

*EXO : LIFE*

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## **Author's Note**

Is there, was there, or will there ever be complex and intelligent life on planets other than our own? The question stretches back through the ages but now we are able to say that the answer is very likely to be yes. Currently the search for our neighbours in the stars gains impetus and uses the most advanced technology we can create.

However, to meet these beings, examples of 'exo-life', both of us must survive long enough to overlap in Time as well as Space. The odds of this occurrence are infinitesimally small. Human life-span is tiny when compared to that of a civilisation, let alone the age of a planet.

Just as two fireflies may shine brightly together in the night sky for only one brief moment, so two advanced alien races reaching a zenith together would occur in a blink of a fate.

Imagine if you will a planet, not unlike our own, populated by beings very similar to us. How could we reach out to them? We may not need to for just one reason, they may already be here...



# **I : The Line of Fortuna**

## **Chapter One**

Pando's noble ancestors arrived on Earth at the edge of the fierce tundra in what is now Northern Russia in 1024 AD. It was fortunate that their landing went largely unnoticed although there were some native tribal peoples who saw the descent and controlled touch down of the vessel, recording the event, and making many attempts to explain it. These people would spend much of their lives relating what they had seen to following generations; the story of the metal mountain that came from the skies above.

It was fortunate that these travellers from another star looked very similar to their new hosts. Pale in complexion with dark hair and strong facial features, their physiques closely resembled those of the people of this civilisation. Perhaps evolutionary forces at work on planets of similar gravity, atmosphere and climate produce similar beings. Of course Pando's people already knew of the favourable geophysical conditions through exact measurements made at a distance. Being of comparable physiology to the foreigners that they

were to meet was of the greatest unexpected benefit. A coincidence of this magnitude was difficult to fathom but then life itself and its many manifestations was most probably due to a series of incredible accidents which only natural selection over millennia were able to sort the best from the merely good.

The star-travellers were prepared for many possible scenarios. They knew themselves to be capable of completing interstellar travel, they were advanced to this particular extent. However, intelligence and technological ability might be only one dimension of development. As far as they knew no other complex life-form had visited their own planet and surely one aspect of a superior culture was its ability to communicate. If necessary the desire to travel in order to do so seemed clear. Communication between one being and another could be intricate and work on many levels. Knowledge of languages existing in many forms, means the prospect of developing a dialogue from one to another is an end in itself and way of life in its own right.

Where were they in relative terms when compared to the guardians of this world? Had they once been like the people of this planet or were they



to meet those who were at least in some way several steps ahead? An appreciation of universal laws of nature, knowledge of their own physiology and a completeness of insight were all important but it was their imagination that was to become their greatest strength. Thus they were ready to be either pupils or teachers and as it turned out they found a requirement to be both.

With their single-purpose, one-way craft as a makeshift home they began sorties to assess the local topography and gather samples of its composition. Knowing that any life here would be difficult and unlikely, they had chosen this area specifically because of its remoteness. Having such environments near the poles of their own planet they possessed the necessary skills to survive here.

The need to remain initially undetected was vital to their mission, first they must learn of their habitat. In this place they could hopefully orientate themselves and gain information as to the indigenous plants and animals. This was all part of the carefully constructed plans which were now being implemented in a logical and thorough manner.

To make the transition to this environment there was a period when they were both supported

by the systems that were in place for the journey and in parallel the construction of a primary settlement. The village they built was composed only of materials found in the immediate vicinity. The same was true of food. They were able to continue making use of the garden of their ship but also began fishing, hunting and discovering which vegetation provided sustenance. In this way it was possible to dove-tail both the very primitive with the most advanced. Doing so was to become as one with the offerings of this part of their new world. Having to borrow very heavily from their knowledge of the origins of primitive life from which they themselves had originated, they learned quickly the similarities and differences between their knowledge and that which they began to discover and document.

To begin from this starting point was deemed to be vital if the travellers were to successfully engage with any friendly communicative beings they found. To interact with inhabitants of the planet in any other way was to risk failure or great danger. To come from positions of basic development that would be common with all possible life here was seen to be the only course of action. With this presentation of themselves, the

most pessimistic forecast of their endeavours was that they would appear to others, if there were any, as a primitive race on a world inhabited by other primitive peoples.

Alternatively, and most optimistically, if they were to come into contact with higher life-forms they would be able to quickly assess the apparent level of intelligence and modify their appearance and behaviour accordingly, hopefully becoming part of a community of equals. Of course this would not be possible if the people they found were of a vastly superior intellect to their own. They had obviously explored this question before; just how far-developed could one intelligent being grow? Is it possible that they could meet fellow interstellar beings on this world? There were so many unknowns.

They had basic weapons for self defence because it was thought very likely that their presence, however well camouflaged by chance or design, could be met with violence. The intentions, motives, dreams and desires of any one organised society towards another could not be imagined, no matter how peaceful one or other of the parties may be.

They made fire. They made tools from local stone. They built houses from trees. They made clothes from animal skins. They made maps of the area. They cooked and they ate. All this in the icy, snowy, wind-ravaged land where seemingly no others were brave enough or able to settle. When times were too hard they took refuge in their space vessel but as seasons passed, they grew more adept at sustaining themselves in such conditions. Life here was all but impossible but with the skills and knowledge they brought with them from their old home, their ability to learn, and genes that could push their survival instincts to the limit, they began to subsist.

As a tribe, they had few rituals or adornments but possessed a strong urge to travel, to communicate effectively and had the ultimate goal of being ambassadors for their kind. In terms of numbers they were no more than thirty strong. As a group of families accomplishing their mission here meant they must work together as one. The only way forward was to listen to each others' wisdom and place great emphasis on the education of their young. It would be their children, and their children's children who would continue the Fortuna line and carry their message to its destiny.

Starting to explore further, sometimes several hundred miles before returning, at last they came into contact with the native people. A group of young men of the tribe on an exploration party saw the smoke of a fire in a wooded valley. They went closer and saw a huddle of male humans, seven of them in total. Fascinated they were hardly able to keep their silence as they watched from a safe distance. If there were men here, there must be mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. How large was their tribe? How far from their own home were they? Of vital importance, and the question with which the visitors to Earth were fundamentally concerned, would they be friendly?

This was a great day. The men they observed were of similar construction and size to the Fortuna's and what's more, when the tribesmen went closer still, they could hear a language being spoken. After an hour of study they made a quiet retreat, going home to their settlement with the incredible news; they were not alone on this planet, they were not alone in the Universe. Not being able to contain themselves as they walked, they compared and discussed in detail all they had seen, so as not to forget one tiny moment they had witnessed.

There were fantastic celebrations, for their oldest question had been answered. In the hearts and minds of these star-travellers the immense feeling of a wonderment fulfilled at last spilled over into a feast of dancing and joy. Special provisions from the craft that had brought them here were made available. Songs were sung in the many tongues of their home planet and as a matter of note a new Fortuna was conceived on that night. Some nine months later he was born and named 'Pando Fortuna', after his father. He would carry deep within his soul, in his DNA, a code that would come to define his line, the destiny of his people and moreover the destiny of their new family, Humankind.

Of course they had prepared for this scenario, it was at the core of the whole purpose of the expedition but still, for what they had dreamt might happen to actually become reality, caused an incredible mixture of relief, astonishment and joy in the sphere of probability if nothing else. They had placed every hope of their race on the odds that were stacked against them in almost every way but now they had won. It was a moment to be marked in the history of both their worlds and indeed all worlds which contain life that seeks life.

There were protocols put in place for this eventuality. A set of rules had been carefully drawn up in order to increase the chances of a successful first encounter. These rules were to be followed but there was room to adapt them should the situation demand it. As it stood they followed the directives in minutiae, not wanting to jeopardise such momentous events.

The objective was to create dialogue. Not knowing the language of their hosts they would have to improvise methods of information exchange based on knowledge of languages spoken on their home planet. There were over three hundred, including many tribal dialects, that may come in useful. Several of the Fortunas were specialists in the science and skills of linguistics and they were obviously chosen as part of the group for the next expedition.

Taking with them nothing of their previous lives they embarked on a journey, some five strong, back into the wilderness in the hope of rediscovering and interacting with those who had been seen. They were gone for many weeks, whilst their tribe could only hope for their safe return.

The way was long and hard in blizzard conditions but they were well accustomed and

expert by now at forays into the wilderness. Guided by two of their group who had made the discovery they traced their steps back to that last location. All the while they were alert and attentive to the fact that they could happen across native people at any moment. Caution was of the utmost concern, this first longed-for meeting could well set the tone for further and more beneficial ones that may follow.

What in fact happened was so natural and normal that a sense of danger or surprise was dissipated. They saw a group of men, perhaps the same that had first been seen only recently, who were walking towards them. As the distance between these two groups became less and less it was clear that fear was not appropriate. It was certain these two groups were dressed in approximately the same clothing of animal skins and boots. They all had long hair and could easily be mistaken as being from similar tribes.

When they became as close as to recognise that they were unknown to each other both groups stopped at a distance of only thirty feet. Both stood their ground for just a few moments then a Fortuna raised a stick on which was tied the bodies of six snow-hares that they had impressively trapped. The other group were also carrying the results of



successful hunt; a small, young deer, also tied to branch that two of them carried over their shoulders. They laughed out loud and held up their animal, showing off their obviously superior hunting skills.

That was how the two groups met, as hunters. Sharing the necessity of a way of life and the knowledge that survival in this environment was tough for anyone. A man had to be resourceful and clever to find food. Laughter at another's lesser ability and fortune in this area was not only human, it resonated with the representative of the Fortuna clan.

The lack of a common language didn't appear to be a problem. The linguists used sign language and body language in both obvious and more subtle ways. They offered maps that they had made of their area, a way of earning trust that they were open about the location of their own settlement. They made a camp and cooked some of the hares, the sharing of fire and food strengthening their bond. In return for the food the natives offered a potent liquid concoction made from potatoes. The results were hilarious. As the laughter due to the language barrier and other less significant points of

behaviour grew, the men became accustomed to the strange sounds of each others voices.

Some basic vocabulary was learned by both groups who were keen to find out as much about each other as possible. The importance of forming ties and creating understanding was not lost on either party, combining new skills and knowledge being an essential survival tool. They were interested in their similarities as well as their differences; the way they constructed their makeshift shelters, the clothes they wore, and their weapons. In their camp, protected from the weather by some dense forest, there were feelings of trust and safety in numbers. With bellies full of food and drink and minds full of new people and new ideas they all slept heavily until morning.

How many encounters like this had occurred in the history of Man? How many had ended in violence? Was this the only way that intelligent man could progress? There was a need to reach out to those who are foreign, different, strange, other, to trust and risk loss rather than to fear and expect the worst. Fortuna now knew, based on this one event, that first encounters could be mutually beneficial. Whether they had just been lucky, whether such luck would continue or whether all humans were so

open would remain to be seen. It was a good beginning and cause for certain optimism. Might they integrate fully with the inhabitants of this planet?

Far in the future the same question would have to be asked again but then on a much greater scale. At that time it would also be a Pando Fortuna, a descendent of a long line, who would be instrumental in providing the answer.

They had been slowly and systematically disposing of their craft by dismantling it and dropping the pieces into a lake. This deep body of water was frozen for much of the year and the evidence of the space travellers' arrival would not be discovered for many hundreds of years. When some of the parts were eventually found no one could speculate as to their function or history and anyone who tried to imagine their source was not believed.

Thus the last remaining ties with their home planet were cut. All that remained of their incredible past were the stories that were told from old to young. The passion, urgency and immediacy of these narratives were designed to leave a permanent impression upon those who would live to relate them once again. The efficacy of such

methods in commitment to memory was high with the tales providing the fundamental framework for learning. In the minds of the listeners were placed layers of intricate patterns, creating interconnections between ideas and histories that ranged over great time and distance.

Of fundamental importance was that the nature of their true home was still alive. Deep in their very being, their souls and their genetic make-up there would always be a code, written within, that would one day far in the future, lead a Fortuna to look with intent at the star of his family's birth. For the present however, in order to maximise their potential, the concept of home as being the place where they had come from evolved into the place in which they found themselves now.

New stories were related of life since arrival not least of which was the one about the growing contact with their neighbours. More and more frequently trading became the basis upon which these meetings were arranged and progressed. The new language was quickly picked up, its structure was simple and the vocabulary was sparse, but it was effective in translating the needs and wants of the tribe into progressive change.

After their great success the thought of moving base became pressing. Through illness they had lost some of their members, having brought medicine they could deal with many ailments but new conditions arose for which they were not prepared. With colds, influenza and the sheer harshness the local climate enforced upon them the decision to find another location was made. By talking with their new friends they established that further south there were warmer climes and the living was easier.

This was a momentous happening in the development of their culture. Several of the younger men and women wanted to stay with what they had built. They liked this hard way of life, feeling that the challenges it provided would stretch their skills and abilities and make them stronger and more durable. They were required to be inventive, improvising with what they had to grow and develop.

They were to become absorbed into the native tribe who had much greater settlements and much experience to share. Staying together at first as a unit, Nature ultimately took its course and relations were made between men and women whose origins were at once so different and yet so

strangely similar. The male line would continue with sons taking the name of their fathers.

Soon those that had chosen to leave were assembled. The day of departure was of the utmost significance being the conscious and deliberate intention to spread the family further afield. The farewell was emotional and so final, however, they had once said goodbye to a whole planet of their peers and so with the moment upon them it was with excitement and wonder of what lay ahead that they set themselves in motion once more.

With only the essential belongings they carried in their arms, minds and souls they ventured forth, creating a new path for their kind, into an uncharted domain populated with all manner of exotic and alien life.

## Chapter Two

Once the Fortuna tribe had started moving it was to keep doing so. They became nomads, resting where they could and making the most of life according to the changing seasons. Where they met with others they repeated the ways they had learned from their first encounters and gained more insight, both practical and intellectual in nature, with every new meeting.

Sometimes violence reared its ugly head. Not all they came across were so accommodating of differences in origin, skin colour or language. Members of the family were lost to random acts of hatred. In such cases the fight or flight instinct always came down on the side of leaving, to stay mobile and in motion was not only the best solution to such problems but became a way of life. Knowing that their home was a place to be carried inside meant they could take it anywhere.

More were lost by further cases of strange ailments, conditions and disease for which they had no cures. Although more babies were born, some whilst travelling, the Fortuna clan began to dwindle in size. They were an endangered species and knew

that should an end come to their line, the true destiny that drove them would weaken and ultimately die along with them. This thought was always at the forefront of their minds and solutions were an immediate concern.

Coming to the conclusion that they must settle amongst well established native people the search began for a suitable location. Several towns and villages were considered and many were rejected as being less than perfect for their needs. There were criteria to be met but most of all they needed to feel accepted and safe with good prospects for the generations to come, somewhere they could integrate fully with a local and sustainable community.

The characteristic spirit of some places they happened upon was that there were not enough resources to go around. These people would defend what they had worked for and wanted no one from the outside to interfere with their lives. It was as though they had created a small, sealed world with no room for any extra guests. Such people made their attitudes very clear and the Fortuna's would pass through to the sounds of shouts and jeers. In these inward looking communities there was a distrust of outsiders and no welcome of any kind.



One spring, after a particularly difficult time on the road in winter, they came across a village sitting at a point where two small rivers converged in the basin of a little valley. It was a beautiful setting. The melt-water from the surrounding hills ran into the rivers, flowers were on the grassy slopes of the valley and as they descended from their vantage point on the mountain range which encircled the settlement the Fortunas dared to hope they could make a permanent home here.

Now they were only twenty but perhaps it was this relatively small size that worked in their favour. For when they entered the village they could see it was larger than initial appearances had lead them to believe. Men and women alike were working in fields, and the huts were fairly substantial in construction. Here were a people who intended to make their homes last, the signs looked good.

The numbers of villagers looked promising too. There were as many as one hundred, and the hope was that they would accept twenty more.

Pando was just a small boy at this time but the first thing he noticed, as they crossed a small sturdy bridge on the edge of the village was the size and quantity of fish that he could see. He paused,

fascinated by their motion and studied for a few moments the grace with which they swam against the current of the perfectly clear water, quickly developing the urge to catch one. For now he was obliged to keep up with, and stay close to, his ever moving family and the safety it held for him.

As a group they were greeted warmly if also understandably cautiously. By now there were a growing number of dialects in the Fortuna's vocabulary and they were able to make themselves easily understood. Upon making pleasantries, telling of some of their travels and trading some valuable goods they had acquired and made, it was soon agreed that they could make their camp just outside the village.

After some days making themselves known to those who were for the most part friendly and curious, they made arrangements to speak with the elders of this busy and productive settlement. Talking of skills and specialties of both the women and the men of his tribe the spokesman for the Fortunas asked whether they would be welcome to stay in the village and begin construction of houses. After consulting each other these leaders agreed. This was to be a first real physical home, surrounded by a mixture of people with whom they

could relate, work and talk. It was here that life and the ability to enjoy it began in earnest.

The boy Pando loved this home, it was a great arena to play, make friends and grow. By the age of seven he was already an accomplished fisherman, his catch making a valuable contribution to his family's table. He had become an accomplished swimmer too, although the water was icy cold even in the summer, so much so that to jump in was a brave event in itself.

In the months that followed he saw houses erected, built in new styles which the Fortunas had adopted from their fellow villagers. All spring and summer the clan put great pride and effort into this endeavour which involved the effort and energies of all. There were many lessons learned by trial and error, but with the help of their experienced new found friends the buildings of strong wood and stone added to the collection that were already in this scene of tranquillity.

Pando was allowed to run free, his parents knowing that he was safe from harm and could only become fitter and stronger, soon growing into a fine adolescent, helping whenever he could. He knew many of the villagers by name but there was one who took his eye, a young girl by the name of

Pushka. They spent much time playing together and he found she was easily able to match him in games and wit. They grew very fond of each other and came to be young, inexperienced lovers with only curiosity as their guide.

Their attempts at concealing this relationship, for fear it would be frowned upon, were ultimately pointless. It soon became common knowledge among all that there was a great attraction here. They were young stars and as such represented a beautiful hope for both sets of their parents. Leading the way for others to engage in similar relationships, it was only a couple of years for there to emerge, amongst their elders as well as themselves, the question of whether they might like to make their relationship permanent.

There had been marriages in this village before, but none between those so young. However, with the consent of their parents who were so proud of the partnership they were married in a small ceremony conducted by the wise man of the village. It was a summer's day, Pushka wore flowers in her hair and their clothes were made especially for the event by Pando's mother, who worked with some of the other ladies to produce the finest of garments. The small ceremony was followed by a large party,

the likes of which were new to the Fortuna family. The entire village celebrated the union, the first of many Fortuna's to be forever linked in this way to the people of Earth.

Now Pando was more of a fisherman and a hunter than a builder but tradition among the village was that newly-weds were to build their own house. Fortunately Pushka's father was a master builder and she had learned many of the tricks of the trade. She designed the house and Pando did his best to turn the concept into something that would stand the test of time. The resulting building was one of great originality, unique among the settlement but with some inherent flaws and peculiarities that were innovative if not entirely successful. Still, the structure kept out the rain, save for a couple of occasional leaks and was entirely functional. There were those who looked upon it with a little laugh but they were equalled by those who found it somehow forward looking, ground-breaking even.

They lived happily in this house for many years, making improvements as and when necessary. In particular, when a new baby, Pandina, was born an extra room was built.

To live this simple life, in surroundings that provided all they needed was indeed great fortune.

To know long periods of peace and laughter and friendship that lasted through the years made for no reason to move. Of course village life had its politics, arguments and occasionally people did leave, also there were accidents and deaths and trauma. However the strength of this closely bound village was that everyone knew someone who could be of assistance. The Fortunas were particularly in demand as they seemed to have knowledge in many areas, from whence this came the rest of the village would never know.

The secret of the Fortuna philosophy was to be held close to their hearts. Their truth was related in stories that could be thought of as pure fiction by those who mistakenly overheard them. The story as a means of handing down keys to the mysteries of their origins was perfected over time but was not all that was passed down through the ages. The genetic make-up of Pando Fortuna was of a genius that could only have been forged in the evolution of a species from another world. He knew he was different and he knew this might be seen as both a blessing and a curse. He was well aware that all who would follow him in his line would feel the same way. The mutations in his DNA gave him great improvements over natives in rationality and

logical thought. Also his capacity in abstract reasoning was unsurpassed. He often had creative solutions to difficult problems and saw simplicity where others were confused. All these gifts, his father warned him, were not only to benefit him, he must share his good fortune with others. If it can be called such, this was his burden.

However, with self-knowledge, Pando began to carry such awareness with ease and even grace. With this attitude came respect and gratitude from others. His father was a very proud man, Pando Fortuna knew that the manner in which his son approached life would be echoed in time and that is how it was. The house of Fortuna became one that would surely survive where others might falter.

Others in their tribe also took brides, some from within their clan, and others from native villagers. The overall effect after a blissful forty years was that the village expanded many fold and the mixture of peoples, families and names brought a fabulous variety of colour to everyday life.

As others came from outside to make yet further additions soon the small village became a prosperous centre for trade in arable goods, materials, metal-work and building supplies. The two rivers that joined in this place provided ample

water for all to drink and wash clean the toil from bodies and clothes.

In that time there were two fires that destroyed several buildings. Not one, not two but three sets of twins were born, all to Fortuna women. Fighting became more prevalent as the potato liquor became more common and the women started using ever more brightly coloured dyes in the manufacture of their clothing.

Naturally there were those that left, including several Fortunas. Their reasons were varied and not always sound in the opinion of many. Some wished to see the oceans of which seasoned travellers spoke. Some had strong thoughts of independence and wanted to make a path into the future by themselves. Others, perhaps leaving problems behind, vanished into the night with seeming strangers who were moving through whilst on a journey to faraway and exotic lands.

Pando had no such appetites and he was content to stay right where he was. When he was an old man, with his wife Pushka still by his side, he had two sons, a daughter, seven grandchildren and fifteen great grandchildren. He considered himself to be the luckiest man alive and this was a truth that few could counter.



When he died he was buried just outside the town at the foot of an oak tree. There was nothing further he could have done in life to ensure that his mission would proceed to completion, his life work would be done, his dream would have wings and his own tree of life would flourish.

The name of Pando Fortuna made leaps and bounds. For the man himself there was always a meaningful inner dialogue that proved to be both a guide and a companion. With his successes came money and notoriety, with his failures came lessons learned and humility amongst his brethren.

Many men were named Pando Fortuna, all heard the voice of their fathers within and all dedicated their lives to the future of the world that had adopted them. Pando Fortuna was dispersed far and wide, exploration being of a fundamental motivation. He learned yet further languages, mapped out many territories, took brides wherever love grew and brought children into the world who were strong and beautiful in both body and mind. Every boy was another Pando and every upbringing included tales of Fortuna, dating back to another world which revolved around another sun.

The daughters were exceptional, gaining all the creativity of their ancestors. They were adept at

music, writing, design, and dance and their athleticism gave rise to prowess in sport. They were loved by their partners and found ever more inventive ways of expressing such love. They loved their brothers too, knowing that they carried the additional weight of their very long term purpose.

From generation to generation the stories they told their children became diluted or exaggerated or even forgotten completely. There were many Pando Fortunas roaming the planet who had completely lost touch with their roots. Externally only the name remained as any indicator of where they had come from in the first instance. However all carried the code within themselves whether they knew it or not.

In some cases the name itself was lost. People change their names by continuous usage of an alter ego, for personal reasons best known to themselves. The special genes of Fortuna ancestry were more difficult to shake. Even so, some genes were mutated, deactivated or deselected by natural choice of forces beyond the control of the individual.

Pando lived and Pando died. Always he tried to bring peace, many times he succeeded. His line multiplied and reached into the future, by the

end of the twentieth century there was a descendant of that first tribe in most habitable countries in the world. Pando Fortuna was not famous but was involved in every occupation under this sun and he mixed with every type of people that Earth has to offer.

Pando was; a lawyer, a builder, a librarian, a cook, a judge, a mechanic, a policeman, a lumberjack, a doctor, there was little that he couldn't do when he put his mind to it. Of course Pando was also; a beggar, a patient, a thief, a drunk, a madman, a fool, a victim, a liar and a convict. Circumstances could be overpowering even when given a gifted head start.

By this time he looked as different from each of his brothers as one could possibly imagine. He was a mix of every race, creed and colour that the planet had beautifully brought forth. With laughter and music of every kind in his heart he represented every facet of vibrant life and was a wonderful combination of opposites. There was natural rhythm in his walk which ultimately propelled him to great distances and heights. He leant himself to every challenge and was no stranger to hard work.

When Pando found himself at the dawn of a new millennium he paused. The twenty-first century lay stretched out ahead of him as a road of possibility. Except this road was not on any map, and although there were no directions, all possibilities appeared attractive.

Something profound happened - he was all men, yet he was only one man. He had no aspirations to conquer, no inclination to command followers, no vision of power. Instead he felt alone but not lonely, single but not abandoned. It was with this consciousness that he could focus plainly on what he felt about his life and the lives of all who live on Earth.

The lives he had lived and the life he had been given had both cause and effect. This, Pando remembered the stories, was in touch with the rich inner dialogue he had cultivated since a boy and knew there was a purpose to his existence. To live and to die was not good enough for the man. To leave a legacy was in itself just a start. He needed more, he needed to reach those who had given him the thread to his narrative from the very beginning, right up to this very point in the present.

Within him his family's story was strong. In his mind, his own memories and those of the

Fortunas who had gone before him, were held as a vast, expansive fabric, woven into deep and detailed patterns, every continuous thread and stitch representing events and knowledge that would have been otherwise lost. This great ribbon of material stretched and wound its way back through all those generations of careful storytellers to the very origin of their journey.

Most strangely he was also a Monk, a very old one, a Pando Fortuna by blood if not name. As such he had a very mysterious power, unknowable to anyone who had not taken his particular path. Perhaps he even held a type of awareness that did not exist in any other domain or on any other world. Action at a distance, the ability to effect change without physical contact, an inherited gift that could only be thought of as a magic by those unfamiliar with its workings. It was this gift that would be used to reach out to his brothers on Earth, the planet on which they had made their home away from home.

There were five Pando Fortunas in particular who had progressed steadily and diligently in their work and personal lives throughout these ages, up to the here and now, and their stories had meaning and consequences beyond even their own imaginations.

In the modern world, with all its wars, problems, discoveries and beauty, there was a Pando who was a Photographer, one was an Architect, another was a Musician, one more was a Physicist, and there was also a Businessman. The Monk would need to utilise all the powers at his command if his message, his call for action, were to find its direction to the lives of these five young men. If just one of these descendants of this age old race from another solar system could complete the task, with which their forefathers had entrusted them, then they would truly be the master of their destiny.

## **II : Earth Brothers**

### **Chapter Three : The Monk**

#### **Xiamen, China : Present Day**

As a boy the monk had given up his ancient family name to join the monastery. He had lived without the influence of parents since he could remember and today was his 90th birthday. When he awoke on this warm and humid morning he decided that today he would have a drink, his first.

He went through his morning ablutions, put on his sacred orange robes and walked out into the courtyard. It was a good day to celebrate and with a serene smile he said good morning to several of the other monks, all of whom were younger and busily involved with their duties. To a man they paused in their work, acknowledging their elder with bows and respectful words. Without looking back he left the monastery for the last time and seemingly propelled by a gentle breeze drifted through the gates upon a small cloud of his own design.

Soon he came across a clothes shop on the corner of a street which was just beginning to wake

up. Yee Hing Tai was a well-established tailor who also stocked a range of labelled goods. He went in and twenty minutes or so later, having spent all the money he had managed to secretly accumulate in life, came out sporting a pair of skinny jeans, a check shirt, branded trainers, an over-the-shoulder bag and a Los Angeles Angels baseball cap which he carefully placed on his shaven head.

He knew a transformation had taken place and looking at his bag he knew he was embarking upon a new journey. Even to him, however, it was unclear as to his destination and purpose. Maybe in some sense he felt as though he was going home, wherever that may be. “Who am I?” He asked himself as he walked further for half an hour or so. Strolling casually he soon came across a bar that looked appropriate for his anniversary celebration.

At 8.30am in the hot and dusty morning the proprietor of the drinking establishment was lifting stock from a truck. Currently he was struggling to carry a large box from which emanated the sound of clinking glass. The monk followed behind him into the saloon and sat down. He waited.

“Hey! What are you doing? We’re closed.”

“I am waiting,” the monk said.



“What do you want? We are not open until six in the evening!”

“Perhaps today you will make an exception.”

“An exception! Are you for real?”

Looking at his clothes the monk expressed surprise. “Do I not look real?” He began considering the bar-owner struggling with the box.

“May I help you with your work?” The monk offered as he rose from the bar stool.

“No offence, old man, but these are heavy.”

“Nevertheless I feel I can assist you. I am quite strong.”

“Ok, yes, yes, you can help me with the lighter ones. My employee is off sick and I have this month’s delivery to unload. Don’t drop anything!”

So the aged monk spent a while unloading the truck. His strength, stamina and agility were fairly super-human and he matched the proprietor box for box. Little did he know, the bar that he had stumbled upon was one of Xiamen’s finest and was in years similar to his own age. Furthermore, Fate, a power over which there was no control, had drawn him back to his very birthplace, a place that had originally been owned by his mother and father, the

people who had woven the music that still played in his mind.

They worked well together, sometimes exchanging pleasantries, the owner in awe as to the monk's work rate. The monk saw names on boxes, written in the strange characters of the Western alphabet. He could not pronounce them but enjoyed their design and how they were very easy on the eye.

Finally the boxes and barrels were unloaded and moved to a store room in the back. The proprietor lifted the last box onto the bar, sat down and wiped from his brow the sweat caused by his exertions in the close heat. The monk who was neither perspiring nor out of breath sat down next to him.

"Now, can I have a drink?" He asked.

The bar owner was still incredulous. "It's still early! I have never met a man with such a thirst this early in the day."

"Believe me I have worked up quite a considerable thirst, over time..."

The monk gazed into the mid-distance as his words trailed off and the proprietor looked at him strangely.

“Alright, alright, you can have a drink, on the house, for all the work you have done. What will it be?”

“What is this?” The monk inquired as he tapped his hand on the last box which remained sitting on the bar.

“Tequila.”

“Tequila...” The monk mouthed the word and smiled, “I think I’ll have a drink of Tequila!”

After four Tequilas, quaffed in quick succession, the monk asked for a fifth but the proprietor was having none of it.

“I appreciate the work you have done for me but I can only pay you in kind so much. Any more drinks and you will have to pay.”

“More tequila, just one more,” said the monk, “and I will be out of your hair.”

Reluctantly the barman filled the monk’s glass for a fifth and final time, “Fine, but that’s it.”

“Five is my lucky number,” said the monk. He regarded the glass, holding it up to the window as the orange light, refracting through the potent liquid, played across his face. At a point in time that seemed carefully chosen he proceeded to knock back the contents.

For a split second silence was everywhere. The din of the traffic on the road outside was reduced to a murmur and even the flies stopped their buzzing. The monk's eyes closed. The barman could only look on in this suspended moment. The warm air blew gently in through the door causing a wind-chime to break the silence and the monk began to dematerialize.

At first a glow appeared around him as he sat on the bar-stool. Then, very slowly at first, the molecules that composed his entire body began to vibrate with a high frequency. These jiggling vibrations increased in intensity as did the aura that surrounded him.

Soon the energy involved became large enough for the very atoms of his being to break free from their corporeal existence.

In a swirling vortex and a flash there was an enormous burst of electromagnetic radiation emitted from the core of the man's essence and his soul was flung to the many corners of the world.

Everything fell instantaneously silent once again. The stupefied bar owner dropped the bottle of Tequila he had been holding and the wind-chime let out a single note.

## **Chapter Four : The Photographer**

### **Queenstown, New Zealand**

Pando carried the 35mm slide photograph with him at all times. Its purpose was as an ‘aide-memoire’, something to help him remember that life’s moments can be fleeting, fragile and hard to hold onto. It showed the naked back of a former girlfriend sitting on the edge of a bed, her hair cascading over one shoulder, the soft light from a window giving her skin tones a warm hue. He had lost contact with her some six years ago but still remembered her pretty face in his mind, even though in the photo it would be forever turned away from the lens. Without the image he feared he would lose the memory.

His current situation involved a second cup of coffee, reclining on a funky, leather sofa in his local cafe. He’d been exchanging casual conversation with the two rather cheeky barista girls for the last three quarters of an hour. They knew him well, and he was relaxed and happy in their company as they were with his.

The sofa was especially comfy and completed the chill-out feel to the scene. There were many books on the shelves surrounding him of a varied, even random selection and no attempt at organisation, alphabetical or otherwise had been made. The cafe had a very casual swap policy - you could trade your recently finished novel for another, one that had most probably been left there in the same way by a previous reader. The idea worked well, there were a lot of travellers visiting Queenstown at all times of the year and most of them had books in their backpacks.

Books have a habit of gathering together he thought, but each book on these shelves had its own singular history and own particular future. Written, printed, published, bought, read and now waiting to be recycled for the benefit of another reader who would possibly transport it to any number of countries all over planet Earth.

He'd become a sort of jobbing photo-hack, known around town for being there whenever there was some kind of opportunity. His pictures appeared in local newspapers and newsletters, they were all over sites on the internet, posters, flyers and advertisements for local businesses. Some of the cafes and bars had his framed photographs on

their walls for sale or just as decoration. He'd spread himself around and was well liked in the community, in point of fact he was quite a minor celebrity. He enjoyed this status and made the most of it. Recently however he'd been employed to photograph the bungee jumping, this was something else.

Photographs of bungee jumpers fell broadly into two categories; there were those whose faces were ashen with fear and then there were the others whose expressions were twisted with the anticipation of the adrenaline that they knew would be arriving at their cerebral cortex within seconds. Pando took several shots of each jumper; one on the edge of the jump, one shortly after take-off and one at the zenith of the return upward journey. These were quickly downloaded to be viewed, selected and purchased by the half-crazed, post-jump customers only too eager to part with their cash for a memory and, most importantly, proof of their incredible bravery or idiocy depending on your point of view.

The work was good, regular and at this time of year in the summer, very pleasant. The other guys, who continuously roped up and dispatched the steady stream of jumpers, were all a good laugh and

there was plenty of playful and sometimes dark humour to go around. Having said this, Pando sometimes felt on the outside looking in. As a photographer, looking through a lens, he felt he was somehow distanced from enjoying life. There was literally an object, his expensive digital camera, between him and being truly part of the reality he saw. Was he hiding? Was he snooping? Was he recording without actually taking part? Well it was his job, but even when he put the camera down for a moment this feeling stayed with him.

That year he had invested in the latest kit; camera, tripod, computer, printer and software. The camera was truly amazing, a top spec professional machine, and he'd been getting great results. However, lately he had been missing his old film camera, of course no-one shot on film nowadays. Professionally the digital revolution had swept film away. He knew all the logical reasons for its success, primarily the evidence for this was that he had been making a lot more money.

There was just one niggling doubt at the back of his mind, his camera seemed to have no soul as such. A digital memory card was no substitute for a roll of film in this respect. He was sure it was just a hang-up but he felt it was a



casualty of progress. Having used film for so long he missed the ritual of changing rolls, especially when at the base of a roaring waterfall or on the shores of a mountain lake.

He'd made a decision to make use of his film camera once again and shoot at least one more roll, just for old time's sake. He'd even had a creative idea for the subject matter. Under ultra-violet light flowers showed an array of patterns not visible to the naked eye. Apparently these allowed insects to pollinate them more easily, acting as 'runways' to the centre of the flower and the stamen. All he needed was a U.V. light source so he went online using one of the cafe's computers and after a short while had ordered just what he wanted, to be delivered in a few days. Funny, he thought, all that is beyond our senses, out of reach by the nature of our physiology, there is a whole secret world surrounding us every day. There and then he decided to become an explorer of the hidden sublime.

First priority in this respect was a female companion. He'd had several encounters with the fairer sex in the last few years but nothing serious and certainly nothing you would call a relationship. However, he was sure he knew what he was doing

and could see himself walking around with a suitable partner in less than a month. He wouldn't actively seek someone, but rather put himself in situations where he could be found, let them come to him he thought. That way he would be sure to find someone who he knew liked him, maybe there would be a choice.

He needed new clothes. He'd been walking around in trainers, jeans, t-shirts and a fleece since he could remember and looked rather shabby. If he was going to play the part, he needed to look the part. Boots, Chinos, a shirt and a jacket of some sort should do the trick. Now he'd set himself a mission surely someone would see him and approach him, he could do the rest. He wasn't unattractive or vain for that matter, kind of rugged in appearance if truth be told. He'd never been concerned about his looks but shaving his beard and regular washing was never his strong point. He'd have to buck his ideas up in this area if he was to attract the type of woman he was looking for.

That's it though, he thought, we have our little lists with boxes to be checked of who would be acceptable and who we would discard almost instantly. Almost always we fail to recognise that others are doing the same thing.

Of course, in the vast number of cases the person who sits next to you in a bar or cafe is almost certainly to be outside your search criteria. You don't expect that you might warm to someone who doesn't fit your description of perfection. Indeed, being 'perfect' might come to be a quality that you learn to find unbearable.

Pando knew one thing, he was lonely. He had been keeping himself busy in order to disguise this deep inner feeling both from others and from himself. It had worked for so long but now was time to face up to reality. With his new insight, a desire to find meaning under the otherwise superficial surface, he would be alert to any opportunity of engaging with a woman who understood him. Any woman who could help him understand himself and who could at the same time decipher his sometimes obscure humour and thought processes would get his undivided attention.

He was clear and as he walked through the town towards the lake he had a renewed sense of purpose and direction. He took out his old film camera from the bag and loaded a fast transparency film. Smiling, with senses alive, he looked up

through the fresh crisp air at the mountains' snowy caps, crystal white against the sharp blue sky.

## **Chapter Five : The Architect**

### **Vancouver, Canada**

Save for himself, the Architect's office was empty. He'd given his eight employees the afternoon off having suddenly had the urge to be alone with the place to think about... well just to think. It wasn't the first time he'd let them go early, he was generous by nature and anyway the work-load happened to be fairly light at the moment. He figured the karma would work itself out and it was wise to keep the workforce happy with these occasional acts of goodwill.

This is what he had signed up for, he'd known his degree and training had taken time, seven years in all, but the prospect of what he could achieve with his sizeable inheritance had motivated him through his studies. At the age of thirty his own firm lay before him and to any onlookers he liked his work beyond any expectations. In fact his life *was* his work and recently his relationship with his wife had begun to suffer as a consequence. His work life and private life were beginning to come into conflict. Being an architect was all about being

in control and whilst business was buttoned down tight, his wife had started to notice that the relationship might be on the verge of coming apart.

