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aux amours d'etc

So many men, so many opinions.

Terence, 190-159 B.C.

Zachiel

An instant ago I was in pain; now the numbness is complete.

A few paces away, the angel stands motionless, his silvery wings outspread, the feathers ruffled by an apparent wind, his folded arms hugging a white tunic. I shiver though I feel neither the expected chill from the surrounding black sky nor the breeze that causes the angel's tunic to flutter. Above, there is no sun, no moon, not even stars to lighten the black monotony. Yet the ground, from horizon to horizon, is a perfectly flat wilderness of golden sand.

'Who are you?' An instant ago, I had a voice to scream my pain, not this frail whisper. 'Who are you?' I breathe again to the creature.

The angel points at the ground in front of him and the sand stirs to trace his name in calligraphic Hebrew.

MIND-OF-GOD, I read: Zachi-El. If I still possess eyes, they look enquiringly at the angel: is my soul cursed or blessed?

The gabriel raises his arms, palms facing the black vacuum above, and folds his wings. His white tunic now flaps wildly, and Zachiel leans on one side in order to keep his balance. I am a rock, insensitive to the sudden storm that sweeps across the desert. A faint hum pulses into my consciousness, a childish tune I have never heard yet instantly recognise. The angel's mouth is closed; the simple song, rising in pitch with the current, must come from the sandstorm itself. The divine

melody which had been my life's quest conquers my very being - I too am now singing like the whirling clouds of sand.

'LA ALL ALAA AL.' My rendition is poor and muted, but after so many decades, I only care that the Grail exists.

Around us, the storm has split into seven maelstroms. The flat desert has sprouted seven dunes that grow into miniature hills of Rome. The song resonates more intensely and the seven hills glow briefly red before settling to a cold transparency.

The song and storm vanish as abruptly as they appreared, leaving me to sing the melody on my own. If I have a mouth, it is smiling at my angel.

Zachiel, steady on his feet, indicates each hill in turn. Sand has been changed to glass. We stand in the centre of seven titanic sculptures. The closest three form points on an equilateral triangle; the other four are due south, west, north and east - random directions in a land whose sky is empty of guiding sun and stars.

As Zachiel points to the first sculpture, I recognise, with a start, the significance of the glass giants. Above a doorway from which white light streams through, are two statues: of a man leaning on a quarterstaff and a seated woman reading from an open book. By their feet are the Hebrew words: *The Magician & The High Priestess*.

The sculptures are three-dimensional where I was used to images on cards; but here, before me, are some of the Major Arcana of divinatory Tarot. The gabriel and I are standing in the centre of a Celtic Cross of prophecy.

Zachiel indicates the second structure, an immense tower, *La.Maison.Dieu*, the Babel that never was. Above the doorway, this time a black gaping chasm, are the familiar Hebrew words: *The Tower*. As I look at each sculpture in turn, I realise that each has a doorway and that other than the first, all are forbidding as

the sky.

The Star: a hemisphere surrounded by smaller hemispheres representing, in relief, a snapshot of a more familiar nightsky. With the star, the equilateral triangle is completed, the past described. The remaining four points of the Celtic Cross relate to the future.

Due south is the largest, most horrendous sculpture. The statue is of a horned creature, with snarling face, female breasts and male genitals. The doorway is formed by the beast's legs that are wide as columns. Engraved in its midriff are the words, *The Devil*.

West is a crescent moon on a dome, *The Moon*; north is a globe with lines of crystal radiating from its centre, *The Sun*.

In the east, the seventh mould created by the desert storm is more portentous than the menacing devil. There is no statue, no sculpture, only a black ominous doorway. The letters are engraved in the thin crystal frame: *Judgment*.

Of all the possible combinations, with all the Arcana cards, why had the divine melody dealt this particular cross? Why had the storm raised such a sequence? I have read many crosses; I recognise the foreboding significance of this Celtic Cross.

Turning to Zachiel, 'Is this my cross? Do I have a future?'

The angel's reply appears in the sand by his feet.

GO. WITNESS THE PAST.

Zachiel points to the first doorway, brilliant with pure light.

'Is it my past? My future?'

THE PAST THROUGH THE EYES OF OTHERS.

THE FUTURE FROM THE TIME OF YOUR DEATH.

I am dead.

Zachiel fans out his wings, soars in the lifeless sky before swooping down

to carry my soul to the Magician's doorway.

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The Magician & The High Priestess

CHAPTER ONE

Greek Letters

Until his death in 1972, Samir's father was the concierge of a block of flats in central Beirut. As such, his duties included cleaning the stairway from the seventh to the ground floor, collecting the trash left outside the flats, and being on hand to run errands for the tenants.

The whole family lived in the caretaker's living quarters which consisted of two small and dingy rooms facing the main entrance. The parents slept on a mattress in one of the rooms, while the children lay huddled on the floor in the other, each child swathed in a blanket.

Samir considered himself lucky. He was the last of three girls and two boys and because the two elder daughters had married young, he could hardly remember when all five had shared the limited floor space. He mostly remembered that George, Leila and he would squabble over the sleeping arrangements. George always won, and he slept at the feet of one of two rickety and mismatching armchairs. With the top of his head brushing against the armchair, George slumbered easily. Samir noticed how, in the middle of the night when George snored softly, his brother's head moved almost imperceptibly from

side to side as if drawing from the armchair a loving caress.

Samir did not sleep so well. Being the youngest, he had to settle for the least favoured part of the floor: in the direct beam of the light in the lobby. His parent's small room was windowless being, as it were, a storeroom in design rather than a bedroom. This room, the living quarters, was inches larger and its most distinctive feature was its one window with its view of the lobby - ostensibly for the caretaker to keep an eye on the main entrance.

For security purposes, the main door to the building was locked at ten in the evening and the light in the lobby was always kept on. Every night as far back as Samir could remember, it was this light that filtered through the window to illuminate his patch of the floor.

He had grown used to it to such an extent that later in life he would need an external light to fall asleep. Therefore Samir did not sleep so well not as a consequence of the excessive light but because he would wake up in the middle of the night simply to think. Sometimes he imagined he was scaling walls like Spiderman, or single-handedly slaughtering all of Lebanon's enemies - a dream that usually ended with the President of the Republic pinning a medal to Samir's chest in full view of all who knew him.

Or sometimes he considered other things.

Lying on the floor, he could see one of the two lobby lights: a bulb encased in an oblong plastic shell with two small holes at either end no larger than five piaster coins. As Samir looked at the tiny dark shadows bulb-side of the opaque shell, he knew that it was through the two holes that the insects would enter to be scorched to death. He wondered whether the insects were drawn by the light or were intensely irritated by it.

These casings had to be cleaned regularly, every month in summer, and every other month in winter. He and Leila helped their mother in the task. Samir's

mother, standing on a ladder, would remove the shells and hand them to her children to be emptied. They would hurry outside each with a casing nestled on their forearms, and they would take turns picking up a frazzled fly or mosquito thereby counting all the dead insects. It became a game where the highest scorer was considered the winner.

'Separate legs don't count,' Leila always said, probably because she usually won.

Their mother always started with the bulb closest to the door, and always handed Leila the first casing and so perhaps the fact that Leila usually won was no coincidence. However she did concede defeat once when Samir held a seared flying cockroach by its abdomen. It was so large that they wondered how it had possibly managed to enter the casing. Even as Samir tried to reenact the bug's last feat by squeezing it through each hole, he found the insect's body too large for the small holes. He gave up when, in one disconcerted effort, the cockroach's body snapped; the thorax fell to the ground leaving the abdomen in Samir's fingers and the toppled head in the shell. For several nights after that event, he woke up and gazed at the light hoping to catch another flying cockroach in the magical act of entering the casing.

Or sometimes, late at night, he wondered why he was Greek.

