



VISION

IAN ROSS

Vision

By Ian Ross

1. Cecilia's Sextant

Anthony had last walked this way, over the river and through the parks beside it, two and a half years ago. He remembered a quick route with obvious paths on which it would be difficult to get lost. However, the last time had been daytime in summer, and now, on a December evening, what little daylight there had been was long gone. Away from roads and city lights, among the squelching fen mud, the paths were not so obvious as he remembered them.

He had considered bringing a map, just to be sure, but had reluctantly left it behind. If he carried a map, people might mistake him for a tourist, which was embarrassing when you lived in a town where there were too many tourists. The map was also too bulky for the pockets of his jacket and it would look bad to have the corner poking out for everyone to see. He had left his torch because it was also too practical. Experience had taught him that excessive practicality was neither normal nor acceptable in a social environment. Tonight he was meeting new people, so he wanted to be particularly careful. First impressions are notoriously difficult to shift.

The path was ageing gravel over packed earth. Although neither it, nor the scrub grass around the bushes, quite thawed at this time of year, the surface was not hard. It was slippery with clay which would be thrown up as he walked and cling to him. The worst would come off his shoes before he reached the pub, however, if any landed on his trousers it would cling on. He was worried that the cuffs might get caked in clay and give the impression he had arrived from some ramble or hike or camping expedition. This image was definitely one he wanted to avoid. It might lead to raised eyebrows.

He reached some swings and a climbing frame beyond which, although he could not see it, he knew the Ely Lane divided the park from one of the college playing fields. Once he reached the road he would turn left towards Berkley College and his destination, the 'Cow and Feathers'. It was a favourite of the students at Berkley although, as he had had little call to visit pubs outside the town centre, he had never been inside himself.

He shivered. His jacket was too thin for this weather, but the cold was not the only reason. He was on edge and, although not scared, felt nervous in the shadows and isolation of the park. Oddly, he felt more at risk in the innocent darkness than he would have felt if some obvious danger was fully visible ahead. He was not realistically scared of assault or robbery, it was more to do with the lack of certainty about what was nearby. For instance, there might be nettles or poison ivy against which he might brush. It was probably out of season for both but then there might be something similar he did not know about. Where did snakes go in the winter?

He passed the playground whose tubular metal furniture was covered with evening rime. Not yet cold enough to have crystallised into ice or frost, it was mucky and slimy and ugly in a visceral sort of way. He felt repelled and slightly sick at the sight of it. Slime is something the animal in us seems programmed not to touch, like slugs or maggots.

The path was obstructed where a shallow puddle had frozen over during the night and broken up again during the day. He was wary of putting too much weight on the remnants of thin ice which were still floating over the suspension of clay. If he stood on them the deluging muck below might splash out and spray slurry over his feet and the cuffs of his trousers. Elaborately, and more by feel than sight, he picked his way through the dirt man-traps, hopping from foot to foot like a bridesmaid tiptoeing with lifted skirts over uneven

church flags. He had a sudden image of how foolish he must look and imagined malevolent spies in the gloom, smirking at a fourteen stone ballerina.

The fluttering of denuded branches and the freezing rush of the wind made a low background noise over which few identifiable sounds were strong enough to be autonomous. He had gone too far from the river to hear anything from it or from the pubs, hotels and college rooms which overlooked it and the squawks, squeaks and cries of animals seemed to have migrated or hibernated with them.

Anthony had lived all his life in a city and this natural white noise was unsettling. It seemed more silent than the total absence of sounds ever did. His ever grinding brain analysed the feeling and concluded that a background blur made his hearing less effective than total silence because slight sounds might be able to hide amongst it. As the weakening of his hearing made him more vulnerable, logically it might also increase his feeling of isolation.

The aural equivalent of the discomfort of being unable to see dangers in the darkness. However, he was not a psychologist or biologist and was probably missing the point.

The sound of an engine and a moving light reached him through the branches ahead and his hunched shoulders physically relaxed. With relief he emerged onto the Ely Road and urban familiarity. Once the car had gone there were still no extraneous sounds, but the quietness did not have the same abnormality as it had in the park. The background hum seemed to have subsided and any deterioration in his hearing was untroubling now that he had a fairly clear view of where he was going and no concern about where to put his feet. Released from animalistic nervousness he could worry again about his appearance and the impression he might make.

In the gloom he could not see whether his trousers were badly marked. However, it was too late to do anything about it so he

shelved the concerns in the dark racks at the back of his mind. On principle he refused to worry about insoluble problems and, having decided that there was nothing practical he could do, he would relegate them to mental obscurity. Sometimes some monster would irrationally shift in this nether-murk and his stomach would clench and his face flush or he would start from sleep sweating. Normally, however, if he ignored insoluble problems, they withered away in time.

