

Chapter Four - Gender Future - A Story

Part One is set in the Year 2015
Part Two is set in the Year 2020
Part Three is set in the Year 2220

Part One - 2015

1.

In a small educational institute, there is a corridor. Along this corridor is an office. Outside the office is a young woman. She hovers nervously by the door, as if summoning up the courage for something. Then we see what it is: she knocks. A man's voice inside...

'Wait a minute!' Grumpily, then, more humanely 'Who is it?'

'It's Sarah Jones. Dr. Porter, you said after the last seminar that I could come by if I had any questions.....' she says this through the door, her voice straining to be heard. The muffled sound, almost like swearing, then 'yes...' then remembering itself: 'Yes come in... do come in...'

She sits on the chair in the corner while he busies himself with shuffling this and that. It is a smallish office, packed but tidy, with a great view over the forest. She sits with her legs crossed awkwardly, as young women do sometimes, as if apologising for taking up space.

'So you said you had a question...? About...?' he said vaguely, as if groping for a memory of her, which he was.

'Well,' she starts to gush, 'You said in the seminar last Monday that there was all of this change going on in the 1990s around gender and you were in there at the time, you even met some of the pioneers, that there was this divide between the therapeutic...or should I say...humanistic...I don't want to get that wrong... and political strands of the masculinities movement and yet...'

She tapers off...then her voice comes back, slower, more determined.

'There are a few questions I have...some things I just don't quite understand....'

'Yes...well what's that...?' he waits...somewhat intrigued.

'It's just that...Your own PhD. I've read it, I mean I've read bits of it, from the website and well you did say to come and tell you if you noticed anything...and you write a bit about your own experience and how your mission is to *embody* it, 'be the change' and all that...except you say that, you say you hope that you would do more than just sound like you believed in change...well...I don't want to sound rude or anything...but...how did you end...up *here*...?? And in your ...well, you know... position...like so many others? I mean how different are you to the people you challenged who wrote about masculinities and how important it was to do more than talk about the change in gender relations but to embody it and here...you...are...I mean, do you ever feel like you too were just going through the motions in order to further your own career...and if so...I'm sorry this is all sounding much more rude and accusatory than I meant it to be...but I just wanted to ask...how has it all panned out...has it really made a *difference*?

He sits down opposite her by the desk. He smiles, for the first time since she came in.

- Do you mean: 'Have I made a difference?'

- Well...yes...

- And here I am, just another middle aged white man, occupying a position of authority, and how different is that to all the people I wrote about?

- Yes...that's it...I mean, to some people you would just appear to be the same as all the rest. Perhaps not totally the same, the work that you do and the things you write

about and say. They are very different. But what you look like (she blushes) I don't mean to be rude...

- No, No! Don't worry this is good! I mean I am glad you are asking me these things, these are good questions.

- So why is gender so important and how is it important? When in the end we end up just being the same, repeating the patterns. Here I am a young woman and you a man in a position of power...is there anything that *changes*?

- Let's talk about that. Let's see what sense we can make together of this, look beyond the stereotypes perhaps. You see a white man, middle-aged, in a position of some power, (although I don't feel like I have much, but that may be part of the point) and this seems at odds with what I say.

- Yes exactly. It looks at one level like you just wanted to talk about these things, but how does that change anything?

- That's a good starting point. It isn't that I ever felt I had to change something. It was that I wanted to change it. I wanted to talk about it. Not many people did, or do in fact, even today. I mean I was then, am now, in some ways, just an ordinary bloke. Except that ordinary blokes didn't talk about these things. That was for others; women, black people, the marginalised. In my view, it was only when the ordinary blokes started talking about things like gender that things could change, because they (we) controlled the discussion.

- But that's it. How much did really change? How much has changed?

- You are here, and we are having this discussion, that in itself may be some kind of change.

- Yes but is that it? Is that all and especially when on the outside not much seems to change...

- The 'outside'?

- Appearances, and real positions of power, where men have them more...

- That's a good point and a double-bind. I mean, what was I supposed to do? Not speak up, and in not speaking up not getting to where I've got to?

- I recognise that double-bind, but the repeating of habits, you know what Judith Butler says; how we feel 'compelled to repeat patterns' of gender.

- That's a name I haven't heard in a while...

- I've read some of her work, and in the end, doesn't she says mean we just end up repeating those habits, in the end?

- Yes and she also says, like Elizabeth Grosz, that in the *now*, in the present, in these moments of possibility, 'in the nick of time', as she says, we can change these habits, be something a bit different, maybe not hugely, not heroically, but a little bit, and that's a shift.

- But look how it looks, middle-aged man etc. etc.

- Yes, and how it looks isn't necessarily what it is...

- But isn't that just a cop out? If it looks like it always did? Isn't it what it always was?

- At one level, I have to put aside a feeling of defensiveness to answer your questions, because at one level I can't help being what I am, or appear to be, a middle aged white man, with (he gestures to the photographs and pictures on the wall), a wife, kids, certificates and diplomas etc. etc. So yes, to a degree it is true. I did have a dream when I was young that I could be a different kind of man...and, have you ever seen that film, the 'Man who Fell to Earth',

- Er no...don't think so...

- It was with David Bowie...?

[She stares blankly]

- It is quite old now I suppose. Anyway, this man, he is a Martian, with special gifts and powers, and in one scene, because these abilities and powers are so threatening to the people around him on earth, they just take him away and operate on him, literally surgically intervene to make him normal, change his eyes, his appearance, re-

engineer him to 'normalise' him through medical processes, it is all very Foucault-esque....

- So what's that saying? Aren't you agreeing with me? That in the end these patterns 'get you' and you end up just the same, 'gender-normalised'?

- That is how it appears isn't it? You start off with these dreams of big change and dramatic difference. But these grandiose dreams may be part of the problem, these expectations of grand transformations. They reflect a mindset that suggests some kind of individualistic, self-determined power, which may be one of the set of assumptions of patriarchy. And it can be kind of depressing, when the system takes hold... drip, drip...your dreams leak away...the first wage... the mortgage...I remember how thrilled my father was when I got my first mortgage, and how much I resented him for it, like it was a victory that he had one over a change I wanted to be...This is further disempowering, creating a myth of the superman that the vast majority feel inferior too. It is a myth of control. We can't control the world, and there's loads of research that shows that most perpetrators of domestic violence have issues of control.

- So it's more than just about 'selling out', it's about an unfulfilled promise

- Yes and that's how it can feel...you know at one level I am what you 'see' before you...but I can tell you too it isn't like that, as well. It is a subtle paradox

- How? You say that. You would say that. But I can't really see it...And maybe that's the point. I mean at one level I just don't get this gender stuff. Like lots of people my age, we just accept there's a difference. Maybe it's just inevitable, because men and women are just different. After all, biologically, we are genetically 99% similar to apes and yet there's a whole chromosome's difference between men and women. That old stuff about feminism and patriarchy; lots of men and women my age, we just accept that we're different and it's not a problem anymore.

- Is that what you think? Really?

- Why not? Isn't it better than just talking about things being different and then living as if nothing has changed?

- [trying not to show his anger] That would make me very disappointed, if that was the case. Did you walk all the way up here because you really believe that? Or isn't it that changing these things is much harder, more subtle and complex, and may just take a lot longer than any of us ever really imagined? I refuse to believe that biological determinism stuff. People blame their own kids for it. We put all this conditioning pressure on them, because the world we present them has this divide in it, so black and white, from the moment they are born, we say 'it's a boy' and then they see little Johnny pick up a stick and and go 'Bang! Bang!' and they say 'See? It's in their genes!' And little Sarah picks up a doll and they say 'see...!' We just reinforce the behaviour we want to see, or ignore what doesn't fit.

- I hated dolls.

- There you go then! Because when little Johnny or Sarah does something different it takes an effort on their part, and they may get hassled for it, and yet they *still do*. Many little boys and girls do rebel against the stereotype. And not just in terms of their sexuality, in terms of lots of other choices. Small disruptions, even though there's all this pressure to conform. Many of them still do choose something different with their sexuality, or what they like to play with, or whatever. And we're seeing these small disruptions more and more.

- And what about you, what did you do differently? What's your disruption?

- I suppose that's it: my only transgression, the only thing I found myself wanting to do differently was to talk about it. I just wanted to start a conversation, and keep it going. I had to learn to do that carefully, in a place like this. Some would argue that using the words changes the reality. Perhaps that's all I know; that's all I am good at.

- So does having a conversation make a difference?

- Maybe not much, and maybe it does. Maybe that is what research is for: without wanting to dress it up, at its most basic level, it is about persisting with conversations, so they just don't go away. That's what Carl Rogers said: what we need is a

'disciplined personal commitment' to a set of questions, rather than a 'methodology'. I have just had some of that disciplined personal commitment to these questions. Pursuing through conversations like this, learning to have conversations that have an impact, maybe in a small way. There is so much that shows the commonly held beliefs about men and women aren't true. Look at Deborah Cameron's book, the 'Myth of Mars and Venus' for example, where she systematically shows how all that stuff about how men and women speak differently just doesn't hold water, yet we still persist in talking about it as if it does. Maybe all we have that can make a difference are these marginal conversations. Maybe this is our methodology. If 'worlds follow words', maybe that's all we can do: think about how we have those conversations and be the change we want to see. That is why your feedback, about me appearing to be the same as everyone else, well, it hurts.

- I didn't mean to hurt, but I just wanted to know, what's the big deal? I mean I just didn't get it.

- Yes I have heard that before, and when people don't understand, don't 'get it', I do get frustrated and then if I'm angry, I can appear as the big, scary, white man; the very thing I am trying to get away from.

- You are quite hard on yourself.

- That's true. But this stuff matters I suppose and I am learning not to be hard on myself, but it's a bit of a life's work, holding it more lightly, learning to have skilful conversations. Like at this place. It is hard sometimes not becoming the person who gets known for banging on about this or that and then you get ignored. I just wanted, I *still* want, to keep the men's stuff on the agenda.

- But why men's stuff? Why not gender?

- Gender is always seen as about women, but where are the men in all of this? In the public domain, where is the conversation about men and masculinities? Men as a class, a 'thing', rather than 'everything'. When Neil Armstrong said 'one small step for man' when he stepped on the moon, did he mean, just men? No. He meant everyone. So how to keep this conversation on the boil, just simmering away for twenty five years or more, that's what my research has taught me? It becomes a kind of life skill, helping me know when to speak and when to be silent...

[There's a silence – which Sarah breaks]

- You do have quite a lot to say now! I wouldn't have realised it mattered so much to you, that you felt it so deeply.

- I suppose part of this long haul has been to know what not to say, and when not to say it, and that's interesting isn't it? Because when I do that I risk looking like everyone else, as you saw me. I do despair sometimes because it can feel like we're right back where we started. Especially when I hear bright young women like you argue for biological determinism.

- And old men like you feeling like they have to patronise.

- I didn't mean to patronise you. But how can I avoid it?

- Things have changed. I mean, compared to my grandmothers' generation, I can go everywhere, do anything. We have different concerns now. Feminism has done its job. But we've got a planet to save. That's more important now, surely?

- This is tricky ground. How can I possibly argue otherwise? I am on dodgy ground. As a man how can I argue differently? Do I want to point out how things *haven't* moved on? How can I argue with women that they are kidding themselves that gender isn't an issue anymore? Just because Yves St Laurent made the trouser suit, is that the end of it? Is that what liberation looks like? Or did it just give them the opportunity to be more like men? And what about the men, who do we need to be like? What's our liberation?

- But the men I know, they are just themselves, they don't worry about these things, and they don't dominate us, they don't get a chance.

- I hope so. I really do. Yes I can see what you mean. I can see it in my own son and daughter. But I also don't see it.
- So what you are saying is that I am kidding myself.
- No! I really hope you don't think that. As I said, this is dodgy ground for me. I want to support you. All I am saying is that there is still this undercurrent, an underlying psychology of dominance. It pervades. Only if we keep talking about it, naming it, can we really hope to shift it. That's all I aim to do, and have aimed to do. I can't tell you how to be. I can try to show you by how I am. Keeping that conversation going and showing who I am in it. It is about a different kind of knowing, telling a new story.
- Stories? How are stories useful? How do they help you in this? You said that before, in your seminar. I don't quite see how telling stories can help.
- It's about practical knowledge. If I tell you a story about something, you get a really clear, direct picture of something happening. A story has so much data in it, about what you can think, what you can do or even try yourself. It is a translation of the wonderful richness of human experience distilled into something even a child can understand. Look at the lessons about deep, big things in a story, like Hansel and Gretel, for example. Good and evil, medieval European parenting, child abuse, trust, sibling relationships, companionship and more. This is what David Abram talks about in *Spell of the Sensuous* – he thinks storytelling is just an expression of linguistic synaesthesia.
- Synaesthesia?
- Do you know when people see number as colours? The world sort of buzzes for them?
- Yes I've heard of that.
- Abram thinks synaesthesia is an innate human characteristic, a trait of our culture – it is the root of animism, which forms the basis of many early human theologies. It is saying that the whole world talks to us; our environment is saturated in a kind of knowledge. In becoming alphabetic, using abstract language, we have rendered all of that knowledge into stories.
- So how does that work? How does telling stories change anything? How does it help us to 'know'?
- Well let me tell you a story. I can say all you like about the importance of gender, the difficulty and complexity of doing work around masculinity in organisations, how arch it all is, but let's see if a story can get you into that world in a way that leaves a deeper impression, and perhaps some more practical knowledge too?

So here's the story:

I was given a project around men and leadership once, a piece of work that fell into my lap and I thought it would be really useful, and be the starting point for my PhD. I thought it was my salvation. How naïve I was! It turned out to be different. At first it all looked quite straightforward. It was for a Local Authority. I was contacted by this woman who organised the development of the senior management, the top men of this council. And they were all men. That was the issue, in her view. In a council that overall was 75% women workers, the top team were all men and they all recognised this was an issue, something they 'had to do something about'. So my job was to work with them to help them address this question.