Samir was Lebanese, he knew that with patriotic pride. At the state-run school, he was one of the few students who knew every word of the national anthem by heart. At eight o'clock every Monday morning come shower or shine, all the children stood in rows in the playground and sang the *Kolona Lil-watan*. Other children droned the verses picking up only the refrain with limited enthusiasm. But Samir, standing firm, belly drawn in as if on parade, confidently sang the lot with gusto if tunelessly.

Yet if he were asked his religion, he would say he was Greek. He was

confused by this mostly in the middle of the night when he had time to contemplate. He sometimes sat up, blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders, and pictured two monsters devouring George and Leila. In less fanciful moods, the beasts became the two unsightly armchairs which, along with a cupboard, a hot-plate, the mattress in his parent's room, all the blankets and some of their clothes, had all been donated by charity. A gift from the Greeks, his mother told him once. And when Samir asked why the *Greeks*, his mother answered that they, being poor Greeks, were often helped by their richer kindred.

In fact the whole neighbourhood was Greek. There were many more Greeks here than Armenians in little-Yerevan, in the north eastern suburb of Beirut. But then the Armenians, at least, were different: they had their own tongue, wrote in their own script, and ate spicy food.

Samir was drawn by the vitality of the Armenian neighbourhood, and he often strolled down the crowded streets in the early evening allured by the many lights highlighting billboards with names like Sarkisian, Avidisian, Manoukian. They sounded so exotic. He walked past flashing and multi-coloured neon signs always of Armenian letters and, sometimes lower and in smaller print almost as a concession, in Arabic or French.

He jostled with other pedestrians in the bottlenecks caused by hand-drawn carts, wide as trucks, half jutting onto the street and half onto the pavement. These carts were stacked precariously high with fruits or vegetables or cooked chestnuts or silk scarves or amusing gadgets and toys, and vendors proclaimed their wares in Armenian and Arabic and, spotting foreigners in the crowd, in French and English.

Samir often paused in front of a shop selling electronic goods to watch some TV; he listened to a pastiche of Arabic and Western songs at times discordant and at times strangely appealing, and smelled a not unpleasant mixture

of petrol fumes from the traffic, roasted chestnuts from a cart and the infamous Armenian sausage from the butcher shop next door. Bastirma was a sausage that smelt so strong that the reek lingered in the mouth for a full day following consumption, and under the armpits for two days.

Armenians had arrived in Beirut from Armenia and Greeks, Samir concluded, must have come from Greece. But maybe the Greeks had been here for so long that they had become Lebanese, ate Lebanese food, wrote and spoke Arabic. Maybe in the past, the shops in his neighbourhood had billboards and signs written in Greek letters.

'You stupid donkey,' George said impatiently one day. 'Greece is in Europe, near France.'

'I know, I know. But we came from there, right?'

'You came from my arse.' George laughed. 'That's why you stink.'

Samir frowned and said defiantly, 'Our grandfather came from there. Or his grandfather, I bet.'

'No stupid, they were all Lebanese.'

'Oh yeah, so how come we're Greek?'

'Are you hanging out with Shiite friends or something?' George said irritably. 'Just because you believe like the Greeks doesn't mean you're Greek.'

This confused Samir even more. He wondered how one could believe like the Greeks and yet somehow be different. Here was more magic, like the cockroach that had entered the casing and yet could not enter it. He thought about these things only at night under the unblinking watch of the bulb in the lobby when his mind imagined other discussions with his brother who lay shaking his head against the armchair.

The image of Leila sprawling on the floor nearest their parent's room was not so vivid in Samir's recollection because she moved in to sleep with their

mother on the mattress when he was twelve, following their father's death. Many years later, it would shame Samir to remember that his father's death had effected little more than a softer bed for Leila and more leg room for the boys. Even so, George still slept unshakably by the armchair's feet, and Samir still in the full beam, awaking in the middle of every night.

For many years until his death, his father had stopped performing the caretaker duties and had taken to drinking arak. To Samir - as to the rest of the family - his father was forever absent either in the pursuit of or under the influence of the aniseed liquor.

Samir's mother assumed the role of concierge without either the landlords or the tenants particularly caring about the change. Together with Leila, she cleaned the stairway every day from the seventh to the ground floor; George and Samir collected the rubbish bags outside the flats before going to school; and their mother ran the errands for the tenants.

Initially, the tenants called for Samir's father. Abou George, they would shout down the stairway and Samir's mother always answered and so she, Im George, was handed the shopping list and paid the *bakhsheesh*. The habit stuck easily, and the tenants soon stopped calling for Samir's father altogether.

Even the owners of the building, kind and prosperous Sunnis, accepted the *de facto* shift in employees. They still paid Abou George his monthly wage - most of which went into financing his addiction - and disbursed half as much to Im George. With that, the *bakhsheesh* from the tenants, and the occasional money donations from the richer Greeks, Im George could make ends meet and no longer needed her husband. Abou George had ceased to exist well before his death.

Once when Samir was ill and had stayed home from school, he heard his father wake up at eleven. Abou George greeted the day with a late morning song that would disgust the most hospitable bedouin: throat-wrenching coughs,

bellowing moans and a rapid succession of belches and farts that reminded Samir of a movie in which policemen were outgunned by gangsters. Abou George stumbled out of bed, entered the room in his dirty cotton striped pyjamas and, still oblivious to the boy, poured himself a stiff measure of arak from the cupboard emptying the bottle. He quaffed it without adding water, and dropped the empty bottle in the armchair, snorted hard, wheezed and coughed several times; then turning back to his room, he spotted his son.

Abou George grunted recognition, moved to the door and with his back to the boy, he said, 'Arak in the morning chases the demon away. Always remember that, George.'

This was probably the sum total of fatherly advice to him and when Abou George returned to bed, Samir whispered, 'My name's Samir.' He stuck his tongue out at the bedroom.

Whether Abou George managed to scare away the many demons in his life remained dubious, but he succeeded at least in petrifying his liver. Samir was twelve and still ignorant of what it meant to be Greek when his father died of cirrhosis.

Samir's daily routine allowed him little time to stop and think. After a quick wash in the caretaker's sink by the boiler room, he collected the trash before rushing to school. As the younger brother, he was in charge of all the garbage from the fourth to seventh floors while George had the privilege of the first to third floors. On any given day, with two apartments per floor, Samir collected either seven or eight garbage bags; one of the two tenants on the sixth floor put out his trash once every three days.

He carried the trash to a quadrangle of desiccated scrub limited by the side of the building, the main street, a side road and a parking area for the tenants' cars. At the corner of both roads was a mature beech tree which in the early morning

sunshine cast a tentative shadow across four open-ended oil barrels doubling as utility bins. In any light, the contrast between the bright grey trunk, the light green foliage and the dirty rusty brown of the barrels was as sharp as a smile and a scowl. But at seven in the morning when Samir was weighed down by the garbage bags, the bins appeared dormant, their colours downright dead compared with the colour-twinkling welcome the beech reserved for every dawn.

School till one thirty was less of a chore than lugging trash. He walked to the local state school for the neighbourhood's poor children; the rich and middle class kids attended the many fee-paying colleges and received an education on par with the European and American schools. The *School of Hope* was, as many Lebanese state schools, of an altogether different calibre and with a scanty track record of five percent of passes in the Lebanese Baccalaureate, it appeared that the school's main objective was to keep poor kids off the streets. The school's emblem, which could be seen above the main gate, was a small circle supported by a single chevron. This was meant to represent a student's head reading from a large open book, and the motto written in Arabic and around the figure was: *With Hope We Shall Succeed*. But the overall defeatist attitude prevalent in the school and the pitiably wanting tuition transformed the emblem, in Samir's eyes, as a teacher's head with outspread arms in a posture that was half shrugging and half beseeching the gods. The motto also became: *With Hope We Shall Succeed In Teaching You, Inshallah* - God willing.

If the five percent pass rate was a measure of divine intervention, then God proved to be particularly meddlesome in Samir's case. In later years, he passed not only the Lebanese Bacho but also the French Baccalaureate - an almost unthinkable achievement for the School of Hope.

