

Paradise
by
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1 The Pavilion at the Edge of My Soul

‘So this is my soul?’

‘I’ve seen worse sir,’ said Stub.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Somewhere you haven’t been for a long time, sir.’

‘You’d better lead on.’

We tramped through cans, bottles and takeaway cartons around the outer edge of a large Dome. The wind was blowing and a refreshing shower of rain was falling. I let it wash over me. The tall spirit ahead of me wrapped his overcoat around himself more firmly and pulled his fedora further onto his head. I followed his long strides rather like a Yorkshire terrier trying to keep up.

We walked halfway round the Dome and then Stub struck out over a large pile of rubbish. I scrambled to follow.

Stub’s moody stride across the landscape lost a bit of dignity each time he sank into the rubbish, or slid down a trash-pile and set off a mini-avalanche and went *whoa* with flail of skinny arms.

He didn’t find it funny.

Eventually we put most of the rubbish behind us and started climbing out of the valley that housed the Dome.

‘I mean it will be all right, won’t it?’ I said.

‘So I am led to believe sir,’ Stub replied.

Behind me I could now see that the Dome nestled in the heart of a valley. A river flowed round it. It was a pleasure-dome, brown at the edges, tacky with a swimming pool and restaurants. Beyond the Dome lay the stain of a town and further hills.

Climbing onto the ridge, we came out from under the shower-cloud and for the first time got a clear view of the sky above and the landscape beyond. I gaped.

The landscape that was my soul was floating between two waterfalls of colour that stretched from the horizon almost to the top of the sky.

‘This region of the heavenly places is called Vanity Fair, sir,’ said Stub.

It took a little while for all the colours to resolve themselves into something that I could understand.

‘It’s a mall,’ I said eventually.

‘Yessir,’ said Stub.

What a fantastic place. Shops were piled on top of each other, layer after layer, filling the sky on both sides. Signs jutted out. Goods spilled onto marble ledges. Vast open doors beckoned you in. ‘In a way, it’s *The Mall*, sir,’ continued Stub.

‘It’s like the Grand Canyon for shopping,’ I said.

All the famous high street names were there. They were sliding past on either side as the great landscape that was my soul glided forward.

‘*Osama’s!*’ Back on earth, my favourite Afghan restaurant had closed down. Here it seemed to be thriving. The wide frontage of the shop stretched back into dark depths where, under whirring fans, a celestial version of the Giant Surly Bread Chef conjured Afghan flat bread called *murtabak* from doughballs and meat. ‘Can’t we go in?’ I asked.

‘No sir,’ said Stub.

‘Just put my nose in the door?’

‘That’s not why we’re here, sir,’ said Stub.

‘Some aren’t even shops at all,’ I said, my eye still ranging up and down the levels of Vanity Fair. A shopfront was busy with editors and journos playing with gadgets, and I recognized it as a 3-D version of one of my favourite magazines. A political review was next door. I spotted a theatre and a camping exhibition.

‘May I suggest you look straight in front of you?’ asked Stub.

‘But this is fantastic.’

‘Sir.’

‘If we must.’

I pulled my gaze away from the Old Fashioned Internet Sweetshop which on earth only existed as a website but here in the heavenlies took up three candied storeys. I offered only a passing glance to a baker’s that displayed Belgian buns the size of, well, extremely large Belgian buns.

‘The task in hand, sir.’

Below me my soul-landscape sloped down to a cricket pitch and then a cliff edge. A wooden pavilion stood at the edge of the cliff. Three ropes stretched from under the pavilion into the sky. These ropes led to a penguin-like creature which was pulling my soul through this canyon of colour.

‘That’s my Pengub.’

‘Yessir.’

Pengubim—*Pengubim* is the plural, like *cherubim* and *seraphim*—are the workhorses of the heavenly places, towing souls through the ether.

‘Keziah told me about the Pengubim,’ I explained.

‘This is where you steer your soul, sir,’ said Stub. ‘In principle.’

‘You mean, if I did ever actively steer my soul, that pavilion is where I’d do it from?’

‘That is the theory sir.’