Now I naively thought that this was about having discussions with them about their masculinity, how they felt, perhaps even get them to open up with each other, learn to cry perhaps? I don't know! Honestly! Poor fool I was! For them, this couldn't have been further from the truth. My job as far as they were concerned was just to sit there and observe their meetings and then 'make recommendations'. I tried to introduce some discussions, to get them to play at men's development, to talk about this issue, about them all being men – I even started by reading them a poem (can you believe it!?). It was a good one, called 'Doodle at the Edge', by William Ayot; it's all about endless

meetings without soul, and it ends with the line about 'bringing the Gods back into the boardroom, the laughing, smiling, weeping Gods of the night-time and the wild'. They humoured me but wouldn't play. Not in front of each other. There was always something more important on their agenda. When I met them one to one, which I was allowed to do, they mostly told me (in confidence) that it was the other person's issue that 'I'm not sexist myself, but I notice so and so is...' I felt manipulated. But it felt important to stay in there, so I toed the line. The woman who had asked me in, she said she thought it was all working fine, but of course, it was her idea, so she would say that, to save face. Then someone else I talked to pointed out that the mere fact that I was involved, hired, was allowing them to tick their box, saying that they were doing something about it. You can imagine how that felt! It was as if I was propping up this little gentleman's club instead of helping to demolish it. I mean I did actually feel for these men, who were by and large very harassed. They were guarded in public, with each other, but in private they did open up to me, about their struggles, their pains and passions, but all with a 'but this has to remain secret, you can't tell anyone about it. I can't be seen to be admitting this'. I encouraged them to open up with one another, but no-one took the bait. Who would go first, and trust that the pack instinct didn't close ranks behind them? One even told me that he usually went home bursting for a pee and starving hungry, because he literally hadn't had time to eat or go to the loo all day. This wasn't exceptional. This was common. But it was too hot to handle. It had to remain private.

- So what did you do?

- I did learn something. It taught me that men are just as subject as women to the demands of a kind of masculinity, a dominant way of being, that influenced their very fibres. In private they could recognise this, but in public – they had to keep on the armour. This all leaves them just as in pain, but that in some ways they have even less space to admit it 'out there'. Well, maybe not less than women, but definitely not very much. And that you can't tackle these things head on. It is just too politically sensitive. I wrote a report, which they accepted graciously. They paid me, and then, as fast as they decently could, they kicked me out and I never heard from them again.

[Pause]

- So that's a story. Of course it is totally riddled with my own biases. Stories are never neutral. But even my biases have data in them.

- Like your bias about that woman and her motivation.

- Yes, you spotted that. But even with the biases there is still loads of practical knowledge there, as long as we don't try and pretend we are being objective.

- I can see what you mean about practical knowledge. It makes me wonder if I'd ever like to do this kind of thing, work with issues like this in organisations! It seems crazy complex. You have to be so...prepared for disappointment, such a political animal.

- But be careful of the generalisation. This kind of 'storied knowing' isn't objective and it isn't general; it isn't universal. It exists in a kind of strange space between the general and the specific. Yes, at one level it is just my story. It is also *our* story, but it may not be *your* story. You might be able to do something different with it. That's that marginal change, 'in the nick of time' as Elizabeth Grosz called it. She means that we only have the present, the here and now in which to make a difference. So it doesn't mean this might happen to you this way, if you tried something like that. But it might help you change your approach, if you wanted to try.

- I was reading recently about something that may be what you are saying. It was David Bohm's stuff on 'proprioception'. I think he meant to see how others see you as you interact with them. And how you can change it by being aware of it. I mean I was involved in this project with these other men, and I could see how they saw me, and

...well, perhaps how *sexualised* their view was. How they looked at me and stuff. I didn't want to be seen that way, so I changed. The following days I changed things, like my clothes. I definitely dressed differently. I think I even smiled less. It's funny but I think they liked me less, but they respected me more. They listened more.

- So how do you know that?

- One guy, the project leader, he practically ignored me on the first day and when I changed, you know, like I said, he responded differently and he gave me more to do and came to see me to ask my opinion on something. Of course it did occur to me he was just patronising me, or maybe he just fancied me...How would I know?

- Its interesting isn't it? In that stories there are just so many possible explanations, positions, possibilities for action and consequences.

- But I really wanted to do that work. It was important and part of me didn't care what they thought, as long as I had a chance to do what I wanted to do. It irritated me that these men behaved the way they did but in a way the result was better for me. So I can see what you are saying about how it pervades, how I had to work my way around this situation. If I challenged them head on and said how sexist their behaviour seemed to be to me, that wouldn't have done any good, I think. They'd have just left me out, excluded me. In some way I just felt like I was just playing their game, but who cares? That's the way it is all the time. I can play their game in order to change it to my rules.

- That's the kind of thing I mean by 'shape shifting'. What Gloria Gordon called bi-cultural competence? Simply put, we can learn to play the game in order to change it, quietly. Not head on. In order to do so it helps to know where we've come from and what we want. In terms of research, there will be things we deliberately try and know more about, and want to change and there'll be unintended consequences too. Like if you can track your story with those men, there will be things you are aiming for and things that emerge as a result of your action, which you can also notice, keep track of, raise awareness about, yours and others. So having told me your story, what do you notice now about it?

- I notice how I felt slightly ashamed of what I was doing, as if I was playing along with their game, but having told you're the story I feel angrier and actually I just feel a bit sorry for them, and feel a bit stronger in myself. And...

- Yes

- It feels funny telling a man, you this story, as if I am giving away something, like secrets or something.

- I do feel honoured that you are telling me this story, and I notice, yes I agree, a sense of transgression. This is the kind of conversation men and women don't usually have. That's what I like though. I seem to have attracted it. I suppose it's one consequence of putting my interest in gender and masculinity out there. I find myself sometimes standing on the border. Like gay men say they do.

- And I feel even more determined. The point is, if I need to play this game in order to get on, I'll play it. I don't really care so much if it looks manipulative. It feels quite good actually! I feel subversive!

- So these are the tools we can develop, of action and reflection, and yes that's Bohm's 'proprioception'. These are the phenomena we notice in action and this can inform what we do, how we do differently next time, 'in the nick' again.

- Is that what you do?

- Yes, well sometimes, maybe. Am I doing it now? Am I changing things, the usual patterns? What's your impression of me now?

- It's true that you look a bit different to me, I can see behind the appearances. I've enjoyed the conversation, found it useful. I certainly feel like I couldn't care even less now what those guys think about me.

- And I've been reminded of something by this conversation

- What's that?

- That the difference I wanted to make in the world isn't that far away, but neither is the opposite – being what I don't want to be. That isn't far away either. It's like a knife edge. It has been a really helpful reminder that no matter how far I think I've come, I can still appear as the very thing I'm trying to change. It has made me think, and it will make me different, today.

2.

In the corridor at the Institute:

- What's the matter?
- Why do you ask?
- You look a bit down
- I don't know, a few things I suppose. I get a bit sick of this place. The targets, the deadlines, the politics you know...Monday mornings...
- Nothing big then!
- Yes I suppose it's everything, nothing new, and that feeling of having absorbed...stuff.
- Toxic meetings.
- Yes that stuff, we pick it up, but I'm used to that, inured I suppose
- Is that it?
- No, there was something else...
- Yes?
- I met a student today, a young woman...
- So?
- She reminded me of...something
- Something or someone?
- No, well...yes....She reminded me of myself, because of what she said
- What she said?
- Yes, she said something and it really...you know...got in there, under the radar as it were. It was like a reminder of what matters to me.
- What did she say?
- She asked a question really. She asked, 'Has it made a difference?'
- Has what made a difference?
- She kind of called my bluff. Sort of accused me, gently, kindly, of not really walking my talk...about the gender stuff
- Ah that.
- Yes that, you know what everyone else here thinks is my 'obsession'.
- Yes, it is something we all know is important to you, but you don't bang on about it quite as much as you used to. I remember when you were doing your research, you saw it everywhere. Everything became a gender question.
- Everything is a gender question!
- There you go again. I thought it was too good to be true.
- But is that a good thing? Banging on about it less? I mean surely it's the kind of thing we need to bang on about more?
- What good does it do? Does it influence things, what does it change? Does it sell? It isn't that much of an issue here anyway. We don't really have a gender problem. We have much more of a race issue don't we?
- Is it a contest...
- That's not what I mean. You know what I mean. It's a question of focus. You can't focus on everything, and there's never really been a clear business case for it. 'Gender Studies': It's a done deal. Not enough money in it to open that can of worms.
- So if it's a can of worms, it *is* an issue then?!
- Here you go again.
- No alright, you are right. I can be evangelical and I'm the first to be put off by that in other people. But I always felt that keeping the conversation going about it, even lightly would have an impact.
- And it does have an impact. You have an impact. The way you are, the way we are, that is the real issue surely? So that we aren't replicating the way of things in a sexist culture? Surely that's the heart of what we do here? Keeping

learning at the centre of things. Surely that's the biggest challenge to the old guard?

- That's just it - she couldn't see it.
- Couldn't see what?
- She couldn't see how things were different, how I was different. She said that in a way I represented all the things I write about changing. That I was white middle class middle aged man in a position of power.
- Wow! she didn't pull her punches!
- She was quite sweet about it really and we had a good discussion, but I do kind of feel that although part of me knows I do, or can disrupt that 'patripsych'...
- The *what?*!
- You know, it's what John Rowan calls that habitual pattern in our psyches of being a dominant man...or dominated woman.
- Oh yes, I see. So why didn't you just say that then?
- It just makes sense to me to use that word: 'patripsych'
- And in doing so, it doesn't make sense to me, it excludes me; surely isn't that when you lose people?
- That's just it, gender interference patterns, theorising about gender and masculinity in a voice that in some way is still riddled with the things we want to change.
- And I know you can be different...it is just that when you become...uni-focussed...that's a good word isn't it? You know kind of evangelical and obsessed, that's when I lose you. It's off-putting.
- And that's what she is saying you know, it's so frustrating after a lifetime of looking at this stuff and it only takes a moment to fall back into the old habits.
- And a moment to fall out of it again. Why are you so hard on yourself? It is when you are so hard on yourself that you get lost in all of this.
- Yes that's true, and when I relax with it that I don't need to 'bang on' as you call it. But I fear complacency. She just got under my radar, called me on the very thing that I fear most – that talking about it and not embodying it...the change...in some way.
- And we all do that in some way, you know, espoused versus lived values, Argyris and all of that.
- But she had a point I feel, I wish there was some way I could hold it more explicitly. I still miss doing men's groups I used to do, you know, after all these years. I miss a project that explicitly tries to address this stuff.
- And you always said that you moved on from it because you felt it was just playing the game, in some way making things worse, just playing along with the gender rules, as if you were helping men to catch up in the game that they had temporarily lost the lead from women.
- Yes that's true
- Look in the end there is just you, and there is just now, and all we can hope for is to approximately live our values. You feel marginalized yourself, that's you pattern you know, and then you find yourself being, well marginalised, even though it's around the issues of being the white man. It's a paradox. But it isn't that important. Perhaps you should relax a bit more? What was it I heard someone say last week: 'We're all just flavours in the cosmic soup!'
- Yes I suppose you're right – except...Part of me just wants to keep the conversation going some how. It feels important to do it.
- Argh! Well, suit yourself. Look I must run...

3.

Back in Jim's office.

- Have you got five minutes? It is Daniel who puts his head round the door this time.
- Er... (He didn't really, but then says:). Yeees...I have the graduation committee meeting, which I am already a bit late for...
- It won't take too long...
- Go on then (relenting)...come in. Sit down. (He felt something was up. An alarm bell rang distantly.)
- It's not easy news I'm afraid.
- Oh. Really.
- It's about the corporate client, Last week. The programme you stepped in for me, with Sue.

He knew something was up. He always hated Monday mornings, anyway. There was something distressing about putting the mask back on, zipping up the suit of armour. But this morning, he had felt particularly unsettled. Then the conversation with the student had shaken him, then the snatched, murky conversation in the corridor. He felt undone. And now he knew there would be more to deal with. He felt a sense of physical distress, an exaggerated version of his Monday feeling; tight throat, hot eyes, stomach churning, shoulders ache. Muffled explosions within.

- Oh, do they want to change the order again?
- Well, no. It is something else. I know we have had problems with them, and you have gone out of your way, stepping in, I appreciate that, with all their mucking about...but this is a bit different. It seems I need you to, well, step out again. We had some feedback.
- Oh. This is going to take longer than five minutes isn't it?
- Yes, I suppose it is.

This was maddening. It was how things happen here sometimes: quiet assassination. He was being kindly, nicely, murdered by a friend. He picked up the phone.

- Sally, yes, this is Jim. Look, you're going to have give my apologies. Yes I know they must have already started. Something's come up. Can you slip in a note? Yes. Thanks. Bye.

He was conscious of how his voice must have sounded, tense, brittle, not how he wanted to be. He was caught in something and sinking.

- Look, (Daniel continued). This isn't easy. Something happened and you were involved and the client isn't happy.
- Something happened... Can you be more specific?
- OK. I see what you're saying. Look can you tell me what happened, specifically, in the evening, over dinner?
- In the evening?!

He thought hard, trying not to let his upset show too much. He knew in an instant what Daniel was referring to. He had joined the group of corporate trainees in the evening for dinner. Something he didn't often do. The conversation had begun for the most part politely. But then there had been a discussion. Actually, as his memory returned to it, it was more truthfully an argument. He hadn't meant to argue. But at a later stage, probably after he had had one or maybe even two glasses of wine, the conversation had strayed into more controversial territory. It had started when one of the two women he was sitting between, Jane and Jo, had asked him about his work and his history.

- They asked me, these two women, about my past work, before I came to the Institute and yes, I suppose a rather heated discussion ensued.

- Go on...

- I told them I used to lecture about gender politics in the workplace before I came here, that this was the subject of my PhD, and one of them, Jo I think, said something like, 'It's just not an issue anymore in our company. Women and men, we're all just the same, all equal'.

- And?

- We had a robust discussion. I mean, Daniel, come on! 'Not an issue anymore', who were they kidding? We know what that place is like. Anyway, I probably came on a bit strong. I think I just said that things may not be as advanced as they thought, to watch out for the glass cliff, that sort of thing, I was trying to be helpful. I did say, 'Look, far be it for me from wanting to tell you that you haven't got the equalities you want to have. I do want to believe you. I do want you to be right. But look at your company. All the top jobs are held by men. How many women are able to really get on...become an executive, you know that sort of thing? It wasn't very controversial. Just pointing out what I saw, what we can all see.

- That's all?

- Yes. Why? What else was there? I mean it was a 'free and frank exchange of views' as they say. I do remember one of them, Jane saying, 'Well, we'll just have to agree to disagree on this one.' And I said 'fine'. Then we just talked about the weather or kids or something else.