Road lights near the college entrance focussed Anthony's view on his goal like the limelight in a darkened theatre excludes everything outside its thin tube. He resumed his consistent loping gait accompanied by its odd sideward shuffling of his lower arms, a style characteristic of the uncoordinated way in which he lumbered through his daily tasks.

Anthony did not naturally display a sportsman's grace or efficiency of movement. Although his physique and determination had given him some success as an oarsman for a time, his achievement and enjoyment was limited by a lack of technique. After two years he could no longer suppress the dread and misery which flooded into his mind in the unguarded seconds when he first woke on rowing mornings. He had welcomed the excuse to quit which finals had given him and since then he had done little exercise. Quietly, and to his indifference, an excess of flab and a lack of fitness had accreted together.

Even if he had the inclination for sports he did not now have time for any serious participation. His PhD project was moving on and he needed to spend long hours in the laboratory fabricating chemical precursors. Often he monitored his apparatus late into the night during which time, for safety reasons, he could go no further from his fume hood than the laboratory door. He had taken up reading novels and drawing to fill the time in a manner compatible with this

lifestyle. Sometimes he would sketch his apparatus or a window frame or an object left on the bench in his lab-book among his methods and results. The sketches were poor but he enjoyed the distraction and the geometry of the objects. He liked structures and patterns most.

The work was beginning to pick up pace and he had recently been obtaining large yields of high quality crystals. This success contrasted sharply with the stories he overheard from other postgraduates. Some said that the whole of the first year of their doctorate had yielded nothing useable, others that their products were impure or unstable. Many were forced to repeat the same experiments continually in the hope of producing anything to test. Most seemed depressed and demotivated by the lack of direction and progress in their work.

Anthony had not spoken much about his comparative success, despite his pride in it. His restraint was not tact so much as the necessary result of the isolation which had been forming around him since his former peer group had graduated and moved on to private research or City jobs. He had found himself, like the mute winner of a tontine of shared history, sole possessor of the scenes of his past.

Initially, he had accepted self sufficiency as compatible with a retiring nature and a respect for order and efficiency. Months later, however, he had admitted that some social interaction was necessary to keep up his self esteem and to let him release the thoughts which were circling his mind. He would also have to get to know more people for there to be any prospect of a girlfriend and he felt obliged to try to find a girlfriend. No-one was seeking him out so he concluded that it was up to him to take the initiative and actively seek out new acquaintances. Unfortunately, this had so far proved difficult.

He had turned first to the obvious peer group of new PhD students

who had come from other universities. They were, however, either not his type or foreigners whose conversation, at least in English, was limited. He had no skill or patience to engage them in any other language.

Having made no progress in that direction he had undertaken an unpleasant but frank self assessment. He was no longer a member of any university societies or clubs. The majority of students in his college were either living through a period of their lives which he had completed or already had hobbies and friends to whom they could turn. His interests did not help him to engage easily with new people and he was not charismatic in a way which attracted friends. He had no patience with small talk, knew nothing about football, music or films, was not fond of drinking and had no talent for pool or darts or dancing. As the majority of social events seemed to involve clubs, pubs, bops or sports he had been left with limited options and no great ideas.

Nonetheless, against his inclination, he was determined to persevere. Even if his work was successful, the time it took him to complete his PhD would otherwise become intolerable. In some desperation, he forced himself to engage strangers in conversation and made a point of accepting any social offer which came his way. He had come to believe strongly in the concept of loneliness as a part of the genetic make-up of humans, as it was being empirically proven by the operations of his own mind.

This was why, as the next in a sequence of unsuccessful outings, he now found himself without a torch on the fringes of town wearing trousers covered in unascertained mud stains and shivering within an inadequate jacket. He resisted the temptation to cut his losses and turn around. His current target was promising and failure to follow up on his first invitation would close off any realistic future opportunities.

His target was Raj, a biochemistry graduate who had not rebuffed Anthony's clumsy conversational approach. Meeting by accident outside Raj's supervisor's office they had had a conversation on the subject of clouds and chaos theory. Both Raj and the conversation had been slightly eccentric but oddly interesting. When Anthony then needed help to test the bioactivity of his crystals Raj had been volunteered. After that they had met a few times in the labs or to discuss the test results and had had a series of unpredictable discussions on esoteric subjects.

These conversations were sometimes difficult due to the odd way Raj had of talking and a strange aloofness which was hard to penetrate. Nonetheless, Anthony had no reason to believe that they did not get on and he was willing to accept whatever friendship was available. He hardly had the luxury of rejecting friends simply on the basis of an erratic conversational style. He had convinced himself that, through the oddness, Raj was intelligent and probably kind.