‘How does the Pengub know where to go if I don’t steer it?’ I asked the gaunt spirit.

‘It feels the impulse of your heart and tries its best.’

I glanced again at the bright canyon of shops that filled the sky on both sides.

‘So my soul came back here as soon it could.’

‘This is it’s natural habitat, sir.’

‘What you’re saying,’ I said, as I followed him towards the pavilion, ‘is that my soul is never happier than when mooching aimlessly on a consumerist whim and fancy.’

‘It’s a default setting, sir. When you can’t be bothered to do anything else.’

‘And now I have to break out of it.’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘I thought I wasn’t going to like it.’

The pavilion on the edge of my soul was wooden, musty and empty. We inspected its echoey depths: a large room for cricketing teas. Changing rooms for the two teams and the umpires. A room at the back where a grounds-keeper could brew cups of tea.

‘What’s with all this pavilion?’ I asked Stub.

‘You built it, sir. Think it through.’

‘It’s not coming,’ I said. Stub sighed.

‘As well as reflecting your love of the game of cricket—and perhaps a generally playful outlook on life—it also says something about the deep

conservatism and fear of change that lurks in your heart. You cling to its old-fashioned simplicity.'

'I do?' I said. 'I thought I was a radical, creative thinker.'

'You are not a radical, creative *doer*, sir. There is a difference.'

'Some people dream dreams. Some people make the bed. Caroline told me that once.'

'I would not disagree, sir.'

A picture-window occupied the back of the pavilion facing out over the cliff to the Pengub. A ship's wheel allowed me to steer. Stub told me my Pengub was called Henry.

'So this is where I'm supposed to take command of myself.'

'Yessir..'

I sat in a captain's chair in front of the wheel.

'OK,' I said. 'OK. Now what do I do?'

'You break out from all of this,' said Stub, his gloomy eyes on me. 'You break the shackles of the past. You move on.'

'I do? ... *All* the shackles of the past?'

'As many as we can manage, sir.'

'I feel quite nervous about this,' I said. 'Now that it comes to it.'

Stub gazed down at me. His heroin-addict face was barely visible between the turned-up collars of his overcoat and the turned-down rim of his 1940s hat.

'See that thin strip of sky?' he said. By straining my neck I could see a purplish ribbon far above us. Lights pulsed in it. Lazy golden meteors slid across like crayon strokes. The weather blew down from there. 'Head for that.'

'OK.' I pulled gently on the wheel.

Henry the Pengub flapped his earnest wings, and we climbed.

It was a long way. We rose through layers of shops and eventually emerged from the canyon.

‘Finally. The end of Vanity Fair,’ I said.

‘No sir,’ said Stub. ‘Just the limit of the retail space.’

‘What’s up here, then?’

‘You can never tell,’ said Stub. ‘Moods. Lusts. Irrational Emotions.

Sudden Whims.’

‘Wild Dreams? Forlorn Hopes?’

‘In all probability.’

‘Abandoned Principles?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Ideas Whose Time has Come?’

‘Not unless they’re very lost, sir.’

‘My soul swims through this stuff all the time?’

‘Yessir.’

‘How will I find the *Diner* in the midst of all of this?’

‘They said they’d put a light on for us, sir.’ Stub was scanning the sky.

‘What’s that dark patch?’ I asked.

‘That’s just a slick or something,’ said Stub. ‘The heavenly places aren’t kept as a clean as we might like.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘Merely unpleasant.’

‘Can we avoid it?’

‘Sir, we’ve hardly started. We’re in the bowels of Vanity Fair. This is just the beginning. It’s the beginning of the beginning. We need to keep to our course. The best thing to do is put Henry onto auto-pilot.’

‘How does the auto-pilot work?’

‘There’s a bit of string for tying the wheel down.’

‘Ah.’

I tied the string and watched apprehensively as the black cloud grew until it filled all the picture window.

Stub wrapped his coat around himself and pulled his hat further down.

‘Let’s walk around for a bit, sir.’ We left the pavilion, crossed the cricket pitch, climbed the ridge again. All was gloomy. The rain-shower had passed, and I could look down on the Dome, which was brightly lit. Inside the Dome, I knew, were sweet memories: a swimming pool, friends—some wearing bikinis—and a selection of restaurants.