- Anything else?

- Jo did go a bit quiet after that. Look, Daniel, what is this about? I mean it was a discussion over dinner, that's all. I Yesterday I had a similar one over lunch, with a group of male students. It was a really good chat. About the double binds we face. About being both white middle class men and wanting to express more of ourselves. Being strong and soft – the toilet paper generation of men we called it. We laughed. It's what I do. You know it's my thing, my shtick.

- It seems that one of these women complained about you.

- Complained? Which one? What about?

- Well, we're not sure which one actually. The client wasn't sure either. He wasn't sure if it was one of these women – Jo or Jane? – or another one who was watching you have this discussion. In fact we think it may have been the latter. But anyway, they complained. To the client. Jim, they thought your behaviour was sexist.

- Sexist! I am...?? What?!

He was flabbergasted, speechless. A rage rose in him like lava. He wanted to cry, to scream. The sense of injustice went way, way back and grew bigger and more uncontrolled as it did so. It was playground stuff, like when he was accused by a teacher at school for talking, when he knew it hadn't been him. He felt, full on, raging, righteous indignation.

- Oh come on! How can I be sexist? I was talking about gender for fuck sake!

His thoughts raced and twisted. Here was Daniel; dear, affable, garrulous Daniel, calling *him* sexist. He liked Daniel; Daniel was his friend, but still...

- Don't get upset! It's just that it looked that way to one of the women, Jim. In fact, she even said to the client that she wondered if you'd made a pass at one of them, Jo I think...

He felt a blow, like a punch to his heart, and then another to the solar plexus. He crumpled in pain. The rage dissipates like a cloud of steam, replaced by numb, deep,

throbbing ache, a sense of nausea. In an instant, he became a photocopy of himself, slightly blurred, upside down and inside out.

- Do you really think that's likely? (He whispered this).
- No frankly I don't. Neither does the client actually. He was very shocked and surprised, knowing your reputation, your credentials. But it seems they are taking a line on this; that there's 'no smoke without fire' and they're choosing, well, asking if you wouldn't mind stepping down from this work. They don't want to take it further. They don't want any trouble, an inquiry or anything. This isn't a witch hunt. They're just asking for you to, you know, step aside. You know how risk averse they are.

No inquiry. That said it all. Something had happened right enough. There was so much to be said about what happened. He knew he wasn't blameless, but there was so much more to be said, to be explored. But he was condemned already and he knew enough to know that when hanged, it's better not to swing. Take it gracefully. He had plenty other things to be getting on with, as they all had at the Institute. But it was the whole cover up that bothered him; the glossing over and 'getting on with it', the injustices that fester. Especially about this, against everything he believed in.

Daniel was still talking

- I think you just got a bit carried away. You know how passionate you are about this stuff. Perhaps you just came across a bit strong.
- Surely that's the point. I was arguing for them to be more aware of the inherent sexism.
- Yes I know, but look at the bigger picture here, won't you Jim? We don't want a big fuss about it. It's no big deal after all. The client wants to move on. They just want it sorted. I can get Derek involved; he says he's free for the dates. He'll step in and we'll all just move on.
- But this is outrageous [although his voice sounds distant, deflated, even to himself, like a drowning man calling for a taxi]. We are supposed to be developing these people, educating them. It's our job to talk about these things. Shouldn't we push back? There's so much to learn here, for me too.
- You know what it's like here. It's best to take it on the chin. You know how things are. We're strapped for cash. We need the corporate clients so we can do the academic work. We can't take a risk with it. If you fight it, Jim, the Institute will roll over you on this one.

He paused. This was the worst kind of news, especially on a Monday. But what choice did he have? He knew he had reached the buffers, the fat lady was singing.

- What about Sue. Have you spoken with her?
- Yes, as a matter of fact. I did pop my head round her door. It seems one of these women, were not sure which one, because no one can quite get the names straight, did come and complain to her that evening. She said she had deflected the woman, saying she may have got the wrong end of the stick. She stuck by you. But it seems it wasn't enough for this woman, who then took it further. Look, go and see Sue. I am sure she'd be happy to chat. As I said, it's no big deal. I'm sure you've got lots of other things on. I know you were just stepping in to help out on this one, so it's no hardship really is it?
- I suppose not.
- It has happened to all of us, at one time or another. It's happened to me.
- What? Being accused of sexual harassment?
- Oh my God no! Not that. But getting the wrong side of a client, and being asked to step aside.

The mask slips back on. It isn't Daniel's fault. Take the revolver...step outside...Take some time to recover.

- Of course. No. Not a problem. It's a relief actually because I've got so much to do, what with this American conference and everything. Very busy.

- Of course you are.

Daniel leaves. Jim slumps. It put the conversation with the student into even sharper relief. He thought of the risk he had taken. His mind bobbed. What if she'd said he was sexist, or that he'd made a pass at her? He sat and stared out the window, over the garden, down towards the big fountain splashing into the lake. With the window open he could hear it, but the splashing water sounded like bullets, the gentle wind like the howl of an outraged jury. The whole world seemed wired up to pass judgement on him.

4.

He should have gone home. He could have called it a day, licked his wounds. His son was due home and he loved talking to his children. He got more pleasure from this than anything else in the world. Even when his son was 2, he remembered sitting in a hammock with him, curled up together, passing the time of day, as if talking with a friend. Their moving away, fulfilling their own independence was something he was so proud of and yet so upset by.

But he had chosen to stay on at work. He felt compelled to see Sue. He hated the idea that she saw him this way; the way they had portrayed him.

- Hi Sue. I know how you hate it when someone says: 'Have you got five minutes', but...?!

She laughs.

- Come on in then. It is only that they say five but they never mean five. But I had a feeling you'd be coming by.

- Oh Sue, I'm so sorry.

- Come on, look I've got some time. Genuinely. We should talk.

He slumps down in the chair

- That bad eh?

- I'm a bit shocked that's all. Daniel came to see me. It's been such a strange morning. Like ghosts coming in busloads. Be careful what you wish for. I say I want to start conversations about gender around here and three come at once. Firstly this young student comes and asks me about some stuff, then a rather unsympathetic conversation in the corridor, then Daniel. All on a Monday too.

- Ah yes, your Monday morning marginality. You like being at the edge, part of your 'shape-shifting' as you call it, but not on Mondays. Look, do you want the feedback now or wait a bit, for when you are less...raw?

- Oh for pity's sake why not? It's not that important is it? It's not the work. It's like, you know, my crumple spot. It has caught me, sneaked in under the radar. To feel so...accused...of something that is so against my grain.

- It was wrong, bad and all that. You were falsely accused. I knew they were getting the wrong end of the stick. But...well, you didn't help did you? How much do you invite this in?

- Yes, well, thinking back, I can remember when it started. I was tired, drained by the day. I should have gone home. Before dinner, I sat outside and had a cigarette. I felt sort of, empty, nothing left in the tank. It had been a tough day.

- Yes they had been a bit of a resistant bunch. Hard work.

- But I remember acknowledging I was tired and that usually does the trick, slows me down.

- I am interested: did you sit where you sat on purpose, at the table?

- Not that I remember. I saw you on the other table and just thought – we'd better spilt up. So Jane ended up on my left and Jo on my right. This woman who complained must have sat opposite but I can't remember who was there.

- We're not sure quite who complained. It may have been the one who came to me that evening or it might have been someone else. To be honest I was surprised when I heard because the woman who came to me, I can't remember her name, but she didn't seem too bothered. She said she noticed Jo was upset and all sorts of things came into her head about it, but when I talked to her she seemed mollified. I just don't know if it was her who went and complained later.

- That's just it, isn't it? It's all rumours and mystery. Someone thinks they saw something; no-one knows who and it becomes just a big spectre, hanging over me. I do remember someone pouring me a glass of wine and just sort of chatting really, and

the conversation getting a little heated, and then Jo just turning her back on me and that was it really. God this is awful...

- It's OK. Go on.

- *They asked me* about the work I did, and I told them about my interest in gender, I always say 'gender' rather than 'masculinity', which is really more accurate. I am scrupulous about it, because if I say 'masculinity' or 'men's development', some people, some women can get a bit...triggered...you know... 'Is it fair just to focus on men? What about the women?' Etc. etc. So I usually say 'gender'. Then I remember one of them, I think it was Jane, saying 'Well, we don't need that kind of work in our company, because gender isn't an issue anymore.' If I'm honest, that was a bit of a red rag to a bull. I mean, the wine didn't help, but I remember thinking that they were quite deluded. After all, that day, all these young women - and there were only 3 men in that group of 18, weren't there? Isn't that typical for this type of role in this type of business? They had sat there that lunchtime listening to a lecture from this big cheese from the company, who was a nice bloke, but a white, middle-class, middle-aged man. How can they not see that gender is an issue? But anyway, I think I said 'How do you know gender isn't an issue anymore?'

- That's quite an inquiring question, but did you say it in an inquiring way? How did you put it?

- I don't know, Sue! You know me. I can come on a bit strong sometimes; I suppose I was a bit passionate. And this comes out as, well a bit strong I suppose.

- You were just having a conversation at dinner of course, so you should be allowed to be yourself. But that's a little naïve, isn't it? I mean, we're 'always on' aren't we? We are always representatives, when we're here and always acting as some kind of canvas for their projections.

- It was an interesting conversation. I suppose I naively thought it was a conversation of equals, at least at first. But when I knew things were going a bit downhill, I did try and dig myself out of it. I said that 'I didn't want to be in a position of convincing them that their world was worse than they thought', that 'I was happy for them if things were equal'. That was what I wanted. At that point, Jo got really heated, saying that she thought my views were really out of date. It felt like a horrible labyrinth really, like Theseus and the Minotaur, except I couldn't find the red thread to help me out. How could I be arguing against their own experience? How could I as a man be saying they were deluding themselves? Anyway I remember saying 2 or 3 times that I was glad for them if they felt that way. 'I'm really happy for you, but it's not my experience. For me gender is still an issue.' 'Give me the evidence', she was saying.

- Who?

- Jo. Jo was saying that. So I think I said, 'look at your own company'. The lifestyle still supports the male way of doing things. The whole way of thinking, the focus on the bottom line, how the things they measured weren't about the quality of relationships but the bottom line, that sort of thing...Oh God, I really screwed up didn't I!?

- You can see how it might have come across. But it's OK...Look is this helping you?

- No. Sort of. Yes. Really. It is useful. It's like...a reminder, a course correction. It is about how I live my values. Or how I don't. Is it helpful for you?

- It's a bit of a spectator sport, but rare to see a man this fired up about this sort of thing. You are working so hard, and I find that interesting. I am fired up by what gets people fired up. That's my obsession I suppose. So this works for me. And I did want to bottom this out, for my own understanding. And I like you, you know that - I care about you. I want to help.

- Thank you. It is helpful.

- Go on then.

- Then I think she said - 'Look how many women are getting promoted now' and I said. 'Is it about the numbers, then? How do they have to behave when they're promoted? Just like the men? And they're expected to do the emotional work as well, and when they don't they get criticised, often by other women, for being harsh and lacking

feelings.' I do remember thinking I was on really dangerous ground and wanting to get out of there, like being having stumbled into a minefield. I tried to stop, to lighten up, but after that, I couldn't just talk about the weather. Then Jane helped – she just said, 'Well, we'll have to agree to differ', and we started talking about our kids, and stuff, and Jo just turned her back; she just literally turned right around and looked the other way, for the whole of the rest of the meal. That's all I remember.

- Apparently she went to bed soon after that, looking quite upset, so this other woman told me. So she assumed something had happened between you. It is interesting someone, maybe her, made an assumption about what that might have been.

- Yes: that I'd made a pass at her! Honestly! The odd thing is, the next day, after my first lecture, Jo came up to me and said, 'You know, I've been thinking about what you said and I think I get it now, a bit more, about this gender thing.'

- How odd! That's a bit erratic of her, isn't it? I think she did this deliberately in front of the other woman, to show that she was 'alright'.

- Because it wasn't her that complained. Oh God Sue I feel so upset by this. I know it was wrong; I felt so strongly that they were deluding themselves, but I should have left it. But the next day when Jo comes to me and says she 'gets it', well, I thought it had been a worthwhile conversation to have. But I know now I shouldn't have argued with them like that; that I shouldn't have expected to turn them into feminists!

- I've got a few things to say about this. Firstly, looking at you as a lecturer, with some authority, in a business school setting, with that cudos behind you, that was a strong challenge to talk about women not having the opportunity to advance, and it's not surprising that it might rub them up the wrong way.

- I didn't say that!

- I know you didn't say those words exactly, but looking at it more broadly, they may think, 'who's this bloke telling us everything we're learning here is irrelevant because of deeper dynamics we can't change?' Come on! Are you surprised they hit back? No matter what your intention was?

- Yes, I see. It's not what I meant, but I do see it.

- Then there's the *how* of your doing it. You can be a bit strong, kind of on top of people before they know it. That may have looked, from a distance, like all sorts of things.

- I was just being passionate about it!

- Yes and isn't it interesting that passion, being passionate, was interpreted by an observer as possible something sexual?

- It wasn't my intention!

- No, well, not consciously anyway. But it is a kind of display. And look: women can be sexist, tending to interpret things in a sexualised way too. They've got lots of justification for thinking that about men. It's not that surprising to find a man's behaviour may have...a veiled intent to it. I am not saying women are perfect; far from it. But it isn't necessarily, well...surprising, to think a man might have sex on his mind.

- Gosh that's a hard message to hear...but I suppose...

- It's just sometimes your size, your presence, your eagerness to be involved. I know you, so I know the place the intent comes from. And I think it may have been wrong to have judged your intent the way they did. But it's not that surprising, is it?

- I...suppose not. I mean I feel quite sore about it, wrongly judged. It is the opposite of what I intended. But what you are saying...it does make sense.

- I know. It feels very personal. But it's the impact you may have on people. You can't necessarily get away from that. You are a potent male in the room, in a group of predominantly women. Some of the projection is theirs'; some is your own intent. Only you can say what that *really* was. But all I am saying is it is not a neutral thing. It is highly charged. And on top of that you talked about women, about gender, which has inherently sexual overtones; these are things that are taboo. I am not saying this is right, it is just what I notice, as a woman. Well, as me. And the work we do, we act as

lightning rods sometimes, for all of this stuff to zap down. You just caught a bit of the zap.

