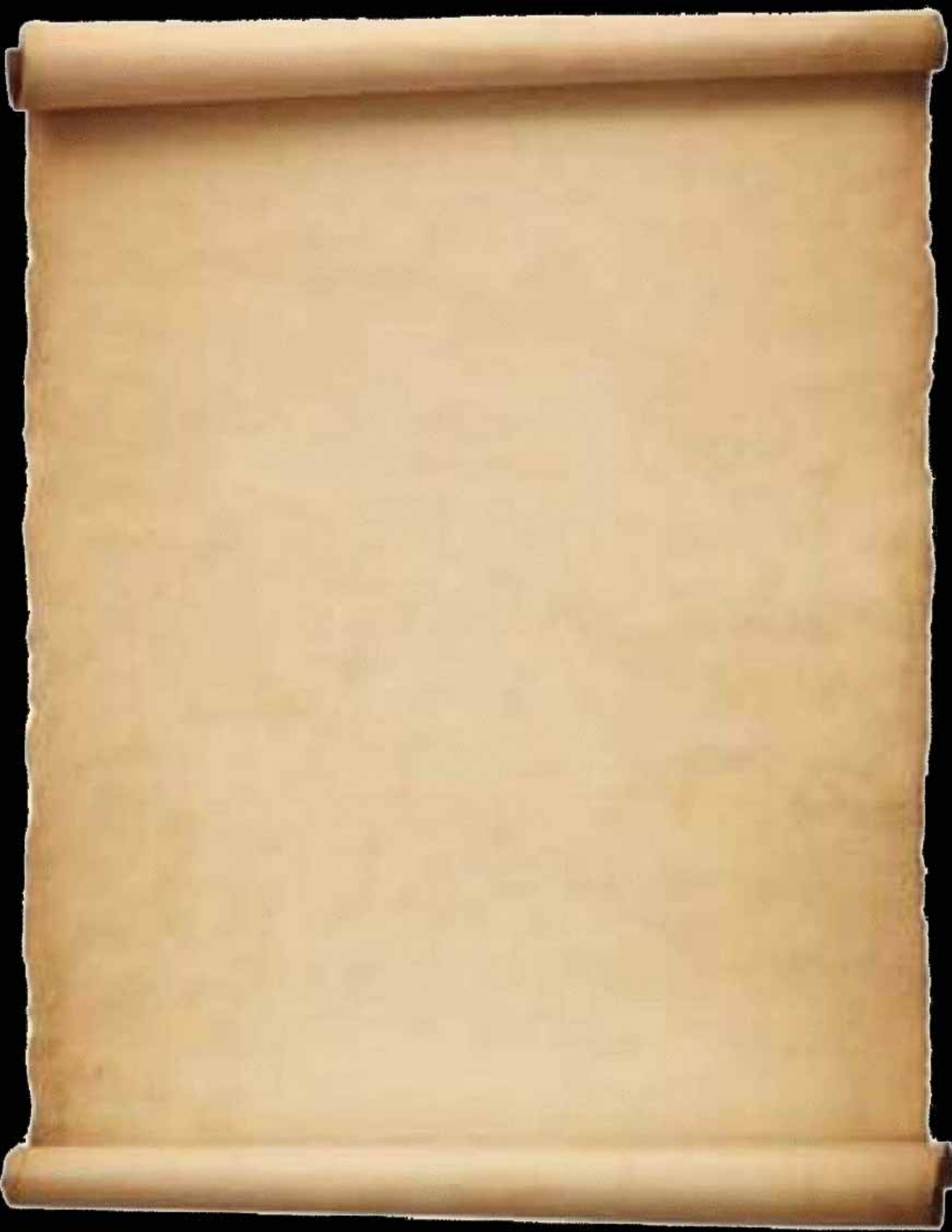


THE STORY OF XTUL
(SO FAR)



I

It says a lot, I think, about the calibre of the young people who spend some of their leisure hours working with the animals at the CFZ, that when confronted by something unquestionably strange they don't bat an eyelid. The other afternoon I was unwell (something which happens with depressing frequency these days) and I had retired to bed. One of our volunteers, a twelve year old girl, was sitting in my study trying to count the relative numbers of Endler's livebearers and knife livebearers in the tank on my desk, when a cacophony of canine contumely heralded the arrival of a visitor to my door.

She remarked to me afterwards that it was strange that she didn't hear the gate open, and that Mark Raines, who was working in the garden didn't notice these visitors arrive. They were two tall thin bearded men wearing long, black, hooded robes. They didn't introduce themselves, just demanded to see me. When told that I was asleep, ill in bed, they gave her an envelope containing a key drive, and without speaking, walked along the path to the gate, and left.

When I woke up later, my volunteer had gone back to her family for tea, and I only heard the story second hand. I opened the envelope, put the key drive into the computer (which, with the benefit of hindsight was a remarkably stupid thing to do, because it could have contained any number of unimaginably horrid computer viruses) and was totally aghast at what I found.

It was a letter and a number of sound and video files. The letter was from someone called Mister Loxodonta, who identified himself as a member of a collective called Xtul. It started off conventionally enough, but then it turned out that Mister Loxodonta was (or at least claimed to be) a terminally ill half naked man with the head of an elephant who sometimes wrote in conventional prose, but had the off-putting habit of launching into regular metred rhyming couplets, of the sort that my late mother called "tum te tum te tumty tum" and the even later Rudyard Kipling was wont to indulge in.

My name is Mr Loxodonta
And when your mind begins to wander
Into places that you know
You really shouldn't let it go
In the gaps between your dreams
Where you hear the idiots scream
That's basically where I can be found
Playing games with light and sound

My name is Mr Loxodonta
I'll find you when you don't want to
Explore realms of world as myth
And pantheistic multi-person
Solipsism 101,
The games of chance have just begun
I'm dying but it doesn't matter
My alter-ego just gets fatter

Apparently there are five or six of them, but only three are named:

- Mister Loxodonta

- Mistress Discordia
- Panne

From the badly scrawled drawings, and fantastical Photoshop constructs that I have been sent, Dora Discordia is a statuesque blonde lady with a skull for a head, and Panne is a schoolgirl dressed as a goatman, or perhaps a goatman who has taken on some of the characteristics of a schoolgirl.

Then later that evening I got an email. It was from an old acquaintance (I won't say 'friend' because although we have known each other for a third of a century so far, I don't think either of us has ever liked the other very much. His name is Danny Miles/Danny Myles/Danny Myers (choose whichever name suits you and him best at the time). I first met him in 1981, and the circumstances of our meeting are chronicled in my 1999 book *The Blackdown Mystery*.

I first met Danny Miles at an obscure North Devon rock festival during the late summer of 1981. In those days I was an innocent and not very streetwise fellow in my early twenties, and I still believed that world peace could be achieved by the ingestion of various noxious substances whilst sitting in muddy fields listening to musical ensembles make whooshing noises on (what seem to me now) to be very primitive synthesisers.

I was, I believe, watching *Hawkwind* playing a spectacularly inept version of *Master of the Universe*, and like most of the rest of the audience, who were cold, muddy and uncomfortable, pretending that I was enjoying myself whilst in reality I was in dire need of both a lavatory and a nice cup of tea and totally unwilling to avail myself of the horribly rudimentary versions of either facility that had been laid on for our "comfort" by the euphemistically named "organisers" of the event. About a hundred yards to my right were the serried ranks of the local Hells Angel fraternity who were encamped en masse like an iron clad phalanx of doom. It was only twelve years after Altamont, and even in the bucolic wastelands of rural Devon, they felt that they had something to live up to. Unfortunately, for me at least, they had decided to set up camp immediately between the area where I had set up my tiny tent and parked my car and the main exit, and several of the nastiest and meanest looking of them were patrolling the area armed with pool cues and what I think were hollowed out pickaxe handles that had been filled with molten lead. I was therefore somewhat marooned, and feeling uncomfortable, isolated, alone and more than a little frightened.

Suddenly, in the middle of what appeared to me to be a sea of greasy black leather jackets, emerged a delicate, fey looking figure, wearing an extraordinary array of satins and silks in a variety of peacock colours. It looked for all the world as if one of the gaily coloured inhabitants of one of Arthur Rackham's fairy paintings had suddenly been transported into the middle of a field of leather-clad Neanderthals. The figure tripped gaily towards me, and appeared to my addled brain to be floating like a surreal, and rainbow-hued butterfly above the sea of mud and motorbikes. As it got closer I could see that it was a youth, hardly old enough to shave with an angelic halo of light brown hair surrounding a face that was covered with intricate paintings of butterflies and lotus flowers. He came and sat next to me and my companions.