‘That’s where I used to go at times like this,’ I told Stub. ‘Gloomy times.’

‘And at all other times,’ said Stub.

Near to the Dome I could see the lights of Keziah’s black Mini and also those of the Polish truck called *Zlotcwicvic Enngerrgrunden Transportowicz, Krakow* (I never did quite catch the spelling)—driving around the rubbish outside the Dome: traumatic memories I’d never managed to purge; memories of the events, and of the person, who landed me here.

The blackness was now all around us, clammy and cold.

‘I feel I could start writing French existentialist poetry,’ I said.

‘I would resist the urge, sir.’

‘It won’t help?’

‘Not in my experience, sir.’

‘What’s that?’ Over the cricket pitch, it seemed like a patch of the darkness was thickening and taking shape like a giant black raindrop. Having gathered itself, it slowly fell.

‘Melancholy is lumpy in the heavenlies, sir,’ said Stub. ‘It condenses out. Brace yourself.’

The giant blob landed, wobbled on the cricket pitch and exploded. A soggy blast wave rushed towards us.

‘What is the point?’ I exclaimed suddenly. ‘I mean really. What is the *point?*’

‘No point at all!’ snapped Stub.

‘I don’t know why I go on. I don’t want to go on. I don’t.’

‘Nobody’s forcing you,’ said Stub.

‘And you’re no help!’ I said.

‘I’m *no help?*’ snarled Stub. ‘*You’re* an albatross around *my* neck!’

‘No.’ I said. ‘You’re an albatross around your own neck!’

‘Oh yes?’ yelled Stub.

‘Yes!’ I shouted.

We were standing toe-to-toe, looking each other in the eye. I coughed.

‘Sorry,’ I said.

‘It’s all right, sir’

‘That was the blast wave, wasn’t it?’

‘Yessir. They pass.’ I brushed the gobby bits of melancholy off my shoulders and face.

‘Will there be others?’

‘Let us hope not.’

A few more dank minutes passed and then the slick began to break up around us. I resumed my seat, untied the wheel, and steered Henry through the purple sky.

We were higher now, but my eyes struggled to make sense of what I was seeing. Bubbles drifted by. Shower clouds blew over, glistening with falling rain. Patterns of light lit the sky—shafts of light breaking into shards. Schools of silverly light coalescing back into lightning-like shafts. Lights strobed. I saw huge fat golden raindrops on solitary journeys; in the distance, odd beings (animals? machines?) on paths not aligned with mine. Smoke-like waves curled by. Sometimes I glimpsed distant landscapes pulled by almost-invisible Pengubim.

I looked at a vertical grey line that seemed suspended in the middle distance.

‘What’s that thing?’ I asked

‘It’s a navigation aid,’ said Stub.

‘It’s followed us ever since we climbed out of the Vanity Fair mall.’

‘That’s a trick of perspective,’ said Stub. ‘It’s always present. It helps people steer through all the layers of metaphor and imagery in the heavenly places. A lot quicker often than using the Pengub. You’ll get taught how to use it.’

Up we went.

Finally, a steady point of light high in the sky, the colour of brass. As Henry the Pengub pulled at my three heartstrings, tugging my soul-landscape up through the heavenlies, the light expanded, unfolded and became a tiny city, which grew.

I eased Henry out of the climb so that we approached the city almost horizontally. I picked out skyscrapers nestled together, basking in their own golden glow. The city rested on a cloud, pulled by a six-winged Pengub.

‘I’ve never seen anything like this,’ I said. ‘Even with everything that’s happened.’

Strange beasts flew round the city, flapping their great wings. Some of the skyscrapers were connected by high walkways. Vast, not made by humans, the city shone with its own quiet light, sliding across the sky like a cruise liner.

‘The word, “glory” comes to mind,’ I said.

‘Er ... that’s not where you want to go,’ said Stub.

‘It isn’t?’

‘I think that’s an administration block.’

‘Oh.’

