padre playing the genial host urged me to sit in a chair and then intimidatinly parked his massive frame on a desk, looking over me like a great ugly cloud. He was definitely the brawn in the equation, a bull like figure where his neck just seemed like an extension of his granite head. Anyone who ever played Rugby at school will know that there is always at least one boy playing who seems much older and tougher. An unnaturally super mature fat kid ready to crush anyone in his path as soon as look at him, and that was who I was up against, that type of guy. Bloody hell, how could I have fucked up so badly and got myself into this position of blackmail with this henchman. But if the Padre was the brawn then the Weasel was the brains behind the operation and soon moved in to interrogate me in my electric chair. The spindly figure had donned a black trench coat presumably to also intimidate and try and scare the shit out of me. He peered through Christie like circular glasses and I was frozen by the crow like scavenger picking at my stoned brain like a carrion carcass.

“So you like to partake in the fruits of life ya, have you ever wondered what it would be like to be Adam in the garden of Eden, and to have a truly religious experience?”

“Well I don’t believe in the virgin birth but I believe in smoking Mother Earth.” I retorted knowing full well that blaspheme would rile the religious freaks up.

They did seem to be losing patience but I knew if I was to be blackmailed into some moral theme park of virtual reality then I had to be cautious and try and fuck their shit up too. I decided to be real cagey and unco-operative about answering their questions in this initial interrogation. They both were now seated with me at a Bauhaus style table that was triangular in shape. A three sided meeting of minds, their seats strategically positioned much higher than my own, leaving them to be even more intimidating. A bright angle light shown in my face from behind them like a shimmering sun of fire.

“Well Daniel Black you are our chosen one to enter into our masterplan of sublime living in the twenty first century 2020. We wish to gauge human behaviour in a final experiment before we unleash this game to the world, ya then we will present our masterpiece to the world, The Game of Earthly Delights.” Proudly proclaimed the Weasel as if introducing a child Aryan protégé live on stage at Nuremberg.

“Don’t you see you will be the first to truly sample the fruits of life in the garden. Any fantasy you wish to indulge your sordid mind in will be rewarded. The more decadent fruits of life you choose to sample, the more points you score. Explore new heights in sexual behaviour and drug abuse all in the comfort of virtual reality heaven.” The Padre exclaimed, the two of them becoming disturbingly ecstatic about the mission they had set me.

“Points for decadence, our game motto Daniel.” They both said in lip perfect unison.

The Weasel then in a bizarre final act of religious imagery fetched some bread and wine to the table.

“A last supper before you enter the garden Daniel, or should I say the lion’s den.” He said chuckling a foul whiff of stale grey breath and glancing to the Padre.

But the Padre had got up and was fumbling in a medicine cabinet, he quickly returned towards us deadly serious holding a case. He went and stood behind me and I could hear him unpacking various items. That was it, I glanced at the door and got ready to make my move and run from these psychos. I didn’t need this experiment; I didn’t even really need this job, I would give up work and turn my house into a commune, live of the land, I was out of there. But the Padre suddenly restrained me physically down in the chair, his great arms trapping me like great oak branches.

“Resistance is futile Daniel, you have been chosen there can be no going back now. Now we are about

to equip you with the latest gaming technology, this being my own patented BIP pad. That is brain impulse pad, a small microscopic microchip fitted to the back of your skull. Ya, we will be observing you in the garden, Padre please go ahead.” The Weasel explained all this to me like a manic surgeon informing me of an operation he was to perform before giving me an anaesthetic. The Padre clamped my head with a grizzly bear like paw and I felt him apply the BIP to the back of my skull. I was then given a pair of high tech shades type sunglasses to wear. The Weasel took the bread and symbolically broke it, also pouring some red wine into a goblet.

“Come Daniel, drink his blood, eat his flesh.” Said the ghoulish geek.

I was now moving into some sort of vulnerable hypnotised state as the BIP pad started to activate. I bit down into the bread I had been given, it was stale with the texture of gnarled tree bark and practically indigestible. I took a slug of the red wine, it really was like blood and the spot lights seemed to intensify as I slipped more into their control, dazed and bemused. I felt drowsy but at the same time, I also felt restless and my feet itched to move, imagine Roger Bannister about to run the record breaking 4 minute mile, on dope and speed, well that was me.

“It is all just the game, so come on Daniel indulge yourself, gorge yourself on life’s forbidden fruit, you’re a free agent now. A secret agent if you will, about to enter our garden, our secret garden.” Babbled the Weasel like a cad professor.

“Yes Daniel debauchery is the name of the game, drink up my boy.” Urged the Padre, plying me again with the crimson wine goblet.

I was totally incapable of refusing as I felt the BIP pad pulsing into my head, transporting me and injecting me with some kind of cybercancer. I seemed to loose consciousness as the room spun and swirled like mercury in a blender, quick silver liquid in a revolving crazy wall of death. I heard my own voice calling and echoing back across empty chasms, “I’m going now, I’m leaving”. I said like Donald Campbell leaving Coniston Water at a tangent.

Chapter 6.

The Garden

When I awoke I was standing alone in a dimly lit corridor facing a metallic purple door and I now knew the game had commenced. I was still wearing the hi-tech shades and I felt energetic and hungry for action, not tired at all from my unconsciousness. The door opened slowly to dark alley, a black 70's Mercedes was parked up, engine running. My mind was just gearing up to playing the game but I felt no inhibitions, only a desire to roll with the adventure, I opened the rear door of the sleek saloon and got in like it was the most natural thing in the world. Sitting up in the driving seat of the Mercedes was a beautiful girl dressed in a black rubber chauffeur's outfit. Under a peaked shiny black cap her hair was immaculately cut in a bob style, platinum peroxide blonde in colour.

"Good evening Daniel Black, I've been waiting for you, allow me to introduce myself I am Helen Wheels, your personnel chaffeureess. You are late for your engagement at The Garden we must go now." Purred the cool cat Helen with a cheeky smile.

I sank back into the lux interior, it all seemed too real this virtual world, but I didn't recognise any of the streets as we sped through the city lights.

"That's it Sir you relax, it's only a game, why not sit back and help yourself to a drink? Are you familiar with the expression, riding the gravy train?" She offered seductively.

I fixed myself a JD on the rocks from the mini bar and lit up a Havana, I could get to like this virtual life. Tiny subtitle digits flashed up in the frames of the shades I was wearing, then I remembered, these must be my points for decadence like the Weasel had explained. Bloody hell I was scoring points already but I wished I could score with Helen. I found I couldn't take my eyes off her she looked so fit in that skin tight uniform, I wanted to concentrate on the game but she had a lustful magnetism that was distracting me. I felt like I was back at school, sitting at the back of the class staring diagonally forward at the sexy girl working away up front. It was that uniform that did it for me, the tight skirt and black stockings reaching down to the pedals.

We moved through the neon screaming metropolis racing with futuristic vehicles. Sleazy characters lined the streets, hookers and pimps working the strip like bat people in Gotham. Helen turned the black gleam machine Mercedes into a driveway and pulled up to a nightclub entrance.

"Here we are Daniel Black, this is The Garden, have fun I'll be seeing you later." Said Helen glancing around with a cherry lipstick smile.

"Thanks Wheels you're a cool ride." I said blowing a kiss, the BIP pad coursing adrenaline through me like nitro fuel.

I got out of the car and turned to wave to her but all I saw was my reflection in the opaque windows, I felt like Steve McQueen in those shades, shit man I thought no one can touch me tonight. I entered the club and was greeted by an Adam and Eve like couple embracing each other passionately in the foyer. Her long red hair washed over his shoulders like fiery red tidal waves, whilst a python entwined its scaly body around hers. The man symbolically extended his arm to me offering a silver apple, I took the chromium fruit and bit into the the mirrored flesh of the strange fruit. The taste was honey sweet and juice ran down my mouth like wine.

"Life's rich tapestry awaits, please go up," Said the surreal doorman gesturing to some stairs. I began ascending up the stairs to pumping sleazy music, I recognised the tune it was 'Nightclubbing' by Iggy Pop, that grating fuzzy unhinged guitar really fitted, I think it's Ricky Gardiner's playing. The vibe in

the joint was good and the whole place had a very erotic feel, a kind of Rock Disco cum Fetish Club. The Weasel and the Padre had come up with a hell of a virtual reality game, but was it really The Game? What happens when virtual reality is so life like that you actually wonder if it is virtual at all? I felt paranoia creeping up as I moved through the freaky club, Bosch's vision of heaven brought up to date in a bizarrely erotic night club. The kind of club where rubber and leather reptilian people hang out, lizards in a lizard lounge. I felt like I was tripping in another world and my whole life; Miranda, friends and family were just a tiny memory bubble stored in the back of my mind. I was conscious of that life back there but I was far out and tripped out, only not on some mind bending chemical this time but lost in cyberspace. I was a chameleon creature of extremes, part of me loved being in that throbbing sleazy club and I liked the Rock 'n' Roll lifestyle. I had played guitar in a punk band years before in dive bars in London and we supported The Damned when they came to our home town. We did not make any money doing it but I kind of felt I had had a small slice of being a Rock Star, be it a very underground one. On the other hand at heart I was just a mellow guy who was at home pottering about the back yard in my zen garden enjoying the quiet life.