People looked to him, Pando Fortuna, for a well designed direction in work and life in general. He was expected to be immaculate, not just in appearances but in all his choices and decisions. There was no room for human error when creating a new building. If nothing else there was safety at the forefront of his mind but the imperative was to build-in an aesthetic that could be clearly experienced and appreciated by all who would inhabit the finished construction. It didn't matter whether it was low-cost housing or a public library the primary directive was form, function and beauty in harmony with each other.

However, perhaps due to his young age, he didn't feel a natural at this, in fact he felt that in another life he may have been a slob on a couch eating pizzas, playing video games and watching television movies. If only his employees in his company knew that underneath the veneer of this cool, calm character was a dopey fool who, having achieved his goal in life now simply wanted to regress and revert to some kind of caveman mentality. His desire to live by his wits rather than

his education was strong. He felt the need to satisfy his senses on a regular and immediate basis. Letting his emotions override his rationale was a recurring distraction.

He was close to taking a motorbike trip through Europe, journeying through Canada's wilderness on horseback or perhaps by Kayak along some river whose name was both exotic and as yet unknown to him. At the flip of some mental switch he could drop everything, plan the trip and be away, a long way away.

Pando's wife, Maria, had married this handsome, clinically clean and high achieving architect some two years ago. To be sure she had married him for his job and his money though she used to say that she had married him for his hands. He held them out in front of his eyes and they seemed to say everything, soft and manicured, gentle and dextrous. His slender fingers where meant to hold a pencil, not the reigns of a horse. He imagined a future where they were calloused and raw, covered in small marks and scars, each one the punctuation in a story of adventure.

The privilege of being able to entertain these thoughts left him feeling cowardly that he didn't have the courage to face his wife with them, still

less put them into action. He picked up an HB pencil, span it through his fingers a few times, then in a miniature fit of rebellion snapped it in two.

Removing his glasses he looked out across Vancouver city and its harbour. The offices were on the eighteenth floor of a modern block and the view was spectacular. Half the reason of moving here was the inspiring vision that showed itself through the large floor to ceiling windows on three sides. He'd reasoned that he would be able to make the most use of British Columbia's great outdoors at the weekends and he had made several ventures into the wilds with like-minded colleagues. However it just left him wanting more, but the business was like a crying child, in need of attention all the time. Further to this his wife was less than enthusiastic to accompany him.

Maria's stay-at-home attitude was the opposite from the ideas they had both expressed when they had come together. They had been engaged for some six months before they were married and all the talk had been of working hard so they could play hard in their free time. Now she was desperate for a child and Pando thought it was too early. He wanted more money to ensure any children a good start in life so had been working



later and later in the evenings and at weekends too. They had been seeing less and less of each other and the cracks were beginning to show.

The worry was that he didn't seem to care too much and by all accounts she was the same. He detected a slow decline in the depth of their conversations and neither of them was too bothered about pushing their own particular point of view. They had both tried at various times to express their feelings but half-heartedly and with no passion. It was all so casual and the trend was making him feel more and more empty inside. All he could think of when they were together was getting away from her and her interest in him had waned to the point where he was indifferent about what she might think.

There were no two ways about it, he was sad and could think of no way of remedying the situation save from running away. Perhaps he should bite the bullet and open everything up. This very evening he could march home with purpose in his step and confront his wife with the problem head on, he might be pleasantly surprised with the consequences, his intuition might be misplaced or he might be able to light a fire to rekindle their marriage. Whatever he thought, he knew that

change was necessary and if he didn't instigate it now the shallow nature of the arrangement would persist and nothing would ever improve.

He replaced his glasses, put his jacket on, picked up his motorcycle helmet, turned off the office lights and took the elevator down to the basement level. When there, he started up the bike, put his helmet on and headed out into the early evening winter sunset. There was snow downtown in the city but the roads were well cleared of the worst of it. He felt the cold air cutting through his clothes and realised the intensity of this way of travelling. At some traffic lights he took the opportunity to look up and saw between the high rise buildings the clear sky. The bike wanted to move so he opened up the throttle. Thoughts, feelings and the streetlights raced through his mind, he overtook several cars and made his way home.

## **Chapter Six : The Musician**

### **Greenwich Village, New York City**

Getting ready for a gig in New York was always a logistical nightmare, however he had learned to love the process, gathering with the band and bringing together all the necessary kit and instruments. They had everything they needed between them including an old 1970's Camper Van to contain it all. Pando drove the van with the equipment and Bruce the bass guitarist took the other three; Jules on lead guitar, Frankie the vocalist and keyboard player, and Max on Sax. Pando was the drummer.

“*Sentinel*”, the name they'd given their outfit some six months ago, had been playing the smaller bars and clubs with some success. Word gets around in The Village fairly quickly, especially if you're any good, and they had acquired a small but committed following which was growing in numbers as they developed their style. It was hard to categorise their sound because they had all come from diverse backgrounds but Pando insisted at their roots at least they were Jazz Funk.

He always listened to a favourite mix-tape compiled by Lizzie, his girlfriend and mother of their two year old daughter. The tape was exclusively from her collection of vinyl and he always found it fresh to have her taste in music playing away as he drove across town. She was at home in their share of a loft conversion looking after Janey, the bars they played being no place for a child. He started smiling and tapping his hands on the wheel, nice to drum along to someone else's tune for a change.

The weather was insane, flurries of snow and the streets re-freezing after rain earlier in the day. Still, the band had a gig and they were making increased amounts of money, which he desperately needed for rent, food and everything that goes with bringing up a kid. How Lizzie stuck with him he wasn't quite sure, maybe it was his potential that she saw, and the determination he had to make the music work. He loved her dearly and felt strong inside because he knew that she loved him right back, it was simple, they were good together. The fact that they weren't married didn't seem to matter, in fact it may have been the key to why they were still the best of friends after three years of trials and tribulations. Lizzie's parents were always dropping

not so subtle hints to him that he should make it more permanent but he got the feeling they wouldn't mind if he would just leave at some point so giving them control over Janey's upbringing.

All these things didn't matter to Pando, he was carefree and doing exactly what he wanted, he had a woman who loved him and as far as he was concerned a career that was just taking off. He felt he was the driving force behind the band and although Frankie was the front-man, they listened to each other and had so far been in agreement as to the direction of proceedings. If they could get through this winter in profit and create some waves in the spring and summer there was a real chance they could make a name for themselves.

He had taken a couple of wrong turns and had to admit that he was off course. His sense of direction was usually good, having grown up in and around New York he knew most of its roads. He might just have to take a couple of detours and short cuts to get back on track. There was plenty of time to get to the destination but he hadn't figured on the heavy snow and the backed up traffic it was creating.

So after a few clever moves he arrived at 'Auto Bar', tonight's venue. Bruce's station wagon

was parked in front and there was a space behind it so he pulled up and went in. The other guys were at the bar already with drinks in mid flow.

“Hey, Pando! Where have you been? We were forced to buy beverages.” Frankie was certainly not shy, shouting across the room as Pando came in brushing the snow off his coat.

“I took a few wrong turnings on the way. Anyways I don’t remember ever having heard you complain before about being obliged to drink.”

“Fair point my man. I guess I should be thanking you for giving us the opportunity.” Frankie, raised his glass and tipped it back.

Unusually for a musician, and a drummer at that, Pando did not drink and Frankie was always winding him up about it. It would have been amusing but the fact was that it was a medical issue. He had loved to drink in his early years but was diagnosed as diabetic five years ago and had to be careful what he put in his body. He didn’t mind the ribbing, indeed the constant taunts had sharpened his wits, and there was plenty of material for him to throw back at the vocalist. It was all friendly chat and it was stuff like this that held the band together.

“Hey guys, can you get Frankie here a few more, you know he can’t sing worth a damn until

his blood's half liquor." Max and Jules laughed and Bruce slapped Pando on his back as he joined the group and sat down at the bar.

There weren't many people in the place at this point. They were running a bit late now so they set up quickly and by the time they did their sound check a steady stream of people was filling the space. Recently they had been rehearsing in Max's folks' garage, he still lived at home and the garage was empty now, his dad's rusting pick-up had been stolen six months back. They were tight, cool and funky and they knew it. So far as clothes were concerned they were as eclectic as you like and there was a sort of unspoken competition between them in this regard.

A well planned song list was organised to maximise the effect they hoped to achieve, primarily to get the floor up and dancing. They had a few covers, some 70s funk and even a disco tune or two but mostly they were original. Of course they all looked forward to performing. Max did get a little shaky beforehand but morale was good for a winter's evening and they were getting paid.

Tonight was weird though. The club owner came up to them about two minutes before they were due to start just to let them know there were

some A&R men hanging around asking questions. This would mean they would have to up their game, it got them all talking but they only had a few minutes to worry about it before their first set began.

During this time Pando became intensely thoughtful. Ever since the first band he'd started at college this had been his dream. He'd begun playing drums on a kit his uncle had given him at the age of twelve. It was fairly well used but had got him hooked. Now everything was gelling and by the end of the night they could be signed up and in the money. If he was quite honest he was more than up for the ride. They were introduced, there were some cheers from their growing fan-base, Frankie said a few words, Pando knocked his sticks together and their music filled the space.



## **Chapter Seven : The Physicist**

### **Geneva, Switzerland**

Deep underground somewhere beneath the Franco-Swiss border Pando sat at his terminal. He wasn't bored but he was very, very tired having been working since the morning. CERN, the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire knew no regular work hours, scientists busied themselves around the clock depending on the nature and duration of the experiment at hand. To anyone visiting this place and coming into contact with the pure research that went on here, there was always an air of excitement and a feeling of being part of the future. Pando too had been wrapped up in the special quality of the place but now, three years into his work here, it felt normal.

As a matter of the ordinary day-to-day operations he was part of a team that analysed the results of some of the many experiments that took place. His experiment was called A.L.I.C.E. (A Large Ion Collider Experiment). Those working with the Large Hadron Collider, including himself, were all PhD Physicists or at least highly qualified

technicians. They were from many different nations speaking a multitude of tongues but all spoke the same scientific language. In this place however, there wasn't much opportunity for small talk. This was work, serious work, which had vast consequences for the future knowledge of mankind, after all this was the birthplace of the World Wide Web.

The people here were, on the whole, quite humble about their endeavours but the underlying assumption throughout the facility was that this was an important activity, profoundly important and Pando felt a small but vital part of it. He was on the frontline of something that mattered.

The next hour was crucial. The LHC was about to collide lead ions to recreate the conditions just after the Big Bang under laboratory conditions. The data obtained would allow Pando and his international colleagues to study a state of matter known as quark gluon plasma, believed to have existed soon after the Big Bang. They had been preparing for this all day, mainly getting the detectors ready that would gather the results of the experiment.

His tiredness was starting to affect his vision, he wore glasses and as he took them off to

rub his eyes he felt good that as soon as this run was over he would be able to leave his post, take the elevator to the surface and drive home. It wasn't a long way but it was night and buried 100m below the surface with no windows he had no idea as to the weather conditions.

He was looking forward to seeing his fiancée, Beth. Due to the nature of his work they saw each other at odd times, but he had all day free tomorrow when they could catch up and he was sure they would spend some quality time together. They'd been living together in a suburb of Geneva for almost a year with Beth teaching English as a Foreign Language during term times. It was next to impossible to co-ordinate their diaries so they had all but given up trying. Instead they gave in to the random nature of their relationship and it seemed to be working. They were very happy together, when they were together.

Frederic, his relief, should be here shortly. Frankly most of the hard work had been done, he just had to stare at the screen to check certain power levels were within the criteria. Mostly it was all automated, but like a plane on autopilot, there was still a human element, thankfully.

Pando let his mind wander for a few moments as the inactivity on the screen and his tiredness caused a tiny daydream. He remembered the science fiction films he'd watched as a boy, how there were always huge control panels, levers, flashing lights and some power-crazed maniac bent on global annihilation. How different this reality, so clinical, mathematical even, with the dominating feature being massive precision engineering tethered to state of the art computing. No evil genius here, just the end product of over fifty years of international collaboration.

It's true that sometimes he did feel he was some kind of automaton, trapped in a machine that had more control over him than he did over it. In spite of his impressive qualifications he was just one of many. There were more than 1000 scientists from 105 physics institutes in 30 countries working on the ALICE experiment. However most of these worked remotely, at the Collider itself people were relatively scarce. The funny thing is he felt happier working with this feeling, it gave him a sense of control.

He took pride in his work but had reached the point where, despite the importance of his tasks, it was just a job. He couldn't imagine doing

anything else and so therefore didn't want to do anything else. He had a private life, Beth and he were planning a family and they weren't without friends. Switzerland was a very congenial place to live. No, whichever way he squared it, he felt like he was doing ok. No need to change, just keep on keeping on.

The phone rang which made him jump out of his little reverie, he answered it. Frederic was French but his English was perfect, he explained in detail why he would be an hour or so late and Pando accepted the fact that he wouldn't be home until at least three in the morning. Furthermore he would be there for the next run and would be expected to download the results from the detectors. He was slightly annoyed because Frederic had done this sort of thing before, leaving him in the lurch after a fifteen hour stint. Still, the facility worked on a flexi-time system which meant he would get paid for the extra hour, some small consolation.

He continued monitoring the levels, making slight changes here and there, mainly to ensure the detectors would be ready for the impact when it eventually occurred. He stared at the screen. Sometimes the purpose of this experiment was too large to comprehend, they were asking questions

concerning the very composition of the Universe but occasionally he had doubts. Maybe it was because he was tired but now was one of these moments. Was this whole project the biggest mistake that mankind had created? It was certainly a long way from Isaac Newton and his apple. Could this vast operation really defend itself under scrutiny? Wouldn't the money be better spent on pursuing laser fusion?

He felt a fraud even entertaining these thoughts, he must be more committed, he must focus, this work could prove to be vital in ensuring that the knowledge of our very being continued to expand. Do the job, wait for Frederic, go home and power down. It was his tiredness causing him to drift, he needed a coffee, but drinks were not allowed on this level. He'd just have to wait it out. He kept blinking, feeling sleepy now, just needed to stay awake.

## **Chapter Eight : The Businessman**

### **Hong Kong, China**

Mathematics both pure and applied, he knew that's what his life was based on. He'd studied it, learned it and he used most of it every day, that's what gave him the edge. He was no gambler, he'd completely skipped games of chance, casinos and betting in general. Sure he played a game, but it was his game, he had built it up over time through experience. Right now he dealt in the financial commodity of Futures, having arrived there through a carefully selected route. However, something else was always ticking away at the back of his mind, something else that set him apart from his colleagues and competitors - he had plans.

His wife was happy, his three kids were happy and all at good schools, and all this made him happy too. However, he could see a new level of wealth opening up before him and he was smart enough to realise that he could be a part of it, day by day his plans grew.

All this flashed in front of Pando as the alarm clock sounded. It was the same thing every

morning, he seemed to be awake and alert within seconds. His beautiful wife mumbled something as she too came 'round, he kissed her and getting out of bed slipped into a silk dressing gown and moved into the kitchen for an orange juice, latte, and croissants. Today was a big day, a big deal was going down but for him every day was a big day and he took his time. Breakfast done, showered and dried he picked out one of several sharp, tailor-made suits and dressed in front of the wardrobe mirror. Before long he was out of the tastefully decorated apartment, fully approved for feng shui, and making his way to street level.

Picking his way through the crowd was second nature for him. He blended into the Hong Kong Chinese way of life seamlessly. However, he felt quietly and comfortably detached from the mad rush of commuters, businessmen and women. Although he had become one of them in many ways, he had always kept an essential part of himself distanced. He had a calm but strong inner voice with which he directed his life and it was always switched on. His consciousness was a great place to be, he could be alone and at one with his thoughts whenever he chose and as he hailed a cab he was already playing with his day's agenda.



A taxi pulled up and he got in. Sometimes he walked but sometimes he let a cabbie take the strain. Once off and running, the drive seemed relatively smooth that day, less traffic than usual. He had some space to think about his personal plans. He had amassed enough capital to get out of the rat race. There was no denying it, he was a wealthy man but when you've gone beyond a certain point doors start to open and he had been presented with a way of making a quantum leap forwards and upwards - real estate.

The beauty of it was he didn't have to quit his job until it had all panned out. Also he would only be using a small amount of his capital initially, he had made the risk assessment and the numbers worked out nicely. He wasn't worried, it was just another deal, only this time he would have control over all of the parameters. Sure, an outsider would say he was making a gamble, but he had read up on all the relevant facts, looked at it from every angle and without doubt he would make his move.

He paid for the taxi, stepped out onto the busy pavement and easily negotiated his way through the revolving doors into his place of work. The change in temperature was marked with the air conditioning almost defining the large high

ceilinged entrance lobby. Most of these people came here every day and most carried some kind of attaché or briefcase. Pando needed nothing except what he kept in his head and he felt the freedom of movement that this gave him. He was not an arrogant man but anyone who chose to look at his good posture and ease of step might have cause to think so.

The elevators were large and many, so much so that over-crowding was not a problem. His office lay on the sixteenth storey of this classic skyscraper and as he rose smoothly up it he enjoyed watching the digital display increasing steadily – it was, he felt, akin to his rise through the company ranks over the few years he had been with them.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Stepping out onto his floor he greeted the receptionist as always. It seemed they were changed every few months or so, what became of the outgoing ones he had no idea. So it was each morning, as he walked to his office he nodded to colleagues who returned the gesture giving him the respect that he had learned to command. Arriving at his door, he looked at his name on the brass plaque which always made him smile, went through, closed the door behind him, took off his jacket and sat

down. Once again, he had completed a perfect journey from bed to office in less than forty-five minutes.

He would wait for someone to knock on his door and whilst he was waiting he would look at the real estate proposal. Not quite proper to do some personal work on the company time, but no one would know. The documents he took from the third drawer down had been given to him by the associate of a colleague. They had met over drinks last week when the suggestion had been made that he might like to come on board at this early stage. Pando's work colleague knew he had been looking for this kind of personal investment for some time and the fact that they liked each other made it easy to be approached.

The third party, proposing the deal, had made it quite clear that he only wanted a small consortium to be involved and the way things stood the three of them could get everything underway as soon as possible. Pando had requested a week to look it over and now he was ready to commit. There was a meeting scheduled for all three of them tomorrow, Saturday lunchtime, at a local hotel which he knew well.

The details of this deal were all there in black and white, he had been over the legalities with a toothpick. Involving some old colonial buildings, three derelict medium sized houses in particular, his colleague had an assurance from a solid source within the planning office that he could obtain permission to build on this site. As always with Hong Kong, space was at a premium. This piece of land was being sold at a fraction of its worth for reasons of an old tax law that meant the vendors had a ceiling on its price. It went against any fundamentals of capitalism, but the old law was there and Pando intended to benefit.

He sat there, at his desk, documents in-hand. He had the money in a new bank account, not connected to his work or home, and he had already made the decision to take it all the way. There had been no need to talk things through with his wife, she didn't like to talk business and he was sure that everything was in order and under control. He just needed to make it through the day, concentrate on his work, and tomorrow would soon be here. He looked at the large, brushed aluminium clock on the wall opposite, almost 9am.

### **III : Triggering**

#### **Chapter Nine**

The monk's soul wave reached its shores, crashing through the consciousness of all five men, instantly and simultaneously, individually and together as one. The effects were subtle but irreversible in nature and had a curious inner beauty that was felt immediately.

The photographer took his film camera and switched it on; good the batteries were still working as shown by the little red L.E.D. light meter bursting into life. Everything about this camera was 1980s and he loved it. Winding the film on and lifting the camera to his eye he focussed on a small sail boat that had just left the jetty. Compose, focus, aperture, speed, shutter release. Click!

The architect leant into a familiar bend in the road with greater confidence pushing through its apex with more speed than usual. His eyes wide behind the visor, reflections streaming through his brain as the adrenaline in his bloodstream increased to a necessary level.

The musician changed his rhythm mid-tune, slowing to an unplanned and funkier beat that the others had to synchronise with. It changed the mood of the audience who, sensing a stronger pulse to the night, began to put more intensity into their dancing. The club was jumping.

The physicist woke up with a start, he had drifted off to sleep at his terminal and now the run had been completed. The results had flashed up on the screen but what he had been expecting were three or four of these exotic particles, what he was seeing was incredible – there were literally hundreds.

The entrepreneur took out his pen, carefully dated and signed the document with a flourish before putting it back into the third drawer down. It was done.

They all had the same feeling at the same time because for this moment at least they were all the same person. Their shared consciousness had just one message for Pando Fortuna – THIS IS THE TIME.

In the mind of the five they were all present, only now there was also a sixth more powerful and poignant than the others. The old monk had found a way to transcend the physical and now his

knowledge, humour and wisdom was a living part of them all, he was their guide. He spoke through them, he spoke to them all, and he spoke to them as one. His voice was at once that of an old man and a young boy.

*“Pando, quickly, over here.”*

Pando’s eyes moved. He heard something but there was no-one there.

*“No, here, inside.”*

Pando’s otherwise calm and quiet inner world had a visitor.

*“I’m talking to you, you need not say anything, just listen.”*

This was a little disconcerting; there was definitely someone else there. Was he hearing voices? Was he having a nervous breakdown? No, he was fine, just ignore it.

*“Listen, I am your friend.”*

This is weird, a friend and a friend in my head at that, is this friend ‘imaginary’?

*“I am real, I exist, and I am here to help.”*

Pando started trying to block it out but it was of no use.

*“Talk to me. We need to talk.”*

So he relented and started talking to the voice.

“We need to talk! About what?!” He thought to himself.

Pando was worried, he’d heard himself thinking to himself, what was happening to him, he knew not.

*“About relationships...”*

“Relationships! Why would I want to be talking to myself about relationships?” He was now having a fully blown conversation with a stranger who seemed to have taken his mind hostage.

*“Relationships between you, your environment, your job, your loved ones and your own mind are what hold your world together. Besides, you’re not talking to yourself, there are Others.”*

“Others, what others?”

*“Other people like you, other people who need to talk and to listen...”*

“Ok, whoever you are, can you get out of my head now, I’ve got things to do, you know, places to be, real people to talk to.” There was a sense of alarm that there now appeared to be a dialogue in his mind.

*“You won’t find anyone more real than me.”*

“Look now, I’m going to say this just once, I don’t need some new imaginary friend, or friends for that matter, knocking around in my



cranium wanting to talk about relationships of all things, so just get lost.” The fluency of his inner voice was unnerving.

*“I’m afraid I’m here to stay, but for now I’ll just say this, you will be hearing from others like you, and from me, a lot more often from now on and your life is going to change... change in ways that you, as yet, cannot comprehend.”*

“Whatever. Just leave me alone right now.”

*“I’m out of here Pando, but if you need me just shout.”*

With that Pando’s consciousness fell relatively silent once more and he was alone again with his own singular thoughts. For the moment what he had to do in the present and what he had lined up for the immediate future occupied his awareness and imagination. He soon forgot about the little episode of some voice speaking to him from inside his head and put it down to stress. Relationships, really...

The photographer looked at his camera with curiosity as though it was the first time he had held it. Was this machine, this object trying to tell him something? Funny he thought, he was so used to being able to review his pictures on the screen with his digital SLR but with this it was a latent image,

hidden until he had them developed and printed. There were thirty-five or so more photographs on this roll, he'd be walking around with an unexposed visual diary in a few days and felt excited at this prospect.

Parking the bike in the underground car park of his apartment block, the architect took off his helmet. Usually he wouldn't have thought twice, but now he looked into the inside of it. He had bought it only a week ago, shiny, black and of vintage style but the vendor hadn't said anything about it being able to talk! Crazy...

The song came to an end and drumming a finale to the tune the crowd burst into great whoops and cheers. The band knew they were winning and they'd just about wrapped it up for the A&R men too. Sometimes there's just a feeling that you've bested yourself, a feeling that you simply cannot do any better, you peak and play with the wave of emotions that's sweeping through you and ride it to the end. *Sentinel* seemed to have truly come of age and the drummer couldn't help thinking that his performance might have been helped along the way by some external force, some being; some entity beyond his ken.

One hundred metres below ground, now wide awake and still staring in disbelief at the screen the physicist was trying to assimilate his experience. Yes, he was amazed but there had been something else he was daydreaming about in his snoozy half-sleep just before the results popped up on his monitor. He had a strong desire to get home to his fiancée as fast as he could. These results could be of great importance but there were other things on his mind. Frederic could pick up the pieces. He left a post-it note, FREDDY, WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS!!!

With the ink only just dry, the businessman was looking at his signature. It had been exactly the same since he opened his first bank account at the age of nine. He signed papers every day, could it be that it was this what fundamentally defined his identity? What else was it that made him who he was? He wasn't sure. And why was he thinking about relationships at this moment? He knew what the word meant, obviously, but suddenly it had immediacy, an impact and even a resounding novelty about it. He knew what a relationship was, he had a wife, but strangely all he could think about in these fuzzy moments was his signature at the bottom of the document. It looked so personal to

him, of who he was, and also so permanent. He wondered what one would have to go through to change your name, your signature, your relationship and even more, your own life?

## Chapter Ten

It felt like a new life for Pando as he strolled through the town camera in hand. The place had changed since he'd arrived here several years ago, it had expanded in many ways. The number of people visiting had grown and in some ways it was unrecognisable. Shops had come and gone and new buildings had grown up around what used to be a tiny lakeside town. It had been enjoyable to watch this progress, for that is what it was. It was a natural growth to meet the demands of the travellers who came to enjoy the sights, sounds and activities of the place.

Because he was a part of the people and businesses who lived here it came as no surprise that the backpackers were seen as transient. They arrived, spent their money and stayed for varying amounts of time before moving on to the many other attractions that New Zealand has to offer. Although they were welcome they were often seen as a cliché by the people who worked the town. European, American, Australian, there were many countries and cities represented but due to his living there as a fixed abode it was amazing to Pando that

so many fitted into various and fairly predictable groups.

However, there were some who stayed. The workforce of the town was forever changing mainly because some had a one year work visa, which meant if they could get a job, they would integrate into Queenstown life and culture quite seamlessly. It was these people whom Pando was most interested in, because he had been one.

It was a small world and one in which it was easy to make casual friendships. Relationships between backpackers were common, some arrived as a couple and left as a couple. Others came alone and hooked up with new people they met along their journey. Some drifted in and out of relationships as the seasons changed. Pando was sure that half the reason most left the security of jobs and friends at home was to meet like-minded people and cultivate a wealth of new and possibly lasting relationships. After all, he had come here with a girlfriend who had left whilst he had stayed.

Now as he walked through town he could make out the tell tale signs of new arrivals. There was no uniform for a traveller of course, but he couldn't help comparing them with each other. There were the relatively down on their luck types,

guys with long hair and rough clothes who carried packs that were well worn. Most of these young men were travelling on a shoestring and had probably been away from their real home for over a year. They looked like proto-tramps but the irony of such people was that they had to have sufficient funds to sustain their travels. Pando suspected that mostly their looks were a well calculated image designed to blend in with the hippy crowd that could be found the world over.

Then there were the ‘comfort’ travellers. These were often couples who had all the best gear, sometimes matching, that money could buy. They could set up home and live in relative luxury wherever they went. He liked these people, there was an honest quality about them – they had left home and didn’t want to just see the world but to record it and show their friends when they returned. They were just as free, but they wanted and were able to travel in style.

The group that Pando was most interested in were the ‘loners’. These people were fewer in number and for the most part seemed to live in the shadows. They were friendly but kept an aloof separateness about them. He suspected that some were travelling because they were running away

from something, or perhaps they had made a decision to break free from their old character, maybe something that was troubling or which they no longer needed in order to reinvent themselves as they moved. It seemed they were the ones who more often than not decided to stay.

He had a renewed air of purpose about him for he was getting in touch with the person he had been when it was he who had first arrived. Senses alert and body language attenuated to interaction, he passed people by and naturally gave the impression he was happy and carefree. This was a feeling he had missed. The people he knew around town were sure to notice this expression of liberty and his hope was that he would become at least superficially more attractive and approachable. He bought the new clothes that he had imagined himself in and the very act of carrying new shopping bags made him feel more invigorated and alive.

Perhaps because of this, or maybe by chance, he came across a group of newly arrived back-packers sitting on a bench in one of the town's small courtyards. They asked him for directions, a small conversation ensued during which he felt he gave a good account of himself and he agreed to meet them in a bar that he recommended for that



evening. This is what he wanted - the open and trusting nature of otherwise perfect strangers, with whom one could fairly easily relate. They were younger than him, and obviously still green with regards to travelling experience, but he liked them as a group and looked forward to helping them have a good time.

There was a boy on the next street that he knew well. He was the son of the woman who owned the photographic shop that he often used. Jake was only seven or so and had a new friend, a beautiful Husky puppy with the most amazing blue-grey eyes who was on a short leather leash.

“Jake. Hello. Who’s this?”

“He’s called Rosco.”

“Rosco. How cool... How long have you had him?”

“Two days. He’s my birthday present.”

“You know, if you look after him, he’s going to grow up big and healthy.”

“Mum says I have to walk him and feed him every day.”

“Well she’s right. You can look after each other.”

“I know.”

“Well that’s good. You’re a very lucky boy.”

“I know.”

“Well that’s great, have a good day.”

“Thanks, Pando.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Pando continued walking. He didn’t know where he was going, nor did he really mind. This kind of random walk was what he remembered as a traveller. When people wonder as to whom we are as a person it is often answered with reference to the behaviour and the purpose we have. Now though, he was realising that sometimes we do what we do just because we can. That was what being a free spirit and coming to this country was all about and it was this which he had almost forgotten. Walking in rhythm with life and letting yourself go meant that you were aware and ready for whatever you might come across next. To know you are at the front edge of experience meant that you expected anything might happen and that’s exactly how he felt - ready for anything.

His random walk inevitably brought him home and he put his new clothes on immediately, he’d never done that before. He lay back on a favourite recliner and tuned his short-wave radio into the BBC World Service. He listened to the

news for ten minutes, it was all bad and so he turned it off and looked through the window at the mountain view. He hadn't been skiing for two seasons and surely that was all wrong. So wrapped up in his business had he been that he'd lost track of the unfeasibly breathtaking wilderness that was all around. Making money is one thing but if you stop living whilst you're doing it well that's something that needs to be addressed.

He just wanted to get up and walk around outside, that was the sum of his desires. He was on a mission, not to get anything, not to do anything in particular but simply to BE. Would anyone understand this freshness, this very primary feeling that was sweeping through him? Perhaps not, better to allow people to think this is the way he always was and always had been. He felt like he wanted to defect from one way of life, where he fitted into the established status quo of the town and its workings, to become once again the traveller that had brought him here. What the consequences of this would be he didn't know.

Walking through the town once again the effect was immediate. Everyone he met whom he knew commented on his new 'look'. Some made fun of it but he was easily adept at shrugging them

off. Others were impressed to the point where he got the reaction he was after, he looked and felt like a new man. At this point he was neither of the town nor of the traveller. It was as though he had beamed down from some other dimension, he loved it.

Eventually he came to the bar he had recommended to the group in the courtyard. He hadn't been in here for a long while, although once it had been one of his favourite places. He walked in, put some music on the jukebox then went straight to the bar. A girl in her late to mid twenties he had never set eyes on before served him the White Russian that he ordered. First thing, she knew the drink, and second thing, she talked to him.

“Haven't seen you before...”

How cool could he play it? “Haven't been here before.”

He felt like some kind of cowboy in a Western and immediately lost the cool he had set up.

“Well, that's a lie. The truth is I haven't been in here for a long time.”

“Do you live here?” She seemed genuinely interested.

“Well yes, how did you know?”

“You don’t look much like you’re passing through. Too clean and tidy, if you don’t mind me saying.” She was definitely flirting with him.

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was meant as one.” She smiled as she gave him the drink.

He looked down, slightly shy. “Thanks.”

“I think I saw you today, with a boy and his dog.”

“Oh Jake, yeah, he’s a cool kid.” He took a drink.

“He looked really cute with that lovely puppy.”

“Yeah, Jake and Rosco, that is a definition of cute.”

There was a little pause whilst Pando had another drink and thought about whether to make a move, or at least attempt to make a move. Before he could think of something to say she beat him to it.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Pando, Pando Fortuna.” he took another drink, feeling cool again, like James Bond or something.

“That’s an unusual name, where’s it from?”

“It’s Scotch-Romanian.”

“Interesting combination”

“Well, so were my parents. How about you, what’s your name?”

“Vikki.”

So Pando and Vikki became acquainted with each other and in between her serving customers and him chatting to other people they got on very well indeed. By the end of the evening Pando had had quite a lot to drink, this enabled him to keep talking but whether the quality of his words were to win her over he did not know. He left shortly before the bar was due to close and as he said goodbye, Vikki leant over to him.

“Let’s meet up tomorrow, if you’re free...”

“That’d be great,” by this time he sounded a bit of a goon, but she seemed to like it.

“How about midday by the lake?”

“Excellent, I’ll see you then, twelve by the lake.”

“Take it easy”

Pando left and big stupid smile grew on his face. What a day, he thought and as he walked home he played it through in his mind. He couldn’t quite account for how he had come to feel so good. What had caused this turn around in his attitude? He couldn’t quite place the moment that something

had changed, he just accepted that there had been a 'before' and an 'after' part to his day and linked it to the use of his old film camera.

By the time he got home his head was spinning. It wasn't until he got into bed and switched off the light that he too began to switch off his babbling mind and wind down. The intoxicating mix of alcohol, his day's activities and the lovely Vikki's kind face, fresh in his short term memory, all had quite an effect on his thoughts. With her soft voice seemingly still talking to him he drifted into a peaceful night's sleep which would be full of the dreams with which only the most fortunate are blessed. Visions of tomorrow were already with him.

## Chapter Eleven

For once he knew what he was going to say. His determination in mind was matched only by the strides he took from the motorbike to the elevator. Once in and travelling to the top floor he stood there, resolved and blank faced waiting for the lift to come to a stop. Opening the door to their apartment he felt he could tell what was going to happen, there was no stopping it. Rather than throwing a few pebbles into a lake and watching the effect of the ripples, he would be lifting a great rock and letting it drop into a small puddle and when the splash was over there would probably be no water left. His wife had no idea what was coming.

“Hi hon, you’re early. Good day?”

“We need to talk.” He was already serious.

“Sure. What do you want for dinner? We have Salmon, Chicken or I can make that Lasagne you like.” Maria was in the kitchen and already in an automatic cooking mode.

“I think we need to talk first, you know get it out of the way.”

“Oh I see, can’t it wait, only I’ve got to get the washing done too.”



Pando felt like she was deliberately trying to exclude him. “Well no, it can’t wait, it’s pretty important.”

“Ok, why don’t we sit down over a coffee?”

“Yeah that’s a good idea.”

Maria busied herself making some fresh coffee whilst Pando sat down in the lounge and went over the enormity of what he was about to suggest. He had no idea what the effect would be, his ideas had been flowing freely but had begun to bottle-neck over this next step. Maria was quick with the coffee but Pando had been given time to cogitate over his plans. His mind was still set and he felt he was about to burst.

“There you go hon. Now what is it we need to talk about? It’s not that trouble with the recycling again is it?”

“No Maria, it’s not the recycling, it’s the business.”

“Nothing’s happened has it?” She was concerned.

“Well yes, yes and no. I’ve made a decision.”

“This sounds serious Pando, what is it, what kind of decision?” Now she was listening.

“I want to sell the company.”

There was a predictable silence. Pando took the opportunity to have a sip of his coffee in an attempt to make things look normal but it didn't work. Maria's usual chirpy self glazed over and an unnatural confusion spread across her face. Pando was already feeling for her.

"I don't understand dear."

"There's not a great deal to understand, it's simple, I want to sell the company and move on to something else, I'm not quite sure what yet, I haven't figured that bit out, but I've got some ideas."

"Something else, but dear you're an architect you don't know how to do anything else."

"Well that's just it, you're right, I need to learn something."

The scale of her husband's decision slowly sank in, and Maria now began to grow a little in her understanding of what she must do in order to stop what she saw as an irrational and foolish irregularity that had swept over her usually quiet and coherent husband.

"Can't you just take a break, there's a bank holiday coming up we could do something together."

“I might be selfish here, but I need more than just a break, I need a change, a fundamental change in my life that will make it worth living again.”

“What are you talking about love? Your life is worth living, we have so much. Yes, I think you *are* being selfish. What about *me*, what am *I* supposed to do? I don’t think you’ve thought this through Pando, not at all.”

There was real passion in his wife’s voice now and Pando saw a glimmer of hope. He knew the person he married had more depth than she cared to show, she was not two-dimensional and shallow like so many of his friends’ wives. He remembered this was one reason why he married her. If he could just convince her that this would be good for the both of them then maybe he could get her on his side.

“You are right, I haven’t thought this through, not logically anyway but I know what I’m doing. I’m going with my gut on this one Maria.”

Maria balked at this and sat upright, her attitude once again changed visibly and she seemed to become bigger, her voice became louder and she started to make her point.

“Since when has your gut been capable of making a living? I don’t know if you’ve noticed Pando but we’ve become accustomed to a certain standard of living. All this.”

She got up and started walking around pointing at the paintings and sculptures in the living room and touching all the soft furnishings. “This, and this, and this! It all costs money and the deal we had was that you would work and I would do everything to support you. But I can’t support you with this Pando, not selling the company. Don’t you see it represents everything you’ve worked for, everything *we* ’ve worked for?”

“Listen to me. I know what you’re saying, I do. I know it sounds crazy but just listen. Yes, I always wanted to be an architect, it was like wanting to be a pilot or stuntman or something, but it was a boyhood dream. Sometimes you grow up and your dream fades or dies or just changes. You know as well as I do that if it hadn’t been for the inheritance I would never have made it this far. All I’m saying is that I think this *particular* dream is over.”

“It’s not just a dream, it’s a job, it’s a mature adult job and you’re good at it, why are you even thinking about throwing all this away?”

Their discussion was getting quite heated now. Even Pando could see that their positions were polarising and that the argument was becoming entrenched.

“Maria, I’m not just playing around here. I know what it sounds like it, but today I gave everyone the afternoon off and when they were all gone I looked out the window and I felt like the boy with the dream. Like the boy looking up at the moon who wants to be an astronaut, I looked at the buildings downtown and thought that someone like me designed those, they were once on a drawing board. Now they are real.”

She interrupted him.

“Your dream has come true Pando, do you know how *lucky* you are, how rare that is?”