- Yes of course.

- Of course you weren't wrong with what you said, by the way. Of course in their world there isn't a level playing field, and they must know that, deep down. But you reminded them of that, perhaps in a style that might be interpreted as...a bit invasive, so much so that your intentions look sexual to a casual observer. I mean it just all adds up. And good girls don't make passes, so these intentions must have been yours, not theirs', 'your shout', as it were. Of course their culture is very traditional, very male.

- I should have seen it. I feel so daft now. This isn't news to me. I do know this, at least, theoretically, but in practice it is hard to do, to advocate without all these interference patterns, when things just overlap and overlay and intentions get so twisted back on themselves.

- I know. When you are at your best, you do soften your tone a bit. Of course you do. And after all, being opinionated is what you get paid for; to be an expert. It is a double bind to some degree. Difficult, to live your values around gender, to be a campaigner, and also to find yourself living the patterns too. You put yourself through it, don't you? Well, we all do I suppose. Lots of 'blood under the bridge', as I say!

- I know it! Look, Sue, that's so helpful. Thank you, it is tough to hear but enlightening. Trouble is with this stuff, you think you've made strides and yet you can be just right back where you started.

5.

Jim sat outside on a bench, eyes shut, with the sun on his face. He had still meant to go home. He felt empty, old, his limbs heavy. The four conversations were settling in him and he digested them slowly, like a snake. He was what he was. He couldn't escape from that. He was still trying to change the world, just one conversation at a time. In his view, you were no better than your last conversation, no better connected than by your latest relationship with someone else. You are never finished in this line of work. A line from *Fight Club*, one of his favourite books, came into his head:

“As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell yourself.”

The mechanic yells into the wind, “You're not your name’.

A space monkey in the back seat picks it up: “You're not your problems.”

The mechanic yells, “You're not your problems.”

A space monkey shouts, “You're not your age.”

The mechanic yells, “You're not your age.”

Why did Jim love *Fight Club* so much? It was a very violent book, and he'd never been in a fight in his life, not a fist-fight anyway. Was it to do with being alive, with being the 'middle generation' of men, as Palahniuk called it through the words of the main character of the book, Tyler Durden: the 'generation of men raised by women, who are wondering if it's another woman they need in their life'?

Jim thinks out loud, plaintively - I just want to have a conversation, to keep the conversation about gender going, about the things that men just don't seem to want to talk about. That's what I want to talk about. And this is what you get.

That's what it was about, this 'inquiring masculinity' of his, the subject of his PhD. It represented an effort to keep the conversations going. If worlds follow words, then that's what was needed, surely? No matter the risks, the misunderstandings the motives and sub-motives? But he was piqued by the student's question – what did it matter? What did it change? Just 'talking'? But what else could he do? Like Seamus Heaney in that poem about his father, he was a man of the word, the pen, or at least the computer keyboard. Unlike Heaney's father, who dug peat, cutting the sods with his shovel, or Jim's own father, a tailor, who made cloth into clothes, a cigarette permanently jutting from his taciturn lips, all he could do was sew words together. This was his product. All he had was conversations. What else could he do?

But then there was the failure of his conversation with the women that night. How could he have got it so wrong? He was caught off guard, like in a T'ai Chi move, where he hadn't quite got set square on his feet and had been toppled. Bam! And he was over and floundering. In an instant he was completely turned over. That's what it was like here. He couldn't help but feel bitter about it. He had known something was up, that he had allowed himself to be sucked into some noxious pit or another, these underground streams that bubbled all over the place around here. It was the nature of this place, where people came to dump their stuff, and move on. Didn't the concentration, the background level of toxicity increase? Didn't you know you would find yourself sinking into it at times?

Yes and no. He knew he wasn't taking full responsibility for something. Yes all of that is true; this could be a poisonous place sometimes, but then there was him. If he really was on a mission, a life-long commitment to a set of questions, still burning after all these years, then this wasn't ever going to be an easy ride. Generations of patriarchy didn't dissolve over night, in him or anywhere else. Constant attention was required to

spot the sucking patterns of the old habits. It did grab him, from time to time, perhaps often, like it did everybody, men and women. Live with it. Roll with it. But maybe even that was too heroic. What was it that John Rowan had said all those years ago: how the 'patripsych' was a lot more resistant than anyone, feminists included, had ever bargained for? Patriarchy is a pervasive creature. It turns its tail, scorpion like, and stings you just when you think it is placid. For him it had just been a sting. Others had felt it, were *still* feeling its lash a lot harder. Just recognise it's a constant, as he had done countless times before, and let go. Dance around it; don't try and warrior your way out of it all the time. That's just playing the game. Let go, 'hit rock bottom', as Tyler Durden said: 'Slide!'

6.

One conversation at a time. A figure approached out of the gloom. Jim was still sitting on the bench, as the sun went down. The figure acquired features. It was Colin.

- Oh dear – that bad eh?
 - It's O.K. Actually I was pulling myself together, enjoying the sunset
- Colin sat down on the bench next to him.
- Yes so was I. It's lovely down by the lake. Just de-gunking myself before I drive home.
 - Hard day?
 - No not hard. Intense. Good in fact. How about you?
 - Not great I have to say. Well, actually good and bad. I have had some interesting conversations.
 - Sounds ominous. Fancy another one?
 - Yes of course. Always.
 - So tell me about the good and the bad?
- Jim tells Colin some of the story of the corporate client, his conversations with the student and Sue. Colin's musings were helpful and sympathetic as ever.
- Perhaps you just refused to comply with their view of the world and they didn't like it?
 - Yes, that's possible, but I suppose I was a bit pushy.
 - How do you know that?
 - People say I am.
 - Did anyone tell you that then?
 - Not directly, and in their reaction afterwards. Not everyone I suppose. One woman just agreed to differ.
 - Which is probably fair comment.
 - It's all just left me kind of...
 - Shaken...
 - Yes. Shaken. On top of this young student coming and asking me this morning if I thought any of this gender stuff really made a difference. I am struck by the synchronicity of it, the meaningful coincidence. This must be telling me something. Perhaps I am just too naïve?
 - Perhaps you were just telling too much truth. We can do that sometimes. But why naïve?
 - I suppose it wasn't a very nice thing to say, that they were kidding themselves if they thought things had moved on. And then the student asks me if anything has changed, and I am arguing the opposite. Well not the opposite, but a nuance of it. It is all so fine-grained, this gender stuff. There's no easy way to look at it.
 - Yes I suppose it is a bit confusing and you may have been naïve. But it isn't all generalisable. It is also about the specific. It is about you and her, you and this woman who observed you and made that judgement. Maybe you were just unlucky. That happens. That woman found it hard to accept what you are saying and this other woman makes a judgement about her upset-ness and decided to make something of it. Who knows why? Bad luck. But that might be it, nothing wrong as such.
 - You sound a bit like Tyler Durden
 - Tyler who?
 - Durden. He's the hero in *Fight Club*. One of my favourite books. Next you'll be saying: 'You have to accept the fact that God doesn't really like you. Didn't want you. That will set you free.'
 - That's a bit strong. But interesting I suppose. But more than that, not just shit happens, but *do something* with it. Do it now, let it unfold. Like you did with that student, and like we are now. Here and now.
 - 'Slide'.
 - Slide?

- Nothing...something else from *Fight Club*. It's funny isn't it, but by and large, I'm not that interested in the women's side of things in the gender question. At least they have some conversations going about them. Gender is hard enough to get on organisations agenda, but at least when it is there, it is about women. But where are the men? What is *their* side of things? That's why I like things like *Fight Club* because at least they try, albeit clumsily to ask questions for men, about the individual men who aren't usually present in the conversation. Yes they are present as 'the man', the voice that everyone speaks with, the dominant masculinity voice, but not the individual, quavering, uncertain, real voices that we all hear in private. Men don't want to hear those voices, and sometimes women don't either. It seems to be really uncomfortable for everyone to deal with these real men, these shaky voices.

- Like yours?

- How do you...? Yes you are right there. I feel shaky, I want to talk about it, how it is about both men and women, about finding a way through, and I don't feel like it's wanted round here. Same old, same old.

- You do have to accept that sometimes women and men, people generally, feel threatened by this conversation about gender. It isn't their fault. A long time ago, when I was having supervision for during my training as a counsellor, one of the supervisors, a woman, said to me 'Your gentleness and emotionality may freak men out some times.' But in my experience it was often as much the women who were freaked out by it. The men just didn't show up.

- Yes that's what I mean. About showing up.

[a silence for some time]

- Thank you (Jim's voice in the now near-darkness)

- Thank you?

- Thank you showing up. For listening. 'Listening without just waiting for your turn to speak'. Something else from *Fight Club*...

- That's a real compliment. In a curious kind of way.

- It is about men in the end for me; a chance for us to speak about what we usually stay silent about. You know, I could have just gone home, sulked at my wife. But connecting with you...feels so much better, and I can go home now without her catching it from me. That's what we don't do. Men, we don't help eachother this way enough and then women catch the emotional flak.

You know how the used to talk about the 'love that dare not speak its name'? They used to mean about gay love, but for me that's not about gay love anymore. Perhaps it's about men generally. Men coming out to eachother about...well loving eachother. God that sounds daft doesn't it?

- No. No. Look, yes, I think we're making something here. A quality of something I can feel it. Clear, strong, but without threat. Is that too much of a leap?

- No ...it feels...intimate. There could be something being made here which could do with being made more often, especially at work. We could get used to it.

- In marginal spaces, in the gaps. To begin with.

- It feels robust and...yet open, like in a way that conversation I had with that woman wasn't. And at least three conversations I've had today, with you, the student and Sue, they have been. Funnily enough, it has turned out to be a good day.

- How many people in your life do you come across who are robust and open, vulnerable with you. Seriously. How many?

- I don't know

- No neither do I. Not many though. Robust, open, sensitive, strong, that's the important bit for me in your 'inquiring masculinity'. That's what you have been doing.

Not one or the other. Both. The courage for both. Strong, engaged, vulnerable, Wow...

- 'Soft and strong – the toilet paper masculinity'

[Laughter. Silence]

Now Colin's voice again in the darkness.

- No wonder many women find it dangerous, as do many men – potency and sensitivity. A great combination. The warrior and the philosopher/poet, honoured side by side.
 - When you said that, I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. It felt like history. The warrior and the philosopher joining up, a powerful moment of connection. I thought of my grandfather, he was a warrior, a soldier. What did he have to deny in himself in order to fight? Perhaps what I saw of him on later life...the translucent skin of his hand as he held mine so gently.
 - We all have old soldiers in our families don't we? Mine was my father. I didn't blame him, well I don't anymore, but I know that he saw such stuff...you never recover from that.
 - *"We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression."*
 - Was that from...?
 - Yes, *Fight Club*
 - Christ how many times have you seen it?
 - Oh I don't know...loads. I've read the book as well. Many times.
 - It's not very jolly is it?
 - Ha! No. But it is kind of optimistic. Funnily enough I think it's a love story.
 - A strange way to be romantic. You're not going to ask me for a fight are you?
 - No! God I wouldn't know how. But I do want to thank you. This was a great conversation. That's why they fight, to make a real connection. But we can do it without the fight. It has affirmed something for me. We make choices all the time, don't we? My choice has been to keep the door open today. Painful, but a good choice. I feel rewarded by this conversation. It has helped me. I'd just like to go home now. Perhaps tomorrow can feel a bit more like *Mary Poppins* and less like *Fight Club*.
 - From your mouth to God's ears! Come on then.
- They walked in silence away up the hill.

Part Two - 2020

1.

Mike looked out of the window of the train as it sped through the spring countryside. He was about 21, clean shaven with bright blue eyes, wearing casual yet conservative clothes: his jeans were blue and spotless. Vast fields of blue and yellow fuel-seed crops painted the landscape beyond his window a vivid, colourful psychedelia. The plants were genetically modified – a whole landscape transformed in the service of an emergency technology. He himself knew this new world as an insider, having spent the previous summer working at a rural bio-fuel processing station. Windmills crowned the hilltops. A whole new landscape, the manifestation of a critical time, come sooner than anyone had predicted.

The guard came through the carriage. Tickets and permit. He needed both. You had to buy your ticket and apply for a permit to travel. Journeys were rationed. People accepted the necessity of it. Losing New Orleans hadn't been enough. Losing New York had been. His journey was granted on compassionate grounds. His father had disappeared. It had still taken six months to get the permit.

A pile of letters in his father's own hand sat in front of him on the stained plastic table. He fingered the pile gingerly. It looked like something antique. He wondered if anyone else in the carriage had noticed it, this evidence of his father's...what was it? - eccentricity, mid-life crisis or some full-blown madness? Paper like this was hard to get hold of anyway these days. There wasn't much call for it. Hardly anyone used ink pens anymore. Everyone's lifestyle was measured minutely for signs of over consumption. This was all part of the crisis driven lurch to the frugal. But he was like most people and he did his writing on a keyboard or with a stylus, the screen converting his hand into some standard, legible text. Some people, protesting, still insisted on a personalised handform, but they were regarded as luddites and anyway, once the message was received, you could choose to convert it to your own favoured script to read it. Most people did. Such conformity was seen as necessary now, oddly part of the prudent, conforming pressures of a world where differences suggested resource abuse and unsustainable selfishness. Inexorable pressures surrounded life: fuel shock, land shock, food shock; shared strictures of a planet in crisis. The times demanded everyone smooth off their rough edges. Nearly everyone. He felt a momentary pang of anger again at his father. In these circumstances, his choices seemed utterly, embarrassingly selfish. And yet...he looked around the carriage. People seemed to divide these days into two types; the vast conforming majority 'getting on with it', and a perverse, fringe extreme; mostly young people who seemed almost at odds with the pressing needs of the day. Some of these were nick-named the 'dragsters'. They had a habit of dressing in style that suggested a weird, bright, flamboyant androgyny. It seemed to be mostly a fashion statement, but it had an edge of political protest about it. Some said it was a like the hippies used to be in the 1960s. But this time, their rebellion seemed express itself as some kind of gender freakout. Most people just didn't get it. Most could afford to get on with their utilitarian lives without worrying about it anyway. But not him. It is can happen within families that one person's choices will thrust unwanted inquiry into the system. And so it was with his father. A couple of these dragsters were dotted around the carriage, an uneasiness between them and their neighbour. They seemed almost like Hindu cows, tolerated, even revered, accepted mostly (although some attacks had been reported). But no-one was at ease around them. They were unpredictable. They were usually strangely reserved and taciturn; their physical presence and style making their point. Before, like most people, Mike had ignored them. Now he regarded them with wary curiosity.