Almost every day after school, Samir sold chewing gum on one of the main boulevards in Beirut. At the red light, he and several other boys moved among the

stopped cars with their boxes of Chiclets chewing gum tempting the drivers to part with twenty five piasters.

It became quickly apparent to Abou Assaad, the grocer who supplied most of the young peddlers, that Samir was his most able seller. For a start, Samir realised sooner than any other novice that of the six varieties, the Chiclets Peppermint gum was the most popular and he always ran to Abou Assaad's in order to reserve his stock of that one flavour. However, most of Samir's success was due to his good looks and manners.

He was small even for a twelve year old and this only emphasised his air of carefree innocence and mature confidence. His eyes were round with inquisitiveness and chestnut brown matching perfectly his fine straight hair which he regularly combed back with his fingers. And then there was Samir's disarmingly open and addictive smile. When he smiled, a multitude of candles were lit in his mouth, and the radiance diffracted between his teeth and glowed through every pore of his face; when he smiled, momentarily at least, the world was a brighter place.

Abou Assaad believed that the boy's success on the boulevard was perhaps attributed to Samir's fair smile, or more accurately, to the subliminal link between his teeth and Chiclets chewing gum. When Samir caught a driver's attention, he flashed his teeth and suggested that a great smile and fresh breath cost only twenty five piasters.

But perhaps a more important feature of his successful selling technique was his overall demeanour. Other boys skulked amid the cars like cowardly hyenas among a herd of uninterested water buffalo. They pawed car windows and whined for a sale, looking pitifully downtrodden with every refusal. When they did sell, from the driver's perspective, it was a matter of giving alms to an urchin.

Samir did not sell for charity. He walked upright, smiled at drivers and

waved boxes of Chiclets at them. When drivers did not buy, there was no hassle, he simply shot them a brief smile, as if to remind them of the benefits they were doing without, and he moved on to the next car. On many occasions, drivers changed their minds and honked their horns at him. He then sold them some chewing gum and in the remaining minute it took for the lights to change, complimented them on their fine cars or clothes or watches. With time, he recognised the habitual drivers of the boulevard, and whether they bought or not, he waved or nodded at them and most often they waved or smiled back.

This was business. Samir earned five piasters per box, or one pound per twenty sold. But he did not care for Chiclets at all. Once the sweetness had dissipated in his mouth, chewing for chewing's sake irritated him and he would take a sharp intake of breath and spit it out as far as he could, counting the distance the gum had travelled in paces, always attempting to beat his last record.

Samir was on his way back home from Abou Assaad's late one afternoon when he spotted the sixth floor tenant, Mr Haddad, in his sky-blue Peugeot. He was on the side road and looking for a place to park. Samir noticed that all the spaces in the lot were occupied and that his own parking space was taken by a red Buick.

Samir pointed and called out, 'You can park next to the tree.'

The man replied irritably, 'I would like to park where I've always parked.'

Samir shrugged.

'Whose car is that?'

'First time I see it here.' Samir guessed that the Buick's owner was visiting someone in the building. He briefly considered asking all the neighbours. 'We can move the bins,' Samir said, 'and there'll be lots of room to park next to the tree.'

Mr Haddad consented and between them they moved the four oil barrels, rotating them towards the main street, and he parked his Peugeot on the scrub next

to the beech tree with Samir signalling the leeway.

'You're the concierge's son, aren't you,' Mr Haddad said as he locked the car door.

Samir nodded.

'George?'

'No. Samir.'

'Thanks for your help.'

'Nice car,' Samir said smiling, 'If you want I can wash it for you.'

'Not now. Some other time maybe.'

'On Sunday, if you like. I could wash your car every Sunday morning.'

Mr Haddad looked at the boy, then laughed. 'I don't know about every Sunday.'

'This way you'll always have a nice clean car. I could clean it from inside too.' Samir shrugged and added nonchalantly, 'If you like.'

'How much ?' the man asked.

'You decide.'

Mr Haddad shook his head. 'Give me a price for this Sunday. If it's too expensive, we'll forget it.'

'Two pounds,' Samir said decisively. 'Inside, outside. Everything for two pounds.'

'Samir is it.' The man smiled. 'Right you've got yourself a deal for this Sunday. We'll see about future Sundays after I see how well you wash cars.'

From that Sunday and for the next four years until Mr Haddad left for Israel, Samir washed, wiped and polished the sky-blue Peugeot, brushed and dusted the interior, and earned two pounds for an hour's work, more than a whole afternoon selling chewing gum.

That day, as Mr Haddad entered the building and returned to his flat on the

sixth floor, Samir remained by the car and looked down at the trash by his feet. While the garbage trucks from the municipality regularly emptied the bins, the rubbish strewn outside the barrels was not so frequently cleared. Samir and George always threw their bags in the bins, but most people littered the area unthinkingly. Pedestrians lobbed their empty cigarette packs at the foot of the beech. Drivers emptied their ashtrays away from their cars and only rarely in the general direction of the bins. Street vendors paused to casually drop a spoiled lettuce or a bruised apple. Small children blew their noses in tissues held by their mothers, and these crumpled sheets of snot were discarded everywhere but in the bins. All these people lived here, and with so much rubbish overspilling onto the streets, Samir sometimes imagined that people's homes were clogged by mountains of garbage.

There were also the stray cats that rummaged in the barrels in the dead of night, scattering their left overs of human left overs. Samir heard them at night fighting or courting when they caterwauled like hungry babies.

When they had moved the barrels, Samir and Mr Haddad had uncovered a lot more filth. Samir kicked the blackened soil where one of the barrels had been and sent an orange peel and a squashed pack of Marlboro flying. He kicked the area several times uncovering a paler subsoil, and displacing a chicken bone and a coin.

Samir eyed the coin with bewilderment, then picked it up, wiped it thoroughly between his fingers and examined it carefully. The coin was twice as large as a one pound coin, bronzed and with patches of rust. He focused on, then fingered the embossed features of a young woman with wavy hair surrounded by four fish. The reverse portrayed a chariot drawn by four horses also in relief, and letters the likes of which he had never seen.

Samir was excited; judging by the rust, the letters, and especially by the

chariot, this coin had to be ancient and worth a fortune. He turned his attention once more to the chariot and discerned a charioteer wearing a helmet, and next to him were the foreign letters. Most of the letters looked familiar, like French written in a small child's hand, Samir thought, but some were very different from French. He felt confident that if he could read those letters, he would understand the coin's origins and therefore know its worth. Standing between the beech and the sky-blue Peugeot, Samir swore to himself that he would somehow learn to read the word. He walked slowly back to the building, pocketed his treasure and thought about a safe place to hide his fortune.

That night, when George snored softly and the light fell through the window, Samir sewed an extra pocket just for his coin. He crept to the cupboard and quietly removed a sewing needle, some thread and a knife. With the knife he cut a rough square off the corner of his blanket ensuring that it would just cover the coin. He then turned his trousers inside out and sewed the square fabric over the seam of the right inside leg, just below the crotch. This way, Samir thought, not only would this pocket be invisible to everyone, but he would constantly be aware of the coin's presence.

The work was dificult especially as he insisted on several lines of stitches for safety. But he was pleased with the end result and slipped the coin in and out of its cache noting with satisfaction that the fabric had to stretch slightly thereby offering a tighter grip when the coin was in. Samir wore his trousers and hoped he would grow accustomed to the strange sensation on his right thigh.

Finally, just before dozing off, he copied on the back of his exercise book and in his neatest handwriting, the word he had resolved to understand one day:

ΣΥΑΡΑΚΩΣ

* * *

Mr Haddad's living room was like none Samir had ever seen - though his experience of house interiors was fairly limited. There were no chairs no sofas, only an assortment of bean bags and large cushions with vivid designs. Samir's favourite was one particular cushion with rows of almost touching blue triangles set against a red background. By swaying his head, he imagined that the rows of triangles moved like men in a folkloric Lebanese dance; as he nodded, the triangles tapped and thumped the *dabké* beat with their lower vertices perfectly mimicking human boots. Also triangular was the large centrally-located coffee table which was supported by a foot high tripod of legs. At the far end of the room were two bookshelves each crammed with books of all sizes, hardbacks and paperbacks, and it fascinated Samir to wonder that so many books could be read in a lifetime.