Much to my amazement everyone else who was with me seemed to take this apparition in their stride. "Lo Danny", one of them grunted cheerfully, "ow are y`doing?". Another friend asked him what the hell he had been doing wandering blithely through the middle of the taciturn, unfriendly and potentially dangerous crowd of bikers. "Ahhhhh they`re harmless." he said, in an Irish accent that he seemed to be able to turn on and off at will, "and anyway they wouldn't hurt me...I am legion, I am many".

His name was Danny Miles, and for reasons known best to himself he had recently adopted the nom-de-guerre of *Legion the Cosmic Dancer*. I got to know him reasonably well over the next few years, and he would occasionally drift into my life, causing chaos for a few weeks and then disappear as simply as he had arrived. During the years when fashions were led by *Culture Club* and the New Romantics, Danny was in his element. He paraded his omnisexuality for all to see like some magnificent, (if slightly deranged) bird of paradise and flirted outrageously with boys and girls alike. As the decade of Thatcherism advanced and my life became more normal, and I drifted into my disastrous marriage

and the twin pitfalls of a job and a mortgage I saw less of him, but he would still turn up once in a while, and we would sit up long into the night drinking wine, gazing at the stars and talking about nothing in particular as I dreamed dreams of my lost youth. Danny never seemed to either grow any older or to settle down.

My first wife disliked him intensely, and I don't think my second wife has ever met him. He has turned up in my life on various occasions over the past thirty years, but I have only heard from him occasionally (and not seen him) since the turning of the millennium when he turned up at my house unexpectedly talking nonsense about succubi and clutching a gift basket of blueberry muffins for me; a gift which he then proceeded to eat entirely himself.

But like a bad penny, he has turned up again. According to his peculiar email, which he dubbed "A Communiqué from the Xtul Underground", he (dubbing himself Xtul's 'Minister for Information' was letting me in upon "The Summer of the Great Secret" and had decided that it was my "Holy Mission" to help propagate the "Message of the Neo-Godz in the Vineyards of Madness", which seems to mean helping him with a Facebook page for (what appears to be) a rather interesting little band operating in much the same territory as the late lamented *KLF*.

I have cautiously agreed for a number of reasons.

- Firstly, I like the music
 - I like the challenge – this reminds me of one of the peculiar magickal art games like THE CASE that I played with Doc Shiels
 - Danny knows where the bodies are buried (in my case at least) and it would be unwise for me to cross him
- My life has been getting a little dull recently, and if there is one thing I have learned over the years, it is that life with Danny is never dull

So onwards and upwards. Let us see what this summer will bring.



I HAVE KNOWN Danny Miles for nearly all my adult life, and whilst I don't like him very much (and never have, if I must tell the truth) it does seem that our destinies are somehow peculiarly linked. In many ways we are very similar; he is the part of my psyche which is unbelievably promiscuous, completely feckless and commodifies people to an insane extent. I am the part of his psyche who worries about things, drinks too much brandy, actually achieves things apart from mischief making, and has a conscience (although doesn't always pay it much attention). About the only thing that we have in common is that we both want to change the world, albeit in completely different ways and for completely different reasons.

I am never particularly surprised when he turns up in my life, and so when he re-appeared a few weeks ago in the guise of the 'Minister of Information' for a group called Xtul I took it in my stride. It so happened that this time I knew a bit about – if not *what* he was talking about – what he was *pretending* to talk about. I also knew from whence he had lifted his influences.

Danny has always been a magpie, stealing ideologies from all and sundry. When I first met him back in the early 1980s, he had taken bits of the philosophy of Timothy Leary, mixed it with large chunks of Charlie Manson, and a pinch of Crowley and dressed it up in the then current peacock fashion styles of the New Romantics, and fused it all together to start a peculiar psychedelic sex cult. I was sucked in hook, line and sinker for a few months and even now my sleep (usually fairly calm due to the enormous amounts of chemicals my Doctor prescribes me) is sometimes shattered by lightning flashes of memory as I relive nights in the middle of a thunderstorm, dancing naked together with a group of other like-minded idiots - under the full moon, off my tits on psilocybin. Something that I really wouldn't rec-

commend to anybody reading this.

But now he was back, and once again stealing ideologies from anyone he cared to. All the bits about Minister for Information where from John Sinclair's White Panther Party in the 1960s who, in turn, had stolen them from Bobby Seale's Black Panther Party. The idea of sending cryptic communiqués out anonymously was stolen piecemeal from The Angry Brigade, a relatively obscure British terrorist group of the early 1970s, and even the name *Xtul* had a long and somewhat sinister provenance.

It so happened that, totally by chance, I knew quite a bit about all three of these subjects. And I also knew that Danny did.. because most of his information had come from me in the first place. So after my first contact with him on the matter of *Xtul* a few weeks ago, and a couple of impressive looking Communiques which turned up in my email inbox but which, when one looked hard enough were purely sound and fury which signified nothing at all, I wasn't particularly surprised when he turned up at my front door.

I was working in my lab late one night. Well, actually, I was. In 1800 there was a fire that burned down two very old cottages on the outskirts of Woolsery. Five years later a single, large cottage was built on the ruins, utilising bits of the ruins which were intact and at least 300 years old. In the 1950s a bit was built on the side, and in the 1970s another extension. My family have lived here since 1971, and I still do today. On the end of the house is an ancient lean-to that originally housed potatoes. It is my office, study, recording studio, editing suite, and yes...laboratory. And I was working in the potato shed late one night when my eyes did behold a terrible sight. It was Danny Miles dressed in a peculiar paramilitary uniform flanked by two tall figures wearing dark, hooded robes.

Here we go again, I thought.

He opened the door and the three of them walked in without knocking. I often sleep very badly, and so it was about 3:00am and Mother had gone to bed about three hours before. An hour or so later, Corinna (my lovely, and long suffering wife) went to bed, followed by the small gaggle of carnivores who always accompany her (two cats, a terrier and what seems at first to be a small pygmy hippo which upon closer investigation is a bulldog x boxer bitch called Prudence). There were various fish, and amphibians, doing their own inimitable thing in their tanks which are scattered about the building, there were Corinna's pet rats, and of course there were the various ghosts with which the house is infested, but I was the only primate still awake.

They came in to my study uninvited; the two robed figures stood implacably by the door, and – as far as I am able to remember – said nothing at all during the whole time they were with me, and Danny (unsurprisingly for anyone who has ever met him) started to talk – nineteen to the dozen – as soon as he entered.

Once again he was talking about a band called *Xtul*. He had played me a few songs by them before, and sent me a few more via Dropbox, and I thought that they were truly excellent. Danny really didn't have to blackmail me into writing about them. But approaching things in a conventional style, like asking a music journalist to write about a new band just isn't his style. He had something on me (he was privy to information about me that he thought nobody knew, although that wasn't actually the case) and was determined to use it as leverage to use me for his own nefarious ends.

I couldn't be bothered to argue the toss with him, (it was pointless to explain that her husband never did find out, and that she went on to marry someone else well over fifteen years ago) and so I sat him down and did my best to find out some more information about this peculiar band *Xtul*. It so happened that I knew a bit about a certain quasi-Satanist occult group who apparently took legal action against Ed Sanders, author of the Charlie Manson biog 'The Family' saying that their inclusion in the book has brought the Satanist occult group into disrepute. They had lived in a Mexican coastal village called *Xtul* for a while, and I wondered whether there was any connection between this and this mysterious musical ensemble? Or whether, as was perfectly possible, Danny had just nicked the title from somewhere because it sounded good.

He told me a little bit more about them. Apparently there were three of them – Mr Loxodonta, Mistress Discordia, and

Panne - and none of them were human anymore. When he started talking up a farrago of occult nonsense about how each of them had been turned into Gods and/or Daemons by events of an incalculable cosmic majesty my brain started to go to sleep. I remembered only too well how a harmless practical joke played by two Wildlife Officers upon a spectacularly inept UFO Research Group, once sucked into the vortex which is Dany Miles and spat out again, became a sinister conspiracy theory that nearly got my arrested by Special Branch, and involved an escaped murderer, several occult rituals, and the consumption of large quantities of alcohol and drugs. If you don't believe me, check out a little thing I wrote fifteen years ago called *The Blackdown Mystery*. It is mildly amusing, and whilst I made some of it up (mostly to take the piss out of Nick Redfern) it does provide a valuable object lesson in how not to take Danny Miles too seriously.

I have taken what he said *cum grano salis* ever since. Three Gods, with a coterie of hooded followers who happen to play guitars, piano and bass? Three malevolent Gods with no reason to perceive humanity with anything but contempt and anger? Three Gods (one male, one female, and one gender neutral) who happen to form a progressive hip hop band? I didn't believe a word of it!



This is the busiest time of my year. In mid August each year I promote the CFZ Weird Weekend, and a motley mix of scientists, academics and oddball researchers descend upon North Devon. I have had quite a lot of problems with this year's event due to some intransigence and internal politics on the behalf of the local community centre where we have held the event for the past eight years. On top of that, I have been having some serious problems with some of my associates who have been running me ragged and robbing me blind, and so as a result of the stress and my ridiculous work levels, I have been keeping very strange hours. Often I am awake all night and only get too bed for fitful sleep at round about dawn, and so it was on the night that I had my latest strange visitors.

