

1

Forty minutes later he was up in the sky

‘I was going to say something,’ he said.

‘So say it,’ she said.

He was quiet, keeping his eyes on the road. In the darkness of the city’s outskirts, there was nothing to see except the tail-lights of other cars in the distance, the endless unfurling roll of tarmac, the giant utilitarian fixtures of the motorway.

‘God may be disappointed in me for even thinking it,’ he said.

‘Well,’ she sighed, ‘He knows already, so you may as well tell me.’

He glanced at her face, to judge what mood she was in as she said this, but the top half of her head, including her eyes, was veiled in a shadow cast by the edge of the windscreen. The bottom half of her face was lunar bright. The sight of her cheek, lips and chin – so intimately familiar to him, so much a part of life as he had known it – made him feel a sharp grief at the thought of losing her.

‘The world looks nicer with man-made lights,’ he said.

They drove on in silence. Neither of them could abide the chatter of radio or the intrusion of pre-recorded music. It was one of the many ways they were compatible.

‘Is that it?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘What I mean is . . . Unspoiled nature is supposed

to be the ultimate in perfection, isn't it, and all the man-made stuff is supposed to be a shame, just cluttering it up. But we wouldn't enjoy the world half as much if we – man . . . that is, human beings . . . '

(She gave him one of her *get-on-with-it* grunts.)

' . . . if we hadn't put electric lights all over it. Electric lights are actually attractive. They make a night drive like this bearable. Beautiful, even. I mean, just imagine if we had to do this drive in total darkness. Because that's what the natural state of the world is, at night, isn't it? Total darkness. Just imagine. You'd have the stress of not having a clue where you were going, not being able to see more than a few metres in front of you. And if you were heading for a city – well, in a non-technological world there wouldn't be cities, I suppose – but if you were heading for a place where other people lived, living there naturally, maybe with a few campfires . . . You wouldn't see them until you actually arrived. There wouldn't be that magical vista when you're a few miles away from a city, and all the lights are twinkling, like stars on the hillside.'

'Uh-huh.'

'And even inside this car, assuming you could *have* a car, or some sort of vehicle, in this natural world, pulled by horses I suppose . . . It would be pitch black. And very cold, too, on a winter's night. But instead, look what we've got here.' He took one hand off the steering wheel (he always drove with both hands laid symmetrically on the wheel) and indicated the dashboard. The usual little lights glowed back at them. Temperature. Time. Water level. Oil. Speed. Fuel consumption.

'Peter . . . '

'Oh, look!' Several hundred metres up ahead, a tiny overburdened figure, standing in a puddle of lamplight. 'A hitchhiker. I'll stop, shall I?'

‘No, don’t.’

The tone of her voice made him think better of challenging her, even though they seldom missed an opportunity to show kindness to strangers.

The hitchhiker raised his head in hope. As the headlights enveloped him, his body was – just for an instant – transformed from a vaguely humanoid shape into a recognisably individual person. He was holding a sign that said HETHROW.

‘How strange,’ said Peter, as they zoomed past. ‘You’d think he’d just take the Tube.’

‘Last day in the UK,’ said Beatrice. ‘Last chance to have a good time. He probably used up his British money in a pub, thinking he’d keep just enough for the train. Six drinks later he’s out in the fresh air, sobering up, and all he’s got left is his plane ticket and £1.70.’

It sounded plausible. But if it was true, then why leave this lost sheep in the lurch? It wasn’t like Bea to leave anybody stranded.

He turned towards her darkened face again, and was alarmed to see teardrops twinkling on her jaw and in the corners of her mouth.

‘Peter . . . ’ she said.

He took one hand off the steering wheel again, this time to squeeze her shoulder. Suspended over the highway up ahead was a sign with a symbol of an aeroplane on it.

‘Peter, this is our last chance.’

‘Last chance?’

‘To make love.’

The indicator lights flashed gently and went tick, tick, tick, as he eased the car into the airport lane. The words ‘make love’ bumped against his brain, trying to get in, even though there was no room in there. He almost said, ‘You’re joking.’ But, even though

she had a fine sense of humour and loved to laugh, she never joked about things that mattered.

As he drove on, the sense that they were not on the same page – that they needed different things at this crucial time – entered the car like a discomfiting presence. He'd thought – he'd felt – that yesterday morning had been their proper leavetaking, and that this trip to the airport was just . . . a postscript, almost. Yesterday morning had been so *right*. They'd finally worked their way to the bottom of their 'To Do' list. His bag was already packed. Bea had the day off work, they'd slept like logs, they'd woken up to brilliant sunshine warming the yellow duvet of their bed. Joshua the cat had been lying in a comical pose at their feet; they'd nudged him off and made love, without speaking, slowly and with great tenderness. Afterwards, Joshua had jumped back on the bed and tentatively laid one forepaw on Peter's naked shin, as if to say, *Don't go; I will hold you here*. It was a poignant moment, expressing the situation better than language could have, or perhaps it was just that the exotic cuteness of the cat put a protective furry layer over the raw human pain, making it endurable. Whatever. It was perfection. They'd lain there listening to Joshua's throaty purr, enfolded in each other's arms, their sweat evaporating in the sun, their heart-rates gradually reverting to normal.

'One more time,' she said to him now, above the engine noise on a dark motorway on the way to the plane that would take him to America and beyond.

He consulted the digital clock on the dashboard. He was supposed to be at the check-in counter in two hours; they were about fifteen minutes from the airport.

'You're wonderful,' he said. Perhaps if he pronounced the words in exactly the right way, she might get the message that they

shouldn't try to improve on yesterday, that they should just leave it at that.

'I don't want to be wonderful,' she said. 'I want you inside me.'

He drove for a few seconds in silence, adjusting quickly to the circumstances. Prompt adjustment to changed circumstances was another thing they had in common.

'There are lots of those horrible corporate hotels right near the airport,' he said. 'We could rent a room just for an hour.' He regretted the 'horrible' bit; it sounded as though he was trying to dissuade her while pretending not to. He only meant that the hotels were the sort they both avoided if they possibly could.

'Just find a quiet lay-by,' she said. 'We can do it in the car.'

'Crisis!' he said, and they both laughed. 'Crisis' was the word he'd trained himself to say instead of 'Christ', when he'd first become a Christian. The two words were close enough in sound for him to be able to defuse a blasphemy when it was already half out of his mouth.

'I mean it,' she said. 'Anywhere will do. Just don't park in a place where another car's likely to run into the back of us.'

The highway looked different to him now, as they drove on. In theory it was the same stretch of tarmac, bounded by the same traffic paraphernalia and flimsy metal fences, but it had been transformed by their own intent. It was no longer a straight line to an airport, it was a mysterious hinterland of shadowy detours and hidey-holes. Proof, once again, that reality was not objective, but always waiting to be reshaped and redefined by one's attitude.

Of course, everybody on earth had the power to reshape reality. It was one of the things Peter and Beatrice talked about a lot. The challenge of getting people to grasp that life was only as grim and confining as you perceived it to be. The challenge of getting people to see that the immutable facts of existence were not so immutable

after all. The challenge of finding a simpler word for ‘immutable’ than ‘immutable’.

‘How about here?’

Beatrice didn’t answer, only put her hand on his thigh. He steered the car smoothly into a truckstop. They would have to trust that getting squashed flat by a 44-ton lorry was not in God’s plan.

‘I’ve never done this before,’ he said, when he’d switched the ignition off.

‘You think I have?’ she said. ‘We’ll manage. Let’s get in the back.’

They swung out of their respective doors and were reunited several seconds later on the back seat. They sat like passengers, shoulder to shoulder. The upholstery smelled of other people – friends, neighbours, members of their church, hitchhikers. It made Peter doubt all the more whether he could or should make love here, now. Although . . . there was something exciting about it, too. They reached for each other, aiming for a smooth embrace, but their hands were clumsy in the dark.

‘How fast would the cabin light drain the car’s battery?’ she said.

‘I’ve no idea,’ he said. ‘Best not to risk it. Besides, it would make us a sideshow for all the passing traffic.’

‘I doubt it,’ she said, turning her face towards the headlights whizzing by. ‘I read an article once about a little girl who was being abducted. She managed to jump out of the car when it slowed down on the motorway. The kidnapper grabbed her, she put up a good fight, she was screaming for help. A stream of cars went past. Nobody stopped. They interviewed one of those drivers later. He said, “I was travelling so fast, I didn’t believe what I was seeing.”’

He shifted uncomfortably. ‘What an awful story. And maybe not the best of times to tell it.’

‘I know, I know, I’m sorry. I’m a bit . . . out of my mind just

now.' She laughed nervously. 'It's just so hard . . . losing you.'

'You're not losing me. I'm just going away for a while. I'll be . . . '

'Peter, please. Not now. We've done that part. We've done what we can with that part.'

She leaned forward, and he thought she was going to start sobbing. But she was fishing something out from the gap between the two front seats. A small battery-operated torch. She switched it on and balanced it on the headrest of the front passenger seat; it fell off. Then she wedged it in the narrow space between the seat and the door, angled it so that its beam shone on the floor.