“It’s true, you’re right. I got everything I ever wanted and more, I got you, I got this place and I got the dream job all rolled into one. When something seems too good to be true it probably is. Most people have broken dreams, something they can look back on and wonder what might have been, whilst they get on with reality. I’ve got the dream, yes, but today I realised I’m out of touch with reality.”

They had come to an impasse. Pando had said his piece and become quite passionate about it but now had run out of energy. It felt good to get this all out in the open and he was pleasantly surprised at the reaction of his wife.

“Look, let me cook that Lasagne and let’s just put this on simmer for this evening. The genie is out of the bottle, I’m sure we can talk all this over slowly and sensibly. Let’s just be reasonable.”

“Ok. Ok. But I don’t think there’s any going back. We’re just going to have to work this through. Things changed today and I’m sure they’ve changed for good. All I ask is that you respect that and try to see things from my point of view.”

“We’re in this together Pando, but I do *not* want to do anything rash. Why don’t you finish your coffee, have a shower and then we’ll eat.”

Pando wasn’t stupid, he could have blown up some more and made a big scene of it all, destroying everything in his path and forcing his own way. There were merits to being married, he didn’t have to do everything by and for himself, including the thinking. Maria was a good woman and the calming influence she had over him was more than welcome. It wasn’t just a questioning of

giving in to her wishes, he knew better than that from experience. She was his other half and he was mature enough to accept that together they would make sense of this new development in their relationship.

He finished his coffee, had a shower and changed into some casual, comfortable clothes. They had a few glasses of wine with their meal, which went well with them discussing past, present and future. They went through the motions of a happily married couple. They watched an old movie on TV, which failed to make them laugh, and painfully avoided conversation about their problem. By the time they went to bed they had no answers but they weren't at each other's throats either. Pando knew that accepting change, evolving and growing, is nearly always a slow process but he believed that it didn't necessarily have to be a painful one. Furthermore he knew that new ideas do come and the best ones tend to rise to the surface if allowed.

That night, fuelled by a few more glasses of wine, they had made love in a way that was sad and unsatisfying for both with the only consolation being that they went to sleep tired by their exercised emotions and passions. They slept heavily but did

not dream, rather their souls had space to rest and recover for the journey that lay ahead.



## Chapter Twelve

By the time the band had played their last set, all were thoroughly fried and ready to wind down. Just before they started packing up, the bar owner came up to them and asked if they would like to stay after hours for a few drinks and to talk to the A&R guy. There was a very brief band meeting that lasted all of about ten seconds before Frankie said yes.

The tension in the band was almost unbearable as they put their kit in the back of the van. They didn't talk much about what was about to happen, partly because they had discussed this possibility quite often. Mostly there was tacit agreement that they had played their socks off and tonight was the night that would take them to the next level. Pando was especially quiet mainly due to the fact that he couldn't explain what had given their music such an incredulous boost while they were playing. They had been rehearsing more lately and with increased energy but for it all to come together so tightly, and for every song, seemed hard to understand. For his part he'd never quite felt so at ease with being so good and the others could sense it too.

As the last customers were leaving, having had a great night, *Sentinel* had taken up residence on some leather sofas in an area just off the bar. The owner had brought them some drinks on the house and paid them for their night's work. He was more than happy with their performance, the proof being that he'd taken far more than average both at the bar and with tickets for the gig. He'd even invited them back for another night the next month. Frankie had casually said 'We'll see', in expectation that they might be worth more by that time, or even be playing a bigger venue. Pando was a little annoyed at just how casual he was about this, figuring that he might be seeing dollar signs too early and burning bridges was never a good idea. Besides even if they were in the money this was their grass roots fan-base, he should have arranged the gig next month at least, they could always come back and play a small night even if there were some developments.

Pando could see all this in the eyes of the rest of the band. They were avoiding talking about the exceptional quality of their sets and the impending meeting with the guy from the record label. It was as though they were already famous and didn't need to concern themselves with such

things. Fame itself was something Pando had reservations about, yes it meant more money but it also meant a big change in circumstances and Pando worried whether he was ready for what may come.

The A&R guy rolled up in a swanky pinstripe suit carrying some kind of exotic cocktail. He looked like a caricature for his type and even though the man hadn't yet spoken Pando was cautious but he told himself not to pre-judge on appearances alone.

"Hi! I'm Mike Haller, Venus Records. Guys, you were great! I mean that, I see a lot of talent in any given month but you are head and shoulders above."

Just at the mention of the Venus label *Sentinel* were hooked. They'd grown up with the name and it was perfect for them, independent and quirky by nature, Venus artists were admired and respected by the band. Frankie was the first to speak of course, he was genuinely and deservedly pleased with the night but Pando hoped it hadn't gone to his head.

"Well we're a small band but we've got a big heart."

So far so good, don't blow it Frankie. This Mike Haller dude is a professional.

“Look guys, I could stand here all night just waxing lyrical about your sound, which by the way I think is unique, but I’ve got one thing to say to you and that is...”

Haller left a dramatic pause, which worked its wonders. A quick look around at everyone else told Pando that whatever this guy was offering the band was going to be buying.

“I’d like to get you guys into a recording studio, lay down a couple of tracks, and see if we can work together. How does that sound?”

It was funny, Pando was as mesmerised as the rest of them but after a pregnant pause they all picked up together and were psyched and animated all at once.

Bruce was the first to let out a whoop. “Whoa! Yeah alright baby!”

And they all joined in. Mike Haller sipped his cocktail with a big smile, he’d seen this before, loving his job and he was truly happy for them. Pando and Max high-fived but Frankie was truly blown away. A whole heap of tension dissipated.

“I’ve got to say we’re not talking contracts yet, so save some celebrations for when that may happen. However, on the basis of tonight I’m fairly confident for you. The guys at Venus listen to me

because I'm their head scout, so I carry a lot of weight. I've got to say it's almost in the bag."

*Sentinel* was still jubilant and Pando could hardly believe it. Venus Records! If you could've picked any label it was them.

"One thing guys and we're pretty strict on this - no drugs. If there's any shady goings on we'll be on top of you like falling masonry. I think with that proviso and bearing in mind that we're not too keen on super-inflated egos either we should all get on like a house on fire."

Pando felt like speaking up. "When's all this going to happen?"

Mike Haller was very calm and reassuring.

"I've got your number, someone will get to you on Monday and work out a day when you can come in and take a look around. We'll arrange a date to record within a week or so. Oh here, you better have a card just in case you want to talk to me about anything."

Haller handed out business cards to each of them.

Jules, perhaps the coolest member of *Sentinel* who had been quiet all night looked at the card and reality set in. He suddenly erupted. "My god, we're all going to be rich and famous!"

They all went along with his explosive hysteria for a few seconds before realising how un-cool it must look to the business-like Mike Haller. They fell silent again and some struck poses in an attempt to retain their perceived image.

“Well look, I’ve got to make a move. Once again, well done for tonight and I look forward to a successful future for all of us. Cheers!” He raised his drink and the band all followed suit in toasting to their changing fortunes.

Pando drove the loaded camper van back to his base very quietly. He played Lizzie’s mix tape on a low volume. He kept thinking he was going to crash and so over-compensated by driving with the utmost of attention and care. He was playing the night over and every now and then he allowed himself a smile or a laugh. There was no getting over it, this kind of thing did not happen every day of the week and he was going to enjoy the feeling as much as he could, albeit with very sensible driving.

Lizzie had said she would wait up for him and he was trying to imagine her reaction when he told her the good news. Janey would be in bed, maybe they would stay up. It was at times like this that he wished he could have a drink. The temptation was always there but since his diabetes

diagnosis he had been very good, Lizzie had all but given up too, they were in this together and her support was immense. He loved her to pieces and was about to explode carrying news of the night's developments.

After he had unloaded the equipment into the lock up, which seemed to take an age, he finally got to the door of their space. By now it was pretty late, maybe Lizzie had gone to bed. Should he wake her, he felt sure he would. Anyway as soon as he opened the door he saw her, in her pink jim-jams, fluffy dressing gown and yellow slippers getting something out of the fridge.

She looked up, "Hi there tiger, how did it go?"

"Well, I got a bit lost on the way there and the snow made me late."

"Oh no, what about the crowd, were they up for it?"

"Yeah, you know, usual thing, mostly alcohol fuelled insanity. We played well though. I mean we were smooth and tight but busting loose at the same time."

"Did they pay you up-front?"

“They gave us the cash at the end of the night. I suppose you can’t blame them for that. But there was someone there who came to watch.”

“Old friend?”

Pando had taken his coat off and walked towards Lizzie. He stood really close to her and put his arms around her. “No, new friend.”

“Sounds interesting... What are you hiding?”

“Hiding? Me? Nah. Just got a good feeling about things”

He kissed her gently and she smiled.

“Doesn’t sound like the usual you. Come on what’s in that big old head of yours, what aren’t you telling me? Who’s this new friend of yours?”

“Venus Records.”

“Venus... The record label?!”

“Yeah, they sent one of their dudes down to the Auto Bar. You know to check us out and that, man by the name of Mike Haller.”

Pando pulled out the business card from his top pocket and put it in Lizzie’s dressing gown pocket. She took it out and looked at it.

“Mike Haller, Venus Records, Acquisitions.”

Lizzie was on the point of losing it but held herself together.



“Is this what I think it is? Is my man a winner?”

“They just want us to record a few tracks, that’s all.”

Then she *did* lose it. She jumped up and gave him a huge hug and a kiss then another hug and another kiss then she jumped up and down again, a few times. Pando started laughing, Lizzie was going loopy and he felt on top of the world.

After they had calmed down a bit they went to bed but didn’t sleep for a couple of hours as Lizzie wanted to know all the minute details of how the night had unfolded. Pando told her in depth what had gone down including the strange feelings he had during their second song when the band had mysteriously upped their game. He couldn’t quite describe it as well as he wanted, but made the best of trying to understand it himself as he tried. They talked about how things were going to change and how they’d better not get too far ahead of themselves. Pando didn’t want to jinx anything, they were a very practical couple considering everything and he wanted to make sure of what they had before they made any big plans. They decided to go for a walk in the park in the snow with Janey

the next day and it was with this thought that they ran out of words and drifted off into slumber.

## Chapter Thirteen

On the road in the middle of the night it felt good to enjoy driving with next to no traffic. The low bass note of the engine and background hum of the air flowing over the car's aerodynamics gave Pando the perfect environment to contemplate the thoughts that had been going through his mind recently. He didn't feel tired anymore, interesting he thought how the brain can dig deep for extra energy when required.

Currently the subject of The Future was under consideration and he wasn't just thinking of tomorrow or next week or even the next year. The timescale he felt that needed his attention was the next thirty years or so. He might have fully grown children by then, he would likely be retired, who knows where they might be living. However, what about the future of planet Earth, would Mankind truly progress in this time-frame? Would there be fewer wars? Can we really learn from history? They say it repeats itself, surely we can learn some lessons from our previous mistakes.

He came back to his recurring thoughts about CERN. His place of work was pure science,

but would its discoveries really be of any use? He went back through scientific discoveries over the last one hundred years and kept coming up with the practical applications of science. It was science coupled with advances in engineering that seemed to offer the most to everyday people. There was one area he felt sure could offer the people of all lands hope and that was the cheap, clean and sustainable form of energy offered by nuclear fusion. It was a dream for many but had always been plagued by the thought that it was forever twenty years away.

He ought to do something about this. He was qualified in a field that could be of direct use. I.T.E.R. had stood for The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor but lately, because of the negative associations of those words, the acronym had been dropped in favour of simply using the word 'ITER' which meant 'journey', 'direction' or 'way' in Latin. To harness the power of the sun could well help to solve the problems of radioactive waste, dwindling fossil fuels and carbon dioxide emissions leading to global warming. Surely this would be a path worth taking through life. He was on the verge of deciding that this way was his way too, a direction that would require a

personal journey. With this thought he let his mind go blank and drove the rest of the way home in a Zen-like state which by-passed his consciousness and relied purely on his senses.

Corners, turn-offs and traffic lights came and went. Gears were selected, indicators switched on and off. The accelerator and brake were gently moved and the headlights showed the way home.

Before he knew it he was inside and the natural thing to do was to get changed, get into his bed where Beth would be fast asleep. She always slept heavily so there would be no danger of waking her. Instead, however Pando went straight to the kitchen put the kettle on, made a cup of coffee and ate a couple of donuts. The computer was his next destination, he turned it on and typed ITER into the search engine. He searched the websites and read every word, knowing that he was fully alert and dedicated to this new flood of knowledge.

He was already committing to memory the facts and data that were published on the problems of nuclear fusion energy production. They could use someone like him and he could be a part of the future of this bold endeavour. After what was several hours and many more cups of coffee and donuts, he went to the home page and selected the

‘Jobs’ tab. Next he located his CV and updated it to include his most recent work at CERN. After a short while he had written an intelligent and keen covering letter, attached the CV and sent the email. As soon as he pressed ‘Send’ he felt an amazing surge of relief that accompanied the end of an enormously long day and what he hoped would be the start of a great new journey.

He had a shower, which woke him up with a start and by the time he got to bed he realised how out of sync he was, physically and mentally wired from the coffee and the seemingly endless day. As he was climbing the stairs he noticed through the window the sun coming up over the horizon. He stopped and paused for a few seconds and there was a renewed sense of wonder about the energy it brought to the world. It was an inescapable thought that we are all dependent on it for light and warmth, ultimately all life comes from the sun.

He got into bed, only moments later Beth’s alarm clock sounded, with a start she woke and turned it off. She turned over and looked at Pando lying there wide awake. They gazed at each other and Pando noticed the engagement ring on her finger as her hand rested on the pillow.

“Morning,” he said, noticing her hair in a mess all over the place.

She was all sleepy with her head in a fog but eventually managed to speak.

“Hey, how long have you been awake?”

“Nearly twenty-three hours.”

“Wow. You ok?”

“Yeah but I’m going to sleep for my country now.”

“Aww. I’ve got to get up.”

So Beth got up, slowly at first, and by the time she was ready to go to work Pando was just beginning to close his eyes. She kissed him good bye and as he heard the door shut all was peace. The curtains in the bedroom remained closed but he could see daylight around the edges.

He let his mind drift back through the last day and suddenly remembered the huge number of particles that the detector had shown up on the last run. He couldn’t make head or tail of them but guessed it was either an error or perhaps a hugely important discovery. He also had a vague recollection of a voice speaking to him, something about relationships that had happened at the same time but it was all very hazy. He could leave the run’s analysis to Frederic now as his own direction

in life was hopefully due to change. Such things as quark-gluon production and the conditions immediately after the big bang may become irrelevant to him in the future.

The caffeine and sugar in his bloodstream was starting to wear off and he let his overly active brain rest. His last thoughts were slightly annoying, he felt he should have talked to Beth about all this before making even such a speculative job application. Perhaps she would be angry about the prospect of the upheaval of moving again, finding work again and starting to make new friends all over again. The more he thought about it the more he started to worry. He fell asleep in a confused state.

Although the cause of it would remain unknown, that night, which was actually a day, Pando had a nightmare. It was the sort of dark dream that seemed to have no end and in its structure was an apparent eternal recurrence of disturbing and troubled images. His subconscious began imagining what could only be a black-hole, massive but right here on Earth. It appeared to him, as he slept fitfully, in the form a giant vortex which was slowly but with increasing vehemence sucking everything into it - starting with pens, chairs and



tables but then cars, buildings, bridges and most graphically people. Everything was going round and round so fast so that nothing could escape its pull. Anything solid was being stretched and elongated in ever more violent ways. He couldn't shake these thoughts and they stayed with him most of the night.

Eventually the darkness of such ideas gave way to a feeling of euphoria as his mind re-focussed on the simple image and sound of Beth's face and voice, something that was thankfully imprinted strongly in his memory. Snoring deeply, a contented look came across his own face and he didn't stir until his fiancée came home.

It was the closing of the front door and the jingle of the keys that he awoke to. Still it was day, sometime in the late afternoon and Pando had a feeling of being slightly disorientated when he opened his eyes. The nightmare felt like a long and distant journey that he had taken way in the past and by the time he was dressed and had thrown some water on his face it was forgotten. Beth cooked an early supper and as they sat eating there was the usual carefree chatting about her day and his night.

Pando wanted to keep quiet about his application for a job at ITER. The way he looked at

it, it was only news when it became news, and there was no point in jumping the gun to discuss something that might not even happen. It was his secret and he wanted to keep it that way until he could assess for himself any offer that might be forthcoming.

He remembered something about relationships, was it in a dream? Had someone said something to him? He couldn't quite place it. It wasn't the sort of thing he would usually talk about to Beth, in fact he couldn't ever remember talking about it. Certainly it didn't seem to be a subject of any importance, but when there was a lull in the conversation he decided to casually throw it into the air anyway just to see what she might say.

“Beth,”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of our relationship?”

Beth stopped eating for a few seconds and then started again. “That’s a funny question, why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, it’s just we never discuss it.” Now it was out there, Pando was actually quite curious.

“Well let me start by asking you, what do *you* think of our relationship?”

“I thought you’d do something like that...”

Pando ate another mouthful of his dinner and then ventured towards what was for him uncharted waters.

“There are mathematical relationships - I know all about them, and physical relationships, well that’s all covered by, well by Physics, but between people, I don’t know.”

He took another mouthful, finding it interesting that there might be a whole area of human interaction about which he knew nothing. As always, when confronted with the unknown, he felt spurred on by the challenge.

“I guess I’ve always thought it was an area only covered in the movies, teenage stuff. I never had much need for it when I was growing up.”

Beth smiled, knowing that the man she loved was struggling with something that could be so simple, but that he was trying so hard to fathom nevertheless. She asked him something that she hoped would open it up for him.

“How would you *define* a relationship?”

“It would appear to be an interaction between a person and a thing - people have relationships with their car or their jobs. But in this case it’s another person. But if it’s something that

exists in *between* people I would think that it would be something that would tend to get in the way.”

“What would you say if I was to tell you that, in my opinion at least, it’s to do with feelings, how you *feel* about someone at any given moment.”

“Ah feelings, well they’re complicated and sort of exist somewhere in between the mental and the physical, the mind and body. I have feelings for you, I love you.”

Remarkably, even though they were engaged, this was the first time Pando had said those three little words to Beth. Beth hadn’t minded all this time because he showed his love for her in so many different ways every day. She knew they were often overused but hearing them now made a great difference.

“In that case, Dr. Pando Fortuna, I think our relationship is in a *very* healthy state indeed. And for the record I love you too.”

They finished their meal, listened to some music, and then watched television until the sun went down. An early night saw them sitting in bed reading books.

“Good night darling.”

“Good night love.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Pando was still looking at his signature even though his mind was elsewhere. Was a relationship some kind of spiritual entity? Did it exist in the mind, body or soul or all three? Was it something you could have even if you were single? Did it require attention and cultivation like a plant? Was it something wholly free and wild like an untamed animal? Was it black and white? Did some people have a relationship and others not, regardless of their status? Could you go and get one if you didn't have one? Would you feel different if you had one? Did you have to be *in* one for any of this to make sense? Why was he even thinking about any of this?

Certainly Pando had never been taught about this kind of thing. It must be something you gain through life experience. He wasn't a selfish man but he had had to think fairly much solely about his own world and everything in it as a matter of survival since he was young. How many people, apart from doctors, nurses, social workers and people in the care profession in general could truly be said to think about the welfare of others anyway?

He believed people were self-centred by nature and he knew this was rather cynical but thought that it was just the way things were. So when it came to relationships his main belief was that they were just the 'glue' that kept two, otherwise separate people together.

A relationship was a convenient invention to say that I belong to you and you belong to me. When a relationship is strong it is simply because the need for each other is strong too. The sense that two heads are better than one and that being together is mutually beneficial means that most people are simply better off when 'in a relationship'. The fact that this is often true financially speaking seemed to cement the idea for Pando. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, help me and I'll help you. So love as a relation was more akin to friendship than anything else. There was no mystical chemistry that bound two people together.

Then he thought of his children, he loved all three of them with individual and special attention to each. He loved them in a different way from his wife. To have a good relationship with his children was always something he wanted and something he worked at as diligently as he could with the spare

time at his disposal. He felt fairly successful in this respect however he sometimes wondered whether, if he quit his nine to five and worked for himself, things would be even better. He was conservative on the whole and not prone to making uncalculated decisions but as the real estate meeting tomorrow came closer he felt a strange and benign power come over him.

He felt he'd been glancing at his signature for long enough now, it didn't define him. You can change your religion, your appearance and your name, so he concluded that a signature was just an historical artefact. Whether you could change your own nature though, that was another question. You can certainly change your mind and he had to do this with care as part of his work, so what was truly permanent? Fingerprints, retinal patterns, blood group and ultimately DNA were what uniquely identified us. People's personalities seemed to change on a daily basis so he had to ask the question do our relationships with people change all the time, or is there something solid and fixed about them too?

It made sense to Pando that we evolve our character throughout our life due to external events and our own choices. Some people see this as life

itself, always changing and always moving onward. Self-improvement and re-invention came more easily to some than others primarily because of the ability to set better, achievable goals and then to go after them. His feeling was that he had always strived to make more money. It was a simple goal and he knew that classically speaking others would see it as empty but he knew from experience that money makes the world go round and there are those who accept this and those who don't. It doesn't buy happiness but it does buy the time to make happiness a possibility.

Just this morning there was a very real emotion running through him. The idea that one is in a state of flux might not seem that unusual to most but to be caught up in these eddies of changing direction and to somehow know that you and the lives of those important to you are at some kind of tipping point was new to Pando. How long do you carry on with one way of life when there is a junction up ahead that advertises another? It is said that the grass is greener on the other side, implying that you can always imagine a situation better than that which you have and also that you are best off sticking with where you are. But what if you have a profound sense that you have been to the other side,



seen the greener grass, and now have to decide to make the quantum jump to be there, what then? Pando was at this point.

What if something went wrong with the real estate deal? What if for some reason he lost his job? He was beginning to realise that he had been living his life without concern or worry which sounded good but as of this morning he was thinking differently. To be caught in an albeit carefully sculpted structure in life was very reassuring but now standing outside of it all for once he could see how delicate this all was.

Most people don't change unless they have to - if you allow external change to dictate your pattern of choices then after the change your choices become compromised and you are forced to slip into another set of structures and belief systems. On the other hand if it is you who initiate any change then you can, at least to some extent, have control over the outcome.

He needed to speak to his wife about the real estate deal, his job and the kids' future. She was very understanding and although he knew that the final decision making process was his it now seemed vital to bring her into his thinking. All this stuff about relationships kept coming to the front of

his mind. Perhaps a relationship itself could be something quite wonderful that could be utilised in helping to sort out all of this stuff. There must be a use for relationships other than fuel for movie script plots. Maybe they don't exist simply in between people, maybe they are more than the stuff that holds people together, may be they are vital to our continued survival.

All these thoughts occupied Pando's thoughts for less than ten minutes, he was a quick thinker. A knock at his door made him snap back to the reality that he was used to and as one of his team came through the door he put the document in the third drawer down.

It was a long day, several big clients were particularly active and Pando had to supervise a lot of important business. He was looking at the clock and his watch all the way through the day, the desire to get home and put this working week to bed was strong. He was in demand almost constantly and managed just a few minutes to himself over lunch. He was hoping to get home early but everything was running late and again and again there was more and more to attend to. In fact it transpired that he was one of the very last to leave. When he eventually walked out of his office, clutching the

real estate document in his hand, the floor was almost empty. The cleaners had already arrived and were busy emptying bins. He did like his job, it was exciting and there was never a dull moment but as he walked through the floor a great depression hit him and hit him hard. He felt alone and somehow destroyed. The journey down to the ground floor in the elevator and the short walk through and out of the revolving doors of the building happened in a heavy daze.

He was exhausted. It didn't occur to him to get a taxi home he was that out of it. Instead he walked slowly along the streets on auto-pilot. The hustle of human traffic that inhabited the pavements bumped into him occasionally. He had no feelings but the image of a ball in a pin-ball machine game sprang to mind. Physically and mentally Pando had always been fine, a good sportsman in his younger years and he kept up his health with good food, he had no vices. Now, however, something was broken inside. Was it his relationship with himself? Was it his pride that had just given up, or was it just the end of another hard week?

He arrived home, still holding on tightly to the document. He hadn't been able to think about it or anything else for that matter all the way from

work. He put the keys in the door and it opened. Taking off his jacket and entering the kitchen he saw his wife and suddenly a weight was lifted. Just to see her standing there meant the world to him, she smiled and then he smiled, for the first time that day.

“I won’t ask how your day was, do you want a beer?”

“A beer, do I want I want a beer? You bet I do.”

She passed him a cold European lager from the fridge. He held it to his forehead and felt the condensation from it run down his face. The kids came bouncing in from the next room, all three of them, his boy and the two girls.

“Daddy, Daddy!”

“Give Daddy some room kids - he’s had a long day.”

“Its, ok, wow have I missed you today. How was school?”

The children were a blessing. He had to block out all thoughts of family whilst he was at work in order to stay focussed, but returning home they were all buzzing with excitement and this was his favourite time of the day. Having listened to their news and praised them for their good work

they all sat down for dinner. Surely their lives were touched with good fortune. Pando felt pride and contentment in equal measure and knew that his family, including himself, all played a part in this. Of course there were tantrums, disagreements and problems but even these disappeared with the correct amount of understanding and rationalisation. All too soon the children were washed and tucked up in bed, a story was read to them and they were asleep.

Husband and wife alone together, as it had been before the children. Pando put some music on and then approached the subject matter that had been occupying his thoughts all day.

“Hey darling, I’ve got some things I need to talk to you about, kind of serious, important things really.”

“Sounds intriguing...”

“Well it is exciting too but I need to run it by you just so as you know what I’ve been thinking about lately.”

“Let me guess, it’s about money.”

“Well yes, quite a lot of it to be honest about the whole thing.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I want to invest some of the money I’ve made, some of the money we’ve saved over the last few years in a property.”

“How much of it?”

“Most of it.”

“Look darling, you are the one who provides for this family, and historically it has always been you who has made all the financial decisions. I know you always do everything in our best interests, so if you think what you’re doing is a good idea then I am with you all the way. I trust you completely.”

This was exactly what Pando had hoped to hear without being able to imagine the words precisely. Once more he felt clear and empowered to do what was necessary to improve the future of his family. He kissed his wife, thanked her for her support and felt ready to take on tomorrow’s meeting with a renewed sense of determination and resolve.

That night as he lay in bed he thought about his relationship with his wife and also with his children and felt a warm and well earned glow of joy. He felt how he imagined famous people would feel – recognised, accepted and loved. Surely he was one of the most fortunate people in the world.

## Chapter Fifteen

Pando woke with a start and for a few seconds he stared at the ceiling eyes wide open. Then he looked down, he had fallen asleep and slept the whole night in his clothes. After the initial shock of being reborn into a new day had subsided the fuzz of a slight hangover came to mind. He looked at his watch, hadn't slept this late for ages, it was nearing twelve, he ought to get up. As he did so he looked at his watch again, sitting on the edge of his bed he recalled the bar, Vikki and their date, in ten minutes! No breakfast, just brushed teeth and splashed some water on his face, no time for a shave – he didn't want to be late, at least he was already dressed.

He got to the edge of the lake with a couple of minutes to spare but Vikki was nowhere in sight. He sat on a log facing the town so he could see her coming, he waited. Funny he thought, one of his strengths was that he was always on time. More often than not, with most people in general being a little late, it was often him who had to wait for people. Especially as a traveller one was always waiting for something or someone. As far as doing

things whilst you wait he had become quite an expert. First off there was orientation and observation, humans he had decided were good at this, we are built to see and hear, look and listen and to make up little explanations and theories to explain what we experience.

Take this lake for instance. There was a geological phenomenon that meant its level rises and falls by an inch or so every day, fairly peculiar but explainable by science. However the local Maori legend had it that a giant lay down to sleep here at the beginning of time and the lake formed in the depression he left. The rise and fall of the water level was explained by the giant's breathing. A much more poetic explanation he felt and the one he preferred. He tried to imagine the Maori mentality that came up with such a story but found himself lost.

As yet still no Vikki. He looked at the birds flying overhead. He looked at the bark on the log that he was sitting on. It came off easily as it was dry and ageing. He looked at the sand beneath his feet and made patterns in it with a stick. Finally he succumbed to temptation, took off his shoes and socks, rolled his trousers up and went for a little walk along the shore. Ankle deep in the clear chilly



water felt just fine, these feet hadn't felt natural fresh water in quite a while. He had obviously been losing touch with nature which was tantamount to a crime in this setting. He skimmed a few stones across the surface of the water, counting twelve bounces for his most successful effort. Maybe she wasn't coming, maybe she had forgotten, maybe she didn't like him as much as he had felt and had thought better of meeting him.

How long do you wait for someone? What he needed was a book or a Walkman, something to take the edge of the feelings of anticipation and rejection that were as one with him now. If she had been delayed they hadn't exchanged mobile phone numbers so she wouldn't be able to call him. This is what it was like before the time of cell phones he thought, better in some ways, worse in others. How did people survive before the ability to call someone wherever they were had become so usual and taken for granted? He was finding out. He looked at his watch, she was beyond late. There was a time before watches were common too, how technology changes the world.

He decided to wait until it was 1pm, which was more than fair. The minutes were long and he was running out of interesting ideas with which to

entertain himself. He sat back on the log and began to put his socks and shoes back on.

“Hey Pando, you’re still here! I’m so sorry I’m late. I really didn’t expect you to be here still. Have you been here long?” Vikki came jogging up to him all in a fuss.

“Hi! Yeah - about an hour or so. I was just about to go.”

“I wouldn’t have blamed you. You’ll never guess what happened.”

“Did you forget?”

“No its nothing like that, I overslept!”

Pando smiled, “Funny that,”

“I can’t explain it really, except we stayed open after hours and I had a few drinks, I was feeling really good, but I must have had a few too many. I fell asleep in my clothes and didn’t wake up ‘til about twenty minutes ago. I’m so sorry, I really am.”

Pando laughed and explained what had happened to him. They talked about it and made light of it all. Pando realised that the hour he had been waiting had been really good for him, it’s not always that one gets a chance to mull over things the way one does when waiting. Vikki laughed a lot and he began to see another side to her more than

just the bar-staff girl that he had met last night. She had a whole character all of her own that really won him over, she was quite something when taken out of the context of that place.

For Vikki's part she was quite impressed that he had waited for her for so long. The meeting last night might not have been out of the ordinary for either of them, but the circumstances and humour of today did bode well for the future. This was something they both felt. The fact was neither of them had any plans so the whole afternoon was open and full of mystery. Every step they took was one into the unknown and consequently they were on a learning curve. Sure they had talked last night but it had been a kind of 'getting to know you' type of conversation that could have occurred in any bar between any two people the world over. Today, however, was already special.

It transpired that they both liked Sushi so Pando suggested that they go for lunch. Sitting cross legged opposite each other at the low table they ordered modestly. The ritual and formalities of the Japanese style of eating whilst enclosed in a special room was not lost on either of them. There was something comforting about knowing what you are supposed to do, with being familiar about these

ancient traditions and customs that accompany the simple act of eating. They were both at ease and welcomed the social aspect of dining together with a heightened cultural feel. Upon leaving they felt satisfied, refreshed and energised.

They walked and they talked, they laughed and they told stories to each other, it was as if they had been friends for a long time. So far so good, what could go wrong? Pando's thoughts and conversation were free and easy and he wondered how this high speed friendship might develop. He felt sure enough about what was going on to let it take its course but there was definitely energy in the air that things might fall into place rather soon. It had all been very easy and they were flirting with each other physically as well as psychologically but when Pando reached to take Vikki's hand she withdrew hers and became serious.

"Say Pando, we seem to be pretty good together right?"

"I'd say we're getting along just fine, why what are you thinking?"

"It's just there's a bit of a problem. I feel like I want to talk to you about it but I don't know what you'll think."

“Well just come out with it, I’ve heard most things before.”

“Ok, I’m in a relationship, sort of.”

“Oh, what does ‘sort of’ mean?”

“Well it’s the tail end of a relationship.”

“When you say ‘relationship’ what are we talking about?”

“There’s a guy I’ve been with the last few months or so, he’s gone out hiking with a few friends the last few days. But it’s complicated.”

“Oh, I see, complicated?”

“Like I want to end it but I’ve been putting it off.”

“You mean until you meet someone else, someone better...”

“Is that so bad? I’m being honest with you.”

“Honest is good but, well, if we should get together what would stop you from trading up if someone else should turn up? You know - someone better.”

“It’s not something I do casually, but I can see what it looks like. I guess you’d just have to take a chance...”

“This is you being open and me having to believe in you by taking a leap of faith into the void.”

“Yeah, that’s the sort of thing we’ve got going on here.”

“Do you think we might have something together, the two of us?”

“Yes I do, that’s why I wanted to get all this stuff out in the open.”

“So how does it play out, this scenario?”

“We wait ‘til Nathan gets back, I give him the bad news, and then we can get it on.”

“Excuse me for asking but don’t you think that all sounds a little simple?”

“The best plans always are, don’t you think?”

“Well look, this is my viewpoint. I think you’re pretty amazing and I’ve only known you an evening and an afternoon. I’d like to know you better. To be fair I can’t see as I’ve got much to lose. It’s more you taking a gamble with me.”

“You see how things work out. I haven’t been happy with Nathan for a while now but it’s hard for a girl to just break up and leave without creating a lot of bad energy. To just get into an argument and walk out seems quite clean but you literally end up having nowhere to go.”

“Have you been living together?”

“We have but I’ve already told him that I want some space and to give him credit he was pretty cool about it. I told him I was going to move in with a girl friend, you know Melissa from the bar last night.”

“Yeah I remember her.”

“So you see I wasn’t just planning on jumping ship.”

“I’ve got to say this is a bit quick for me, I mean would you want to move in with *me*? You know we haven’t even kissed!”

“We could change that now...”

Pando took a good look at Vikki, he liked her, not just superficially but, even from their brief time together, he could tell she had depth. She seemed strong and independent, not a basket case or bag of nerves like some of the girls he had known. But did he want her in his life? There was nothing in the way but he hesitated and Vikki noticed this.

“I’m sorry I shouldn’t have said that, you probably think I’m really loose and just looking for a way out. It’s not like that I promise, we connected last night and I feel safe with you that’s all. I just think that...”

Pando leaned over to her, held her head in his hands and kissed her slowly and passionately

until the both of them were relaxed. A first kiss, there has to be first. There was some smiling then when Pando looked up to the heavens he realised they were standing directly beneath an “All You Can Eat For \$15!” sign, how romantic!



## Chapter Sixteen

Pando woke first and glancing over at Maria who lay there calm and serene he felt he had already sold the business and moved on to something greater. He knew this was just the beginning and that if everything was to pan out as he hoped there would be a lot of soul searching and indeed a lot of work to be done. It was Friday but there was no way he was going into work, he would call Brandon and make up some excuse. For now all his energy centred on getting out of the city, putting some distance and breathing space between him and the problem. What he failed to realise was that he would simply be taking the problem with him.

By the time Maria was up and about and they had had their breakfast in silence the tension between them was unbearable. The architect's wife started the conversation with a joke about yesterday evening. Pando failed to see the funny side of it and expressed as strongly as he could that he had meant what he said and was still determined to go ahead with what he had stated. Maria was confused and increasingly upset as she could not see what had brought this all on. Pando explained that he too

could find no instigating moment for his reasoning privately thinking that the strain in their relationship was to blame. Deep down he knew it was something else but was reluctant to dig so far as to discover the cause.

After a good hour of talking, both quietly, calmly and reasonable and also at great pace and increased volume levels, they ran out of steam. It was Maria who came up with the solution.

“Why don’t you simply put Brandon in charge for a few weeks, a month or whatever, to give yourself a chance to work out what you *really* want?”

“We’ve gone over this before, I know what I want and it all starts with the sale of the business.”

“Just stop and listen to yourself for a minute, will you? You sound like a stuck record, you just keep repeating yourself. Please, please, please just take a minute to consider the idea that whatever’s got into you might be, I’m just saying *might be*, a mistake, a glitch. To sell, honey its so, well it’s so *final*.”

“Ok, I hear you. Let’s say that I’m in the wrong here, just for a minute. Your idea of handing over the reins to Brandon for a while certainly is not a bad idea, it hadn’t occurred to me. What I’m

talking about here is a life change, I need to know, even if it's only for a few months are you going to be with me?"

"You know I'm with you, I'm with you now aren't I?"

"I want to do what we talked about, what we said we were going to do right from the start. We need to travel, we need to explore, see the world whilst we're still young, we agreed on that before we got married remember?"

"I remember but I thought you were talking about weekends away, camping, that kind of thing. We also agreed that we were going to get along with making a family of our own. Now you've got it into your head that you want to become some kind of global wanderer, no roots, no home. Is that what you really want?"

"It's what I *need*."

"I don't think you know what you need any more Pando, I certainly don't think you need *me*."

With these words Pando physically took a step back. It was such words that he hadn't imagined but subconsciously he'd been driving Maria towards. In that moment he felt all energy drain from their relationship and a strange desire not to fight. Maria just stood there for a long time and

then started to cry. Pando stood still, no power within to comfort her in her suffering, eventually he could watch no more and simply turned away from his wife, his job and his life.

“I’m going out on the bike.”

He left the room, the apartment and before long the building. The road led nowhere. The chaos in his mind was reflected by his choice of route. To begin with he just kept riding and turning left and right randomly. By the time he realised that he wasn’t actually in control of his direction he was on the far side of town running parallel to the ocean. He gazed out across the bay at the tankers: Where did they come from? What loads were they carrying? What was their destination? His lack of concentration on the road nearly caused an accident on a couple of occasions. He didn’t think about Maria, he didn’t think about love, he was thinking about freedom.

His motorbike was always his favourite toy, but that’s all it had been, the play thing of a successful man. Now though it meant the world and he was beginning to believe that this was just the first step into a new life, a life of adventure. He had forgotten his problem, his problems, in his thoughts they were a long way behind him already.

Sure he would have to attend to the details like selling the firm and working out a fair deal for Maria but that wouldn't take long. He could afford to start making plans.

Maria was distraught and beside herself with a mixture of emotions that she couldn't begin to sort out. She kept crying then stopping and then starting again. In a period of calmness she decided that she needed to talk to someone and so called a friend from her yoga class. In between sobs she tried to explain.

"Sam, Sam is that you? It's Maria."

"Hi Maria, are you ok? You sound awful."

"Oh, Sam something terrible has happened, I just don't know where to start."

"What's up? What's happened? Where are you?"