In the Garden girls were dancing in the strobe lights on a central platform, many were very scantily dressed in push-up bras, g-strings, suspenders and stockings. On a lower level men moved around the girls circling the platform, voyers transfixed by the sex sirens. Occasionally a man would embrace one of the girls picking her off like a shark feasting on a school of tuna. I made for one of the bars to hang out and ordered a vodka slammer. After a few drinks I felt I was blending in and the vibe was good as everybody was partying in harmony, heavy hip-hop music was pumping and couples gyrated in dry-ice to the beat. As I downed more vodkas digits flashed inside my shades, points for decadence like The Weasel had said. Through the haze of the club I watched the female action, all the girls in the Garden looked like pouting supermodels with an aura of untouchable cool. I guessed it all had to be a virtual man made reality I was in because everyone looked so good and born to groove. I couldn't imagine any of them working nine to five or clocking on at a factory. Of course this was the Weasel's underground utopia world, the playground of the beautiful ones, no ugly birds showing off cellulite corned beef legs in here. No paralytic drunken geezers throwing up and fighting after a few pints. Yet these people seemed too perfect it was unreal, like the Aryan race at play, shit I was undercover in the master plan. These drop dead gorgeous blondes and brunettes looked so cool but so unapproachable, like some kind of revenge to a man's world. No man was worthy of them and they could make you feel two foot small with just a look. This game was hard work for a lazy barfly like me, I ordered a vodka red bull, I thought that dutch courage and chemical energy would fire me up. The hip hop music finished and live band sauntered onto the stage, great I instantly felt more at home and I was pleased that even in this space age technological game there was still live music. The band were called 'The Viagra Fools' and they looked like an odd ball lounge act, all dressed in black suits they began to pump out a primal rhythmic beat that had the crowd throbbing like electro gothic zombies.

Chapter 7. The Game of Earthly Delights

“Fucking hey man, these dudes fucking rock.” Drawled an American voice next to me.

I turned to a tall lanky hippy standing at the bar next to me.

“Name’s Chester, when d’you get into town pilgrim?” He asked shaking me hand vigorously and sounding like something straight out of a circa. 1969 road movie.

“Just came in tonight man, still checking out the place you know.” I replied looking at myself reflected in Chester’s circular mirror shades.

“Oh yeah man I know what it’s like on your first night in the Garden. You wanna play the game but you don’t know how. Well yer know man you’ve just gotta move in and take whatever you want and lose your inhibitions, go ahead try whatever you feel.” He advised surveying the talent on the dance floor.

I noticed a foxy black girl strutting around to the band across the floor, she was wearing knee high leather boots and a black rubber mini dress.

“Who’s the black chick in the kinky gear at two o’ clock.” I said to Chester.

Like a robot he moved around on his bar stool to our right.

“Oh shit man, that’s Ramona you just better forget about her. That bitch will have you as an horderve.” Advised Chester wryly grinning.

“Yeah but maybe I’m feeling susceptible, I mean its all just a game of fantasy isn’t it. Can you introduce us.” I asked Chester, the vodka induced Dutch courage kicking in.

“Oh, O.K. man but don’t say I didn’t warn you. She gonna take you down to the underworld.” Chuckled the American.

Then for a second he looked kind of familiar and I felt paranoid that the reality wasn’t so virtual after all. He made some sort of signal to Ramona and she began to stride coolly towards us like a dusky panther confident on the cat walk. Chester was like an over the top American Cadillac salesman in the seventies, he wore an outrageous mustard chequered sports jacket with wide lapels and he sported bushy sideburns. I never trusted salesmen and didn’t trust him, what were his eyes saying behind those mirror shades? It was like he was some kind of catalyst brought into the game to push me deeper into decadence, even somehow tempting me with Ramona by saying stay away from her.

“Hey Ramona we have ourselves a pilgrim who’d like you to show him around the underworld tonight, can you take him down to the Red Room.” Chester introduced me to the beautiful but very powerful looking black buxom beauty.

“You want me to take you down boy, I’ll take you down.” Said Ramona pouting in an ominously dominate voice.

She didn’t mess around with small talk or pleasantries instead she quickly walked me over to an elevator at the side of the club. The Vodka Red Bulls I had downed were kicking in and my mind and body were racing. We entered the elevator, it’s walls were covered in mirrors. I caught a glimpse of Chester, he gave me a smarmy wave, his false smile changing as the elevator doors closed. It was rather like the grinning face of the Weasel, I knew he’d set me up and I was going down, down like Dante.

We stood there in the elevator the mirrors reflecting our bodies into infinity. I couldn’t help but ogle Ramona’s Amazonian figure as every conceivable reflective angle was displayed. She wore a black rubber mini dress that hugged her ample figure like skin tight black cellophane. She wasn’t so much muscley but athletic, an olympic dominatrix in spiked heels. Ramona was ice cool and stood there analysing and staring

me out in silence. I tried to diffuse the stone cold atmosphere with a little light conversation.

“So Ramona do you have like any interesting birth marks or tattoos?” I asked meekly, it was my tried and trusted chat up line and had never failed to get some kind of reaction out of the opposite sex.

Yet again it was indeed successful and even this ice maiden was won over, she could not help but smile at my question. She coolly peeled at the tight rubber hemline to reveal a small tattoo of a sweet little kitten. It was such a beautiful harmless image for such a hard looking vixen to have, but as I stooped lower to get a better look at it I noticed the kitten was in fact swiping it’s paw at a butterfly to crush it. Then like a fly caught in a black widow’s web she suddenly tore into me, grabbing my hair and wrenching my head back with long talon like fingernails.

“I don’t remember asking you to look at me boy get on your knees and bow down.” She erupted smacking me in the mouth, making my lip bleed.

I obeyed and got right down at her feet staring at her shiny stilletos. She moved her foot and pinned my right hand with her spiked heel, it was agony like a crucifixion nail hammering down on Christ’s palm. Casually she operated the elevator and I was conscious that we were descending down to some kind of abyss. Digits flashed in the shades I was still wearing, God was I now scoring points for decadence in this sick game. The elevator ominously halted with a bump and the doors opened to a cold prison like corridor. Still kneeling like a dog next to the mistress she quickly produced a dog lead and collar and attached it to my neck, she pulled on the lead choking me out into the corridor like Barbara Woodhouse on speed.

“You’re bleeding dog slave, better get you cleaned up now.” She talked down to me.

I obediently followed Ramona into a tiled urinal and she let me wash my bloodied mouth in the wash basin. Her stiletto heels clicked around the place on the ceramic floor, the sound was bitter and harsh like her most highness, the beautiful bitch.

“Got something to make you feel better dog slave, but you must wear this.” She instructed stretching a tiny black thong between long red finger nails.

She then produced a small bag of white powder and poured a line out onto the toilet cistern. Caught up I threw caution to the whirlwind of this drug fuelled sado-masochistic game and donned the leather thong, Ramona then encouraged me to take the line of coke. She rolled up a new crisp bank note and gave it to me. I lent forward and sniffed the line, the powder hit me like a hurricane and I as I began to stand up, suddenly I was being pushed back down and bent over and then.

“Whoa, Aharragh”! I cried out like a banshee.

The scheming bitch had strapped on a big dildo cock and was attempting to fuck me as I was sniffing the coke. With a great pelvic trust she went right up like a London bus right up the old deaf and dumb. Stone me, up the Old Kent Road guvnor, apples and pears. Luckily it was a quick fuck she wanted and she soon yanked the lead choke collar and again I was down at her knees. She stood over me like Boadicea, but this chick had a dick. The strap on phallic dildo stuck out from her groin, a black ebony back door intruder with plastic bulging veins!

Ramona then showed me into her palace of pain, The Red Room, the ultimate dungeon of decadence. Bathed in red neon spotlights this torture chamber was cosily fitted out in black and blood red pvc vinyl. Every conceivable implement of sado machochistic torture adjoined the walls of this Pandora’s box room. In the corner was a small barred dog kennel, in the other a vertical beam, but the centre piece standing on the other wall was a massive St. Andrew’s Cross. Pretty soon I was all trussed up with no where to go, as she expertly tied me up like I was some kind of Christmas turkey. This girl was born to abuse and I guess I was born to lose as I soon realised she had just been playing with me, the way felines do up to that point.

The bleeding lip and quick shag was just for starters, now the real pain was about to begin. She took down from the wall a cat-o-nine-tails and began to seductively stroke it lightly down my back, the cold leather sent shivers down my spine. Then she paused and stepped back and I knew this was just the calm before the storm.

“Now then dog slave you have been found guilty of committing the deadly sins up there in heaven. I’m about to punish your gluttony and lust for sex, drugs and alcohol.” She snarled.

She cracked the whip against my back, like tongues of hell fire it stung me like whirling snakes making me gasp and grit my teeth. Tied to the cross like Jesus this abuse seemed to last ages and then she finally stood back to admire her work, but not satisfied with this torture she began to spin the cross on its axis. Faster and faster she rotated me and I was spinning in sadistic cyberspace, the red neon light blinding like a bleeding sun. I lost consciousness and the next thing I knew I was back in the elevator. Dazed and giddy I tried to get up and someone grabbed me and hauled me up to me feet it was Chester, he lightly splashed a bottle of mineral water over my face.

“Hey pilgrim you’re pretty fucked up, don’t say I didn’t warn you, but you wanted to meet Ramona. Hey don’t worry guess what, you’re through to the next level.”

He handed me the shades back, I put them on and ten thousand points for decadence flashed up.

“Can I get off now I just wanna chill out out and go home.” I said wanting to end the bizarre rollercoaster trip.

“Hell no pilgrim, there’s no going back now, no you’re committed to finishing the game, hey you’re on a mission brother.” He said loudly slapping me on the back.

“In fact The Weasel has personally selected you for the cyber experience of a lifetime. Hell Pilgrim you’re goin’ for a ride with the brudders.”

“Who the fuck are the brothers Chester?” I asked now getting tired of all the riddles.

“The brudders are waiting to show you a real wild time in the underworld. That’s Delroy and Yardy Boy your genial hosts on the hell ride.”