Samir came here every Sunday morning to return the car keys and to collect his two pounds. Mr Haddad always had a fizzy lemonade for him which he sipped politely, even though he was invariably hot and thirsty after an hour spent cleaning and wiping the Peugeot. By sipping his drink, Samir prolonged his stay in Mr Haddad's interesting apartment, and their chats. Samir was flattered by these conversations because they talked of many things but never, it seemed to him, on a superficial level. They would discuss endemic problems like the worsening traffic in Beirut, or the rise in violence directed at and by the Palestinians and Samir was both surprised and elated that a man almost four times his age should be so genuinely interested in his viewpoint. Here, he was treated as an equal where the usual tags he wore in his daily life such as class, poverty and age were left pinned to the apartment's door. To everyone else, Samir was simply the concierge's son. But for Mr Haddad, the boy's background seemed unimportant and could, for all he cared, dance the *dabké* with the blue triangles.

Samir enjoyed the short Sunday sessions and liked Mr Haddad despite his mother's disapproval. On the first Sunday, Samir was timid and Mr Haddad did most of the talking.

'Do you like books?' Mr Haddad asked.

'Yes,' he lied, trying to impress the man. He knew only the school textbooks and found them completely boring.

'So you enjoy reading?'

'Of course,' Samir added, 'Arabic.'

'No French?'

'French too.' he hesitated. 'A little.'

'I like books,' Mr Haddad said moving to one of the bookshelves. 'Reading a new book is like meeting someone for the first time. It's exciting. Sometimes you read a book and make yourself a friend for life. Of course you can also be unlucky and be introduced to a terrible bore.'

'Yes,' agreed Samir with feeling, which seemed to surprise the man.

Mr Haddad waved at a bookshelf and continued, 'This is like owning a city in your home. In those books there's a world of different people living in different places.'

'I like Beirut.' Samir said cheerfully; the man was silent so Samir added quickly, 'That's why I also like books.'

Mr Haddad bent over and removed a thin hardback from the lowest shelf.

'Now here's a good book. I'll lend it to you if you promise to return it in the same condition.'

Samir nodded, took the book, glanced at the picture on the dust jacket of a young boy wearing a white turban on a black horse, and read the title: *Al Amir*.

'It's the story of a poor boy who turns out to be a prince.' He looked at the boy, waited, then added, 'Thank me only if you enjoy it.'

'Thank you,' Samir said insincerely.

He wished he hadn't lied. He didn't want to read the book, but was too proud to refuse. Now it was too late, he had to read *Al Amir* in case Mr Haddad quizzed him. Reluctantly, that night, he opened the book when the family was asleep and was hooked by the second page. He read *Al Amir* in a week, and dreamed for the next month that he was galloping over dunes, scimitar waving in the air.

Im George disapproved of this loan only half as much as she disapproved of Mr Haddad. She was highly suspicious of a man in his late forties who was still a bachelor and taking such an interest in her son. She tried on several occasions to dissuade Samir from visiting the sixth floor tenant. Washing a car, she argued, was one thing but talking for half an hour sometimes longer every Sunday, and receiving books from an unmarried man was altogether another thing. Samir did not particularly care for her point of view; for the first time in his life he felt he was being treated as a person and he was unwilling to give up either the talks or the many books he read in the middle of the night under the light in the lobby.

A few months later, when Samir was starting his fourth book, she asked him what was so special about their talks. And Samir tried to explain how they discussed important subjects about living conditions in Beirut, about good and evil, and about life in general. Im George retorted that Mr Haddad would get far more insight by discussing the meaning of life with a wise sixty year old (herself) than a thirteen year old child (himself). This infuriated Samir - angered especially because he saw the logic.

He relayed his mother's statement to Mr Haddad the following Sunday.

'Why should I ask a withered sixty year old,' Mr Haddad generalised, 'who talks of life as an inventory of errors committed versus material gains. Every living creature has the right to talk about life, but only those with a clean slate

offer an understanding that is as pure and unadulterated as a youthful heart and spirit.'

'Is that a poem?' Samir asked, wondering if he should mention that his mother was in fact exactly sixty.

The man smiled. 'And if ever I want to know what life was like in Beirut under the colonial French, I'll ask a wrinkled sixty year old, not you.'

Later, when the friendship between them grew and Mr Haddad offered to teach Samir French every Sunday, Im George complained to the landlords who had a discreet word with their sixth floor tenant. But Mr Haddad was resolutely firm.

'It's up to you Samir. As long as you choose to learn French, I'll be here to teach you.'

His mother shouted at Samir, 'You don't need French.'

'I want to learn French.'

'School teaches French.'

'I want to learn real French, and English.'

'I won't allow you,' Im George declared firmly. 'It's for your own good, dear.'

'To stay stupid? I hate this place.' He ran off, shouting over his shoulder, 'I'm going to learn and you're not going to stop me.' He swore to himself he would never be a concierge.

Samir later told Mr Haddad, 'Can you teach me English too?'

'I spend my whole week teaching.'

'I can pay you.' Samir flashed him a smile. 'Two pounds a week.'

'And your mother?'

The smile vanished from the boy's face. 'I told her I'd come anyway.'

The man nodded slowly. 'One of life's unsolved mysteries - why do

children grow into such dispirited adults?'

Samir frowned; at times, Mr Haddad appeared to talk to himself. 'Will you teach me English?'

'Can you learn both languages together?'

'Yes,' Samir replied confidently.

'Then I'll teach you both languages together.'

And later, after the first Franco-English lesson, as Samir was preparing to leave, Mr Haddad said, 'It's a shame that in every society, a mature person is deemed one who no longer asks simple questions.'

They became master and disciple in the Ancient Greek fashion with the mutual respect and affection but without the pederasty. Even Im George had to concede that the unmarried Mr Haddad did not seem to have sexual designs on her son. But this had never been Im George's primary concern anyway. She objected to the visits right from the start on the grounds that Jacob Haddad was a Jew.

There was a sizeable Jewish community in Beirut and Jacob Haddad proclaimed his Jewishness by lecturing a course on Hebrew and Arabic at the Lebanese University. He later explained to Samir that he also gave seminars at the Université de Saint Joseph and the American University of Beirut on Proto-Semitic and its evolution and branching into Akkadian, Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic.

'So you're a Jew,' Samir said on the third Sunday.

'Yes.'

'I'm Greek,' Samir said smiling.

'That's nice.'

That day they discussed other things. The fact that Mr Haddad was a Jew had no effect on Samir, other than that he did wonder if Haddad was the most popular surname in Lebanon, proving that even Jews had smiths. His own

surname was Khoury meaning priest, and that was naturally only a Christian surname. Strange name, *Khoury*, Samir thought. He wondered if his grandfather or his grandfather's grandfather had been a priest. Clearly one of his ancestors had broken the church law to have a family. Or maybe priests in Greece were allowed to marry.

Jacob and Samir discussed religion almost six months after the discovery of the coin, and two days after Samir's fight with Hassan.

Hassan was George's sidekick, a Palestinian who lived in one of the neighbouring refugee camps. He sold Chiclets chewing gum on the same boulevard as Samir and they were walking back from Abou Assaad's one afternoon when Hassan said, 'Look at the enemy go.'

'Where?' Samir asked.

'There, in the blue Peugeot.'

'Where?' Samir repeated, spotting Mr Haddad.

'Eat shit Samir. There, the Israeli.'

'He's not Israeli. He's Lebanese.'

Hassan glowered at his friend's brother. 'He's a Jew,' he spat.

'A Lebanese Jew.'