"It's ok, it's ok. I'm at home. Pando has just, has just walked out."

"What do you mean?"

"Hold on, I'm just going to sit down."

"What do you mean Pando has walked out?"

"He's gone, about half an hour ago. Something got into him last night and we were arguing and I thought it would all go away but then

this morning we started arguing again and he's gone. I think he's gone."

"Look Maria, do you want me to come 'round? I'm not doing anything. I can come 'round right now."

"Could you, I just need to be with someone, I could come to you."

"No, don't you go anywhere. I'll be there in like fifteen minutes."

"Thank you Sam, you don't know how much it means to me."

"Don't go anywhere. Just make yourself a cup of tea and wait for me. I'll be there in fifteen, ok?"

"Ok, I'll see you in a bit."

They hung up and Maria made a cup of tea with her trembling hands. Her mind was completely blank and would remain so until Sam arrived. When she heard the doorbell ring she walked calmly to it and opened it to see her friend standing there, what a welcome sight.

"Hello Sam. It's so good of you to help me out like this. Do come in."

Perhaps understandably she was making out as though there was nothing wrong. It was easy for

Sam to see through this but she didn't know quite where to start.

“It's no trouble at all, are you ok?”

“I'm fine now, it was all a bit of a shock. I think I've got a handle on it.”

She clearly hadn't.

“Why don't we go through to the lounge, sit down and I'll make us a cup of tea.”

They sat and talked for a long time. Maria went over what was said in the best detail she could manage, trying to understand what had happened. Sam listened carefully, occasionally asking questions to clarify and understand the gravity of the situation. Maria knew what it meant even though it hadn't been said, their relationship, their marriage was over. She had a good grasp of Pando's philosophy and was sure that once he had made his mind up there was no stopping him. It was true what she had said, he didn't need her and that was the worst feeling, not to be needed anymore. What was she going to do? She had no real qualifications or skills to speak of. She could touch type and use a telephone; maybe she could get work as a secretary.

Sam persisted along the lines of trying to work out a solution but at every turn Maria showed

her the obstacles in the way. She felt that in truth this event had been a while in the making, needing just a nudge to push Pando into his current mental state. She didn't know what had caused it or whether she had been partly to blame. Whichever way she looked at the situation it didn't add up. What was the straw that broke the Camel's back? After an hour or so during which time she kept herself together mostly she began to think of what would happen when Pando returned. Practicalities occupied her thinking, she wouldn't sleep in the same bed as him tonight, she didn't want to cook for him and she had no idea as to what she would say if or when he did come back.

Whilst filling up the petrol tank at a garage Pando stared at the display of the pump watching the numbers change. He began to realise what this all meant and started to think of the repercussions of his actions and decided that there were many. However, the feeling that had come across him yesterday as he stood in the empty office was as strong as ever. He simply hadn't worked out the chain of cause and effect but as he did so everything started to fall into place.

The business was successful but he no longer wanted to be an architect. It was the



fulfilment of a childhood dream but one which he no longer cared for. This led naturally to a break up with Maria who he was convinced was only married to him because of the conferred status she enjoyed from her husband being an architect. The more he thought about it the more he could see that he was striking out for himself, to live, to live a life that he could choose as an adult. If this meant throwing away his history then so be it, he would be a new man, unshackled from the burdens of work and marriage.

Selling the business would be easy, he felt sure Brandon would be interested and if not there would surely be others who would delight at taking on a company that was thriving and in tune with the buzz of the city. The new owner would certainly make changes but his employees would most likely stay on and keep their jobs. They were in the middle of several projects all at different levels of progress but any architect worth his salt would be able to see the value of the enterprise. Putting a figure to it would be difficult but he had a good accountant who could advise him on this matter.

Moving away from Maria would be harder, he could see himself setting up in a small apartment but with his plans he would be away most of the

time and would simply use it as a base. The formalities of a separation could all be dealt with in a fair and even clinical way. Maria would agree to a divorce he was sure. He knew she would get a sizeable percentage of his worth and he would need a lawyer. At this thought, he finished filling the tank, paid with a credit card and rode towards home. What he failed to take into account at this point was, that by any relevant meaning of the word 'home', his life was now without one.

## Chapter Seventeen

A day in Central Park in the snow with Lizzie and Janey, all wrapped up warm and ready for fun. It wasn't a long walk to the park, Janey never complained anyway. She was wearing her favourite yellow boots and a big fluffy purple coat and a white woolly hat. Pando and Lizzie were in high spirits, smiling and laughing about almost anything. After negotiating a few busy road crossings they arrived and the Park looked a vision. There was fresh snow overnight so in many places their footsteps were the first to make an impression.

Of course snowballs were high on the list of things to do. Lizzie started it by putting a big handful of snow down the back of Pando's neck. He retaliated by hugging her and wrestling her to the ground. Janey was quick to join in with a sizeable ball of snow that hit Pando right between the eyes. He fell down, pretending to have been shot and lay there for a while before jumping up and holding Janey upside down, dipping her head in the deep white carpet. Lizzie and Janey then made snow angels as Pando videoed them with his phone.

This release of pure pleasure kept them occupied until Lizzie played her surprise card. She had brought a bag with her, packed secretly so that neither her man nor their daughter knew of the contents. It was a special winter picnic, consisting of a small rug, a flask of coffee and loads of cake. They sat there toasting the future success of *Sentinel* and munching on the cake. Pando could see that Janey was in love with the day and wondered if she would remember it in years to come.

Acting on some hidden force Pando moved towards Lizzie, kissed her and said quiet simply the words that were at that moment filling his soul.

“Lizzie Carmichael, will you marry me?”

There was no pause just an immediate recognition of the moment.

“Yes! A thousand times, Yes!!”

They kissed again.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted to be Lizzie Fortuna?”

“Tell me.”

“Since day one.”

“Do you know how long it’s taken me to find the right time?”

“Tell me.”

“Since I found out your last name was Carmichael!”

Janey who had been watching and listening suddenly piped up. “*I want to get married!*”

Lizzie and Pando looked at each other, smiling, then at Janey.

“Well you’ll have to get yourself a nice boyfriend first.” Said Pando.

“But all the boys I know are stupid and eat like animals.”

Lizzie laughed, “The trick is to find someone smart and playful who loves you deeply.”

“I think I’m going to marry a fireman, they’re brave and strong.”

“I’ll remind you of that one day Janey.” Lizzie remarked.

Soon they all started to get a bit cold and decided to head back home. Pando was riding a wave of good feelings that transferred easily and completely to Lizzie. Even though they explained to Janey what had happened to Daddy’s band the night before she was more interested in a fire engine that happened along the way as they were waiting to cross the road. In fact all she could do that afternoon was draw pictures of fire engines and firemen putting out fires and rescuing cats from trees.

It was certainly a change from angels, butterflies and fairies, her previous favourite subject matter.

It was quiet for the most part of the rest of the day, the sky was clear and the sunlight streamed through the large windows of the loft space that they shared with a man called Tycho who was a writer. There was no central heating so it was always cold but they did have a few electric heaters dotted about if they needed to warm up.

If the recordings went well, Pando thought, and they were signed to Venus there would be enough money to make life a little easier. Both Lizzie and Pando came from quite well to do families and had been accustomed to a certain standard of life growing up. They wanted to give Janey the best life they could afford and with Venus Record's help, they just might be able to.

Lizzie was cutting out the pattern for a dress she was making for Janey. Pando lay on a beach style sun-lounger in his coat reading a copy of The New York Times. He knew a little about the current financial situation of the country and indeed the world in general. His father had been an Economics professor at North Carolina State back in the Seventies and Eighties and had taken every opportunity to educate his son as much as possible

in the ways of the flow of currency and its impact on society. He felt grateful to his dad for teaching him such things as it had helped in many circumstances. Because of these life lessons Pando was thrifty and careful with the little money he had so far earned and accumulated. He must be one of the elite groups of drummers with a portfolio, however small, of stocks and shares.

Currently what occupied his thinking was an article on the price of crude oil and the factors which influenced its fluctuation. They were varied and many in number, everything from the cost of transportation in tankers to the global effect of the various wars that were ravaging the planet. He was trying to see long term, something his father had impressed upon him, and was looking at the graphs of the price of crude when nuclear power had been introduced. He wondered how expensive oil would have to get before people started to take alternative forms of energy production more seriously. In particular he mused to himself over conspiracy theories of the large oil companies holding back the progress of nuclear fusion.

Lizzie's dress for Janey was going to be a birthday present. It was a simple pattern but the finished dress would be elegant and smart. Their

relative lack of money meant that making clothes was a necessity as much as anything but for Lizzie it was a pleasure still. She made her own clothes too, Pando escaped for the most part but he did sport several of her creations every now and then. As a family they looked like a bunch of hippies but their educations had been such that they had learned ways to stay above the bread-line. They grew a few vegetables in the spring as there was a small terrace outside and when the light and warmth came it was another means of saving valuable cash.

The truth was that Lizzie and Pando had both opted out of regular society jobs at quite an early age. They weren't exactly rebels but Pando for one had made a definite and permanent decision to earn his living from music. They had fallen in love when they both had nothing, Janey had appeared on the scene five years ago and they had struggled to make ends meet. The news that Venus Records were quite likely to sign *Sentinel* caused a great wave of feelings, maybe they wouldn't have to be so poor in the future. They had allowed themselves to hope and their prayers seemed to have been answered. Still the rabbit wasn't quite in the pot yet. First they had to show that they were as good a recording act as they were live.



Pando felt in limbo, he had risked everything on *Sentinel*, he believed in everyone in the band but now he had to wait, suspended in time, until he could prove himself. He wasn't just the drummer, he was the foundation of the band, Frankie was the front and the other guys did a great job but everyone looked to him for stability and sustainability. He wasn't good at waiting and always liked for there to be something to do. Having become disgruntled with the newspaper he decided to clean and polish all his shoes. It took his mind off waiting for the best part of forty minutes after which time he felt at a loose end again.

He went through to the other side of the loft to talk to Tycho, the writer. He explained to him about the impending recording sessions and tried, fairly successfully, to contain his bursting excitement. Tycho was fairly psyched for him and said he would be one of the first to buy their debut album. Pando started thinking about the album cover art. He knew a photographer and a graphic designer, perhaps he could get them on the job. He was sure Venus had people of their own for this type of work but still he might be able to put in a good word for his friends.

By early evening Pando had cleaned his shoes, alphabetised his record, CD and DVD collections and washed the dishes and put them all away. Lizzie was impressed.

“Do you want to put the bed-clothes in the wash?”

“Sure, I’ll do it now.”

“I’m kidding, come over here and sit down for five minutes.”

Pando did as he was told. “You know I’ve never felt quite like this, what are you supposed to *think* in this kind of situation?”

“It’s the anticipation isn’t it?”

“That’s exactly what is! One second I’m playing drums, then I’m in the recording studio, next thing I’m thinking about the money situation, then I’m worrying about the other guys and what they’re thinking, now I’m here just trying to get through the day.”

“Why don’t you ring Max, he always chills you out.”

“That is a *good* idea.”

Pando picked up his phone and called Max.

“Hey Max, how are you doing?”

“I’m going out of my mind Pando man. It’s the anticipation.”

“I know, I know. Have you spoken to anyone else?”

“Have I? I talked to the postman for about half an hour this morning, then my landlord got the full front of it too. He even forgot to ask for the rent which is why I think he came ‘round.”

“No, I meant have you spoken to any of the other guys?”

“Yeah, they’re all buzzing. Everyone except Frankie that is, he’s taking it all in his stride, said he knew it was coming and figures we’ll all be swimming in it by the summer.”

“I just hope he can keep his ego in the bag until we’ve actually laid down a few tracks, last thing we need is him getting the jitters and mouthing off to some exec.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be cool, he’s just enjoying having a front for a change. How are you coping?”

“I’m hanging in there. You know I’m hoping we can do ourselves justice in the studio. We played like fiends and they’re expecting us to reproduce that kind of energy.”

“We will my friend, we will. Just make yourself a hot-chocolate and relax.”

“Good advice, catch you later.”

“Later.”

Pando hung up. Lizzie looked ‘round.  
“What did he say hon?”

“He said to make a hot-chocolate, I think  
that’s what I’m going to do.”

Pando stood still for a few seconds looking  
at the phone. Then, mostly because he had no other  
ideas he made himself a hot-chocolate.

## Chapter Eighteen

Weekends often saw Pando doing very little, however as soon as he awoke he felt full of energy and decided to get a few things done. First on the mental list to do was fix the toilet. It had not been filling up properly and like many such things he had just ignored it on a habitual basis for the last few months. Beth had mentioned it many times but only now did he feel like doing anything about it. Despite being a purist with regards to Physics he was surprisingly practical even to the point where he had considered a career in Engineering.

After he had lifted the lid of the cistern he soon found out that the problem could be easily remedied by introducing a bend into the ball-cock lever. It took all of two minutes and after it was done Pando stood there slightly incredulous at the amount of vexation the problem had caused over such a period of time and how little effort it had taken to solve. Beth would be pleased and he made a mental note to tackle these little obstacles for a stress-free life sooner rather than later.

Next was his mountain bike. Once again he had ignored its dysfunctional status due to laziness,

a lack of confidence in his ability to repair it quickly and efficiently, and a generic personal excuse that he didn't really need the bike for anything anyway. This practical problem was a little more difficult, it was the rear brake. The cable had snapped near the calliper and he had made a temporary fix which meant that the brake was almost fully engaged even whilst the brake lever was not being operated. He knew he needed a new cable and although there was a shop not a mile from their house in the town he had put off the inevitable. No more with such mental slackness.

Pando put on his shoes, jacket and cap, told Beth where he was going and set off into the chilly morning. It was a feeling of freedom that greeted him as he strolled down the road. Of course he could have driven but the walk would enable him to think through his actions of the last few days. As a matter of fact he felt able to throw off any reservations that he may have had about his actions and was thoroughly in the moment as he walked along with a confident stride.

He looked at his wrist-watch, the time was 11:12am. His cheap digital watch had been with him since school days with only three changes of batteries in that period. Now he was in Switzerland

he couldn't help feeling that it might be time to buy something a little more fitting of his status, something to remind him of how far he'd come since a boy. A Swiss watch would be the perfect way to mark a new job, a new direction in life but should he buy it now? Would it jinx his chances of landing the job? He was optimistic about the future and now might be the perfect way to punctuate this part of his life.

As he entered the town proper he headed straight for the bike shop. It was a simple purchase as the cable he needed came in just the right length. He paid and left the establishment but instead of heading straight home he walked a little further into the small town with the desire to do some window shopping in the jewellers.

This was where he had bought Beth's engagement ring. It had taken no small amount of subterfuge, involving one of her friends with whom she worked, in order to get the right size. He had taken his time and listened carefully to the woman who ran the shop to buy just the right one. He had settled for a classic design of a solitaire set in platinum and she had been thrilled. Maybe now was the time to reward himself if nothing else for all the hard work he had put into his job.

The watches were all beautiful and expensive as you might expect from a Swiss jeweller but where should he start? Looking in the window he remembered the drive, determination and purpose with which he had purchased the ring but now, when looking for himself he felt somehow empty. He didn't deserve such a beautiful thing, surely? It was not his place to have such an item and show it off. This was vulgar and ostentatious was it not?

Pando had always suffered from a lack of self-esteem and confidence. Certainly Beth had helped in this regard but there comes a point when you are the only one who can bestow value upon yourself. Would Beth want him to spend so much upon what was really only a piece of jewellery? The watch he had was functional and had been good to him all these years. Yet it was hard to be sentimental about a piece of plastic and some electronics. Looking at it again it suddenly occurred to him that he had been a slave to this thing most of his adult life, why not just throw it away and open up a new chapter?

The lady proprietor had been looking at him through the glass door and remembered him by his



jacket and cap. She came out and walked up to him.

“Good morning Sir, can I help you?”

“Oh thank you, I was just looking at watches.”

“How was the engagement ring received?”

“Oh she was thrilled.”

“I’m so happy for you. Is there anything in particular I can show you?”

Pando felt embarrassed, doing something purely for himself as he was.

“I’m not quite sure where to start to be quite honest with you.”

“Do you have a budget?”

“No, there is no budget. That is I don’t mean the sky is the limit, it’s just I haven’t decided yet on how much to spend.”

“Have you thought of a style? A dress watch, something a bit sportier?”

With these options Pando’s confidence grew, he had felt the same feeling passing through him when he was buying the ring. This was also a purchase for someone important only this time it was him.

“I’d like something special... something that says... adventure... Not a dress watch, rather

something that I can wear every day, something that makes me feel good whenever I look at it.”

“Why don’t you come in Sir and I can give you a few choices.”

So Pando went into the shop and tried on an assortment of luxury gent’s Swiss watches. Each one gave him a unique feeling, each one heightened different parts of his mind. After quite some time he came over light headed, he was on the verge of buying one that had caught his eye and felt just perfect. All he had to do was break out the credit card and it would be his. He hesitated, looked at the digital watch that he had taken off and which now lay on the counter. It was an embarrassment but in the same way these timepieces felt too exuberant and showy for a Physicist. He was torn. In a sudden realisation of his situation he caught a glance of the brake cable that he had bought in the bike shop and made a decision that he would buy this watch if and when he got the job at ITER. It was clear.

Leaving the shop he had to stop himself from apologising to the lady but as soon as he was on his way home he felt there was nothing to be sorry about. Indeed, should he get the job, her

excellent service may well draw him back to buy the watch he had liked most, if it was still there.

For now he was walking briskly again, with a mission on his mind to fix the bike and enjoy Beth's company. It wasn't long before he got back. He went straight to it and soon the bike was fixed. Looking at it he felt an amount of pride about what he had just done. That which was useless for so long, now had functionality and a purpose. Indeed this potential energy of what was only an inanimate object made Pando think about the man-machine interface. A bicycle is nothing without a person but once someone is riding it there is a kind of harmony. It was this kind of harmony that had first interested him in Technology.

Beth was in the kitchen making some lunch.

"I've fixed the toilet and the bike."

"Well done, there's some lunch on the way. You could take the bike for a run after we've eaten."

"No, I thought we could just hang out together."

Beth stopped chopping and looked up at him.

"That would be nice, maybe we could work on our *relationship*?"

Pando smiled in recognition about his previous naivety of the word.

“I would enjoy that very much.”

They ate quietly, as a couple they were polite but casual, formal but cool. Pando was bursting with the news of his job application but kept a tight hold on his desire to discuss the matter. He knew it was a long shot but he was also aware that someone of his calibre could be utilised at ITER. It wasn't so far away either, they didn't have much in the way of personal possessions if the chance to move came. He would hold back, but if he got the job and Beth was behind him on it, he had promised to himself that he would buy the watch. He would have earned it, he would have deserved it.

Beth was thinking to herself about the class she taught, the students were a real mix in anyone's books. She enjoyed seeing progress and what's more she enjoyed giving special attention to those who needed it more than others. She was good at teaching English language. She found it rewarding that, as a teacher, she too was called upon to learn as she went along. Her students looked up to her and tried their best, the advantage of teaching this course was that everyone there really wanted to

learn. They were mostly professionals who had come to Switzerland for employment reasons. Her course specialised on business language and for the most part the students were quick on the uptake.

The subject of marriage and children wasn't talked about much in their household. There was an unspoken agreement that there would be a 'right time' for these things to happen naturally. Beth hoped that they would be good parents. The fact that they had moved for Pando's job didn't matter to her, what she really felt though was the lack of experience that she had with children. Pando had every confidence in her but she sometimes wondered if it was misplaced, what if she was a terrible mother?

Pando now had a plan. He would get the job, he would buy the watch, and they would move, get married and work on a family. End of story. It was amazing how much hope and optimism had worked for him in the past and he considered it normal to make decisions on the basis of factors over which he had no control, it was his way. For now it was business as usual, stay on track at CERN and carry on life in the strange rhythm with which they had found themselves.

## Chapter Nineteen

Saturday. Pando was up and ready for the meeting. He had only one problem which was what to wear. He didn't favour one of his work suits but on the other hand he didn't want to appear too casual either. It was warm so he settled on a blue shirt and some pale chinos, corporate casual. He had the document in a folder and he was ready to go. He kissed his wife before leaving.

“Wish me luck.”

“Good luck. See if you can enjoy yourself.”

“That might be easier said than done, but I'll try. I'll call when I'm done.”

With the words ‘Good Luck’ ringing in his ears, Pando left the apartment and went towards what would be the biggest meeting of his professional life. He had decided to walk, even though it was a fair distance to the hotel where they had decided to meet. Cabs could get stuck in traffic and he wanted the gentle exercise of walking to ponder over this momentous event. It was cool he thought to be doing business on a Saturday when everyone else was either shopping or at home. He felt as though he was ahead of the pack somehow.

He was smiling and felt at ease, he was happy he'd told his wife what he was doing and was perfectly in control.

The hotel sat on the waterfront and as it came into view Pando just knew he was doing the right thing. These opportunities come perhaps once in a lifetime and it is only the wise who snap them up in the brief amount of time that they are available. The revolving doors to the hotel were smaller than those of his place of work but they were finished in gold. As he approached he looked up to the sky but as he went in he dropped the folder and it became folded and crushed in the doors. He recovered it but it was fairly ruined and a wave of embarrassment and anger came over his face. This was not good, still he went ahead. He had not been nervous but now he was truly unsettled.

His work colleague and the third party were already seated and sipping on drinks in the hotel's foyer bar. He looked at his watch, he was on time but how would he explain the crumpled folder? Both of them stood.

“Pando, how are you?”

Pando shook their hands.

“I'm fine, I've never felt better.”

They all sat down but Pando was conscious of the folder in his hands and felt that the other two would be more than unimpressed by this lack of professionalism. He decided to confront it head on.

“Look, can I just say that I’ve thought this through and...”

He paused for a few seconds, and then a few seconds more looking from man to man. He had a wave of bad nerves rise from his stomach to his head, in a rush of images he saw his life savings slipping away, his job lost and his family in financial meltdown. He looked at the folder and took its mangled state as a sign. The other two were waiting on his words.

“I can’t do this, I’m sorry.”

The phrase losing face came to mind but at the same instance a moment of relief.

“Are you ok?”

The third party looked worried although Pando was sure this was due to his realisation that the deal was on thin ice, at best, rather than any concern for his wellbeing.

“I’m fine, I came here today ready to do this thing but I’m having second thoughts. In fact I want to tell you that this proposal is most certainly



gilt-edged but for me the time is not right and as of this morning I'm afraid the deal is off."

Pando's job and his life in general was about saying 'Yes', but he had learned over the years to trust his instinct and that 'No' was often a stronger reaction when in doubt. The speed of his turn around was a surprise even to him but the other two were in a state of shock, they could see their million dollar plan in tatters. Pando's work colleague was bemused.

"Pando, what can I say, you were up for this not just yesterday, what has happened to change your mind?"

"To be honest with you I couldn't put it into words. If anything it's something to do with an inner connection I've made that seems to be helping me in life."

The third party was vexed as he knew he would have to find another investor which would take time that he did not have. He vented his frustration on Pando's work colleague.

"You told me this guy was the real thing, all I see is a man, if I can call him that, who doesn't know what he wants. I've got better things to be doing."

With that he upped and left, leaving Pando and his co-worker sitting alone in the plush surroundings of the hotel. His friend was not happy.

“Pando, you’re a fool, you know that. Life’s not going to throw you another one of these gifts. Chances are you’ve ruined it for me too. You’ve let me down and you’ve done yourself no favours either.”

Pando had become quite serene, his nerves had gone and he felt in tune with his surroundings. His senses were heightened yet he was at peace. He saw a little boy playing with a toy aeroplane, he heard the blades of the overhead fans cutting through the air and he caught the smell of someone’s cooked breakfast as the waiter walked by to serve a nearby customer.

“I am very sorry I couldn’t have let you know sooner but I myself had not made my decision until... until very recently. I’m sure you’ll find someone else to come on board. This city is littered with people who don’t know what to do with their money and it is a very good proposal, it’s just not for me and not for my family either. I thank you for your belief in me and for thinking of me. All I can

do is to wish you good luck with your venture. If you'll excuse me now I have to go."

Pando stood up and left, his friend remained seated and ordered another drink to contemplate his next move. For Pando, after carefully exiting through the revolving door, the day seemed new. The air felt cleaner than usual, there must have been a breeze coming in off the sea, he walked with a swagger in his step and knew that firstly he had done the right thing and secondly his life would be different from now on. He knew that his wife's belief in him would be rock-solid and that he had not put his children's future in jeopardy.

As he walked past a bin he placed the crumpled folder in it and was once again free and easy. Looking at his watch he had all the time in the world so took a rather long route back to the apartment. He wanted to look at a piece of sculpture that had recently been placed at the junction of two roads outside a corporate building. He had his camera phone so as soon as he was there he took a picture. It was one of several sculptures that had been cropping up around the city. The relationship between art and business was obscure to most but for Pando he could see now that

business for him was an art and indeed art could be a business.

Pando was not a religious man by any meaningful definition but he did have a copy of the Tao Te Ching which he looked through every now and then. He believed that there was more to this world than meets the eye but left it to others to try to describe what that might be. Now though, as he walked, he had an overwhelming sense that there was some benign force guiding him, protecting his being and moulding his actions. He was open to it and any previous superstitions that he might have had began to melt away. The joy in helpful coincidences and the feeling that luck was on his side strengthened his resolve. It was without hesitation that he bought some flowers from a street-side vendor, whom he came across around one corner, to take home to his loving wife.

So he came to his building and arrived at his front door. Opening it to the familiar and welcoming furnishings and decor he was greeted immediately by the kids. Flowers in hand he went through to the kitchen.

“Wow, are those for me?”

“I hope you like them.”

“They are beautiful. I’ll get a vase and get them in water quick. How was the meeting?”

“It went very well, I was lucky.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in luck!”

“Well let’s just say beforehand I didn’t feel like I needed it. Something bad turned into something good and if that’s luck, as of now I’m all for it. I pulled out of the deal.”

“Why was that?”

“I can’t explain it, I just got a feeling. You know that ‘too good to be true’ type of feeling, once it had my attention I just had to act on it. The strange thing was my action had to be inaction, I didn’t *do* anything I just found myself able to *not* do something.”

“All sounds very Taoist if you ask me.”

“Maybe, maybe.”

Pando spent the rest of the weekend playing with his kids and rediscovering the beauty of the relationship he had with his family as a whole. He also found time to read a book, something he realised he had not done for a couple of years. As a boy and a teenager he was a voracious reader of every kind of fiction, factual books and the text books that took him through University. For now his attentions surrounded a book on the

relationships between economics and chaos theory. There was so much to learn and he felt that this would all add to his ability at work. He was even looking forward to getting back to it on Monday morning. Rested in mind, body and soul as he was there seemed to be every reason to redouble his efforts for the company, who knows perhaps there was a promotion around the corner.

## **IV : Shared Consciousness**

### **Chapter Twenty**

Frame, focus, f-stop, shutter speed, shutter release:  
'Click'

Time passed. The seasons shifted and moved. Where there was warmth there became change, where there was once cold, life began to emerge. For a photographer this was what gave inspiration. The sun rising higher and staying longer in the sky, or sinking so that its zenith was that much nearer the horizon, this was the reality that was in tune with Pando's heart. To be in phase with such flux was, for Pando what his very essence was all about. He loved the differences in the play and colour of light that reflected itself all around.

He realised that this was what he lived for. He was at once a man and an animal, constrained by the rules of society, enamoured by the ebb and flow of his instincts. He could not live in the caged confines of a city yet depended upon its modern technology that he held in his hands. He was a slave to the zeitgeist of modern humanity, comfortable only when fused to nature through

nurture. He knew how to behave whilst grounded in culture, he knew how to extract money from man by his craft and he knew what was expected of himself by the people to whom he owed a living.

Just as simply as a bird's migration he felt the longing to move, the wanderlust of motion towards survival. However, he was a simple man who knew his limits and his place within the hierarchy of cultures and subcultures to which he belonged. The forces of these emotions were not lost on him but neither were the necessities of subduing them for the sake of those with whom he dealt on a professional basis. His life was a delicate see-saw which acknowledged both freedom and constraint in equal measure. He was a man who yearned for the solace and sanctuary of the forest glade whilst constantly reappraising the definition of what it was to be part of the economic market in which he found himself.

Pando had been a loner most of his life but with his meeting Vikki he was beginning to reign in his wilder side. To be where he wanted he could simply not afford to wear the badge of the outsider any longer. With Vikki's help he had become at first a creature of habit and then one with a home of sorts. In some ways she had tamed him over the



weeks since their meeting, in some ways he had allowed this humanisation to take place. It was as though he were a teenager again, experiencing the painful feelings of growth and the necessary rituals for becoming a friend, a partner and a gentle-man.

To fight this change was not an option, something had clicked inside when he had joined paths with Vikki. She had an effect on him that he had never felt before. He wanted to settle, to stop the random walk on which he had been so dependent. She was beginning to teach him the ways of peace and serenity and he was an eager pupil. There would be no more treks into the wild for weeks on end to capture the perfect picture, nor the solitary existence to which he had become accustomed and from which he had felt no escape. He no longer identified himself with the singular but was becoming attuned to the reality of harmony with another.

Far from being a captured animal he felt new and complex thoughts and feelings growing inside. The responsibility of being in a relationship meant that he was learning every day. As he learned from Vikki so he became able to learn from others. It did not take him long to alter his style of photography even. He became adept at the candid

photograph, capturing his subjects unknowingly at moments of contemplation or through the lens transforming people into otherwise unforeseen characters. Indeed as he progressed, the portrait became a more natural and heightened event.

It was over these weeks that he set up his own studio in a disused shack on the edge of town. He put a huge piece of Perspex into one side of the roof, it was not difficult with the help of a few new found friends and he invested in some lighting equipment. In this balance of available and artificial light he created the perfect place with which to further his career.

Starting out he invited people that he had come into contact with in the town, and friends of Vikki to come to the barn for their portrait to be taken. He charged nothing to begin with but built up his portfolio. Then he began to offer his services to fee paying guests by advertising all over town and in the local papers. At first he was realistic about creating an income, but before long it became known around town that his services were of a very high standard and soon more and more came.

With every 'click' of the shutter Pando was creating. He created mood and depth in his subjects and allowed them to see in themselves what he

could see. In the faces of travellers he showed humour and liberty and transience. In the body language and clothes of those who lived and worked in the town he showed contentment and a feeling of being at one with their environment.

His greatest discovery however, was the nobility he captured in his pictures of the native Maori peoples. They taught him more about the grace and pride of being an artist than anyone else. For that is what he had become, an artist. He knew it and Vikki knew it and for the combination of the two of them it was a good ship to sail for the time-being. As a business it was beginning to break even, given the amount he had spent at the outset on equipment.

Foot-stand, ignition, select first gear, release brake, clutch, open throttle – Speed.

Lately Pando had become a little lost. He was living alone, his wife had filed for a divorce and he had been spending his time planning ‘The Big Trip’. He was obsessed with it down to every minute detail and had the most part of it organised. The separation from his wife had been painless. He hated her in no way but felt nothing except renewed

determination in his quest for freedom in her absence.

They had met only twice since their breakup that night. He had seen her lawyer more often and was mostly worried about how much of his small fortune she would take. He had hired the best person he could find for himself and was leaving it up to her to work out the legalities.

He felt a twinge every now and then, mostly when he was on his bike. It was as though someone were trying to remind him of what he was throwing away but all he had to do was go a little faster and the feeling disappeared.

He had presented an offer for the sale of the company to Brandon who was planning to go into partnership with one of the other employees. They must have thought that all their wishes had come true all at once such was the nature of the deal. Pando was happy knowing that the business would be in the hands of people whom he knew and respected and felt there was a good future for all of them.

Maria was still in denial. What had happened to the man she married? She felt he must have just blown a fuse. One minute he was fine the next his head was full of all these ideas about travel,

and ‘getting away from it all’. She knew he could be prone to fanciful notions and even delusions of grandeur when it came to architecture, but with everything else he was so predictable, boring even. Did he have no feelings for her anymore? Did he really love her all the time that they were together? She didn’t understand. She spent a lot of time crying on her own and to her friends both on the phone and in person. At least he’d had the decency to find a place for himself but the feeling of loneliness in the place they had called home was immense.

Pando felt no such loneliness, he was alone but at last he was with new horizons. It’s funny he thought, all these years it was as though he had been playing a role, the character of the architect had been like a part in a play that he was particularly good at. However, at the end of the night, when the curtains had closed and the audience had given their applause and left the theatre he was now free to be the real Pando Fortuna. The only difference was that an actor builds up his own persona as he goes along and knows when he is only playing a part. For Pando his real life had only just begun, the character of the architect was a role that he had inhabited and now would no longer play.

From Maria's point of view it was like someone had stolen her husband. Of course she naturally suspected that there was another woman involved but Pando assured her that this was not the case and she felt sure he was telling the truth. She noticed a new kind of mad energy around him, some might call it an aura. It was at once fascinating and frightening and served the purpose of warning her away from him. She couldn't tell whether it was some kind of defence mechanism he had put up around himself or whether it truly represented a new found glow of freedom and happiness.

There was no such feeling of energy around Maria, she was constantly exhausted, frustrated and confused. Her friends were amazing and came to visit often when they would listen to her concerns and try to take her mind off it all. When they were gone however, it was just her and the apartment. She had to come to terms with the fact that she must eventually leave the place and find somewhere that didn't always remind her of the past. She found the best therapy was walking and began to take extended walks through the city and to places she used to go as a child. It was on one of these walks

that she found a place to rent, it had a sea view was relatively spacious and in a nice neighbourhood.

Sorting out the finances during the period of separation was very difficult, Pando had always done this and although he was being very reasonable about such things as credit cards that kept her afloat she had to put a lot of trust in her lawyer. Selling the apartment was a big deal. She wanted a quick sale and so took slightly less than its actual worth but was glad when the transaction finally went through. On the whole Maria managed very well considering the sudden nature of the disaster, indeed she even managed to learn about several aspects of the legal system that might become useful in the future. She had been thinking about what she would do with her time and found the prospect of getting a job quite intriguing. She was not without qualifications but knew that there might be a need to learn a few new skills.

Pando easily forgot the immediate past. So obsessed with his new life adventure was he that he skipped meals and spent hours on the internet looking at companies offering wilderness trips and experiences that were beyond what anyone might call a holiday. He wanted the kind of life changing journey that explored not just the landscape but also

the inner uncharted regions of the mind. There were no places too extreme, few places that he did not consider and as he looked deeper he began to see that it was the prospect of extended travel in other countries and the ways of other peoples that interested him most. How far did he need to go in order to satisfy himself?

Microphone check: one-two, one-two, ok let's go for another take.

It was a strange arrangement, the loft being divided up as it was. Mainly born out of financial necessity, Pando's and Lizzie's half was slightly bigger than Tycho's. He was more than happy with the situation as he had even less money than them, all he wanted to do was write. Basically it was a just a partition that separated their spaces. They shared the bathroom and kitchen but rarely got in each other's way and as far as people go they got on with each other just fine.

Pando had been trying to talk to Tycho about the novel that the writer had been consumed with ever since they had met him. It seemed he had been writing it for at least the last year but Pando realised that he still had next to no idea what it was about. Every now and then he would ask Tycho but would



get brushed off with mutterings along the lines of ‘It’s philosophical’, or ‘It’s an exploration into telepathy’, or ‘It’s science fiction’. This morning when he asked again he got a different reply, it seemed as though the novel was always changing but that now it was really beginning to take shape:

“It’s about this small group of benign alien beings who inhabit Earth. They’re similar to us in most respects, but identical in appearance to each other, like clones, and they are capable of telepathy within their group. See, they’ve been with us since the dawn of time, carrying on their bloodline from one generation to the next. As ambassadors and students from another world, every now and then, through an immense combined effort, they upload all the knowledge they have gained during their lifetimes to their home planet. Such is the nature of this process that the being through which all their wisdom is channelled is completely destroyed. Otherwise they lead completely normal lives, have relationships with humans, and have the same thoughts and feelings as most people. However, when triggered, their extra sensory perception allows them to share their innermost wisdom with each other and so help themselves, and indeed the whole human race, to evolve. They themselves can

never physically return home, only in thought, and in order to perfectly maintain the illusion of their humanity they are blissfully ignorant of their own true nature. What do you think?”

Pando was impressed, this was more than Tycho had said to him in the whole year they had been living next to each other, at least about his writing, and at last he had some idea of the workings of his mind. Obviously the plot to his book was pure fiction and could have no correspondence with reality. Pando concluded that there was a mysterious hidden meaning in it that might somehow apply to his own life, however after a few moments of contemplation he let the thought go. They agreed to swap CD for book when *Sentinel* created their first album and Tycho was published.

The first recordings, two singles, had gone very well. It's true the band were not used to being cooped up in a recording studio but Venus Records facilities were state of the art having grown from small beginnings to the production house they now were. It all took a lot longer than they had expected, the intricacies of the technical side and the top end production values that Venus prided itself on all meant for many long days. Pando for

one was not tired of it by any stretch of the imagination and he sensed too that the rest of the band was revelling in the novelty and dynamics of the recording process. It was fascinating and only Frankie complained of the endless takes and repetition necessary to achieve perfection. Even this, Pando felt was mainly for show and it certainly didn't hamper proceedings.

They had to wait a good while for the tunes to be mixed down and put together but all of them felt justly proud of the finished results. The important thing for Pando was that the process had not taken the edge off their performance. What they had at the end of the recording sessions was a true reflection of what they were capable of live but with the sharp resonance, dynamic range and resolution gifted by professional treatment.

Venus themselves were cautiously optimistic. They were obviously not a pop band nor did they fit very neatly into a particular genre but Venus specialised in niche bands and agreed to put a single out into the market place. With this decision they were duly signed, obviously a great achievement, but at this stage they were made aware of the fact that any real money would not be made until a high selling album had been crafted.

There was a feeling of jubilation amongst the band, they were making their first tentative steps into a bigger world, so all agreed to keep their heads down, work hard and manage their good fortune sensibly. The fact was they were signed to a cult record label and this realisation was not lost on any of them.

Lizzie was over the moon for her man, she had believed in him all this time and now his efforts were starting to come good. As a family and a band they had been living in the shadows but now some light had fallen on them and they were going to bask in it for as long as they could. As far as fame went they were hoping for an underground following to begin with, then a status that could be sustained for as long as possible. They would want to explore their style and move with the times as well as continuing with their unique sound. All of it was suddenly possible and it was no surprise good feelings were running wild amongst them all.