Oh great I was out of the frying pan into the hellfire. I began to get real paranoid about the game and the more as time went on the more a didn’t trust the Weasel. There was some real low life hanging upstairs now in The Garden. The atmosphere had soured and the faces looked mean as Chester led me through the foyer. A spaced out girl bumped into me obliviously, then turned and stared with snarling black eyes. She must have been on some heavy shit, the septum of her nose was missing giving her the look of a drugged up alien. Although I was still dazed I felt glad to be leaving the place still relatively sane and together. Immense paranoia clouded me as Chester showed me through to the car park.

8.

Murder at Martello?

“OK Chester, hey it’s been an interesting experience, but I think I’ll split now.” I said veering off at a tangent and towards the towpath.

“Hey Pilgrim not so fast man, the Weasel has got one last job for you.” He said trying to look sincere.

But I could not help noticing him looking behind me and signalling to someone. Quickly a black BMW wheel spun around to us like a panther leaping from the darkness. This car was the night itself, mysterious and awfully bad as fuck, an opaque electric window slowly lowering.

“Ho Chester what the fucks happening.” Grunted a voice as deep as the ocean.

Chester replied in homeboy fashion. “Delroy gotta a pilgrim here whose on a trip, like you to show him round.”

“Get in Mutherfucker.” Said the driver Delroy, giving me a cold stare and waving a small handgun.

And that was it, I was really up shit alley. I had no option and I was soon in the back of the beemer being chauffeured to God knows where by two huge yardies. Two massive black gangsters with dreads and fuck off big gold jewellery. I sat quietly contemplating certain death in the back seat and tried to stay cool, but I was really freaking out. I stared at the back of their heads, they had great wide shoulders, Delroy wore a Shaft style leather jacket and the other who answered to the name Yardy Boy sported an American football top. I decided to try and at least talk to them to see if they were as hostile as I thought.

“Look guys you really don’t have to go to all this trouble giving me a ride, I’ve had a good trip and now I’m ready to split, you know you can drop me off anywhere here will do.” I stammered nervously.

They glanced to each other and chuckled in very deep Brunoesque tones.

“You wanna see Babylon mutherfucker, well we’re gonna take you there, now shut the fuck up.” Said Yardy Boy then turning up the car stereo to overload.

The speakers pumped out some speed garage garbage, not really my thing and the bass made my whole body vibrate, my skeleton pinging like a metal tuning fork. I pressed my head against the window as I could see bright lights through the ever present shades I was wearing. We were soon cruising in a busy street with bars and take-aways and now it struck me I was back in reality because I recognised the town, it was the seaside town of Felixstowe and we were riding down Hamilton Road, the main street. I remembered back when I first used to visit Felixstowe with my family as a kid about 30 years ago. We would always drive down Hamilton Road to the top of Bent Hill where the road would wind down to the seafront. From the back of dad’s Hillman Imp my sister and I would say, “I can see the sea”, as we declined to the Victorian style promenade, then there would be the pier pointing out to sea like a long iron finger. But tonight I felt no joy as I looked out to the grey skyline, just the menace of the moment and the pier was an iron finger of doom. I expected to see the quaint little café at the top of Bent Hill called ‘The Nuts and Honey’, but it had gone and in its place was now a fucking kebab shop. It was that strange empty feeling you get, when you return to somewhere years later to find it’s no longer the same magical place. Sleazy people were hanging out there and aggressive drunks were scuffling with each other as Delroy stopped the car and activated the window down. Shifty characters came out from the dark doorways nearby, I didn’t even try to listen to their gruff banter. I just stared at the greasy spittle on the kebab shop window, the meat revolving on the spit looked like an enormous fatty elephant’s foot and about as appetising too. How the fuck was I going to get out of this one I wondered, I knew where I was so maybe if I could break free I could get back to Great Eastern station. Hope flew out of the window as I tried the door handles which were locked tight.

“Who said game o’er man, no fucker said game over till I say game over.” Growled Yardy his dreads scything around like a tarantula in a tornado.

He’d clocked me trying the door handle, Delroy then decided to warn me too. “Weasel got a job for you at Martello tower, and you better not fuck up or your bones swim with the fishies tonight mutherfucker.”

Then we were off again on our merry way for a little trip along the cliff road heading for Old Felixstowe. We left the busy south side of Felixstowe with its sprawling docks creeping up the River Orwell and past Charles Mannings Amusements, an Art Deco building now painted such a shocking shade of pink that sailors use it to navigate out in the North Sea. Old Felixstowe I knew from childhood days there was a dead end and this worried me. It’s the much quieter unspolited side, almost like a small shanty village perched at the mouth of the river Deben. You get to it by driving through a winding road that meanders through a golf course, and there we were cruising through the deserted green fairways that led to the rickety fishing shacks and boat houses. There is an old café and a pub called The Ferry Boat Inn which my Father always called the FBI. It felt as though some sort of fate and climax must be awaiting at this dead end, my captors were like their car, immensely powerful but dead quite. We moved like black fog and I glanced over to the coast running parallel, I could just make out the shape of the Martello Tower situated on the shore, shaped like a huge concrete steam pudding. Martello Towers are the Napoleonic Forts that can be found on the coast of East Anglia. We turned off right along a track leading up to the Tower and stopped under some trees near a parked transit van. Two figures got out of the van and quickly made their way over to us. Then the door next to me opened, it was the Weasel and he got in looking like some kind of Grim Reaper. Shortly after the Padre got in the other side sandwiching me in the back seat.

“Well done Daniel for playing such an excellent game, have you enjoyed the underworld.” Sneered the Weasel.

“Well it’s not my idea of a picnic at the beach.” I said trying not to show what a wreck I felt.

“Well we’ve got one last little virtual experiment that we’d like you to undertake up at the Martello Tower. Come Daniel you didn’t expect to indulge all your fantasies for nothing did you. You have gorged yourself at Satan’s table and you must now pay the bill. Complete a little task of repentance and you can return to reality a free man.” Said the Weasel producing another BIP pad.

The Padre grabbed my arm tightly, his great hands clamping me like steel machinery and my long fingers spread out in pain like brittle tree twigs, blue vein tributaries winding out on the backs of my hands. The Weasel attached a new BIP pad to the back of my head and I immediately felt those effects of hypnotism again.

“Now for the task Daniel, it’s quite simple, we just need you to go with our friends here to the Martello Tower and carry out an assassination of a drug Lord. Remember this is all virtual reality, we just need to see you can destroy evil and return to your life cleansed. Our experiment has led you through what you may have thought were earthly delights; but now you can emerge a better person, just take this gun and destroy this demon. Our two yardy friends here will brief you on your weapon Daniel, good luck. You have been an exemplarily student of the earthly delights, now you can complete the game and go free.” Explained the Weasel and after passing the gun to the rastas, he and the Padre were gone into the night.

“Tech 9 small assault weapon Delroy.” Murmured Yardy Boy looking down the sight of the gun. He seemed very knowledgeable about the fire arm.

“You got tha’ right weapon man, low quality made in Miami, 9mm drug dealer gun. Just what we need to take Jack out tonight.” Said Delroy turning and smiling through gold teeth that shone like amber tombstones in the moonlight.

“Ho! You ready to take out the Jack man.” Yardy Boy gruffly gestured the gun at me.

“What the fuck are you on about.” I thought to myself, of course not audibly saying anything.

“Jack man, Jack is Jimmy Jacket, he’s dealer you are gonna kill. You’ll know him when tha’ time comes, cause he’s a mutherfucker wearing a big fuck off suede jacket.” Advised Yardy.

“We go up to Martello real cool, we just chillin’. When inside you hang back, we make connection and Jacket gives us the gear. When Jacket pass over the package, then you take him out. You get respect and win the game man, we drive you home.” Delroy explained like it was a walk in the park.

The new BIP pad was kicking in and I felt under the rasta’s command, nothing else mattered now but the game. It was like some trippy drug again, and I thought back to when I had once done an acid trip years back. Like when hippies say ‘far out’, I suddenly found myself really far out on a trip and I had come to a point of trying to comprehend my life. All I knew was that my brain was out there but I suddenly thought of my life, my family and friends back there in normality. It was so strange, but it was as if my normal everyday life was just a tiny picture bubble in the back of my mind. I knew it was all back down there somewhere and I felt the same being trapped in this crazy virtual reality game. Picturing Miranda and my family back there was the only thing that was keeping me from totally freaking out.

“OK man lets do it, Delroy bring tha’ money; you take this and remember you’re the killa’ ho just gotta kill Jimmy Jacket.” Yardy Boy thrust the cold steel gun into my hands and pushed me up the pathway.

The cold air was damp with sea salt and you could hear the waves crashing on the shingle, the stones being dragged back into the tide only added to my gloom as we made our way up to the Martello Tower. The massive circular building stood ominously unmarked against all the elements of the North Sea. The yardies swaggered up the steps marching me before them like centurions, they showed no fear instead they were cocky and arrogant in their strides. The shades made my vision infra-red and digits again began to flash up the game was still on, I turned to look at the yardies breathing down my neck. They didn’t seem human but more robot like as they clumped mechanically, sand under foot behind me. Shit if this was a virtual reality game I was in, I certainly had to hand it to the Weasel it was bloody realistic, but I still couldn’t tell as the surroundings were too familiar and a bit too real. We mounted a small wooden bridge that led up to the Martello Tower and stood facing a very substantial metal door. That fuck off great big metal door meant one thing, and that was crack house dealer den. Delroy activated a small intercom device on the wall.

“Yo, is Jacket in, this is Delroy, we got tha’ money.” Whispered the Rastafarian.