'Nice and subdued,' she said, her voice steady again. 'Just enough light so we can make each other out.'

'I'm not sure I can do this,' he said.

'Let's just see what happens,' she said, and began to unbutton her shirt, exposing her white bra and the swell of her bosom. She allowed the shirt to fall down her arms, wiggled her shoulders and elbows to shake the silky material off her wrists. She removed her skirt, panties and pantyhose all together, hooked in her strong thumbs, and made the motion look graceful and easy.

'Now you.'

He unclasped his trousers and she helped him remove them. Then she slid onto her back, contorting her arms to remove her bra, and he tried to reposition himself without squashing her with his knees. His head bumped against the ceiling.

'We're like a couple of clueless teenagers here,' he complained. 'This is . . . '

She laid her hand on his face, covering his mouth.

'We're you and me,' she said. 'You and me. Man and wife. Everything's fine.'

She was naked now except for the wristwatch on her thin wrist

and the pearl necklace around her throat. In the torchlight, the necklace was no longer an elegant wedding anniversary gift but became a primitive erotic adornment. Her breasts shook with the force of her heartbeat.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Do it.’

And so they began. Pressed close together, they could no longer see each other; the torchlight’s purpose was over. Their mouths were joined, their eyes clasped shut, their bodies could have been anyone’s bodies since the world was created.

‘Harder,’ Beatrice gasped after a while. Her voice had a harsh edge to it, a brute tenacity he’d never heard in her before. Their lovemaking had always been decorous, friendly, impeccably considerate. Sometimes serene, sometimes energetic, sometimes athletic, even – but never desperate. ‘Harder!’

Confined and uncomfortable, with his toes knocking against the window and his knees chafing on the furry viscose of the car seat, he did his best, but the rhythm and angle weren’t right and he misjudged how much longer she needed and how long he could last.

‘Don’t stop! Go on! Go on!’

But it was over.

‘It’s OK,’ she finally said, and wriggled from under him, clammy with sweat. ‘It’s OK’.

They were at Heathrow in plenty of time. The check-in lady gave Peter’s passport the once-over. ‘Travelling one-way to Orlando, Florida, yes?’ she said. ‘Yes,’ he said. She asked him if he had any suitcases to check in. He swung a sports bag and a rucksack onto the belt. It came across as dodgy somehow. But the logistics of his journey were too complicated and uncertain for a return booking. He wished Beatrice weren’t standing next

to him, listening to these confirmations of his imminent departure into thin air; wished she'd been spared hearing the word 'one-way'.

And then, of course, once he was handed his boarding pass, there was more time to fill before he would actually be allowed on the plane. Side by side, he and Beatrice meandered away from the check-in desks, a little dazzled by the excessive light and monstrous scale of the terminal. Was it the fluorescent glare that made Beatrice's face look drawn and anxious? Peter put his arm around the small of her back. She smiled up at him reassuringly, but he was not reassured. WHY NOT START YOUR HOLIDAY UPSTAIRS? the billboards leered. WITH OUR EVER-EXPANDING SHOPPING OPPORTUNITIES, YOU MAY NOT WANT TO LEAVE!

At this hour of evening, the airport was not too crowded, but there were still plenty of people trundling luggage and browsing in the shops. Peter and Beatrice took their seats near an information screen, to await the number of his departure gate. They joined hands, not looking at each other, looking instead at the dozens of would-be passengers filing past. A gaggle of pretty young girls, dressed like pole dancers at the start of a shift, emerged from a duty-free store burdened with shopping bags. They tottered along in high heels, scarcely able to carry their multiple prizes. Peter leaned towards Beatrice's face and murmured:

'Why would anybody want to go on a flight so heavily laden? And then when they get to wherever they're going, they'll buy even more stuff. And look: they can barely walk.'

'Uh-huh.'

'But maybe that's the whole point. Maybe this is a display put on specially for us. The sheer impracticality of it all – right down to the ridiculous shoes. It lets everyone know these girls are so

rich they don't have to worry about the real world. Their wealth makes them like a different creature, an exotic thing that doesn't have to function like a human.'

Bea shook her head. 'These girls aren't rich,' she said. 'Rich people don't travel in packs. And rich females don't walk as if they're not used to high heels. These girls are just young and they enjoy shopping. They're having an adventure. They're showing off to each other, not to us. We're invisible to them.'

Peter watched the girls stagger towards Starbucks. Their buttocks quivered inside their wrinkled skirts and their voices became raucous, betraying regional accents. Bea was right.

He sighed, squeezed her hand. What was he going to do without her, out in the field? How would he cope, not being able to discuss his perceptions? She was the one who stopped him coming out with claptrap, curbed his tendency to construct grand theories that encompassed everything. She brought him down to earth. Having her by his side on this mission would have been worth a million dollars.

But it was costing a great deal more than a million dollars to send him alone, and USIC was footing the bill.

'Are you hungry? Can I get you anything?'

'We ate at home.'

'A chocolate bar or something?'

She smiled but looked tired. 'I'm fine. Honestly.'

'I feel so bad about letting you down.'

'Letting me down?'

'You know . . . In the car. It feels unfair, unfinished, and today of all days . . . I hate to leave you like this.'

'It'll be awful,' she said. 'But not because of that.'

'The angle, the unfamiliar angle made me . . . '

'Please, Peter, there's no need for this. I'm not keeping a score-

card or a balance sheet. We made love. That's enough for me.'

'I feel I've . . . '

She stopped his mouth with her finger, then kissed him. 'You're the best man in the world.' She kissed him again, on the forehead. 'If you're going to do post-mortems, I'm sure there'll be much better reasons on this mission.'

His brow furrowed against her lips. What did she mean by 'post-mortems'? Was she just referring to the inevitability of encountering obstacles and setbacks? Or was she convinced that the mission as a whole would end in failure? In death?

He stood up; she stood up with him. They held each other tight. A large party of tourists poured into the hall, fresh from a coach and keen to travel to the sun. Surging towards their appointed gate, the babbling revellers split into two streams, flowing around Peter and Bea. When they'd all gone and the hall was relatively quiet again, a voice through the PA said: 'Please keep your belongings with you at all times. Unattended items will be removed and may be destroyed.'

'Do you have some sort of . . . instinct my mission will fail?' he asked her.

She shook her head, bumping his jaw with her skull.

'You don't feel God's hand in this?' he persisted.

She nodded.

'Do you think He would send me all the way to – '

'Please, Peter. Don't talk.' Her voice was husky. 'We've covered all this ground so many times. It's pointless now. We've just got to have faith.'

They sat back down, tried to make themselves comfortable in the chairs. She laid her head on his shoulder. He thought about history, the hidden human anxieties behind momentous events. The tiny trivial things that were probably bothering Einstein or

Darwin or Newton as they formulated their theories: arguments with the landlady, maybe, or concern over a blocked fireplace. The pilots who bombed Dresden, fretting over a phrase in a letter from back home: What did she *mean* by that? Or what about Columbus, when he was sailing towards the New Land . . . who knows what was on his mind? The last words spoken to him by an old friend, perhaps, a person not even remembered in history books . . .

‘Have you decided,’ said Bea, ‘what your first words will be?’

‘First words?’

‘To *them*. When you meet them.’

He tried to think. ‘It’ll depend . . .’ he said uneasily. ‘I have no idea what I’m going to find. God will guide me. He’ll give me the words I need.’

‘But when you imagine it . . . the meeting . . . what picture comes to your mind?’

He stared straight ahead. An airport employee dressed in overalls with bright yellow reflective sashes was unlocking a door labelled KEEP LOCKED AT ALL TIMES. ‘I don’t picture it in advance,’ he said. ‘You know what I’m like. I can’t live through stuff until it happens. And anyway, the way things really turn out is always different from what we might imagine.’

She sighed. ‘I have a picture. A mental picture.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Promise you won’t make fun of me.’

‘I promise.’

She spoke into his chest. ‘I see you standing on the shore of a huge lake. It’s night and the sky is full of stars. On the water, there’s hundreds of small fishing boats, bobbing up and down. Each boat has at least one person in it, some have three or four, but I

can't see any of them properly, it's too dark. None of the boats are going anywhere, they've all dropped anchor, because everyone is listening. The air is so calm you don't even have to shout. Your voice just carries over the water.'

He stroked her shoulder. 'A nice . . . ' He was about to say 'dream', but it would have sounded dismissive. 'Vision.'

She made a sound that could have been a croon of assent, or a subdued cry of pain. Her body was heavy against him, but he let her settle and tried not to fidget.

Diagonally opposite Peter and Beatrice's seats was a chocolate and biscuit shop. It was still doing a brisk trade despite the lateness of the hour; five customers stood queued at the checkout, and several others were browsing. Peter watched as a young, well-dressed woman selected an armful of purchases from the display racks. Jumbo-sized boxes of pralines, long slim cartons of shortbreads, a Toblerone the size of a truncheon. Hugging them all to her breast, she ambled beyond the pylon supporting the shop's ceiling, as if to check out whether there were more goodies displayed outside. Then she simply walked away, into the swirl of passers-by, towards the ladies' toilets.