Recently, during a rambling discourse on the difference between facts and understanding, Raj had mentioned a friend in Berkley who had attended a particular quiz every week since the start of her undergraduate course. Anthony had seen an opportunity and had crashingly interrupted to ask if, next time, he could join their team. Raj's answer had not been an express offer, but, swallowing his embarrassment Anthony had pretended that it was and expressly accepted it. Raj had laughed and his eyes wandered as if his mind had moved on elsewhere. Then he had given the time and place and reverted to his stream of thoughts. When Anthony tried indelicately to find out more about the friend, Raj had been vague and moved the conversation off at another tangent. Anthony wondered whether there was any chance he and Raj's friend might get on.

A car was coming towards him with its headlights on high beam. The glare built up until he raised his arm to hide his eyes in the shadow

in its lee. The glow evaporated suddenly as the Doppler shift changed, to be replaced by a complete blackness with sinking red threads and floating halos. He blinked a few times and stared at the cycle track on the roadside while he waited for his vision to return and the man-made stars to fade. The fine sand which covered the track would be green, however, even in good light he had difficulty with greens and it was irretrievably grey to him now. When the sparks had burnt themselves out he resumed his walk.

The light from the lamps and buildings on the road side gradually grew. It became easy to see and, although he did not notice, Anthony's pace increased slightly. Berkley College was on the left. It was a brick, post war complex of three-storey oblong buildings each connected by a covered walkway to the hexagonal hive of the main college building. The peripheral satellites contained the staircases on which the undergraduates lived. They were arranged so the majority of rooms looked away from the road over the playing fields and the college garden with its modern sculptures in rusting metal and chipped brick.

Opposite the college entrance was a terrace of houses, probably built in the 1930s, with high iron railings and narrow doors, beyond which was a shorter terrace of much older buildings. At the far end a sign was swinging in the wind with the pub name and a picture of a cow. When he reached it, Anthony paused, breathing heavily in the cold air.

As is common in very old buildings, the windows were divided by wooden slats into smaller panes which, Anthony recalled, are called 'lights.' The edges of the lights were fogged in circular frames around the clear glass in the middle. Looking through them was like peeping through a knot hole in a fence or a portal in a ship or down a telescope or microscope. The images of motion inside appeared through the visible section and disappeared again out of sight with a

suddenness which made them difficult to follow.

Some of the lights had a crack off which the lamplight diffracted, others were covered in growing moss or slime. In places the paint on the frames was peeling off, in others the frames were clearly rotting and the lights rattled loosely with gusts of cold air from outside or warm air from within. The wooden door, which had buckled in the cold or the wet, did not fit smoothly into its jamb and bumped open and closed with the same gusts. The latch was tied open with string but would probably never have met its catch due to the buckling. Anthony knew that looking at the door and the building and the lights was procrastination.

The door opened and a disorganised bunch of four students stepped around him with looks of surprise. Anthony nodded at them, bit back the embarrassment of being found peering in the windows and examining the door in the cold, and went in.

There was just time to see that the door opened onto a corridor between two large rooms before his glasses fogged over completely. He took them off and shook them in the air. His eyesight was too poor to find Raj without them and he was obliged to wait indecisively until they cleared.

The pub was steamy and smelled strongly of last week's spilled ale and rising damp. The noise was complex, loud and indistinct with the same quality of dislocation as the wind and the rustling of leaves in the park. He could feel a tingling on his skin from the sudden change from cold to warmth. A fat man in a red top squeezed past and Anthony hunched instinctively, prey to an unknown threat. The weakening of hearing and eyesight again made him vulnerable. He sneezed violently.

The glasses began to clear from the middle so he put them on. He could see directly ahead although clouds continued to obscure any

peripheral vision. Images and objects swam suddenly into his full vision like they had appeared in the lights of the window. It was like the fully shaded and partially shaded zones created by an eclipse, only in reverse. Penumbra and umbra.

The pub was the amalgamation of at least two houses and their stables producing a labyrinth of interconnecting rooms. The ground floor had three levels with one or two steps joining them usually under low hanging wooden joists. There were two bars and a host of partial walls and interconnecting spaces in which tables were concealed behind standing drinkers. Anthony searched the whole maze at least once before spotting Raj alone at a table staring imprecisely at a wall lamp. He breathed deeply and approached the table.

Raj was slim, almost gaunt, with long arms and fingers and fine features under heavy black hair and eyebrows. Although he was tall, poor posture often gave him an academic and unworldly deportment. His eyes were a light brown and often misty or unfocussed behind old fashioned wire frame glasses. Anthony suspected that he was quite good looking in a boyish soulful way. Raj was sitting awkwardly with a rounded back and seemed to be thinking.

“Hello.”

“Good evening Anthony; what a pleasure you are to see.” Raj spoke slowly and often quietly as if his voice reached you from a long way away. He pronounced Anthony with an affected ‘th’ sound which Anthony did not himself use. Anthony sat down.