'All Jews are Israelis.'

'He's not. He's Lebanese.'

'Fuck your sister. He's an enemy.'

'He's Lebanese. I'm Lebanese. You're the Palestinian.'

'Eat shit.' Hassan shouted and kicked Samir in the right leg.

Samir punched him in the mouth and he was punched back in the stomach and kneed in the face. Samir fell back with a bleeding nose. Hassan kicked him once more in the belly and walked away shouting, 'I fuck your whore-mother you pimp-son.'

Two days later when Jacob asked Samir about his black eye, the discussion turned to religion and nationality.

'So you're not an Arab,' Jacob said.

'No.' Samir exclaimed.

'What are you then?'

'Lebanese, of course.'

'What is Lebanese?'

Samir looked quizzically at his teacher. What a stupid question, he thought.

'There's no such thing as Lebanese,' said Mr Haddad.

'*Kolona Lil-watan,*' Samir sang the first bar proudly.

'Do you know what the colours on the flag stand for?'

Samir nodded, this he had learnt at the School of Hope. 'The red's for the blood, the white's for the snow, and in the middle there's the Cedar of Lebanon.'

'Yes,' Jacob said. 'The red stands for the blood spilt in the fight for independence from the French, a fight many Lebanese opposed and for an independence many Lebanese are still against. The white is for the snow that falls on Maronite and Druse mountains, it hardly ever snows in Greek and Sunni Beirut Sidon and Tripoli. And the Cedar of Lebanon, most sacred of Lebanese symbols, contemplates a history older than the Bible. But in this land, seventeen histories cater for seventeen communities. In one neighbourhood, a past statesman is a martyr, in another, he is a villain.' Samir looked away resentfully as Jacob added, 'Believe in yourself, my young friend, not in a flag of dyed cloth.'

Samir felt he had defended Mr Haddad's *Lebaneseness* in vain. And he said so: 'You're an Israeli then?'

'No. I'm an Arab.'

Samir was confused.

'And you're an Arab. We're all Arabs - that's our common heritage. But

there's an historical conspiracy. If you say you're an Arab, it's assumed you must be Muslim. Islamic and Arabic have long been interchangeable. We speak Arabic, we eat Arabic, we think Arabic, but we don't believe Islamic. Assuming an Arab to be Muslim should be as preposterous as assuming all Europeans to be Catholics, when there are Protestants and Orthodox like yourself.'

'Like myself?'

'Yes. Russian and Greek Orthodox.'

And it was Jacob Haddad, a Jew, who explained to Samir for the first time what it meant to be a Greek Orthodox.

That night, Samir thought about the discussion. Being Greek now seemed so trivial compared with this duality of Lebanese and Arab. Samir did not want to be an Arab; he was proud of being Lebanese. But was he more or less Lebanese than others? As he fingered his bruised eye he thought: if the Orthodox believe like the Greeks, the Maronites like the Romans, the Jews like the Israelis, the Shiites like the Iranians, the Sunnis like the Arabs, would no-one be left to believe like the Lebanese?

Samir was fifteen when war broke out on the streets of Beirut. In the early stages, the war seemed little more than mischievous in contrast with later years. Everyone was excited, and everyone knew their cause to be just. In these first months it was as if the whole population had been invited to a hunting weekend but with the added thrill that the animals were to be allowed to shoot back. Doctors dropped their stethoscopes, surveyors abandoned their theodolites, street vendors left their carts stacked high with rotting vegetables, and they all donned Balaclava helmets to fight the enemy for fear of being recognised at work.

This was to have been a dirty weekend affair. On Saturday two men would fire at each other from neighbouring penthouses, and on Monday they would meet for business as usual: the bank clerk serving his client, the doctor extracting the

bullet he had fired. Compared with the later years, this first phase of the war was comical, almost endearingly innocent.

Samir remembered during one short lull when schools opened again, his Maths teacher turned up with his Kalashnikov and a belt of cartridges. The most boring teacher in the most boring school had, overnight, been transformed into a dangerously exciting militiaman. He handed the children a test on algebra and settled in the corner of the classroom to wipe and polish his machine gun. He was so taken by the task that he never noticed that all the children were not in the least interested in the test and had all eyes riveted on their militant Maths teacher and his gun. He looked down the barrel, blew and wiped his weapon and balanced it for weight like a pro, all under the adulating gaze of boys and girls alike.

George joined the *Parti National Libéral*, the PNL militia, as a full-time member in the days most militiamen were, like the Maths teacher, still part-time. Samir missed his brother mostly in the middle of the night; he missed his brother's head brushing against the armchair in his sleep. Samir did not mourn his brother's death almost a year after he joined the PNL. Like with Abou George, he could not find tears for his brother. Instead, he would grimly picture Hassan, George's sidekick, as the PLO sniper who had aimed and shot his erstwhile friend in the head.

Now Samir had the floor space all to himself, but he still slept in the direct beam of the light in the lobby, and still read the books Jacob lent him.

The two books he now had, and would always have, were the last Jacob Haddad lent him. These were not Jacob's but were borrowed from the library of the Université de Saint Joseph. The first was a thick volume on the study of Ancient Greek which included a comprehensive Ancient Greek-French dictionary, and the second was a book on antique coins replete with illustrations. Samir had shown his coin to Jacob who recognised the letters as Greek. Upon Samir's

insistence, Jacob withdrew the two books for a fortnight so that the boy could research his coin's origins.

This was the fortnight of the PLO advance in Beirut, of the massacres of Christian and Muslim towns, and of the Christian militias counterattacks on the Palestinian refugee camps. This was the fortnight the war lost all pretences of innocence, when the militiamen removed their Balaclava helmets.

For six months, as any sane civilian living in central Beirut, Samir did not budge and was confined to the concierge's living quarters, venturing out sometimes in the early mornings in search of food and water. During those six months, with nothing better to do, he learnt Ancient Greek and became a numismatist without a coin collection.

As mortars and rocket-propelled grenades rained down on their neighbourhood, pitting buildings like swarms of locusts ravaging a crop, Samir studied Greek grammar and memorised the differences between the genitive ablative and dative cases; and from the illustrations and text in the other book he learnt to distinguish between Athenian and Spartan coins.

By the time heavy artillery and tanks were introduced onto the streets of Beirut, Samir could write entire paragraphs in Ancient Greek and had retained much of the vocabulary, and he could theoretically grade a coin's value according to its *Fine*, *Good* or *Very Good* characteristics.

As for his own coin, he had discovered from the first week he had the books, that the treasure, guarded so secretly and uncomfortably below the crotch, was nothing but a fake. For a start it was perfectly round - no ancient coin was so compass-drawn perfect. There was rust, but not enough rust for a coin supposedly two thousand years old. Samir's coin was a replica of a Syracusan decadrachm - and not even a good replica at that, he now knew. The four fish were supposed to be dolphins surrounding the bust of Arethusa. And in the replica, the hair was

wrong: it was wavy instead of curly; and the fake had neglected to adorn Arethusa with an earring. On the reverse, the chariot was facing the wrong way and the charioteer did not have *Niké*, the goddess of victory, hovering over his head. But the clinching argument was in the Greek letters themselves. The would-be Syracusans had misspelt the name of their city. Samir wrote the correction in his exercise book ten times as if correcting a school dictation.

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Jacob Haddad was kidnapped during those six months by the Christian Phalangist Party. He was released a week later because he was suspected of being an Israeli spy. It seemed ironic to think that had he been captured by another group, he would have been tortured and killed for precisely the same reason.

'I've got to leave, Samir.' Jacob said one day.

'Why?'

'I can't stay here any more.'

'But everything's going right now,' Samir complained; everyone was optimistic about the Arab peace-keeping force that was being deployed in Beirut. 'You'll see, the war will be over soon.'

'The peace-keeping force is ninety percent Syrian and I don't want to be here when the animals in this jungle finally get wind of the lion's true intent.'

