

## *Once a Queen...*

Stephen Livesey Ashworth

August 2020

~ 1 ~

I had been frittering away the time trying to build an upright piano when the scratching noises started.

The clumsy instrument I had imagined into existence had not been successful. On my first attempt at a keyboard the ivories made no sound when I pressed them, and the familiar pattern of black and white notes kept on fading into a uniform grey. When at last through sheer mental concentration I forced a couple of octaves of keys and all the little levers and hammers behind them into stable existence, the sounds they made were so hideous and so out of tune that I lost patience with the thing and shouted a curse at it. The result was a small moment of gratification when I saw the whole misshapen structure of wood and iron respond to my flush of anger by crumpling up into a small grey mass like a pile of old clothes covered in dust.

Of course it was only a dream. I had had dreams before of trying to play pianos full of broken keys, or trying to skate on ice rinks where my blades skidded on carpet and the tables and chairs were forever getting in the way, or trying to climb staircases with missing sections that one somehow had to scramble across. Weirdness was normal.

Recognising weirdness when one saw it was not. It must be a lucid dream. I had sometimes had those, too, but only for a few minutes before waking up. This one had been going on for quite some time – I forget how long – and I was getting pretty fed up with it, I can tell you. I had created an imaginary bed, laid down on it and tried to get back into a proper sleep, from which I might then wake normally, but without success. Somehow I just could not make myself feel sleepy. Nor had the opposite effort, to pinch myself awake, produced any change in my situation. With those two avenues closed to me, I had embarked on the failed attempt to amuse myself making music.

I was gazing with disgust at the heap of debris in the corner between the floor and the wall, my stomach hollow with frustration, when I heard the noises again.

They started as a scratching or scrabbling sound behind one wall. I followed the sound with my ears as it made its way the length of the wall and turned the corner. As it did so, I thought I heard an answering rustle coming from behind me. It would be impossible to watch both walls at the same time. A shiver ran down my spine.

As I was turned to see what was behind me, the sounds in front of me intensified. I turned back just in time to glimpse a glistening black object the size of a dinner plate run across the floor in a whirl of multi-jointed legs. My heart turned a somersault. Before I could

react, the horrible thing reached the wreckage of my piano and scuttled behind it.

Meanwhile the scratching in the other wall was getting louder, as if some other little monster was about to burst out at any moment. I could bear it no longer. I tore the door open, rushed on trembling legs out into the hall and thence out of the house altogether and into the street, slamming the front door shut behind me. Careless of my direction, I ran.

After a while I slowed to a brisk walk and began to take notice of my surroundings. The street looked just the same as I had seen it before: row upon row of squalid two-storey houses interspersed with dusty tobacconists or small bookshops of the sort that sell *The Works of C.S. Lewis*, all apparently deserted and all draped with a depressing sameness in the grey twilight. The gloom seemed to promise the onset of night, if not of dawn, but so far as I could tell had neither lightened nor deepened in all the time I had been there. The sky was overcast from one horizon of anonymous rooftops to the other, and there was a chill in the air. After walking for ten minutes I realised that the jacket which I had materialised around my shoulders was ineffective against the cold, and also that if I went on any further I would be completely lost. A few minutes later I corrected myself: ever since leaving the Civic Centre – as far back as my memory of that dead city would take me – I had been lost.

I have had dreams before of wandering through strange cities, uncertain how to get home. How could getting lost possibly matter here? I walked on. For a while the slap of my shoes on the uneven pavement and the rustle of my own breathing were the only sounds to disturb the eerie stillness. Once I stopped to listen, and even held my breath, but there was nothing. Not a pedestrian, a car or a cyclist was to be seen or heard; not a stray dog, not a sparrow, not even a mouse. Thank goodness I had at least managed to leave the scratching things well behind.

I needed a plan. I stopped at a crossroads and looked carefully in every direction. In one of the side streets my eye fell on a scrawl of spray-painted graffiti, black paint squirted over a grey concrete wall: "WELCOME TO HELL", next to a grinning devil's head with horns and goatee. But in the opposite street there was a newsagent's shop, and I thought I spotted a light in one window. My mind made up, I turned that way.

~ 2 ~

The front door was locked and the notice in the window said "CLOSED", but I continued hammering on the door until I heard footsteps from within.

"Who's there?", said a woman's voice.

"Hello? Can you let me in, please?"

"What do you want?"

"I want to come in. I want to buy a map."

"Go away."

"Do you have any maps of the city?"

"I said, go away."

"I'm sorry, I really need... Can't you just let me in for five minutes? It's cold out here,

and I've been walking for ages, and I just need to sit down and have a rest. Please?"

There was a long silence, and I thought that the woman had gone away. But suddenly I heard the slither of a bolt, and the door opened just enough for me to see an elderly face under a tangle of grey hair.

"We don't have any maps", she said, while she examined me critically.

"That's all right", I told her, trying to look as honest and friendly as possible. "Maybe if I could just... I need to rest, maybe talk a bit."

There was a pause. I made no move to push my way in, but just gave the woman a weak smile. It seems that she took pity on me in the end, for she opened the door wider and invited me in.

I followed her down a gloomy corridor and found myself in a comfortable sitting room. There was so much furniture – padded armchairs, tables of some delicately carved dark wood, bookshelves, all resting on a faded patterned carpet – that there was very little space left to move in. A coal fire was burning in the grate, and when I held my hands out to it I felt a feeble warmth. The silver candlesticks on the mantelpiece stood either side of a clock whose regular ticking drew my attention to the time: half past four. An electric lamp on the sideboard cast a pallid glow over the room, and a chink in the thick velvet curtains explained the glimmer of light I had seen from the street. Before sitting down my hostess noticed the gap and pulled the curtains tighter together.

"Would you like some tea?"

I looked at her in some surprise, as I could not remember having felt either hungry or thirsty since arriving in the city, or having seen anything to eat or drink.

"Yes, please... Do you have some?"