Corinna and Mother had gone to bed, and I was sitting in my study working on an article about yellow legged tortoiseshells. It is possibly symbolic of the strange times in which we are living that at the time that I write this we are undergoing an interesting invasion from Eastern Europe.

In 1953 a single specimen of an eastern European butterfly called the Scarce or Yellow Legged Tortoiseshell was caught in Kent. Another specimen was found dead in the Shetlands in November last year. But now, following a huge invasion of western Europe, they have turned up in some numbers in eastern England. There is now speculation that they might breed here.

I said to Corinna that as my stepdaughter Olivia lives in Norfolk she should give the forthcoming baby the middle name of Xanthomelas in honour of this extraordinary invasion, and she just looked at me with barely disguised disdain.

I am a fairly heavy drinker, and I was sitting typing with Archie the Jack Russell asleep on my lap, and a bottle of cheap bourbon by my side. I was also listening to the first solo album by Damon Albarn, which is my favourite record of the year so far and I was fairly deeply engrossed in what I was doing, so I didn't hear the door open. I just looked up and there was Danny Miles grinning at me knowingly. He was accompanied by a slight figure in a long black hooded robe, with the hood pulled down so I couldn't see its face.

"Lo Jon" he said. I grunted in reply. I was not in the mood for dealing with any more of his bullshit. I was enjoying the music and the whisky and was engrossed in my task, and didn't want to hear any more of his nonsense about demi-Gods performing hiphop. "What do you want?" I grunted rudely.

"There's someone I want you to meet", he said. "Say hello to Panne", and the robed figure spoke to me shyly in the voice of a young teenage girl, "Hello Jon".

I was still unimpressed. "Look man" I said to him, rudely ignoring his companion. "I don't wanna be rude to either of you, but I am not in the mood for this. I have got lots of work to do, and I don't want to be distracted... by anyone".

Danny looked at me smugly. "I know that you found the story that I told you hard to believe, so I thought that I should try and convince you". He gestured to his companion. "Take your robe off Panne".

She did as he asked, and with horror I saw that she was wearing nothing underneath it.

I am nearly 40 years too old to be having naked teenage girls in my rooms, and I reacted with horror! I have told you before how I have never liked or trusted Danny Miles, and how he was already attempting to blackmail me into helping him with his insane schemes. Back in the late 1990s, after my divorce from Alison, I was having an affair with a married woman who was not only notorious in her own right, but was then married to a well known and very influential businessman in the computer games industry. Danny had already intimated that he would make this affair public, if I did not help him with his project.

What he didn't know was that not only did Corinna - my second wife - know all about it, but that the lady in question was now divorced from her influential husband and married to someone else. We still send each other Christmas greetings on Facebook and occasionally swap Leonard Cohen bootlegs, but that is the extent of our relationship these days.

They say that when you are close to death your entire life passes before your eyes in slow motion, and as Corinna and I nearly died in a car crash on the M25 about seven years ago, I can confirm that this is actually true. As I stared at the naked figure before me, exactly the same thing happened. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that Danny had decided to take advantage of the current socio-political situation following the revelations about the late Jimmy Savile and the conviction a few weeks back of Rolf Harris; he had brought a naked girl into my study in order to attempt to blackmail me further. It is exactly the sort of thing that the bastard would have done. Then I realised something: the person before me was indeed unclothed, and had the slight figure of a thirteen or fourteen year old girl. But she was covered in silky brown fur, she had two cloven hooves where she should have had feet, and two - rather cute, I have to admit - tiny horns peeking out from the curly hair on her forehead.

Then my inner zoologist kicked in, and I noted - clinically - that she (I still thought of her as female) had no external secondary sexual characteristics, and that the shape of her face, shoulders and forearms were such that whatever she was....she was certainly not human.

"Fuck!" I said, and took a deep swig from my whisky and coke.

IV

Oh how times have changed. I am not talking about the Scottish independence vote, or the events in the Middle East, but - for once - for me personally. As regular readers of my blog will know I have done something unpleasant to my neck and because this unpleasant something is exceedingly painful, I am now on a complex cocktail of muscle relaxants and narcotic pain-killers, which is pretty much the cocktail of chemicals that I used to use for recreational purposes about a quarter of a century ago. The results are fairly similar (except that I am not dancing around the office to the On U sound system) and I am what I used to describe as "out of my gourd".

The weird thing is that now, instead of finding it a pleasant sensation, I am feeling mildly nauseous, very drowsy and wondering why I ever paid good money to feel like this. I wonder if I put 'The Happy Mondays' on, whether it will make the sensation any better. It always worked for me back in 1990. (I tried. Sadly, it didn't)

But as a result of this new chemical regimen, I am keeping peculiar hours, and last night, after everyone else was fast

asleep in bed, I was downstairs with the smaller of my two dogs listening to music on my iPad, and reading *Brandy of the Damned* by John Higgs, which is an extraordinary book about which I shall be writing in some depth at another juncture. But my mind is as ephemeral as a newly hatched mayfly, and if I go off at a tangent and talk about Higgs' book, I will never finish telling you what I want to talk about. So I won't.

I was sitting with Archie the Jack Russell in my favourite armchair, lost to the world, when he began to whimper and cower in submission. I looked up, and Panne was standing there looking down at me.

My father was a strange man. He suffered from the dichotomy of being a devout Christian of the old-fashioned Anglican variety, and also having leanings towards Paganism. His mother had been a witch and had introduced several of my cousins to the craft, and whilst my father knew this and occasionally alluded to it in his conversation whilst the old lady (and, believe me, she was very much a lady) was alive, I don't think he ever completely accepted it.

However, despite being a Churchwarden and a Lay Preacher, he could also divine water (as can I) and charm warts (which I can't) and I will always remember one day when I was about nine. We had left my beloved Hong Kong for six weeks, and were on a family holiday on Dartmoor. My little brother (now in his early 50s and a high ranking Army Chaplain, who – I suspect – doesn't really approve of the path that my life has taken) was unwell, and my mother and grandmother were back at the B&B looking after him. My father was saddled with the job of taking the 10 year old Jonathan for a long and brisk walk.

My father was a Dartmoor man born and bred, and he knew far more about the place than he ever let on. On this occasion we parked the little Mini Clubman that he had hired for the duration of the holiday in the carpark next to Hound Tor, where these days there is usually parked a mobile café with the greatest title of all time – *Hound of the Basket Meals* and walked up the narrow incline towards the tor itself. For those of you who do not know such things, the tors of Dartmoor are great formations of granite – fossilised volcanic cores – that stick out of the top of moorland hills on Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor. I have always thought that they look like enormous stone cowpats, and they dominate the landscape making it look unearthly and more like something from the cover of a 1970s progressive rock album than something that one expects to find in a National Park in southern England.

My father and I walked up the hill in silence. We had always had a difficult relationship, and for some reason I had the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in my head as it began to drizzle and we trudged on. The tor itself was seething with holiday makers and so rather than climb to the top, we walked on past it, and down the hill on the other side in a vaguely easterly direction to find somewhere where we could have our lunch.

Eventually we found ourselves in a patch of ancient woodland that I have never been able to find since. Much of the woodland that you can see if you examine the area on Google Earth is relatively modern, coniferous forest, either planted by the Forestry Commission, or by private landowners, who – in the years following WW2 – had done their best to jump on the bandwagon and turn unproductive wilderness into the location for a lucrative timber industry which usually failed to materialise, but scattered amongst these dark green and regimented fir forests were small pockets of native deciduous woodland, not as gnarled and overtly witchy as places like Wistman's Wood, but still with their own ancient magickal vibe.

We sat down, resting against huge boulders and ate out sandwiches and crisps, and it was whilst masticating on our desert of individual Walls fruit pies (I always particularly liked the black-currant ones) when we heard a noise.

It was an eerie, low, pulsating sound unlike anything I had ever heard before. It was the wildest and most exciting noise that I had ever heard; it was recognisably music. But it didn't sound like any other music that I had ever heard before.

“W-w-what's that Daddy?” I asked, hesitantly, not sure that anyone but I could hear it. Even at such a young age I was aware that I could sometimes here things and see things that no-one else could, and I was always afraid to admit such a

fact (although if I had done, my psychosis would probably have been treated decades before it actually was).

But I needn't have worried. Just one look at my father showed that he was as enraptured as I, but it seemed to be more familiar to him. Unlike me, he didn't seem scared.

The music filled me with strange, exciting longings. The nearest that I have ever come to being able to describe it was in the lyrics to a 'Pet Shop Boys' song I heard a third of a century later: "I feel like taking all my clothes off, and dancing to the Rite of Spring, but I wouldn't normally do that kind of thing". I wanted to rip my clothes off and dance naked amongst the ancient woodlands, but my father was there, and of course I wouldn't do such a thing in front of him.