Had his father become one of them? He recoiled at the thought. His solid, reliable stable father, a dragster?

He looked back at the letters. He had decided to save this moment until he was on his way, safely on the train. So now, he began to read.

2.

September 2020

Dear Mike

Hello my beautiful boy. I guess you may not feel like hearing this, but let me say it straight off. You are, and always will be, my beautiful boy. Your sister Jenn will always be my best girl too. It seems so important to say, before all the torrents of difficult words that may pass between us henceforth, just to say that, and tell you that I love you.

So now you want to know what is going on with me? Why this sudden and what may seem like ridiculous set of choices? Let me please explain.

Years ago, when you and Jenn were small, I embarked on a small, personal research project and in a way, this is the next stage in my fieldwork, so to speak. It all began when I was doing my PhD. I don't know if you remember that time; you were about 10 when I finished, Jenn about 8. But if you do remember, it would be that the subject of my PhD was gender and in particular, masculinity. It seems funny now, what with all that's happened, but no-one was much interested in gender then. Anyway, I was doing this research, interviewing people as you do, and at the same time I was keeping a kind of private journal, of all the things I was thinking about, really thinking about, things that you couldn't put in a PhD thesis because they were too personal. For example, doing the research made me wonder, 'What kind of man am I?' But I couldn't write about that; it wasn't 'proper research', so what I did was keep this journal and it just sort of happened that this journal became a correspondence. You see, you and Jenn were so important to me at that time, and I suppose I felt so guilty that I was spending all this time away from you, working, doing my research, etc., so I found myself writing to you. It was a bit one-sided of course; for once you couldn't answer back! But it was such a huge help to me, when I was doing the 'formal' work, to be able to tell you and Jenn what was really going on for me. These letters became a sort of anti-thesis, a shadow work, my very own portrait of Dorian Grey. Of course, as you know I got the PhD, became a 'Doctor', and after that I got on with things pretty much as before and forgot about the letters. But then years later something happened at the Institute that reminded me of this time.

I suppose I had forgotten some of the things that were important to me, things I had written about in this journal. One day a young student came to see me, and she challenged me about whether anything I'd done with this research or after it with my work at the Institute, had well, really made a difference?

That was just the start of it, and for a few years I tried to push it away but it was like a little voice that got louder and louder until I couldn't help but listen to it. Especially with what was going on in the world. I know for most people it seems unimportant, but there are a number of us for whom the question: 'who are you really?' has become more important than ever. So with all that is going on in the world, I just felt I needed to do something. There are those that can do real, practical things to make a difference. You are one of those people. So is Jenn. I am so proud of you both, getting on with your lives. Then there are others, those aren't so suited to tending crops or building things with their hands; they have to try something else to make a difference; they are the ones who only have themselves, their words and their bodies to make a difference with. I think I am one of those.

I know you must be feeling all sorts of things, and protective of your mother and sister as you always were. But I wanted to try and help you understand. That is why I offer

you these letters. My address is below. I am with good people, who are helping me work things out. Come and see me, if you can get a permit. Let's talk. I love you.
Your father
Jim x

Mike sat back. He sighed deeply and looked again out of the window. In the midst of the eco-shock, his father seemed to be having some kind of midlife crisis. He had only heard rumours about where he was; that he was living with a bunch of freaks and social outcasts; that he was some kind of pervert, had flipped into a deranged cross-dresser; that he had gone off to live with a man who was really a woman. People sniggered behind their hands. He pushed the ridiculous image of his father in a frock and a wig out of his mind with a shudder. It was all just rumours anyway. But at once he was annoyed again, at the self-indulgence of it all. His father, Jim Porter, who had been a rock, someone so utterly solid and reliable, a middle of the road, liberal Jew, an academic, a football fan, so...boring. 'It's the really boring ones you have to watch out for: they're often the real perverts', his friend Cathy had said, rather brutally. She had meant to be helpful. But Mike had liked really boring. It gave him a real sense of comfort to know that wherever he wandered, his mother and father would be there, in the same old house he had always know, lighting candles on a Friday night for the Sabbath and saying the ritual blessings for their children.

The note of the engine changed and he noticed they were climbing now, threading their way up a valley. He sifted through the pile of letters again, and began rebuilding the shattered image of his father that sat like an overturned jigsaw on the table in front of him.

3.

September 2007

Dear Mikey

I have been wondering about something, something that has come up for me as a result of doing this research. I wonder what it would be like if there weren't men and women anymore? If we had a different sort of world, with more choice about who we were? A strange thought I know, but it came to me recently whilst I was doing this work.

Before I say anymore, I want to say first of all how I would never want to stop being your Dad. That puts me in a quandary. I suppose I would always want to be your parent, to nurture you, it makes me wonder what being a 'father' really is – an act or an activity? People talk about 'fathering' but they usually mean 'siring'. I hope I am more to you than that.

Anyway I just have a hunch that something in the world would be set free if there weren't such solid boxes around who we are as men and women. I mean I like being a man, most of the time, but there are also a few things about it I don't like. Most of all, part of me doesn't like the way people react to me in a certain way, thinking I am this big, broad, strong, solid thing, when inside sometimes I am not.

I was wondering about this whilst in a group the other day. It was a focus group for my PhD research. I found myself really looking at the people in the room and after a while I felt like we were all living a bit of a lie. It was as if the difference between the men and the women was false, or at least, I started to notice how different the men and the women were *amongst each other*. There was as much difference within as between the men and women. I noticed for example how this one woman, Sue, was quite big and loud and even quite, well, hairy! And this man, called John, was soft and round and quietly spoken. It was true that some of the women and some of the men just followed the stereotype; most of the men were big and talked more, most of the women wore brighter clothes and talked less. But these majority who fitted, they were the boring ones, as if they had hidden a big part of themselves behind this convenient, catch-all called 'man' or 'woman'. I know I should have listened to them all equally but I cannot deny that the ones who grabbed my attention the most were those who didn't quite fit, who showed more of themselves, their quirky-ness. But even that started to break down when I looked closely; for example I saw that one man was wearing pink socks! It was as if he was saying, 'Ok I am mostly going to fit in, but at least my socks are pink!' But I had to work harder to spot these more subtle differences. For one brief flicker of a moment, it was as if the categories of man and woman just disappeared and I felt I caught a glimpse of a world that could be, where men and women are more themselves. But what is 'ourselves'?

This got me thinking; what if there wasn't this distinction? How would it be? And I remembered about this category of people who are called 'intersex'; how they are born with both male and female bits, you know, private parts. There are a significant number of these people (figures vary and there's quite a bit of debate about it, but enough for several hundred thousand at least in the world, probably). What doctors have been told to do in the past is operate on them to make them a boy or a girl, whilst they are still babies, for their 'own good'. This is because they think that an androgynous person, who is neither a man nor a woman, would find fitting in with the world we live in too difficult. So this is saying: 'it is the world's problem because the world wouldn't know how to treat them, but then the world hands this little baby the problem and says, 'it's for your own good...'

Then I remembered discussing this with you, one day a few years ago – you must have been about 6 or 7. I told you there were these intersex people and I said: ‘and you might have your own children one day and imagine if one of these were intersex – how would you react?’ And you just burst into tears! You were really upset. I really, really didn’t mean to upset you and I was really surprised by your reaction, almost as if I had cursed you. This made me realise that the world puts lots and lots of pressure on little boys and girls to conform, and then says ‘Look: boys and girls want to be different from each other’ – as if it comes from them. We *give* you the problem and then make out that it came *from* you. You have to choose. Hence why the idea of an intersex child is so upsetting to you. And isn’t it interesting that with all this pressure, some boys and girls choose not to fit in? Look at your friend Penny, who wants to be a boy, wears trousers and plays football all the time, even though she gets teased for it?

So I do wonder what the world would be like, and part of me feels trapped by the box of being a man, and I worry about you too, because you are really like me and need to express yourself in a big way, and will you feel similarly trapped? It’s not that I want to be a woman – I just wonder what options I’d have if I wasn’t always put, or put myself, in the ‘man box’. I wonder if I’d be more ‘me’?

* * *

October 2007

I really enjoyed visiting this focus group yesterday, as part of my research. For a change it was a group of only men. I enjoyed the feeling of togetherness, the fun we had and all the banter and laughter, once people got through the uncomfortable silences at the start. A few of the men thanked me afterwards; one of them said ‘it was a bit like a birthday party except nobody was having the birthday!’ But between you and me, I felt a bit disappointed. You see we talked about the bigger issues and the more personal stuff that usually they say men can’t talk about. In all of the rush and busy-ness of our life at the Institute it was so nice to hear these men talk about these things, but now when I see them, hard at it, back at work, it all feels like such a dream and it’s as if it never happened at all.

Then, later on I went to another meeting, and it was such a contrast. There are so many of these type of meetings at the Institute. It starts and everyone is a bit cagey. We had a ‘check-in’. This is quite a new thing, where we are supposed to say how we are, how we are feeling, but often people are still reserved, and so am I, when I don’t quite trust everyone who is there. We spend quite a lot of time discussing why we are here, having this meeting. People seem to have their own agendas. I do too and to admit this to you makes me quite ashamed, but I want to be honest.

This makes me think about the Institute and why I am there. Generally I think it is a good place, and does some great work. Sometimes I think it is just my problem, and that I should work harder fitting in. It is like I say to you sometimes, how if you believe something deeply enough it will tend to come true. So if I believe I can do good work here I will. But life gets really difficult when I feel like I have to pretend. Especially on Mondays! I don’t feel confident or that I know what I am doing but I have to pretend I am and I do. I have to put a kind of mask on, because it just isn’t done to be that honest about this kind of thing all of the time. It causes too many ripples. Even though it is a good place, people will start to judge you.

The other day, I felt very angry. I felt like someone had judged me without much reason. It was only an off the cuff remark, but I felt really angry about it. They said I was quite smug. What is interesting is that couldn't be further from the truth! Little do they know how un-smug I feel! But I sat in this kind of rageful prison, like that story we read sometimes, about Theseus and the Minotaur? On the outside I was very calm and just carried on with the report back I was giving. On the inside I was really seething. Except I am both the hero and the rageful beast. I sat there, in the panting darkness, patting the ground desperately with my hands, searching for the red thread to help me get out of there.

Some of this is about just getting on in a place like the Institute, but some of it relates to this PhD I am doing as well. It is about how much freedom I have to be myself, within the limits of this box I am in called 'being a man'. It is about what is acceptable. The other day I was listening to the radio and this person came on who had won a prize for his artwork recently. He is a man but he is well known for dressing up as a woman. He gets asked all the time why he does this and it must be really annoying, as if it seems almost rude of him to dress up as a woman, according to the people who ask. It is as if it offends them, reminding them of something they are sure about that perhaps they shouldn't be. Yet he always seems to answer their questions with a grace that impresses me. This time he said: 'Why do I dress in these clothes? Because of the emotional range it gives me'. An emotional range. That's what it feels like sometimes, the thing I want more of. I look at women sometimes and envy the emotional range they seem to be allowed to have.

* * *

October 2007

I want to tell you about someone I met today called India. This feels so important because I hope she can be my friend and she seems to understand many of the things I am trying to. You see, she used to be a man and now she is a woman. Yes, she has been both!

She said that in her view, there is something behind being a man or a woman that is bigger than both. That's what interests me. She said that people who have changed their gender, 'transgender' or just 'trans' people as they are sometimes called, they often have a sense of this bigger thing. It is a spiritual thing. She told me that when she went through her change, which took quite a while, it was like being literally taken apart, inside as well as outside, and that was very hard for her. But there always seemed to be something there that was bigger and that helped her keep it all together.

We sat in the bar at the Institute and talked for a long time. She said to me: 'You know it is quite unusual for me to open up so quickly about these things to a man.' She says that she watches people's reactions to her 'trans status' as she calls it, and this tells her a lot about people. In her view, the more open people are about this, the more 'spiritually awake' they are, 'awake to the important things in life, beyond the obvious stuff'. I wondered if this was about Descartes. Separating our mind from our body, like he did, we think spirituality might just be something we can 'think' into. But our bodies and what we do with them may be an important part of the puzzle. Eastern traditions, like Yoga, understand that. Suddenly transgenderism made more sense to me.

She told me this amazing, moving story about her experience. It was about when she was going through her transition from man to woman. She was saying how she learnt about this set of spiritual questions at the heart of gender the hard way. For example, one day she was walking along the road and some young boys, teenagers, decided to

have a go at her. They jeered and shouted and as she walked away they started to chase her. Of course, she was afraid, and they chased her down this high street and she knew that no-one would be likely to help her if it got ugly; if they started to hit her. A friend of hers, also trans, had been hospitalised by a mob like this only recently. Can you imagine this? It reminds me of Nazi Germany. Just like the Jews reminded these Nazis of something about themselves they just couldn't tolerate, so trans people seem to do the same. As she ran, these boys chased and started to throw things. So she ran into a bookshop. As she said: 'Luckily I remembered that there is something quite unique about the British which makes it unacceptable for a bunch of teenage hooligan thugs to beat anyone up in a bookshop!' And she was right! They didn't follow her in, but stood at the door. Whilst they carried on jeering, they didn't follow her in.

So here she was, in this bookshop and she felt the need to pretend that she had come in on purpose of course, so she went up to this shelf of books and picked up a book, the first one she could find, and began to read it. It was a book by Carl Jung, a famous psychologist, and it was a collection of his writings. The first thing she read was about what he called 'synchronicity', which is how things always seem to happen for a reason. And then the next page she read as she flicked through the book said something about 'how men are very scared about the frailty of their own egos, which is why they can be prone to violence'. She said she realised when she read this that when she chose to leave the bookshop, these boys couldn't hurt her anymore.

I found this story both sad and uplifting. That is the sort of person India is. It is as if she went through this change not for itself but because of the deeper person inside that she really is, that finds a different, better expression as a result. It is funny; it reminds me of that story people say about how if you try and point out the moon to a dog, the dog will always look at the end of your finger. That's what it's like with India and her trans friends. It is such an unusual, incomprehensible thing to most of us that we just look at the finger rather than seeing the moon beyond it.