Like a magician she produced a tray from behind her chair, complete with teapot, cups and saucers, sugar bowl and milk jug. I accepted a cup from her and settled myself in one of her armchairs in front of the fireplace. Dream tea, I thought, as I took a sip. It was lukewarm. I thanked her and introduced myself.

"My name's Siggy", she replied. "What my friends call me."

In the pale light coming from under her lampshade I could now see my hostess clearly. Siggy must have been in her seventies, with a plump old woman's figure. Looking into the fleshy ruin of her well-lined face, I guessed that she had been a beautiful woman fifty years earlier, but now she looked ready for the eternal sleep of the grave.

"You must have been here some time?", I wondered. "I wasn't able to make myself so comfortable."

"I've got a vivid imagination. Especially when I was a child. We had an imaginary fairytale land where we had all sorts of adventures... It still seems real even now, but I'd rather not think about it."

"Why not? I'd love to have had adventures in a fairytale land. Maybe I could still visit it in dreams?"

"Fairytale stories are bad for children", she went on. "Lead them to expect happy endings. False sense of security. Not like the ancient myths." She smiled at me, and her eyes flicked

away for a moment towards a framed painting on the wall. "They had more of a sense of real life to them."

I nodded and smiled back. The picture showed a young man and a young woman, she standing in front of a gnarled old tree, he sitting at her feet on a bearskin. The two were gazing at one another, and a caption underneath simply said: "Siegmund and Sieglinde".

"The prince and the princess", she explained. "Never happy ever after, because what's waiting for both of them is death."

It struck me that she could have been a princess once; there was something graceful in her manner and her speech. She seemed to have taken a liking to me, after her initial distrust, for now she continued her story. Her voice was soft, but slightly cracked with age.

"My boyfriend when I was a student was called Ken. I thought the world of him. My real-life prince. He was going to be an engineer. He was all I had, of course..."

I heard a catch in her voice. She paused, then looked up at me brightly. "Some fruit cake with your tea? Look, I baked this one yesterday. You'll like it!"

I found a small plate with a large slice of cake and a fork being pressed into my hand. I thanked her, while suppressing the irreverent desire to ask her how one made cake in a dream, or what the point of consuming it might be.

Meanwhile she recovered her poise and continued with her story. "I was twenty-one when it happened. My whole family wiped out in a train crash. Can you imagine it? I was in Bristol, at the College of Art and Design. My life was expanding, all sorts of new possibilities, and then a policewoman knocks at the door to tell me: my mother, brothers, even my beloved little sister, all dead, all gone forever. Only Father survived, and he was so badly injured he died before I could get to the hospital. They were all believers in God, much good did it do them. So Ken was all I had. Perhaps that's why I was so infatuated with the little bastard for so long. I clung to him night and day, refused to be parted from him for a single day. Even when they told me he had another girl on the side, I wouldn't believe them. I'll never forgive him for that."

I nodded sympathetically and nibbled cautiously at the cake. It tasted like cake does – of course, my own dreaming imagination would have seen to that.

"I was ready to kill myself after I found the two of them together. I wanted Ken to go through the rest of his life knowing he'd murdered me – I hated him that badly. So I took an overdose. But of course they found me and pumped me out and put me into therapy."

"I hope things went better for you after that?", I offered.

"Better? You're joking! After Ken left me I met Alex. No, first there was Steve. What a wash-out that was! Of course, he helped me when I was still going through therapy, brought me flowers, wrote poetry, that sort of thing. I was in love with him for about five days. Then I discovered he didn't have a job, didn't have any prospects in life, and was even more of a nutcase than I was. So I gave him his marching orders. But he refused to leave me alone. He wrote letters to me, had flowers delivered to my door by the lorry-load, pestered me incessantly. I had to move house twice before I managed to shake him off."

"Some men find it difficult to lose a woman they've fallen in love with", I suggested,

weakly trying to defend my own sex.

"Love? You call what Steve did to me love? It was just unforgivable, the way he treated me!"

I lowered my eyes and let her continue her story.

"Then, thank goodness, I met Alex. We got married on 9 June 1956, on a beautifully sunny Saturday afternoon. I was already pregnant with my daughter, though of course Alex's parents didn't know that yet. He was a chartered surveyor with a good career, and we had a lovely house together in New Barnet. Unfortunately Lucy died of pneumonia when she was five, and I had to go back into therapy."

"I'm very sorry to hear that", I murmured.

"It went better for a while after my son was born. Then came that terrible January. My husband was in Germany on business. He was flying from Frankfurt in a plane together with the Italian swimming team, which I thought was a good omen, more fool me. They reached Bremen in bad weather. The pilot tried to land, but couldn't see where he was going in the dark and the mist. He tried to go around for a second time..."

Now Siggy's voice did break with emotion. I did not dare to look at her, but waited quietly for her to recover.

"There were no survivors", she said at last. I could sense her forced cheerfulness. "Can you believe in a God who allows such things to happen? So I was alone again, but at least this time I had Eddie. He was my one consolation. I thought of him as my Siegfried. Someone to slay the dragons of loneliness. I went back to Bristol and after a few years managed to get my career started again. But then about the same time of course Eddie left home and started his own family. Well at least I had my work. I think that kept me sane in the end. Away from the useless therapy groups and hypocritical personal counsellors – what did they know of pain? What did they know of losing everyone you hold dear?"

"You didn't lose your son?", I ventured hopefully.

"At least Eddie managed to stay alive", Siggy said in a sour tone, "which is more than most of my family managed. But after he was married he gave me the cold shoulder, that's for sure. I begged him to name his first daughter Lucy, after his dead sister. He refused, and called her Chloe instead. What sort of a name is Chloe? And then he insisted on getting a job in north-west Wales, can you imagine? So what if Lynette was Welsh? It would have been so much easier for the both of them to come to London. I told him so a hundred times, but he wouldn't listen. There was a house for sale very close to me that would have been ideal for them. We could have visited each other every week, and I could have looked after Chloe when they wanted a free evening out together, even though she did have such a silly name. I think he did it on purpose, out of spite, even though I'm his mother and all that was left of his family, because he knew I didn't want to move to Wales to be near them."