'I've just witnessed a crime,' Peter murmured into Beatrice's hair. 'Have you?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you might be dozing off.'

'No, I saw her too.'

'Should we have nabbed her?'

'Nabbed her? You mean, like, a citizen's arrest?'

'Or at least reported her to the shop staff.'

Beatrice pressed her head harder against his shoulder as they watched the woman disappear into the loo. 'Would that help anyone?'

'It might remind her that stealing is wrong.'

‘I doubt it. Getting caught would just make her hate the people catching her.’

‘So, as Christians, we should just let her get on with stealing?’

‘As Christians, we should spread the love of Christ. If we do our job right, we’ll create people who don’t *want* to do wrong.’

“Create?”

‘You know what I mean. Inspire. Educate. Show the way.’ She lifted her head, kissed his brow. ‘Exactly what you’re about to do. On this mission. My brave man.’

He blushed, gratefully swallowing the compliment like a thirsty child. He hadn’t realised how much he needed it just now. It was so huge inside him he thought his chest would burst.

‘I’m going to the prayer room,’ he said. ‘Want to come?’

‘In a little while. You go ahead.’

He stood up and walked without hesitation towards Heathrow’s chapel. It was the one place in Heathrow, Gatwick, Edinburgh, Dublin and Manchester airports that he knew how to find without any bother. It was always the ugliest, dowdiest room in the entire complex, a far cry from the glittery hives of commerce. But there was soul in it.

Having found it again, he perused the timetable posted on the door in case he’d arrived just in time for a rare Communion. But the next one wasn’t scheduled till Thursday afternoon at three, by which time he would be an unimaginable distance away from here, and Beatrice would have started her long months of sleeping alone with Joshua.

He pushed the door open gently. The three Muslims kneeling inside didn’t acknowledge him as he walked in. They were facing a piece of paper attached to the wall, a computer-printed pictogram of a large arrow, like a traffic sign. It pointed to Mecca. The Muslims bowed, thrusting their rumps in the air, and kissed the fabric of

the brightly coloured mats provided. They were immaculately dressed men, with expensive watches and bespoke suits. Their polished patent-leather shoes had been tossed aside. The balls of their stockinged feet squirmed with the enthusiasm of their obeisance.

Peter cast a quick glance behind the curtain that divided the room down the middle. As he'd suspected, there was a woman there, another Muslim, shrouded in grey, performing the same mute ritual. She had a child with her, a miraculously well-behaved little boy dressed like Little Lord Fauntleroy. He was sitting near his mother's feet, ignoring her prostrations, reading a comic. Spider-Man.

Peter walked over to the cabinet where the Holy Books and pamphlets were kept. The Bible (a Gideon edition), a separate New Testament and Psalms, a Qur'an, a tatty book in Indonesian that was probably another New Testament. Stacked on a lower shelf, next to the *Watchtower* and the Salvation Army newspapers, was an optimistically large pile of leaflets. The logos looked familiar, so he bent down to identify them. They were from a very large American evangelical sect whose London pastor had been interviewed for this same mission. Peter actually met him in the USIC foyer, leaving in a huff. 'Bunch of time-wasters,' the guy hissed as he headed for the exit. Peter had expected to be unsuccessful too, but instead . . . he had been chosen. Why him and not someone from a church with loads of money and political clout? He still wasn't sure. He opened one of the leaflets, immediately saw the usual stuff about the numerological significance of 666, barcodes and the Whore of Babylon. Maybe that was the problem right there: fanaticism wasn't what USIC was looking for.

The quiet of the room was interrupted by an intercom message, piped through a small speaker attached, limpet-like, to the ceiling.

‘Allied Airlines regrets to announce that there has been a further delay to Flight AB31 to Alicante. This is due to technical problems with the aircraft. The next announcement will be made at 2230. Any remaining passengers who have not yet picked up their meal vouchers are requested to do so. Allied Airlines would like to apologise once again for any inconvenience.’

Peter fancied he could hear a collective moan of lamentation start up outside, but it was probably his imagination.

He opened the Visitors Book and leafed through its ledger-sized pages, reading the comments scribbled one beneath the other by travellers from all over the world. They didn’t disappoint him; they never did. Today’s entries alone filled three pages. Some were in Chinese characters, or Arabic script, but most were in English, halting or otherwise. The Lord was here, poured forth in this welter of biro ink and felt-tip pen.

It always struck him, whenever he was in an airport, that the entire, vast, multi-storied complex pretended to be a playground of secular delights, a galaxy of consumerism in which religious faith simply did not exist. Every shop, every billboard, every inch of the building right down to the rivets and the toilet plugholes, radiated the presumption that no one had any need for God here. The crowds that queued for snacks and knick-knacks, the constant stream of passengers recorded by the closed-circuit TVs, were wondrous proof of the sheer variety of human specimens, except that they were presumed to be identically faithless inside, duty-free in every sense of that word. And yet these hordes of bargain-hunters, honeymooners, sunbathers, business executives preoccupied with their deals, fashionistas haggling for their upgrades . . . no one would guess how many of them ducked into this little room and wrote heartfelt messages to the Almighty and to their fellow believers.

*Dear God, please take all the bad parts out of the world
— Johnathan.*

A child, he guessed.

*Yuko Oyama, Hyoyo, Japan. I pray for the children of illness and peace
of planet. And I pray for finding a good partner.*

Where is the CROSS of CHRIST our RISEN LORD? Wake UP!

*Charlotte Hogg, Birmingham. Please pray that my beloved daughter
and grandson will be able to accept my illness. And pray for everyone in
distress.*

*Marijn Tegelaars, London/Belgium. My dearest friend G, that she may
find the courage to be who she is.*

*Jill, England. Please pray for my late mother's soul to rest peacefully
and pray for my family who are not united and hate each other.*

Allah is the best! God rules!

The next entry was indecipherably crossed out. A nasty, intolerant rebuttal of the Muslim message above, most likely, deleted by another Muslim or by the caretaker of the Prayer Room.

*Coralie Sidebottom, Slough, Berks. Thanks for God's wonderful
creation.*

*Pat & Ray Murchiston, Langton, Kent. For our dear son, Dave, killed in
a car crash yesterday. Forever in our hearts.*

*Thorne, Frederick, Co. Armagh, Ireland. I pray for the healing of the
planet and the awakening of ALL peoples on it.*

*A mother. My heart is broken as my son has not spoken to me since my
remarriage 7 years ago. Please pray for reconciliation.*

Awful smell of cheap air freshener you can do better than this.

Moir Venger, South Africa. God is in control.

*Michael Lupin, Hummock Cottages, Chiswick. Some other smell than
antiseptic.*

*Jamie Shapcott, 27 Pinley Grove, Yeovil, Somerset. Please can my BA
plane to Newcastle not crash. Thank you.*

Victoria Sams, Tamworth, Staffs. Nice décor but the lights keep going on and off.

Lucy, Lossiemouth. Bring my man back safely.

He closed the book. His hands were trembling. He knew that there was quite a decent chance that he would die in the next thirty days, or that, even if he survived the journey, he would never return. This was his Gethsemane moment. He clenched his eyes shut and prayed to God to tell him what He wanted him to do; whether it would serve His purpose better if he grabbed Beatrice by the hand and ran with her to the exit and out to the car park, and drove straight back home before Joshua had even registered that he was gone.

By way of answer, God let him listen to the hysterical babble of his own inner voice, let it echo in the vault of his skull. Then, behind him, he heard a jingle of loose change as one of the Muslims jumped up to retrieve his shoes. Peter turned around. The Muslim man nodded courteously at him on his way out. The woman behind the curtain was touching up her lipstick, primping her eyelashes with her little finger, tucking stray hairs inside the edges of her hijab. The arrow on the wall fluttered slightly as the man swung open the door.

Peter's hands had ceased trembling. He had been granted perspective. This was not Gethsemane: he wasn't headed for Golgotha, he was embarking on a great adventure. He'd been chosen out of thousands, to pursue the most important missionary calling since the Apostles had ventured forth to conquer Rome with the power of love, and he was going to do his best.

Beatrice wasn't in the seat where he'd left her. For a few seconds he thought she'd lost her nerve and fled the terminal rather than say her last goodbye. He felt a pang of grief. But then he spotted

her a few rows further towards the coffee and muffin kiosk. She was on the floor on her hands and knees, her face obscured by loose hair. Hunkered down in front of her, also on its hands and knees, was a child – a fat toddler, whose elasticated trousers bulged with an ill-concealed nappy.

‘Look! I’ve got . . . ten fingers!’ she was telling the child. ‘Have *you* got ten fingers?’

The fat toddler slid his hands forward, almost touching Bea’s. She made a show of counting the digits, then said ‘A hundred! No, ten!’ The boy laughed. An older child, a girl, stood shyly back, sucking on her knuckles. She kept looking back at her mother, but the mother was looking neither at her children nor at Beatrice; instead, she was focused on a hand-held gadget.

‘Oh, hi,’ said Beatrice when she saw Peter coming. She brushed her hair off her face, tucked it behind her ears. ‘This is Jason and Gemma. They’re going to Alicante.’