“Has no-one else turned up?”

“Quite the contrary, as you shall see. Lucy seeks the ladies’, after ordering Baileys. Darren is fulfilling her command, assuming he does not require a hand. No doubt he too would seek ladies and may be

delayed on that score. Should he succeed in doing so that is. I hope his tarrying is not great, however, as I have a desire for a drink which I would that he would sate. I would go so far as to say that I have a burning desire for liquids. "As the hart pants for cooling streams" as Wodehouse, or whomsoever he quoted, would no doubt have it. I have been distracting my desires by considering the lampshade over there."

"What have you concluded?"

"I haven't concluded. That would preclude my further consideration of the lampshade. You should never reach a conclusion when you have nothing urgent to do. A conclusion concludes whatever you are doing. If you reach a conclusion you will have to think of an alternative occupation." Raj's diction was very precise and his accent posh and geographically unplaceable. Despite his Indian colouring his Englishness was undeniable.

"Very whimsical. You sound like Alice in Wonderland."

"Did Alice speak whimsically? I like to think of it as fluffy thinking. Fluffily." Raj moved very little when he spoke. He did not accompany his words with hand or body movements or, most peculiarly, any change in facial expression. When he smiled it was an action of its own, not an accompaniment to speech; he smiled, or laughed, or frowned because he wished to communicate by a smile, a laugh or a frown. Although Anthony could see no logical need for words to be accompanied by gestures or physical movements, their absence was distracting. Combining with the quietness of his voice and the abnormal way he spoke, the lack of gesture made it difficult to follow Raj's words over the background noise.

"Alice! Alice? Who, the fuck, is Alice?" A short fat man had swung up to the table from behind Anthony. He was no older than Anthony and Raj, however, his hair was thinner and was obviously receding

from his temples. He looked unhealthy, not only because of his weight, but because of the sheen on his skin and a brittle look to his hair which is sometimes seen in smokers. His face was round with heavy eyebrows and his whole countenance was red as if he were blushing or hot. His ears were curled, stuck out too far and appeared too small for the shape of this head. He was smiling and there were beads of sweat on his forehead.

Raj seemed almost too far away to have noticed the interjection and made no comment. Undismayed, the newcomer turned to Anthony. His movements contained excessive energy and no part of him was ever quite still. He held three drinks in a triangle formed by the fingers, palms and thumbs of his hands which jiggled and reeled, but somehow did not spill. His gaze was confident, challenging and cheerful and was concentrated and directed into Anthony's eyes from deep within a face padded with fat. He shivered with confidence and his lip was curled into a smile as if he were laughing at a private joke.

"Hi, I would shake your hand but I'd drop this lot. Here, can you take, like, the end one, while I put these down 'cos I'm not really very good at this and not a lot of practice you see, I don't like to buy other people drinks, in that y'know it is expensive and ultimately unprofitable."

"Darren, who this is, is the possessor of a commercial mind. He believes in the teachings of the ultimate profits."

"Darren." Darren nodded his self introduction, "That's for the spectre at the table we call Lucy," he indicated that a slim glass of clear liquid was to be put at the spare seat.

"I thought you said Lucy wanted Baileys." Queried Anthony.

"Definitely not what she asked me for. She was, like always, like, well, how can I put it, uh, perfectly clear on that score. Like y'know

every score.” Darren was still smirking, still following his private joke.

“Lucy has indubitably directed Baileys, it may be that today is not, however, the day on which she did so. It perhaps reinforces the eminent sense of my not taking, neither prosecuting, orders. I, unlike Panama, will not be dictated to successfully.”

“Raj is, you-know, talking out of his hat again.”

“Hat, hot air, fluff, sense and turkey. A word can sink a battleship, condemn a man to death or start the creation of the universe. Whether its import is a swine-cast pearl, a mot juste or just a mot, depends upon how you see it.”

“like its in the eye of the beholder or something and one man’s fruit is another man’s poison and other clichés to the same effect, only more long winded in your case. I can’t help like thinking there is ‘tho a joke on ‘Just a mo’ here somewhere.” Darren’s intensity had temporarily been directed at Raj, but now he switched it back to Anthony. He sat down heavily, banged his elbows on the table then leant right forward, his scarlet silk shirt hanging away from his chest draping to where his middle pinned it to the table-edge. The private smile became a leer as he jibed with Raj but his deep sunk feral eyes kept reverting to Anthony as if gauging his value in some way.