"Why not?", I wondered.

"What, move to Wales? What is there in Wales? It's a complete waste of space, all mountains and forests and rivers and empty sea coasts. There's nothing to do there except go for endless walks."

“Going hiking in beautiful scenery can be a lovely way to—”, I began.

“Beautiful tosh! Try enjoying the scenery when it’s cold and windy and raining, which it mostly is. And when the place is empty of people, because all your family and everyone you’ve ever loved...”

Again I had to look away. Siggy’s distress was so vivid to me that I would not have trusted my own voice at that moment.

After a pause I ventured, “Wouldn’t it have been worth it to be near them?”

“I had my career to think about. I was in one of the big fashion houses.”

“Do they have fashion here? I haven’t seen any big shops.”

“Not here, silly. Back home. On Earth. While I was still alive.”

I stared at her. It was just a dream. She could say anything she liked, and it would all be meaningless. Just sit back and enjoy the show.

“I was only twenty-one”, she said, and I realised that she had jumped back to the start of her story. “I don’t know why they all had to be on that train. All except me, because I was at Bristol. My sister and brothers were part of a group who were involved with the fairy story from our childhood, but I didn’t want to do that any more because you’ve got to get on with your life, haven’t you? I mean, I had my studies and my boyfriend and hopes of starting a family of my own. Of course Ken was a disappointment, he betrayed me in the worst possible way, and after finding him with another girl I even wanted to kill myself...”

~ 3 ~

Sometime later I asked Siggy once again whether she had such a thing as a street map of the city in her house. She had not, but she allowed me to search the adjacent newsagent’s shop. I spent an hour rummaging through shelves of tinned food with faded labels, stacks of miscellaneous stationery items, tins of tobacco and the like, without turning anything up. My most potentially interesting discovery was a pile of newspapers dated 11 August 1999, but when I tried to read their contents the words blurred before my eyes and I could make no sense of them. I kept on seeing repeated phrases: “the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light”, “repent while there is still time”, and the like, but could not decipher the context. Dream newspapers.

Back in her sitting room, I frowned at the clock, which seemed to be stuck on half past four, and asked Siggy what she knew of the local area. Were there other people living nearby? There had been, she said, but over the years they had all moved out. Did she have any idea which direction one might go in order to get back to the Civic Centre? She merely shrugged and busied herself with the tea pot. Was there any public transport in operation? She thought for a while, but could only remember a bus stop in the next street, and no, she had not seen any buses using it.

My options appeared to be limited to sitting tight and waiting for something to happen. This was not satisfactory. There must be some action I could take? I pondered the matter and came up with a plan to rediscover the Civic Centre, or at least chance upon

somewhere significant in the city, by going out into the street and walking in a spiral pattern centered on her house.

"How will you know which direction to go when you can't see the house any more?", Siggy asked, revealing an unexpected practical side.

"If the streets form a regular pattern, I can navigate by counting how many intersections I've gone in each direction", I grinned at her. "Then I just keep on increasing the number until I finally get somewhere."

"They're not", she sighed. "They're all higgledy-piggledy."

"Well I don't know. Maybe the clouds will clear up and we can navigate by the stars? Maybe there's a landmark I can use? A high tower? I know! Why don't we build a high tower ourselves?"

"Why hasn't anybody else ever done that?" I was stumped for an answer, and she went on to answer her own question: "Because you can't build very high. Any more than two storeys, and they fall down as soon as you lose concentration."

I thought of my failed piano and groaned with frustration. "But we must do something! I can't just sit here forever!"

"Why not?" She smiled at me and offered me more cake. I sighed, settled back in the armchair and accepted the plate, even though by this time I was getting sick of dream cake. At least I suppose eating it doesn't make you fat.

I put a morsel to my lips, but just at that moment heard a low rumbling sound. The house had been so quiet, apart from our two voices and the gentle ticking of the clock, that it made me jump.

"What was that?"

"Just the pipes banging. It comes on every now and then. Just ignore it and it'll go away."

"The pipes?" In a house where one never went to the toilet or washed one's hands, because it was all only a dream? But then I remembered that sometimes I had been in crazy dreams where I was looking for the toilets but they were all too dirty to use, or I was taking a bath and discovered that I was still fully clothed. Why not a nightmare about domestic plumbing?

The rumbling intensified until it sounded like the growling of some wild animal – a bear, perhaps, or a member of the great cat family. After several uncomfortable minutes the noise subsided.

"He came to my funeral, at least", Siggy went on as if the story of her life had not been interrupted. She was looking not at me, but into her cup. "He was sorry then. When it was too late. I saw him crying, till Lynette and Chloe led him away. He wished he'd been kinder to his dear old mother while she'd been alive. He wished he'd listened to me more. Served him right, ungrateful boy."

I stared at her. "If it was your funeral, how did you see him? I mean, if you were...?"

"One does, you know. You seem to be floating over your body, watching what happens to it. But of course you know that yourself, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"And then they bring you here. A strange man with a clipboard takes down your details, tells you you're free to go wherever you want, do whatever you want..."

"I want to wake up in my bed at home!"

"I was twenty-one, you know", Siggy went on. "It happened while I was at Bristol. One day a policewoman knocked at the door of my room..."

I gave her a sharp look.

"My little sister was in the train with some friends, she said. Father and Mother as well. My two brothers were waiting on the station platform. Something went wrong with the brakes, and on top of that there was another train in the station where it shouldn't have been, right in their path. They wanted me to believe that life was all for the best, that there was a good and loving God watching over us, helping us through life, and then they all got on that train together and left me behind..."

The pipes started groaning again.

"Father used to let me ride on his shoulders, he used to tell us bedtime stories when the younger ones were still only babies, and when I got to the hospital it was too late, he was lying there cold and limp..."

The banging got louder.

"Stop it!", I shouted, jumping to my feet. "You've told me that twice already! D'you think I want to listen to the wretched story of your life over and over for ever?!"

She stared at me in shock.

The rumbling of the pipes was developing into a threatening growl. I turned in their direction. "And you can shut up as well!", I yelled at the wall.