The allusion was not lost on the boy. Lion in Arabic was *assad*. 'It'll be OK,' Samir said stirringly. 'Please stay, don't go.'

Jacob put his arm around the youth's shoulders. 'My Greek student,' he said fondly, kissing him. We're all children having an unscheduled day off from school. We'll be excited until the school burns down and until we run out of sticks for the bonfire.'

'But when will you come back?'

'When a Shiite mother stops scolding her child by threatening to call the Phalangists.'

A month later, Jacob Haddad drove away from Samir's life and followed the seasonal geese south, stopping at Tel Aviv.

The night Jacob left, Samir cried.

As he lay alone on the cold floor, swathed in a blanket, he gazed tearfully at the bulb and the light which was still ridiculously left on at night. He heard the occasional bullet whistling through the air as a macabre replacement to the courting cats. He wept for his friend who had been forced to leave his country. Yes, Jacob Haddad was Lebanese not Israeli. More Lebanese than anyone he knew.

For the first time, Samir found he could cry for his father who had been chased to death by his unnamed demons, for his brother who had died for nothing but vainglory, for his coin which was a worthless chunk of metal. Above all, he cried for his lost innocence. A past when days were longer, when he and Leila counted bugs, and when he smiled at drivers and sold them Chiclets Peppermint gum.

Tired, he became dozily aware of a shadow on the opaque shell encompassing the bulb. He wiped the tears off his eyes and was astonished to see a flying cockroach crawling over the shell towards one of the two holes on the side. He held his breath and the cockroach almost casually slipped through the hole into the searing light.

Samir looked quizzically at the bulb and then grinned broadly as the cockroach thrashed briefly in the casing. The light played on Samir's teeth, and had he been able to see them, he would have imagined that his teeth too could dance the *dabké*. Momentarily, at least, the world was a brighter place.

Of course, Samir thought happily, the holes expand in the heat.

* * *

1982

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The two silver sheets had been rolled tightly, each encapsulated in a tin sheath, remaining undisturbed for over two thousand years until their discovery.

The man sat at his desk and handled the two tin cocoons, fingering the rusted buckles by the stoppers which, he considered, enabled carriers to hang the sheaths on their belts. He had to use a pair of pliers to remove the stoppers, and then, with eyebrow tweezers, he picked at the rolls of silver inside. The first roll presented little difficulty and slid out easily, but with the second, the man tugged impatiently almost ripping the sheet until it too emerged into the twentieth century. He unrolled both sheets on his desk.

Each was roughly four centimetres wide and sixteen centimetres long. They were matt in the direct sunlight that filtered through the french windows, as if quenching a thirst brought on by millennia of darkness. He ran his left index across one of the sheets feeling the characters in relief.

The cocoons, he thought, were the antique equivalents of modern paper envelopes. And as he balanced the two sheets on his palm, he remembered someone who could sell these two Ancient Greek letters for him. He placed the two silver sheets and their tin sheaths in the top drawer of his desk, and picked up the phone to call Samir Khoury.

CHAPTER TWO

A Matter Of Time

A curious mind discovered the *chronon*.

On her twelfth birthday, in 1969, Maira told her family that she planned to become a great artist. 'Post-impressionist,' she qualified affectedly, cutting short further enquiries. Before asking her parents for paints and brushes, Maira had

looked up and memorised all the relevant words. If questioned, why post-impressionism, her prepared answer would have been: 'Because cubism is too abstract and impressionism too dull.'

In the event, however, no-one bothered to ask. As Maira unwrapped her present that would set her on a course to fame - via a *Teach Yourself Art* book and beginner's easel - her nan explained to the rest of the family that she too had gone through a similar phase as a child, using a lock from a horse's mane because brushes were, oddly, in short supply during the Great War.

The following morning Maira rose at dawn, set up her easel on the patio beside the garden table, lined the brushes, opened the box of oil paints, put her thumb through the small palette, and stared at the blank canvas.

Perhaps a summer's morning in a back garden in Southampton was not inspirational enough. She wished she were in Paris; all the best artists were Parisians. By the time her mum came downstairs to prepare breakfast, Maira, still standing by her new easel, had scrutinised the sycamore, the garden pond, even the blowzy gnome looking for an interesting subject to paint.

By eleven o'clock, she was thoroughly bored. She sat cross-legged on the ground, staring despondently at a half eaten piece of toast dropped a few hours earlier. Two large black ants had crawled on the toast and were pacing round and round in circles.

Confused, Maira thought. Must be the biggest banquet they've ever seen. They don't know where to start.

She tilted the slice, gently knocked it so that the ants fell lightly to the ground, then breaking off two crumbs, she dropped them by each ant. With manageable portions, the ants picked their crumbs in their mandibles and scurried to their antheap. Maira followed them.

The heap was nine of her paces away from the easel. One ant, after a quick

turn and wave with its antennae, headed straight for home. The second followed a zig-zagging route turning sometimes left sometimes right, constantly retracing its steps as if a series of obstacles had been placed in its path.

Taking the scenic route, Maira thought, which was what her dad said whenever they got lost on outings.

The second ant finally made it to the anthill very many minutes after the first. Maira frowned. How odd; a minute must be like an hour to an ant. Why should one ant take hours longer over the same route? Maybe the second was younger, less experienced, or the first was brighter. Could ants be said to be intelligent, she wondered. She had read that bees and ants checked the position of the sun as they left their hives and heaps and thereafter constantly worked out their bearings to the sun thereby knowing where they were in relation to their homes. Which was another reason, she guessed, why you never saw bees and ants in winter. Maira left the anthill to look up the word *intelligence* in her dictionary.

Ten minutes later she returned to the garden with a tape measure, her digital watch and an empty glass. She measured the distance from the anthill to a crack on the patio floor and captured four ants in the glass. Squeezing red, blue, yellow and green paint onto her palette, she used her thinnest brush to carefully apply a drop of each primary colour to each abdomen. Then, paintbrush turned sword, she sliced the air on either side of the glass of ants, smiled, and said aloud: 'I dub ye Sirs Grant, Yant, Blant and Rant.'

She prepared four equal crumbs of toast, upturned the glass at the crack on the patio floor, and recorded the times from the moment each ant picked its food and to the moment each entered the heap. Before her mum called her for lunch, Maira was able to repeat the experiment three times with the same ants - except for Yant who had strangely disappeared after the first trip.

In the afternoon, she completed her first and last painting on canvas. She

painted the anthill and the patio floor marking, in black, the distance to the crack. Below, she added a graph of the time taken against the distance with Grant's, Rant's and Blant's average performances as straight lines in their respective colours. Then she wrote a simple ratio:

Intelligence, I = Comprehension, C/ Time taken to comprehend, T

Comprehension, Maira decided, was the same for all her ants. All three knew they had crumbs in their mouths, and all three knew they had to return to their heap. Comprehension was therefore a constant and she wrote three further ratios in the appropriate colours to the right of the graph:

$$I_{(green)}/\ I_{(red)} = T_{(red)}/\ T_{(green)}$$

$$I_{(green)}/\ I_{(blue)} = T_{(blue)}/\ T_{(green)}$$

$$I_{(red)}/\ I_{(blue)} = T_{(blue)}/\ T_{(red)}$$

As the green ant had been 1.5 times faster than the red, and 2.25 times faster than the blue, she titled her work: *Grant the Antstein*. In the top right hand corner, she painted the sun surrounded by a blue sky, and considered adding the sycamore when she thought it would look silly. After all, she had only added the sun out of respect for the ant's sense of direction. She looked at her masterpiece, nodded with satisfaction, and signed her name - Maira Brisden - in orange paint in the bottom left corner. Orange because it was the colour of her hair.

Of course, Grant couldn't *really* be more intelligent than Rant and Blant. Rather, as measured by her watch, Grant had had 1.5 and 2.25 *more time* to reach the anthill.

In her diary that night, Maira wrote: *My watch and ants tick differently*.

For her second experiment, towards the end of the summer holidays, Maira roasted her watch.