I noticed a small CCTV eye scan us over, all the time the gun casing pressed into my ribs inside my coat. After a while the door opened slightly and an ugly flat nosed man peered through and gave each of us the once over before letting us into the terror tardis. Then we were inside the circular Martello Tower entrance floor. The place was quite sparsely furnished apart from a computer console desk with another pig ugly mug studying CCTV screens of the outside surrounding area. He slowly spun around on his chair and scrutinised us with contempt from head to toe.

“Call up to Jacket Vinnie tell him the spondolicks are ere.” He said in an Essex accent.

Vinnie phoned up to Jacket and gestured us to a special spiral staircase. The yardies started towards the iron steps then,

“Oi, hold it, just fucking wait there! Better fucking check their not tooled up Vinnie.” Said the doorman blocking the stairs.

Vinnie searched the reluctant yardies for weapons and then quickly frisked me as if I was not really a threat. I froze but somehow Vinnie being a complete meat head missed the gun inside my padded jacket. I

guessed that compared to Delroy and Yardy Boy I probably did look a little lightweight in the hard bastard department. The doorman then led us up the winding spiral staircase with fun guy Vinnie bringing uncomfortably up the rear. We entered into Jimmy Jacket's domain, a clinically clean circular room up in the Martello Tower. There drug baron Jimmy Jacket sat behind a teak desk, a managing director of mayhem in an office of oblivion, at another table sat who else but Chester the American character I had met at the Garden Niteclub.

"Well if it ain't Daniel in the lion's den, c'mon in Danny boy." Drawled the yank blowing smoke rings across the room. But his welcome was suddenly cut short by a short fuse temper blowing.

"You took your fuckin' time Delroy, just two things, any sign of the pigs on the way out ere and who's this cunt." Coughed Jimmy Jacket pointing a nicotine finger at me.

"No sign of tha' babylon and he just a kid in on tha deal for a small cut." Replied Delroy trying to play down my role in the connection.

"Small cut ha, I'll give you a small cut you fucker." Shouted Jimmy Jacket storming over to me and tearing off my sunglasses.

He pulled out a flick knife and began brandishing it close up to my face, he stared at me with his tiny ultra streetwise eyes piercing my retinas like x-rays. He smelt of stale pub beer and cigarettes, his shitty breath weezing with hostility. Jacket wasn't a physically big man but his vermin features were menacing enough. A cockney dealer who looked as though he would stab you in the back at the drop of a hat. Of course over his wiry frame hung his trademark, an overlarge suede tan jacket, expensive but completely wrong of his scarecrow body. His hair had the consistency of dirty straw and the colour of red rust, his pale pitted complexion freckled and pitted like a Newcastle street map. He was the mother of all motherfuckers, puny in presence but as evil as hell. I was right up Kirsty Alley with two massive yardies as my only back up and I wasn't even sure of their intentions. Then of course there was Chester sitting there and grinning, could I trust that a yank as far as I could throw him, well thankfully he did get me out of hot water by suddenly butting in to distil this perilous situation.

"Whoa there, it's OK Jacket, chill out man, I've checked this guy and the dude's cool. Put your shades on kid." Drawled the Yank, opening a large box on the table.

Jacket retracted his flick knife reluctantly, still snarling contempt as he backed off. This delightful character then turned his attention to a small piece of paper littering the spotless floor.

"Who the fuck dropped that, Vinnie get up here." Screamed Jacket down the stairs.

I then realised just what a paranoid psycho Jacket really was. It was strange to see a drug dealer whining like an old school teacher about a bit of litter.

"OK no problem Jacket, Vinnie pick up the litter." Said Chester trying to calm down the paranoid pusher.

Chester then got down to business and turned his attention to the metal box on the table.

"Gentlemen shall we do business." Announced Chester opening the silver chest. "Just take a look at this guys, Columbia's finest cocaine fresh in today through the Port of Felixstowe." He said placing a line of the white powder on a mirror and cutting it with a razor blade.

He cut a fine line out and offered the coke to Delroy. Delroy bent forward his dreadlocks cascading over his shoulders like giant tarantula legs. He took the line of coke with a sudden sniff, whipping his head back and inhaling his nostrils like twin gas turbine engines.

"Ain't that just like white lightning going through yer' man." Beamed Chester, his Texan teeth shining like billboards.

Delroy stood there, his speeding head pulsating in the rush and everyone waited quietly for his reaction. Finally he broke the silence his deep voice simply rumbled.

“It’s good shit.”

“God damn, of course it’s good shit, but have you boys got the fifteen grand with you?” Pressed Chester keen to close the deal now.

“Fifteen grand man, it’s all tha’.” Said Yardy Boy dropping a leather bag onto the table, like something out of a spaghetti western.

Chester quickly took the money and checked it with a counting machine. I felt nervous as if I was waiting in the wings to play my part in this twisted play. My mind was racing and going through a thousand different scenarios as the cold metal gun dug in my ribs inside my coat. The yardies were giving me glances as if to cue me and the adrenaline was really pumping around my body. Delroy reached for the package of cocaine.

“Hold it right there, what you got there Chester” Commanded Jacket guarding the drugs.

“Looks like twelve grand Jacket.” Replied Chester his wide American grin dropping.

“What the fuck you talking about man, I counted out fifteen grand myself.” Growled Delroy squaring up to grab back the money.

“Don’t you fucking move.” Screamed Jacket becoming psycho again and pulling out his knife.

I knew this was where I was meant to really enter the next level. My head was swimming as my eyes scanned around the circular Martello room weighing everyone up. The room was spinning but not in a drunken haze, no my dizziness was fuelled by the BIP pad altering my perception of reality. I scratched at it on the back of my head like an electronic scab filling my brain with violent puss. As I vigorously scratched at the BIP pad everything became darker and the figures around me less animated. The mad digits stopped flashing inside my shades, I pulled them off and tossed them aside. For the first time that night everything felt down to earth and real again, my senses crash landed back to reality but the situation was the same. I found myself standing rigid, my arm stretched out and I was looking down the sights of the Tech 9 assault gun at Jacket’s ugly ginger head. Nobody was moving an inch, Jacket was sweating buckets, his beady eyes transfixed on the gun barrel. His skeletal hand dropped the flick knife and it clattered to the stone floor.

“Do it, do it, take him out.” Ordered Delroy ominously signing a verbal death warrant.

My finger caressed the trigger, my eyes flickered around and I could see Chester, mouth wide open. Delroy, Yardy, Vinnie and back to Jimmy Jacket his head lit up from behind like a fiery halo. Behind him a small window and out in the distance the warm glow of the public house down at Old Felixstowe. It was the Ferry Boat Inn where outside I had sat as a child eating salt n’ vinegar crisps and drinking shandy. I was about to blow Jacket away, but this was real and I knew then I had been set up to murder him. I also knew it was kill or be killed and I had to think quickly. My instinct was the escape route and in a millisecond I turned my head and saw the stairway down, I turned back and simultaneously shot the gun but instead of exploding Jacket’s head like a pumpkin my arm raised up 45 degrees and the bullet shot off at a tangent shattering the lighting bulb. Fragmented shards of glass rained down on everyone in the dark confusion, everyone that is except me. I ran to the stairs and fled hotfoot down the spiral staircase, luckily everyone in the building was stunned in the confusion upstairs fumbling for lighters in the darkness. The front door was heavily bolted and I furiously flung back the bolts, all the time I could hear Jacket’s manic voice shouting abuse upstairs. With all the bolts now undone on the metal plated door I wrenched it open just as the demonic dealers started to come down snarling like rapid dogs. I finally shot out the downstairs lights and slammed the great door behind me, outside I tossed the gun into the bushes.

Chapter 9.

Those in peril

The frosty night air bit my face but I welcomed that feeling, it was the feeling of freedom again. I made for the cliffs and the sound of the waves crashing on the beach, the tide and the shingle on the shore. I scrambled down the steps not looking back, but I was sure they would soon be chasing me. The night was black and the moon was no where to be seen, suddenly I lost my footing slipping on the shiny salt concrete, I tumbled onto the beach my bony body clattering on the pebbles. I was dazed but not hurt too bad, I lay there my heart pounding like a kettle drum. Then I heard the chilling sound of the dealers whopping and hollering like possessed banshees. Jimmy Jacket was barking orders to hunt me down, the master of the hounds of hell. So like the fox I had to keep running, I got up and mounted the concrete wall hauling myself up onto the roof of a beach hut. I had been here before in happier times with friends and whilst quite pissed we had for a laugh, run along the tops of the beach huts. Here I was reliving that silly drunken game once more but this time I was running for my life. My legs felt like lead as I continuously jumped from roof to roof finally leaping onto a grassy bank. I laid low behind gorse bushes taking a breather, then I looked up onto the golf fairway at the Old Club House, then back down to The Ferry Boat Inn. The lights were still on and the place looked like my best bet for safety. Maybe I could call Piers and get him to collect me from hiding in the marsh land I thought. I decided to go for it and I sprang onto the fairway and sprinted towards the Ferry Boat Inn or the FBI as my Dad always used to call it. I ached all over from the fall down the cliff steps but I kept charging through the darkness to the lights at the pub. I thundered up the fairway towards the warm glow at the Inn. I felt like a smuggler running through the cold night to sanctuary, but I knew the drug smugglers were after me and closing in fast. The grass of the fairway ran up to a large bunker before the eighteenth green. I charged towards it, then as I reached the lip of the bunker suddenly a figure stood up from the sand, erect and arms outstretched like a ghostly crucified scarecrow. A large ill fitting coat hung over his shoulders, it was of course Jimmy Jacket. Still holding the scarecrow pose his head slowly looked up grinning a vicious grin and his bony hand clicked, the moon glinting on his flick knife.