* * *

November 2007

India and I talked again, this time about what I means to be 'queer'. This is a word some people use as an insult, but we talked about how it could be a good thing. Being queer could mean standing apart from the crowd. We were saying how it could be that we all have a queer part of ourselves; it's that quirky bit; the bit that we hide in order to be accepted as 'normal'. This means there are a lot of queer people about! They are often hiding beneath the surface of being normal and bland, especially in organisations.

I was saying how it could be seen that Jewishness was a kind of queerness. Although most Jews hide this part of themselves to get on with normal life, there is a part of what we do, how we are that we know seems really odd when looked at by the outside world. And some Jewish communities, like the Chassids, who wear the black coats and hats, they are seen as queer, even by many Jews, who don't like the way they remind the rest of the world of what is actually our own queerness.

Of course, being gay used to be one of the main queer things you could do, but its interesting that people don't necessarily associate being queer with being gay anymore. It has become quite mainstream, even quite middle class, which I suppose is the opposite of queer in some ways. Anyone who goes on holiday to Mykonos can't really be that queer! India said something very interesting, which is that lots of trans people, once they have made the change and can 'pass off' as a man or a woman, (which means people can't tell if they are trans anymore), they often like to get on with

their settled, nice, middle class life, with holidays in Tuscany, drinking Chianti just like everyone else. Nothing wrong with that, but they also want not to be queer.

I know it sounds kind of odd, but part of me would really like to be a bit more queer, or be able to express this a bit more. Maybe that's how I use my Jewishness, as a kind of queer 'trope' (a trope is a slogan - like a newspaper headline) announcing that there is a part of me that is really quite different when I need to show this. At least I have that choice. Our Jewish grandfathers and great grandfathers couldn't really hide this. They did all they could to do so, almost desperately, like changing their name, putting on western clothes, changing their accents, hiding their Yiddish language, just to fit in. I wonder if their hard work and struggle has in a way given us a kind of choice: this ability to choose to be queer or not. I can feel both sides sometimes, an urge to throw off the strictures and be really 'queer', and at the same time, a deep urge to blend in and not be queer at all, to 'disappear'.

Being more queer is also just about being less buttoned up, being a bit more expressive of the wilder sides of ourselves, perhaps the more emotional sides. If queer is everything that the 'normal', everyday world cannot handle, then for men it could be about just showing how sad and distressed and alone and out of control we feel, as a part of our everyday experience. This isn't actually unusual. It is quite common I think – we are all more queer in this way than we like to admit. It doesn't mean we are messed up; it just means we are showing it more honestly to the world, and in doing so, we might be *less* messed up. I don't want to pretend I am not hurting sometimes. Perhaps when we bend a little we learn to be more flexible. After all, isn't it the more rigid branches that get blown off the trees?

* * *

November 2007

Yesterday we went together to the war memorial. You went with your Cub Scout group. Jenn, mum and I walked down the road that had been shut off from the traffic along with all the other people. We listened to the hymns and watched the old soldiers walk past, with all their medals shining in the low winter sun. I was thinking about something that Rudyard Kipling had written. You know about him because he also wrote those 'Just so' stories we listen to in the car sometimes. Kipling's own son had died in the First World War, in those muddy trenches, like so many others. He had been out there in France for just one day when he was killed. Apparently, he was very short-sighted and needed thick glasses to see anything and they got all fogged up with the rain and wind and mud. He didn't really stand a chance in the fighting. Kipling had written:

If any question why we died
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

I wonder what Kipling felt when he wrote that? What did he feel his own lies had been about? I wonder about my own lies to you, and if Kipling wasn't just talking about the lies you speak, like when you say you haven't been reading in bed when I know you have, or like if I have been smoking cigarette and pretend I haven't been? I wonder if the lies he meant are more about the way we live our lives, the lies we tell by who we are? The lies in what we *don't* say?

* * *

December 2007

I met with India again. She said that when a child is born, they always say 'It's a girl', or 'it's a boy', and she wonders what the 'it' is, before they name it in this way! Well, when you were born I had a really strange experience of the whole world changing, not just me, or you, but the whole world. I had it when Jenn was born as well. Like there was some kind of shattering, shuddering rift and the whole world was new. Would Doctor Who call this a rift in time and space I wonder?! I mean, lots of babies are born everyday and this can't be happening with all of them? Or could it? There is a Hebrew saying that goes something like; 'He who saves but one life save the world entire'. As if every single life is in some way the whole world as well.

All my life I have wondered who I really am and yet the only time I have ever really had an idea what that might be about it was to do with being your dad. I mean I am a lecturer, teacher, researcher, citizen, taxpayer, husband, Jew...yet none of these things ever feels like the complete story and as an incomplete story they feel like not the story at all. Except being a dad. That feels more like the whole story. But not just dad as in I 'fathered' you but am *fathering* you, an ongoing activity that gives me more of a sense of who I am than anything else. Everything else seems to transient, changing such a pale shadow of what I feel like. But not that; when you were born, the world was changed, absolutely and forever, but at the same time I just took a big step to becoming something much more constant and fixed. As that Abraham Gibson poem goes: 'the feel of your tiny hands wrapped around one of my fingers, has made more a man of me than I could ever make of myself'.

Writing these letters to you and Jenn really helps me. I feel connected with you and therefore connected to myself, in a real way which is such a contrast to the work and research I do, which feels so abstract and unreal at times - in fact much of the time. It helps me be more of how I want to be, working in connection with something rather than just 'alone in myself'. It reminds me of what this philosopher Gregory Bateson asks: where the blind man's self really starts? Let's say he uses a white stick to feel his way around. Does his self start at the tip of the stick, or in the handle, or somewhere between, some point halfway down? Like this pen. Where does it become part of me, and you, where do you end and I begin? As a man sometimes we are encouraged to see ourselves as complete, 'self-made' and therefore separate, discrete entities, and that you, my children, are objects that I own, like a house or a car. I know that I feel like that sometimes: emotionally and psychologically alone in myself. It reminds me of my father, your grandfather. When I was a child I remember sometimes getting up in the night and noticing that the light was on in the living room, and my father would be in there, on his own, in the middle of the night, worrying, worrying, worrying, usually about his business which wasn't doing very well. He was trying to figure it all out, on his own, in his own head, as he watched late night TV. During that time, my mother would say, 'be good, be quiet, your father has a lot on his mind at the moment', and her voice would come into my head and stop me from walking down the stairs and asking him if he was OK.

Sometimes, when I drive to work early in the morning and I leave you and Jenn sleeping in bed, and my head is full of a million things I've got to get sorted, and I suddenly feel just like him, as if my body is turning into his body and I can understand much better now what it must have felt like for him. I feel his anxiety and loneliness in my own limbs.

But writing to you like I am now, it has the effect of being a kind of lightning conductor, making some kind of connection and grounding this energy and I feel closer to you

and much, much better, even though I haven't actually told you 'in real life' what is going on! This is what they call a 'paradox'.

* * *

December 2007

I wanted to be more honest in these letters. Something urges me to talk about more difficult things as well as good things. It is a challenge, but I wanted to show you what I am really like, and not pretend I am some kind of hero. So for example, let me tell you what it's like if I have had a bad day.

Sometimes, something happens when I come home, especially if I have had a bad day. I walk up the front path feeling like an aeroplane that just scrapes into land over the perimeter fence. When I put my key in the lock it is like some kind of grounding, psychic lightning, the electric charge coming to earth, crossing from the public to the private world, 'boom' and I am full of rage. I try to keep it outside but it rolls in with me like thunder. Then things catch my eye and serve as conduits for it: a letter that hasn't been posted for a couple of days. The floor that was clean when I left it now covered with marks. 'Boom!' These trivial objects seem to be the issue but there's a deeper message here. 'Do you know, do you understand? Do you *care* what I've been through since I was here last?' Most of the time you and Jenn just ignore me but sometimes I catch a glimpse in your eye of something familiar, just like I looked at my Dad when he came home on Friday night and spilled his own rages over the dining table. I am rageful or later numb; later, when I have tried to take back the words, they are like cleared-up floodwater that leaves a muddy slick behind it. I sit with your mother at opposite ends of the sofa, safely hemmed in by silence and the anaesthetic of trash TV and chocolate.

It feels like breaking a taboo to tell you this. This is the stuff that remains private even in the family's private space. It is something we keep from our children. We suggest this is 'for their own good'. But is it really because we are so ashamed that we have turned into the very thing that we promised we would never ever become ourselves?

The other day I saw on the TV news how a Dad had flipped. Whilst on some holiday, he had picked his kids up and thrown them and himself over a hotel balcony. Every few weeks I notice a story like this and whilst of course I am appalled, like you are supposed to be, at his selfishness, his self-centred, 'this is what I made, I own them and this I can take them away' attitude, I am even more appalled that part of me even understands. There are some lines from a Paul Simon song this reminds me of:

I knew a father who had a son
He longed to tell him all the reasons for the things he done
He came a long way just to explain
Kissed his head whilst he lay sleeping then he turned around and headed home again.

Will I ever be able to explain to you, this strange transformation that takes place? A kind of alienation - from what? - You see part of me remembers quite well what it was like to be ten years old, the simplicity of it, the straightforward logic. There's much less logic in the life of a grown up, especially a parent. You argued with me recently, when I was telling you off: 'Why should what you say or think have any more importance than what I say or think?' It is such a good point, but it is also wrong, not because of a lack of logic but because of the way things are, the same power dynamics that keep us all in our confined spaces of expression. Can I ever explain to you how much I would like to break out of this box?

* * *

January 2008

Do you know that film, '*La Vita e Bella*', (*Life is Beautiful*)? It's about a father who plays elaborate games to hide the awful truth from his son that they are living in a concentration camp.

It moved me so much when I saw it, and I thought it was just because of the Jewish angle, but it occurs to me now that the really moving thing about it is it may be about many of us, to some extent. Do we portray our own lives as a holiday camp sometimes, in order to protect you from the truth? Today I met a man as part of my research who was so sad, so angry and full of despair. He was the head of a company and things are going badly, but not because they had done anything wrong. It was what we call 'politics' and he was going to be blamed. Now in a way this was something that he is paid for so you don't have to feel that sorry for him. That isn't my point. My point is how in this private space where he confided in me, all this emotion was going on, and yet as soon as it was time to go, he sort of buttoned up, and became so strong and resigned. As we walked down the corridor together it was like being with a different person. It was so shocking in a way, I even had this moment when I wondered if it was the same person.

It occurred to me that this is what we do: we button up all of this emotion because we convince ourselves and everyone else that this will help us get on with life better; that things go more smoothly and more safely as a result. But I wonder whether the opposite is true: because we are so disconnected from this feeling, we can do things that are quite wrong headed, plain foolish and harmful to ourselves, others and the world? And also, what happens to all those feelings? Do they simply disappear because we aren't talking about them, or do they float around, like a kind of gas, or an infection, leaking into places they aren't wanted? Maybe feeling things more, making that the foreground, would help us create a better world, a better environment? Maybe there really is a link between the way we treat ourselves and the way we treat the earth?

So my darling children, I am OK and not OK. I am a little normal and a little bit quirky, queer. The queerness isn't something I worry about – indeed it is actually something I like in a way. It stops me from believing the stories about myself; that I daily tell in the public places, because that's the habit we are all in to. Perhaps this is what the world needs: a little more queerness. A little of the truth of my life may not harm you at all – it may make you stronger? I know this isn't really talking to you but it does feel like a kind of rehearsal for when we could talk about these things.

So what kind of a man am I in all of this? A kind of man who accepts minor defeats all day long, in order to keep your space safe so that you can grow up and one day go out and do the same? But even that in a way is a kind of deceit. Because it suggests this process is only one way – that I make you. The truth is, I am as much made by you. This is what takes away my right to own your future; what gives me the responsibility to look after the place a bit better. I have only borrowed it from you. There is a vital point here that I am groping for in the dark, like Theseus – it is my red thread, my ticket out of the blackness. The real legacy I can leave you is my uncertain but persistent questioning, my inquiring 'What sort of a man am I?' In the end, isn't it their children who ultimately know the answer to this question of their fathers? Only you and Jenn will be able to look back and say with some authority: this is what he was really like. And so we may meet in the middle of this labyrinth one day. But it helps me to

ask, so thank you for letting me. Gradually through this process I am letting go, of my pride, my vanity, my sense of self-importance and standing here hand in hand with you, naked and full of nothingness.

* * *

February 2008

Mikey, yesterday you said something which really struck me. You were lying in bed and you looked a bit upset and I asked you what was up. You said that sometimes you felt things and you didn't know why. You said you felt guilty and that you didn't know why; that you didn't think you'd done anything to feel guilty about. It was just there, a feeling, 'like a visitor', you said. I said to you that maybe sometimes feelings just float around, waiting for someone to have them. And then when I said that an image came into my mind:

Imagine our Jewish ancestors, this boiling, seething mass, rolling westwards, running from their homes of a thousand years, millions of people. Imagine what they felt; the fear, the anger and pain, not being able to defend your own home, being kicked out with a day or two to pack your things. You can only take what you can carry. The name you're given when you get to London is a bastard name, a translation, like 'Porter', of some eastern European slur. It means 'schlepper', carrier, because that's what you had to do: carry all your things with you. On your back, on carts, like refugees do. It's funny that now, the universal and dramatic nature of this story makes it something to be proud of. This is a name with a story, a heritage. But not then. For those that were given it, it was a name of shame. Like the names of African slaves who were given the names of their white owners, on the plantations of the west Indies, or America.

The picture skips a generation and I see your great-grandfather, my granddad, a broken, quiet man, a Russian exile. He was a socialist, who believed in the revolution and took risks for it; who fought for it, but was then nearly murdered by some communists, who despite everything, turned out to be anti-Semitic. He ran away from the conflict, to London, but found himself married to a woman whose family loved to fight! Outside he was as placid as anything, but what was going on inside? He died of a heart attack, aged 65. "He killed himself," says your grandma, my mother, his daughter in law. Then there's your grandpa, my father, who it seems had a similar distilled rage within him. Your grandma, his wife, calls him 'Mr. Malcontent'. "He was never happy." She says. He inherited the gentle, kind face of his father yet this masked something, perhaps some of that fighting spice of his mother's family, who liked a punch up and fought their way from the Caucasus to London. Yet the only punch up your grandpa liked was listening to boxing matches on the radio with his father. Jews made good boxers in those times; they were famous for it. Why? Imagine all those feelings of rage, shame, guilt, fear, etc., bottled up inside and through those mass generations, as if it were condensed like spirit through the tubes of some strange, invisible distillery.