While he talked, Darren violently painted the meanings of his words in the air, flaunting his physicality so no one could forget who was leading the conversation. Anthony watched the clubby fists waving their arcs. A pair, or three, thick black hairs grew between joints on the backs of each of his fingers and his nails were off-yellow, brittle like his hair and split in places. The quick shared the bleached pallor of the skin under the nails. Accidentally, Anthony caught Darren's eye and a penetrating stare from black irises out of keeping with his apparent joviality. Darren's eyebrows moved up and down like

blocks in the hands of a puppeteer while his face creased in a puppet show of the thoughts which did not show in his eyes.

Anthony was dragged back to the present as Darren laughed completely, rocked back onto his seat and convulsed with his eyes closed. If there had been a joke Anthony had missed it. For all he could tell it might have been made by Darren or by Raj, or might not have been a joke at all but merely Darren's internal smirk breaking the surface. Whatever the cause, Raj remained impassive, now looking at a poorly framed picture of a boat which was part of the over-decoration on the walls. Many objects were displayed, each of which might have come from a car-boot sale, in order to provide an acceptable pub environment while avoiding any expensive items or any exercise of taste. It was the current style.

The table fell silent while Raj was enthralled by the boat and Darren was gasping back the breath which his exertions had pumped out of his great chest. Anthony felt pressure to do or say something.

"Right, I'll take the chance to get a drink then." Darren nodded to him vigorously as if this was the best idea he had heard in months. Each gesture crinkled up the rolls of fat around his neck. Raj made no motion and seemed almost as if he had not heard the statement. After a further hesitation Anthony fought his way through to a bar.

When he returned, the loudspeaker was announcing the quiz and a third person was sitting between Darren and Raj. Even on first sight from behind, there was something odd about her appearance, something which became odder as he got a clearer view. She was small even for a girl, but that was not what struck him. There was something else, something more structural as if she was not so much a person as a collection of body parts in a bag. She sat hunched with a domed back and one shoulder lower than the other like you might see a vagrant boy with a hollow chest or an emaciated old man on a third world street. It was not the posture of a girl or

woman of any age. On a female its inelegance was almost offensive.

Her head behind red-brown hair was held gawkishly like a candy-floss ball inclined at an angle to its lolly-stick. Her hair was disordered but not in a stylish way and its periphery was a corona of split ends and static, like Umbra and Penumbra. She wore an oversize Michelin-man puffer jacket in an unmistakable yellow green which people would call neon, although it was closer to the colour of chlorine gas. Anthony could not imagine anyone he knew taking so little care over their hair and clothes or even buying a coat like that. Personally he saw no logical reason not to leave your hair unstyled and wear bright clothes if you wanted to, but he knew that most women did not think that way. His sister, for example, would certainly have a great deal of acid things to say on the subject.

Raj was still looking at something far off. Darren rocked back and forth gesturing at some note paper with his grin and gaze shivering between the pen tip and the girl's face. This dual focus was interrupted as he caught sight of Anthony and his eyebrows lifted his lips on invisible strings into an all consuming smile. He swung his whole frame to face Anthony's approach.

"Welcome to 'Cecilia's Sextant.' It was the only like name we could agree on and we've like stuck to it as a winning formula, you know three from three - the unbeaten team and any discussion on changing is going to be ultimately unprofitable so you won't like don't even y'know go there 'cos you're like the late boy on the scene and late boys have to take what's on the table if that is there is..."

"and it has been the 'only' name, as you put it, since at least two years before I ever met you." Her voice was nasal and sharp and certainly far from diffident or demur. It seemed bitter or possibly just impatient. Anthony could not tell which, although he knew he would not like to be on the wrong end of it. She did not turn towards him as he came round the table and gave no physical sign

that she was even aware of him. He wondered whether he should take the initiative and try to introduce himself. Introductions were always difficult because they never seemed to fit naturally into a conversation which had already begun.

“ahhh, those y'know heady bacchanalian days, before ever you saw my face, when like the sun had his hat on ...

“the lark was on the wing, the snail his thorn; something on some other thing and gods had not yet been born.” Raj’s gaze had drifted back from the far oceans with their yacht cruising in the tropical sun. There was warmth in his eyes as he looked at Anthony but no smile on his face. Nevertheless, without being able to say how he gained the impression, Anthony sensed that Raj was relieved that he had returned.

He only got his first full view of Lucy's face after he had sat down. She was not like any other person he had ever seen. Her head was thin and tall, her cheeks seemed to suck in as if she were starved and the skin was a pale cream which even in deep winter looked unhealthy. Her forehead was unnaturally high under a hairline which formed an unbroken arch with its highpoint at the top of her head. The abundant candy-floss curls were dragged backwards without any attempt to impose a style and her hair stuck out above her left ear as they had been left and as the static kept them.