So I asked for the third time, and this time he answered, in a strange, soft voice.

"It's Pan, boy. The God of the Woods. Those are his pipes, and what you are feeling is Panic".

I had, of course, read *Wind in the Willows* and my favourite chapter of it had been 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' in which Portly the lost baby otter is discovered in the care of the horned God of the ancient woodlands, so I knew exactly what he was talking about. I started chattering excitedly and this broke the spell, and my father's eyes filled with an immense sadness, and I realised that I had just done something else to him that he could add to the long list of things for which he would never be able to forgive me.

In the ensuing years I have heard snippets of what I thought could have been those pipes again. But never as clearly, and I have never felt that full-blown rush of feral joy course through my veins. I have heard it in the wilder parts of England. Once I heard it in the hills of Hong Kong, and most recently, during July 2004 in the El Yunque Forest of Puerto Rico. When I was younger I tried to invoke it by dancing naked in the woods and screaming out Crowley's *Hymn to Pan* but to no avail.

But, like the protagonist of the 'Waterboys' song *The Return of Pan* I know one thing beyond doubt. I know that the "Great God Pan is alive".

But what was the relationship between Pan and Panne?

Even before I had heard these verses, I had always tried to follow the moral compass given:

At sea on a ship in a thunderstorm
On the very night that Christ was born
A sailor heard from overhead
A mighty voice cry, "Pan is dead!"
So follow Christ as best you can
Pan is dead, long live Pan!
From the olden days and up through all the years
From Arcadia to the stone fields of Inisheer
Some say the Gods are just a myth
But guess who I've been dancing with
The great god Pan is alive

And now I had this little goat-footed soul standing before me for the third time. This time (s)he was alone. Archie treated Panne with a respectful deference that I had never seen him do to anyone or anything before. I had already figured out that (s)he was neither human nor animal, and I didn't feel like I was in the presence of a God. As I have tried to describe before, Panne had the slight, boyish figure of a teenaged girl, but was covered with short, wiry, chestnut

brown hair which shimmered in the reflexion of the light from the fishtanks in the corner of my room. I got the overwhelming impression that (s)he was not male, and not female, but whether Panne was neither – or both – was something that I have not yet been able to work out.

Back in a previous life, when I was the acting Night Nursing Officer at the long defunct St Mary's Hospital in Axminster, I had looked after a middle aged person with a hermaphroditic disorder. This person had been raised as a woman, and I always thought of her as such, but between her legs, as well as a vagina she had a small, but – apparently – fully functioning penis and testicles. She was not only severely clinically subnormal but was dying of cancer, and was bed-ridden. I had to bed bath her often, and her dual physical gender both repelled and fascinated me. The fact that she sprung an erection every time she was bathed and powdered for bedsores was particularly disturbing. But this patient of mine was a freak. The psychic vibes that she gave out were of a wrongness that even surgery could never expunge. Bother her body and her soul were deformed due to a teratological anomaly and she had been doomed to a long, horrible and unproductive life in hospital, and I was relieved and happy for her when she died.

But Panne is not like this. Whatever (s)he is (and I still have no idea) (s)he is perfect and healthy and exactly the way (s)he is meant to be. And, peculiarly, I am not in the slightest bit scared of her. And the fact that (s)he had suddenly turned up in my sitting room in the middle of the night without warning, didn't seem in the slightest bit disturbing.

I looked up at her.

“Hello Panne” I said.

(S)he looked back in silence.

“What can I do for you?” I asked, feeling slightly embarrassed at asking such a banal question under such extraordinary circumstances.

Panne stared back at me with her unblinking yellow eyes with their vertical caprine pupils.

“Have you any chocolate?” (s)he asked shyly.

V

I got another one of Danny Miles' stupid bloody “communiqués” in my e-post this morning, and it irritated me so much that I decided that I really had to break silence.

There is a well-known syndrome in both fact and fiction that someone to whom strange and inexplicable things happens refuses to tell anyone because they didn't want to appear to be losing their sanity. This doesn't apply to me. No-one has ever considered me to be sane, nor have I ever pretended that I was. All sorts of strange things have happened to me throughout my life, and I have usually written about them. The only reason that I have not been doing so over the events of the past few weeks, is that I don't care. I have far more important things going on in my life at the moment than Danny Miles and his damn fool attempts at being a Black Panther, and even the fact that a strange Halfling from the depths of the forest has taken to visiting me in the middle of the night in search of chocolate pales into insignificance in comparison with my main concern of the moment. A few weeks ago I became a Grandfather for the first time, and the doings of the rest of the omniverse really do not matter a damn in comparison with that.

So I have been doing my best to emulate a proverbial ostrich; I have been sticking my head in the sand and ignoring everything else while I try to grok the biggest and most momentous thing ever to have happened to me.

I have never made any secret of the fact that I am bipolar. I am also not that far away from being a Paranoid Schizophrenic, and I also have a fair parcel of neuroses and personality disorders sprinkled here and there as well. Physically I am a fairly uncontrolled diabetic, I have a heart condition, arthritis and a number of other things wrong with me. I am also overweight, drink heavily, smoke more cigarettes than I admit to my doctor and occasionally partake in more exotic diversions, so both my physical and mental condition is pretty ropey.

I have tried to kill myself, twice. The last time was fifteen years ago and I don't think I shall try and do it again. Russell Hoban described it best in *Turtle Diary*:

"It was absolutely uncanny, gave me the creeps. That woman actually thought I'd been thinking of suicide. I had been thinking of it right enough, often do, always have the idea of it huddled like a sick ape in the back of my mind. But I'd never do it. Well, that's not true either. I can imagine the state of mind, I've been in it often enough. no place for the self to sit down and catch its breath. Just being hurried, hurried out of existence. When I feel like that even such a thing as posting a letter or going to the laundrette wears me out. The mind moves ahead of every action making me tired in advance of what I do. Even a thing as simple as changing trains in the Underground becomes terribly heavy..."

Over the last decade and a half I have acquired an ever expanding extended family, and the main reason that I don't think that I will try and kill myself again is because of them, and especially because of my wife whom I love very much indeed. But the thought of it is always huddled like Hoban's sick ape at the back of my consciousness, and I have never much cared whether I lived or died, as long as my departure from this world is not as unpleasant, painful; and undignified as most people's seems to be. That is why I still drink, smoke and do other things potentially injurious to my health. Because my particular sick ape tells me that it won't really make much difference whether I do or I don't. But now things have changed. I have a reason to live. I want to see my granddaughter Evelyn grow up.

This is the biggest change in my mindset for decades, and I am trying to get my head around it, which is why Danny Miles' damn fool nonsense has not really made much of an impact on me over the past few weeks. However, now I begin to think of it, the events of the past few weeks really do need to be written down whilst they are still fresh in my head.

The night that Panne turned up in my sitting room was the beginning of it all. (S)he had come through two locked doors without disturbing either of my dogs. Archie, the smallest and most volatile of them had been sitting on my lap as I vaguely scratched his tummy whilst reading, listening to music and vaguely worrying about the journey to Norfolk which we would be undertaking a week or so later to be there for when Olivia gave birth.

The fact that even when (s)he appeared before us, Archie didn't rush about excitedly, barking like a mad thing, but lay respectfully at her feet and silent as the grave was weird enough, but it was his/her completely banal request for chocolate that floored me. I smiled at him/her and went into the Dining Room which doubles as my wife's office and broke about six squares of Cadbury's Fruit and Nut off a big bar that I knew that she had secreted next to her scanner. I went to the Court Cupboard that Lady Christine Hamlyn had given to my Grandmother as a Christening present back in 1898, and grabbed a bottle of brandy, the cheapest that Asda could provide, that I had bought at the supermarket the previous day, and went back into the Sitting Room.

Panne was still there; motionless and silent, with Archie supine at his/her feet. I passed her the chunk that I had pinched from my wife's chocolate bar, and poured myself an enormous brandy and coke, lit myself a cigarette and wondered what I was going to do next.

I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that there was what appeared to be a naked Godling covered with hair standing in front of me eating my wife's chocolate. I remembered Mr Beaver's advice from *The Lion, The Witch and*

the Wardrobe:

“But in general, take my advice, when you meet anything that's going to be human and isn't yet, or used to be human once and isn't now, or ought to be human and isn't, you keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet.”

But I didn't have a hatchet. Or rather I did – it was in the fireplace awaiting its task of cutting up kindling if the winter of 2014-5 is cold enough to warrant more log fires than we needed last winter. But Panne was between me and the fireplace, and my mobility is so severely impaired these days, that even had I wanted to I wouldn't have been able to out-fox her and get to the fireplace in time and grab it. And even if I had wanted to I wouldn't have done it. I instinctively knew that Panne was good, or at the least morally neutral, and – even if I had been in possession of my hatchet – I was never going to use it to attack a creature that appeared to be a very sweet, slim fifteen year-old girl, albeit one covered in hair, with cloven hooves on her feet, and cute horns curling out of her forehead.