So perhaps all these feelings, like your guilt, aren't yours. They are a by-product, or even a waste product and they sit around us, in ourselves, our bodies and our stories. Perhaps this is part of our quirky-ness, our 'queerness'. Perhaps this is what drives it or fuels it. Could it do with some kind of expression? Perhaps one day someone will find out how it can be cleared up, like the sludge after a flood, and it won't bother ten year old boys lying in bed anymore.

* * *

February 2008

There is so much feeling around. Sometimes I feel like I absorb it, and I don't know where my own begins and that of others ends. Mom used to say that I look like I carried the world on my shoulders, that is why my back is bent. But that's what it feel like, that there is all this feeling around, and I just suck it up like I'm drawing from a deep well. And the work we do at the Institute, people come through and it feels like they leave this emotional baggage behind sometimes and we accidentally pick it up and the handles break, the catches open and it just sort of spills out all over the place, like dirty clothes. Everyone talks about the environment, how there is a risk of eco-disaster, and yet there's this other environment, an emotional environment that may be more at risk than the physical one. We've got some clearing up to do, there as well. Recently I heard a wonderful woman called Joanna speaking at a conference and she talked about how what we feel isn't just for ourselves. She said: 'There's a shared part of it, which we pick up and feel, sometimes for the whole world'. That's why are stories are important, because they aren't just our stories. They belong to everyone.

My father, your grandfather told me a story once. One day, he was on the London Underground, going home after work. He found himself, by chance, in the same carriage as his own father, you great grandfather, also going home. But instead of walking up to him, saying hello, he ignored him, pretending he hadn't spotted him. You see, he was ashamed of him. He was ashamed of what he looked like: an old dishevelled Jewish tailor, an exile, nodding off on the tube train. My own father tells me this story and his eyes fill with tears.

* * *

4.

The landscape rolled by. Tears rolled down Mike's face. Decades, worlds apart, different trains rattled across their points, the resonant feelings rebounding off the carriage walls.

It was dark by the time the train arrived at the northerly halt. The dimmed low energy bulbs hardly cast a shadow along the platform. He stepped nervously into the gloom.
- Hello Mikey.

An unmistakably voice and then his father's face appears, older perhaps, and a little thinner. His hair was long and his clothes...were... people stared surreptitiously.
- Don't mind them, said his father. I am used to it. And they hugged.

Later as they ate, the six of them in the homely kitchen of the cottage, with three children dancing around the room, visiting each lap, including his own. At first Mike had been very tense, not knowing what he might encounter but after a while he was surprised by his own initial caution. More than anything, he noticed the normality of it all, a family eating together, at ease. Four adults, plus his own father and himself. At first he had been conscious of the way they seemed to describe every combination of gender and sexuality in his limited lexicon and beyond it. But the food was good, the chatter amiable and relaxed. It all felt quite familiar. Very soon he felt as if his own was the only uptight, queer presence in the room. They asked him about his life, his work, and seemed to be genuinely interested in his replies.

Later, when the children had been ushered off to bed and the various adults had dispersed to different rooms, he found himself in the kitchen, clearing up with Susan. Susan was Paul's partner, and theirs was the main relationship of the household, off which all the others seemed to hang. Paul had been a woman, but now lived as a man.

Susan had broken the silence, noticing in Mike's hesitant questioning, his attempts to fit all the puzzle of it together.

- It's confusing isn't it? She said, airily
- I didn't mean...I am sorry
- Don't be. It still boggles my mind sometimes, all this chopping and changing, so I don't see why it should make sense to a visitor. She laughed, seeing Mike's discomfort.
- Paul hates it when I call it that too, but it's my northern humour I suppose. Yes, you might find it a little disorientating. Paul calls it 'gender dysphoria' It's a kind of disorientation we feel when a key pillar that holds up our social relationships, this pillar of bipolar gender, disappears. God, it did my head in at first but you start to realise that it really isn't all that important, when the chips are down. Go on, ask me.
- What?
- Ask me how it all fits, how we all fit together. What I am, what Paul is and God knows, how your father fits into it all. I know you are dying to.
- Yes. Actually, I've got a bit of a better idea now, you see he left some letters and I read them as I came up.
- Good, well the way I see it, your Dad's a bit of a refugee. I mean he is struggling with something, some questions, and he doesn't know the destination of the journey he's on yet. We're just offering him a bit of a safe house. Like we are for most of the queerness that ships up here.
- What sort of a journey are people on when they come here?
- Well, it's usually sort of about who we really are. I mean *really*. Take me. I am quite a conventional girl really. Nice middle class northern lass (perhaps itself a

little queer, to be Northern and middle class). I just wanted to do my work, find a good man, settle down. And I have. Except that Paul is so much nicer than so many of the men I ever met. I just think it was meant to be.

- And your family?
- Oh, it's been hell! But, the kids have made such a difference. They are Paul's and mine by the way. That is possible these days. But my parents refuse to see Paul as the father, or rather as the equal parent. (Few of us can get beyond this mother-father thing yet). I am resigned to know they will never accept Paul, but I actually wonder sometimes if they'd have accepted anyone who I ended up with. It's just their way. No different really, they'd have found some other excuse. In some ways Paul's difference, his queerness makes it easier for them to feel aggrieved. This kind of thing just brings the feelings into starker relief. I think that's what it's all for.
- What's for?
- The chopping and changing, the gender-dysphoria and third-sexness. It's a rebellion against a buttoned up-ness that the eco-shock has brought out in people. Some of us feel that's the last kind of response that is needed. Like, that's what got us into this mess in the first place. It is like we shine a big bright light on all of the wobbles within people, just showing what we're all really like. They just don't like what they see, but we think it's important to show them, nevertheless. The irony is; who am I to talk? I am just a married, working mum, like so many others.
- So what about my father? Where does he fit in? Is he a dragster?
- You see, there you go! Dragsters! Yes, I know I use the word too, but that's what we're called from the outside; it's like what your father says about being a Jew, 'a Jew is what *other* people call us', he says. (It's from Satre apparently). Oh I know all the rumours about him. He has shared that much with us; what some of your family or his work colleagues think: that we are all living and sleeping together, like some grand ménage or whatever. It is funny how the outside world seems so much more obsessed with our sex-life than we are! Who has time for sex with kids around anyway? The truth is this: your father is a refugee, a lodger in the clear, queer oasis. What they are saying about him being here says so much more about them, their own obsessions, hang ups and projections than it does about our reality. The more the shit hits the fan, the more they button up, which is what your father is trying to get away from. Go easy on him, Mike. Try to understand. He is a little lost, yes some of it is just about him, going through his own process, a bit of a mid-life crisis if you like. He won't change that much really in the end. No-one ever does, in my experience. Beyond the he or she there's a pretty constant 'it' in everyone. But there's also something bigger here, something more than just about him. Your dad is just looking for a little life, a little colour in all of this greyness, that's all. Some of it is about some bigger movement, some grand statement, that's for sure. We all need a bit of that. But in the end it is as if part of him just got put in a box and we're all just helping prise the lid off a bit.

5.

Later, Mike and his father were alone.

- I read the letters

- Oh did you... good...did they...help?

- Yes. No. Maybe a bit. I mean, they showed me how...well, lonely you were.

- That's interesting. They seemed lonely did they? It's funny but when I wrote them I think I felt the least lonely I've ever felt. I was more at home being your father when you were little then than I have been before or since. It was a good time in my life; one of the best.

- But in the letters you seemed...quite often angry, despairing...at your wits end.

- There's some truth in that, but they were just an expression of what I felt, and in expressing it to you, it was OK and it was changed. I don't think I was worse off than most men. I was just showing it a little, that's all. And in doing so, it helped. The opportunity to write to you and Jenn that way felt so...completing, like I could be whole. They allowed for a kind of balance that I think most people don't get the chance to express. And it helped me. It helped me practically. I mean I got my PhD, and I owe you that. My career went from strength to strength; I even felt that they helped us understand each other better. I didn't have to actually say those things to you...they were kind of implicit, like body language only more so. It gave me a kind of power, a location. I used that sense of location to get me places, to get us places. Now I feel like I've forgotten where I came from.

- So they got *you* places. What about *us*? They helped you, but how did it help us? It sounds like we were, kind of your therapy.

- I can see that, yes. I didn't mean it like that. I was aware that it was therapeutic to write to you that way. But that wasn't the main purpose. It was to find a way of asking the questions, in a way that mattered more to me than the research I was doing. They were and still are important questions, not just for me, but for people, generally; for men generally: it's who we really are, behind the facades we create for ourselves. When we feel stuff, we aren't just feeling it for ourselves. That's the flaw in the self-orientated, self-obsessed, therapy culture. I am not just doing this for me. When people feel things, they are picking up on other stuff too. Stuff that's happening in the world. Yes sure, it's amplified through their own make-up, maybe I am having some kind of mid-life crisis, in the end, who cares? We always seem to miss this point: We are like iron filings in the wider field of a magnet. We align to invisible forces beyond us, invisible patterns and whorls of evolution. We are still responsible for ourselves of course – I am choosing to do this, but I am also picking up on something beyond me as well. Yes it does look quite self-indulgent, I can see that, but it is also *useful*. Writing those letters enabled me to stay in touch with a truth, the queer private truths that we all carry, and I think especially those who succumb to the type of closed in masculinity that pervades the tops of organisations, businesses, the cultural and social elites. A masculinity that thinks it is self contained, 'self made'. We talk about a 'self-made man' as a good thing! It's a lie. Writing the letters reminded me who I really am; that I am not self-made; that I am made by relationships like those with you and Jenn. It was about recognising the limitations of my ability to make a difference. If I couldn't change things for 'men', could I do it for me? Writing those letters was typical of an evolutionary process. I meant them as a by-product and they became the main event. Later, I kind of drifted away from these very questions that I stood for, as if getting the PhD and promotions and whatever were *the thing*. Here I am, trying to find my way back.

- How did you drift away?

- Just getting on with things, becoming part of an establishment, at the Institute that talks about these questions of self-awareness, of learning but was I *living* it? Things started to happen that reminded me...like a young woman, a student, asking me how the things I had written about in my research had really made any difference. Finding

myself here, with all that's been happening in the world, recovering from the disasters, these questions seem more important than ever.

- But isn't this all a bit selfish? Isn't this a time when we need to focus less on ourselves and more on how we sort out the world?

- That's just it. I think in this time, who we are, who we *really* are, is a more important question than ever. You know, the day I decided to leave, can I tell you what kicked it off in me? It was talking to my accountant. Yes Mr. Money himself. I was asking him something about my taxes, and in the course of the conversation, he told me he was off to visit Auschwitz, on a kind of pilgrimage. He had even got a black market permit for it. It was then that it hit me. What was I doing? How was what I was doing answering the questions about all those people, who had died? I felt a connection. You see it wasn't just the Jews who died in Auschwitz; it was, well, anyone who represented a difference, a 'queerness'. We had an affinity. In the early 1900s, there was this man, Otto Weininger, and he wrote a book, about the 'shared inferiority between Jews and Women'. It was called 'Sex and Character'. The Nazis used it as a kind of bible, even though Weininger was a Jew himself, a self-hating, sorry young man. It struck me that the point wasn't abstract or ideological, it was about bodies. Our bodies, and how being male, maleness a kind of muscled-up, armoured maleness, was like this big tide that swept everything up in its wake, and that the clenched, anxious response to the eco-shock, that was just making it even more so. It was knocking the edges off everyone. So all of us, men, women, Jews, non-Jews, we're all becoming a kind of *man*. And the main symptom of this man was in our bodies, how we held them, how we masked our feelings and pretended we were strong. I saw it in the work I was doing, I saw it in women too, especially women in the mainstream, at work, at the tops of organisations. I don't blame them. How else were they going to get some kind of economic power, except by pretending to be more like men? This was feminism's big double bind: women couldn't win. Join in, and become this kind of *man*, or stay out of it, and stay victimised. And look at Israel: why do you think they created one of the biggest armies in the world? A big, macho, state-sponsored muscularity? And look where that led them? To me, it all seems to point to this same kind of question, about our bodies and what sort of *man* we were all becoming. And in my work, my research, I was talking about these things, but what side was I on, really? Those letters show you, I was just the same. The only thing that made a difference was the proposition of writing of them. And then I stopped even that. So where do you go next? How do you, as a man, forge some kind of ...disruption, make a difference? I accept this isn't a coherent response. Maybe that's the point. People like Paul and Sarah, their responses are more coherent than mine. Do you know how brave and strong they have needed to be, in order to stand up for who they really are? But for me, I wish there was a better way, but I think all I can do is be part of something, join this shabby, great band, and make some kind of small gesture. You see, we might get through this, the eco-shock, but what if we get through it by being less than we who we are? Perhaps if we could find more, better ways of being ourselves then there's less chance we recreate exactly the same kind of problems.

- It sounds like a kind of manifesto, a movement of some kind.

- I think it is, but it is all just an inevitable thing too, part of evolution. I am not trying to sound polemical, just to explain. It is about noticing what's been happening. It is a kind of evolution, a proliferation of things, beyond the old binary. First the hold of the religious orders on social life breaks down. Institutions like marriage don't fit the way things are. Rates of divorce outstrip those of marriage. Complex families emerge. Gay culture becomes more mainstream, but there's this interplay with the past and it too becomes quite conservative, becoming absorbed back into the binary. But then there's this flowering of diversity. Fertility technology frees up the biology. You get transsexuals, (non-op and op), transgender, TG butch, femme queen, third gender, drag kings and queens, transbois...a 'roiling, radical critique of the limits of gender roles' as Dvorksy & Hughes called it. There's Ursula Le Guin writing 'The Left Hand of

Darkness', about a race of androgynous humans, Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto. Japanese *Manga* cartoons with all-pervading intersex characters. Youth fashion cults, mystical androgyny or what is commonly called 'dragsterism'...suddenly you have an avalanche of proliferating 'types', far beyond the binary. That's the way it was going. The eco-shock just slowed things down a bit. The irony is that this evolutionary process, aided by science and technology, undermines the gender order far more effectively than any number of men's groups or women's groups. Gender binaries get separated from the traditional power dynamics. Ultimately people are asking spiritual questions, about who they really are. It is interesting that in some cultures, people who represented some kind of androgyny have been regarded with reverence, as if they were onto something, some kind of magic, like shamans. Take the 'Hijra' in India; they are a legally legitimised category, beyond male and female. There's the Siberian 'berdache', the 'third sex', who are often seen as having magic powers. It's why what we do with our bodies is so important. In the west, we think spirituality's only a mind thing. We have Descartes to thank for that. In Eastern Philosophy, spiritual evolution is a mind and body thing. That's what's unfolding here. That's the social change that's underway and why it has to be about bodies.