Deuterium, Tritium, Fusion, Ignition –  
Energy

Pando didn't have to wait long for a letter to drop onto the doormat that looked important and confidential from the outside. He took it to work

with him trying to delay gratification if the news was good. He couldn't wait long though and as soon as he was at his station he removed the letter from his jacket pocket and opened it carefully with a penknife. The envelope and letter were of good quality paper and the letterhead bore the impressive logo of the ITER project.

Dear Dr. P. Fortuna,

Thank you for your recent application for a post at ITER. As you can imagine we receive many worthy applicants for jobs at this facility and unfortunately the position you have applied for has already been filled.

However, we were very impressed with your credentials and experience to date and have discussed in some depth other ways that you may be utilised.

Given the ever expanding and changing nature of the work we do here we have decided on some unique conditions regarding your possible future with us. What we would like to do, if you are amenable to this proposition, is to create a new role for you. As with all these things an exact title for you would be difficult to define as of yet but in the short term we would like to give you some time to

do some research of your own in a time period that you see fit.

In conclusion, we would like you to come on board as soon as possible. We understand that you may have obligations at CERN and that you would need a certain amount of time to move and get settled in with us. My suggestion is that this be the start of an ongoing dialogue where we can negotiate the best possible situation for all concerned.

We would be grateful if you could let us know how you regard this offer and hope that it will be the start of great things. Also you may give some thought as to how close to the front line you would like to be or whether a more managerial approach might suit. As I'm sure you're aware ITER has bright expectations and the addition of your expertise would greatly enhance our efforts.

Thank you once again, we look forward to you being part of the team.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Silberzan Hermann

Director of Operations ITER

Pando was dumbstruck, how does one react to such a letter? He couldn't really tell anyone at

work so he decided to sit on it until he got home when he would give the good news to Beth. He didn't know how she would react but guessed there would be some amount of surprise at the outset followed by an initial resistance to the idea. When he gave her the full picture though he felt sure she would come around to his way of thinking and by the end of the evening she would be with him all the way. That's how he envisaged it, the reality would be slightly different.

All day he sat at his station with the letter tucked into his jacket pocket. His concentration on the job at hand waxed and waned as his mind kept wandering off. The end of the day finally arrived and having made the drive home he walked into the apartment where Beth was sitting in the lounge drinking a cup of coffee.

“Hey there, how was your day?”

“Well it was quite interesting actually.”

“Oh really, in what way?”

Pando had decided upon a casual approach.

“It's just I got this letter in the post this morning, I think you better read it.”

He handed the letter to Beth.

“What is it about?”

“I think you just better read it.”

She read it through carefully whilst Pando looked on for clues to a reaction, there were none. When she handed it back her face was neutral.

“That’s a very nice letter. What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me you’re happy for me... for us.”

“Well that I cannot do. Why didn’t you tell me about this earlier?”

“It came this morning, I could have phoned you from work but I wanted to tell you face to face.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were applying in the first place?”

“I didn’t want to say anything until I knew something for sure. We’ve got time to get used to the idea.”

“Don’t you mean for *me* to get used to it? Look here Pando, we’re in this together. If you’re going to go off and do something foolish I would at least expect for you to tell me about it. I think that’s reasonable, don’t you?”

“I know what you’re saying but there was really no point in me letting you know until I got a positive result. Aren’t you happy for me?”



“Yes, I am happy for *you* what I want to know is if you ever had a thought for *me*? We would have to move all our stuff to god knows where, where is this place anyway? You know I don’t even care. I thought that this was it. I’ve got my job and some great friends. I thought we were settling down.”

“I thought we could settle in this new place, we don’t have much stuff and I’m sure you could make some new friends.”

“New friends, you don’t just make them like, like cups of tea or cheeseburgers or whatever, these are real people you know, you come to depend on them, you trust them you *need* them.”

“You’re right, I understand, I should have talked to you about it but it all happened so quickly, to be honest even *I’m* not even sure what came over me. I just got it into my head that it was something that had to be done.”

“Well do you want to do this or is it just a flash in the pan?”

“I appreciate it would be a great upheaval but the work would be very interesting and from the wording of the letter I can see a better salary. We might be better off all round.”

“Pando, we’re doing fairly well here the two of us. Don’t you think it would be a shame to chuck it all in on the chance of something better?”

“What I want to say is that we take it so far, carry on here as normal until we see what they eventually offer and only then make a decision based on a few more facts. What do you think?”

“I think you can talk me into almost anything and that over the next few weeks or months or however long it takes you’ll persuade me and we’ll end up going!”

Data, Analysis, Choice, Decision,  
Transaction – Money.

What Pando loved most was to play with his children. Making the time to do this was not always easy but he made it a priority. If he only had half an hour it was to be spent with them at the local play ground. It was amazing he thought to himself how much they grew and how quickly they learned, nearly always by trial and error. He helped physically, he suggested psychologically and his discipline was born from a rationality based on his own upbringing and education. He was a born winner and he wanted all three of his children to know how it feels to be ahead of the pack.

His wife was a constant source of goodwill and inspiration. It was true she was supportive of Pando but more than anything she provided a sort of subconscious feeling of calm that pervaded all she did. Of course there were times when her behaviour met with his opposition but more often than not he would discover that there was an obscure feminine logic to her actions that had beneficial intent and success.

The real estate deal was history. His work colleague had stayed in the loop after Pando's departure from the proposal and they had found two more investors for the project. However, the hoped for assistance of the contact in the planning office was dubious and they were having trouble securing the necessary security of planning permission for the site. Pando felt well rid of the whole affair and with each day that passed since he pulled out he breathed another sigh of relief that the problems the cartel faced were no longer his. Stress was such a fickle mistress, leading one on into more and more a tricky situation fuelled only by greed and a will to never give in. The ability to cut short, move away and move on proved to be a far more effective strategy.

As it was, the apartment which they had bought had increased in value by more than one-hundred percent over four years and Pando was thinking of upsizing to somewhere a bit more laid back. The family had grown and occupied more space as the three children required more room for work and play. A journey to another home beckoned, but where? His roots were in London but the financial freedom of Hong Kong and the employment it ultimately offered were over-riding. Now though, any financial institution in the City of London would be proud to utilise the experience he had gained on the stock market. Things had changed since the hand-over to the Chinese and although he was comfortable he was well aware that he had choices.

Every day was an endless stream of family and finance. If he could only fuse his talents with both and initiate change to benefit both then he would truly meet the strict criteria for success that he demanded of himself and others. He was in no hurry, he was cool where he was, he knew exactly what he was doing and he had time on his side. Sooner or later though he would want to move, to act, to live another way. He had dear friends and family in his native country and he knew they

would welcome him back with open arms but he had to make sure there was a job waiting for him.

The journey to Hong Kong was born of youthful ambition the journey back would be one of the heart.

There was one strange attractor to this business – friends. All Pando had at one point had been his friends and they had led him, for better and for worse to the far side of the globe. He was not unhappy but were the friends that he had left behind? There was no sense in guessing the answer to this question but it was also something difficult to find out by a series of emails. A certain amount of faith and trust was involved, he had seen some of these friends on a recent visit to England but would he upset the karma of the whole delicate web of people should he return home? He imagined the viewpoint of these friends, he was in two minds – did he matter to them, did they matter to him? On an intense wave of strong feelings he said ‘Yes’ to both.

Could he make such a decision on his own? If only he knew that his friends *wanted* him back, *needed* him back, sometimes a man can only advance with the help of another. Without spelling it out: ‘Come Back!’ They shouted in unison. What

is it that causes a man to leave home and to go so far away? What is it that a friend can say to truly mean that all is forgiven, if indeed there is anything to forgive? To be fair what, if anything, can one do to influence the course of another man's life? Should one try?

The language of friendship is as delicate as the language of love. A father's love for his son potentially knows no bounds, and a mother, a wife, a child? These myriad elements in the structure of life hold so strong. Sacrifices are sometimes made, but at what cost? How much damage is done to these relationships by the decisions to choose one course of life over another? Is the prime directive one of damage limitation and repair? Or do we simply carry on with the status quo, hoping mindlessly that what was once set in motion is best left alone? The past is often rewritten but the future remains a realm of possibilities.

## Chapter Twenty-One

His senses were alive and feeding his consciousness with new impressions. Some were filtered out and some were factored in, so unsurprisingly his feeling was one of change. Trying to hold onto one fact, one truth, was like trying to stop water draining through a sieve. The sands of time ran through the hourglass and Pando's decision was to go with this flow. Does Man make decisions or is it just that Time merely reveals a path as it moves inexorably onwards?

Pando imagined himself to be in several places at the same time. He was one person but his memories belonged with so many. Indeed his identity seemed to be a composite of his own path in life, those with whom it had intersected and those with whom it would interact in the future. Each instance of time was an integration of multiple moments. At first this felt fractured and broken but with will power he was able to fuse these schisms to create a pleasing and overall more coherent whole. The truth of reality it seemed was being able to piece together extracts and remnants of the past to meet in a smooth and analogue present. The

moment of the now was therefore the result of concentrated focus.

He had often wondered what it would be like if there were several of him, how much more he could accomplish. What if there were distinct and different versions of himself? There may be some lagging behind in the past, others in the present and some forging ahead into the future but all living out their lives in their own way. Maybe he could communicate with these other selves and even inhabit their lives, if only for a short while. What if they started to talk to him?

Perhaps a past Pando would remind him in the present of lessons he had once learned but had now forgotten. Could he send ahead advice to help himself in the future? There was also the feeling that another version of him in the present could guide him through difficult times, right here, right now. Could thoughts travel through space and time?

He imagined with a massive act of self-control, and a firm belief in the vibrations that he sent out all the while to others, that he could change places as and when he chose and so live multiple lives. He thought that possibly this was already happening but that he was not influencing its



occurrence. Which one of him is calling the shots and making the choices that direct his path through life?

If his consciousness was like wearing hat, who was wearing it at any given point? Who if anyone was in charge? Sharing the hat between multiple selves ensures that the best person for the particular job in hand is controlling the situation and this might conceivably make life easier. But how was he to switch, jump, oscillate, morph or translocate? Through effort, concentration and practice could he 'tune-in' to the lives of others?

Maybe his life was like a team game, passing the ball, or power to effect change from one to another. Or even more vividly he was like an actor playing several roles in one play. As he reads another one of him writes. As he sleeps there is another who works. Who is ultimately orchestrating the entire show? Can we really choose who we want to be or are there limited palettes with which to illustrate our lives?

Pando came to understand that through acts of creativity and good will we all send out communications in varied forms to those who might listen, those who might make use of a shared understanding. The medium of the space-time

continuum acts like a wind, carrying our thoughts to whom-so-ever is open to receive them. These energies are absorbed and re-emitted providing echoes of the now which carry sensory information in the form of sounds, visions and dreams. Our fellow players are on the same wavelength and can recognise and decipher multitudes of feelings, and understanding them relay information back and forth.

We have a signature wavelength assigned to us from birth like the myriad and distinct values attached to every colour or radio frequency. We are all pre-programmed to receive but later in life we learn that we are also empowered to transmit, in our own particular way on our own particular wavelength, our discoveries as we travel the paths of our lives.

Every creative instinct that is realised in this very real world produces such energies. Every one of us who is attentive and focussed can begin to understand that with these other souls as our friends, these emissaries and ambassadors forging new identities, we are truly not alone.

With our multiple pasts and futures in the many worlds that our players live, our parallel universes are forever intersecting and when they do

in the immediacy of the present, sparks can fly. Our perception is interactive, we create just by being and the style of our sense impressions feed our minds to make choices and small steps into the future. How far ahead can we see? How much of our own singular history can we remember? How much of the adventures on our meandering paths towards forever changing goals can we share with others?

If our actions in the now can both send and receive to others in the present, the past and the future, how best can we handle and deal with such a skill and responsibility? This sonar of the soul can provide us with a magical realism, but are we ready for it? We have no choice, it is already here. We need to learn a new language and begin trading in a new currency of cool communication, one which holds a mirror up to time and asks us to reconsider what is real and what is illusion.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

People say that the camera never lies, Pando had found this to be true and furthermore his recent work had reflected a deeper truth. He found that given the opportunity and the trust, he could enable his subjects to reach beyond themselves and project their ultimate image to him. Making the photograph was then relatively easy and he made sure that any post-shoot manipulation was minimal. The resulting pictures increasingly transcended anything that was 'real' and more often than not his subjects were not only surprised at themselves but were changed in small but inspiring ways.

At some point and with the advice of Vikki, he decided that he had mastered the portrait. At the very least he felt sure that the work he was doing had inherent value as well as financial worth. He wasn't bored and was quite happy to continue doing what he seemed best at but one day Vikki suggested that they go on a little road trip. Having had the wanderer in him reigned in and also feeling comfortable with a stable and settled relationship, the idea came as quite a bolt from the blue. He didn't need much persuading however and they

began to throw ideas around as to what they might do on a limited budget.

There were several options but the one that rose to the surface was the most unconventional. It was hard to say who came up with it as it was a kind of organic process. In the future they would ask each other many times; “Whose idea was this anyway?” There was never an agreement as to the answer. Like most good ideas it was simple. They would hitch-hike around both the South Island and the North Island, staying in hostels and their tent, and create a book of photographs of everyone who gave them a lift. Vikki would interview each one as they drove, using a digital Dictaphone and Pando would make the photographs. They figured that they could extract some interesting anecdotes and life histories from these unsuspecting and captive drivers to go with the photo of each one in the book. It was the sort of idea that if you searched long enough it may have been done before but this didn’t arrest their enthusiasm for the project.

Of course they would need the permission of their intended subjects but they thought that anyone picking up hitchhikers probably wanted someone to talk to anyway. Also the fact that they were a couple might work in their favour. Operating as a

duo they were confident that they could gather some great pictures and stories for a coffee table book. The more they talked about it the more animated they became and soon the only question was when to go.

They had a vague route planned which would take in all of the finest locations and destinations that the country has to offer, there were many. The limiting factor was, as with many things, money. Pando had saved in the past and Vikki was frugal with her money. Put together they calculated that they could be away for up to a month. Everything fell into place.

The day came when their back-packs were full and between them they were self-sufficient, carrying all they needed for their journey. It was exciting and fun, they weren't just on vacation they were on a mission, they had purpose and a child-like air of mischief.

They started out of town and put their thumbs out as they walked along the edge of the road. Within about two minutes they had their first ride, it was someone they knew. Jack looked after the jet-boats that routinely took tourists along the lake and up-river. He slowed down and leant over.

“What on Earth are you two doing?”

Pando laughed at their luck, Jack was a good friend and would surely provide an ebullient in-car interview and photo. He would be a perfect subject on which to model further encounters and would certainly not take the whole thing too seriously.

“Can you give us a lift out of here?”

“Sure, jump in.”

They threw their bags in the back of the truck and climbed in the front where there was enough room for all three on a bench seat. Having explained their mission, Vikki got down to quizzing Jack whilst recording the whole thing to be transcribed later. He was very accommodating and told them a considerable amount about himself that neither Vikki nor Pando previously knew. It’s amazing what secrets and stories people hide away because they think no one would be interested. Just to be asked is all some people need for them to open up and reveal a whole host of facts, figures, dates, journeys, family histories and opinions. Interestingly Pando already noticed that the variety was large, Jack’s stories were sometimes funny, often sad but always honest.

He could only take them so far but this first outing did bode well for future activity. Having been dropped at the side of the road they compared

notes as to what they could do better next time and the strengths and weaknesses of their technique. Pando took the photograph of Jack leaning out of the driver's side window. He took several, trying to get Jack to give a cheesy smile through his thick ginger beard. It was a simple picture but had a certain rugged quality that Pando was pleased with. The truck itself was ancient and the final picture could have come from thirty years past. Even with nothing to compare it to, they felt that not only was it a success but that the book itself could be full of an immense and rich realm of human experience.

They sat on their bags trying to come up with a working title for the book but after a short time without much luck they stood up, put their packs on and walked along the road, waiting for the next ride.



## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Pando's thoughts were racing, he knew he had to slow down in order to synchronise his thinking with his understanding. As he did so he realised this avalanche of his mind was actually very straightforward. He came to believe that we all inhabit many different characters in the course of a single day. Most of us have subconscious multiple personalities and this is not a disorder or an illness but a common, natural and ultimately very functional and helpful part of being human.

Even those of us who see ourselves as constant and unchanging behave differently depending on who we are with, the situation and our environment. We depend on this flexibility and ability to adapt to change in order to survive and to learn in life. This idea is simply a way of communicating between these different aspects of our own character. As a result we can benefit from what is basically a natural part of being a person in the world faced with the forever changing challenges of modern life.

He needed to talk to someone and was no longer on speaking terms with the person to whom

he would have usually turned to, his soon to be ex-wife, Maria. He had any number of friends but in most respects he felt that he was on his own. He had made his choices and now had to live with them but still he needed to talk through his plans. Everything was mixed up. His business was in the process of changing hands, his wife was filing for divorce and his travel plans were sprawling and chaotic. The call he made to his closest friend resulted in the suggestion that he see a shrink. This made him laugh and he was initially dismissive but the more he thought it over the more he began to realise that speaking to a stranger, and an educated and professional one at that, might not be such a bad idea. Someone who would listen and not judge him might be able to provide insight into his life at this stage. Indeed he, or she, might be able to help him come to his own conclusions.

After going online to search for what he was sure would be a fairly easy person to find, he became frustrated. What criteria does one use when selecting a person with whom you want to explore your innermost feelings? Eventually he found someone who appeared to be very well qualified, his name was Dr. Ron McLaren. The fees were fairly astronomical but he would soon be very well

off and he only planned on seeing him for a couple of sessions at the most. He called the office and made an appointment.

The day came around very quickly without him making much progress with his tattered life and he was looking forward to someone shedding some light on his circumstances. Dressing smartly he went through a door where a secretary asked him to take a seat. He wasn't seated long before the secretary informed him that Doctor McLaren was ready to see him.

During the first five minutes the shrink told him that he would use the first session to see if Pando was someone with whom he could work. It seemed as though the good Doctor was somewhat of a minimalist in terms of giving advice, he simply encouraged Pando to do all the talking. Pando's questions were met with brief neutral answers from the doctor but at the end of fifty minutes he brought the session to an end and told Pando that he was prepared to take him on for analysis for however long it was until they both agreed the necessary work had been done.

When Pando left he sorted out the payment details with the secretary and walking out the door he had the sense of firstly having achieved

something and secondly having invested in his future. It was a painless experience although he felt they had really only uncovered the tip of the iceberg and that any real cathartic emotional journey was yet to come. He had taken the first step.

Subsequent sessions saw Pando opening up about a range of issues that went back to his idyllic childhood and stretched forward in time to observations he had made on the way to the office. Dr. McLaren's rules were simple; he would not speak first, allowing Pando to have control of the direction of the session and he would encourage Pando to answer his own questions. Self-discovery was paramount and any glib pseudo-scientific explanations to Pando's situation were not encouraged. Ron was mostly interested in Pando defining his problems and finding his own solutions to them. In this way Pando's self-awareness grew and he made ground every week. Ron made it clear to Pando that as much as anything he was a facilitator and that the process was unique for each client.

It was obvious to Pando that Dr. McLaren had chosen a very lucrative business yet in a way this impressed him even more. He was taken with the doctor's calm approach especially when the

subject was sensitive as was often the case. Fears, hopes, dreams, mistakes, clouds with silver linings, attitudes, issues, stories and pet theories to explain his condition were all popular areas for discussion. The fifty minutes went very quickly and Pando was always determined to get his money's worth. Each week that passed he redoubled his efforts to focus on the solutions to the problems that were endlessly uncovered.

In fact he was continuously surprised not only at the depth of his own character but also the deeply fractured nature of his thinking. Subtle ideas that he would have previously discarded became the starting point for intense investigation. After a while he lost all association with any stigma attached to seeing a psychoanalyst and began to talk openly about it to others in social situations. Some were fascinated, others shunned him but he didn't care as he was making leaps and bounds in repairing what turned out to be a scarred psyche. He had thought that such therapy was always meant for someone else but the more he persisted with his own treatment the more he realised that this activity was what he had been searching for over many years.

Through this process he came to be aware that there were indeed many different people living within him who showed themselves as an equally varied number of differing facets to his personality. But to his pleasant surprise he also discovered that he had a certain unique and personal integrity which was born of his own ongoing desire to be a 'whole' person.

This singular character first began to show itself in his sense of humour. Without trying consciously he began to create laughter and more importantly he started doing it in his own way with his own style. Further to this he began forming a whole host of opinions and beliefs that were original and based entirely on his own personal experiences. He stopped reading newspapers and explored forming ideas based on immediate observations of the world around him.

Throughout all of this it didn't cross his mind for an instance that he was being in the slightest bit selfish. His feelings for Maria had all but evaporated, some might say that he was cold or numb to her. He left her behind in his quest for self-discovery and had no concern for her well being. The fact was that she had done nothing wrong, nothing to deserve being so suddenly cut off

by Pando for seemingly no good reason, but this didn't matter to Pando. He had loved her in the past but his love for her had disappeared so completely that he no longer thought of her feelings. Maria's friends were unanimous in condemning him and it was some comfort to her that they united in this way on her side. She grew to despise him, which was initially an appropriate response but as the months went by the hate began to eat away at her until she too felt numb and cold at the mention of his name. The process of forgetting set in and eventually she began to change in whatever ways she could to move on in life.

It was a sad end to what had been a relationship with much potential and, whichever way you looked at the situation, it was all Pando's fault. He carried on with his new found emotional journey blind to the pain he had caused without regret or sorrow. His plans to embark on his great travels grew in scale and complexity and when the money came through for the sale of his business he was ready.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Sentinel* was officially hot property. They had laid down a whole album, mostly tracks that they had been playing for a while but a few new ones to spice things up a bit. The studio time was for them a revelation. They took well to it and enjoyed the way that Venus worked and handled them as artists. Of course it was hard work and there were times when tempers frayed but Pando assumed a new role as mediator between the members of the band and the recording company itself. There were late nights and food ordered in, it all felt beyond what they might have expected.

Pando's two friends, the photographer and graphic artist were keen to get involved but Venus had in-house employees who had been assigned to design the album cover. Pando felt disappointed for them when he gave them the news and there was a bit of a sting as he felt as though he was turning his back on an old world in favour of a newer one. He couldn't help but think that this might be the beginning of a pattern, one which led from happy times to one of success and even fame. He made a decision there and then not to lose touch with



anyone who might otherwise be left behind. He once was told to be careful of how you treat those you meet on the way up, you may need them on the way down!

Lizzie was fully involved in this upward spiral, she was so full of life and supportive of everything Pando was doing. Janey had become swept up in their good fortune too, she sensed that something very special was going on and seemed to thrive on the positive energy that was flying around the loft all the time. Art was piling up everywhere as Janey was becoming quite a prolific painter and her work was plastered over all the walls.

Of course Pando was changing because he was allowing himself to be changed by what was going on. To fight change he reasoned was futile, much better to go with it and enjoy the ride. He became like a ball of potential energy and his task was to regulate how this energy was dissipated and transformed into the work of music. He found himself using the phone far more often and for greater periods of time. The burst of creativity of the band members was forming tighter bonds between them and there was a lot of talk amongst them of how to play the game.

In times of intensity there is a tendency for people to grow too quickly, reaching too far and flying too close to the sun. Pando sensed this and decided to advise the others of caution. It would be too easy to give everything and peak with their first album. He wanted this to be the start of something long term, rather than both the beginning and the end all rolled into one. Everyone was with him on this one except Frankie who had somewhat let things go to his head. Pando had to constantly bring him in from far ranging flights of fancy. He felt like a kill-joy but knew it was the right thing to do.

Venus themselves were simply very professional, they had done this many times before and even had advisors who spoke to them about everything from their image, financial details and their personal lives. It wasn't a factory but from time to time Pando felt as though they were being processed to some degree. The desire to make their mark in their own way was at the forefront of their minds but to some extent they all had to tow the company line.

Soon after the album had been recorded there was talk of a mini-tour to promote it. This was the type of launch that they had been hoping for. It was only to be a few gigs, maybe five dates

in total but they were invited to treat it as tour and would be staying in one of the record label's custom built coaches for the duration. It was without doubt a coup which had them in high spirits for a long time. They were a cool bunch and could keep themselves from looking too excited most of the time and they helped each other from freaking out, doing well to keep it all together.

There would be no room on the coach for girlfriends or wives and certainly not children, this was naturally met by a wave of feelings of freedom but the loyal and good natured Pando knew that Lizzie would make the most of the time with Janey and the trust in their relationship was rock solid. As for the others Pando wasn't quite sure, they all had girlfriends but he wondered about the strength of some of these unions. If there were obliging women available he was sure some of them would crack and give in to the temptations of being on the road.

He wasn't worried about drugs, they were clean living in this respect and none of them had ever been into them in any way, shape or form. What concerned him most was the alcohol. Except for him with his medical condition they all drank and when they were happy they drank more, much

more. Could it be that this was their weak link? He hoped not but could easily see things getting out of hand. The last thing he wanted was for this to ruin their long term prospects. Before he was diagnosed as diabetic he had enjoyed drink more than most but since he was forced to give it up he had become a mere observer. He noticed everything about the effects of drink. The way it was casually abused and the effects it had on people's speech, behaviour, intelligence and quality of life.

The album cover and name was agonised over almost right from the start. Eventually Venus came up with title "*SENTINEL – CALLING ALL CATS*" with a black and white picture of a Lynx's face in close up. The album's production was finished and a conservative first run of CDs set in motion. The album would be available concurrently through digital media too. Venues were booked and a date was set for the tour.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

With the prospect of a shift in career path now a reality, Pando began to find the work at CERN monotonous and routine. The experiments he was running were certainly exciting to most of his colleagues, as much as Physicists are able to express excitement. It was true also that the work was ground-breaking and the results that were coming through on a repeatable basis were suggesting new ways of looking at the world on a subatomic and astronomic scale. However, Pando's mind was elsewhere. He was thoroughly gripped by the dream of energy production by means of nuclear fusion.

He would discover that all people at the ITER facility shared this dream and so also shared in the lofty ideals that came with the territory. Even through his own private research and communications with his future superiors he found that those already on board with the project were driven by higher goals. It was refreshing and gave him new personal energy. His passion for the subject grew on a daily basis as his interest in the

‘pure’ research of elementary particles simultaneously diminished.

Beth had noticed an improvement in his attitude and she was greatly impressed at the amount of time he devoted to improving their relationship and future prospects. It hadn’t taken long for her to come round to his way of thinking and like Pando she was getting truly excited about the move. The journey itself was actually not so far, only just over one-hundred miles. There was now a large map stuck on the wall which illustrated the route and this made the whole experience seem that much closer.

The news had not gone down to well at CERN. The question ‘Why?’ was asked many times by everyone he encountered and save for Frederic the answers he gave were met with no enthusiasm. Obviously some were sad to hear that he would no longer be working with them but to a man they failed to share the excitement that Pando felt for the move. In fact the more he explained his new direction in life the more he could see how isolated and blinkered the scientific community was here. The methodology and philosophy was so ingrained as to paralyse original thinking. There were even those whom he considered friends who

began to blank him as though he no longer existed for them in any real way.

It was during this time that Pando began to realise that he was special. The fact of being a PhD Physicist, he found, did not wholly define him. He was a person first with needs, wants and desires and a scientist only secondarily. It was his individual character that had drawn him towards ITER for idealistic reasons, his ability as a Physicist was merely something that was required to make it a possibility.

It transpired that he grew into somewhat of a misfit for his remaining time with the facility. This annoyed him to begin with as he prided himself in his ability to get along with others. However as the time drew close to his leaving date he began to enjoy some freedoms. Of course he was still contractually obliged to do his job and carry out all of the requirements of his position but a mischievous side came out of him as boredom drove him to play.

Paper aeroplanes were flown, elastic bands flicked and even some friendships made with people such as the maintenance and cleaning staff with whom he had not previously mixed. These people, who had hitherto been virtually invisible to

him, provided much laughter and an alternative way at looking at the functioning of day to day activities. He discovered that many of the employees with whom he had a professional relationship were lampooned by these 'lesser' staff who created fairly derogatory nick-names for their superiors. It was these friendships that he made in his last few weeks that would provide the bridge to a much less formal although arguably more committed workforce that awaited him at ITER. The further he removed himself from pure research concerning the fundamental structure of the Universe the happier he became.

There was a leaving party for him after work on his last day but it was pretty lame. His colleagues had bought a small cake with a couple of candles. Frederic came up with the goods by introducing a bottle of champagne into the proceedings and it was all over fairly quickly. He said his good-byes to everyone he knew, which took less time than expected. Mostly people wished him good luck and made sure he had their email addresses but overall he was left feeling that he had made a good decision. He exited the building for the last time smiling and happy that a new



adventure lay ahead. One door was closing another was opening.

Pando had made just the one trip to his future place of work for an interview which seemed more of a formality than anything. He was welcomed warmly and met some of his co-workers to-be and before he knew it he was back with Beth with the job offer in black and white in his hands. These people were good, they had an idealistic dream which they were intent on fusing with their passions to turn it into a reality. The problem with nuclear fusion was simply one of image. Most people who knew about the project and even some of those in the 'serious' scientific community saw it as something of a fool's dream and a very expensive one at that, and this in spite of all the breakthroughs and progress that had been made.

Apart from the brave souls who had signed up for the actual hands-on project of achieving their goals, many scientists had said that nuclear fusion was like trying to put the sun into a box, only no-one knew what to make the box from. Pando was on a steep learning curve but had already absorbed much of the history. The project at ITER was not simply an experiment, it was more of a prototype and if everything went well and the international

funding was sustained he began to believe that it was all possible. Like most dreams, there was a degree of optimism and luck involved but this was firmly tempered by serious science married to technological design.

Beth had been packing all day. They had but a few days to get everything ready for the removal van. The plan was to drive to their new apartment ahead of the van and for the van to arrive a few hours later. They would take a few essentials in the car such as a kettle and some food. The best thing was that the flat had come with the job. The ITER community was well set up for organising such things and there had even been a choice of three places from which to pick online.

The day of the move arrived and Pando woke with a smile on his face. He leaned over and kissed Beth who stirred gently and soon came around. They had a lie-in, knowing that they had done most of the hard preparatory work and could afford to enjoy the experience. For both of them this was a new beginning.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

The desire to return to London was growing with Pando. The last thing he wanted to do was uproot his family but he felt their time in the relentless cityscape of Hong Kong was drawing to a close. It had been good to them but photographs and correspondences reminded him of all he had left behind. He was justifiably confident that his friends would welcome him back with open arms because he had always been very popular. He had no enemies in England only memories of good times. In fact, other than employment, he often wondered what it was that had pulled him so far away from home. Certainly the experience that he had gained in the East would translate easily to work opportunities in the West.

His first thought was to start looking for jobs, then he realised that should he find one he would have to move pretty quick. Instead he decided upon a little visit to test the waters. If he could blend back into the culture of his friends and their families and could imagine a new life for himself and his family he would begin to think about a place to live. He liked several places in

London; Richmond, Twickenham and Greenwich to name a few. Greenwich he found particularly attractive and there was no doubt that it was something to do with the Greenwich Meridian, the line that marked the time from which all time zones referenced. He would see.

Pando was not sure how his wife would react. He felt she would be with him but there was always the problem of the weather. London was notoriously cold and damp in winter whereas Hong Kong had a very pleasant climate most of the year. With such problem analysis comes many pros and cons, sacrifices and compromises but if the strengths outweigh the weaknesses some decisions are surprisingly easy to make.

Some people remain in the same place all of their lives. Some leave home never to return. Some have a base from which they routinely escape but always come back. The last of these Pando labelled 'Boomerang' people, always travelling, always searching but always returning. It is the nature of a boomerang to take a course which brings it back to its owner but its true nature is that of a weapon. Its purpose in hunting is to kill the prey sought by the thrower so that in essence its success occurs when it strikes its target and does not return.

There are those who treat travel as an end-in-itself, travelling for pleasure for as long as finances allow. For these people the only point in working is to fund the lifestyle. Such wanderlust is certainly a way of life that seems appealing and such travellers are currently spread all over the globe, in all walks of life, speaking every conceivable language and discovering the extreme variety that exists with their every step.

Home is where the heart is and Pando's heart was with his very own family which was by far and away the best thing he had ever had a hand in creating. If he could put together a scenario for his family that represented a step-up in the quality of their lives, whatever this might involve, then it would be an attractive package to present to them. Sometimes people just need a change, another way of being, in order to grow and become everything that they can be. If moving to London was meant to be then this change would be natural and even obvious. It was hard to think outside the box so Pando put the idea on the back burner and decided that any action to be taken would grow organically out of his current situation.

Still, his feelings about this matter were strong enough to motivate the booking of a ticket.

He had a date in the not too distant future to make a journey that would conceivably alter the course of his life and those of the ones he loved. Just this prospect put him in a great mood that stayed with him every day as the date grew nearer. He would arrange meetings to talk through his ideas with all his friends both individually and, if he could manage, all together in the same place at the same time. Then and only then, would he report back in order to work out the best way forward. It was exciting to have this imaginary project gather pace, he wondered what facts and impressions would come to mind during the non-stop flight but the main thing was he was in control.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Moving, the smooth flow of life, thoughts and feelings married together, woven into the material of our collective awareness. Mindful to any image, any sense that sparks a memory, a cascade of mental activity that bubbles over to form words and expressions of the most immediate present. A gift that brings recognition and then laughter to the surface of deep waters that enclosed all that we once were.

Pando and Vikki were on a roll. Their hit and run interview/photography mission an ongoing success they had the wisdom to relax and enjoy the surroundings that scrolled past through the cars' windows. Mostly the countryside was beautiful, but it took time for them to synchronise with its nature. One of the most recently settled countries in the world, it had yet to be spoiled by the overworking hand of Man.

How does one describe that which apparently has yet to be? Certainly there were already disused buildings, derelict wooden houses that had been left to an albeit recent history. The sheep were everywhere, around every corner, each

one staking its claim to a piece of land. There was no denying that this land had a beauty that defied description. Perhaps only the Maoris to whom it really belonged began to give a feel of what this place means, what effect it has on those who live here and the stories and journeys that are born here.

The task of documenting the random people who live here, at least those who were kind enough to give them a ride and then agree to be recorded, began to take on a serious and more compelling edge than they had suspected. The idea had started on a wave of laughter, how funny it would be turn the tables on those strange people who give other people a lift for a while. However, these were as valid a cross section of society as one might hope for, and their stories and experiences, narrated at thirty to sixty miles an hour, were more interesting than any one might find over drinks in a bar.

They found people to be most congenial and with only a little prompting quite fluent and descriptive. It didn't feel dangerous either, there were no near misses with other vehicles, just a steady discourse of personal histories and anecdotes told with varying amounts of feeling. In fact after only two or three attempts they realised how far ranging these people were. Given the chance,



drivers would enter into the spirit of, what were effectively free therapy sessions. As a result, when the journey in question had come to its conclusion, all parties were satisfied with egos massaged, and the human desire to bring about catharsis and closure satiated.

This effect was quite marked. Vikki and Pando quickly amassed hidden treasures and were more than aware that their little project had expanded beyond the initial idea. Along with the photographs they were beginning to imagine the scope of the book that they hoped to publish. Pando took these photographs with all the experience he had to hand. Not only did they need artistic merit, they had to be technically perfect and endeavour to show beneath the surface of their subjects. It was his biggest challenge to date and he felt equal to the job.

As for their relationship, this was growing with the project. They finally had something meaningful and of real value to share and talk about when they were alone together. They felt so fortunate and communicated this to each other often. Even when the project was out of their minds it felt as though they were so much closer to each other than they had been before. The bonus of

teamwork was the main factor determining such an evolution. The opportunities for lovemaking were scarce, as they were restricted to single bed hostels and their cramped tent, but when they were able to, their sexual intimacy was heightened and strong.

Of course they met other people, other couples even, but they couldn't help feeling somehow superior to others who were merely travellers. They didn't talk about this but it was obviously shared. They had so much more to talk about with others given the scope of their vision and their mission. Their happiness had depth. That's not to say they didn't meet some very interesting people, it was just that they were putting most of their combined energies into their work. For that is what it had become, they were a couple engaged in a job of work which had significance for the complexion of the country through which they were moving and a definite, concrete goal to be achieved.

Pando could review and even edit some of his photographs as they went along but for Vikki she realised that other than asking good leading questions, most of her work would come when the journey was over. Maybe it would be the start of another new chapter of their relationship. First she would have to transcribe everything that they had

recorded on the Dictaphone, which she knew would take a long time. Then she would have to choose which parts to include in the book. The way she looked at it, the whole thing would make most sense if there was a picture on one page, with the writing taking up the whole of the facing page. This might mean creating a significantly larger book than they had envisioned.

They would have to pick the best publisher they could find. The photographs were of high quality and needed good paper to show them off at their best. Now it was clear that the book had to be a hardback of quite some size that would sit comfortably on any an accomplished person's coffee table. How many subjects would be included? They were taking business cards, email addresses and phone numbers from each subject, anything that would enable them to be contacted when the book was complete. As well as being courteous they imagined that these people would be among their first customers.

This was their pro-active attitude, in their imaginations the finished book was taking shape but their conversations ran out of steam when it came to pricing. This was something they would have to discuss with a publisher, for they had nothing with

which to compare what they were doing. One fear was that a similar project may have already been completed by somebody else - they simply had to have faith in the originality of their own idea. In one book shop in one town they looked at many books for comparison but thankfully found nothing to put them off continuing.

After week one, they were comfortably in their stride and had developed a successful technique. It was at this time that they realised how formidable a couple they had become, no job was too small, no subject immune to their charms. They were having a lot of fun but of course they argued occasionally. Usually it was about something slight and ultimately of no importance but whatever it was they dealt with it and moved on. The fact was they had no choice, they had set out on this journey and the one thing they certainly agreed upon was that they were going to finish it.

There were times when they said nothing to each other for hours, when they were waiting for the next ride or at a hostel on bunks reading books. Yes they were good friends but any onlooker might think that they were a married couple, so at ease were they with each other's behaviour and habits.

They were a good looking duo, naturally so, but one time Pando made some remark about Vikki being vain with her hair. He felt she was obsessed with it. It was true Vikki liked to stay clean as often as she could and this especially applied to her hair, but she took offence and remarked that Pando might take a leaf out of her book and look after his own increasingly wild appearance more than being concerned with hers. This niggling conversation recurred often and there were many other such annoyances on both sides, but it seemed to be in the way of a game, something fun disguised as a negative to balance out all the positives they were experiencing on a daily basis.