So I took a drag on my cigarette, gulped down a huge mouthful of brandy and diet coke, took a deep breath, and – for the first time – summoned enough courage up, and spoke to her.

“You know who I am, Panne. But who are you?”

Time seemed to stand still. She looked straight at me, and I gazed into her deep yellow eyes with the caprine vertical pupil, as she stared back at me in silence.

Then she slowly stepped towards me and – even more slowly – bent down towards me. For a few moments I stared back in horror, thinking that she was going to kiss me. I was still very aware that she may have been covered in hair, and may have had hooves and horns and the amber coloured eyes of a wild goat, but still in part appeared to be a naked teenage girl, and furthermore one who was (in some arcane way) allied to Danny Miles, who I have known for well over thirty years, and wouldn't trust further than I could throw him.

I started to protest, but she put one finger over her lips in the internationally recognised symbol for silence, bent nearer and rested her two horns on my forehead.

Then everything changed forever.

VI

Anyone who has ever been in truly excruciating pain without the benefit of analgesics will know what I mean when I say that for a few seconds after Panne's horns rested upon my forehead I felt a brief lightning flash of electric blue pain, and then momentarily lost consciousness, but then – a few moments later – I woke up, and I was in the last place that I could ever have expected.

I was standing outside the main ward block of Hawkmoor Hospital, just outside Bovey Tracey, and it appeared to be sometime in the mid 1970s.

Now, this is where it gets weird. I like to pride myself on being a reasonably good writer, but here – quite literally – words fail me. I have always been mildly irritated when I read a novel in which a passage like this appears, but quite truly I cannot find words in the English language for what happened to me next.

As anyone who has read my inky fingered scribblings here and elsewhere will be aware, that over the years my central nervous system has not been a stranger to chemical stimulation. I am not one of these people who struts around the place figuratively wearing a T Shirt saying “I take Drugs Me” any more than I go around proclaiming my taste for sex,

curry, alcohol, or the books of Robert Heinlein, but I have – at various times in my life – indulged in various drugs. Those days are largely over, but I remember the experiences vividly, and none of them were anything like this. I took psychedelic drugs (LSD and magic mushrooms) for a few months over thirty years ago, and have not touched them since, but even in the depths of my most profound excursions through the doors of perception I always knew what I was experiencing were hallucinations. What I experienced the other night was completely real!

The nearest analogy that I can give is what happened to me about seven years ago when Corinna and I were involved in a serious car crash when I was driving our new Jaguar on the M25 and a car jack-knifed into us after being hit by a lorry and we spiralled out of control. For a few moments, as I desperately remembered what my father had taught me when I was learning to drive, I tried to right the car, but we hurtled into the crash barriers in the middle of the motorway and I truly thought that we were both about to die. During those moments I felt remarkably calm, but my life *did* flash before my eyes, or at least selected scenes from it did. And this was what was happening now, Except that it *wasn't* my life. It was someone else's.

Peculiarly, however, bits of my own experience were interspersed within the narrative, which was more like a cross between a particularly lucid dream and watching a film in 3D except without those stupid cardboard glasses that always make my nose itch. Initially I panicked, but unlike when I thought that my wife and I were about to die in a tangled maelstrom of flesh and bone on the M25, I knew that there was nothing I could do about it, and so I decided to treat the experience as if I was watching a film. So, with the slight figure of a woodland godling bending over me with his/her horns pushed against my forehead, I sat back in my chair, reached for my brandy, and decided to see what happened. As I did so, Archie jumped onto my lap, burrowed his way under my blanket and went to sleep.

Hawkmoor Hospital was opened in 1913 as part of a national programme to build hospitals and sanatoriums for the treatment of tuberculosis. It became part of the NHS in 1948, but within a few years was well on its way to being redundant as new antibiotic treatments made TB as a widespread disease in Britain largely a thing of the past. It then slowly became used as a unit for residential care of long term Mentally Handicapped adults, which is what it was when I went there a few times during the summer of 1984. Its days were already numbered; the Thatcherite programme of 'Care in the Community' which was doomed to failure because – on the whole – the community not only didn't care, but didn't give a fuck, and the hospital was already scheduled for closure.

At the time I was a Student Nurse working towards my RHMH qualification, and I was doing a placement with the Torbay Mental Health Community Team, who were pivotally involved with the management of the hospital during its final years. According to the Internet, by 1984 there were over a hundred patients living there, but I don't think I ever saw more than a couple of dozen – severely mentally and physically disabled, sat in a row of wheelchairs in a room reeking of pine disinfectant positioned in front of a TV with the volume off for hours on end.

I found the whole place really upsetting and said so, which did not make me popular with the Community Charge Nurse in charge of my education at the time, so I was dismissed peremptorily, and told to make myself scarce. This I did, and I spent the next hour or so exploring what had once been a charming period sanatorium straight out of the pages of Agatha Christie. One could easily imagine Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings furtively sneaking about the place, avoiding the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* bacilli and searching for clues.

At the top of the hill was a handsome, but horridly run down, building which had once been some kind of pavilion. Much to my surprise, whilst pootling around on the internet while I was supposed to be working on something else, I found a photograph of the building in an article on Hawkmoor Hospital in one of the pdf magazines published by the Devon Historical Society. I remember it as being bigger, longer and more magnificent, both from my memories of my visits there thirty years ago when it was used as a storeroom for broken and unserviceable hospital equipment and my experience of the other night, but it is certainly the same building, and mildly reminiscent of the Cricket Pavilion back at my rather shabby provincial *alma mater*. And just like the aforementioned Cricket Pavilion, when I went snooping around it back in 1984 it was showed every evidence of being used regularly by the locals as a place to indulge in sexual fumbings and smoke cigarettes.

...just the
Act, so that compre
to this should be made by local authorities.

...ity lay with the County Council, and with Devonport, Exeter
...h Councils. It was under this scheme that Devon and Exeter
...ide the new
...moor. On the first
...t five patients, housed
...elters, but plans were
...ved for 80 beds in three



Open Air Tuberculosis Shelter, Boulton and Paul catalogue, 1912

...a popular site for
...se of the importance
...r quality fresh air as part
...ent. Plymouth's response to the
...policy was to fund a wing, the King
...ward VII Memorial Pavilion, at the Didworthy Sanatorium, near South Brent, run
...03 by the local branch of the Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis.

...m treatment, Devon County Council planned long-term care b
...wton Abbot and at Tiverton, for example. Schemes already
...groups, such as the open-air shelters in Crediton and Tr
...ital in Torquay, were adopted. 'Dispensaries', clearing
...l were also established. Those initiat
...Exeter and ...le S

The other night, however, I saw it restored to full function, with patients in wheelchairs enjoying themselves in the sun, and nurses in crisp blue uniforms bustling around with busy looks on their faces. Various people in mufti were also to be seen doing their own inimitable thing, and from the haircuts and footwear I would hazard a guess that the year was sometime post Ziggy and pre-Sex Pistols, approximately 1975.

Although I assumed that I was seeing the spectacle through Panne's eyes, I saw a small girl on a tricycle with a teddy bear riding pillion. She was pootling up and down the path outside the front of the pavilion and as none of the other people who were obviously either resident or working there were paying her any attention it appeared as if this personable little girl with the bright pink dress and the teddy bear was an accepted part of the landscape.

This intrigued me. Even in the early 1980s when I first started working for the NHS, the once proud beacon of democracy, and – arguably – the only good thing to result from the Second World War was crumbling beneath the weight of bureaucracy and administration, and although it was many years before the Health and Safety Executive started to make this country impossible to live in, small children were not allowed to play unsupervised in the grounds of psychiatric institutions.

This intrigued me. I had to be seeing this little girl for some reason. What could it be? By an effort of will I discovered

that I could change my vantage point and ‘follow’ her along the path as she happily rode her tricycle, and carried out a long) and presumably one sided) chuntering conversation with her teddy bear. So I followed her as best I could trying to find out who she was and what she was doing there. I had by suspicions about the former, but the latter was a complete enigma.

Strangely the fact that I was sitting in my armchair, underneath a blanket, cuddling a very cowed Jack Russell and swilling brandy like it was going out of fashion with the horns of a naked and hairy half goat half androgynous human pressed to my forehead didn’t phase me anything like as much as the fact that there was a small child playing happily forty years in the past in the middle of a residential hospital.

I zoomed in on the child and realised, not really to my surprise, that the little girl was Panne. Or rather she was part of what would eventually become Panne at some time in the future. I opened my mouth to speak but although brandy was perfectly able to go in, words seemed unable to come out. It was like one of those dreams when you try so hard to speak or shout, but find yourself unexpectedly and inexplicably mute.