“Sorry old bean you’re bunkered.” Smarmed the smug druggler.

After everything that had gone on I felt almost fearless now and I stood my ground in the bunker facing him. Game or no game, my goal was now to have Jacket right there and then and we squared up to each other like feuding cowboys in some old Western. His tombstone teeth still grinning and gritted, Jacket moved about me gesturing the blade in stabbing motions. Quickly he swung his arm, the knife scything past my face, he missed but I reeled back my hand grasping the turf at the back of the bunker. Then just like in those old Westerns my hand instinctively grabbed a fist full of sand and I flicked the wet crystals into Jacket’s ugly face. The sand showered his wide open eyes and he barked out like a demented wolf.

“Aargh fackin’ ell, facking ell!” He screamed repeatedly staggering in disorientation.

I took this opportunity immediately to step back and kick him squarely in the groin, like a rugby player I converted those little leather balls into eternity.

“Whack, Ohh!” My boot went in with a dull thud.

But I couldn’t leave it at that, no way, Jacket was an evil sod who had to be dealt with. I turned and coolly stepped on the bunker rake lying there, the rake handle sprung up and into my hands as if in some martial arts movie. I swung the spiky implement around like a claymore. Then it was as if thirty five years of bottled aggression finally exploded inside of me, all those years of sitting back and taking crap from

complete fuckers came to a head. I extended out the metal rake catching the snivelling wreck by the nose and gently pulled at his pathetic features.

“Get up Jimmy.” I simply growled, whilst pulling him up to his knees the rake still caught in his nostrils. He was crying sandy tears and begging for mercy holding his groin and just slumped there.

“I am the Grim Reaper Jimmy and it’s pay back time, this ones from every addict whose life you have ruined.”

I swung the heavy rake like a samurai ready to knock his block off. But as I brought it down around I stopped just short of his head, then he fell face down in the wet sand, I couldn’t finish him. Not even this horrible excuse for a human being, what was it coming to. I stepped out of that terror pit and threw away the rake, the shock from virtual reality back to real life really hit me. I was truly losing my mind, I could see Jacket’s henchmen coming down the fairway and I knew I had to move fast.

I could see the Ferry Boat Inn lights glowing beyond the golf course fairway. I ran to that warm glowing beer light, it shone like some kind of safe haven in the darkness. The dealers were hot on my tale and I could hear Yardy Boy and the others with their terrifying tribal like screams as they raced after me. I ran up to the doors of the Ferry Boat Inn and peered through the windows and I could see some punters supping with each other. I entered the Inn hoping for a genial welcome from some stout yeoman at the bar, but the hub hub stopped immediately as I came in. Instead a deadly silence cut in as cautious and suspicious eyes looked me up and down. I had clearly entered a private meeting where strangers were not wanted and a meeting of what appeared to be a Convention of the Fat Lardy Motorcycle Fellowship.

“Nothing for you here skinny stranger, go on fuck off.” Piped up a chubby fat biker in a broad Suffolk accent.

“This is a private evening for The Cider Bellies MC, not lager drinking ponces on mopeds up from the smoke.” Scoffed another obese hairy man in a tiny leather waist coat, triggering a roar of laughter from the other gut buckets.

“Come on guys, I’m being chased by Yardies just let me use the phone.” I replied hoping for some sanctuary from the bellies, but fat chance, if you forgive the pun.

“Yardies on The Cider Bellies patch, ha! They wouldn’t bloody dare come down ere.” Chortled the chief belly waddling over to the window. “Now come ere and show me what your bloody talking about boy.” Groaned the ample bellied biker swilling a jug of Old Crone cider and waving me over to the window.

“Look for christ sake, fucking yardies coming down the fairway.” I was losing my cool now.

Then suddenly the fatty grabbed me in a headlock, his great lardy arm crunching my neck like a giant lily white boa constrictor suffocating a chicken. Then I wondered if the Cider Bellies MC were in on the whole frigging thing. The whole virtual paranoia thing crossed my mind again, I mean a bar full of Suffolk yokel fatties calling themselves The Cider Bellies MC (Felixstowe Chapter) how unreal could that be.

Still holding me in a headlock however that certainly didn’t feel virtual, as the fat biker took out a mobile phone and started dialling.

“Is that Jacket, alright boy, this is Hugh Janus from the bellies, we’ve got a fox on the run down here at the FBI. Oh don’t worry Jimmy he ain’t going nowhere, we’ll put him on the barbecue spit.”

Oh shit, straight out of the frying pan into the fat pan, I thought. Then Hugh Janus started to drag me still in the headlock through the bar to a back room of the pub. My head was held fast and his great swirling belly seemed to be consuming me like a greasy burping pillow. As he dragged me I fought to wrestle my face clear for air, my hand grasping at his tiny leather waistcoat. Clawing in desperation I caught hold of the pocket of the waistcoat and I felt something metallic and grabbed hold of a small key.

Hugh Janus kicked open a back door and flung me into a outhouse garage. He slammed the door shut behind me, dazed I shook myself down. My eyes slowly became accustomed to the low light in the dimly lit garage; I began to take a look around, it was full of motorcycle parts, exhausts, cylinder heads and standing at the back a beast of a motorcycle. This had to be just part of the game I thought as I felt for the keys I had snatched. The moonlight poured in through a crack in the doors I held the keys up to the super trooper light ray, they were attached to a Triumph key ring, if only. The garage doors were locked tight with what seemed to be a chain from the outside. The bike was my only chance of breaking out, I quickly ran back to the great dormant machine lurking like a enormous dirty chrome spider, motionless but deadly. God it was a Triumph Bonneville and that key slid in like a greased gigolo. I mounted the great lump as majestically as Laurence of Arabia mounting a camel after he had just mounted a lady. The moon was big and bright and I was on the up, game on I thought. I turned the key and the kicked that mutherfucker over, she growled like a dragon awakening but refused to start. I took a deep breath and flexed my calf muscle and again kicked the starter with all my might. The engine this time roared into life and thundered as I pulled the throttle like crazy. I could hear the bellies coming out to the garage so I just went for my only chance. I flung the bike into first, accelerated and hit those doors like a battering ram exploding through the chained doors in a hail of splinters, out I rode into the pub courtyard. Cider Bellies outside jumped clear and scattered as I roared out without a care, through the boathouses I motored on the throbbing beast past old Felixstowe café then on past the Old Shellfish Shed. The Cider Bellies were still waddling about in chaos back at the FBI, so I parked up at the small phonebox, it was all too much, it had gone to far now I decided to call Piers for help. I frantically dialled Piers mobile number, there was no answer but I just stood there in desperation with the receiver clutched to my ear.

“C’mon Piers pick up, pick up for Christ’s sake.” I murmured away into the murky night.

I looked out across to Bawdsey, then at the jetty, the boathouses of Old Felixstowe hadn’t changed at all since I was a kid. I knew again this was no virtual reality, no way man, I had to believe, I had come back down to earth from whatever trip I had been on.

Then as I was just about to hang up, finally Piers answered. “Now look here its fucking four thirty and you better have a hell of a bloody good reason for calling.” Came his camp cross voice.

“Hi, Piers, it’s me Danny can you pick me up at Bawdsey Manor, I’m in deep shit, I’ll tell you all about it when you get here.” I frantically replied.

“My dear boy, where the fuck have you been.”

“Please Piers just get here to Bawdsey Manor or I’m dead meat.” I shouted hanging up the receiver.

I could hear the rumble of heavy engines roaring up towards me, I ran out of the telephone box and down towards the boathouses. Old Felixstowe jetty was just like I remembered it from my childhood, I skidded to a halt on the old quay. My life was flashing before me and like a dream I was that kid again with Dad down by the ferry looking across the water to Bawdsey Manor. Dad always told me about when he was stationed at Bawdsey in his R.A.F days. The R.A.F had used the big Manor house as a base carrying out radar research there during World War II. I remembered one story about how he said he had missed the last ferry boat back from the FBI to Bawdsey across the river. The river Deben enters the sea right there between Old Felixstowe and Bawdsey and the current is treacherous. But what Dad had told me was that having missed the last ferry he had decided on that night whilst completely drunk, to take a rowing boat and row back to Bawdsey against the current. He said it had been the hardest thing he had ever done as the current was particularly fierce and not many people had made it without been swept out to sea. Looking at the river water rushing out to sea I knew what he meant, and also seeing an old rowing boat moored up I knew this was my only chance.

I clambered into the boat and took up the oars, Dad's old story coming back to life again, and here I was following in the old man's footsteps. The river was pretty fierce just here where it met the sea and you could see the current moving at speed impatiently rushing with the dark tide. Bike and car lights were steaming towards me, Jimmy Jacket and the yardies had probably linked up with the Cider Bellies and I knew if I hung around I would soon be a dead man. So just as Dad had done back in the Fifties I was going to have to row across the raging torrent of the river Deben to Bawdsey. I pushed off in the wee rowing boat, someone had painted a name on the bow it read 'Hoof Hearted'. But in my moment of panic the boat's joke monicker was lost on me as I vigorously pulled at the oars, the heavy grey water felt like setting concrete as the current carried me out to the doomy North Sea. The jetty on the other side at Bawdsey seemed like a world away and what's more Jimmy Jacket had arrived at the Old Felixstowe quayside with the yardies. They jeered and laughed at me mocking my every pull on oars with rain sodden matchstick arms, veins bulging like the red river tributaries running to hell with the dark Deben. The Bellies then arrived from the rear, shining their bike headlights on me from the darkness, Crack! A shot rang out as the fuckers began shooting. The side of the boat splintered like wet brittle bone as the boat took a hit, but I was more worried about being carried out to sea as I pulled like a helpless galley slave against the current, Bawdsey was becoming further away. I thought about the story Dad had told me years ago, completely pissed he had fought the tide and got back to base at Bawdsey Manor, his RAF Barracks. I knew then I wasn't really even a pimple on the old man's arse, as here I was stone cold sober trying to do the same thing and failing miserably. I was being swept out to sea, the current too strong for me. My Dad was made of different stuff, a man who after he left the RAF spent his whole working life in the Fire Service. He never really bragged about any of his achievements; he would just mention the funny things that had happened, like the drunk rowing boat stunt, and that for me was the sign of a true hero. A man who had nursed my Mum through years of a deteriorating Multiple Sclerosis illness to her death. Who stuck with her and never stopped loving or caring when she was left unable to talk, eat or hardly even move. How could you follow an act like that? Well he was so modest I never really had to, just quietly believe in your own ability and don't brag about it, that was the philosophy I was raised on.