‘We hope,’ said the mother wearily. The gadget made a small beeping noise, having analysed the glucose levels of the woman’s blood.

‘These people have been here since two p.m.,’ explained Beatrice. ‘They’re stressed out.’

‘Never again,’ muttered the woman as she rummaged in a travel pouch for her insulin injections. ‘I swear. They take your money and they don’t give a shit.’

‘Joanne, this is my husband Peter. Peter, this is Joanne.’

Joanne nodded in greeting but was too bound up in her misfortune to make small talk. ‘It all looks dead cheap on the brochure,’ she remarked bitterly, ‘but you pay for it in grief.’

‘Oh, don’t be like that, Joanne,’ counselled Beatrice. ‘You’ll have a lovely time. Nothing bad has actually happened. Just think: if the plane had been scheduled to leave eight hours later, you would’ve

been doing the same thing as you're doing now – waiting, except at home.'

'These two should be in bed,' grumbled the woman, baring a roll of abdominal flesh and sticking the needle in.

Jason and Gemma, righteously offended by the allegation that they were sleepy rather than maltreated, looked poised for a fresh set of tantrums. Beatrice got on her hands and knees again. 'I think I've lost my feet,' she said, peering nearsightedly around the floor. 'Where have they gone?' 'They're here!' cried little Jason, as she turned away from him. 'Where?' she said, spinning back.

'Thank God,' said Joanne. 'Here comes Freddie with the food.'

A hassled-looking fellow with no chin and a porridge-coloured windcheater lumbered into view, several paper bags clutched in each hand.

'World's biggest rip-off,' he announced. 'They keep you standing there with your little voucher for two quid or whatever. It's like the dole office. I tell you, in another half an hour, if this lot don't bloody well –'

'Freddie,' said Beatrice brightly, 'this is my husband, Peter.'

The man put down his packages and shook Peter's hand.

'Your wife's a bit of an angel, Pete. Is she always taking pity on waifs and strays?'

'We . . . we both believe in being friendly,' said Peter. 'It costs nothing and it makes life more interesting.'

'When are we gonna see the sea?' said Gemma, and yawned.

'Tomorrow, when you wake up,' said the mother.

'Will the nice lady be there?'

'No, she's going to America.'

Beatrice motioned the little girl to come and sit against her hip. The toddler had already dropped off to sleep, sprawled against a

canvas backpack filled to bursting point. 'Wires slightly crossed,' said Beatrice. 'It's my husband who's going, not me.'

'You stay home with the kids, huh?'

'We don't have any,' said Beatrice. 'Yet.'

'Do yourselves a favour,' sighed the man. 'Don't. Just skip it.'

'Oh, you don't mean that,' said Beatrice. And Peter, seeing that the man was about to make an off-hand retort, added: 'Not *really*.'

And so the conversation went on. Beatrice and Peter got into rhythm, perfectly united in purpose. They'd done this hundreds of times before. Conversation, genuine unforced conversation, but with the potential to become something much more significant if the moment arose when it was right to mention Jesus. Maybe that moment would come; maybe it wouldn't. Maybe they would just say 'God bless you' in parting and that would be it. Not every encounter could be transformative. Some conversations were just amiable exchanges of breath.

Coaxed into this exchange, the two strangers relaxed despite themselves. Within minutes they were even laughing. They were from Merton, they had diabetes and depression respectively, they both worked in a hardware superstore, they'd saved up for this holiday for a year. They were none too bright and not very fascinating. The woman had an unattractive snort and the man stank terribly of musk aftershave. They were human beings, and precious in the eyes of God.

'My plane is about to board,' said Peter at last.

Beatrice was still on the floor, the head of a stranger's child lolling on her thigh. Her eyes were glassy with tears.

'If I come with you to Security,' she said, 'and hold you when you're about to go through, I won't be able to cope, I swear. I'll lose it, I'll cause a scene. So kiss me goodbye here.'

Peter felt as if his heart was being cleaved in half. What had

seemed like a grand adventure in the prayer room now bereaved him like a sacrifice. He clung to the words of the Apostle: *Do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.*

He bent down and Beatrice gave him a quick, rough kiss on the lips, clasping the back of his head with one hand as she did so. He straightened up, dazed. This whole scenario with the strangers – she'd engineered it to happen, he could see that now.

'I'll write,' he promised.

She nodded, and the motion shook the tears out onto her cheeks.

He walked briskly to Departures. Forty minutes later he was up in the sky.

2

He would never see other humans the same way again

The USIC chauffeur emerged from the gas station with a bottle of Tang and a spotless, supernaturally yellow banana. Dazzled by the sun, he scanned the forecourt for his tanked-up limousine and its precious foreign cargo. That cargo was Peter, who was using this fuel stop to stretch his legs and attempt one last call.

‘Excuse me,’ said Peter. ‘Can you help me with this phone?’

The man seemed flummoxed by this request, jerking his hands around to indicate that they were both full. In his dark blue suit, complete with tie, he was overdressed for the Florida heat, and was still suffering some residual stress from the plane’s delayed arrival. It was almost as if he held Peter personally responsible for the turbulent atmospheric conditions over the North Atlantic ocean.

‘What’s the problem with it?’ he said, as he balanced the drink and the banana on the sun-blazed surface of the limousine’s roof.

‘Probably nothing,’ said Peter, squinting down at the gadget in his palm. ‘I probably don’t know how to use it properly.’

That was true. He wasn’t good with gadgets, and used a phone only when circumstances forced him to; the rest of the time it would hibernate in his clothing, eventually becoming obsolete. Every year or so, Beatrice would tell him what his new number was, or what her new number was, because yet another service

provider had become too frustrating to deal with or had gone bust. Businesses were going bust with alarming frequency these days; Bea kept up with stuff like that, Peter didn't. All he knew was that memorising two new telephone numbers every year was not easy for him, despite his ability to memorise long passages of Scripture. And his unease with technology was such that if he pressed the gadget's call symbol and nothing happened – as he'd just done, here in the blinding limbo of Florida – he couldn't imagine what to do next.

The chauffeur was keen to resume the drive: there was still a long way to go. Biting off a mouthful of banana, he took hold of Peter's phone and examined it mistrustfully.

'Has this got the right kinda card in it?' he mumbled as he chewed. 'For calling . . . ah . . . England?'

'I think so,' said Peter. 'I believe so.'

The chauffeur handed it back, non-committal. 'Looks like a healthy cellphone to me.'

Peter stepped under the shade of a metal canopy that overhung the fuel pumps. He tried once more to tap the correct sequence of symbols. This time, he was rewarded with a staccato melody: the international code followed by Bea's number. He held the metal lozenge to his ear and stared out at the unfamiliarly blue sky and the sculpted trees surrounding the truckstop.

'Hello?'

'It's me,' he said.

' . . . ello?'

'Can you hear me?' he said.

' . . . hear you . . . ' said Bea. Her voice was enveloped in a blizzard of static. Random words jumped out of the phone's tiny amplifier like stray sparks.

'I'm in Florida,' he said.

‘ . . . middle . . . night,’ she answered.

‘I’m sorry. Did I wake you?’

‘ . . . love you . . . how are . . . know what . . . ?’

‘I’m safe and sound,’ he said. Sweat was making the phone slippery in his fingers. ‘Sorry to be calling you now but I may not get another chance later. The plane was delayed and we’re in a big hurry.’

‘ . . . e . . . o . . . in the . . . me . . . guy know anything about . . . ?’

He walked further away from the vehicle, leaving the shade of the metal canopy. ‘This guy knows nothing about anything,’ he murmured, trusting that his words were being transmitted more clearly to her than hers were to him. ‘I’m not even sure if he works for USIC.’

‘ . . . haven’t ask . . . ?’

‘No, I haven’t asked yet. I will.’ He felt a bit sheepish. He’d spent twenty, thirty minutes in the car with this chauffeur already and hadn’t even established if he was an actual USIC employee or just a driver for hire. All he’d learned so far was that the photo of the little girl on the dashboard was the driver’s daughter, that the driver was newly divorced from the little girl’s mother, and that the mother’s mom was an attorney who was working hard to make the driver regret the day he was born. ‘It’s all very . . . hectic at the moment. And I didn’t sleep on the flight. I’ll write to you when I’m . . . you know, when I get to the other end. Then I’ll have plenty of time and I’ll put you in the picture. It’ll be just like we’re travelling together.’

There was a rush of static and he wasn’t sure if she had fallen silent or if her words were being swallowed up. He raised his voice: ‘How’s Joshua?’

‘ . . . first few . . . he just . . . o . . . ink . . . side . . . ’

'I'm sorry, you're breaking up. And this guy wants me to stop talking. I have to go. I love you. I wish . . . I love you.'

' . . . you too . . . '

And she was gone.

'That your wife?' said the driver when Peter had settled back into the vehicle and they were pulling out of the truckstop.

Actually, no, Peter felt like saying, that was not my wife, that was a bunch of disassembled electronic noises coming out of a small metal device.

'Yes,' he said. His almost obsessional preference for face-to-face communication was too difficult to explain to a stranger. Even Beatrice had trouble understanding it sometimes.