So I tried to “think” the question. Maybe I could communicate with Panne in another way. And suddenly the scene changed again. Changed completely. And this time it was another devastating surprise. Because although I was still at Hawkmoor, but this time I was looking at a 24 year old version of myself. And I was completely alone.

I was reliving the events of the summer of 1984 when I was exploring the semi-deserted grounds of the hospital after having annoyed my supervisor so much that I had been cut loose to fend for myself for an afternoon rather than spending it attending a series of dull, but informative meetings to gain brownie points towards my nursing qualification.

However, here I have to say that I only have the vaguest memory of actually going to Hawkmoor Hospital at the time. Nothing important happened during my visit and it did not therefore impinge on my memory at all. So I am not sure whether what happened next actually happened at the time in 1984, or only happened to be in ur-space the other night, or whether these events had any objective reality at all.

The law forbidding staff in NHS institutions from smoking on the premises had yet to be brought in, but I was aware that I had already blotted my copybook more than I should have done, and as I wanted nothing more than to sit down, have a cigarette and read my dog-eared copy of *The Number of the Beast* by Robert Heinlein, I found myself furtively exploring the rear of what I had begun to think of as The Pavilion. The ground was littered with cigarette ends and as I approached, two surprisingly able-bodied looking patients each wearing the shameful stigmata of pre-frontal leucotomy shuffled away embarrassedly, adjusting their clothing as they did so. This was not a very wholesome place to be, but I continued my walk. I came to a pair of big French Windows, and looked in to see a pile of battered hospital beds, some Bristol Maid medication trolleys that had passed their best, and – in a corner – a battered red child’s tricycle and a dusty teddy bear.

I gasped. Panne pulled away from me with a start, and Archie started to bark. I was back in the present day, and sat alone in my armchair, there was no sign of Panne, and only a chocolate wrapper on the carpet gave any hint that (s)he had ever been there at all.

VII

Whatever I did after that it would be an anti-climax, so I polished off the brandy and Archie and I trotted off to bed to join Corinna and Prudence (Corinna being my wife and Prudence being a large, ungainly animal whose antecedents included bulldog and boxer, and who looks more than a little like a pygmy hippo). The excitement and the brandy

proved too much for me and I was asleep within minutes, dreaming of a normal world, where normal things happened and I was not privy to the complex emotional history of a strange half human Godling who had ventured out of the deep woods in search of chocolate.

The next day I awoke with a mild hangover and got on with my daily business. The events of the evening before had been so strange, that I really didn't feel able to talk about them with anyone, not even my wife, so when Danny Miles burst into my office in a state of what I believe the authoresses of historical 'bodice ripping' dramas would call 'High Dudgeon' I was not best pleased. As anyone who has read these memoirs so far will probably realise, I am not best pleased when Danny Miles turns up in my life at the best of times, but when he burst in through the door, yammering at the top of his voice and waving his arms about, before I had even finished my breakfast, and when my second cup of coffee had not yet dispelled the faint fronds of a hangover, it was really beyond the pale.

"What the fuck do you want?" I asked grumpily.

"What have you done with Panne?" he screamed at me with panic in his eyes.

I have learned quite a few lessons in diplomacy over the years, and I decided that it would be best if I adopted a position of what I believe the security services call 'plausible deniability'.

"I haven't done anything with her. What the hell are you talking about?"

"She has disappeared" he said, ashen faced, "and all hell has broken loose".

Much against my better judgement I sat him down, entreated my darling Mother-in-law who was carrying out her own arcane morning activities with a dustpan and brush to make me another cup of coffee and give Danny one as well, and as I blithely ignored my vague resolution not to smoke in the mornings, I lit a cigarette and did my best to try and find out what on earth this was all about.

Danny was not the most articulate of people at the best of times. His strengths lay in getting people to do stuff for him whilst he took a load of drugs and played the part of some metaphysical Mr Fixit. In all the years that I have known him I have never before seen him in a state of panic, but when one considers the derivation of the word, somehow this seemed quite appropriate.

"The word panic derives from the Greek πανικός, "pertaining to shepherd god Pan", who took amusement from frightening herds of goats and sheep into sudden bursts of uncontrollable fear. The ancient Greeks credited the battle of Marathon's victory to Pan, using his name for the frenzied, frantic fear exhibited by the fleeing enemy soldiers."

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia

Slowly I got the story out of him. Although he has been portraying himself as *Xtul's* Minister for Information, he is basically nothing of the sort. This didn't surprise me overmuch. It has been many years since I was actually impressed by anything that Danny Miles said or did.

He was actually a fairly lowly go-between who had no real idea of who the three members of *Xtul* actually was, let alone their true nature, where they actually came from, or what they were doing.

He had got involved with them by accident, and – following his usual *modus operandi* – was just exploiting the situation as best he could in an entirely opportunist manner.

He was even cagier than usual about how he had got involved with them, but from what I could gather, at some point at

the end of last year he had been driving up from Cornwall to visit his old friend and sometime lover Basil at his home which was in a hut deep in the Somerset Levels.

He picked up two girls who were hitchhiking along the A39 in torrential rain. Knowing him as well as I unfortunately do, I am sure that his motivation was purely venal, but whether his intentions were consummated or not he did not reveal, and I really didn't care. He was quite prepared to go off on some pulchritudinous tangent, describing how the two girls were "soaked to the skin, leaving little to the imagination" but I did my best to shit him up, and return him to the matter at hand.

It turns out that the unlikely trio stopped off at the *Westcountry Inn* for lunch, and according to his description, they were all over him "like a rash", considering him as "their hero" for having rescued them from the torrential downpour. I hate to admit, however that I doubted it. Whereas it is an indisputable fact that when he was younger, Danny had some indefinable magic which seemed to appeal across the board to young women who fell for his peacock prettiness, his silks and satins, and his air of debauched elegance. But he was a third of a century older, and whilst time has not been particularly kind to me, I have no pretensions as to being any kind of Love Machine, being quite happy in my self-imposed exile as some kind of middle aged hippy academic, with a wife, a mother-in-law, two stepdaughters, an infant granddaughter, two houses, mortgage and a couple of dogs.

Danny, however, was about five years younger than me, and had attained his half century unencumbered by responsibility, and still seemed to be trying to attain some personal Nirvana via the medium of casual sex and substance abuse. Now, I will admit that this was exactly what I was doing about seventeen years ago, but this phase only lasted a few years with me, in the aftermath of my particularly unpleasant divorce, and was over by the time I was about a decade younger than Danny is now. With the benefit of hindsight (good old hindsight) I can see that this was not a particularly dignified way for me to spend my time, but in my defence, I was only in my late thirties, and my life had just - very spectacularly - fallen apart. Danny (by now in his early fifties) sported a 'smart casual' haircut of the sort which looked tacky back in the late 1980s and merely looked ridiculous now. His rapidly greying hair was far thinner than he was prepared to accept, and his clothes were whatever the male equivalent of 'mutton dressed as lamb' is.

Although Danny had only one, mildly unsavoury motive in mind, he did his best to worm himself into the confidence of these two hapless young women, so he attempted to feign some sort of interest in their lives. And so when they told him that they were hitch-hiking across the country in order to meet up with the rest of their so-called 'Spiritual Family' who lived in a community where clothes and guns were optional, somewhere deep in the woods somewhere in North Devon, he suddenly started to show interest.

I have known Danny for a long time, but have always been aware of the unfortunate fact that he has had somewhat of a Charles Manson fixation ever since I have known him. This is something that I can understand, because back when I was about eighteen I had one too. It was the summer of 1978 and due to a concatenation of unfortunate incidents I found myself living with my cousin Pené and her first husband, in a house owned by the Devon and Cornwall Police in Plymouth.

That summer the Manson biopic *Helter Skelter* was shown for the first (only?) time on British TV and I was completely blown away. I was eighteen, unemployable, sexually confused, and completely lost, and I suddenly found something that appealed to me. Despite the fact that Manson and all of his main followers were (and still are) incarcerated or dead didn't put me off. The idea of an unruly tribe of social malcontents living a life of dune buggies, drugs and nudity in the sunshine of California's Death Valley, was completely irresistible to me.

Amusingly, the very next day after watching the second part of the film on BBC2, I was in Plymouth City Centre looking for a job. Well, I was *supposed* to be looking for a job. After having dutifully paid a visit to the Job centre, to find there was neither anything there that I wanted to do, or - if I am gonna be completely honest about it - nothing available that I was able to do, I was wandering about the City Centre with £1.50 in my pocket, trying to decide whether I was going to go to the pub, or have something to eat, when a smartly dressed young man approached me. "Do you want to turn your life around?" he asked.