But here I was in deep shit and all of a sudden religion didn't seem like such a bad idea. The current held me fast now and the unforgiving open North Sea was devouring me like plankton. In helpless desperation I began singing at the top of my voice, just howling into the black night the old hymn Eternal Father strong to save.

"For those in peril on the sea." I sung like a demented twat.

The swirling abyss had me spinning as if I were being blended in some great salt water cocktail. The clouds, the rain and the sea spray converged into one great nightmare demon and his cloak swept over me taking me to hell, swirling black hell. That's all I remember about being out there in that boat off Bawdsey fighting that tide that was pulling me out to sea.

10.

White Wisteria Angel

I woke up in a hospital bed a complete jabbering wreck, physically and mentally wasted. Family and friends came and visited me and came to the conclusion with the doctors that I was probably messed up on drugs getting myself nearly drowned. Of course I was pretty out there but I could not find any words to explain what I had been through, and the fact I had been a guinea pig in a weird experimental game was still puzzling for me to comprehend. After a week of suffering the stodgy bland hospital food Doctor Wilson decided a spell in a rehabilitation home might be the answer, so I was packed off to St. Edmunds clinic. It was a kind of rest home for mostly younger people who had gone through some bad shit and needed to convalesce in peace. The whole ordeal had left me withdrawn, tired and pretty confused. It was August now and I found solace out in the garden, Miranda came around every afternoon and we'd just sit out under the big shady cedars at the back of St. Edmunds. It was a big old mansion on Constitution Hill overlooking Christchurch Park and the massive garden was perfect for just sitting and contemplating your fucked up life.

"Look Danny I know you've been through a lot but what the hell were you doing out in that boat. I mean the coastguard found you unconscious, I mean why?" Said Miranda hoping to get through to me.

"Would you believe me if I said I just got mixed up in something, some drug dealers were chasing me and I tried to row across to Bawdsey that's all I remember." I recalled blankly.

"Drug dealers, what the fuck are you talking about Danny." She said becoming angry with my lack of communication.

But I didn't answer I just watched the bees buzzing round the lavender bushes, I couldn't explain anymore.

"You must have been on something, I think you still are, your eyes are just gone, look at yourself for fucks sake."

She was angry and sobbing and, I like a fool just sat there watching the bees. She got up and stormed off, I didn't even look up or shout after her and she was gone. I don't remember wondering whether she would come again or caring, I was totally gone she was right. Yes the sun was out and it was idyllic out there in the garden but I was cracking up, I just sat there for hours watching the sun move round on the little ornamental sun dial. The tranquillity of wasting the day away was only broken when I saw one of the head nurses Sister Stella emerging from the French windows. She prowled out, a starched white walking chemistry set to administer medication to Heather the anorexic hippy chick. This gave me a chance to escape my medication and I slid off through the rhododendrons like a sly fox. I crouched behind the bushes watching Sister Stella with Heather who also, was not mad on taking her medication. Unfortunately for her, her twiglet limbs were not physically any match as the heavy Nurse grappled her into swallowing her pills. I had seen enough of the bullying and passed through to the kitchen garden it was really quite there. I found another seat and was at peace again until a long haired figure shiftily came through to join me. It was Troy a recovering heroin addict, looking more dodgy than a cut and shut Vauxhall Viva.

"Hey Danny I'm on the run from the SS, I'm a methodone actor in a getaway chase from old stone face." Drooled Troy plonking himself down in enormous heavy flared jeans with frayed bell bottoms that covered his feet.

"I take it you mean Sister Stella when you say the SS." I said smirking at his paranoid humour.

"Yeah man, she gave me a dose of something yesterday and it completely fucked me up. I was chucking

up all night, talking to God on the big white telephone I was, practically puked my spleen for fucks sake. Besides I don't need her frigging medication, when I've got me own Danny boy." He said producing a chunky fat spliff from the tent like denim jeans, laughing through dirty teeth. "One hit of this little number and I'm sorted geezer for the rest of the day." He chortled, sparking up the fat one.

He seemed to go off into a trance as he smoked the joint and he started babbling on about the birds. I guessed it must have been strong grass and I foolishly took a few puffs as he passed it over.

"Look at that seagull up there floating man." He said gazing fascinated up at the sky. "You know why they called Charlie Parker 'Bird'. It was cause he played that sax like the notes were a bird floating over the jazz man." He chuffed, and I was caught up in his vision as I too peered up at the dreamy cotton wool clouds through the brown smoke until.

"Oh shit Troy is this shit heroin we're smoking?" I awoke from slow motion world and handed the spliff back to him, I had never done heroin before and I didn't want to start either. I was practically flat out before I realised and I looked over at Troy whose body was slumped in the seat with his dumb head somewhere up in the stratosphere with Charlie Parker flying over the clouds. But I wasn't so gone that I could not hear the kitchen garden gate grinding. I stumbled up and crashed behind a big camellia bush in the corner, peering through the leaves to see Sister Stella, hands on hips weighing up Troy pathetically crashed out there on the seat. His long hair drawn like curtains over his spaced out head. She hadn't seen me though, I mopped my sweating brow, God I felt awful though.

"Well, well, I thought he might be here. Eugene!! we'll need the wheelchair please." She shouted over her shoulder.

Eugene, a large black geezer soon appeared down the path with a wheelchair into which he effortlessly hauled the zonked out Troy and then he wheeled him back up to the house. Eugene was a sort of nurse cum bouncer at St. Edmunds, and with so many out of control young people around he was always busy putting someone straight. I emerged from my safe cocoon and slumped back into the garden seat still spaced out from the puff on Troy's industrial strength spliff, luckily like Bill Clinton I hadn't inhaled too deeply and wasn't laid out like Troy. The effects had left me feeling extremely weird though, the sun was shining directly through the arched doorway to the walled garden where I was crashed out. Like rays of light over a henge standing stone megalith the effect was quite spiritual. The bright dazing sun shone through the long trailing flower racemes over the archway, the flowers were bright white wisteria and through the drugged haze a figure appeared in the archway. But I didn't flinch as it was not stone faced Sister Stella, no it was a more welcome sight, I realised it was Piers dressed in white T-shirt and white Levi's.

"Hello dear boy." He said in his familiar camp greeting.

For a moment he just stood there in the sun in the archway, and with the wisteria flowers trailing either side he kind of looked like an angel, yes a big gay white wisteria angel.

"Shit man, you really are a sight for sore eyes." I said literally rubbing my red sore eyes in disbelief.

"What on earth have they got you on dear boy, you look bloody terrible." He said.

"Yeah Christ, I've gotta get out of here, have you got wheels c'mon there's no time." I said quickly springing into action and grabbing Piers by the arm.

"Well yes, but shouldn't we get you checked out." He said trying to sound responsible.

"Are you fucking joking this place is like Colditz, you don't just leave here Piers." I stressed, becoming an impatient out-patient.

We cautiously crept through the archway of the kitchen garden and made for the laurel bushes by the wall. I peeped through to the side gate of the building to freedom. There were no starch white uniformed

stormtrooper guards patrolling the perimeter so we hurried down the passage.

“You did bring some wheels then Piers.”

“Of course dear boy, I came in the Mazda, it’s got leather seats you know.”

“Oh wipe clean.” I said, and he chuckled like Quentin Crisp might have done.

“Excuse me Daniel, I believe you’ve forgotten your medication.” Then boomed a fog horn voice behind us.

It was Sister Stella advancing to the rear and not a happy bunny.

“Sorry Sister you have it, it might calm you down, thanks now gotta fly! Ere Piers start the car.” I said out of the side of my mouth sliding into the MX5 like vaselined lightning.

Chapter 11.

Hello Sailor

We zoomed out of the grounds of St. Edmunds and down Constitution Hill, it was a beautiful summers evening. Piers glanced over as we turned out into Henley Road.

“You’re starting to look better already dear boy, I thought you looked vegetated in that garden.

“Yeah I was gone, but I think I’m back thank God. This guy Troy gave me a drag on a joint and I think it was heroin. Whatever it was it totally monged my head.”

“Heroin, oh shit, you haven’t become a junky in there.” Said Piers concerned.

“Oh no, look it was just one smoke, look what the fuck happened to me that night, I was in a boat.” I turned the subject to the hazy recollection of my weird adventure.

“Well you called me, and you were totally stressed out and you told me you were being chased and were about to row a boat across to Bawdsey. So I drove to Bawdsey, couldn’t find you and got worried by the rough sea so I called the coastguard. The lifeboat was scrambled; a little like your brain right now, and they picked you up a mile out to sea after a helicopter sighted you. You were passed out in the bottom of the boat half drowned. You then spent a week in hospital before being transferred to St. Edmunds Convalescent home, where you have being for two weeks, presumably zonked out on drugs.