'And your kid's called Joshua?' The driver seemed unconcerned by any social taboo against eavesdropping.

'Joshua's our cat,' said Peter. 'We don't have children.'

'Saves a lot of drama,' said the driver.

'You're the second person in two days who's told me that. But I'm sure you love your daughter.'

'No choice!' The driver waved one hand towards the windscreen, to indicate the whole world of experience, destiny, whatever. 'What does your wife do?'

'She's a nurse.'

'That's a good job. Better than an attorney anyways. Making people's lives better instead of making them worse.'

'Well, I hope being a minister achieves the same thing.'

'Sure,' said the driver breezily. He didn't sound sure at all.

'And what about you?' said Peter. 'Are you a USIC . . . uh . . . staff member, or do they just hire you for taxi jobs?'

'Been a driver for USIC for nine, ten years,' said the chauffeur. 'Goods, mainly. Academics sometimes. USIC holds a lot of conferences. And then every now and then, there's an astronaut.'

Peter nodded. For a second he imagined the driver picking up an astronaut from Orlando Airport, pictured a square-jawed hulk in a bulbous space suit lumbering through the arrivals hall towards the placard-wielding chauffeur. Then he twigged.

‘I’ve never thought of myself as an astronaut,’ he said.

‘It’s an old-fashioned word,’ conceded the chauffeur. ‘I use it out of respect for tradition, I guess. The world changes too fast. You take your eyes off something that’s always been there, and the next minute it’s just a memory.’

Peter looked out the window. The motorway looked much the same as a motorway in the UK, but there were giant metal signs informing him that splendid attractions like the Econlockhatchee River and the Hal Scott Regional Nature Preserve were somewhere nearby, hidden beyond the windbreaks. Stylised illustrations on billboards evoked the joys of camping and horseback riding.

‘One of the good things about USIC,’ said the driver, ‘is that they have some respect for tradition. Or maybe they just recognise the value of a brand. They bought Cape Canaveral, you know that? They own the whole place. Must have cost them a fortune, and they could’ve built their launch site somewhere else, there’s so much real estate up for grabs these days. But they wanted Cape Canaveral. I call that class.’

Peter made a vague noise of agreement. The classiness – or otherwise – of multinational corporations was not a subject on which he had strong opinions. One of the few things he knew about USIC was that it owned lots of formerly defunct factories in formerly destitute towns in sloughed-off parts of the former Soviet Union. He somehow doubted that ‘classy’ was the right word for what went on there. As for Cape Canaveral, the history of space travel had never been of the slightest interest to him, even as a kid. He’d not even noticed that NASA had ceased to exist. It

was the sort of nugget of useless information that Beatrice was liable to unearth while reading the newspapers that would later be put underneath Joshua's food bowls.

He missed Joshua already. Beatrice often left for work at dawn, when Joshua was still fast asleep on the bed. Even if he stirred and miaowed, she would hurry off and say, 'Daddy will feed you.' And sure enough, an hour or two later, Peter would be sitting in the kitchen, munching sweet cereal, while Joshua munched savoury cereal on the floor nearby. Then Joshua would jump on the kitchen table and lick the milk dregs from Peter's bowl. Not something he was allowed to do when Mummy was around.

'The training is tough, am I right?' said the chauffeur.

Peter sensed he was expected to tell stories of military-style exercise regimens, Olympic tests of endurance. He had no such tales to tell. 'There's a physical,' he conceded. 'But most of the screening is . . . questions.'

'Yeah?' said the driver. A few moments later, he switched on the car radio. '. . . continues in Pakistan,' an earnest voice began, 'as anti-government forces . . .' The chauffeur switched to a music station, and the vintage sounds of *A Flock of Seagulls* warbled out.

Peter leaned back and recalled some of the questions in his screening interviews. These sessions, held in a boardroom on the tenth floor of a swanky London hotel, had gone on for hours at a time. One American woman was a constant presence: an elegant, tiny anorexic, who carried herself like a famous choreographer or retired ballet dancer. Bright-eyed and nasal-voiced, she nursed glass mugs of decaffeinated coffee as she worked, aided by a changeable team of other interrogators. Interrogators was the wrong word, perhaps, since everyone was friendly and there was an odd sense that they were rooting for him to succeed.

'How long can you go without your favourite ice-cream?'

‘I don’t have a favourite ice-cream.’

‘What smell reminds you most of your childhood?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe custard.’

‘Do you like custard?’

‘It’s OK. These days I mainly have it on Christmas pudding.’

‘What do you think of when you think of Christmas?’

‘Christ’s Mass, a celebration of Jesus’s birth, held at the time of the Roman winter solstice. John Chrysostom. Syncretism. Santa Claus. Snow.’

‘Do you celebrate it yourself?’

‘We make a big deal of it in our church. We organise presents for disadvantaged children, put on Christmas dinner at our drop-in centre . . . A lot of people feel horribly lost and depressed at that time of year. You have to try to get them through it.’

‘How well do you sleep in beds that aren’t your own?’

He’d had to think about that one. Cast his mind back to the cheap hotels he and Bea had stayed in when they’d participated in evangelist rallies in other cities. The friends’ sofas that converted into mattresses of a kind. Or, further back still in his life, the tough choice between keeping your coat on so you’d shiver less, or using it as a pillow to soften the concrete against your skull. ‘I’m probably . . . average,’ he said. ‘As long as it’s a bed and I’m horizontal, I think I’m fine.’

‘Are you irritable before your first coffee of the day?’

‘I don’t drink coffee.’

‘Tea?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Sometimes you’re irritable?’

‘I don’t get annoyed easily.’ This was true, and these interrogations provided additional proof. He enjoyed the sparring, felt he was being tested rather than judged. The rapid-fire questions were

an invigorating change from church services where he was expected to orate for an hour while others sat silent. He wanted the job, wanted it badly, but the outcome was in God's hands, and there was nothing to be gained by getting anxious, giving dishonest answers or straining to please. He would be himself, and hope that that was enough.

'How would you feel about wearing sandals?'

'Why, will I have to?'

'You might.' This from a man whose feet were sheathed in expensive black leather shoes so shiny that Peter's face was reflected in them.

'How do you feel if you haven't accessed social media for a day?'

'I don't access social media. At least I don't think so. What do you mean exactly by "social media"?''

'It's OK.' Whenever a question got tangled, they tended to change tack. 'Which politician do you hate most?'

'I don't hate anyone. And I don't really follow politics.'

'It's nine o'clock at night and the power fails. What do you do?'

'Fix it, if I can.'

'But how would you spend the time if you couldn't?'

'Talk to my wife, if she was at home at the time.'

'How do you think she'll cope if *you're* away from home for a while?'

'She's a very independent and capable woman.'

'Would you say you're an independent and capable man?'

'I hope so.'

'When did you last get drunk?'

'About seven, eight years ago.'

'Do you feel like a drink now?'

'I wouldn't mind some more of this peach juice.'

'With ice?'

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Imagine this,’ the woman said. ‘You visit a foreign city and your hosts invite you out for dinner. The restaurant they take you to is pleasant and lively. There’s a large transparent enclosure of cute white ducklings running around behind their mother. Every few minutes, a chef grabs one of the ducklings and tosses it into a vat of boiling oil. When it’s fried, it gets served up to the diners and everyone is happy and relaxed. Your hosts order duckling and say you should try it, it’s fantastic. What do you do?’

‘Is there anything else on the menu?’

‘Sure, lots of things.’

‘Then I’d order something else.’

‘You could still sit there and eat?’

‘It would depend on what I was doing in these people’s company in the first place.’

‘What if you disapproved of them?’

‘I’d try to steer the conversation towards the things I disapproved of, and then I’d be honest about what I thought was wrong.’

‘You don’t have a problem specifically with the duckling thing?’

‘Humans eat all sorts of animals. They slaughter pigs, who are much more intelligent than birds.’

‘So if an animal is dumb it’s OK to kill it?’

‘I’m not a butcher. Or a chef. I’ve chosen to do something else with my life. That’s a choice against killing, if you like.’

‘But what about the ducklings?’

‘What *about* the ducklings?’

‘You wouldn’t feel compelled to save them? For example, would you consider smashing the glass enclosure, so they could escape?’

‘Instinctively, I might. But it probably wouldn’t do those ducklings any good. If I was really haunted by what I saw in that restaurant, I suppose I could devote my whole life to

re-educating the people in that society so they would kill the ducks more humanely. But I would rather devote my life to something that might persuade human beings to treat *each other* more humanely. Because human beings suffer so much more than ducks.'

'You might not think so if you were a duck.'

'I don't think I would think much about *anything* if I were a duck. It's higher consciousness that causes all our griefs and tortures, don't you think?'

'Would you step on a cricket?' interjected one of the other questioners.

'No.'

'A cockroach?'

'Maybe.'

'You're not a Buddhist, then.'

'I never claimed to be a Buddhist.'

'You wouldn't say that all life is sacred?'

'It's a beautiful concept, but every time I wash, I kill microscopic creatures that were hoping to live on me.'