The noise subsided, turned into a quiet gurgling and faded to nothing. Siggy continued gazing at me, wide-eyed.

"I'm sorry", I said to her. "I shouldn't have shouted at you. And in your own... It's just that things are getting a bit..."

"Let me give you some more tea..." The look on her face was frightened.

It was still half past four.

"Siggy, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going out to that bus stop. I need you to show me where it is, please. I'm going to wait there and see if a bus comes along. And... maybe you'd like to come with me?"

"Where will you go?"

"That depends on the bus company. Come with me. Please."

She shook her head sadly.

I went up to her. "Do you want to live here for the rest of your life?"

"My life has ended. There's nothing more to do now."

"Siggy, you don't know that. Look, you're alive now!"

"I'm dead. It's all over."

"So you're going to sit here and drink imaginary tea and eat imaginary cake for ever?"

She looked at me.

"Come on, Siggy, let's go. Let's find out if this city really is as dead as it looks."

"There won't be any buses."

"Come and wait with me. One hour. If a bus doesn't come in one hour, then you can go back home and forget all about it. All right, I know clocks and watches don't seem to work here, but you'll know when you've been waiting long enough. So how about it? You've got nothing to lose. Please? Or would you rather sit here all alone?"

She looked away from me, but then nodded. I took her hand and she allowed me to help her to her feet.

~ 4 ~

In fact the bus stop was a good half hour's walk from the newsagent's, so far as I could judge in that time-forsaken place. My decision to persuade Siggy to come with me, consisting of equal parts pity for her loneliness, and fear of getting lost without her, had been a good call: without her I might easily have missed the turning.

Once in the right street, however, our destination was unmistakable. After a few yards a bright spot of colour came into view in the distance. On getting closer we saw that it was a round street sign, illuminated from inside, with the words "BUS STOP" in red. I stopped for a moment to stare: that sign, and also a red letter-box on the opposite side of the street, were the only bits of colour in the otherwise monochrome scene. I shrugged: must be some trick of the light. A queue of people were already standing in line, huddled in their overcoats. I heard their voices, saw them stamping their feet to keep warm.

We hurried to join them, and I gave Siggy a smile of encouragement as I said, "Looks like there are more people in the neighbourhood than you thought."

A well-dressed man standing at the end of the queue turned to look at us. "Hello", I addressed him, "Is there a bus coming soon?"

He gave me a superior look. "I'm expected up there", he announced in a confident tone. "They'll be waiting for me. If you haven't got a friend or two in high places I shouldn't bother, if I were you. From all I've heard about it."

"What have you heard?"

"You need to be in with the right sort. Make sure you're invited. It's no use at all just turning up and hoping for the best."

"How do you get invited?"

He did not reply, but merely grinned and pointed across to the other side of the road at the red letter-box.

"Bullshit!", shouted a young man who was next in line after the well-dressed man. "When have you ever seen them emptying a letter-box?"

Siggy looked puzzled. "What address did you write on the letter?"

But the well-dressed man merely smiled and said, "No need. It's an intelligent box. There's a robot inside that opens the letters and faxes them up to the control room by radio."

"Bullshit!"

"We'll take our chances", I said, "but it won't matter either way unless a bus comes."

I glanced at the people further up in the queue, and a middle-aged woman in a fancy hat said, "It'll come. You've only got to wait a bit."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen it happen. People queue up, then a bus comes. They must have someone monitoring the bus stops. I've had a funny feeling ever since I came here that I was under secret surveillance."

"Where are the cameras, then?", asked the young man. "There aren't any!"

"I've got a funny feeling the cameras are very small. So small we can't see them." She suddenly frowned at something past the end of the queue, and I heard footsteps behind me.

"Bullshit!", was the young man's verdict.

"You're wasting your time, fools!", shouted a male voice in a foreign accent, and I turned to look at the newcomer. He was dressed in armour of antiquated appearance: a chain mail shirt and leggings under a richly decorated, multi-layered tunic which fell to his knees, a round spiked helmet which left his swarthy face exposed to display a swashbuckling moustache and a long goatee under a pair of glittering eyes, shoes with long toes which curved up to a point, and a belt with an ivory-sheathed scimitar at his hip.

The woman who had spoken was cowed into silence, but the young man laughed at the newcomer and shouted, "Where's the fancy dress party, then?"

The foreigner stared at him for a moment, then slowly drew his scimitar, advanced on the young man and said quietly, "Barbarian dog! On your knees, if you don't want my cold steel between your ribs!"

The young man retreated into the road, hands half-raised. "You can't kill me with that." He looked around at the others in the queue for support. "You can't kill anybody. We're all dead already."

"I know that. But you won't believe how much pain I can cause!" His lip curled into a snarl and he levelled his blade at the man's chest. "A curse upon your dog's heart – the curse of Tash, the inexorable, the irresistible!"

I was suddenly surprised by Siggy, who threw her arms around me and buried her face in my chest. "Don't let him see me!", I heard her whisper.

I patted her back in reassurance.

I looked up in time to see an athletic young woman leave her place further up the queue to confront the foreign swordsman. I noticed she was wearing a policewoman's cap and a dark jacket. "Your sort are scum!", she shouted, pulling a hand gun out of a black holster. "Drop your weapon! Now!"

The armed man stared at her, smiled to himself under his moustache and carefully laid down his scimitar on the ground. As he straightened up he casually reached under a fold of his tunic and pulled out a Kalashnikov.

There was a volley of shots, shockingly loud, which echoed off the nearby houses. The policewoman fell groaning to the ground.

"Glory to Tash, the inconceivable, the impossible!", exulted the foreigner, loosing off

another echoing burst of fire into the grey sky. "Accept this offering of another soul to your limitless empire of evil!"

A bright light appeared at the far end of the street, and there came the sound of a diesel engine.

Stowing his automatic rifle back under the folds of his tunic, the man picked up his scimitar. He glanced at the approaching light with a frown, then quickly inspected the people in the queue. He stopped when he spotted us and came closer.