“God yes, I remember trying to cross the river and that’s it, from there on the current just carried me out to sea. It’s all like a bad dream, I was being chased by drug dealers.” I said shuddering.

“Yes I know what went on that night, I put a bug in the Weasel’s office. I heard everything he was saying to the Padre, they were monitoring your actions all night. They set you up you know Danny. You thought you were playing their virtual reality game but it was real life, they wanted you to really kill that dealer Johnny Jacket to see how far you would go. He is nothing to them, this is science fiction brought to life they said.

“That game has totally fucked up me up, I think I’ve had a nervous breakdown, fuck those bastards!” I said coldly, realising that it wasn’t a dream but a living nightmare.

“Oh well dear boy I’ll get you home you probably just want to chill out.” Said Piers.

“Funny really I don’t feel that tired, I guess I’ve been chilling out for two weeks in that home, look can we just drive around for a while.” I said.

“Well are you at all hungry?” He then said.

“Ere not really, they certainly do feed you well in that place.”

“Oh no, I mean are you hungry for revenge Danny. You see I also have a reason to get the Weasel back. Yes, they were onto me too, they must have known I had been bugging them. They planted some drugs in my desk and I’ve been sacked from VonArb, I’m on the scrapheap. I got some more information before I left though, its about the vigilante project they are working. It’s all going on at the house they share at Deer Park Lodge.

“I’ve heard of that place that’s out at Woolverstone isn’t it. Yeah come on Piers let’s go and see what they are up to out there.” I too was eager for revenge.

I had spent two weeks doing absolutely nothing and the sound of a bit of action seemed refreshing. Especially after sitting in the garden of St. Edmunds with just the sound of the nearby churchbells as my contact with the sanity of the outside world. “You know those old iron bells kept me from drifting off into oblivion each day, campanology I think they call it.”

Piers chuckled. “Well I’ve always been something of a campanologist myself, dear boy.”

Piers really was up for this as we sped round the docks and drove across Stoke Bridge out of town towards Woolverstone. He tenaciously gripped the wheel and pretty soon we were speeding along by the River Orwell and up the hill to Freston, past the old pub The Boot and on through Chelmondiston. We turned off down towards Pin Mill, there down by the river we arrived at the pub 'The Butt and Oyster' and drove down to some house boats and parked up.

Piers turned off the engine and sat there deep in thought. "Guess what dear boy, I know a Turkish couple who have a nice little house boat down here; Mustapha and Hussan. We should pop in and say hello boys."

We left the car and walked down past the waterfront barges moored up on the banks of the Orwell. One barge really stood out as it was brightly painted pink and I knew before we reached it this had to be the one.

Piers led the way boarding the Venus vessel and knocked at the hatch. "Now isn't this just the gayest galley ever to ride the waves." He smirked over his shoulder.

A large bare chested bald man with huge ring earrings appeared and embraced Piers in a bear hug. He looked like some great camp pirate in a gay porn version of Sinbad.

Piers coughed from beneath the man's tanned tattooed bicep. "Hello sailor. Danny dear boy I would like to introduce you to Mustapha, that's Mustapha Shag to his pals."

Mustapha laughed loudly welcoming us down inside the barge hatch. "Come in boys, Hussan open the Ouzo."

We went down into the living quarters of the barge, it was decorated in a Llewelyn-Bowen boudoir style. Pink and red silk hung everywhere and Hussan, a man also with many piercings about his body sat in a lotus position mounted upon a huge purple velvet cushion.

Mustapha clapped his hands like a Sultan commanding his house boy. "Hussan, we have guests get the ouzo."

It was obvious Hussan was the bitch in this relationship, and the lithe greased gimp stopped meditating and quickly got up and disappeared through a beaded curtain.

Mustapha smiled at me. "Do you meditate Danny?"

"Ere no, I've got a girlfriend." I said in a Charlton Heston voice trying to sound macho.

Again his laughter boomed out as he offered us cushions. "Please sit boys, now Piers where did you find such a beauty."

I sat uneasily down opposite Mustapha my buttocks clenched like that of a Saharan Camel in a sandstorm. He gazed lustfully at me and licked his lips as if I were a morsel of chilli kebab.

Piers thankfully began trying to distract the drooling tongued Turk. "Now Mustapha, his virgin arse is not yours for the taking."

"Ouzo!." Said Hussan emerging from the beaded curtain like an Istanbul Charles Hawtry to save us from this embarrassing predicament and offered us Eastern cups of the aniseed smelling plonk.

"Oh well we really can't stop boys, we've got some business nearby and I just thought we should drop in. We have parked up outside can we leave the car there?" Said Piers quickly rising and gesturing me to also get up also.

"Oh boy's no stay, c'mon we can play twister." Frowned Mustapha slapping Hussan across the back as if he were a fleshy gong.

I took a quick sip of the ouzo to be sociable and quickly edged towards the door hatch "Cheers, ere nice meeting you guys." I said leaving Piers to say his goodbyes.

Up on deck I could still hear our Turkish host's booming voice. "Oh well, if you fancy coming back for night cap later boys we'll be waiting." Laughed Mustapha.

Chapter 12.

Deaf by Des

We left hot foot into the early evening moving back up past The Butt and Oyster beer light to the track that led up to Deerpark Lodge, the Weasel's lair. It was as if the game was far from over as we marched in some kind of revengeful quest up what was called Mockbeggars Lane. I remembered my Dad talking about that name Mockbeggars Lane years ago as we sat outside The Butt and Oyster. He always used to say that it was called Mockbeggars Lane because in the olden days beggars would have trudged in vain up the very long lane to Deer Park Lodge only to be turned away and mocked. The light was fading now, but the remains of the setting sun glinted through the trees and lit up the rhondedendrun flowers like psychedelic lanterns. The walk lasted ages and dusk was beginning to descend down on the Deer Park as we reached the gates of the Lodge. We kept to the trees to hide from any security closed circuits and peered through the railings at the old lodge buildings. There was a whimsical look about the old Deer Park Lodge, the fat cobble stones in the walls gave it the appearance of a fairytale ginger bread house.

Piers pointed to large black American Transit van parked up in the gravel drive. "They are home alright, that's the Vigilante Van I was telling you about Danny. If we can just get our hands on the keys then we can really get our own back on the fuckers, this is the technology they've been working on for months."

We grinned at each other in the silver moonlight. "Alright man, let's work our way round to the back of the building, it's more sheltered from the woods." I whispered. "I'll come up the rear dear boy." Piers replied and we began to creep round the fence into the woods. From the cover of the trees we then moved slowly out stalking the lodge like Apache Indians hunting buffalo. We crouched behind a low wall flanking the lawn and peered over; and there they were, the Weasel and the Padre sitting together in the window of the kitchen facing each other at a table. It looked as if they were enjoying a feast or some kind of bizarre ritual.

"Christ, it's the doxology." Piers exclaimed.

"What the hell is a dogsology dude." I murmured back puzzled into the darkness.

"No, I said doxology dear boy. It's a formula of praise to God." Piers replied sounding like Bamber Gascoigne.

On the table inside the lodge where the Weasel and the Padre were sitting was a sumptuous spread of food. A great mound of cooked meat and ripened fruit together with large pewter wine goblets adjoined the table around a centre piece of a baby suckling piglet. The piglet was glazed in a golden brown colour and you could just see the obligatory apple stuck in its mouth. The apple shone out and sparkled silver, and could not help remembering the silver apple I had been offered in The Garden nightclub at the start of the game, it looked very familiar and my nightmare thoughts came flooding back.

The Padre stood up and began blessing the feast set out before them. He still looked like a meat head henchman, despite the starched white dog collar separating his gloating ruddy face from the dark jacket on his massive bull like shoulders. Still we crept ever closer to the lodge as if drawn to their doxology. Then suddenly a crack rang out through the woods piercing the silence like a leg breaking in a library. Piers had stood on a branch breaking it, we stopped motionless in the darkness like stalag escapees frozen in the night. The Padre immediately stopped the blessing and stood up at the window peering out like an angry ogre over a troubled town, but the shadows were hiding us and after a few minutes he returned to the table.

We could hear their voices now as they ranted away at each other. "Come Padre, a hymn I think." Said the Weasel seating himself at an old harmonium in the corner of the room.

“Yes Wolfgang, we plough the fields and scatter.” Replied the Padre placing his hands on the Weasel’s scrawny shoulders.

So they then launched into an awful din with the Padre on vocals accompanied by the Weasel on harmonium. “We plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by his almighty hand.” They boomed away smugly looking like the deranged old entertainers ‘Hinge and Bracket’ and sounding ten times worse.

“C’mon Danny this is our chance.” Said Piers leading us round to the side entrance of the lodge.

Surprisingly the side door was open so we let ourselves into the lodge like two battleships quietly slipping into an enemy harbour unnoticed. The whole place was very sparsely furnished and very functional with a Shaker style about the decoration, the plain wooden chairs were hung up on pegs on the wall leaving the bare floor boards empty and minimal. I couldn’t help but grin at Piers as we crept down the hall for the Weasel and the Padre were still belting out the horrendous zombie songs of praise. Piers stopped dead in his tracks silently holding up some keys that he had picked from a small basket next to the telephone stand, I could see the Dodge logo sparkling there in the hall light. These had to be the keys to their secret project the Vigilante Van that Piers had read about in the secret email. This was all we needed to get our revenge, so we did not hang around but instead quickly doubled back out of the lodge to the old stable yard.

Piers face was positively glowing with ecstatic excitement. “Fucking hell Danny, you know what these are don’t you dear boy.”

“Yeah, only the keys to the Vigilante Van, wanna take a ride?”