One morning they had packed up the tent and were walking along the road. Vikki had her thumb out and after twenty minutes or so of several cars passing them by, a pick-up truck pulled over. The driver was riding with a fairly docile and friendly Alsatian dog who quite happily hopped in the back to make room for the two travellers.

After a while, having explained their work to the man, Vikki turned on the recording machine and began to ask some tentative questions: Where are you from? How old are you? Where do you live? Where are you going to? Are you married?

Do you have children? These were standard fair for Vikki but soon they realised they had met their match.

It quickly transpired that John Townsend, aged 38 from Auckland had just been released from a psychiatric hospital. He had been there for three months and had been diagnosed with schizophrenia before being discharged two days ago with a prescription of a combination of psycho-active drugs and a health regime. He'd picked his dog up from a kennel and was on his way to see his wife to talk about starting a tourist caravan site.

Vikki and Pando were slightly taken aback and their questioning soon ceased as John seemed capable of talking openly and freely without prompting about extremely personal issues. They hadn't counted on this kind of experience but after some eye contact between them and some not-so-subtle hints from Pando they got out of the truck at the next town some fifteen minutes down the road.

In such a daze were they that Pando almost forgot to take the obligatory photograph. When he did he managed to get a shot, more by accident than design, a smiling and seemingly happy John and his dog featured in a very pleasing composition with both leaning out of the truck window. From the

photo there was nothing to suggest John's recent psychiatric history but Vikki's recording would quite clearly tell the story. So dumbstruck was she that she forgot to turn the recorder off and later they laughed listening back to the conversation she and Pando had shared after John had driven away.

Their selected sample of the population based solely on those willing to pick up hitchhikers and willing to be recorded was extremely varied in nature and at first they could pick out no common ground. There seemed to be no link between these people. Then, little by little a theme evolved – most of these people were lonely. Whether it was a business man going to work, a nurse on her way back from a shift, a Maori in a camper-van going to visit his cousin or a wealthy property developer on his way to pick up a new yacht – they all communicated the simple desire for company.

This position of isolation, almost all were driving alone, acted as a strong urge to stop and pick up perfect strangers. Some confessed to practicing this behaviour very often, they just wanted to talk and to hear the situation of others. For Pando, as their adventure continued, he noticed melancholy amongst the drivers but he didn't know whether this was a permanent part of the subjects'

lives or one which only manifested itself when they were on the road. A strong thread running alongside with these characters was a genuine benign quality, a real desire to help someone in need and to be of aid to their fellow travellers.

The presence of a young couple in the vehicle would surely have an effect on the drivers' mood. Vikki soon realised that, by asking the right questions, she was able to lighten this mood and as they became more experienced in their work it became easier to leave their subjects in a better position than when they had found them. The Vikki and Pando team made quite an impression on those who had been kind enough to help them along their way.

Of course there were those who failed to take part. There was still a mutual respect for these people who were quiet for the most part and who seemed to simply be offering a service.

Pando kept a note of the route they took, he had bought a large and detailed map of the country on which he drew a meandering red line marked with each lift they received and each place they had stopped for the night.

They carried as much food as they needed, replenishing their stock whenever they had a chance



and preferred camping, sometimes just off the road. To ride, do their work, camp and cook was a simple way in life which, with their companionship, provided all they needed for a satisfying time. Their one luxury was a short-wave radio on which they listened to the news happening all over the world. As they cooked and ate under the stars so much of the troubles around the globe seemed important but far removed, so as not to create a negative impact on their lives. More favourable was music, music that created the soundtrack to what was often a breathtaking landscape. They slept well and rose early. The rhythm that they fell into naturally felt as though it had been left behind for them by previous travellers and they were glad to be in its safe embrace.

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

Pando's journey involved; car, bike, train, motorbike, boat, plane, horse, helicopter and hiking on foot. His plan was to travel the width of Canada, from West coast to East coast using all these means of transport. Once the ball was in motion he ceased to question the reasons for his travel and simply became obsessed with the logistics and minutiae. It was all arranged and budgeted down to the last dollar, day, hour and minute. He had incorporated and allowed for delays and extra time that may be taken to view unexpected sights. Even the unknown was given consideration and factored in so that nothing could go wrong.

The idea that one of the primary reasons for travelling was so that the experience might change you as a person, was lost on Pando. He simply wanted to plan the ultimate journey and go through the motions so that he would have something to talk about with any interested party for the rest of his life. The fact that for the most part he would be travelling alone didn't seem to worry him. In fact he wanted the solitude and sharing it with someone else wasn't a concern. It didn't occur to him that

there would be no other witness to the events that would unfold to even corroborate his future stories.

He was thoroughly immersed in himself – exactly what car he would drive, the make and model of motorbike and most importantly what clothes he would wear. In this regard he was a complete victim to brand. He spent a fortune on high end clothing, everything had to be the best and for him the best was the most expensive. If he found brands that were the most expensive but that he hadn't heard of before then he would do extensive research to see if these manufacturers sponsored any high profile sportsman or actors. By the time he was packed and ready he was a walking, talking advertisement for approximately forty labels. From his point of view he was simply prepared for whatever might come his way, from anyone else's he looked like a joke.

It has to be remembered he had never done anything like this before - he was a novice, a virgin and a beginner. He had simply gone about planning in the most efficient and thoughtful way possible for an architect, whose life experience was limited to this one profession. He was used to calculating safety factors for the structures of buildings and he didn't want for his own safety, and more

importantly his comfort, to be compromised in any respect. He went about this period of getting ready the only way he knew how. He read books and he talked to the people in shops from whom he purchased his kit. Anything else he looked up online. Nothing was left to chance.

The morning of the first day of his transcontinental trip arrived. He was packed and he was self sufficient and he was keen to get underway. Ordering the taxi felt good, waiting for ten minutes for it to arrive was an annoyance. When it eventually pulled up he loaded the trunk with his two bags and climbed in. First destination on this mammoth trip was the train station. There was traffic all the way, road works in the centre of the city and then to compound the delays a car which had simply stopped in the middle of the road. The driver had even popped the hood and was looking perplexed at the engine as he scratched his head.

Pando had pre-bought the train ticket and left an hour for the short taxi-ride. However, the minutes to his departure were ticking down so he thought he'd better tell the taxi-driver to hurry up. This taxi-driver was Bulgarian and didn't speak a word of English, more frustration for Pando. As they got closer, still crawling along nose-to-tail, he

calculated how long it might take to walk the rest of the way. Sure enough he couldn't bear to see pedestrians confidently striding ahead on the pavement under their own power so he paid the cabbie, not waiting for his change, jumped out and gathered his luggage.

With a look at his watch he decided it would be prudent to break into a jog. His bags were heavy, laden down as they were with every conceivable travel aid, the logos attached to everything must have weighed a few pounds all on their own. He was cutting it close but saved a smug smile for when he saw the countless commuters lining up to buy their tickets.

The video screens giving journey information were down but once he again he felt happy with himself for having inquired from which platform the train would be leaving. Platform two was at the other end of the station so he hurried along in a kind of half-run and when he arrived thought he'd better check with the guard that he had the right train. He quickly learned to his dismay that the platform had changed to seventeen. He looked at his watch, minutes to go.

Bumping into people without apologising and straining under the weight of his bags he got to

seventeen quite promptly although he felt every second. He checked with another guard, to make sure, and boarded the train at the nearest door. Shutting it behind him, his pulse raised, and having broken into a sweat he breathed a sigh of relief. Looking at his watch, which he had set accurately before leaving, he saw that he was there exactly thirty seconds prior to the departure time, not quite the start to his journey that he had planned.

The train was not full and he found a seat quickly. In fact he used up two seats, putting the one large bag overhead and his smaller bag on the seat opposite. He sat back and smiled, this was surely the first test of his journey and he had been equal to it. Planning an hour for the taxi ride had been wise and he made a mental note to always leave even more time in future.

A quick look around in his compartment revealed a small blonde woman wearing a large pair of headphones, a dude playing with his mobile phone, an old man dressed immaculately in a tweed suit and a teenage boy reading a book. He wondered how far along the train ride they would each be going and whether he would end up talking to any of them. As for Pando, he was going all the way up the coast some five hours ahead, surely he

would engage in conversation with someone during that time. Still, for the time being everyone at this stage looked as though they were keeping themselves to themselves.

Pando wondered why the train had not yet pulled away, he figured it must be running a couple of minutes late. What was he to do now? Looking out the window he saw a Chinese couple running along the platform who then jumped on the train – lucky for them that it was not quite on time. Really what was he supposed to do next? He looked at the teenager and the blonde woman - he hadn't brought a book or any music. Instead he decided to break out the notebook that he had chosen to be his diary.

He paused at the energy of the first empty page. Picking out a special pen, for which he had plenty of ink refills, he hovered over the bland expanse. It was a thick book and would be a record of everything he did lest he forget any detail of the adventure. He had decided that no matter where he found himself he would at least record the facts of the day at its end, everyday. For now he wasn't sure how to begin. Does one attempt description, impressions, thoughts and feelings or should he stick to the basics?

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Nearly missed the damn train, heavy traffic in the city and platform had been changed. Eventually made it though and now relaxing.

Not a very auspicious beginning he admitted to himself but you have to start somewhere. The train had still not left the station and as he put the diary away there was an announcement over the train's internal speakers:

“This train, terminating at Prince Rupert, will be delayed by approximately thirty minutes. We are experiencing problems with staff shortages and will keep you informed as and when the situation has improved. We apologise for the delay.”

There was a general murmur of discontent on the part of all the passengers. Pando was looking at his watch, what was he supposed to do now?

He quickly found a magazine, shoved down the side of the seat which turned out to be a copy of *Vogue*. He'd never held a copy of it in his hands before but, as he would learn many times over during the next month, travelling is all about being open to new experiences. Initial thoughts were that there would be absolutely nothing in it to interest him and scanning the contents seemed to prove him right. However as he flicked through it he stopped



and read a few articles. Pando realised that he was no fashion aficionado, but he found himself making instant and snap choices about what he liked and what he didn't.

Maria used to subscribe to Vogue. It was possible that she still did, indeed that she had this very copy on her coffee table. Maybe she was reading it right now. What did he care? She was thoroughly in the past and her position on fashion had not been and would never be his concern. This was a woman's magazine right? Could the guy with the mobile phone see the cover as he was reading it? What would he think? This was the only reading matter he had, why hadn't he given this any thought?

He liked the advertising; perfumes, shoes, watches and luggage – all photographed very artistically they looked great on the glossy pages. He began to see the merits of this publication and understood there was a reason why it was known globally in such high regard. The articles were another matter in that they simply had nothing to say to him. The more he thought about it, the fashion world appeared to be a inward looking microcosm. The magazine represented a hermetically sealed world that existed

independently from all other worlds. It had its own morals, view points and language that made it most inaccessible to the likes of Pando.

He persevered largely for lack of an alternative and began to draw his own tentative conclusions. To start with, it had appeared to be the case that clothing, which he thought was central, was just the tip of the iceberg. The fashion world was actually an industry that didn't exist just on its own. He could see that it was connected to and supported by a vast sprawling network of related businesses that all held each other in place. The catwalk was just the thin veneer, the shiny surface, of all these companies put together. It wasn't just 'What clothes should I wear?' What was more important was 'What kind of a person should I be?' It was this question that got Pando hooked, in large part because he realised that it applied most immediately to him.

He understood form and function in the design of a building and he always thought that clothes were the same. You wore the clothes that were appropriate to your job. What if there was no uniform to accompany your job? And what if you didn't have a job at all? He had always worn a suit, and it was true that he had several suits and that

some he preferred to others. He knew what it meant to feel cool because of the clothes you wore, but here was a whole industry that seemed to revolve around *being* ‘cool’, or at least *looking* cool.

Pando had always been fortunate in that he had good taste but could he honestly say that he had his own *style* or was it merely borrowed from others? Looking quickly at what he was currently wearing he had given a lot of thought to what he *imagined* was appropriate for a trans-continental traveller, after-all there couldn’t be many different permutations and combinations, could there? Glancing at those nearby him on this train he thought, aren’t we really all travellers?

The train had pulled away whilst Pando wondered over this new-found knowledge. He had hardly given it a second thought as they had accelerated up to speed so engrossed was he in the magazine. He concluded from his readings that he was as much a fashion victim as any teenager and the finality of this was brought home upon the realisation of the influence that brands and their labels had had on his selection for the journey.

Funnily enough these musings were not something that would go in the diary, maybe they were ephemeral and he would not have them again.

Or just maybe such feelings were the beginning of some kind of tentative growth within Pando that would colour his outlook over much of what he was to see in the next month.

He looked up from the magazine and stared out of the window. The scenery rolling by emptied his mind of all thoughts and he truly began to experience the sensations of many travellers. A position of mind and an expression of the face that is blank, fresh and ready but somehow content and pensive. How many hours would he spend in this suspended state? Often, a long-haul translocation from one point to another is accompanied by a deep and unexpressed longing that is steady and unchanging. Sometimes such way of being alters its host and sometimes it leaves him or her unchanged.

Pando was no longer running away from home, he *was* home.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

There weren't many clothes in Pando's wardrobe and he hadn't thought to buy any new outfits especially for the tour. Soon he ran out of time anyway and the inclination to get something special in which to perform came and went. He packed a small bag, with just the essentials; toiletry bag, spare shoes and a digital camera.

They all met in the Venus Records car park on a clear Tuesday morning. After a quick group shot outside the coach they clambered aboard and were immediately in another world. To begin with they knew of several other bands that had travelled aboard this very bus and so were aware of its history. To be living here for the next couple of weeks meant that they were walking in the footsteps of some fairly acclaimed predecessors and this lent a great feeling to the moment.

After they had absorbed the imagined past of previous occupants they began to take in their surroundings. The coach was a double-decker with the ground floor being sleeping compartments at the front and storage space at the back. There was also a toilet and shower facility near the rear. It was all

very spacious and as they stowed their belongings the feeling of going on vacation, albeit a working one, was overwhelming.

They had been assigned a manager for this mini-tour who was taking care of all the arrangements for the gigs. He was a mild-mannered man called Jim and he was polite to everyone, it was obvious from the start that he would be a calming influence and would make sure everything ran smoothly and according to plan. He wasn't there to make friends and would spend most of his time apart from the *Sentinel* group and indeed a great deal of the tour on the phone.

Upstairs was the living, cooking and eating areas. This coach was huge and there seemed to be plenty of room for everyone to spread out and relax. The only other member of the party was Bernie, the chef. He was a jolly bloke who was in charge of filling the cupboards and large refrigerator with food, and cooking breakfast, lunch and dinner for the duration. The overall feeling from Pando's point of view was one of being treated like a VIP. You could see from the faces of the band that being immersed in this environment was a dream that had come true. Even as kids they had all imagined this

type of experience which made the reality of it that much more special.

It took a good half an hour for everyone to explore this space-ship like vehicle but eventually Jim had them all upstairs, seated and as relaxed as they could be. He ran through a few health and safety checks which were largely ignored by the still excited posse. He reminded them of their contractual obligations and of the fact that they were employees of Venus Records. There was plenty of cheering, and jovial banter to accompany all of this which Jim handled like the pro that he was. When all the formalities and rules of the road were over they received a little pep talk and some warnings about excessive behaviour but eventually they were ready.

The driver, who also had a bunk, asked his passengers over the speakers if there were any music requests. Frankie chose some suitable obscure blues record but sure enough after a short delay the sound system sprang into life and they were underway.

So it turned out that Bernie was quite some Cordon Bleu chef, they would eat like kings for the next two weeks. Dishes included Coq au Vin, Beef Bourguignon, Lasagne and some exotic Venison

burgers the likes of which Pando had not previously imagined. Bernie was forever singing the praises of the coach's cooking facilities which were of Swedish design and cost a small fortune. As for alcohol consumption Pando was happy to see that the well stocked bar was not abused with the exception of Frankie who took it upon himself to be the drunken poet that they all knew he was at heart. It wouldn't have been the same otherwise. His lifestyle was such that he could handle this role quite effectively and really there was nothing to worry about at this stage.

Their first gig was the hardest, a small town venue in New Jersey that Jim apologised for in advance where the audience were as knowledgeable about music as Jim was about cooking (he had once burned toast and had ceased his exploration into the culinary arts at this point). The nature of the night, in what was nothing more than a glorified village hall with a bar, was that they would play a song from the new album, there would be a small amount of applause and then they would play another.

No amount of extra energy supplied by the underwhelmed *Sentinel* would suffice to change this pattern so they soon fell into a rhythm of apathy until the night played itself out. What a



disappointment. Morale was low and it was quite a come down considering their heady rise in the recording studio of late. They sold two t-shirts and seven albums from the optimistically stocked merchandise stall.

Pando played his heart out and all the guys had given it their best but it all counted for nothing. Frankie concluded that they just weren't ready for the *Sentinel* sound and cited several other acts who were met with equally lacklustre audiences who then went on to achieve great fame and fortune. Pando wasn't sure whether Frankie was making up most of this stuff but it did go some ways to reassuring the band that they themselves were not a failure.

Jim was very philosophical in that he made no judgements. He simply stated that he had heard this type of thing before and after all it was New Jersey. He promised the next venue would be more to their liking and there was no reason to start any feelings of doom and gloom. Buoyed up by Jim's optimistic attitude they all went to bed chalking this one up to experience.

Max fell asleep almost immediately and Pando, on the bunk below, realised he had not slept in the same room as any of these guys before. It

was obvious to him that minor differences in opinion, pet hates, and contrasting styles of living might be amplified in these close quarters. Still he lay there, unable to sleep due to the adenoidal raucous, and played back in his mind the night they had been approached by Venus.

That night the place had been rocking and as far as he could tell they were solely responsible for it all. They had got the gig, chosen because a friend ran the place, and they were in charge of all the advertising. Apart from a small loyal following which surely helped, they had been able to animate a not inconsiderable crowd into wild and ecstatic gyrations all due to their skills as musicians. That night however there had been a force with them which was noticeable by its absence tonight.

Were they a flash in the pan? Was their magic conditional on the presence of forces beyond their control? Did they deserve to be successful? He kept coming back to what he saw as fact – they were good. However, his doubt surrounded the idea that being good might not be enough. Furthermore he wondered whether being good was in fact a hindrance and that success might entail compromise and an extra ingredient that would spoil the taste of their style. Was the album they recorded already a

journey in the wrong direction? What lengths were they prepared to go to achieve maximum recognition? He felt that humility and dedication to their craft combined with energy and some amount of luck were the elements they needed. He fell asleep with a mixture of thoughts and feelings.

As he slept he drifted through the plains of other worlds. He left this planet with all its magnificence and troubles and found some comfort in the visions of far-away galaxies. Surely there must be others who resembled us, who had the same capacity for suffering and joy? There was no easy travel to such places, only the abstract play of dream-sleep can take us there. Lizzie and Janey appeared for an instance with a surprising urge to carry him further and as he did so he was awe-struck by the friendly reception he received. Space-travel and aliens were for kids he thought, but this travel was by the thoughts of a mature man, alone and at rest, the thoughts of a drummer in a band on tour in New Jersey of all places. What did it matter what he thought anyway?

He went on to be enveloped in a bath of sound and as he relaxed more and more he allowed himself to be free of the tethers of this world. He was invited to accept that there are others and that

one does not have to look to a far-flung galaxy to find them. They are here, they walk and talk as we do and they are here to help. There is no fear in this domain there are no monsters of the id or beasts of the psyche. He relaxed more and was soon deep in sleep, happy and at one with his situation. When he woke he would remember none of this but all the same it would remain a part of him.

The smell of bacon frying and the sound of Max sneezing were the sensations to which he became conscious. As far as he was concerned yesterday's debacle was forgotten and this was the start of a new day. As he got out of his bunk he looked around, the guys were in various stages of wakefulness and as he sat on the edge of his bed he rubbed his eyes and scratched his head of long hair. Despite the slumber that was still upon him he was sure that today would bring with it a plethora of new experiences and he was more than open to it all.

It was a slow start and no-one talked about last night. They were parked in a nice spot with a good view over some fields. Pando was quiet too and looking at the guys he was happy to be in their company. They were an odd bunch and he fitted right in. From all kinds of backgrounds it was their

love of music that held them together and there were some surprisingly strong bonds between them.

Bruce on bass and Jules on lead were linked by their love of guitars on an almost primal level. However, their friendship had grown beyond this obvious link to the point where they were a double act, constantly finishing each other's sentences and setting up gags for the other to knock down. You could say from the way they interacted they had become like brothers, a mysterious force held them together and yet they could push each other away as and when needed. It was like they were joined by invisible elastic and it was this relationship that was largely responsible for the group dynamic.

Max was the least sociable of them all. He lived his life the way he played his sax, forever in some idyllic solo that for him could never last long enough. He was still a part of everyone's lives but his influence was through some kind of strange extra-sensory perception that trickled through the rest of them. Because of this it may have appeared to an onlooker that he was the coolest of the bunch but Pando's felt that without each other together they were less as individuals. Max read books and made pencil sketches in his free time, leading the others to believe that there was much hidden depth

to him. As for Max himself he regarded his outlook on life as somewhat of a simpleton, he didn't need much to keep himself happy and he didn't say much because he didn't know much. There's nothing more fascinating than a simple person with complex vibes.

Frankie on the other hand was mostly talk. He loved to air his knowledge and had opinions on everything which seemed to change from day to day or even moment to moment. As a result he gave the impression of a complex and conflicted man, the troubled artist. Pando knew differently – Frankie's persona covered a somewhat delicate and insecure interior and his front was carefully constructed to defend it from anyone who came too close. Even so Pando liked him very much and went to great lengths to ensure that he was as happy as he could be for most of the time.

Frankie liked to think that he was the leader but the fact of the matter was that it was the rest of the band that supported him. Perhaps that was why he had become their spokesperson. He knew everyone individually better than anyone else because everyone had to have a special relationship to him just to keep him up.

Pando really had no idea what people thought of him, it wasn't that he didn't care, far from it, it was just that he couldn't work out the psychology of the network they created. He knew his limits and after much thought and soul searching he concluded that he just wasn't smart enough to form another's image of himself. At some point he just gave up trying which seemed to have the effect of leading to better relations and harmony between him and all the rest. So he played his drums, which he was very good at, took praise whenever it was offered and laughed a lot. The truth of his position in the group was that they all looked up to him, even Frankie although he would never say as much. Without it being spoken they all subconsciously agreed that Pando was the stuff of magic that glued their hearts together forming one giant beat.

Bernie's food was top notch. It was a handsome cooked breakfast that really hit the spot. As soon as they were done there was a kind of 'zooming out' phenomena whereby each member of *Sentinel* sat back, took in the views from the coach windows and came to rest on the incredible reality that they found themselves in. There was a lot of contentment buzzing around the living area and then there was a moment when all became silent as

they sucked up the satisfaction. They realised that they were very much on the same page but the feeling was soon over as Pando let out a huge belch, they all creased up and started throwing cushions at him. Before long they were on their way to the next venue.



## Chapter Thirty

Two burly brothers showed up in a van that was obviously far larger than required, but better too big than too small Beth and Pando agreed. It took most of the morning, some five hours to load all their belongings not so long due to everything having been carefully boxed and labelled beforehand. There were plenty of coffee breaks for everyone as Beth had decided the kettle was the most essential item to help make the move run smoothly. This, along with a constant supply of donuts, kept energy levels high and the whole task turned out to be quite enjoyable.

Altering their plan to go ahead, they decided instead to travel in tandem just in case there were any problems along the way. They had been renting and had agreed to leave the keys with their neighbours who shared the same landlord. After knocking on the door the neighbour opened it and in only a couple of minutes worth of goodbyes they left one part of their lives behind. Pando was used to saying goodbye, he had lived in several places before he met Beth, and gave only a few moments nostalgia to the place. They'd had some good times

here, even a few parties but with a new found feeling of hope he believed the next destination would be more permanent, stable and productive.

Having children would become more likely where they were going. Pando and Beth had agreed they would get started on a family as soon as they could after they had settled in the new home. The idea of having babies, little bundles of energy, little people who would grow into their own unique characters drove them both onwards. They had hardly spoken of this previously but, since they knew that Pando had the job and they were definitely leaving, it had been a hot topic of conversation. To bring new life into the world became an even greater purpose than Pando's already much obsessed-over altered direction in work. For some reason Beth wanted to have twins, this despite Pando reasoning with her that it was very unlikely and not something that one could control, at least not at this point in the history of science. Still she insisted it was possible and there was something about the symmetry of it that fascinated her.

In the car, with the removal van in the rear view mirror, they trundled along at a steady pace. Their journey was a simple one with them being on

one major road most of the way. Pando drove and didn't say much but he enjoyed listening to his wife's voice as she looked at a print-out of the floor-plan for their new and considerably larger apartment. Beth was good at interior design and had decided they would spend the first week redecorating before unpacking most of everything they owned. Pando was not due to start at ITER for a couple of weeks and so they would have plenty of time to get things just as they wanted.

The traffic was mercifully light and the two brothers had no trouble following behind. They slipped into their usual routine of listening to the radio and talking about football. This was an easy move for them as they had played their part in several far greater long distance moves before. Pando had already told them he would be paying in cash which made them happier, indeed he had given them half upfront just to sweeten the deal and keep them keen. Their family had been in the removal business for three generations, so this was bread and butter work for them, in fact they knew nothing else and were masters of their craft. In the course of the move nothing was ripped, torn, bent or broken. They prided themselves in their safe hands and immaculate logistics.

There was a period of time, fifteen minutes at least, when Pando and Beth were quiet with each other. They were very comfortable in each other's silence and it gave them both the time to think to themselves whilst in the company of each other. On Beth's part she was planning in her imagination the colour schemes and where they would put the furniture. For Pando his mind was drifting elsewhere.

He thought about the watch in the shop he had visited. Being so wrapped up as he was with cutting edge science and technology he always thought of himself as a man of the future. But on this journey he couldn't help but think of the two of them as time-travellers in some long and distant past. People move, it's in our nature and occasionally people move everything they have from one place to another and it is, he decided, as natural as walking. He thought way back in time and tried to connect to all those millions of souls who have undertaken such journeys since time began. It was mind-boggling.

As he came out of this reverie, realising that he had been driving on auto-pilot for a good while, he made a mental note to buy that watch. He would find a good jeweller, somewhere with an extensive

luxury range, and buy a time-piece that he could look at for the rest of his life as a keep-sake to remember this movement, this change and this new way. Searching for the building blocks of matter at CERN he felt was simply a gateway to the future which consisted of finding energy for everyone. If he could make one achievement in his life it would be this; to play his part, however small, in enabling others to share this feeling.

Movement felt like an end in itself for Pando as he drove with the hum of the engine and the sound of the tyres on the road. He was effectively in some Zen-like trance with just the image of a wristwatch at the front of his mind. Rather than just a fleeting thought this state lasted, it lasted long enough for him to become detached from reality for a while.

Far from being dangerous his senses were heightened and he drove perfectly but during these minutes his experience of time was running at a different rate. His thought processes were very slow but perfectly precise and at the opposite end of the spectrum from that of panic. A crystal clear picture grew within, accompanied by the automatic movement of the watch that would soon find a home on his wrist.

This mental event came to be something that he could not explain but that he would remember in the future as being a kind of 'edit' or creative transition in the journey from his old life into the new. Everything before it was mixed with a haze of slight confusion and everything that followed was accompanied by a wise awareness and a feeling of compact strength of vision.

Beth broke the silence by indicating the next turn off which was signposted and coming up shortly. Pando jumped out of his bizarre dream aberration and changed lanes to get ready for the exit. Keeping an eye in the rear view mirror he hoped that the brothers were following. Sure enough they were on cue and both vehicles left the highway. It was only ten minutes before they arrived at the location, the rental company's directions being perfect and, some two hours after leaving, they were all standing outside the building.

Beth did the honours with the key, turning it in the lock with great expectation. They were not disappointed. The apartment was new, large, completely empty, light and being away from any main roads quiet too. It had the smell of paint, and Beth's first impression was they would not have to redecorate. They looked around the rooms which

were all very spacious and big smiles grew on their faces. Pando saw that the removal guys were already unloading and Beth quickly put the kettle on. Pando's little idea was to put a portable CD player in the centre of the living room so that they could have music as they worked, which they did, happily.

Everything was in, the brothers had been paid and left and Pando and Beth sat in a couple of chairs with plastic cups full of Champagne that Pando had secretly brought along for the moment. They sipped on their beverages slightly dizzy at the speed with which everything had happened. Waking up earlier that morning already seemed a lifetime away which effectively it was.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Passport in hand, Pando gazed dreamily around the airport. Having checked his single large suitcase in and made it through the hand-luggage x-ray and metal detector control he was wandering aimlessly through the people and around the shops. Everything was on offer but he needed for nothing, the only purchase he made was a copy of National Geographic which featured an extensive article on the endangered Mountain Gorillas of Central Africa. He listened to his MP3 player for a while and waited for his flight information to come up.

As he looked around everyone was in various states of transit. Funny he thought, the effect airplane travel has on people. Some sat eating, others drank in a bar. Most were shopping and carrying differing amounts of labelled goods in bags. However Pando noticed that the vast majority seemed to be lost and meandering in random patterns. It was as though the points of the compass meant nothing here with a free yet chaotic result ensuing.

There was an airport gaze on the faces of all – focussed in the mid-distance at nothing in



particular, with the occasional flurry of those who had been told via the large displays that they needed to take the next step to their departure gate. All was calm as the random chaos revealed an order - everyone was simply going from A to B all via a route directed by the free time they had available. In this sense the departure lounge was no different from any other public place. The differences here though were that the hazy consciousness of all hid an air of excitement about the mysteries of travel.

Pando could tell the seasoned traveller from the novice, it wasn't just their dress but an attitude and a feeling of certainty that leant itself to those that had done this many times before. Pando himself was an observer and it occurred to him now that maybe he was in a minority in this respect. As he looked around everyone else seemed to be doing something whilst he simply watched. There was nothing wrong with this but it was strange how he could find only a few other 'observers' in his immediate area. Soon his gate came up and picking up his hand luggage he moved another step closer to his flight.

Always thinking ahead whilst he stood on the moving, people carrying conveyor belts he imagined the mirror journey that he would take

from his flight when he arrived in London. He kept thinking of the scene at the beginning of the movie 'The Graduate'. What would be his welcome upon returning? Showing his boarding pass to a smiling member of the Airways staff he started to settle into a new scene. Everyone here was to be flying on the same plane, to the same destination but as soon as they had landed, cleared passport control and collected their luggage all paths would immediately diverge. Where were their ultimate end points?

Shuffling in the queue to board the plane Pando was shoulder to shoulder with this diverse yet connected group. Taking his seat in business class put him in yet another smaller sub-group. He had flown many times in his life and all of this felt quite normal but the ability to step into an aeroplane and fly half-way around the world always gave him a sense of privilege and excitement. Externally blasé, controlled and cool, all at once, but inside the joy of expectant flight.

More waiting whilst everyone else boarded and a young American took his place next to Pando. They exchanged a few pleasantries but seemingly and maybe knowingly agreed to maintain their own privacy throughout the flight. The doors were shut,

there was some more waiting then they taxied to the runway.

Pando always rated take-off as the best part of this kind of transportation and here, at last, it came. The sound, the roar of four huge jet turbines and then the acceleration that was both fierce and seemed to continue for an age, this was what it was all about. With a window seat Pando could see the immense wings flexing with the vibrations of the wheels on the tarmac. Also the sudden use of the control surfaces which provided the lift and then release... No longer tied to the ground by gravity the immense machine lifted its weight and that of all three hundred or so passengers into the air which held it aloft for the next eleven hours of flight.

At 33,000ft the 747 ceased climbing and levelled off. In business class they were quick to offer drinks and Pando had taken the same as always, a Bloody Mary. He never drank it when on the ground but for some reason it was his in-flight drink of choice, something habitual.

Food followed fairly soon after, there was a choice of three meals and Pando opted for some Chicken which wasn't bad at all. This, he decided was an aspect of flying which had definitely improved over the years. That is to say the food

itself was better but of course the eating position was, as always, problematic. Still it was easy to get lost in the process of eating for twenty minutes or so accompanied by further drinks. Then there came the time when all eating materials and associated rubbish had been cleared away and the prospect of how to best fill one's time during flight presented itself.

There was the in-flight entertainment, as with the food this too had improved. The headphones were better and the selection of retro-TV and movies was fairly impressive. Pando spent the next hour staring at the small screen in the back of the seat in front of him. He paused play for an intake of another drink then resumed watching. He remembered his youth when a friend, who flew often because his dad was a pilot, came to school after the summer holidays announcing that he had seen certain films on a plane before their release date in England. This was the kind of thing that makes any schoolboy jealous, but now it seemed rather meaningless.

Next the National Geographic came out again. Pando was an avid reader and would remember most of what he speed read. He marvelled at the kind of life that writers and

photographers must lead. Surely they were amongst the best in the world at what they did. How good it would feel to have a job like that, roaming the globe in search of stories, lives and situations that had yet to be documented. The fact was that in this magazine lay articles that were of great importance to mankind, they may be highly specialised but the issues with which they dealt all had an impact more wide ranging than for just a minority. He made a mental note to subscribe and wondered how many other people on the flight had a copy and were thinking the same thing.

He needed to go to the loo, always an annoyance but on an aeroplane some miles up in the sky it was nothing less than a mini-adventure. First he had to locate not just the nearest convenience but the one that had no queue. He waited to make his move until he could spot an opening at the front end of the plane. Stretching his legs felt good, the business class seats were certainly more comfortable than economy but sitting down anywhere for a certain amount of time brings with it an amount of stiffness. So he came to the cubicle which was engaged but he wouldn't have to wait long for an old man with a beard to vacate. He went in and shut the door behind him.

No one wants know about this aspect of air travel but it's a fact that on long haul you need to go, probably twice. One tends to dehydrate in the dry air in the interior of the plane so it's always easy to over drink. There is also the problem of claustrophobia, thankfully Pando did not suffer from this and managed his call of nature promptly, washed his hands and face, and left to find three more people waiting in line.

On returning to his seat he noticed the young American was asleep, half covered in a blanket with his baseball cap covering his eyes. As a rule, Pando didn't sleep on planes but envied those who were able. The sound of flight and the slighter lower than perfect temperature meant he would usually only doze in a sort of half-sleep for an hour or so before becoming restless again. Still he usually tried and maybe he would be successful on this occasion.

Requesting an extra pillow and a couple of blankets he carefully made himself as comfortable and as warm as he could. With the seat reclined and a fair amount of leg room he made the effort to switch off. He closed his eyes. It took several minutes of adjustments before he felt that sleep was

a possibility then, after managing to empty his mind, he began to slip into unconsciousness.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Vikki had left Pando. They had returned home on a massive high due to their incredible journey and mission to document the hitchhiking life. Vikki had become truly adept at her interviewing technique, drawing from each person some amazing anecdotes, each interview a personal picture of the driving hitchhiker-friendly subject. Pando's photography had developed an ability to frame the character of these people be they beautiful, ugly, weird or just plain honest folk.

They had arrived back in Queenstown ragged and with back-packs full of dirty clothes. Pando had not shaved and was sporting what he thought was a rather attractive full beard. The truth was they were exhausted and took a good week to recover, clean-up and begin to re-integrate into town life. During this time everything was fine, it was just a relief, to have accomplished so much and to have returned with so much material. High up on the agenda was to begin getting the interviews written up and choosing a picture for each one.

After recovering, Vikki set to work on the interviews. She was a fast audio typist, from a



previous job in what seemed like a previous life, and could transpose the recordings quite easily with few mistakes. There were some forty journeys to receive this treatment but it didn't take her long to have them all sorted and stored on her laptop.

Meanwhile Pando had set about uploading his photographs. It wasn't difficult to select the best one for each journey, many were un-useable but there was at least one that was good for each subject. He was ahead of Vikki time-wise and so set about trying to find a publisher. This proved to be very hard at the outset but soon the steep learning curve that he was on in this task started to level off. With some diligent work online and some snooping around the book stores in town, he had narrowed down his search to three companies. He put all his energies into targeting them and produced what he felt was a high quality proposal for each. Included were three sample interviews, accompanied by the appropriate photographs and a map of their route.

The day came when he took these three packages to the post office and sent them to their destinations. By this time, all the rest of the photographs had been selected and Vikki had all but finished editing the interviews. Suddenly they had

nothing to do except wait, and that's when the problems began, Vikki was experiencing a massive anti-climax.

They were shackled up in Pando's place and had nothing but their own company to entertain themselves. It was surprising how difficult this was. When they had been on the road they had their jobs to do and the rhythm of their journey was plenty to fuel them with topics for conversation. Now, however, when they had stopped, their interactions seemed to stagnate. There was no longer the continuous motion of travel to provide the rolling backdrop to their relationship, only the day to day reality of being face to face, stationary with each other. Everything started to fragment.

Their playful banter, once leading to laughter, now only seemed to escalate into disagreement. Whichever road they went down they only arrived at discontent and argument. It wasn't that they were no longer friends, it was just as much of a shock to the both of them that they failed to grow or even tolerate each other now the dynamic of their situation had changed. They were like two cogs which were only in harmony when meshing properly in motion. As soon as they came to a stop so did their relationship.

It was with great sadness that this revelation about their inability to co-exist came down upon them both. Soon the rowing and friction between them came to a head and Vikki decided to move out of Pando's pad, taking up a spare room that a friend was able to offer. For a while this situation and the space between them that it provided proved to be hopeful in saving their relationship. They were simply polite and civil with each other and as two individuals they found they had grown and were more able to be mature about how they felt around each other. There were a couple of attempts at reconciliation, both ending in failure and after these efforts they resigned themselves to separation.

First one and then another rejection letter arrived. Both of these companies saw no financial viability for the project and declined to take it on. It was without hope that Pando opened his mail after this but then, the third publisher they had approached sent a letter that was the greatest of affirmations. They loved the novelty, the depth and the idea as a whole. Pando and Vikki were united once again in a great celebration but still this was not long lasting or strong enough to save their relationship. However, they agreed to see the mission through to completion and worked together,

either in silence or listening to music. This time the situation was akin to a brother and sister reluctantly put together to complete a task.

The financial rewards propelled this activity. There was a small advance which they shared and the promise of royalties should their book go into profit. Most of the following work was to be done by the publisher. They were a smaller company who usually specialised in travel guides but Pando and Vikki's mission had excited the management and all concerned in the book's manufacture and distribution. They felt it had appeal not only in the country but also farther afield in a global market. Because they were smaller and had fewer books on their slate they moved quickly and soon the finished article was almost ready.