"Who have we got here?", he asked in a menacing tone, and raised his scimitar with the intention of jabbing Siggy in the back with it. But at that moment the young man grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to turn around, and delivered him a punch to the nose. Behind the young man, a pair of rapidly approaching headlights were already flooding the scene with garish white illumination. I saw a couple near the head of the queue helping the policewoman to her feet and back onto the pavement.

Unsettled by the young man's attack on him as well as by the arrival of the bus, the foreign swordsman cursed, turned and ran off, empty-handed.

I patted Siggy's shoulders again. "It's all right", I said, "he's gone now."

Her frightened eyes met mine. "I know him", she whispered. "He tried to force me to marry him."

"Was that Ken... or Steve...?", I thought back to the list of names she had given me.

"No. Before all of them. Something that happened when I was a child..."

"My goodness! Wherever did you meet such a weirdo?"

She shook her head.

"Look, the bus is here. Let's get on."

She nodded and allowed me to lead her on board.

~ 5 ~

The bus was an old-fashioned triple decker, as one sometimes travels on in dreams, with the driver in a separate cab up front and the stairs by the entrance at the back. I looked around for a conductor, wondering what destination to ask for and what our fare would be, but nobody seemed to be in charge. Somehow the driver seemed to know when everybody was on board, perhaps using a mirror or a hidden camera, and the bus moved off.

The other passengers made a lot of noise as they selected their seats, and the young man's frequent exclamations of "Bullshit!" were especially annoying. We went upstairs to the middle deck, exchanged wary glances with the scattering of people who had settled there, and continued upstairs again to the top deck. Here the seats were unoccupied and the windows were surprisingly clean. I led Siggy to the front of the bus and we sat down to a grandstand view of the grey city. Only from this vantage point did I begin to get some impression of its size.

"It's all the same", Siggy said sadly. "Look how it just goes on forever, street after street, all the same."

"Yes", I had to agree, "you'd have thought people would've had more imagination building their houses."

"There's nowhere to go. Wherever we get to, we might as well have stayed at home."

"I mean, why not try adding towers at the corners, with little battlements and a pointed roof? Or why not have a garden with flower beds and trees? A splash of colour wouldn't do any harm at all. Why didn't I think of that when I was making my house?"

Siggy gave me a solemn look. "I want to go home."

"But you said it's all the same everywhere, so doesn't that mean you can be at home anywhere?"

"It took me absolutely ages to get everything right, and now I don't know if we can even get back to the bus stop."

"But not the pipes!"

"Did you see the name of the bus stop? So we can get home again?"

"I was rather hoping it would take us back to the Civic Centre. That's a logical place to be close to the bus station, don't you think?"

She sighed. "I had everything cosy and just so. And now you've dragged me away..."

That irritated me, and I snapped back, "So if you can't get home it's my fault, is it?"

She gave me a reproachful look.

Seeking to open her eyes to new possibilities, I said, "Funny about what the well-dressed man said. You know, the first one we talked to. He said he was being met. In high places. I wonder who's meeting him, and why. Siggy, is there anyone you'd like to meet?"

She looked at me. I saw a tear glisten in her eye before she turned away again.

"Look!", I said in some excitement. "We've left the ground!"

It was true. Without any of the drama of an aeroplane takeoff, the bus was smoothly rising into the air. I saw the street curve to one side beneath us as we flew over the rooftops, gaining altitude all the time.

"I was twenty-one when it happened", Siggy said suddenly. "Can you imagine it? My little sister and my two brothers and Mother and Father, all on the same train, I mean the boys were in the station waiting for the train, but it made no difference, because the brakes failed and there was another train on the line where it shouldn't have been, and can you believe in a God who allows such things without giving you any hint of a warning..."

"Oh, for goodness sake!", I snapped. "You've told me that story three times already! Give it a rest, can't you?"

She gazed at me in fright, stood up and rushed away to the back of the bus. Well, let her sulk alone, I thought. At least I'll get some peace.

And the bus continued to climb.

After a few minutes we entered the clouds and the grey city was lost to sight. The bus spent a long time immersed in mist before at last we got to the top and emerged like a submarine coming to the surface. As we came out the light was instantly transformed, and I had to hold up my hands to shade my eyes before they adapted to the brightness all around us. The upper surface of the cloud layer was shining pure white like a landscape covered in

freshly fallen snow, and the sky all around us was a deep indigo which only intensified the higher we climbed. Clearly the well-dressed man's "high places" had been intended literally.

The thought of where we might be going, accentuated by the pure quality of the light all around us, made me feel ashamed of my burst of bad temper. The equation of "high places" with high standards of conduct was of course a mere superstition, I told myself, yet I could not shake it off. I glanced around. Siggy was sitting at the back, looking mournfully at the seat in front of her, ignoring me and ignoring the view from the windows. Her lips were moving soundlessly. In that stark light she seemed shrivelled and corpse-like, with no trace of colour in her cheeks or her clothes, yet even so I thought I still detected a glimpse of the radiant young woman she must once have been.

After five minutes wrestling with my conscience I got up and went back to her. As I offered her my hand the words "I'm sorry I shouted at you", passed my lips almost against my will. Yet she followed me back to the front seat, neither acknowledging my apology nor meeting my eyes. You could see that her attention was focused on reliving her memories.

Though there was no visual sign of our progress, a slight tilt in the floor told me that we were still climbing. The light was getting ever brighter. Siggy had started speaking again, and now she continued retelling her story without a pause as if for the first time, neither looking to me for a reaction nor distracted by the scene outside. I let her soft, sad voice wash over me without paying too much attention. If it makes her feel better, let her talk. Better that she should have a passive listener, than that she should be left completely on her own.

I spent some time trying to create a pair of sunglasses, but without success. The faculty of materialising objects from my imagination which I had enjoyed in the grey city below was no longer effective, and I was forced to give up.

It must have been hours later that I noticed a change: in the distance directly ahead I saw a dark line which was rapidly putting on thickness and solidity. Siggy had fallen silent at last, exhausted by the recollections of a lifetime of much pain and little happiness.