Irritated, and assuming that he was trying to sell me some sort of religious experience, I turned round to him, and was just about to tell him to "fuck off" when I saw that he was accompanied by. Girl who looked just like Sadie Mae Glutz. She was massively beautiful, and underneath her semi transparent blouse she was not wearing a bra.

"Do you want to eat?" He asked. I was insanely hungry, and hoping that he was not speaking metaphorically, I nodded in the affirmative, whilst doing my best not to ogle the Susan Atkins lookalike.

"Susan Denise Atkins (May 7, 1948 - September 24, 2009) was a convicted American murderer who was a member of the "Manson family", led by Charles Manson. Manson and his followers committed a series of nine murders at four locations in California, over a period of five weeks in the summer of 1969.

Known within the Manson family as Sadie Mae Glutz or Sexy Sadie, Atkins was convicted for her participation in eight of these killings, including the most notorious, the "Tate/LaBianca" murders. She was sentenced to death, which was subsequently commuted to life in prison. Incarcerated from October 1, 1969 until her death - a period exactly one week short of 40 years - Atkins was the longest incarcerated female inmate in the California penal system, having been denied parole 18 times"

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia

The two peculiar young people took me for a long walk into the suburbs where they ushered me into an unimpressive suburban house where I found about fifteen young people, all attractive(ish) and all eating lentil stew. "This is Brother Jonathan" my new friend announced and the assembled company rose to greet me.

My introduction to the world of living in a cult was not a success. I cant remember whether they were The Moonies or The Scientologists, but they were very earnest and talked a lot about meditation and abstinence, when all I wanted to know was where the guns were. After the meal I started to drop heavy hints about drug fuelled orgies, and was peremptorily shown the door

All this was a long time ago. I was young and psychotic at the time, and was so well balanced that I had a chip on both shoulders. I felt that I had been treated appallingly badly by 'straight' society, and that there must be something better out there. To a horny, unbalanced, and socially challenged teenager the idea of a love and terror cult had certain irresistible qualities, although I doubt whether I would have enjoyed it much if I had actually joined one. A. Ore probable outcome is that I would have irritated the leadership of the cult as much as I did those 'straights' that I despised so much, and would probably have ended up in an unmarked shallow grave somewhere on Dartmoor. But even thirty six years later I could understand why Danny had found the stories that his two nubile hitchhikers had told him so irresistible.

"So what happened then?" I asked with interest, momentarily forgetting that Danny was a near psychopathic nuisance who had committed the unforgiveable sin. Of bursting into my study before I had finished my breakfast, read my post, and perused my daily dose of Bad Machinery which, as my family knows, is an almost capital crime in my eyes

From what Danny told me, the Amusing irony about how the events of that rainy late autumn lunchtime transpired was that he had taken them into *The Westcountry Inn* planning to spend as little money as possible and seduce one or both of them. What actually happened was that he ended up maxing out his credit card on an exceedingly expensive lunch for three, and being seduced - both intellectually and emotionally - by his two young companions.

They told him how the three leaders of the group ("although we don't really have leaders y'know man, but they are Gods so we have to do what they tell us, especially Mr Loxodonta") had bought a piece of woodland in the middle of the deep woods. I knew from my own experience that there are quite a few online agencies which sell land like this which cannot be built on, and - indeed - I have often toyed with Idea of buying a plot myself in order to manage it as a

nature reserve, and have a little bit of England to which I could retreat whenever the real world got too irritating.

The three leaders then, apparently, brought their divine powers into play and did something that would be difficult for a mere mortal, but not impossible, as Danny pointed out especially if one was an experienced computer hacker. Apparently they had paid a visit to the London offices of the Land Registry, and done something to their computer records, so as to all intents and purposes their ten acre parcel of trees no longer existed, and as it was surrounded by deep and tangled fir plantations, which had been planted in the early years of the 20th Century, just before, and during the early part of WW1, before Lord Lovat had become the first Chairman of the nascent Forestry Commission, and the owner had been killed at Pascendale where he drowned in a sea of mud, nobody actually knew who it was that owned the forest, so the trees could never be cut down. So this unruly band of raggle taggle gypsies lived safely impregnable on a remote slice of land that was untraceable by any normal, and most abnormal processes.

Here the three gods lived in seclusion with their ever growing band of neo flower children. They spent their days making music and lying around doing nothing very much. The two girls suspected that the three gods had some mysterious purpose in mind, but they didn't know what it was. And they certainly made music. They had some on a MP3 player.

"It was really good" said Danny.

"And when I heard about the cult family, and listened to the music some more, and looked at the two girls, I thought, 'I want a bit of that'"

And he leered at me in a most unsavoury manner and winked at me conspiratorially.

XVIII

I don't know how many of you have ever been kidnapped at knifepoint by a beautiful girl over thirty years younger than you, whom you had been hoping to seduce, had a bin bag unceremoniously plonked on your head, been bundled at gunpoint into the boot of your own car by pre-teen terrorists wearing pig masks, and driven lickety-split down a bumpy country road. I certainly haven't, so any comments that I make upon the subject have to be purely conjectural. However, this is exactly what Danny Miles claimed had happened to him, one morning in late autumn when he sat in my office looking scared to death. Although he tried to make light of it, the experience had obviously terrified him, and even the process of reliving this all was difficult and cathartic for him.

I have never been particularly good at writing speech down, and in this particular case Danny, who is usually self-assuredly voluble, was nothing of the sort. He muttered and stuttered, slurred his words and kept on stopping in the middle of sentences and even in the middle of words, upon which I had to gently prompt him into continuing. The only time in my life that I have ever found myself interviewing somebody who was as neurotically reticent as this before was way back in the autumn of 1995 when my first wife and I interviewed a young man to whom I later gave the nom de guerre of 'Gavin' who had (five or six years before) had an encounter with the "thing" (as Ivan T Sanderson would have called it) that is generally referred to as The Owlman of Mawnan. He had been suffering from a sort of short term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder brought on - or so I surmised - by the trauma of having to re-live, under questioning, one of the nastiest and most emotionally horrific experiences of his young life. I recognised the same, or at least very similar, symptoms in Danny, and - whilst his story was so bizarre, as to be bordering on the unbelievable - I was sure that Danny, at least, believed the absolute truth of what he was telling me.

The car trundled on down the bumpy road, and eventually turned off into something even more bumpy which Danny surmised was some kind of cart track, and after about twenty minutes (or so he estimated) the car shuddered to a halt. The doors opened, and Danny could hear the sound of muffled voices and laughter, but remained locked in the boot for what seemed like an eternity. "Then I fell asleep" he muttered shamefacedly. "Under the circumstances I know that it

seems insane, but I was very tired and whatever reserves of strength I had, just ran out!"

His sleep was rudely awakened minutes or hours later, when the boot of his Astra opened suddenly and, still with the bin bag over his head, he was pulled out of the car to his feet. His captors roughly jerked the bin bag off his head, and - although the sudden influx of bright daylight was almost too much to bear - he did his best to take in as much of his surroundings as he could, and found (not altogether to his surprise) that his car was parked on a rough cart track which was entering a small woodland clearing. Around the sides of the clearing, half-hidden by trees, were some large khaki tents of the sort that are usually advertised in Army Surplus stores as 6-8 berth, and a number of young people were wandering around. They were all wearing pig masks, and some were clutching guns.

Over to his left was an open fronted marquee, again khaki canvas, and shrouded in camouflage netting. Inside was a long trestle table, and sat at the table were more young people, all wearing rubber pig masks tapping away industriously at laptops. Danny opened his mouth to speak but Sable kicked him hard in the shin and told him to shut up. They led him a little way into the deep wood, where there was a canvas chair. Roughly they sat him down, and Sable and Araminta turned and left. Without a backwards glance they were gone.

Danny was left alone with the two children, still silent as the grave, still wearing rubber pig masks and still carrying what appeared to be AK47s which were far too big for them.

You could almost feel sorry for Danny at this point. With more than the usual human capacity for self-delusion, he had managed to convince himself that the two girls he had picked up hitchhiking along the A39 were going to take him to a paradise full of bare-breasted flower children living in squalor. What he actually found was something akin to a neat and tidy military encampment full of fully clothed children brandishing guns, and engaged on some complex computer-related activity. He had hoped for free love and drugs, and had blundered into a nightmare full of paramilitary pig children with guns.

A tall dark figure strode through the wood towards him. Long haired, leather-jacketed and booted, he was well over six foot tall, and - according to Danny - had the musculature, gait and bearing of a gorilla. Now, gorillas are peaceful, gentle, knuckle walkers and mostly vegetarian, but rather than remonstrate with Danny about his pitiful lack of knowledge of the physiology of the higher primates, I let this one be, and assumed that the person who was swaggering towards them up the woodland path towards them was completely human. Anyway, I had my suspicions about whom he might turn out to be.