There was one photograph missing. The publisher wished to have a picture of the two of them together for the sleeve notes and introduction. Strangely enough they did not have such a picture. Their time together had been a whirlwind spent almost exclusively in each other's gaze. Unlike many couples they had not mixed in a group of friends and gathered the many relaxed and happy photographs that such socialising brings. They

needed to find someone who would take a special picture of the two of them together.

This happened unexpectedly one day when they found themselves walking, Pando camera in hand. Jake and his Husky puppy Rosco were sitting on the step outside a shop. Pando and Vikki stopped to say hello and play with the dog and as they were chatting Jake suddenly piped up;

“Hey Pando, can I have a look at your camera?”

“Sure, be careful with it though, it’s worth a lot of money.”

“I know.”

Pando gave the camera to Jake who looked at it carefully.

“It’s heavy... Can I take a picture?”

“I don’t know, can you? I mean do you know how?”

“It can’t be *that* difficult, show me.”

So Pando gave Jake a thirty second lesson, with everything set on auto. Jake seemed pretty confident;

“Ok. Get together - put your arms around each other. Yep that’s good.”

Click!

With them together as one for an instant again the picture they needed was taken. As far as first photographs go, this one was a winner. Whether by accident or design, Jake had framed it well and had a good background of the mountain skyline. As they said goodbye and walked off, the event was to inspire Jake to take up a very early interest in photography, one that would shape and colour his life.

The book was finished but this proof of their amazing time together was still not strong enough to keep them together. Pando wanted to put down roots and had in mind another project, a plan for a photographic book he had already entitled “Spirit of the Maori People.” Vikki on the other hand was gathering energies to travel once again. She felt this place had given her all it could and she needed to move on, perhaps to India.

They had separate accounts for the split royalties. The future would show them that their time together was not only an incredibly journey but they had made something quite remarkable in the book. It was a great success and had landed as they had wished, on many well-to-do coffee tables. They parted and did not see each other again. Although the book preserved their memories

forever, it was Jake's simple photograph of them together, with their thumbs in the air which left an indelible imprint in their minds.

Pando went back to taking photographs, on his own. He had by now become a very accomplished photographer and had even provided a spectacular set of prints for an article in National Geographic about the glaciers of New Zealand. As successful as he was he failed to reach the happiness he had experienced with Vikki. Often whilst walking in the wilderness alone with only his camera and backpack as company his mind was full of all the ways in which he had lost her. A loner and a philosopher inspired by the captured image he stood proud but lonely.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Somewhere in Northern Canada, a long way from any friends or loved ones, Pando stumbled into a bar. It was a bar in one of those towns so remote that you are immediately a foreigner, a loner and someone not to be trusted. Through your thoughts and actions in such a place you are judged with the eyes of those who can see straight into your soul. Essentially you are naked and vulnerable and must be cautious of your words and movements.

What was an architect doing in such a place? There was certainly no merit to this building, it could be found anywhere in North America and was so nondescript that Pando made none of his usual mental notes. The architecture that he knew and loved was to be found in cities and the nearest city of any note was some two-hundred miles from here. He sat down at the bar.

Two stools to his left was an old man with a grey beard wearing a Caterpillar baseball cap and a dirty set of all-in-one overalls, possibly a mechanic by his filthy hands or simply a man at the end of his days who had long since begun to neglect his appearance. He was drunk and mumbled something



incomprehensible to Pando who simply nodded. To his right were a ropey looking couple who had been arguing a few minutes before but had ran out of words as soon as Pando had walked in.

Still pristine in his designer travelling gear Pando had no doubt that these people were as far removed from the type that he had wished to meet on his journey as he could imagine. Who was he looking for? What did he really want and why did he think that by coming here he would be more likely to find it? He had been keeping his chin up until this point but thoughts of Maria and what he had left behind were at the front of his mind. Without realising it walking into this bar was an admission that he had made a mistake and that his morale had subconsciously been sliding away beyond his grasp. He had been going downhill fast all the way and had drifted here to arrive at a place below rock-bottom. Seeing these hopeless faces gazing at him brought it all home, he had taken a wrong-turn in life, it happens sometimes to the most careful of people and now he had to look within to face his reality. That was what drink was for right?

The barman came from out the back and was the last of this disparate band of locals to look judgementally at him. He walked up to Pando and

asked him what he wanted. Pando ordered a beer which he drank quickly due to a great thirst but somehow it wasn't strong enough. A whiskey perhaps, no, too serious, he need something that would make him feel good about himself, put him in a party mood. He spotted a bottle of Tequila on the shelf and thought that would be the very thing. He ordered, two shots, partly to satisfy his longing for oblivion and partly to go some way to convincing his audience that he was a real man.

He threw the two shots to the back of his mouth and felt nothing. Whatever it was that alcohol was supposed to bring this just wasn't doing it, so he ordered two more. The barman obliged, curious at this newcomer with whom he had no desire for conversation. Pando took the third and sank that one, beginning to feel the effects of the first two. Yes it was strong but he was a big man and hoped that the fourth would achieve the desired result, whatever that might be. So he sat there, a peculiar object of curiosity to a few of life's losers. An image of his wife and the beautiful, apartment, office and city flashed before him and he realised that in this place at this time, he too was a loser.

He didn't want such images running through him, he wanted to remember something else,

something that would inspire him onwards and upwards. However, his hyper-real spiral only descended. Feeling that he would have to go down before he could go up he ordered his fifth Tequila. Once again the barman poured it without comment and Pando realised that none of the onlookers had said a word since he had come through the door. Whether he liked it or not he was the main attraction.

Sizing up the shot he wondered what he would drink after it. Should he switch back to beer? Maybe he could order some food. The more he looked at the shot the more he realised that he didn't care what came after it. Perhaps that was the point, drinking in this state of mind erased the possibility of a future and for this moment that was how he liked it. He picked up the small glass, as he did so he heard a single note ring out and he turned to look for its source. There was a sculpture made out of hub caps dangling from the roof outside. As he looked through the window Pando could see the wind had picked up and just as he was about to look away he caught a glimpse of an old Chinese man walking by.

He looked back at the full shot glass again but it didn't look as appealing as before. He placed it back on the counter and pushed it away from him.

"What's the matter, drink not good enough for you?"

The barman stood there looking fairly menacing and Pando felt as though he needed to do something to change the situation.

"Do you have anything in the way of food?"

"Sure, the menu's on the wall."

Pando looked up and read what was quite a comprehensive, if somewhat high-cholesterol, list of foods.

"What would you recommend?"

"That's easy, the moose burgers, fresh today."

"Ok, I'll take one of those."

"Good choice."

The barman shouted the order through a hatch in the back wall and then resumed his staring duties. Somehow the other customers were beginning to bore of the newcomer and carried on their lives without interfering with Pando who sat there quietly awaiting his food. He felt the effects of the first four shots coursing through his system and felt somehow relieved that he had managed to

stem a potentially damaging drinking spree. The last shot still sat there and as he looked at it the liquid seemed to emit a hideous vibration. The more he looked at it the happier he became that he had not succumbed to its seduction.

The moose burger arrived and he took a huge bite out of it. Chewing slowly on the tough meat he suddenly stopped for a second. He had an image of all the other people in the world who were at that very same moment eating with mouths full of all the various cuisines of every country. He had lost weight, he guessed, certainly his belly had contracted and then it hit him. Maria had always bought the food and cooked for him. Whilst the fare she produced may not have been rich and exotic it was always healthy, nutritious and filling. As strange as it may seem he missed her cooking.

This was just the start of it. As he made progress with the burger all manner of things centring on his wife began to course through his memory; her smile, her laugh, her dress sense, her smell, her way with words and lastly, her elegant body language. For some reason and for the first time since he had set out on this journey everything to do with her was at the front of his mind. By the time he had finished his meal he could do nothing

but think of her. To the exclusion of all other thoughts she was there with him. Almost in a trance, without choice or reason, he found himself taking out his phone and bringing her up in the contacts. It was as though nothing had come between them and he was making a routine call. Maria answered;

“Hello, Pando?”

“Hi Maria, yeah, it’s me. I’m in some back of nowhere place, I don’t know where and I just thought I’d call to say I’m coming home.”

“Oh. Ok.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how long I’ll be, maybe a week or so but I’ll let you know when I’m back. I’ve been a fool but I’ve got my head in the right place now and it would be good for us to talk.”

“Are you safe?”

“Yeah everything’s perfect this end of things. Don’t worry about anything, I’ll see you soon. I’ve got to go now I think I might be able to get the next train out of here.”

“Well alright, as long as you’re ok.”

“Right see, you in a while, love you loads, bye.”

“Good bye. Bye.”

With that Pando turned his life around. He paid for his drinks and the food. Walked out the door and went home. Years later he would not be able to explain this change in events just that somehow he had come to the end of one journey and would begin to take another one which was all to do with what he knew best, building. This time around though it was not just to do with architecture but had everything to do with building a new life, a better relationship and ultimately a family. Now however, he was up to the task and exceedingly fortunate that he had in his wife a partner who would eventually take him back upon his return.

This episode in his life he would put down to a kind of absent minded walk on which he became lost. To leave everything that he loved and travel as far away as he could was impossible for even him to understand. All he knew was that once it was over nothing like it would ever happen again.

Upon his return, after a strange period of re-integration with his previous existence, things began to resemble the state of affairs that had been in place before he had left. Indeed he could remember very little of the adventure and the only permanent effect it had on him was that he developed a curious taste for moose meat.

Sometimes, he would have a few shots of tequila but would always stop short of downing five. Whenever he got to four something primal would happen, and a safety mechanism would take over.

Knowing his limits was a great lesson to learn. The desire of an architect to become a great explorer had been one step too far. He had allowed an inflated ego to allow his head to grow too big. For him stepping out of his comfort zone into the unknown was not brave it was just stupid. Moving back into a life that was not only familiar but was one to which he was suited meant that there was realignment of energies within him that he quickly accepted as being more than enough for his limited capacities. He went back to designing skyscrapers and was happy with his lot.



## Chapter Thirty-Four

This is Pando. I am Pando Fortuna. My name is Pando Fortuna and I'm a fictional character in a book. Well actually, I'm a real character but my writer stole my name from this guy, a real guy who we used to share a loft space with in New York. I say 'we' because me and my writer, Tycho is his name, are pretty close, sort of like brothers. Whenever he starts a new book we get to know each other really well, it's a bit like method acting.

To begin with he started writing about me, my life and everything in it, there's not much you can hide when you share a living space with someone. He told me all about it, he said 'Hey would you mind if I wrote a book where you're one of the main characters?' I was a bit reluctant to start with. I mean it's a bit strange wanting to write about someone isn't it? Then he explained that it would be akin to asking a person if they would like to sit for someone to paint a portrait. When he put it like that I was flattered and said fine, do your best.

So he started by asking me a few questions, we already knew each other well, so these questions were mainly details. I was in the middle of signing

for a record company, our band was doing really well and we were about to go on a sort of mini-tour to promote our first album. I talked to my girlfriend Lizzie about it and she was cool, anything creative is good as far as she is concerned. So over the next few weeks, he wrote, mainly for just a couple of hours a day, and every now and then he would let us know what was happening with the story.

He said he was using pseudonyms to 'protect the innocent' as they say in the movie business but the way he talked about what he was writing it was kind of a documentary. As I say I was flattered and the idea that someone would want to write about the drummer in *Sentinel*, that's our band, was pretty cool. If we make it big there'll be an account of how it all started.

Then he started asking me about my name, I get that a lot, people think it's like a stage name that I've made up but the fact is my dad's surname is Fortuna and my parents did name me Pando. He was wondering if there were any other people in the world with the same name, it seemed fairly unlikely. We put it into a search engine and surprisingly it brought up four results other than me, nice to know you're not alone in the world! As a writer he had an amazingly vivid imagination and had travelled a lot

and met a great number of people. In addition he had friends all over the globe who he was still in touch with and so had a vast experience to draw upon.

So he came up with the plan of writing about this small group of people, spread over the planet who all shared the same name. Would they be in any way similar? How does an 'interesting name' affect your character, your personality and even your path in life? With me as a starting point he began to spin a few stories about imagined others and we had a lot of fun creating 'other Pando's'. He was quiet for a few weeks as he fleshed these people out and became obsessed with the blurring of fiction and reality. When you are wrapped up in one of these stories yourself it gets very intriguing.

Eventually the characters we came up with started to take on a life of their own and it soon became obvious that these people could be just as real as us. Also, from another perspective, they could simply be facets of just one person. Maybe in another life or in a parallel universe I was someone else. It's true we all start out in life along one route and some of us chop and change as we go along depending on what we think is best, what we are good at and essentially what Luck throws our way.

Could I have been an architect, a businessman, a scientist, a photographer? Some things some people are just no good at, could an architect have been a drummer? It seemed possible. Could a scientist have become an architect? There seems to be limits on what other roles we might have been able to play in life but the idea that we are all destined to be just one person seems out of place.

There are plenty of people, I know some myself, that have changed course mid-stream and for many different reasons. Also I know a few that have several strings to their bow, and enjoy living out very varied and multi-dimensional lives. All of them are interesting and all bring aspects of one side of their being into the other parts of their character. These people are rare and very fortunate, perhaps that's a result of being born with a name like Fortuna...

So the writer comes up to me one day and says he's finished. He'd been toying around with these stories for half a year or so but the actual writing only took him a couple of months. He says 'I've finished the book, would you like to read it?' I had plenty of time on my hands and said sure. He gave me some two hundred pages all printed on single sided and double spaced numbered A4,

unbound. It was quite a handful but I started in earnest, reading a few pages every day after breakfast and soon I was half-way through.

The parts involving me were all well written, the facts were accurate and I got a sort of glorified satisfaction by seeing someone else's version of my life on the page, like looking in a mirror and seeing someone you like. However, what I was most interested in were the other Pando Fortunas. Their lives seemed as real as mine and I began to be suspicious that they too were based on real people. This wasn't a novel, it was a diary. I took this up with Tycho and he confirmed that everyone in the book was based on someone or more truthfully composites or combinations of various people that he had met over the course of his life. Would they recognise themselves? Would the book ever reach them?

The fact that a book written about real people might never find its intended audience, however small that might be, puzzled me, even made me feel a little sad. However, on the sunny side, in this day and age of technological communication the chances are, he reasoned, good. It might take a little time but these friends who were important to him might yet be friends again and

they might get a kick from seeing their lives in print, albeit as he had re-imagined them.

I read the book completely, accelerating towards the end as it became more exciting. I liked the ending but had hoped that it would have had several endings, then I realised it had no end at all. The lives that he mapped out just carried on going after the book itself was finished. Then it all made sense, my life, as it was in the book was just a slice of reality that had been fictionalised and so it was with the others. He had just shone a light on each of us for a brief period of time in our lives at an appropriate moment.

When I had done reading the manuscript, I gave it back to him, told him I thought it was quite an achievement and thanked him. However, he told me, it wasn't finished until you could buy it in a book shop. He felt the job of finding an agent to then find a publisher to print and distribute this novel would be an uphill task. He was to give it his best shot and he was to be successful. We parted company soon after our album began to do well, he wanted to move, needed a change, and I was in a position to rent his half of the loft. It was great that we had the whole area to ourselves, we could

entertain more easily and just having the extra space was a bonus.

He had told me the name of his agent and sure enough a few months later I was surfing online, put in his name, and there it was. His book was called 'There's Only One Pando Fortuna', it made me smile - was I the 'One' to whom the title referred or was it one of the 'others'? That afternoon I went down to the bookstore, half expecting to have to order it but no, it was on the shelf and I bought a copy. Funnily as I walked out of the shop I said to myself, 'Am I actually going to read this?' After all I had read it once already.

By the time I had arrived home I decided to give the book to Lizzie as a present and she was thrilled and started reading it that evening. To find that she and Janey too were also in the stories was a buzz; it was like looking at photographs of yourself or watching a home-movie that a relative has made. Going over the events of that time and remembering all the little ups and downs was a cool feeling and there was a lot of laughter.

I wondered if we'd ever see Tycho again, he had assured us that there would be a way to hook up in the future should we choose to take it. Maybe he would find us, he had said. *Sentinel* was on our

second album, perhaps events in the world would make it so that fame would be on our side. When you're in the spotlight it's easier to be found. I told him that it might transpire the other way around, I had the name of his agent, how difficult is it to find someone if you want to? He had said that maybe some people don't want to be found and we had argued that one out to the conclusion that friends are friends and should always have time for each other.

We did see each other again just the once. He came to a gig and managed to get backstage afterwards. It was great and we spent a long time talking about everything. I gave him a copy of the new album and he gave me a copy of his new book which was a turn away from the mystical towards more mainstream Science-Fiction. We signed our works for each other and concluded with a laugh that we were now both officially famous. His plans were to go to California, and try his hand at scriptwriting for the movies. The best thing about the experience was that we swapped phone numbers and to this day we often call each other to describe how our lives have changed in so many ways. Success it seems is something worth sharing.



The whole thing about the rise of *Sentinel* is that it's allowed me to meet a whole host of famous people. It's surprising to me that just how much more access you have to well known characters when you have a little fame in your life. On the whole, people who are in the public eye have a slightly different attitude to life. Some are very inward looking and are very self-centred but many are genuinely projecting their energies outwards towards the fans, the people who really care about the messages sent and who benefit from them.

Now I'm no superstar, but even in my limited social sphere of rubbing shoulders with people on the up, I've noticed that a lot of the people I meet are basically saying the same thing. Much of their thinking begins to converge. They may be coming from radically different backgrounds but in the music world at least, I've found a certain unity of intention beginning to emerge. Sometimes I wonder if all these people, many in positions of influence over great portions of society, are actually all related in some way. Could it be that they all share a certain gene, one which when switched on propels them to great heights. It's crazy I know, and sounds like something out of one of Tycho's novels but as I

climb higher with *Sentinel* I wonder if I'm 'one of them'. Incredible what happens when you've got too much time to think, but then as a species we've been around for a fair while now, perhaps it's not surprising we're able to dream up such ideas. Yeah, you might laugh, I know people don't think I'm all that smart, but take a look, are all those people in high places really smart, or are they just fortunate?

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Time flew. The move was a complete success. Such a shift of mind, body and soul however required adjustment and in this case the process took all of the two weeks prior to Pando's start date at ITER. After this time had passed new memories had started to form, old routines and subroutines had been exchanged due to their change in environment and Beth and Pando had changed too.

There was a quantum jump in energy that would last and all novel experiences such as finding the nearest shops, knowing when to put the rubbish and recycling out for collection, getting used to a new phone number and discovering the characteristics of their apartment were all taken on with a keen drive and enthusiasm. Every night when it was time for bed they both felt a healthy all over body tiredness but often found room to try for the addition of a third member to the clan which meant the world to them, also talk of plans for a wedding were in progress.

Beth made sure to keep her 'old' friends informed as to the advance of proceedings and was happy to stay on the telephone sometimes for hours

describing all the intricate details of the new home. There was plenty to talk about and she realised how much she loved to be a part of other peoples' lives even if it was only over the phone. She had decided not to look for paid work as the work of change and preparations for being married and hopefully becoming a mum occupied her thoughts night and day.

They made a few new friends almost immediately, two new neighbours made themselves known and invited them for drinks, one of whom was a worker at ITER who had been there only two months. As a couple they were way down on the pay grade that Pando would be commanding but after his experiences on leaving CERN he made sure that he would treat this man as an equal and consequently a friendship was formed. Pando decided the technician's job was just as important as his own and the man's knowledge as a new employee would prove to be invaluable to Pando in the future. As he began his new career it was with relief and great satisfaction that there was no culture of aloofness here, he had left all that behind.

Some new work clothes seemed appropriate which he chose with Beth at a nearby shopping mall, and then came the watch. This time he

searched with Beth and together they not only purchased an expensive Swiss timepiece that Pando had preselected online but, from the same jeweller, two gold wedding bands. It was all happening at once, they were riding a great wave of fabulous feelings and as they travelled on this wave they did so in style. It was their time and they were giving it their all, with no small amount of energy they grew forever closer together.

Pando's first day at work arrived and with the support of his soon to be wife he was ready to meet the challenge. He got in his car, proudly wearing the new clothes and sporting the new watch. The journey was simple and he drove listening to music and unsuccessfully trying to control a smile.

It was not a long drive but there was some beautiful scenery scrolling past the window and Pando wished it was still further. There was plenty to think about. The fact was the days preceding the move had taken on a rather dark hue. It was as though Pando had been in a deep hole and only now had been able to climb out of it. He wondered if Beth shared these feelings. He had been literally buried underground at CERN but ITER was in the light. The shining morning sun, broken

occasionally but the thinnest of clouds, accentuated the contrast of how he felt now compared to how he had felt just a few months ago. It seemed a lifetime away.

Armed only with his education, experience and a positive attitude Pando was ready to take on anything. He knew his job would require hard work but he was motivated and more than anything else he felt confident that nobody would be able to bring him down. Little did he know it was this state of mind that united almost all workers at the facility. The hope and optimism that he now felt was shared throughout the site and it bubbled over into all aspects of their work and social life.

Perhaps he would buy a new car in the near future. What he was driving currently was perfectly adequate but Pando was in the mood for change. He knew the wedding and the much wanted baby would all cost but his starting salary was very handsome and he felt sure that even after a few months there would be cash to spare. His thoughts were that selling this car and buying another would be the last part of the move.

The desire for everything to be new in order to accompany a new wave of experience and sensation is strong. Everyone in a rut wants to start

anew. When actually presented with the chance, or indeed fabricating it oneself, and then going on to embrace it fully, the effects can be nothing short of staggering. The feeling of taking control of your life in this way is wholly liberating and Pando felt it from his head to his toes.

Even as he drove, Pando was unaware that a baby Fortuna was already growing in the belly of his equally unaware wife. Beth was busying herself with everything from interior design to change-of-address emails. Soon they would be three and their change of circumstances would be complete. Many changes are small and insignificant, some are small and life-changing and some encompass the totality of one's life. For the fortunate these changes have a habit of snowballing into a kind of welcome chaos that wipes the slate clean.

Pando could hardly remember how he had been able to step outside himself to see the situation he had been in. He vaguely recalled a long day at work ending with an extraordinary result to an experiment. What was it that had started him on the journey, which continued now on his way to work, in the first place? Did it matter? Maybe it was not important what the event had been which started the ball rolling, just that there had been something.

Perhaps he had come across a reason to change because he was subconsciously hunting for it and would in fact have found it in anything. This was the opinion of a man who was content but his last ideas on this current train of thought were for others. For those less fortunate, Pando Fortuna asked what it is exactly that creates the beginnings of every new and life-affirming journey.

Pando refocused on the road and, following the signs, soon arrived at his workplace. He parked his car, walking with much anticipation and confidence towards what would be a life-time of dedication and deserved reward in the pursuit of a dream. It was a personal dream but its realisation was directed at the welfare of all.

Concentrating as he was on the very specific job in hand Pando had pushed to the back of his awareness a thought that had been with him from a very early age. His connection with his roots had pushed him to be the very best he could be but now, unbridled by a devotion to his past, he felt somehow liberated to become part of a great optimistic human project. It was as though he had been waiting for the moment at which he could be as one with the people he wished to help. Perhaps his experience



and contribution as part of his team would one day enable great leaps to be made.

The key to his involvement was simple. All endeavours of great ambition are made successful by a series of accumulative achievements. Pando's single goal was to be instrumental in creating one or more of these steps. Such advances are usually incremental and additive but Pando's input would be bold and revolutionary.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

“Good evening ladies and gentleman. We have begun our descent into London and will be touching down at Heathrow in approximately thirty-five minutes. Would you please put your chairs and tables into the upright positions and fasten your safety belts. The current local time is eleven twenty-three pm and the temperature in London is nine degrees Celsius with light rain. We hope you have enjoyed your flight with us and look forward to seeing you again in the future. Thank you for flying British Airways.”

Pando woke with a start. His sleep had been deep, uninterrupted and full of imagery. He was stiff however, in spite of the large reclining chairs in business class and looked forward to landing when he could stretch his legs. Looking out of the window it was a dark and wet night pierced only by the bright intense red light flashing on the tip of the wing. He put his seat up, yawned and gathered his belongings. The plane was soon over London and with touchdown Pando sensed relief sweep over the passengers as they were finally on terra firma and so much closer to their destinations.

By the time the plane had come to a rest and docked with the airport everyone was desperate to disembark and leave the confines of the aircraft. There is a certain glamour associated with air travel but for anyone who flew regularly there's also a feeling of the discomfort of enduring long-distance flight. Although the business class passengers were allowed priority, Pando stayed in his seat until the bulk of people had stood, waited and bustled their way out, only then standing and leaving with relative ease. He said thank you to the air hostesses and left the plane.

Soon in his stride he walked rather than stood on the moving walkways, glad for the opportunity to be under his own power. He went through passport control with no trouble and proceeded to collect his bag from luggage reclaim before passing through the exit into the arrivals area. There was no one to meet him - he wanted it that way, preferring instead to make the last leg of his journey by taxi.

Finally making it outside, the chill, rain and slight wind made him smile, he knew he was in England. It wasn't difficult to find a taxi and having given the driver the address and directions to his old family home he sat back and began to think.

Everything he saw reminded him of his youth and upbringing. In his heart he was an Englishman and always would be. It was the road signs that gave him the most cause for nostalgia, place names that he recognised instantly but had long since forgotten about. Even the orange glow of the lights illuminating the way seemed to be of a particular quality only to be found here. The number plates were unique too which caused a kind of sadness that they no longer felt like a welcome home greeting. He didn't feel home, he felt like a foreigner.

Had he been too long away from the land of his birth? Had he become a native to Hong Kong, to China? It was with these questions and through these eyes that he sped through the night. He started to feel 'bad', in the sense of how he imagined a criminal might feel. Where had his feeling of belonging gone? However, running alongside this feeling was the growing belief that he could turn things around and reverse the situation. He was certainly ready for this place, he had learned a great deal in his time away and he could bring much of it back should he so wish. Was this place ready for *him*?

His thoughts sprang back to his beautiful wife and children in their beautiful apartment. They were warm and happy and thinking of him. It was hard to imagine them all living here, especially on this cold and wet night. However, he tried. There were many possibilities and it was part of his journey here to try to flesh them out and gather the information he might need to make some decisions.

The taxi driver was thankfully silent and Pando welcomed this time to let all his choices cook on simmer. There was no denying it, this was a big decision as far as decisions go. He had left home, moved to a far-away place, started a very well paid job and moved up the ranks, he was married with children who were all healthy and happy. Why change? It was just a recurring thought that they might all be better off here, wet and miserable as it often was. He thought of the education and the friends, the sense that it might be here where they could all attain the sense of belonging that he yearned for. It was a lot to think about so he switched off and simply gazed out of the window.

Fairly soon he was beginning to feel vacant and tired but he remembered he'd told his wife he would call as soon as he could. He pulled out his phone and marvelled for a few seconds at the ability

he held in his hands to do just this. He called and after a few moments she answered. It was so good to hear her calming voice and at once he felt as though he was only down the road or calling from work to say he'd be home early. The conversation lasted some ten minutes and he was glad to hear details about the children. When he hung up however, within minutes he felt desperately alone. Sitting in the back of a cab driving on a motorway at night in the rain his mind occupied by problems he was at an all time low. Thankfully it was then that the cabbie began to talk;

“Are you coming or going?”

“Excuse me?” It was a bit of a shock as this was the first time the driver had said a word.

“I just wondered if you were coming back from somewhere or going somewhere.”

“Oh, I’m visiting. I live in Hong Kong.”

“Been there long?”

“Coming up for ten years.”

“I hear it’s changed a lot since we handed it back to the Chinese. Has it got better or worse?”

“Some things are better, some are worse.”

Even feeling as alone as he did Pando was not really in the mood for conversation.

“But you call it home then?”

“I’m married with three children. I’ve made it my home.”

“Let me guess, you’re a Cancerian, right?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“They say they can make their home anywhere, it’s that hard shell, acts like a roof.”

Pando was suddenly slightly intrigued.

“You don’t believe all that nonsense do you?”

The cabbie was annoyingly happy and was talking as though it was a bright sunny morning.

“Well, I only dabble but my wife swears by it, it’s a religion for her, she’s even got her own astrology counsellor. It makes her happy so I leave her to it. Surely you read your horoscopes every now and then?”

“No, I can’t say that I do.”

“Here take a look, there might be something in it for you, they’re at the bottom inside the back page.” The cabbie handed back a crumpled newspaper that had been sitting on the passenger seat. Pando took it and opened it up to the back page. He had always considered himself to have been born under a bad sign and had resigned himself to a life without much luck but he looked under Cancer and read;

The moon has an unusually high power over you this month but Saturn is rising and you may use it to your advantage in order to make some difficult decisions. Your strong sense of individuality may get in the way of finding happiness so you must reach out to your friends and loved ones who will point you in the right direction. Try to see the good in bad and let your heart have priority over your mind. Fate will look kindly upon you.

Pando put the paper down, incredulous to this simple and unexpected advice. He couldn't believe it but the longer he let it soak in the more it seemed to make sense. These few words that arrived from nowhere at just the right time were all he required. Indeed they would colour his journey and provide him with a theme for his visit and thoughts of home. Where that might eventually be he was not yet sure, however, a warm and strong wave of feelings, of unknown origin, told him that home was a very real place, deep and safe inside. A beautiful music from somewhere far away filled his soul and he was as one.



## **Part V : Unification**

### **Chapter Thirty-Seven**

Pando's welcome home was initially full of great celebrations and stories that needed to be told. His family were so pleased to see him and wanted to know everything about his life far away in China. He was happy to give them all the descriptions and details that they demanded but after a few days he was exhausted and began a long period of rest and relaxation.

It was at this time that Pando became fascinated and then obsessed with Communication and the Media through which information is distributed to reach an intended audience. He had of course been exposed to it all most of his life but suddenly it had a much greater immediacy and for him an urgency too. He went through a form of rediscovery, re-examining that which he had been acquainted with all his life but which had been subtly camouflaged by the business of everyday life. This opened him up to new ways of thought but would also ultimately lead to a kind of

regression and numbness of an unprecedented scale in his young life to date.

Starting with the newspaper the taxi driver had said he could keep, he began to consume every form of information delivery system. He read the newspaper from cover to cover and found to his surprise that he was able to memorise its contents. He formed no opinion as yet concerning the subject matter but acted merely as an objective recipient of all data. His primary thoughts were however that these stories were themselves all subjective representations of what might be called 'reality'.

He was aware that all facts and even figures and statistics were open to translations from the source matter to the printed page. He made mental notes of other ways in which reality may have been reported. The fundamental media here, he decided were humans themselves. They acted as filters or perhaps more accurately lenses that altered raw information in the process of relating it to others. He kept an open mind as to what might be considered the truth.

Hungry for further methods of obtaining, collating and referring reality from one human to another he began a systematic analysis of all media. The next format was a magazine. This one dealt

with global matters. It was an eye opener in that it explored many facets of life around the world from Geography and Geology to Flora and Fauna and from Tribal Cultures to Industrialisation of the planet. The photographs in it were beautiful, of the highest quality and often said a lot more than the words could on their own. Interestingly there were also articles on problems that Man may have caused and was now attempting to solve. He concluded that in these areas they would be well served by applying a lot more manpower to the problems and indeed seeking help from those who might be able to provide it.

Books came next. He read several without stopping to eat or drink. It seemed they were broadly divided into either 'Fact' or 'Fiction'. All those that claimed to be factual were once again plagued with what he could only see as subjective opinion. There were theories put forward, ideas expressed elegantly and much research to back up the way that one author saw the problems of life which needed solutions. He was sceptical of such books as it was obvious, even to him that many of them were out of date the day they were printed. However, he read as many as he could in order to get a flavour of supposedly current thinking.

Fiction was much more interesting. There was no pretence that any of it related strongly to actual ways of life, it was merely entertainment. The more he read though, the more he could see, emerging from between the lines of these fanciful stories, there were very real truths that perhaps could not be expressed in any other way. To think, to learn and to be entertained if only for a short while by reading such material was time well spent he felt.

Something in this fiction led him to search for yet further understanding of the human condition, even if it was to be found in areas that had no lofty ideals of pushing forward a particular version of reality on the reader. Following his interest in photography, how it could explore virtually any realm, he came upon the art of painting. Here was a whole rich history of work that had been around since the very beginning of human development and had grown and built upon itself slowly but surely and sometimes with great leaps of innovation.

He could only touch upon the different styles that had evolved and been employed over time but knew in his heart that the creators of this work were looking ahead to communicate with

those who inhabited the future in ways that other media could not. It was also clear that these were not just pretty pictures with only an aesthetic value but that there were many depths and layers of meaning in every one. They spoke to him on many levels, mainly those that he could not express himself. This was important, this was vital.

Sculpture too was a revelation. What hit him first was the sheer time that must have been taken to transform various matter into such beautiful objects. Their apparent simplicity and sometimes complexity created within him an awe of great proportion. The pictures he found of some sculptures left him with just one feeling. He wanted to go to the place where they were, to look at them with his naked eye. To stand before such sculptures, he decided, was nothing less than an experience. Would one be allowed to touch them? If not, why not?

Still his hunger for more forms and ways of reaching out to people was yet to be satisfied. He re-discovered Cinema and had an incredibly mixed but vast array of feelings associated with storytelling in this genre. How much did it cost to make these things? Truly they were marvellous, events which were impossible to ignore. Who were

these people on the screen? The magical trickery of its illusion left him smiling to himself.

The music he experienced sent him on a seemingly endless enquiry into what he found to be an almost endless variety of sounds. There was everything that anyone could ever want. He was drunk with choices, jumping from one to the next, only to find another. Radio became a constant companion were he could tune into whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He was keeping very strange hours and radio turned out to be essential as a companion.

Initially only interested in sound, he became deeply engrossed in lyrics. The songs that accompanied the music were often poetic, with rhyming words strung together in harmonious combinations. The singers themselves, both male and female used undulating voices that highlighted ideas, emotions and stories. He was hooked, how could there be so many things to be said and sung? It was with a kind of sadness that he began to be convinced that many of the songs sang of the same concepts. Time and time again the stories of Love entered his ears. There was so much pain, so little hope. It seemed to him that it was in this area that Mankind needed the most attention. Hard as it was

to let go, he left analysis of the music scene in order to gain more knowledge and hopefully a greater understanding of how humans go about the business of interacting with each other at a distance.

At one point he came across some Braille on a packet of pharmaceutical medicine of all things. It had to be explained to him what it was and when he knew he felt happy. To know this brought him to his own senses again. He remembered the sculptures he had seen in magazines once more, and hoped that the world of communication by touch was open to a people who have to rely on it so much.

His next subject was the esoteric world of computer languages. These it seemed went back to a specific point in the history of technological development and had all been based on the binary system. Nevertheless many forms of programming a computer had evolved, each it seemed with a growing bias towards making the process more user-friendly.

A multitude of protocols, algorithms, commands, software and jargon were required in order to give instructions and build programmes that would ultimately enable a human user to interface directly with the otherwise machine code

of the device. Ingenious innovations were created that led to people being able to complete business, purchase items and even talk to their computer in order to get what they needed.

Although Pando knew this was of great importance to multitudes of people globally he couldn't help but think that these languages had been designed by the computers themselves. He never found the truth of the matter. Their cryptic nature was apparently only decodable by a select number of highly mathematically trained individuals. It seemed odd that it was just these few who determined what would be achievable for the majority of the masses who owned and operated computers. He was fascinated for a long time by the structure and hierarchy of the computer language in general but eventually became more aware of and interested in the functions that such activity produced.

Games, playing with friends or against the machine, were a lot of fun. One could lose oneself for hours, or even days and weeks in the pursuit of higher scores and levels accomplished. Where was the communication here? Perhaps their only role was to entertain and waste time. What's more, as Pando himself played, he found the whole



experience to be rather dehumanising. He became closer and closer to the characters in the games, and closer still to the screen itself. He imagined that in terms of interaction between people and building relationships the computer game as a genre might become rather counterproductive.

Of course the business applications of computers were many and in terms of making people aware of each other, sharing ideas, generating forecasts, plans and income predictions the strengths of these machines were formidable. In terms of organising and co-ordinating information, meetings and the movements of people themselves computing power was untouchable. However, it left Pando cold when he realised that fundamentally all this was driven by one goal: the creation of wealth. He understood economics, knowing it to be the best use of scarce resources, but surely there was a place in technology where it was people themselves who had primary importance. Or was he being naive? Perhaps money was the solution to all problems.

Then he turned his mind to electronic mail and knew in an instant that this was both a business tool but also that it could be utilised in direct person to person and *personal* operation. Was this the pinnacle of human achievement? After all people

had been writing letters to each other for a long time, but here was the ability to send instantaneously and reply within moments. Pando was onto something here.

The World Wide Web was a revolution, the scale of which people were still reeling from. Those born into it were blissfully unaware as to life beforehand and for some, those who saw it arrive and grow, took it for granted whilst conveniently forgetting the skills with which they used to survive before its arrival. It was through this medium that he had been doing most of his ‘research’ as he started to call it. Then he asked himself: What would happen to the world if this Internet, this ‘net between people’ were somehow damaged? He got bored after only a day of discovering everything that he didn’t know, knowledge is power yes, but without imagination it quickly descends into just a very long list of facts and figures. Just as he was about to leave it alone, as the incredible technical jewel in the crown of technological invention that it was, he found a site that enabled everyday people to show their own work.

He knew the site well but now re-focussed his analysis on its purpose. This facility contained millions upon millions of audio-visual clips that had

been posted there by ordinary people all over the world. Fascinated, he spent hours on end randomly selecting the type of material that one could not possibly have imagined or predicted. This was a true paradigm shift in communication between people. However, after four days of laughter, intrigue, amazement and stupefaction he had to admit to himself, reluctantly but perhaps understandably, that there was an enormous amount of garbage floating around in cyber space and that it was growing at an accelerating rate. Was it all really necessary? He filed it in his mind under 'fun'.

He had purposefully saved the most popular media for his final inspection. He knew of its proliferation. He knew that virtually anyone who could afford it would have one as a standard, even if they hadn't asked and answered the question of whether they really wanted one. He knew of its power to reach all in times of catastrophe. He knew of its use across the world but for many years of late he had ignored it, dismissing it as merely a box full of all the craziness in the world and the primary distraction in leading an otherwise fulfilling life. Now he had this chance, he would give it his full attention.

He found a comfortable chair and sitting in front of a 42 inch Plasma screen, armed only with a remote control, he began to view and review Television.