'So where's the dividing line for you?' the woman rejoined. 'Dogs? Horses? What if the restaurant was frying live kittens?'

'Let *me* ask *you* a question,' he said. 'Are you sending me to a place where people are doing terrible, cruel things to other creatures?'

'Of course not.'

'Then why ask me these sorts of questions?'

'OK, how about this one: Your cruise ship has sunk, and now you're stuck in a life raft with an extremely irritating man who also happens to be homosexual . . . '

And so it went on. For days and days. So long, in fact, that Bea lost patience and began to wonder if he should tell USIC

that his time was too precious to waste on any more of these charades.

‘No, they want me,’ he’d reassured her. ‘I can tell.’

Now, on a balmy morning in Florida, having earned the corporation’s stamp of approval, Peter turned to face the driver and posed the question to which, in all these months, he hadn’t been given a straight answer.

‘What *is* USIC, exactly?’

The driver shrugged. ‘These days, the bigger the company, the less you can figure out what it does. Time was when a car company made cars, a mining company dug mines. It’s not like that anymore. You ask USIC what they specialise in and they tell you things like . . . Logistics. Human resources. Large-scale project development.’ The driver sucked the last of the Tang through a straw, making an ugly gurgling sound.

‘But where does all the money come from?’ said Peter. ‘They’re not funded by the government.’

The driver frowned, distracted. He needed to make sure his vehicle was in the correct lane. ‘Investments.’

‘Investments in what?’

‘Lots of things.’

Peter shielded his eyes with one hand; the glare was giving him a headache. He recalled that he’d asked the same question of his USIC interrogators, at one of the early interviews when Beatrice was still sitting in.

‘We invest in *people*,’ the elegant female had replied, shaking her artfully clipped grey mane, laying her scrawny, delicate hands on the table.

‘All corporations say that,’ Beatrice remarked, a bit rudely he thought.

‘Well, we really mean it,’ said the older woman. Her grey eyes were sincere and animated by intelligence. ‘Nothing can be achieved without people. Individuals, unique individuals with very special skills.’ She turned to Peter. ‘That’s why we’re talking to you.’

He’d smiled at the cleverness of this phrasing: it could function as flattery – they were talking to him because it was obvious he was one of these special people – or it could be a preamble to rejection – they were talking to him to maintain the high standards that would, in the end, disqualify him. One thing was for sure: the hints that he and Bea dropped about what a fine team they’d make if they could go on this mission together fell like cookie crumbs and disappeared into the carpet.

‘One of us needs to stay and look after Joshua, anyway,’ said Bea when they discussed it afterwards. ‘It would be cruel to leave him for so long. And there’s the church. And the house, the expenses; I need to keep working.’ All valid concerns – although an advance payment from USIC, even a small fraction of the full sum, would have covered an awful lot of cat food, neighbourly visits and heating bills. ‘It just would have been nice to be invited, that’s all.’

Yes, it would have been nice. But they were not blind to good fortune when it was offered. Peter had been chosen, from among many others who were not.

‘So,’ he said to the driver, ‘how did *you* first get involved with USIC?’

‘Bank foreclosed on our house.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Bank foreclosed on just about every damn house in Gary. Repossessed them, couldn’t sell them, let them fall apart and rot. But USIC made us a deal. They took on the debt, we got to keep the house, and in exchange we worked for them, for like, grocery

money. Some of my old pals called it slavery. I call it . . . humanitarian. And those old pals of mine, they're in trailer parks now. And here's me, driving a limousine.'

Peter nodded. He'd already forgotten the name of the place where this guy was from, and he had only the vaguest grasp on the current health of the American economy, but he understood very well what it meant to be thrown a lifeline.

The limousine cruised gently to the right and was cloaked in cooling shade from the pine trees on the verge. A wooden road sign – the sort that normally advertised campsites, roadside grills or log-house holidays – announced an imminent turn-off for USIC.

'You go to any sinking city in the country,' continued the driver, 'and you'll find lots of people in the same boat. They may tell you they're working for this or that company, but scratch underneath, and they're working for USIC.'

'I don't even know what the letters in "USIC" stand for,' said Peter.

'Search me,' said the driver. 'A lot of companies these days got meaningless names. All the meaningful names have been taken. It's a trademark thing.'

'I assume the US part means United States.'

'I guess. They're multinational, though. Somebody even told me they started up in Africa. All I know is, they're good to work for. Never screwed me around. You'll be in good hands.'

Into thy hands I commend my spirit, Peter naturally thought. *Luke 23:46*, fulfilling the prophesy of *Psalms 31:5*. Except that it wasn't clear into whose hands he was about to be delivered.

'This will sting some,' said the black woman in the white lab coat. 'In fact, it will be real unpleasant. You'll feel like a pint of cold yoghurt is travelling up your veins.'

‘Gee, thanks. I can hardly wait.’ He settled his head uneasily in the padded polystyrene hollow of his coffin-like crib and tried not to look at the spike that was approaching his tourniquetted arm.

‘We wouldn’t want you to think there was anything wrong, that’s all.’

‘If I die, please tell my – ’

‘You won’t die. Not with this stuff inside you. Just relax and think nice thoughts.’

The cannula was in his vein; the IV drip was activated; the translucent substance moved into him. He thought he might vomit from the sheer ghastliness of it. They ought to have given him a sedative or something. He wondered if his three fellow travellers were braver than him. They were nestled in identical cribs, elsewhere in the building, but he couldn’t see them. He would meet them in a month from now, when he woke up.

The woman who had administered the infusion stood calmly watching over him. Without warning – but how could there be any warning? – her lipsticked mouth started to drift to the left of her face, the lips travelling across the flesh of her cheek like a tiny red canoe. The mouth did not stop until it reached her forehead, where it came to rest above her eyebrows. Then her eyes, complete with eyelids and lashes, moved down towards her jawline, blinking normally as they relocated.

‘Don’t fight it, just go with it,’ the mouth on the forehead advised. ‘It’s temporary.’

He was too frightened to speak. This was no hallucination. This was what happened to the universe when you were no longer able to hold it together. Atoms in clusters, rays of light, forming ephemeral shapes before moving on. His greatest fear, as he dissolved into the dark, was that he would never see other humans the same way again.

3

The grand adventure could surely wait

‘Man, man, *man*.’ A deep, rueful voice from the formless void. ‘That shit is one bad, *bad* motherfucker.’

‘Mind your language, BG. We got a religious person here with us.’

‘Well, ain’t *that* a lick on the dick. Gimme a hand outta this coffin, man.’

A third voice: ‘Me too. Me first.’

‘You’ll regret it, children.’ (This said with sing-song condescension.) ‘But OK.’ And there was a rustling and a grunting and a gasping and a muttering of hard labour.

Peter opened his eyes, but was too nauseous to turn his head towards the voices. The ceilings and walls seemed to be convulsing; the lights yo-yo’d. It was as though the solid framework of the room had turned elastic, walls billowing, ceiling flailing around. He shut his eyes against the delirium, but that was worse: the convulsions continued inside his skull, as though his eyeballs were inflating like balloons, as though the pulpy insides of his face might, any moment, squirt out through his nostrils. He imagined he could feel his brain filling up with – or being drained of – some vile, caustic liquor.

From elsewhere in the cabin, the grunting and scuffling went on, accompanied by deranged laughter.

‘You know, it’s pretty entertaining,’ remarked the mocking, sober voice, removed from the other two, ‘watching you guys flopping around on the floor like a couple of sprayed bugs.’

‘Hey, no fair! Damn system should wake us all up at the same time. Then we’d see who’s most fit.’

‘Well . . . ’ (The superior voice again.) ‘Somebody has to be first, I guess. To make the coffee and check that everything’s working.’

‘So go check, Tuska, and leave me and BG to slug it out for second place.’

‘Suit yourselves.’ Footsteps. A door opening. ‘You think you’ll have privacy? Dream on, people. I can watch you squirming around on the surveillance cameras. Smile!’

The door clicked shut.

‘Thinks the sun shines out of his ass,’ muttered a voice from the floor.

‘That’s ’cause you’re always kissin’ it, man.’

Peter lay still, gathering his strength. Intuitively he understood that his body would settle back to normal in its own good time, and that there was nothing gained in trying to function too soon, unless you were the competitive type. The two men on the floor continued to grunt and giggle and heave themselves about, in defiance of the chemicals that had allowed them to survive the Jump.

‘You gonna be the first one standing or am I?’

‘I’m up already, bro . . . see?’

‘You’re so full of shit, man. That ain’t standing, that’s leaning. Let go the bench.’

Sound of a body falling to the floor; more laughter.

‘See *you* do better, bro . . . ’

‘Easy.’

Sound of another body falling to the floor; dopey hysterics.

‘Forgot how bad it was, man.’

‘Nothing a half dozen cans of Coke won’t fix.’

‘Fuck that, man. A *line* of coke and you’re talkin’.’

‘If you want more drugs after this, you must be dumber than I thought.’

‘Just stronger, bro, just stronger.’