‘The *Diner* can’t be far though.’ Stub was still scanning the sky. ‘It moves around. But I’m sure they’ll have put it somewhere nearby. There!’ he said finally.

‘That light there?’

‘Yessir.’

We rose above the great city and flew on.

It’s not easy to measure time in the heavenly places, since time passes at different rates depending on the neighbourhood. Even after we spotted the light that had been turned on for us, it was a long pull towards the *Diner* through the busy purple sky.

‘Steer just so as you miss it, sir,’ said Stub. ‘The navigation light is swinging underneath the *Diner* itself.’

‘OK.’ I adjusted my path slightly. We passed the light, which was hanging down from the porridge-coloured clouds on which the *Diner* rested. We came to the lip of the cloud; and over.

The *Shepherd Diner and Lido* looked like a hacienda, a low white wall topped with terracotta tiles, floating in the sky—not a huge place from which to remake the world, or a life.

Henry, slowing now, flapped leisurely along the length of the wall. We followed the wall until it enlarged into a two-storey building in the same white and terracotta. Friendly arches in this building gave glimpses into a garden and pool within. In front of the building was a pavement cafe, which offered a spectacular view of the high heavenlies.

The cafe was nearly empty. Seated at one of the tables, with a fresh smoothie in front of her, was Keziah. She still wore her familiar black top and jeans. Her face was as white as ever, her hair as straight and black as ever, the eyeliner overdone as usual, the lips sulky. She did seem, though, slightly more relaxed than the Keziah I was used to.

We glided past. I waved. She didn’t wave back and I noticed green eyes watching me steadily.

‘How do I park this thing?’

‘Fly out, then approach the *Diner* head on,’ said Stub, ‘Get your Pengub nice and high, to keep out of the way. And *dead slow*.’

I still maintain that I *was* going dead slow and the bump was just what happens when two things with momentum meet. Hardly any chairs fell over. A bartender did poke her head out of the entrance to see what was happening, but she soon went away, after putting the chairs back up.

Keziah was standing up with smoothie splattered on her T-shirt.

I tied the wheel, left my pavilion, walked with Stub to my soul's edge, and stepped neatly onto the *Shepherd Diner and Lido*.

'Hello,' I said to Keziah.

'Thanks for this, Jamie,' she said, holding her T-shirt so the orange juice, passionfruit and mango didn't stick to her.

'Sorry.'

With a flick of thought, Keziah changed into identical clothes that were clean.

'Never mind.'

'Hey, where's Henry going?' I asked, seeing my pengub flapping away, towing my soul behind him.

'The *Diner* has its own Pengub, sir,' said Stub. 'Customers' pengubim enjoy swimming with her. Henry will be OK.'

'I see.' Then I said to Keziah. 'Well I came, then.'

'Yes.'

'I hope I'm doing the right thing.'

'If you don't think you're doing the right thing, you shouldn't have come.'

'I'm just not totally sure what I'm letting myself in for.'

Keziah's glared.

'Jamie.' She grabbed my shoulders and spun me around, so that I was looking out over the heavenlies, my feet overlapping the edge of the *Diner*.

'Look at it!'

'Ow,' I said.

'*Look at it*. Billions of souls. Down there, swimming in that soup, a soup they're blind to. I can see it. You can see it. Because of what we've been

through. And up here, a team, friends. Jonah and Corrie Bright and Stub, and others. Turning the world upside down. Turning it the right way up. Replanting Eden.'

'Well, yes.'

'Not many people get to do this.'

'I suppose—'

'We live in the margins, Jamie. And it's what life is *for* Jamie. It's what life is *about*.'

'For you maybe.'

'No. For you too.'

'Perhaps.'

'Not perhaps. Not this time. Jamie, what *you are doing* is re-starting your sad, smug, hedonistic, self-obsessed life.'

'I am?'

'And to start with you might like to practice your driving, which is *lousy*.'

'Keziah,' I said, wriggling out of her grip, which was hurting, 'If we're talking about *driving* we might like to remember how we got here in the first place.'

'That was not a driving problem. It was a head problem. And it was a long time ago.'

'It was two months and three days ago.'