She had left it in a pre-heated oven for exactly an hour, timed by her father's

old watch. She was very disappointed to discover that her watch had utterly perished three minutes after the beginning of the experiment. Indeed the dial - forever reading 12:03 - was the least charred part of the watch.

'Daliesque,' she said sadly.

But this was the second part of the experiment; the first was by far more successful. Maira had synchronised the two watches, and for a whole day had kept them side by side, checking on them regularly. Satisfied that a day later they were both still in perfect sync, she placed her watch in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator for an hour, keeping the other watch in her room. When she removed her watch, she found that it now lagged her father's by a full minute and twelve seconds. She synchronised the watches again and left her watch in the freezer for a full day at the end of which, she discovered her father's watch led her own by twenty eight and a half minutes.

She verified her conclusions by synchronising the watches again and leaving them side by side in her room for a further day. Again they ticked and recorded time in perfect unison.

She didn't have a thermometer but she assumed that the freezer setting 4 would be twice 2 which would be twice as cold as the freezer mark 1, so she spent a week placing first her watch in the freezer at different settings and then her father's, and she tabulated all the readings, drawing graphs of the results on graph paper which was easier than on canvas. The easel, palette and paints had already ended in the cupboard.

There were differences in the results between her father's old watch and hers when each had been frozen at the same setting and over the same period, but these she put down to differences in quality: her father's watch was Swiss and gold-plated, while hers was Japanese and made of stainless steel. Later, consulting an A-Level Physics book, she refined her interpretations to describe their different

thermal coefficients.

Maira was keen to complete the experiment, and what had been demonstrated with cold temperatures should, in her way of thinking, be demonstrated with hot temperatures. So in the second leg of the experiment, she cooked her watch to oblivion.

In her diary she wrote: *Time is slower in cold temperature*.

She looked at her graphs, chewed her pen, then smiling, Maira Brisden added: *The greatest art is pure science. I want to be a great artist*.

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1982

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The conference was called *A Matter of Time*. It was the first of its kind in that it would group academics from a wide spectrum of interests all discussing their pet theories on time. This was Professor Morgan's brain-child, head of Mathematics and Master of Peterhouse College, Cambridge.

Like others, Professor Morgan had noticed that the nature of time was fast becoming the most discussed academic topic of the eighties. Evolutionists, geneticists and geologists were joining particle physicists and thermodynamicists in an unparalleled battle of concepts. One had only to glean the literature of the last few years to notice the sudden prominence reserved for time. Evolutionists and geneticists who wrote their theses under headings like *The Cycle of Time* faced angry physicists and geologists waving banners with slogans of *Arrow of Time*; others still, wrote like arbitrators under questioning titles, *Time - A Measure of Entropy?*

Like others, Professor Morgan knew that a cross-specialisation exchange of

ideas was long overdue. Unlike others, Professor Morgan had both the inclination and academic clout to make the conference a reality. He knew with apprehension that this first conference in Cambridge was as controversial as getting Arabs and Israelis to discuss peace. It could also be the last if the discussions went out of control. It was hard enough to encourage two physicists from different branches to converse in a reasonable and reasoning manner, let alone delegates from widely different fields of science, and worse still, scientists and non scientists. In a bid to incorporate all visions of time, Professor Morgan could not fail to invite the oldest chronologists, the historians, nor the linguists who were interested in the evolutionary nature of languages.

To close friends, he had likened the proposed conference to a cageful of parrots plucked from different forests of the globe. There would be one of two results: either all the parrots would find some common branch and discover a universal parrot-speak, or the parrots would squawk that much louder in their own tongue in order to be heard above all the other squawking parrots.

As the first day of the conference dawned, he could only hope that he had taken sufficient precautions. The main problem was one of semantics. Gone were the days when an educated person could, with wit, comprehend all the different fields of human achievement. The last true polymath had been killed in the twentieth century by the technological revolution, and with the resulting Big Bang of jargon, every specialist was now required to learn an esoteric dialect.

Professor Morgan had therefore gone to considerable effort in selecting the speakers. The first requirement was, naturally, that they be leaders in their fields. The second, and almost as important, was that they be practical enough in their approach and simple enough in their syntax and nomenclature to be comprehensible to the other delegates. So, of the twelve main speakers, he had chosen only two other Cambridge colleagues. Dr Paul Stevens of the Anglosaxon

Norse and Celtic Department would discuss time from an etymological perspective, and Dr Maira Brisden would talk of a chronon and of an old universe.

Maira's was the third and final lecture of the day.

Professor Morgan had scheduled three main lectures a day over four days each followed by a recess - coffee, lunch, tea - and group discussions. The first day had been reserved for physics: thermodynamics, quantum mechanics, and now, Dr Brisden's chrono-physics.

Professor Morgan felt that the last lecture on quantum mechanics had been particularly harsh on less scientific ears. When the speaker had described, in simple terms but at great length, world planes that were really strings mapped out in imaginary time, Professor Morgan had looked in dismay at expressions of abject boredom from many non-physicists. He wondered if it had been wise to hold three physics lectures in a day especially as he saw little change after the lunch break from some of the linguistic delegates.

'Thank you Professor Morgan,' Maira said when he finished introducing her.

As he returned to his seat and looked around the lecture theatre, he thought Dr Brisden would have a tough job keeping this lot interested.

'Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,' Maira began, 'how long is Britain's coastline?'

There was a lengthy pause and she scanned the hall, gazing intently at individual delegates. When she was satisfied she had everyone's attention, she resumed: 'The answer depends largely on our view.'

She showed a series of four slides: a stretch of ground in microscopic detail where pebbles appeared as insurmountable boulders, then a vista of a scenic bay, followed by a frame of a stretch of coast taken at high altitude, and finally a

satellite image of the south coast of Britain.

* * *

Maira began her lecture by talking of three creatures walking from Southampton to Plymouth: an ant, a man and a giant. Were the coast a perfectly straight line (with a dimension of one), the three could agree on a universal unit of length, a *cosmic metre* which would require conversions only in terms of scale: more paces for the ant than the man, than the giant. However, Maira explained, Mother Nature sketched coasts, mountains and curved space. It was precisely because of the coast's fractal one-and-a-bit dimensions (the idealised straight line regularly displaced into the second dimension) that the three could not agree on a universal measure of length. The distance between Plymouth and Southampton was fixed, but because the ant's coastline was more jagged than the man's, than the giant's - more nooks and crannies within every bay and promontory had to be contoured - the concept of length and space became subject to the measurer's *own* size.

Maira proposed that time was equally fractal where each organism defined its second also according to its size; she called her theory, the *Chronon Theory of Time*, CTT for short. A cosmic second, like the cosmic metre, did exist, but by virtue of being alive and affected by time, no observer could measure its value. However, with CTT, a total relativistic approach could be entertained: *any* time-varying system regardless of size and density (an elephant, a shrew, a star or the cosmos itself, or even abstract systems such as the evolution of species or language) could be compared to any other time-varying system (such as a man).

She defined the chronon in the following terms: when an elementary particle of mass is acted upon by a quantum of time, a chronon, the particle of

mass is displaced into the future.

Conscious of the non-scientists in the lecture theatre, she illustrated the idea with the analogy of a beach ball as a particle of mass moving under the steady stream of a jet of water. Upon impact, each individual chronon imparted a fixed amount of *ageing* to the particle of mass - the ball moved further along the beach. Maira described inertia in terms of beach balls: a small ball was propelled further than a large ball by the jet, if both had the same air pressure and density. The CTT equivalent was that a large object offered more resistance to ageing (to being propelled into the future) than a small object - and a similar argument held true for density where a larger helium-filled beach ball was propelled further than a smaller air-filled ball. Volume and density were thus the primary variables in this theory, and CTT predicted a smaller second - less chronon inertia - for the following four cases:

1: a small body versus a large body of the same density.

2: a body versus a denser body of the same volume.

3: a hot body versus an equal but cold body.