The dark line resolved itself into a cliff face, rising out of the depths, whose crest was still many kilometres above us. I looked down, but the cloud deck had long been absorbed into the general blue-white brightness. Ahead of us the approaching cliff-face was putting on patterns of structure whose downward movement betrayed our rapid ascent. I tested my ears with my fingers, but could not detect any discomfort from changes in air pressure. I glanced at Siggy and was gratified to see that her gaze was at last directed to the window.

"Look!", I said to her, "We seem to be getting somewhere."

"I want to go home", she murmured, but her eyes were wide with an expression of wonder, and I doubted whether at that moment she really hankered after her little room in the grey house with the grumbling pipes where it was forever half past four.

~ 6 ~

At last we crested the clifftop and found ourselves flying over a vast plain. As we descended I saw that the ground was smoothly paved with an elaborate mosaic of variously coloured

slabs arranged into pictorial patterns: here I saw a lion rampant, there a tree with birds flying around it. Glancing to right and left, I saw that the smooth area extended a long way in both directions and that other buses were in use, some stationary on the ground, others in the act of landing or taxiing for take-off. We had clearly arrived at a major transport hub.

Our wheels touched down with an almost imperceptible sigh of deceleration and we rolled forward, coming to rest in front of a gothic stone façade. The terminal building resembled an immense church, one of a series of churches extending to right and left in front of the pavement. They were not all identical by any means; far to the right I spotted onion domes, while in the other direction some of the churches were in a modernist style, all sweeping concrete and glass. Inbetween each pair of churches I glimpsed a strip of garden with green trees, shrubs and flowers.

Looking down to see whether people were disembarking yet, I was disturbed by what I took to be a puff of smoke near the rear of the bus. Surely we could not be on fire after such a smooth landing? I could guess how sensitive Siggy would be to any hint of an air accident. In some consternation I led her down the two flights of stairs to the exit.

The air outside the bus was clean, fresh and lightly perfumed, like a flower garden in springtime after a refreshing shower of rain. Somewhere overhead I could hear the singing of a lark, but when I tried to look up the brightness of the sky made me blink and turn my head away. Through half-closed eyes I looked around for any signs of a fire and saw several smoky figures the size and shape of people. They even had human faces: among them I recognised the well-dressed man, the young man, the middle-aged woman and the policewoman. I stared in shock: every one was monochrome grey and translucent. The colourful outline of a church or a nearby parked bus could be seen through them as clearly as if they were literally no more than puffs of smoke or patches of mist. There could be no doubt: these were the same people we had travelled with, but when out in the open in this land the harsh light was passing through their bodies, turning every one of them into an insubstantial, ghostlike smudge. I turned to Siggy but she, too, was now made of smoke.

Then I thought to examine my own hands and body. They were the same, and a shiver ran down my spine at the thought of my insubstantial appearance.

I turned and saw the bus driver approaching. The change had not affected him: his golden hair, piercing blue eyes and crimson uniform looked solid all the way through. He was altogether too shiny to look at for long. He belonged to this place; we clearly did not.

"Excuse me, driver", I said, "what's happened to us?" I was shocked anew by the tinny sound of my voice, as if I was speaking from a great distance.

The middle-aged woman had come up behind me, and she squeaked, "Why have you brought us here?"

"Where are we?", came another plaintive voice.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and others!", the driver said. His tone was relaxed, his voice effortless, yet his words came at us as if through an amplifier at a rock concert. "This is the country where you will be united with your heart's desire forever, or else where you will finally reject your heart's desire forever. The choice is yours alone. If you decide to stay, I

promise you your bodies will quickly become acclimatised. Until they do, the management would like to offer you shelter, where you can rest and pray, and where you can meet your loved ones who have come a long way to meet you." The driver gestured behind him at the nearest church building, whose doors stood open and whose interior was invitingly shady.

"What if we don't want to stay?", asked someone.

"Then you can return on the bus", the driver answered. "But the management strongly recommends that first you spend a little time in the church of your choice."

"Not bloody likely!", I heard behind me. "This place gives me the creeps!" I glanced around to see one of the smoky figures waft back towards the bus.

I turned to the driver. "Will the bus take me back to the Civic Centre?", I asked. "You know, in the middle of the grey city?"

"If that's your decision, then yes. But why not stay a while first and see what happens? Maybe you'll prefer it here after all?"

I glanced at Siggy and was surprised to see her approaching the driver with intent in her grey eyes. "They were taken from me when I was twenty-one", she began. "There was a train accident. It was going too fast and the brakes failed and there was another train in the way and it couldn't stop in time. Can you believe in a God who would do that to me...?"

The driver held up one hand to stop her. "That story is coming to an end", he said sternly, "and a new one is beginning, if you want it to. Your family are all safe and sound. They want you to be reunited with them." He gestured towards the church behind him. "All you have to do is go inside and accept their love, and allow them to lead you to the love of God Himself."

Siggy stared at him open-mouthed, and the driver turned and walked away.

"Come on, Siggy", I said. I would clearly have some time to kill before the bus was ready to depart again, and meanwhile I was curious to see her long-dead family. "Let me help you." I held out my arm, and after giving me a distrustful look she hooked her hand over it and allowed me to lead her towards the open church doors.

~ 7 ~

The driver had not been wrong. Inside the church the shade was very welcome, and where the light from outside did enter it was through tall, narrow stained-glass windows. Rainbows of colour slanted through the air to fall on the tiled floor and on the rows of stone columns marching into the distance. There were seats of polished wood at the base of many of the columns, but otherwise the floor space had been left open. The smoky people were now much easier to see, but the interior was so large that as they fanned out from the entrance each one had a generous acreage of space to him or herself.

"It's been a long time since I was in church", I said. I noticed the faintest of echoes in that cavernous space, whose high ceiling would have accommodated a Moon rocket with ease. "I went once or twice to show my respects, but it all turned out to be nonsense. What about you?"