And so it went on. The two men sparred with each other, expelling bravado into the atmosphere, bidding for time, until they were both on their feet. They grunted and panted as they rummaged in plastic bags, mocked each other’s taste in clothing, put on shoes, tested their bipedalism by walking around. Peter lay in his crib, breathing shallowly, waiting for the room to stop moving. The ceiling had calmed down, at least.

‘Yo, bro.’

A large face loomed into his range of view. For a second, Peter couldn’t recognise it as human: it seemed to be attached to the neck upside-down, with eyebrows on the chin and a beard at the top. But no: it was human, of course it was human, just very different from his own. Dark brown skin, a shapeless nose, small ears, beautiful brown eyes tinged with red. Neck muscles that could raise and lower an elevator in a twenty-storey shaft. And those eyebrow-like things on the chin? A beard. Not a full, furry beard, but one of those finely-sculpted fashion statements you could buy from a fancy barber. Years ago, it must have looked like a neat line drawn with a black felt-tip marker, but the man was middle-aged now, and the beard was patchy and speckled with grey. Advancing baldness had left him with just a few knobs of frizz on his head.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ croaked Peter. ‘I’m Peter.’

‘BG, bro,’ said the black man, extending a hand. ‘You want I pull you outta there?’

‘I . . . I might prefer to lie here a bit longer.’

‘Don’t wait too long, bro,’ said BG, with a radiant white grin. ‘You shit your pants, and it’s a small ship.’

Peter smiled, unsure of whether BG meant this as a warning of what might happen or as an observation of what had already happened. The viscose swaddling of the crib felt damp and heavy, but it had felt that way even when the woman in the lab coat first wrapped him in it.

Another face swung into view. Sunburnt white, fiftyish, with thinning grey hair cut to a military bristle. Eyes as bloodshot as BG’s, but blue and full of painful childhood and messy divorce and violent upheavals in employment.

‘Severin,’ he said.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Artie Severin. We gotta get you out of there, pal. Sooner you start drinking, sooner you’ll feel like a human being.’

BG and Severin lifted him out of the crib as though they were extracting a newly purchased piece of equipment from its box: not exactly gently, but with sufficient care not to tear or break anything. His feet barely touched the floor as they carried him out of the room, down a short corridor and into a bathroom. There they stripped him of the gauzy loincloth he’d worn for the last month, sprayed him with blue foam from neck to ankles, and wiped him down with paper towels. A large transparent plastic waste bag got filled halfway to the top with blue and brown muck before they were finished.

‘Is there a shower?’ he asked, when it was over and he still felt sticky. ‘I mean, with water?’

‘Water is *gold*, bro,’ said BG. ‘Every drop we got, goes into here.’ He tapped his throat. ‘It don’t do nobody no good out *there*.’ And he nodded towards the wall, the outer shell of the ship, the

barrier between them and the vast airless emptiness in which they were suspended.

‘Sorry,’ said Peter. ‘That was naïve of me.’

‘Naïve’s not a problem,’ said BG. ‘We all gotta ride the learning curve. I done this trip once before. First time I didn’t know shit.’

‘You’ll have all the water you want when we get to Oasis,’ said Severin. ‘Right now, you’d better drink some.’

Peter was handed a plastic bottle with a resealable nipple. He took a big swig and, ten seconds later, fainted.

His recovery from the Jump took him longer than he would have liked. He would have liked to spring up like a momentarily winded boxer, and impress the other men. But the other men shook off the effects of the Jump rapidly and got busy doing whatever it was that they were doing, while he lolled helpless in a bunk, occasionally managing a sip of water. Before take-off he’d been warned that he would feel as though he’d been disassembled and put back together again, which was not exactly how the Jump worked, scientifically speaking, but was indeed the way it felt.

He spent the afternoon . . . well, no, those words made no sense, did they? There was no such thing as afternoon, morning or night here. In the darkened room where BG and Severin had stowed him after cleaning him up, he woke occasionally from his woozy slumber and looked at his watch. The numbers were only symbols. Real time would not resume until he had ground underfoot, and there was a sun rising and setting.

Once he got to Oasis, there would be facilities for sending a message to Beatrice. ‘I’ll write to you every day,’ he’d promised. ‘Every single day, if God allows me.’ He tried to imagine what she might be doing at this moment, how she might be dressed, whether she would have her hair pinned up or hanging loose over her

shoulders. That was what his watch was for, he realised: not to tell him anything useful about his own situation, but to allow him to imagine Beatrice existing in the same reality as himself.

He looked at his watch again. In England, it was 2.43 in the morning. Beatrice would be asleep, with Joshua stretched opportunistically on his side of the bed, legs spread. Joshua, that is, not Beatrice. She would be on her left side, one arm dangling over the edge, the other thrown up, elbow covering her ear, fingers so close to his pillow that he could kiss them from where he lay. Not now, of course.

Maybe Beatrice was awake. Maybe she was worrying about him. A month had passed without contact between them, and they were used to communicating every day.

‘What if my husband dies en route?’ she’d asked the USIC people.

‘He will not die en route,’ was the reply.

‘But what if he does?’

‘We would let you know immediately. In other words, no news is good news.’

Good news it was, then. But still . . . Bea had spent these last thirty days conscious of his absence, while he’d been oblivious to hers.

He pictured their bedroom, lit in subdued tones by the bedside lamp; he pictured Bea’s pale blue uniform slung over the chair, the jumble of shoes on the floor, the yellow duvet with Joshua’s fur all over it. Beatrice sitting up against the headboard, bare-legged but with a sweater on, reading and re-reading the uninformative info pack sent by USIC.

‘USIC cannot and does not guarantee the safety of any travellers on its craft or domiciled in its facilities or in the pursuit of any activities related to, or not related to, USIC activities. “Safety” is defined as health both physical and mental and includes, but is not

restricted to, survival and/or return from Oasis, either within the time period specified by this agreement or beyond that period. USIC undertakes to minimise risk to any persons participating in its projects but signature of this document is deemed to constitute acknowledgement of understanding that USIC's efforts in this regard (i.e., minimising risk) are subject to circumstances beyond USIC's control. These circumstances, because unforeseen and unprecedented, cannot be detailed in advance of occurrence. They may include, but are not restricted to, disease, accident, mechanical failure, adverse weather, and any other events commonly categorised as Acts of God.'

The door of the dormitory cell swung open, silhouetting the massive body of BG.

'Yo, bro.'

'Hi.' In Peter's experience, it was better to speak in one's own idiom than echo the idioms and accents of others. Rastafarians and cockney Pakistanis did not come to Christ through being patronised by evangelists making clownish attempts to talk like them, so there was no reason to suppose that black Americans might.

'You wanna eat with us, you better get yourself out of bed, bro.'

'Sounds fine to me,' said Peter, swinging his legs out of the bunk. 'I think I'm up for it.'

BG's massive arms were poised to lend assistance. 'Noodles,' he said. 'Beef noodles.'

'Sounds just fine.' Still barefoot, dressed only in underpants and an unbuttoned shirt, Peter waddled out of the room. It was like being six again, when he was spaced out on liquid paracetamol and his mother fetched him out of bed to celebrate his birthday. The prospect of opening presents was not sufficiently adrenalising to dispel the effects of chickenpox.

BG led him into a corridor whose walls were papered with

floor-to-ceiling colour photographs of green meadows, the kind of adhesive enlargements he was more accustomed to seeing on the sides of buses. Some thoughtful designer must have decided that a vista of grass, spring flowers and an azure sky was just the thing to combat the claustrophobia of airless space.

‘You ain’t a vegetarian, are you, bro?’

‘Uh . . . no,’ said Peter.

‘Well, I am,’ declared BG, steering him round a corner, where the verdant if slightly blurry scenery was repeated. ‘But one thing you learn when you go on a trip like this, man, is you gotta relax your principles sometimes.’

Dinner was served in the control room; that is, the room that contained the piloting and navigation hardware. Contrary to Peter’s expectations, he was not met with a breathtaking sight when he stepped inside. There was no giant window facing out onto a vast expanse of space, stars and nebulae. There was no window at all; no central focus of attention, just reinforced plastic walls punctuated by air conditioning vents, light switches, humidity adjustors, and a couple of laminated posters. Peter had seen the imagery before, on the USIC pamphlets when he’d first applied for this vacancy. The posters were glossy corporate productions, depicting a stylised ship, a stylised bird with a stylised twig in its beak, and a small amount of text extolling USIC’s high standards of business practice and unlimited potentials to benefit mankind.

The ship’s controls were also less impressive than Peter had imagined: no giant rig of knobs and dials and meters and flashing lights, just a few compact keyboards, slimline monitors and one freestanding computer cabinet that resembled a snack dispenser or automatic bankteller machine. In all honesty, the control room was less a ship’s bridge than an office – a somewhat pokey office, at

that. There was nothing here to do justice to the fact that they were floating in a foreign solar system, trillions of miles from home.

Tuska the pilot had swivelled his chair away from the monitors and was staring into a small plastic tub held up near his face. Steam obscured his features. His legs, crossed casually over one another, were bare and hairy, clad only in oversize shorts and tennis shoes without socks.

‘Welcome back to the land of the living,’ he said, lowering the tub to rest against his rotund belly. ‘Sleep well?’