Needless to say, with a satellite dish linking him to broadcasts from every corner of the globe, the choice from just over one thousand channels was bewildering. He settled down for a full scale assault, with a view to reaching some systematic analysis. This world, this country in particular must be in a permanent state of televisual hypnosis he thought, immediately before sinking into such a state himself. He was addicted and immersed in a zone of pure absorption.

Immediately he found himself channel hopping, searching in vain for something that applied to him. Already this instinctive action started to bypass his brain. It was as though there was a connection in his nervous system that sent signals from his eyes and ears directly to his fingertips operating the remote which rested on the arm of his chair. This pathway, which was of course very real, was exploited by the device. Other than the movements of a couple of fingers and his eyes, his body was to all intents and purposes motionless.

Even when he found a programme that interested him greatly on some level he found that his fingers had a life of their own, simply overriding any cognitive choice that he might have chosen to implement. This would become the mode in which he 'worked' for many hours. The carefully selected volume of the surround-sound system, which encased him in this hyper-real bubble of meditation, perfectly elevated him to a type of cerebral suspension that was at once continuous and stimulating.

For a long time he marvelled at the painstaking efforts he felt must be required to create a hand drawn cartoon. So much care to draw frame after frame of subtly different images for the purpose of humour alone. But they were funny and his face too became animated as he watched in a combination of wonder and amusement. The hilarious tones of insanely contorted overlaid voices, added to impossible feats of stupidity, played carefully constructed tricks on his mind and he laughed out loud. He knew he wanted more of this but his fingers made the decisions as to what he would watch, moving only millimetres to do so.

Episodic science fiction entertained him for a while. Tales of space travel and indeed travel

through worm holes, black holes and time itself gave him a weirdly familiar feeling as though this was something of great importance. The acting was good enough to be sure and the stories themselves were full of great ideas that he connected with on a profound level but suddenly he felt they made him feel empty inside. Something was wrong with such fantasy, it wasn't human, it wasn't real, and it had no message for him in his way of life. Of course it was only escapism, he just wished they had put a little more thought into the facts of the matter. How foolish and silly to talk of aliens, faster than light travel, robots that could think for themselves and life on other planets. This was nonsense for kids, who could dream of nothing else, people for whom life on this planet was not enough and needed to have their imaginative muscles flexed in ridiculous and bizarre ways. At least that was what he convinced himself of, all the while remaining a little fascinated. It was with a subconscious reluctance that he moved on to other shows.

Documentaries were beautifully shot and explained areas of wisdom and learning that gave Pando an insight into something more concrete. They made him feel more intelligent than perhaps he was but he forgot what he had learned within

seconds, his new knowledge being replaced instantaneously with still greater and more wonderful facts and figures. These too were quickly surpassed with yet more.

All that had been recorded was beautifully presented for his entertainment. He could see how this television industry worked with production companies selling their creations to channels who were in turn supported by advertising revenues. The commercials themselves were a mixed bag and he soon became bored of their remit to make him, the viewer, aware of any and every item or service that was for sale. What he eventually focussed on was, he decided, what this medium was designed for and its greatest strength. Live Television.

The News, broadcast regularly and on some channels continuously, brought global events into Pando's mind as they were happening. Lone reporters, with only their cameramen for company stood as messengers in far away lands to tell him of stories unfolding as they spoke. Their heightened voices, carefully but usually unsuccessfully suppressed by a veneer of professionalism, told of often terrible situations.

There was famine, war, tsunamis, earthquakes, pandemics, aeroplane crashes,

murders, man-made disasters, tragic personal stories, political upheavals, business catastrophes, religious uprisings, kidnappings, torture, and fires burning out of control over areas of land as large as small countries. This was the truth Pando had been seeking and when he found it and finally accepted it he slumped into an emptiness from which he thought there could be no return.

However, he soon began to pick out the personal human stories amongst this vast sea of death and destruction. Relating bravery, courage, hope, strength, resolve, the saving of lives, persistence of vision, nations uniting with each other, success of diplomacy and dreams fulfilled. With these as a counterbalance he managed to redress his previous disillusionment and suddenly the Weather Report sprang onto the screen. Tomorrow would be sunny and dry.

Live Sport rounded off at least ten hours of viewing. There was football, skiing, rugby, horse racing, snooker, motor racing, tennis and even sailing. What a pleasant reprise from everything else. Here was something that at once was just a game and yet also seemed to express everything that mattered about the human race. We move, we compete, we play, sometimes we lose, and



sometimes we win. It had everything. Having found what he needed he was about to finish the day when he came across a Shopping Channel.

Within minutes, battered by a moronic onslaught of salesmanship and also, to be fair, exhausted by his television marathon, he had his phone and his credit card in his hand. He was about to purchase a *real*, Russian made timepiece, for only £124.99! But he already had a watch! And a very nice one at that! He caught himself just in time, put the phone down and replace his card in his wallet. There was no doubt about it, as long as you knew how and when to turn it off, Television is King. He went to bed with images and ideas racing through his mind, falling asleep only when his brain decided that the density of his information overload was enough.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

It had been a week. Pando's parents were a little worried that he had been so engrossed in what they assumed was work related matters. After yet another full day in front of the television screen his father approached him.

"Hey Pando, you seem to have been really quiet for a good while, are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm just fine, I just needed to crash and zone out for a while. Work's been pretty stressful, this was the only way I could find to get some distance."

"Have you phoned home?"

"Oh don't worry about that, I phoned when I landed."

"It's been a week, don't you think you ought to check in, make sure everything's ok back there?"

"It's a good idea dad. In fact I'll do it now."

"Good. We're all going over to your sister's tomorrow, you will be coming won't you?"

"Definitely, it'll be good to see her and the baby. I wouldn't miss it."

"Your grandmother will be there too. She'll be so happy just to spend a little while with you."

As soon as his dad had left for bed Pando picked up the phone, looking at it curiously for a while. This was the medium he had ignored, or forgotten about. How easy just to talk and with someone so far away. He dialled, it rang and was quickly answered by his wife.

“Hello.”

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Hey Pando, so good to hear you. I was beginning to think you’d defected!”

“No danger of that. I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner, I’ve been so preoccupied.”

“With what? You’re supposed to be on holiday!”

“I know. I got this funny thing in me to totally lose myself for a while and that’s what I’ve been doing.”

“Well I hope you find yourself again!”

“Yep, I’m here, I’m all good. How are the kids?”

“Oh they’re fine. They have been a bit of a handful since you’ve been gone. I think they’re trying their luck, seeing what they can get away with. They know you’re not here to give them that look of yours.”

“Well, tell them from me there will be trouble when I get back if they don’t do exactly as you say.”

“Oh so you are coming back then?”

“Ha! Of course, another week here I’ll be ready to return to normal.”

“Well as you know, there’s very little in the way of normality here.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s crazy wherever you go right?!”

“You just relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I’ll do that. All my love honey. I’ll call again soon.”

“Ok, and don’t worry about us, we’re doing just fine.”

“Alright. Take care.”

“Bye then love.”

“Bye.”

He hung up and smiled, once again looking at the phone, with amazement and in awe of the power and potential it contained. The potential of just this one invention was almost limitless.

A good night’s sleep and he was up and ready to go to his sister’s house. It wasn’t a long way even considering they had stopped to pick up his grandmother on the way. She was over the

moon to see him and the two of them sat in the back with her asking him all manner of questions as they drove.

His sister too was thrilled. It had been a long time since they had seen each other and that had been before she had become a mother. Her little baby girl, Violet, was just a little bundle but Pando fell in love immediately. When she looked at him from her tiny cot her eyes locked onto his and he became transfixed by her gaze. It lasted for a long time until she finally laughed and he smiled feeling he had made a real connection with this new life.

He knew that he had missed the time around the birth. He knew he had missed his sister's joy at that time and this was continuously feeding his thoughts about whether he should return to this country or stay where he was so happy, albeit so isolated. Could it be that he could transport his own wife and children here and make one proper big happy family. He had begun to think that this could be very possible.

Seeing his grandmother hold Violet gave him yet more emotions. The oldest and youngest of their clan together.

Lunch together was grand. His sister and her husband had put on a table of beautiful food. There was a lot of talking, sometimes loudly but always followed by peels of laughter. Violet made her presence felt but was on the whole very well behaved and didn't cry out, not even once. The wine flowed freely and Pando told stories of the land where he had chosen to live and work. Towards the end of the meal the question came up, posed by his father about his plans for the future.

"You know I've given it a lot of thought lately, a lot. I started thinking about it a while back and it does make sense, you know to be here all together again. It'll be a big journey, I'll have to find a new job."

"That won't be hard dear, not with your qualifications and experience." Pando's mother was all for seeing him return, she missed him greatly and wanted to be a grandmother to his children in reality not just in title.

"You're right. Look I can't commit, not yet, I'm going to have to go back and talk it all through but I want to let you all know right now that I'm leaning towards doing it."

There were cheers, glasses were raised and Pando felt that the decision had been made in spirit if not in actuality.

Then, perhaps overexcited with the situation his grandmother began to cough, uncontrollably. She was choking, but it was not on the food or the wine. It was a horrid kind of cough that was deep and was affecting her whole body. She was given a glass of water, which helped initially but the coughing would not stop.

After half an hour of this an ambulance was called as they were really concerned for her well-being. Pando's mother went with her in the ambulance and as it pulled away everyone was left in shock. She had been unwell for quite some time with what was thought to be just a minor chest infection but to see her so clearly in distress Pando knew it had suddenly either become a lot worse or there were other forces at work.

She died that very night. It had been a cancer that had eventually eaten its way through part of her lungs. Words of sorrow said between the members of the family were not enough to express how they were all feeling. It was the greatest comfort however, that they were all together to

share the grief. Pando's recurring thought was that she hadn't had to suffer for long.

The funeral arrangements were made for the following week and it meant that he needed to re-schedule his flight. He phoned home to break the sad news. There were a lot of tears shed that week, Pando's grandmother had been a matriarch and a key figure in the family who was held in great admiration by all. Her death triggered many emotions and indeed became a catalyst, motivating many kinds of action.

The days between her death and her cremation were spent with Pando and his father trying to sort out all the legal matters. It was horrible work, mostly carried out in silence save for all the questions that arose which had to be answered.

They began the long process of going through her personal belongings and tidying the house. The house, in which she had lived alone for the last eight years since her husband, Pando's grandfather, had himself died quietly in his sleep, was now eerily empty. Speech and sounds seemed to be absorbed by all the now redundant furniture. It was decided quite quickly that it would all be



sold, house and contents together, following the reading of the will.

The day of the funeral arrived. Pando wore a dark suit that his father lent him. It was a misty morning with dew covering the grass over which Pando walked at the crematorium. He had been to funerals before, not many, but knew that somehow they were a part of life. This was to be a celebration of his grandmother's life but try as they might it would always simply be a very sad farewell.

Pando himself said a few words that he had written the day before. Mainly they were reminiscences of his early memories with the only grandmother he had known. Prayers were sombrely said but she had requested in her will that no songs be sung as "Singing is for the birds and the angels." She was a beautiful old lady and loved to sing herself when no-one was around.

There was a small wake, mainly to thank several old friends, some of whom had travelled far to be there. It was all over. Cleaning away the food and tables that had been carefully arranged in the reception room was a task that brought the family together again in an activity that was comfortingly normal.

The next day, with everyone dressed in their normal clothes, there was a feeling of relief, release even. As every hour passed so the family, supporting itself, grew to begin accepting their loss. Nevertheless everyone was still awkward and tense. At one point Pando's mother dropped a glass dish which shattered on the kitchen floor. An event that might have usually ended in laughter brought her to tears. This shared feeling lasted for the next two days and eventually Pando announced that he thought it would be good for him and the family if he were to make himself scarce for a couple of days. His presence, he felt, was causing an unneeded disruption. His dad agreed and said he could borrow the car if he wished.

After consulting a map of the county he decided to visit some areas he knew from his youth. He packed a duffle bag with a vague route in mind and planned to stay at various Bed and Breakfast places which he found online. Before he really knew what he was doing he was on the road.

Within minutes his tensions were dissipating. The strangest thing had happened, it seemed he had dealt with his grandmother's death already. He simply had to think of his one lasting memory of her holding his sister's baby Violet and

he knew she was at peace and that it was a peace he could share in. He had always been told since the first death he had been near to, his history teacher at infant school that everyone grieves in their own way. His grief was spread over much of his life and seemed to be greyness in the back of his being that was always there. It shaded in the empty parts of his soul and came to the fore whenever he experienced sorrow, suffering or the pain in people's lives. Now he felt few emotions but, for what they were, they provided fuel for his journey and coloured his perception.

The car hummed along. It was big thing, expensive too and he was thankful that his father had allowed himself such a luxurious ride. Pando felt important driving it and the ride was smooth and easy. He began to remember so much as he slowly encountered familiar corners and lanes. Road signs, shops, telephone boxes even trees made themselves known to him once again. The nostalgia was completed by his old school which he slowed to pass, it felt smaller than the image he held in his mind.

He had been but a child then and knew nothing of where his life might lead. Certainly his job and its location were beyond his imagination at

that time. What were the events that had led him to his current place in the world? The chain of cause and effect were unfathomable but still he tried. Influences, options, choices and ultimately decisions, this process had occurred many times over forever refining his destiny.

Now he was in motion, which he always felt, had been a state in which he was most content. Indeed he made most of his decisions whilst on the move, he always had done. There was something about the fact of travelling forward, through time and space towards a goal that needed to be met. To be moving was to be living, to be static was to remain so, until you decided to move, move forwards, onwards.

Soon however he came to his first stop and as he stepped out of the car he truly felt he was on vacation. This was a surprise to him. He had enough time to re-acclimatise to his country of birth so that he really did feel at home, but on holiday. A strange feeling but not an unpleasant one.

This feeling was to last, if only for the few days he had. Apparently, without really planning it, through forces beyond his control he was now a tourist in his own country and more than this it turned out to be a holiday from himself.

He checked into the Bed and Breakfast hotel, unpacked his small bag and had time to go for a short walk before dinner. It was a fine day, the early evening light accentuating the colours of autumn. He didn't think much but instead allowed his mind to wander freely as it may.

The sense of liberty was quite powerful and he began to concentrate on the idea that his family could do well living here, or hereabouts. Anywhere in this idyllic countryside would be perfect as long as he was within commuting distance of London. It would take great energies and a singular direction, resolve too, but the more he thought about it the easier it seemed.

The kids were young enough to be able to adapt to a change in environment and circumstances. He knew that they would settle into an English school very quickly, actually they would probably see the whole experience as some kind of adventure. They would miss their friends but would most surely make new ones very quickly. His wife would probably find it the most difficult. She was used to a very warm climate and had been all her life, but she would find amazement in the snow and ice of a British winter. She would buy lots of designer winter-wear, dress up warm and as long as

she had an air conditioned car and a warm house to go to she might find the change a lot of fun.

A job could be less problematic than he had thought, Pando had contacts in London, and his current employers had extensive operations there too. There might be an opportunity for a direct transfer.

He arrived at the Bed and Breakfast and was quickly installed in a small but adequate room. He had no desire to rest, make observations of the place or go over his thinking any longer and was soon in the dining room of this family run business. Having chosen the place not just for its location but also because it offered this evening meal as an option, he was ready just to eat without any hassle and switch off his heavily worked thought processes.

Sitting down to dinner, alone at a table but accompanied by various other guests at other tables, Pando ordered a steak and treated himself to a large glass of red wine. He had often dined alone in strange places, on many occasions his work took him to cities away from home but he never felt lonely. It always felt like there was someone with him. This night it was his grandmother, as he drank his wine he remembered her once again.

His first glass of wine had been by her side, at the age of ten, at a family gathering she had encouraged him to try some. “It’ll put hairs on you chest”, a funny thing to say but it might explain his hairy chest as much as any other more biological cause. Whether it was the meal or the wine or a combination of both, tears were running down his cheeks and he made no attempt to wipe them away. He let them be, knowing full well that they were real and a genuine reaction to recent events. He didn’t care as to the looks of the other guests who eyed him with a rude curiosity. In fact, as he ate, he didn’t care about anyone very much. He was in a zone detached from his surroundings for there were incredible waves of mysterious energy stirring within him, vibrations that over-powered and transcended simple Earthly emotions.

The young lady who came to clear away his plates asked him if he was ok and he became aware of how he must look, actually laughing as he put a napkin to the tears. It was the first laugh he’d heard from himself for at least ten days.

Pando went to bed with a clear head, feeling for the first time he was now perhaps a leader in some sense. His father was still the head of the family but they would all be looking to him to make

steps in a good direction. He had to make some decisions, he had to be bold and show resolve.

As he fell asleep he became comfortable with the idea that there were others, his whole extended family, more perhaps who were depending on him. He was being called upon to make a decision that would affect them all and he needed to accept and embrace that responsibility.

A new time was coming, one in which he would need to summon all that he knew, and gather all those people who had influenced him over time, to one place within him, within his heart where they could have the power to enable him to act in the best interests of all.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Waking with a new found vitality he had his breakfast and was up and out before 9am. Throwing his bag in the back seat of the car, he turned the key and was in motion. This particular journey would have great consequences not only for his family but for all those who he loved, his friends and... Humankind.

Pando drove, once again re-familiarising himself with landmarks and sights, recognising much from his life here before. Small scenes played out in memories that would have otherwise remained dormant forever.

Here was that church where the school service was held at the end of every term. There was a phone box where he had made his first phone call home to his mother when the chain had come off his bike and he was stranded. How had he come to be this far from home? He could hear quite clearly now in the theatre of his mind the coin dropping into the machine and dialling the home phone number he had memorised.

That was the house where Melanie Rogers had lived, the first girl he kissed and the one who

later had also thrown ink all over his clean white school shirt.

His dad took him to these tennis courts with his friend Richard Mathews. What, he wondered had become of him?

Then a line of Poplar trees, lining one side of the road, their shadows making stripes across the tarmac in the low morning sun. Like a huge natural bar code the flashing ones and zeros as he passed through light and dark made Pando a little mesmerised. He brought up his free hand to his eyes, now heading directly into the sunlight as the road swept around.

He was driving free and easy and had put the radio on. It was straight into reports of war torn countries and outbreaks of particularly nasty and infectious diseases. He re-tuned and found a classical music channel. Never really a great fan but this particular composition soothed him and brought a calming state to the front of his mind. This way of life was so very different from the pulsing chaos of the Hong Kong streets.

Not only a few weeks ago he had nothing but money matters coursing through his brain which had become more of a calculator rather than a companion. Here, this was a kind of existence that

one might see in a car commercial. Rays of sun glinting from the chromium trim on the body of the vehicle. Colourful autumnal leaves swirling in its wake and at the wheel a cool looking man, a couple of days growth on a face, perhaps images of success. All this accompanied by a piece of music that highlights such a particular human condition; free, strong, elemental and confidently moving into a future created by empowered choice.

He could definitely get used to this. He was born here, he belonged here. Hong Kong was coming to symbolise a satellite planet where he had been experimenting with life. This though, this was life.

Somewhat spontaneously, and under an influence of forces beyond his consciousness, he took a random turning off to the left, signposted to a place he did not recognise. He could only get lost, he could only find himself again. If he had been down this road before he didn't recall the event. It was narrow and winding and covered with a canopy of trees that made the road into a sort of tunnel. In fact it became rather tiresome taking the very restrictive bends that lead to even narrower lanes. Pando considered turning back but only for an

instant. There is no way back, there is only the present and what he could see ahead.

Suddenly the trees receded and the car was propelled into open space. The darkness overhead also vanished and the sky reappeared. In front of him were fields, large open farming land and Pando felt an immediate openness. There were two rows of low hedges either side of the road but they did not restrict his view.

Softly undulating geography reached all the way to the horizon and Pando was sure that somehow he'd travelled into the next county. All here was natural save for a line of electricity pylons and their fine swooping cables that traversed the hills nearby. Of course many would say they spoilt the vista but Pando knew that such a 'scar', as it might be called, was merely part of an infrastructure providing a modern civilisation with its means to work, to communicate, to function. Such structures could even be seen to have a beauty in themselves.

As it was, he was soon clear of them and the vision that lay before him was, but for minor details the same as it may have been stretching back many centuries into the past. This is the land that helps to provide the food that feeds the nation. Of course the numbers of people in the last couple of centuries

had increased so much that now much food was imported. The global network of trade didn't exist just as financial transactions. Many goods were brought from other lands and some exported too, by sea, by air, of course all those trading in such commodities made a profit with every new stage in these operations.

Without warning, this concept became massive. We had come from a small people who were mainly self-sustaining to a dense population that had to rely on people in other countries just to feed ourselves. Goods, services, all traded but could this be sustained? The world was getting smaller but we had to think bigger just to stay alive. Overpopulation could mark the end of this planet. How can you possibly stop the world from wanting more? More food, more children, more energy, more money. Surely there must be a point when we simply can't get any bigger. Will this be the way in which we will be forced to do with less?

Interesting as this line of reasoning was, he had to dismiss it. It didn't feel like it was his area of expertise, certainly not his job, to consider such things. That was for other far more intelligent people to concern themselves with. He knew civilisations rise and fall and sometimes consume

themselves completely, ultimately to become part of history. His job was to live his life as best he could and make a new home for the future of his own people. For the time being there was room here for more and his children would have to learn about their past and imagine their future just as he was still trying to learn about his.

He tried to dismiss these ideas but they kept coming back. What if we are the future? The amassed knowledge that we generate and leave as a legacy to those we bring into this world is a precious cargo indeed. We need to be careful how we analyse it, organise it and present it to those who will be in a better and better position to be able to act upon it. Specifically we need to realise that we are also in such a position by virtue of the work that those before us have done and that we too must be willing and able to act wisely ourselves.

With another corner turned, a strange object came into Pando's field of view. Way up ahead in the distance he could see a small hill on top of which, rising up clearly was a man-made structure that had a peculiar resonance. He had never seen it before but he somehow knew it.

Without intention or thought he took the next road which seemed to lead towards it. Trying

to maintain his concentration on driving he couldn't help but to keep glancing up at what, as he drew nearer, appeared to be a castle or tower. As though he had knowledge of the place from a picture in a book or some subconscious memory, the curious nature of existence here was fascinating.

For a while it went out of sight, surrounded as it was by trees and unexpectedly, without any signs the road came to an end. Pando had to park. Putting on his coat he acted in a way as to appear lost in the magic of this area. There was no question that he would get to the tower, driven as he was by something ancient buried deep in his being. To anyone looking he may have appeared to be just another local, such was his body language and the casual attitude that he had, but no one was looking. He walked.

The path which continued from the end of the road was well trod and although there were no signs it was clearly heading the right way, winding upwards to the structure that still remained hidden from sight. Pando pressed on, his only thought to get to the top and explore what may be there.

After climbing what became a steeper and steeper slope for at least half an hour he came out to the clearing at the top. Slightly out of breath and

legs aching, Pando saw the tower. It was about 30 metres in height, of square cross-section and looked to be in very good condition. Walking towards its base, looking up all the while to its turreted top he discovered a plaque.

From what he read this structure was over 200 years old and had been restored only fifteen years ago. Pulling himself away from its impressive presence Pando looked around at the view. Walking in a large circle through the clear, crisp air he could see many miles to the horizon. He could even be sure that London was within range of his unaided eye and imagined that many counties were spread around in this panorama.

The effect of the place surprised him. He had always lived very much in the present, with one eye firmly fixed on the future. Here though past, present and future were merged as one, as was his soul and all those who composed it. It had been clear to him from an early age that we are all made up of fractured parts, the elements of which were those experiences and people who had made the greatest impact on our core. Also too those that are constantly reaching out to us whose influences we can choose to accept or ignore. In this sense Pando always felt dispersed, at best a composite that he



was assembling continuously in order to stop himself from falling apart at the seams.

The energy in this tranquil zone, with none others present, was apparently fusing together the mosaic of his being. He brought together all forces, all versions of himself, all wisdom that he had absorbed. Of course he was instrumental himself in achieving this and, as he let it happen and made it happen, one voice emerged, strong and unique, low and powerful. It was the voice of his father, and his father's father.

He had been told as a boy that the Fortuna name had existed for centuries. His father had even shown him the end result of his research into their family tree. Running back some nine-hundred and fifty years they had wandered over many countries but had arrived in this country two hundred years ago, about the time the tower had been built.

Having been teased as a boy about the strange name, Pando had grown to be proud of his heritage. Knowing that the line stretched back so far gave him confidence and an attitude that many mistook for arrogance. The family as he knew it was small and had no claim to great properties or lands but it had played its part in many a war and

had seen revolutions and natural disasters come and go.

Now he turned his internalised stream of thoughts, expressed in the voice of his fathers, into a question. How are we to survive? It was fascinating to him that their line had been able to adapt and endure for so long but he felt that Mankind would ultimately not fare so well. Many believed that we would die at our own hands. Civilisations can decay and destroy themselves from within, the only difference now was that we had the means to do this globally and permanently.

We hope, we strive and some of our brightest minds work on solutions to the great problems that we face. For this to be in vain, for so much to be lost both from the past and from the potential of what we could become, appeared to Pando now as the greatest manifestation of the inability to communicate with ourselves and with each other. We have the means, the technology at our fingertips, we need to make good the work already done and build upon it, not temples to our greatness but instead an architecture of our minds.

His phone rang, but only once and then stopped. As he took it out of his inner coat pocket he looked at the last incoming call. It was a zero

followed by just a string of ten digits, all fives; 0555555555. Weird. He thought nothing of it and sat down on a nearby fallen tree, looking out over the spectacular view. Then he looked at the phone again. How could that be? It made no sense and surely no such number could exist. But that number, 5, was stirring something already.

Curiosity got the better of him and he rang the number. After several beeps and clicks, that he had never before heard when making a call, even an international one, there came a ringing tone and then a female Chinese voice began talking quickly. Pando's Chinese was not good, he could get by in a restaurant, but this he failed to understand. Fortunately she continued with a translation in clear English in which she simply said; "This is not the number you are calling. This is a recorded message." And it ended there. He hung up, perplexed with his face frozen expressionless. It did not compute and he had trouble finding a thought to follow it.

Before he had even finished looking at the phone it rang again, the same number came up on the screen. In an automatic mode, somewhat controlled by an innate but subconscious will to know what on earth was going on he answered it.

The same voice answered in Chinese with another recorded message, also subsequently translated; “Please send your text message now.” And again it ended.

Pando was now not himself. Somehow the sudden leap from his idyllic Surrey musings had been interrupted and he had been transported, cerebrally at least, back, to China. More magically the mere sounds of the Chinese language had triggered some long forgotten message, written in Chinese characters, that was a fundamental part of his thinking.

Not even a loud gunshot nearby could have disturbed Pando at this moment. He was effectively in a state of full mind-body hypnosis. As he sat there motionless his analogue brain was going digital. Racing through memory and sensory data it was searching, randomly at first, for the correct hidden response. As it ruled out irrelevant information it began to home in on its target using search parameters and signs that showed the way. Eventually lodged firmly in some long forgotten part of Pando’s mind it came across the coding that it required.

Pando had been still and quiet now for several minutes. The task of coming round and

being at least physically able was largely up to him. The feeling was somewhat similar to coming out of a general anaesthetic accept he was alone and there was no one to talk to. Still sitting and staring at the phone bit by bit he came back on line but there was only one six word message flying around his mind. It had originated in his neural-network, a system of connections that had been formed by countless other versions of himself. Only now had they come together as one.

Without being able to do otherwise he selected the message button. He typed the six word message that was in his head and then, carefully standing rather unsteadily, lifted his arm and hand and phone to the skies and to the number comprising of ten fives pressed “SEND”. The message began its journey.

Pando collapsed. Physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. He was unconscious for two hours until a couple walking their dog found him lying there, in an awkward and unnatural position that could not indicate sleep. They walked up to him, cautiously fearing that he was dead. The first thing Pando knew was the dog barking. He stirred and moved and the couple came close.

“Are you ok?”

Pando was actually smiling and after a few moments was able to fashion a reply.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. I must have dozed off...” He laughed to himself as he sat upright.

“Are you sure you’re alright, you haven’t hit your head or anything?”

“No my head’s just fine...” He laughed again, rubbing his head. The couple left and assumed that he had been drinking. Pando was far from hung-over though, the snooze seemed to have done him a power of good. He stood up, he was balanced, he was together and he had absolutely no memory of anything prior to his phone ringing. It was on the floor, he picked it up, looked to the sky and shouted out, “I did it, I’m alive!”

## **Part VI : Message Home**

### **Chapter Forty**

The message he had composed or more accurately had come together within him, had a long way to go. By virtue of the voltage produced across the battery in the phone, Pando's six words were sent from the internal antenna as a relatively weak and short pulse of radio waves to a local cell base station. The mast received the transmission and relayed it to another station where its very particular and special character was recognised and amplified many times before being re-routed once again but this time to a satellite transmitter. Here it was encrypted into a purely digital stream before being amplified once more and beamed to a geostationary satellite orbiting at an altitude of approximately 36,000km. From here it was redirected once more but this time to a specially tasked, dedicated, military satellite that had one purpose. To send data *away* from the planet.

The information pulse, that had originated in the combined souls of many Fortunas and had been channelled through the mind of One Pando Fortuna,

a Businessman from Hong Kong. This pulse had been received by the most advanced piece of technology that Humankind had created. Its power was amplified again but this time by many orders of magnitude. At a point in time, it was transmitted as binary pulses towards a precise point in the night sky. It would continue to be repeatedly transmitted at a particular wavelength and frequency for a number of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years.

Now it was travelling at the speed of light on a straight course heading directly for a distant sun in the same galaxy some twelve light years away. In particular the message was aimed at one of that sun's orbiting planets. A planet that lay in the 'habitable zone' of that sun and had cultivated a great variety of life of its own.

The packets of energy, transmitted in pulses of radio waves, travelled straight and true towards their target. In their twelve year journey Pando, its sender, grew older, as did his children and all those whom he knew. His job was done and he could carry on life without having to think of the consequences of his actions. Indeed such was the nature of the job that he had little or no



understanding of the part he had been called upon to play.

History unravelled itself, marching forever onwards. Some wars ended and others began. Countries forged new trade relations with each other, some changed their borders and even their names. Science made new discoveries and novel technologies were born of them. Original movements in art were conceived and spread across the globe. Love brought hope and new life and caused many to reach out towards their companions. All the while the signal hurtled through space.

Finally, when the message was twelve years of age it was received by the inhabitants of that beautiful planet, a world who greeted the news it contained with a tremendous welcome and great celebrations. Twelve years was only a heartbeat to these people, they had waited over one thousand years to hear the voice of a man that this message represented. It had returned, it had come home.

## **Part VII : Echo Flight**

### **Chapter Forty-One**

Since the launch of its many interstellar probes over one thousand years ago the planet called ‘Maa’ had seen many revolutionary changes. Some were self generated, some were beyond their control.

Due to the particular mathematics of the spin and orbit of their home around the sun, changes of a cyclical nature meant there had been an immense climate change. Ice caps had melted, water levels had risen, and previously inhabited land masses had been drowned. All this would have occurred as a matter of course but depletion of their ozone layer due to previous generations’ pollution of the atmosphere had exacerbated the situation.

Everything considered, the geological make-up of the planet had been altered quite considerably. This had a knock-on effect in that all populations had withdrawn inwards away from the rising sea and hence population density had increased appreciably. The world was already over-crowded and now there was even greater competition for limited resources.

Wars, caused by this very problem, wiped out the best of many nations and left a survival of the most aggressive, violent and adept at killing. As a consequence population numbers were reduced in line with what the planet could sustain but this vicious natural method left many otherwise prosperous and intelligent societies in ruins. A great wiping clean of their civilisation had occurred with blood stained soil as the aftermath.

Such wars were not themselves advanced. Men had resorted to ensuring their survival using basic weapons borrowed from times gone by. Metal blades may have been the tool of their early ancestors but they were cheap and effective as tools of genocide.

There was one country that stood apart from this barbarism and stood head and shoulders above those that had descended into chaos. With a great and long tradition of art, science, philosophy and music they were keen to keep that which they had so carefully built over the millennia. They were no strangers to war themselves but the technologies they had innovated for use in energy production and space travel in previous centuries threw up technologies of warfare that were beyond compare.

They had evolved abilities to destroy entire cities in a single blow. They had the means to disable any threat including that of asteroids that might otherwise impact their world extinguishing all life. Crucially they commanded satellites encircling the globe to communicate with, and if necessary neutralise, other civilisations that had perchance developed similar means of defence.

On the whole a peace-loving country, the might and power that they held was more of an expression of potential power. Technology was an art-form that they continued to master and re-invent.

As global events in other lands took their course this nation grew wary of its fellow terrestrial neighbours. Such protectionism was perfectly aligned with their sensibilities for they were an island, a large one that rose high above the water line. As an island they were happy to look inwards, they had much to be thankful for in terms of natural resources and could be proud of their achievements. Having long ago implemented a one child restriction on every family their population was stable. As times had changed they withdrew from international relations, effectively becoming barricaded, isolated and yet perfectly safeguarded

from the perceived danger of those who would seek to destroy such hard-earned security.

Technology became their God, primarily because it proved over and over again to be their saving grace. Without it they would surely have met their end as did most of the rest of the world who were unable to adapt to their changing environment and had made no such provision for their futures. The ability to extend the creative forward thinking power of thought beyond the mind, beyond the arm and hand, beyond the body and even to other solar systems was the origin of their success.

However those who lived on this island in the sea, which was in turn on an island of a planet surrounded by space, knew how dependent they were on such technologies. It had become a life support system, if anything should happen to disturb its workings they too would surely die. They were intelligent and not too proud enough to realise that sooner or later they would require outside help.

This key concept was deep rooted in their culture and had been the touchstone of their lives since they had biologically evolved from less able versions of themselves. Uniquely among those who developed in parallel with them, one eye was

always on what was yet to come and it was for this reason that they had initialised the program to send manned probes to other planets. Perhaps one day the life they enjoyed would be threatened and they would need to look to others in order to continue life. That was exactly what was happening.

The probes were sent as ambassadors to other worlds that may sustain complex life. To know one had a brother on a nearby planet meant that one could arrange to visit if local personal circumstances became compromised. In the thousand years that followed, this idea remained constant in the background. The ideals of that era were not forgotten. The culture that had conceived this project had prevailed and remained steadfastly dedicated to the reasoning of their predecessors, their forefathers. They kept vigilant, always listening attentively to specific areas of the cosmos for echoes of the emissaries that were so hopefully dispatched. No such news came but still they waited and became experts in patience.

During this long wait there was much to be done, they were everything but lazy. Continuity of technological design, improvements and breakthroughs were eagerly sought and found. The man-power and finances that went into these

projects was monumental and went unquestioned as technical expertise became religion.

The palace made for the ruling monarchy was itself created on these principles. No longer just a building, the ruling elite demanded that their symbol of divine right to rule had a purpose, a function as well as a form. By this time most, if not all, of the citizens of this great futuristic nation were involved in some capacity in an all consuming effort. The nature of this palace was as much an expression of wealth and deference to the deity king as it was a hope for the population of transcendence to worlds beyond their own.

This palace was a ship to another star. Its shining presence rose high into the sky and its sheer size was to inspire all. This was what the king wanted, for all his subjects to be united in a common goal. And when this king died and his sons and their sons were crowned, the vision was maintained, the work progressed and after centuries had passed it was complete. However, there was still no word from those in whom they had placed their hopes and dreams.

Decades more passed with the king and his family keeping good rule over those who now returned to more mundane activities. The

interstellar ship was, as a palace, representing the will of the king but it also served as a reminder to all of what could be done and the consistent philosophy of their race to look to the future.

On a normal day, much like any other, a signal was at last received. From a tiny star in the night's sky, one to which a probe had been sent, a powerful and recurring beam of energy had been emitted. The king's technical advisors picked up the signal and on strict protocol had brought it straight to the king himself, his line being the only one who had the key to decipher it. It read simply *"JOIN US. LIFE HERE IS GOOD."*



## Chapter Forty-Two

Preparations began almost immediately. Any discussion of how to proceed was non-existent. Details of actions to be taken were laid down many years previously and a gigantic set of operations had been put in place that were simply carried out without question. This was the destiny of the ruling Fortuna family and had been so since their race began. The king directed his business with flawless precision.

Those who were to leave were gathered in the palace. Every person played a crucial part in the meticulous countdown which began at the instant the king had de-coded the message. There were to be those from every part of society. Professionalism was paramount and very quickly all was in place.

The people of the country were now embroiled in celebrations of every colour and so it would be long after the craft had left. In some ways they too would subsequently be free. Freedom from the sometimes obsessive religion of their time, now at liberty to change and grow as they themselves saw fit, with no Technological rule oppressively

over their heads. But their long term future was now uncertain, once the craft had left, carrying the best the country had to offer it was possible they might fail as their neighbours had done.

Citizens, the land, and the planet, would now, for the king and his chosen followers become history. This was the first moment when those who had built the future from a perfect memory of the past would be forgotten. With the king and his crew as exiles some lost the hope they once had, some took advantage of the situation and some became angry at being abandoned. The future of this race was uncertain but then so it was for those who had ventured forth.

The spacecraft had left. In a trajectory around its sun, propelled by engineering of uncanny intelligences, its subsequent acceleration to a good proportion of the speed of light flung it far from the bounds of its own solar system.

Following in the path of the probe who had gone before, some thousand years previous, and motivated by the echoing voice of one of its royal ancestors it flew straight and true.

Throughout the journey there was a metamorphosis of some sorts. The king had imagined this and was perhaps instrumental in its

cause. No doubt, those aboard were all hand picked for their utility but the only such role the king could play was one of ruler over them all. This did not sit happily with him for he was at heart a simple man and wished for this particular group of people to be equals. He chose to relinquish his throne and take up a position more akin to a spokesman and an ambassador as had his ancestors before him.

This rearrangement in hierarchy was welcomed by all and now it was just the captain who had control of the craft and who took all the decisions. The type of people who they became was a reflection of the way in which they had lived their lives. They hoped that what lay ahead would be a better place than that which they had left behind. They also respected the notion that they would no longer be rulers of themselves but, all things being equal, would become the guests of another civilisation.

The very fact of receiving the message meant that there was organised life who had sent it. What would be their welcome? How were they to introduce themselves? What would be the effect of their presence?

They slowed and entered this new solar system. Their trajectory took them past several

planets but they were only interested in one. As the plotted course took them closer and closer still they finally came into a low orbit with a planet that looked from above remarkably similar to their own. A globe of blue seas, white clouds and clearly defined land masses came together to create a vision of beauty and wonderment. They hoped the people of this incredible exoplanet would allow them to live peacefully with them, on this Earth.