The first thing he saw within the frame created by this hair, and the dominating feature of her appearance, were her glasses. Their lenses were half spheres fitted into perfectly circular frames of thick steel wire. They extended beyond the width of her face on either side and down to a point almost level with the bottom of her nose. Like great crystal balls they reflected, caught and glowed with the room lights. They magnified her eyes and eye sockets so that looking directly at her was like volunteering to be examined by a microscope. The weight of the glass and the height of her hairline

gave the illusion that her eyes had slipped too far down her head and been left to swell in a great desert of forehead.

The rest of her features seemed crushed into a tight melee around her chin. Her nose was taugt and thin which left her mouth as the only feature which, with its full and naturally red lips, could be described as pretty. She wore no makeup and at places there were clear pock marks of former spots and burst blood vessels.

Her gaze through the fishbowls disturbed him. Her eyes were too still as if she did not blink; or perhaps she did blink but did not focus, or focussed but did not follow movements with her irises. Whatever it was that was abnormal, Anthony felt uncomfortable before her, especially when her face was turned towards him. He felt apologetic, then guilty for that feeling. Pausing to be objective he catalogued his inappropriate and embarrassing responses. He felt foolish, charitable, pompous and patronising. But mostly he did not want to look at her.

“Some might say the gods have still not been born.” She spoke sharply.

“Ah, M’lady, you should like not look like they seemed to used to have done upon life in such a metaphysical sense, it is ultimately pointless, fruitless and bootless.”

“He calls me ‘M’lady Myopia.’ Darren’s charm is of a special sort.” Lucy seemed to address Anthony for the first time although as she did not turn her face towards him, he was not certain. The bitterness was no more pronounced than previously and she spoke in a level tone. Darren was smiling broadly to himself and the table.

“Are you going to tell me who you are? I can’t imagine these two doing so.”

Anthony felt uncomfortable, then felt sorry for her again, then

wondered if she was challenging his right to be present. He was angry with Raj and Darren because she had put him on the spot. But there was no aggression to her question and no logical reason to regard it as a challenge. He must learn to engage more easily with new people without suspecting that everything they said was meant as a criticism.

“Hi. Uh, well I’m a Chemistry Postgrad.”

“Perhaps Marx was right. People define themselves by their work. I take it you’ve found some way of putting up with Darren then.” Anthony did not understand this comment and had just opened his mouth to ask for an explanation when Darren lurched forward dangerously. His elbows crashed down on the table and the glasses on it shook but did not fall over.

“You a Chemistry grad? I thought I knew all the chemicky lot. I’m next door at the Scott Polar research labs but I spend like more time in your building than mine.” Darren was beaming and almost buzzing. He interrupted picking at a hangnail on his left hand to run fingers through and over his flattened hair. Every movement was accompanied by his body shaking with positive cheerfulness. There was a painful scraping noise as he adjusted his seat to lean even further over the table.

“But surely you must have seen me – I’m hardly not going to be readily missable.” To the accompaniment of the creaking of his chair legs, he sat violently back in his seat while he pulled a face like a supercilious angel.

“I can be a little noisy.” He said as if admitting adultery to a lecherous friend.

“I don’t hang around the coffee room much.”

“Neither do I. They don’t like me in there and don’t let me trundle

gently in so I well like spend a load of time in the y'know atrium place with the balcony outside the round the thingy lecture halls." Anthony nodded indicating he knew the place. "But what are you doing. Probably like everyone else- badly?!"

"No, not really. I can't complain. It's been going quite well."

"Anthony is anomaly. He is approaching unique among the chemist clique. His are the works which work and comparison to whom makes those who fail aware of their failure," Raj's intervention surprised Anthony. In the face of Darren's insistence and Lucy's appearance, he had almost forgotten that Raj was present.

"Really, no wonder you're like not around then much. Too busy with all the like stuff coming out the funnels and stuff and so you must have like well... what've you made?" Darren had bobbed forward again and down in the wells of his fat cheeks his eyes contracted like almond seeds turned on their sides. Something about his eye sockets reminded Anthony of the buttons on overstuffed leather sofas which hold the seat padding to the frame. They were, however, shinier than buttons and Anthony sensed acquisition in them.

The loudspeaker screeched and Darren's immediately raised hand cut down the response before he began it. Darren focussed on Lucy's lips and then his pen tip. His gaze continued to shoot between the two as he strained in concentration on the air and his chair and the table shook slightly with his keyed up sincerity.

"Right well, we'll start with an easy one to wake you all up. First ten questions on the first page and then hand them in at the bar. First question then. Who succeeded Henry second on the throne. English throne that is."

"Wat?"

“Who followed Henry the second?” Anthony clarified for Darren.

“No – ‘Wat’ as in Tyler. Like half the toxic twins as like he would have done if the peasants had been less revolting and more revolving.” Anthony did not understand this but Darren was too consumed in laughing his private laugh to elaborate.

“I think you’ll find that was Richard the second. You are only two centuries out. The answer to the question by coincidence is Richard the Lionheart.” Lucy spoke levelly as if she had been proved right in expecting the worst.