‘I don’t know if I was sleeping, really,’ said Peter. ‘More just waiting to feel human again.’

‘Takes a while,’ conceded Tuska, and raised the noodle tub to his face again. He had a mouse-coloured beard, and was obviously well-practised in the logistics of conveying sloppy food past the hazards of facial hair. He twirled some noodles round his fork and closed his neat red lips over them.

‘Here’s yours, Pete,’ said Severin. ‘I’ve torn the foil off for you.’

‘That’s very kind,’ said Peter, taking his seat at a black plastic table, where BG and Severin were tucking into their own noodle tubs with their own plastic forks. Three unopened cans of Coke stood ready. Peter shut his eyes, recited a silent prayer of thanks for what he was about to receive.

‘You’re a Christian, right?’ said BG.

‘Right,’ said Peter. The beef noodle stew had been cooked unevenly in the microwave: some parts were bubbling hot, other parts were still ever-so-slightly crunchy with ice. He stirred them into a warm compromise.

‘I used to be Nation of Islam, long time ago,’ said BG. ‘Got me through some tough times. But it’s high maintenance, man. Can’t do this, can’t do that.’ BG opened his considerable mouth and

forked a quivering freight of noodles in, chewed three times, swallowed. ‘Ya gotta hate Jews and white people, too. They say it’s not mandatory and all that shit. But you get the message, man. Loud and clear.’ Another mouthful of noodles. ‘I make my own decisions who I’m gonna hate, know what I’m saying? Somebody fucks with me, I hate ’em – they can be white, black, aquamareeeen, man; don’t make no difference to me.’

‘I suppose what you’re saying, also,’ said Peter, ‘is that you make your own decisions about who you’ll love.’

‘Damn right. White pussy, black pussy, it’s all good.’

Tuska snorted. ‘You’re making a fine impression on our minister, I’m sure.’ He’d finished his meal and was wiping his face and beard with a towelette.

‘I’m not that easy to scandalise,’ said Peter. ‘Not with words, anyway. The world has room for lots of different ways of talking.’

‘We’re not in the world now,’ said Severin with a lugubrious grin. He cracked open a can of Coke and a frothing jet of brown liquid sprayed up towards the ceiling.

‘Jee-sus,’ exclaimed Tuska, falling half off his chair. BG just chuckled.

‘I’ll take care of it, I’ll take care of it,’ said Severin, snatching a handful of paper towels from a dispenser. Peter helped him mop the sticky liquid from the tabletop.

‘I do that every goddamn time,’ muttered Severin, dabbing at his chest, his forearm, the chairs, the coolbox from which the Cokes had come. He bent down to dab at the floor, whose carpet was fortuitously already brown.

‘How many times have you made this trip?’ asked Peter.

‘Three. Swore I wouldn’t go back each time.’

‘Why?’

‘Oasis drives people crazy.’

BG grunted. ‘You’re crazy already, bro.’

‘Mr Severin and Mr Graham are both seriously unbalanced individuals, Pete,’ said Tuska, magistrate-solemn. ‘I’ve known ’em for years. Oasis is the most suitable place for guys like them. Keeps ’em off the streets.’ He tossed his empty noodle tub into a garbage bin. ‘Also, they’re extremely good at what they do. The best. That’s why USIC keeps spending the money on ’em.’

‘What about *you*, bro?’ BG asked Peter. ‘Are you the best?’

‘The best what?’

‘The best preacher.’

‘I don’t really think of myself as a preacher.’

‘What do you think of yourself as, bro?’

Peter swallowed hard, stumped. His brain was still residually affected by the same violent forces that had shaken up the cans of Coke. He wished Beatrice was here with him, to parry the questions, change the nature of this all-male atmosphere, deflect the conversation onto more fruitful paths.

‘I’m just someone who loves people and wants to help them, whatever shape they’re in.’

Another big grin spread across BG’s massive face, as though he was about to unleash another wisecrack. Then he abruptly turned serious. ‘You really mean that? No shit?’

Peter stared him straight in the eyes. ‘No shit.’

BG nodded. Peter sensed that in the big man’s consideration, he had passed some sort of test. Reclassified. Not exactly ‘one of the boys’, but no longer an exotic animal that might be a major annoyance.

‘Hey, Severin!’ BG called. ‘I never asked you: what religion are you, man?’

‘Me? I’m nothing,’ said Severin. ‘And that’s the way it’s staying.’

Severin had finished the Coca-Cola clean-up and was wiping blue detergent gel off his fingers with paper towels.

‘Fingers are still sticky,’ he complained. ‘I’m gonna be driven crazy until I get soap and water.’

The computer cabinet started beeping gently.

‘Looks like your prayer has been answered, Severin,’ remarked Tuska, turning his attention to one of the monitors. ‘The system has just figured out where we are.’

All four men were silent as Tuska scrolled through the details. It was as though they were giving him the opportunity to check for emails or bid in an internet auction. He was, in fact, ascertaining whether they would live or die. The ship had not yet begun the piloted phase of its journey; it had merely been catapulted through time and space by the physics-defying technology of the Jump. Now they were spinning aimlessly, somewhere in the general vicinity of where they needed to be, a ship in the shape of a swollen tick: big belly of fuel, tiny head. And inside that head, four men were breathing from a limited supply of nitrogen, oxygen and argon. They were breathing faster than necessary. Unspoken, but hanging in the filtered air, was the fear that the Jump might have slung them too far wide of the mark, and that there might be insufficient fuel for the final part of the journey. A margin for error that was almost unmeasurably small at the beginning of the Jump could have grown into a fatal enormity at the other end.

Tuska studied the numbers, tickled the keyboard with nimble stubby fingers, scrolled through geometrical designs that were, in fact, maps of the unmappable.

‘Good news, people,’ he said at last. ‘Looks like practice makes perfect.’

‘Meaning?’ said Severin.

‘Meaning we should send a prayer of thanks to the tech-heads in Florida.’

‘Meaning what, exactly, for us, here?’

‘Meaning that when we divide the fuel over the distance we’ve got to travel, we’ve got *lots* of juice. We can use it up like it’s beer at a frat party.’

‘Meaning how many days, Tuska?’

‘Days?’ Tuska paused for effect. ‘Twenty-eight hours, tops.’

BG leapt to his feet and punched the air. ‘*Whooo-hoo!*’

From this moment onwards, the atmosphere in the control room was triumphal, slightly hysterical. BG paced around restlessly, pumping his arms, doing the locomotion. Severin grinned, revealing teeth discoloured by nicotine, and drummed on his knees to a tune only he could hear. To simulate the cymbal-clashes, he flicked his fist periodically into empty air and winced as though buffeted by joyful noise. Tuska went off to change his clothes – maybe because he’d got a noodle stain on his sweater, or maybe because he felt his imminent piloting duties warranted a ceremonial gesture. Freshly decked out in a crisp white shirt and grey trousers, he took his seat at the keyboard on which their trajectory to Oasis would be typed.

‘Just do it, Tuska,’ said Severin. ‘What do you want, a brass band? Cheerleaders?’

Tuska blew a kiss, then made a decisive keystroke. ‘Gentlemen and crew sluts,’ he declared, in a mockingly oratorical tone. ‘Welcome onboard the USIC shuttle service to Oasis. Please give your full attention to the safety demonstration even if you are a frequent flyer. The seatbelt is fastened and unfastened as shown. No seatbelt on your seat? Hey, live with it.’

He jabbed another key. The floor began to vibrate.

‘In the event of a loss of cabin pressure, oxygen will be provided. It will be pumped straight into the mouth of the pilot. The rest of you just hold your breath and sit tight.’ (Laughter from BG and Severin.) ‘In the event of a collision, low-level lighting will guide

you to an exit, where you will be sucked instantly to your death. Please remember that the nearest usable planet may be three billion miles behind you.'

He jabbed another key. A graph on the computer screen began to rise and fall like waves. 'This craft is equipped with one emergency escape pod: one at the front, none in the middle and none at the rear. There's room for the pilot and five really hot chicks.' (Guffaws from BG; snickering from Severin.) 'Take your high heels off, girls, before using the escape pod. Hell, take it *all* off. Blow on my tube if it fails to inflate. There is a light and a whistle for attracting attention, but don't worry, I'll get around to all of you in turn. Please consult the instruction card which shows you the position you must adopt if you hear the command "Suck, suck". We recommend you keep your head down at all times.'

He made one more keystroke, then held a fist up in the air. 'We appreciate that you had no choice of airlines today, and so we would like to thank you for choosing USIC.'

Severin and BG applauded and whooped. Peter put his hands together shyly, but made no noise with them. He hoped he could stand by unobtrusively, part of the gathering but not subject to scrutiny. It was, he knew, not a very impressive start to his mission to win the hearts and souls of an entire population. But he hoped he could be forgiven. He was far from home, his head ached and buzzed, the beef noodles sat in his stomach like a stone, he kept hallucinating that his body parts had been disassembled and put back together slightly wrong, and all he wanted to do was crawl into bed with Beatrice and Joshua and go to sleep. The grand adventure could surely wait.