"When I was a teenager", Siggy said. Her voice and her darting eyes betrayed a nervousness which I had not noticed before. "The war was just coming to an end and there were shortages and ration books. When we went back to London I was horrified at the piles of rubble. The others went to church. They said it was all connected with our fairytale land that we played in when we were children, so I went along with them, but it didn't mean very much to me. Life was about growing up and passing exams and all the rebuilding after the war, and what did prayers and hymns and sermons have to do with anything? And then of course, when I was twenty-one... Can you believe in a God who does that to you?"

"Why should it be God doing it? Maybe it was something that God couldn't prevent, despite His power?"

"All my family just wiped out in one afternoon, as if the planes had come back over England and started the bombing all over again..."

"Look!", I whispered, "They're coming!"

I saw that a number of people, shining and solid like the bus driver, were coming towards us from the further end of the church. They, too, were fanning out as they evidently spotted long-lost friends or family. I watched them for a while.

"Now there'll be some interesting meetings!", I told Siggy. "Look, over there, the well-dressed man seems to have got into an argument already. Looks like he's lecturing his friend about something... The young man looks very quiet; I wonder what they're saying to him? He seems to have forgotten his favourite word... Oh, there's that woman who knew the bus was coming. I wonder if that guy talking to her is the one that gave her a funny sense of being watched over all the time? The policewoman's having quite a tearful reunion over there... I wish I could hear what they're saying, but they're too far away. Looks like they're leaving already. Yes, she's going with them; they're going towards the far end, the exit to whatever country lies beyond. She's looking more solid already; there's even a bit of colour coming into her cheeks..."

Siggy's hand tightened on my arm.

I looked in the direction she was facing, and saw a couple of the bright people approaching us: a radiant young man and an equally radiant young woman. The woman's face lit up with joy and she ran the remaining distance. Siggy shrank back from her, and the expected embrace did not happen.

"Susan!", the newcomer cried out. "It's you! You've come at last."

Susan? Siggy? Why not? They both begin with an S.

Her reply sounded reproachful. "Lucy... you've changed."

She would have changed, I thought, if this was her daughter who had died at age five, but apparently it was a different Lucy. It was not hard to guess that these were two of Siggy's siblings from the train crash.

"We're all like this up here", the shining Lucy said, face beaming with excitement. "You can change as well, you can be just like us. Come with me; let me show you!" She stretched out her hand, but Siggy only clung to me the tighter.

"Where have you been all these years?", she hissed. "I thought you were all dead. I

was left all alone in the world after the crash. Why didn't you get in touch to let me know you were all right?"

"But we *are* all dead! You too, now! It's so wonderful we can all be together again!"

By now the young man had joined us. He said, "I know you've got lots of questions, Su. We can bring you to the one Person who can answer them all."

Siggy shook her head. "No. Not Him. I can't face Him after what He did to me."

"He loves you, Su. He loves all of us."

"I tell you I can't see Him!", Siggy shrieked at her brother, as much as her thin voice, insubstantial as smoke, would allow. "What kind of a God takes everyone you love away from you and leaves you with nobody? Answer me that!"

"Sometimes God needs to take away your happiness", the young man said gravely. "How can I say it with sufficient tenderness? God whispers to us in our pleasures, but shouts in our pains; suffering like yours is His megaphone to warn you in advance not to rest in your sins, that your life is insufficient, that earthly things are not enough. He needs you to recognise your need to come to Him and depend only on Him."

"I call it wanton cruelty!", Siggy objected in a trembling voice.

"Admit it, Su, you turned away from Him. You were interested in nothing except nylons and lipstick and invitations to grown-up parties where you could meet people who would draw you even further away. But even then He didn't take everyone from you; you still had your son, who you named after me – thanks for that, by the way."

"Eddie? He was hopeless. He just wanted to get away from me."

Lucy shook her head. "No, Susan, you were too possessive of him."

"I loved my son! I always did my duty by him!"

"You tried to control him; you wouldn't let him be himself, find his way to God; of course he had to get away from you. Come with us now, and learn how to love truly."

Their brother added, "You'll feel better after you've seen Him. Just think how hard it was for me that first time! Surely you've not forgotten that?"

"I'll never forgive Him!", Siggy shouted back, "He doesn't love me, and you don't love me either, or else you'd have let me know how you were, instead of hiding away in your magic fairyland and leaving me to suffer grief the entire rest of my life back home!"

Lucy gave me a questioning glance. I nodded, and prised Siggy's hand away from my arm, while Lucy rested her own shining hand on Siggy's shoulder.

"I know it's hard to understand", she said. "I'm truly sorry that you had a hard time after we were taken away. Please forgive me for not getting in touch, and please believe I'd have come like a shot if only I'd been allowed to. But you know in your heart of hearts that there's only one Person who can make it all right. Come with us now. Please?"

Their brother chipped in, "It had to happen like that, with a train crash, because we were living in a sinful world. Do you really want to suffer it all over again now?"

Siggy straightened her head and gave the two bright people a hard look. Despite her evident misery, there was a note of triumph in her voice. "You all abandoned me. Now it's my turn. Go to hell, the whole pack of you! I don't need you any more!"

She turned round and started walking slowly back towards the buses. I stood and stared, hardly daring to breathe.

Lucy's voice was sad but resolute. "Susan! We can't go to hell. We're in heaven. This is where all the love and joy is. We love you, Susan, but we need Him, and you must see that you need Him too."

Unexpectedly the young man said, "Su! Pull yourself together! Remember you're a Queen! Remember our castle on its little hill, where we were all kings and queens, and the sands, with rocks and little pools of sea water, and seaweed, and the smell of the sea and long miles of bluish-green waves breaking for ever and ever on the beach! And the cry of the sea gulls! Don't you remember?"

"And playing chess with fauns and good giants", Lucy added. "And the mer-people singing in the sea. And our great ship with the swan's head at her prow and the carved swan's wings coming back to her waist. And the time when we had the musicians up in the rigging playing flutes so that it sounded like music out of the sky."

"And the Lion's kiss. Don't you remember that? Like floating in a sea of tossing gold, with such a sweetness and power that you felt you'd never really been happy or wise or good, or even alive and awake, before."