- So if this is happening anyway, why do you need to join in?

- I suppose I just felt a bit like my own life had become a sign of something, a sign of the opposite. At one level I could be seen as just a rather eccentric old man. Maybe that is all I am. But it could also be that it does a little something, like...have you ever heard of John Carlos and Tommie Smith?

- No.

- It was thirty years before you were born, at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. They caused a bit of a stir. They had won first and third place in the 200 metres, gold and bronze medals. They had agreed they would use this as a bit of an opportunity. You see they were black, and they decided that they would do what became known as a 'black power salute' during the American national anthem, in the medal ceremony, as a way of demonstrating their protest about the way that black people were being treated in America. A small, significant embodied act, yet it had a huge impact. They were punished for it. Their lives didn't turn out too well because of it.

- So you see yourself as some kind of heroic figure, like Carlos or Smith?

- As I say, I could just be seen as an old man in a frock. That doesn't concern me too much. What interests me is that Carlos and Smith felt compelled. They had a choice; they didn't have to do it, but they felt compelled to do something a little different. I felt compelled. It makes me think that there's something much bigger to all of this, and I'm just a part of it. You see, all of this, the eco-shock, the gender confusion, the mystical androgyny, it could all just be a window of opportunity.

- O.K., look I get it. I get what you are trying to do. But surely people do this all the time, change things, challenge things, make a difference. I remember how you used to rock me asleep to Clare da Lune. A man and a baby, nurturing and intimacy. Surely that's as much of a protest in a way as standing on a podium? Perhaps more so, perhaps it's a little bit less macho and grandiose?

- Wow, you remember that do you? Gosh, yes that's a good one. And I agree with you. In its time, that was a good way of embodying some kind of difference. That was then, and this is now. I'm at a different stage, and so are you. All I'm doing is putting my body where my words have been. So many words Mikey. I am a man of words. Well placed, cogent wordage. But where's the grit in the oyster? My oyster. A little bit more grit was required. Something a little bit queerer. Look: in all of this, there is something I haven't been telling you so much about. It's about how I feel. That's the real connection to those letters. Writing them helped me express something, to be a certain way, to be in connection with parts of myself that were before like shut doors into locked rooms. And so does this. It's funny isn't it, how I still need to argue the case with you, rather than just tell you how I feel? As if part of me still feels rational case is more valid than a heartfelt one? I am an irredeemable academic. I just feel like I can

express more, presenting myself this way. It gives me more options. I actually notice different things. Life has more colour. I am less obsessed with sex. It's funny that isn't it? When the whole world thinks first and only that this must have something to do with some kind of sexual perversion, yet actually what I feel is far less obsessive, far less *interested* in sex, and much more open. Queerness always holds up some kind of mirror to the world. Their reaction says so much more about them. What they miss is the spiritual opportunity here.

- How so?

- Because we're opening new doors, new opportunities, being ourselves, really ourselves, instead of squeezing into the boxes we have made for each other. I mean, look at you and Jenn. Look at your *Mikeyness*. It's so good to see. There's so much more to you than being 'a man'. You've got so many more choices now. Don't believe the lies that we've all got to be smaller in order to save the planet. It's the opposite. We've got to be more ourselves, bigger, more feeling. We have got to feel it all, so that we can understand the real impact of the mess we make. We need to grow, and expand. It's what nature has always done, proliferated, diversified, adapted yes, but through diversity. I marvel at the strong, beautiful people you have become. Do you remember what India said about the 'It', before it gets named as a 'boy' or a 'girl'; that's the bit I'm interested in, in you.

- I don't feel strong or beautiful. I feel...well, anxious much of the time. I wonder if I am playing *my* part. This feels like the most important time in history. We have to find solutions. Put the planet back together, it feels like such a responsibility. How can I contribute?

- And I wonder the same thing. I know what I'm doing seems weird and crazy from the outside, when everyone is so focussed on the shock-world, but I'm looking for the solutions inside as well as out. Do you remember that Seamus Heaney poem? The one we used to read together; called 'Digging'?

- 'Between my finger and thumb, the squat pen rests, as snug as a gun'

- Yes that's it!

- 'Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

My father, digging. I look down....

- It ends with the lines:

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.

- It's about a son watching his father doing something he couldn't do, he wasn't skilled at, so he had to find his own way, find out what he could do.

- That's right, that's us, Mikey. I'm digging here, you are digging there. I only know how to dig like this, into myself, asking myself who I really am. Finding myself unsatisfied with most of the answers I'm supposed to have, like a 'man', or even 'a Jew'. You can dig your way. You are digging your way. I admire you so much. You don't need me anymore, not like you used to. You stand on your own ground. I love you so much. Whether you can love me, who I am now, that's up to you. I hope you can.

* * *

On the train home, Mike, deep in thought, looked up from his pod, and was startled to notice that a dragster, a mystical androgyne, had taken the seat next to him. He sat for a few moments, then turned towards them, smiled and said: 'Hi, I'm Mike. Where are you going?'

Part Three - 2220

Trem lifted the lid on the old archival boxfile. Through the dust, the date read 'letters-early 21st century'

- Before the emotional plague-height, Trem murmured. This is exactly what I am looking for! Trem's long, delicate fingers prised open the box. The seal broke with a slight popping hiss. Reverently, Trem started to leaf through. A whole jumble of papers, then something caught Trem's eye. Some letters were written in the strange, curling shapes of someone's own hand writing. Trem gasped.

- These are the ones, and began the struggle to read the old scripts.

Later, Trem met with Hong who asked what Trem had been doing down in the sub-basements.

- I found some letters, Trem said, from the early 21st Century. Hand written.

Trem said the last words with a studied emphasis.

- Early 21st, so? You're period! And hand-written. Well done. What do they invoke in you?

- Many, many feelings. It is so exciting. Just what I've been picking up on from that period, when tuning in, during the Cleansing.

- So, history meets Cleansing. Perfect. Our grants will be renewed if we submit this carefully.

Hong took the other younger, slender person by the shoulder and led towards the window.

- The Council has been looking for just this kind of justification for our historical hard research. Too much in this age relies on telepatho-emotional research. The current fashion is that we can tune into ourselves for all our inquiries. No-one seems to want documentary evidence. It is seen as too scientific. Good work Trem. Tell me, where are you in your birth cycle?

Trem had been waiting patiently for this question, as Hong asked it periodically and was seemingly forgetful of the answer. Trem trundled out a practised answer.

- I have just co-sired with my partners and now am gyni to another membryo. I am expecting birthing in two terms but although am favouring natural birth, predict I will be away no more than half a term, just as I was with my recently born. My partners are also re-configuring their cycles for the mem-coming.

- Good. I knew you were an enthusiastic breeder but that has never got in the way of your work. Remind me how many partners have you?

Trem hesitated, feeling out for the vibe from the headresearcher. Then slowly: I have two, both of whom present pro-andros. (Vibing: What business is *this* of yours?)

- Please don't be offended, I can feel your vibe. It is your right to feel aggrieved. I am only asking because I want to consider when the news is submitted to the Council.

Clearly I would like it soon, but also I would like you to do it, yourself. I mean it as an honour.

- Oh. Thank you Hong-sen.

* * *

The room light was lowered and a slight hiss-hum was a barely audible from around the forms of the 12 or so there gathered. The hiss-hum faded, diffracted between them and seemed to emanate from and around their whole bodies. It rose and fell in intensity, at times reaching a sort of crescendo, then fading to a barely audible murmur. Trem, who was present, had heard the old recordings of the sea from the planetsurface, from the old time, before the Catastrophe, and thought that the Cleansing sounded just like the sea. The noise began to fade and for some considerable time, there was silence.

The light level rose and the tall form in the middle began to speak.

- Thank you for your Cleansings. Thank Reich for our work.

- Thank Reich - the group responded in answer.

The Council head, the venerable Sang-Yo Chan began briskly.

– So! Now our Cleansing is over we move to the lesser business, and let's hope we can get it over with swiftly because I for one am off for a holiday to the virtuals from today for a full term! I can't wait!

- Where will you be plugged? Asked another, fatter round person, in a deferential manner.
- Oh it's such a bigvibe! I am off to Italy of late 20th Century!
- I went there last term! said another. Tuscany! It was jolly. I got completely smashedoff by the wineries. It was fabjoy. Can you imagine they actually drank that stuff into their bodies, not virtual? They must have been a psycho-mess!
- Well, whyddya think we have all this Cleansing to do? Said another. I was off to NewYork recently. I couldn't believe what they were up to there! Total pissedup, mind mess.
- Ahem.

Trem was conscious that vibing impatience hadn't been sufficient to distract the Council from their reveries.

- Ah yes, Chan said, Let's return to the one external item. Trem has a request, on behalf of the Institute for External Research
- The Historico-Cultural Department, Hong who was also present, jumped in with the full title.
- Ah Hong yes I felt your vibe. Do not worry. Although we are wary of your work, it offers some important verification of the Cleansing. But of course you are aware that there are those who suggest that documentary verification of the pre-plague isn't required? That the need for it could represent a partial plague relapse in itself, coming as it does from a potential suspicion of feeling-over-mind?
- Yes your Councilhead, I am aware, but we felt that far from inviting such suspicion, it is completely feeling-sound, as it offers just another form of cultural expression, and as such represents art-over-science.
- Ah! The art-over-science-argument! Very persuasive. Good, the Council is partial to it. We are wary of the science case, for as you know, ultra-science and the squeezing of the mind-frame away from emoto-resonance and into lonely self-obsession was the ultimate herald of the mind-plague's height.

A murmur of assent ran around the gathered circle.

- If I may, Trem ventured, the documents I have found I think shed some light on the split between the private-public which plague-ridden ultra-science was grounded in. (Then, hurriedly, to avoid sounding too scientifico-historical): which we could present as high art, of course, were we to match it in with appropriate patterns of the Cleansing. It would make a fabjoy exhibition.
- This sounds good, it tugs good heart appeal, the Councilhead averred. And yes we have felt your vibe about credits Hong, and would like to venture that we are probably persuaded, are we not, gentlefolk here gathered? (There was a murmur of ascent and a goodvibe). So you can relax and tell us more. We are keen to hear, Trem-San

Later, Trem was at the crux of exposition:

- ...So, to summarise, it appears that these were a set of writings, written by hand with pen-and-ink, of a Daddy to a SonnyGirlChild. They are important art for a number of feelings: Firstly, they show the feeling of inner and outer split, the private and public that we all feel at the Cleansing and came to a head around the time of the plague height, about 2035, at the same time as the eco-collapse. Secondly, they show the feelings of unconsciousness, that the psycho-problem was given some prominence, but less so than the eco-destruct and hence why the plague was indeed discovered, thank Reich, but too late. Thirdly, they show interestingly, quite peculiar to this author, an interest in

androgyny and queerself, and a yearning to end the mummy/daddy divide which as we know now, brought about the possibility of the Cleansing art. So we have to consider that the author and those around him (the gathered council murmured and shifted uncomfortably at the use of the gendered pronoun) were dimly aware of the possibility of psycho-share and even emoto-resonance. The author...he...er...refers to a primitive type of cleansing, which they called 'check-in'. It seems though they attempted to vibrate with words rather than bodies. (Laughter gently echoed around the chamber) Yes...I know...as I say...primitive. Indeed this was around the time of the she-seers, such as Joanna Macy, and their web-talk about how feelings were not just individual, that one-feels-for-all. We even wonder whether he met her, as he refers to a Joanna. That is fabjoy exciting. It was also about fifty years post-Reich, and so the author may have read some web-talk of this work. So it all checks out....(Trem caught Tremself quickly)...Not that such historical reasoning is important of course (Trem rushed to add). But (Trem couldn't help self) it does show that such awareness of emoto-resonance was around earlier than we may have thought. And more widely shared, and amongst Daddies as well as Mummies, which is quite rare to see admitted.

- Indeed, Chan began, I do feel the letters; they appear much riddled with many feel-ranges, somewhat be-plagued but also remarkably clean in places, almost high-art, especially the love that is clear for...ahem...his...sonnygirl child. Have you cleansed this period yourself? Said Chan
- I have got near to it, around the early 21st Century and that region in Engerland that they called Sorrey. There was much plague spore there of course, but it seems there were also clearer-uppers, even then. We know of course of the psycho-practitioners...the psy-cho-logists...

The Councillors snorted derisively, as one. Trem continued, somewhat defensively

- Yes but we know that the counsellors and psy-cho-therapists were not all bad! We have seen documents that show some inadvertently enabled Cleansing, even had some art!

Hong coughed an interruption.

- I am sorry if Trem shows some young-age.

Hong was keen Trem didn't reveal too much of the scope of reasonable research they had been doing. It wouldn't look good to appear too systematic.

The Councilhead waved away Hong's protestations.

- It is no matter. Trem's art is good. It shows much feeling. I can feel much compassion to this Daddy and what the she-he divide must have been like from the merest sniff of these letters. Awful. All that angst, the boundary-confusion between self and other, the daddy and mummy-divide, the burgeoning awareness of emoto-resonance, plus the crude art of pre-plague parenting. Yet the love shines through. It is good art. It muchly deserves the credits. Organise it for display behind the high table at the great Cleansing feast on Reich's day. Thank you for your work, Trem-San
- Trem smile lit up the room, and Hong sat back and sighed contentedly.

Later that miniterm, Trem sat with Trem's own new child in arms, feeling the stir inside of the next membryo. Trem cooed, stuck out a finger and the infant gripped it instinctively. One of the letters of the Daddyman came back to Trem: something from a poem; what was it? 'The feel of your tiny hands wrapped around my fingers, has made more a man of me than I could ever make of myself'. A man. This was something Trem found so hard to understand. What must it have been like to be so fixed; so emotionally limited, polarised and plagued as a *man*? But it also struck Trem: to be made by one's child. Yes. Trem looked into Trem infant's eyes, and as Trem felt out and back towards the ancient Daddyman, this was understood completely between them.