“Dicky Lion-heart.” Repeated Darren pronouncing each syllable slowly as he wrote it.

“Question two. Who was the arch enemy of the three musketeers?”

“It seems as if someone has only bothered with one page of the encyclopaedia,” commented Lucy.

“...and therefore the like answer is?” asked Darren. Lucy did not smile, nonetheless Anthony gained the impression that she was enjoying herself.

“Roquefort” responded Lucy.

“Rock-fort” repeated Darren as he wrote it down. “Who was he then?”

“He wasn’t – It’s a cheese. The answer is either Rochefort or Cardinal Richlieu. Or Milady de Winter. Bad question.”

“Question three. Who betrayed Thomas More in ‘A Man for all Seasons.’?”

“Richy Rich.” But Darren wasn’t buying it this time, he simply stared at Lucy and oscillated slowly side to side. They began to argue tentatively and warily like Olympic judo players looking for a hold or

a weakness. Anthony looked at Raj but Raj did not appear to be listening, he was watching Lucy. Occasionally he blinked slowly but did not smile or frown or offer any assistance as the questions proceeded and Darren and Lucy rowed. Presently a negotiated solution on the first ten questions was reached and Darren rocked back and forward until he managed the momentum to get up and take the paper to the bar.

Lucy stood up too and walked away from the table through the crowd. She was perfectly balanced and confident if not graceful. It was possible that she walked with one arm held slightly out in front of her. It was possible this was to protect her from unseen objects and passers by.

“How does Lucy know so much?”

“the oddest hath borne most. Or at least Odilia has. We that are young shall never know so much nor live so long. She reads a lot. Perhaps the time on her hands weighs so much a book is light by comparison. Odilia, by the way, is the patron saint of the blind, Lucy has enlightened me on a number of facts of that kind.”

“So her eyesight is not so bad? She can read books?”

“It is remarkable what you can do if you have no option not to and what you will do to prove that you cannot be stopped from doing it too. Do not let your view of her vision be limited to her lenses.” Raj paused as if he had finished all he had to say. Anthony waited. Almost aggrieved by having to continue, Raj spoke quicker to conclude the explanation: “She has a magnifying glass - by holding the text up to it and leaning over she can read fairly clearly. Each word requires her concentration. Perhaps that is why she remembers that word. When her eyes are tired she has little option but to think. Perhaps that also helps. But she can read and consequently she does. I know few if any who know more and in

that I include all of the University Professors of esoteric subjects and those who universally subject us to their professing on esoterica.”

Darren returned and began to spin the pen about his fingers. He fidgeted, smiled, pouted, opened his mouth, closed it, looked over his shoulder, squirmed on his seat and looked over Raj’s shoulder. Lucy returned from the toilets.

“Other than a chemist what do you do with yourself?” Anthony jumped slightly, he had been thinking of other things. Brought back to the present he stuttered slightly. Lucy, however, had retargeted her attention on Darren without waiting for his answer.

“Did you meet your friends at the bar?” Anthony detected a slightly sarcastic tone to this question as if she expected it to surprise Darren. Darren looked trapped and cast a quick glance and a frown at the bar. Then he smiled and looked over his shoulder again. He pushed back his chair and stood up before leaning back over it and tipping dangerously forward above the table.

“I’d better go speak to... Back in a mo. Just a Mot. Ha, see I knew I’d like there was a joke on that. Well. Probably, I’ll...” he stepped away.

“Odd way to speak about your friends. You haven’t answered my question.” Lucy had reverted to Anthony who had been watching Darren shove his way through the knots of students in college scarves towards two older men by the bar. One of the men was tall, the other short and muscular. Both seemed rough and were dressed differently from the casual uniforms of the students around them.

Lucy picked up the pen and the next sheet. She adjusted her grip with care and laid the page flat with her right hand. That hand stayed holding the top corners while with her left she deliberately wrote out ‘Cecilia’s sextant’ in an even, curly script. She wrote directly under her right hand which she then slid smoothly down the

page until her fingers were level with the bottom of the script.

“Well. There’s not a lot to say really. I read novels. I used to row. I paint and draw. Well I used to paint and now I draw.”

“How many cardinal points does a compass have?”

Lucy wrote the letters ‘four’ and her hand slid down the page to the bottom of the new script.

“What do you draw?”

“Structures mostly or things out of books or photos. I like the geometric designs the Arabs use on buildings. Buildings and other things sometimes. But mostly I just draw things I can see. Objects on the desk and so on.” Anthony thought too late about this description and flushed with embarrassment for callously picking an interest she could not relate to. Raj continued to ignore their conversation, his eyes were on Lucy’s shoulder and he was blinking slowly again.