4: a body at rest versus an equal body in motion.

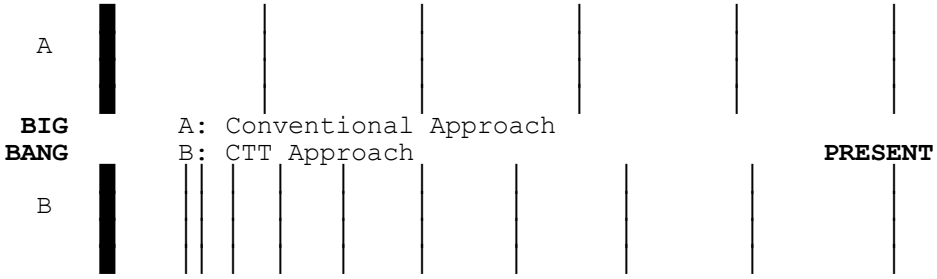
In her examples to show CTT's predictive powers and the universal applications of the theory, Maira used her formulae to quantify a baby's higher pulse and thus longer notion of the second ('Time waits for no man like it waits for a baby.'); the 800 million heartbeats which both an elephant and a shrew underwent in their lives, the former in 50 odd years, the latter in a year; a whale's 30-minute song relative to a chaffinch's minute; the rise and fall of the Roman Empire where the citizens were as cells in an organism; and the life-cycle of a market product, from launch to divestment.

She ended her lecture in her own discipline, with the interpretations the Chronon Theory of Time reserved for the age of the universe.

The universe began with a Big Bang which took place approximately sixteen billion years ago, an age which is calculated by observing a blue shift in stars and galaxies, inferring a rate of expansion of the universe, and from this rate deducing a time in the past when the entire universe could be contained in a table-tennis ball. But, she propounded, while agreeing with the calculations, the universe only *appeared* to be sixteen billion years old, because the age was calculated using the universe's *present* year. According to CTT, a second (or a year) in the past universe would have been a shorter time than a second in today's universe.

She offered the proof: in the past after the Big Bang, the volume of the universe was smaller thereby shortening the second, and the density was higher thereby lengthening the second. From Einstein's equations, the mean density at any given time is inversely proportional to the radius squared of the universe, while the volume is proportional to the radius cubed. The net effect, then, is that the universe's second or year shortens with a smaller radius. The universe's year or second becomes a function of its radius.

And she showed a slide:



The true age of the universe was evaluated by counting all the years separately (by integration), resulting in an age over three and a half times older than present estimates. With CTT, the very idea of a *Big Bang* was undermined. The closer a hypothetical observer reached that past event, the more he would find that a present year became millions of years as recorded by his hypothetical clock,

like attempting to watch a two hour feature film in one thousandth of a second. The Big Bang was not a sudden spark out of nothingness but rather an intolerably slow progression, a greatly protracted evolution that would take a near-eternity of time. And - Maira stressed the notion - at the very instant of the Big Bang, the intervals of time would be so close, the second would be so short, as to be unchanging. The Chronon Theory of Time therefore predicted that time itself did indeed begin with the universe.

* * *

'Thank you, Dr Brisden,' Professor Morgan said. 'If there are no further questions, I would like to adjourn this conference till tomorrow - '

'Professor Morgan, I have a question for Dr Brisden.'

He looked at the man in the back row and hiding his impatience, he said jocularly, 'I rather think Dr Brisden needs some fresh air and a stretch, as do the rest of us, I imagine.'

'It's a short question,' the man said.

Professor Morgan nodded and returned glumly to his seat. The questions and answers sessions had lasted almost as long as the lecture itself. While he was glad that the lecture had aroused some interest, he shifted his weight onto one buttock and was uncomfortably aware that most delegates were longing to leave the theatre. This was to be the nineteenth question - Professor Morgan had counted them. Almost every question had been short, and invariably every answer had been detailed. Indeed, he felt that there was an inverse proportionality between the lengths of the questions and answers so that the shortest question given by a non scientist had required the longest answer - Professor Morgan had verified this with his watch. The question had been: 'Is time travel possible?' and

the twenty minute reply: 'No. Never.'

In all fairness to Dr Brisden, this was an over-simplification. She had answered very conclusively describing how CTT was the first theory in physics to incorporate a clear-cut arrow of time. It was widely relative in that some mechanisms would only appear to be unaffected by time to other shorter-lived mechanisms. But the chronon travelled in one direction, arbitrarily named from past to future, down a one way street of causes and effects; no paradoxes were needed, and certainly no parallel universes required as explanation, or some other science fictional theory. With CTT, Dr Brisden had not only fused the large with the small, science with non science, but she had succeeded in the more difficult task of returning physics to the realm of the common sense.

'Bill Walters of the SETI Institute,' said the man in the back row. 'As you may know, the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence has for some years now consisted of scanning the skies with a grid of radio telescopes searching at many frequencies simultaneously for signs of alien communications. We have, so far, found no evidence of alien broadcasts. It has been suggested that because there have been few generations of stars, Earth could well be among the first generation of planets with intelligent life and that, therefore, it would be too soon to expect transmissions from other life in the universe.

'If I understand your ideas, you dispute the number of generations of stars - you would have more generations between our sun and the Big Bang. This suggests more heavier elements required for planets and life far sooner than previously envisaged. This in turn implies the possibility of many generations of intelligent planets well before Earth. Given this added probability of older and more advanced civilisations elsewhere, my question simply put is this: are there any CTT reasons which would explain why we've received no signals?'

Maira stared at Bill Walters for an uneasy while, as if she were still

expecting the question, then she smiled and said kindly, 'I can't imagine.'

A record, Professor Morgan thought, glancing at his watch.

'I'm sorry,' she added, 'I don't have all the answers. Other than the statistical approach, we don't really have conclusive proof that life will form elsewhere. We know it can, given favourable conditions, but will it generally? But then you will know more about this than I. You say that the frequencies are checked simultaneously, it may be that you should be investigating something other than frequency, or perhaps in addition to it.'

'Such as?' Bill Walters asked.

She shrugged.

'I don't know.' Maira's eyes went vacant as she added, 'But I promise you I will think about it.'

Zachiel

In the physical world, Zachiel is a white jinnee who appears in an explosive plume of smoke to lead me away from Samir and Maira's pasts through the floodlit doorway to his world of eternal desert night.

In the centre of the Celtic Cross once more, I expect him to carry my soul to the second door, that of the crystal tower. Instead, the fourth doorway is now glowing with light, not white as the first but blue.

Zachiel points at the glass monster, horned, with female breasts and male genitals refracting the cold blue light: I am to pass between *The Devil*'s colossal legs to visit a future earth where I am no longer alive.

AZAZEL: the name appears in the sand by the angel's feet.

Azazel the blue demon, the evil spirit of the wilderness to whom Jews of old sacrificed a scapegoat on *Yom Kippur* - the Day of Atonement. *Azaz-el*, anti-God, king of the blue jinn.

Az-Zurruk, the blue sprites, are all-embracingly evil. They take after their master and lover, Satan: creator and non-uterine brother. That is the very secret of their existence for they, alone in the known universe, were not among the species accounted for in the Creation. They arrived later, obnoxious gate-crashers to a ball for living things, as the proud showpieces of the Devil's stolen technology. Only God breathes life into viscous mud; so Az-Zurruk were new creatures insofar as Woman was moulded from existing human stock. The first blue jinnee, Azazel, was an angel's rib bared and hacked not out of love for order, but out of envy and for chaos.

Azazel and his Zurruk are guardian nonangels. They stick to spiritually-

dead humans like bluebottles on a cadaver until the victim's soul is exposed and quartered. The flesh of a damned fig thus prepared, the blue hounds move respectfully aside, leaving the quarry to their dark creator.

White jinn are reborn every spring, excited by the resurrection of Adonis in the fields and orchards. Azazel and his blue minions seek their thrills through the birth of unloved babies.