I could not believe that we had just stolen the keys right under their noses, the Padre was a master of security but he had become complacent and was tonight too absorbed in the doxology. We sidled up to the massive American Dodge van, Piers couldn’t wait to have a nose inside the back and soon disappeared into the back. I followed him inside the big black mystery machine but it was completely bare of any gadgets bar a small screen and consul at the front.

“Stay back Danny and hold open the door, this thing is a trap for joyriders.” Commanded Piers.

“There’s nothing in here Piers except another of their poxy computers.” I said disappointed as I felt a spliff in my pocket and lit it up.

At least maybe I could have the last laugh and have a smoke in the Padre’s van. Piers had to have a play with the computer though, and of course he was soon tapping away on the keypad like a sad professor.

“Come on man there’s nothing here.” I said bored.

But Piers was absorbed in the computer. “Just watch the door and keep watch.”

After what seemed like ages of the key tapping the computer suddenly burst into life and a message came up in tiny words on the screen. Piers leant forward to read the small message, it read, Hello welcome to the Vigilante Van this is the Padre speaking and you are nicked.

“Oh shit the dead lock solenoid, hold the door.”

Clunk click acid trip, the doors shuddered as if trying to lock themselves. Steel bars clicked in the panels of the doors but luckily I had held them open and they had failed to activate into locking us in.

Piers was very relieved. “Thank Christ you were there, c’mon let’s get out of here they will be onto us Danny.

“Alright but hold on I just want to leave a token present for them.” I took the joint still smoking from my mouth and laid it on the computer keyboard, I thought the Padre’s face would be a picture when he found it burning away there. We then ran out back into the woods and hid up waiting to see what occurred, and soon there was activity in the lodge as some sort of alarm must have gone off alerting them to the van

outside. We could see the Padre rush out of the lodge and enter the van, whilst the Weasel went around the other side of the building soon returning with a very aggressive looking Rottweiler pulling on a lead like Iron Mike Tyson in a rage.

The sound of the Padre's voice boomed out across the woods from inside the van. "Wolfgang, here quick bring Gengis."

The Weasel led Gengis into the Dodge like a bloodhound and I shivered as I thought of that great mutt sniffing my scent on the joint. But I didn't have to worry long as suddenly again the van doors shuddered and then we realised the amazing irony, yes they had managed to lock themselves into their own trap. They were caught inside the van, the dead lock solenoid had done its job and soon they began hammering on the thick steel panels as Gengis barked like a canine demon.

I stared at Piers almost speechless in the moonlight. "Ere wouldn't it be funny if we like just left them here, trapped in there."

But as I began to turn back into the woods Piers grabbed me. "No wait a minute, I've unfinished business dearboy."

I followed him as we cautiously approached the van again and Piers walked round to the front and got into the drivers seat. "Before we go I had just like to try something, I wonder?" He said surveying all the controls on the dashboard.

"C'mon let's get the fuck out of here." I was anxious to go.

But not Piers. "Wait I know something about this van. I read on that email that when they had caught some joyriders in the back, that they were going to subject them to some noise terror treatment via the built in speakers."

Piers turned on the hi-tech sound system and opened the glovebox fumbling through a bad taste CD collection, he pulled out a classic crooner CD, Des O'Connor with Roger Whittaker. He grinned to me as he loaded the CD, activating the repeat button on track one at full volume to the vehicle rear compartment, he then pressed play. The sound of them hammering the doors and Gengis still barking was then drowned out by Des and Roger's version of the 'Skye Boat Song'. Piers then started the engine and I got in and off we went with Des O'Connor crooning 'Speed bonny boat like a bird on the wing, onward the sailors cry, carry the lad that's born to be king, over the sea to Skye', and Roger whistling away like a demented nightingale. The music must have been deafening for our captives in the back which they had no way of stopping.

Piers drove out of the the Deer Park at high speed. "Let's take them somewhere real remote and leave them to get deaf by Des, you follow on in the Mazda Danny." He laughed like a madman, tossing his keys to me. He dropped me off back at The Butt and Oyster and I picked up the Mazda to follow him I knew not where. I was worried about Piers he looked quite ill and was as white as a sheet, he seemed to be operating on nervous energy and adrenaline. I wondered if it was safe for him to be driving that van as he stormed through the night like a speed demon possessed on revenge. I even had trouble keeping up with him in the sporty Mazda, but I knew I must him being in the state he was in. We headed north through the Suffolk backroads to keep clear of the cops, well we were technically kidnapping two men and a dog in their own van. At Yoxford we turned left and crossed the A12 and headed up to Dunwich, a small ancient village that was slowly being reclaimed by the battering North Sea. Piers turned off up a remote track onto Westleton Heath and drove for about ten minutes until we reached a bleak spot of marshland, only ever frequented by ramblers and bird watchers. He parked the van in some woodland and got out, he looked drawn and ghostly in the headlights as I approached. This whole adventure had left him completely drained and exhausted and

he suddenly looked quite old as he slumped on a nearby picnic bench. God only knew what state the Weasel, the Padre and Gengis must have been in, trapped as Des O'Connor was still blaring away in the van.

Piers staggered to his feet, "Let's just leave the fuckers, you drive Danny I don't feel too good. I've got my Uncle's keys to 'The House in the Clouds'."

So that was it we just left them in that lonely place with the music on repeat. I knew of 'The House in the Clouds', it was a amazing local landmark that Pier's Uncle Gregory owned down the coast in Thorpeness. It looked like something out of a fairytale, as it was five storeys high and towered over the countryside and nearby Meare. At 3.15 am I pulled into the driveway of 'The House in the Clouds', Piers was slumped in his seat asleep so I woke him up and we went into the house. Once inside Piers immediately crashed out on a sofa and went to sleep again. He looked awfully weak and his face was a ghostly white, I wondered just how ill he was. I hoped he just needed some rest and I went upstairs and found an empty bedroom that overlooked the sea, I settled down on the bed to send Miranda a text message. If she had found out I had left the Convalescent Home she must have wondered where the hell I was.

I slept like a log and awoke in the morning to a glorious view looking out to sea from my window, this was a great holiday home but somehow I knew I wouldn't be staying very long. I went downstairs to Piers to find him still sleeping, he looked so pale and quite effeminate like a young T.E. Lawrence. I gently shook him, he stirred and tried to open his eyes but he looked like he was slipping away.

I went through to the wash room and got a flannel, wetting it with cold water under the tap, then I mopped his sweaty brow. "Hey Piers I'm taking you to hospital you look so ill."

His eyes blinked open. "Oh dear boy I'm so bloody hot; just take me down to the sea, I just want to feel the cool water. I am sure I had feel much better if I could just feel the water on my face."

So with his arm around me I helped him out of the house and down the road to the beach. It was still early on that beautiful Summer morning, there was a misty haze across the horizon and out to sea. Down the beach at Aldeburgh I could see The Scallops by the artist Maggi Hambling. This is the huge shell like sculpture in memory of Benjamin Brittain that so annoyed the local Phillestines, the small town small minds.

Piers weak frame hung over me like an old grey overcoat, he could barely walk, but somehow we made it to the beach. I continually chatted away to him to keep him awake, I guess I knew this might be his dying wish to touch the water. We finally stumbled to the lapping shore and he began to kneel down as if to pray to the sea, he kissed the salt water and tried to wash his face.

I sat down beside him and put my arm around him. "C'mon let's get you to hospital." I said.

But he didn't get up, he just fell into my arms like a rag doll. "Thank you dear boy, we showed those bastards didn't we!"

"Yes, we showed them." I murmured back, but his eyes were closed and he suddenly looked calm as the sea washed over his body like a foaming veil. He had gone, and we just sat there together. I just wanted to share a moment with a friend. After a while I carried him in a fireman's lift back to the car and drove him to Gippeswyk Hospital, I couldn't accept he'd gone and I chatted to him all the way. At the hospital they pronounced him dead, the doctor diagnosed that a long Aids related illness was to blame. I walked out of the hospital in a daze and just kept walking. Even though you know someone is ill is hard to believe they can just go like that, I was racked with guilt that I should have persuaded him to go to hospital instead of staying at 'The House in the Clouds', but he wasn't having any of it.

After walking for what seemed like ages I found myself at Derby Road Station, a small Railway Station on the edge of town. I sat on a seat on the empty platform and stared down the deserted track thinking about Piers. My mind drifted off like the rail lines and gradually I was conscious that I was having some kind of outer body experience. I seemed to be above the station and I found myself looking down upon a lonely figure on the platform, that person was me. It was like I had tripped out too far and all I knew was that somehow I must return to my body. I looked depressed and worried, like I was waiting for some kind of freedom train to come along and carry me home. As I floated overhead I began to hear a ringing sound and it began to get louder, the silver rail tracks buzzed and I could see myself looking up from the seat in hope. A train of thought was coming in and I knew I must be on it, my will to live was sucking my soul back down to earth. Confused and in sheer instinct I rose up and boarded the train, entering an empty carriage I sat down by a window.

It was a short journey across town to Gippeswyk station, I got off the train and began to walk home. I was coming down in a small town; but I was coming back to life with hope in my heart and I felt I had everything to live for, despite all the bad shit that had gone on. I turned into Withipoll Street and I could see Buzz sitting in the window watching the world go past; I opened the front door, Miranda was at the top of the stairs, she smiled. I picked up 'The East Anglian Daily Times' local rag from the doormat, the headline read 'IPSWICH CITY Gippeswyk to be renamed in city status'. Further down the front page an article read, SCIENTISTS FOUND KIDNAPPED IN VAN. Two scientists and a dog were found in some state of shock at a remote Suffolk beauty spot. It's thought in some bizarre kidnapping, they were locked inside their own van and forced to listen repeatedly to a Des O'Connor song at an extremely high volume for over twelve hours.