“I have always loved the pencil drawings of Da Vinci. Also the anatomical ones of Gray. To be able to draw fact and make it appealing in itself is a marvellous skill. I’ve always been intrigued by the effect of religious architecture on congregations and the reputation of the Church. I cannot claim an interest in Arab architecture in the same way but I see how the Alhambra may be in the same class.” she responded.

“What does ‘Ceasar’ as in ‘Julius Ceasar’ actually mean?”

The question saved Anthony from hiding his surprise. Lucy carefully wrote ‘the hairy – a joke on his family’s baldness’ and slid her hand down the page.

Darren did not return. Lucy filled in the answers, each time her hand crept down the page in a graduated fashion. At no stage did she

review the answers and at no stage did she take out a magnifying glass. Raj sometimes contributed to the conversation with long monologues or opaque references but mostly he was withdrawn into a world populated only by his imagination and the debris on the walls.

Anthony took the pages to the bar at the end of each round. The first time Darren was there talking, with giant gestures and expressions, to the taller of his friends. Afterwards, he was not there and neither were they.

There were seven rounds in which Cecilia's Sextant scored 66 from the 70 possible points. Anthony collected a prize of tokens for free drinks which Lucy put in a shoulder sack she used as a purse.

"We'll use them next week. I have not paid for a drink in here for over a year. Same time, same place gentlemen. I am sure Darren will also turn up." Lucy had assumed a command which Anthony accepted as the natural order of their relationship. Raj was already standing behind her holding the chair when she stood up, which seemed not to surprise her.

"Toodle-pip Tony. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, til time has tired of its tedious tour. Be aware among the beakers. We will meet again. Maybe not tomorrow and tomorrow, but soon."

Anthony found himself on his way home. Following the path in reverse he was less concerned with the silence and the dirt which no-one had noticed on his trousers. He had become tired. He couldn't decide whether he had enjoyed his evening or even whether he was glad that he had made the effort.

2. Undeniable Presence

When that I was and a little tiny girl. With hey, ho, the wind and the rain. Plenty of wind. Lucy liked storms, although this was not really a storm, just inclement weather. Blow winds and crack your cheeks. The crack was a real sound. She liked sounds with volume which she could get to grips with, like the whistling of wind or the shaking of boughs. And rain, or sleet or snow: cold and wet and obvious. There would be slippery mud after the rain was done. Puddles which would splash on your ankles when you stood in them. She liked weather she could be a part of. Like heavy rain that would run streams down her arms and through her hair. But wind was better - an invisible maelstrom full of undeniable presence. She loved the message it brought of great distance and the way it was invisible, as much for her as everyone else.

The whistling wind was Gaia talking; living mother Earth speaking to humanity. Although mother is the wrong term. Earth is not a person and is not female and is not concerned with her 'children,' or bitter about their failings. That phrase is an example of human arrogance. 'Personification' as literary types might describe it. Humans are no more to the Earth than mobile stones. Earth is no more human than agar on which viruses grow. If one grows viruses on agar. She was not certain, it is the sort of detail which Raj would know. She would ask him if she remembered to do so.

Raj would have a description of some sort which would be factually accurate but tell you nothing. If he was feeling brief he might say something like: Humans are a category of mobile and potentially autonomous carbohydrates located on the flimsiest ring of the outermost solid rim of the Earth. And, perhaps: Earth is a spinning impure silicate mass orbiting within the local gravitational pulls of a single star and the wider physical laws of the universe.

Descriptions which miss the point. The chemical and physical terms

are just labels invented and used to categorise human investigations. It is typical of scientists to seek to own and control something merely by ascribing a name to it. Earth is more than its chemical symbols and a statement of the various theories men have used to describe it. It is a wild and chaotic complexity too great for labels and names. An inconceivable volume of magma and more than magma. A core, an inner core and mantles each more incomparably massive than our tiny periphery with free running tides and streams and eddies and unpredictable krakens and unknowable dragons. What makes us think we are more complex than such extraordinary vastness? What makes us think we are any more alive, if we are no more complex.

We rely upon this Earth, this Gaia, for everything, for our life and our support. Perhaps Gaia is indeed a god with power over life. Perhaps she is the only god, indifferent to our prayers and pleas. Is Gaia the blind watchmaker? Or an equilibrium, perhaps, that moves to eliminate a stress, like the excessive growth of one category of carbohydrates on its outer rim.

Is she the Aether? A gestalt of all life? A biologist's or a geologist's or a rheologist's god? Or simply a name for the laws of physics to which we try to give more meaning. More meaning which would give our existence importance and satisfy human arrogance. Whatever she is, she is more than can be explained by the rules and models and methods and theories of science and more than can be labelled by man's terminology. And her voice, wind, says more Lucy than her real mother ever did.

CONTINUED

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