"He's waiting for you here, right now! All you have to do is to trust in Him and believe..."

Siggy had stopped. Her body was shaking violently.

Suddenly she turned back towards us and rushed at Lucy, sobbing.

This time the embrace was consummated, though I guessed that Lucy had to be careful not to crush the still smokelike figure of her sister with her greater strength.

After much weeping, with soothing words from Lucy, the two of them started walking arm in arm towards the further end of the church, the one leading out into whatever wonders this country contains. When their path happened to take them through a shaft of colour falling from one of the tall windows, a strange trick of the light caused me to seem to see both the women wearing golden crowns. Their brother watched them go and then turned back to me.

"Will you come with us, too?", he asked. "We'd be very happy to welcome you into our little company. All you have to do is accept God into your heart."

"What was that about a queen?", I asked. "Is that something to do with the fairyland she sometimes talks about?"

"Yes. We were kings and queens together, all four of us. Sounds funny, I know."

"And why was it", I went on, "that you died, and yet you were still conscious and awake in the afterlife, so far as I can see, and yet unable to let your sister know that you were all right and that she would meet you again one day?"

"It's hard to explain... It's because the world is sinful, and Su had so little faith."

"I mean, couldn't you have appeared to her in a dream? Or sent her an angel with a message? How about a phone call from the other side? Look at the Bible; that's full of supernatural appearances to people on Earth."

"If you really want to know", Ed told me, "then you must leave your intellectual pride behind and come with us."

"No, thank you", I replied. "I can see exactly where this is going: you're going to want me to believe all sorts of weird stuff that simply isn't true."

"I'm only asking you to believe my own story. I was a traitor once. I felt myself sliding into misery and evil, but He saved me and reunited me with my brother and sisters. If you want to find out more, it's all in *The Works of C.S. Lewis*."

"Thanks. Great story, by the way; but my story's different. Another question, if you don't mind. Are you seriously saying that God deliberately arranged for your sister to be left behind on Earth while the rest of you went to Heaven, so that she'd contemplate her life and realise how shitty it was and turn to religion? Or turn back to whatever it was she had before with the rest of you?"

Ed smiled. "He wanted her to have that chance of repentance, yes."

"But it didn't work, did it? She got more and more bitter and resentful. When I met her, she seemed to be perfectly happy to sit in her little room in the grey city forever."

"Whatever she was feeling, it was certainly not 'perfectly happy'."

"Sorry. Turn of phrase. I mean, that's what she ended up doing, and when someone like me came along she just wanted to tell me the story of her life over and over again. So her experiences on Earth had the effect of leading her away from the being you call God, not towards Him."

"It could have led either way. She had to make her own choice."

"But that's my point! She did, and she chose to stay down below. If I hadn't come along, she'd still be down there. Even when I took pity on her and convinced her to get on the bus, even after talking to you she still preferred the grey city. So let's suppose you're right and God did make her life on Earth a misery to try to draw her back to him. My point is this: it didn't work. It failed utterly. It's only at the last minute when you suddenly thought of doing something different, when you reminded her of stuff – I suppose it must've been from the happier days when you were all children together – only then did she remember the good times and change her mind and decide she wanted to be with the rest of you after all."

Ed was still smiling in a way that irritated me. "God was working through me. He always know what's best."

"But look what that means! It's the old fable of the sun and the wind. There must be millions of people down on Earth right now who God's putting through misery in the hope they'll turn to Him. Billions! Surely you don't have to be the greatest intelligence in the universe to realise they'll be infinitely more responsive if you offer them something nice rather than beat them over the head with something nasty? So how can you possibly say that God knows best?"

Ed shook his head. "I don't know", he said at last. "In a sinful world, I don't think it's possible for God to show too much of Himself. He only managed to reveal Himself to the four of us as much as He did by drawing us away into another world by magic. I remember

Him telling us that the reason we were brought there was to know Him better when we returned home.”

“But why on earth did you need all the palaver of going to another world to see Him? Why not in this world? – I mean, England, planet Earth.”

“Because – you have to understand – our own world is not free. It’s occupied by the enemy. God will invade in force and take it back one day, but not yet. In the meantime He can only operate there undercover.”

I frowned. “That’s nonsense! I don’t see any reason why the supposed creator of the world should be so shy. And even supposing He is: why then don’t all children have your experience? Why didn’t I, when I was young?”

“All I can tell you is my own story: before His face all questions die away. He Himself is the answer. Wrong will be right when He comes into sight, and when He shakes His mane, it’s springtime again.” Ed made a little laugh, as if recalling sweet memories, and continued, “He offers you everything you could desire – provided only that you believe and that you prove your faith by keeping hold of it through the hard times. It’s not an intellectual argument, but an emotional experience that goes to the very heart of your being. Will you allow me to lead you to Him?”

“If God’s got the sort of geographical range people seem to think, He can probably track me down Himself. So thanks, but I think I’ll just wait and keep my eyes open in case any portals to a magical world open up in front of me. Anyway, what does it matter? I’m not even dead yet; I’m only having a strange dream. One that’s been going on a good deal longer than I would’ve liked.”

He gave me a sad smile. “I’m sorry, my friend, but you’re mistaken. This really is the afterlife. I’m afraid you died in your sleep without realising it. The grey city below really is Hell, though if you stay here you may call it Purgatory.”

“Naah. Wasn’t hot enough for Hell.”

“If you think you’re dreaming, why can’t you wake up?”

“I will do, soon. But this place is too sunny. It’s sensory overkill. I need somewhere a bit darker.”

“You’ll find that Hell gets darker and more terrifying the longer you stay there.”

“Great. If a bit of nightmare doesn’t wake me up I don’t know what will. Or else I’ll hijack one of the buses and fly back to Earth in that!”

I turned away from Ed and walked resolutely back towards the paved runways where the buses were waiting.

---

Stephen Livesey Ashworth, Oxford, UK  
sa@astronist.co.uk / www.astronist.co.uk