As he got closer, Danny could see that he was an enormous biker, bare-chested under his leather jacket, and with a distinctive tattoo of a skull with a wreath of roses across its cranium on his barrel chest. My suspicions were confirmed. I didn't think that there could be many people in the Westcountry with the unlovely soubriquet of 'Skullfuck', and this bloke only had the name because I had given it to him.

Thirty plus years ago, when I was a Student Nurse at the Royal Westcountry Hospital in South Devon, and living at the nurses' home at an old, tumbledown, and rather beautiful art deco house called Staplake, in Starcross, I used to drink at a pub called The Dolphin Inn in the neighbouring village of Kenton. It was a nice little pub, and I used to drink there because I could happily chat away to the landlord about tropical fish, politics and all sorts of other things that have always amused and interested me. For some reason that I have never understood, Kenton has always been home to a sizeable biker community, and - over the years - I became friends with some of them.

A bloke called Pete, mildly hippyish and a bit of a Jack the Lad also drunk there, and one night he invited me and a bevy of the local bikers back to his flat for 'a drink and a smoke' which invariably meant cider and Afghan black. We all tumbled into my car, and I drove unsteadily (because I had ingested five or six pints already, and had originally planned to spend the night in my car in the pub car park). We drove up a windy lane, and we could see the way before us illuminated in the moonlight. Driving across a little humpbacked bridge which crossed a silvery stream, which babbled in the moonlight, we headed up a hill, and at the peak of the hill was an enormous Gothic mansion which appeared out of the darkness like something out of the 1963 film of *The Haunting*. "This is it," said Pete cheerfully, and directed

us to a small car park by a side entrance.

It turned out that the mansion was owned by his grandfather, and that Pete was in charge of having it converted to luxury flats. However, the process was scheduled to take at least another three years, and in the meantime, Pete was quite happy to play at being Lord of the Manor. He led us in through the side entrance where we found the sort of hippy crash pad that I have seen on innumerable occasions over the years. If you can imagine a spacious but grubby area containing (in no particular order) a poster of Che Guevara, another of Jimi Hendrix as painted by Martin Sharp, several cardboard boxes containing (in total) several thousand LPs in dog eared covers, makeshift bookshelves made from planks and bricks and containing a selection of the de rigueur hippy tomes like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull* and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, some joss sticks burning in plant pots, two well fed and indignant looking tabby cats, and dozens of unwashed mugs and plates. The atmosphere smelt mildly of cat pee, masked partially by the smell of incense and stale hashish, and I immediately felt at home.

The two bikers turned out to be working with Pete, whilst simultaneously signing on. They were brothers, and the youngest was contemplating getting his first tattoo. At the time both Pete and I were very much into The Grateful Dead, and he rummaged through his grubby LP collection and got out a copy of the band's self named album from 1971. The cover is iconic.

"The skull and roses design was composed by Alton Kelley and Stanley Mouse, who added lettering and colour, respectively, to a black and white drawing by Edmund Joseph Sullivan. Sullivan's drawing was an illustration for a 1913 edition of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Earlier antecedents include the custom of exhibiting the relic skulls of Christian martyrs decorated with roses on their feast days. The rose is an attribute of Saint Valentine who according to one legend was martyred by decapitation. Accordingly, in Rome, at the church dedicated to him, the observance of his feast day included the display of his skull surrounded by roses. This was discontinued in the late 1960s when Valentine was removed from the Roman Catholic canon along with other legendary saints whose lives and deeds could not be confirmed. Kelley and Mouse's design originally appeared on a poster for the September 16 and 17, 1966 Dead shows at the Avalon Ballroom. Later it was used as the cover for the album Grateful Dead. The album is sometimes referred to as Skull and Roses (or Bertha)."

Another name for the album is 'Skullfuck' (a vulgar term for oral sex), and it is a matter of record that the band wanted this unlovely moniker for the album, but that their record company put their foot down and (quite sensibly) refused. "Why don't you have this for your tattoo?" Pete suggested. Having ingested far more alcohol and hashish than was wise, I was slurring my words massively when I muttered, "If he does, he is gonna have to change his name to 'Skullfuck'!" He did get the tattoo, and the nickname that I gave him whilst trying to be clever and showing off my exemplary knowledge of Bay Area psychedelic rock music stuck. With this new revelation from Danny it seemed that, thirty something years later it was still sticking.

Now, when I was living at Staplake, during the time immediately before I got engaged to Alison who I married in 1985 and stayed with for the next eleven years, Skullfuck and Pete were reasonably regular visitors, as was Danny, but it seemed that they had never met, or if they had, Danny was (as usual) been so wrapped up in his own self-importance that he had no memory of anyone who didn't actually impinge into his own peculiarly insular little world.

I decided that on this occasion that discretion would prove to be the better part of valour. I had no idea where this peculiar journey was going to end up taking us.

But I didn't trust Danny further than I could throw him, and Skullfuck and I had shared quite a bit of history for a few years following our first meeting, and I would like to think that if our paths crossed again, that he would be kindly disposed towards me.

So I kept my council, and asked Danny what happened next.

"Well, he didn't seem very clever," said Danny sneeringly at me. I knew Danny's sad history and said nothing. "He kept

on asking me who I was, and what I was doing there. And as I thought that it wouldn't be a very good idea to admit that I had only been interested in the two chicks, I told him that it was because of the music. And it seemed as if that was exactly the right thing to say," he said.

One of the big buzz words of our early 21st Century social economy is 'Identity Theft', and Danny didn't bat an eyelid as he brazenly explained how and why he had proceeded to steal MY identity.

He wasn't even slightly apologetic as he explained how he told Skullfuck how impressed he had been with the music that the girls had played him in the pub. How he, himself had worked in the music business for many years, and could tell a hit record when he heard one, and how he wanted to help make these people stars!

The trouble is, that none of this was true. Apart from a few years as a male escort in the early 1980s around the time that I first met him, he had never worked as anything. He had never been employed in any industry, having led a charmed life drifting from one disaster to another, and leaving debts wherever he trod. I, however, much against my better judgment had never actually turned him away in the third of a century that I had known him, and had worked intermittently on the fringes of the music industry for many years. Currently I am editing a weekly online music magazine and doing the odd bit of contract work for my old mate Rob Ayling at Gonzo Multimedia, and am in the process of starting up my own community orientated record company together with a mate called Martin Eve.

Although we hadn't seen each other for years, Danny had kept vague tabs on how my life had been progressing, and as he got more enthusiastic talking to Skullfuck, he stole more and more of my personal back story and made it his own. He explained how he had got unique powers and skills as a polemicist, a publicist and a student of rock and roll history, and if anyone could manipulate the 21st Century media into making this unique band of musicians into stars, it was him.

"What were they called, by the way?"

"Xtul," grunted Skullfuck.

I gulped; my past was really coming back to haunt me this time.

I believe that in the current vernacular, what Danny was doing is known as 'Social Engineering', - the psychological manipulation of people into performing actions or divulging confidential information. A type of confidence trick for the purpose of information gathering, fraud, or system access, it differs from a traditional "con" in that it is often one of many steps in a more complex fraud scheme. He soon engineered the situation to one where he was asking the questions and the poor hapless biker before him was not only giving Danny the answers, but was treating him like an honoured guest rather than a prisoner, and Danny was soon manipulating the poor fool into doing exactly what he wanted.

Skullfuck told Danny much the same as the two girls had some hours early. This woodland was the home for a group of people who were trying to save the earth, and who lived together as 'The Children of the Three'. He confirmed that 'The Three' were Gods who had come to change the world forever. But he added two other pieces to the jigsaw. The two girls had been sent out specifically to find someone with a car, use their womanly whiles to fascinate the driver, and bring him back to the wood. They were then supposed to kill him and steal the car, but things hadn't quite worked out that way.

Danny was so shocked, not only by his recent brush with death but at quite how badly he had misjudged the situation, that he didn't really take the second bit of information on board. The three members of Xtul, the people responsible for some of the most amazing music he had ever heard, were the Gods themselves.

"I didn't believe for one moment that these people were Gods. They were just people who were better at social engineering than me, and had better computer skills than I had," he blustered, going on to tell me that for the first time he not only thought that he was going to get out of there alive, but that he felt he could "make a few quid" out of the situa-

tion. So he struck while his figurative iron was hot. By rights he should have been buried in a shallow grave deep in the woods with a bullet in the back of his head. But he had turned the tables on his captors through his own extreme cleverness, and it was Danny that was now calling the shots.

"I want to meet one of the Gods," Danny demanded, and by this time poor Skullfuck was so confused that he was regarding Danny as a cross between Brian Epstein and that irritating bloke with the smug smile on Pop Idol, and nodded his consent. Motioning to the two pig headed children with guns that they were no longer needed, he escorted Danny deep into the woods where a small log cabin had been built. "Come In!" Thundered a voice from inside, and Danny went in.

"And you are not going to fucking believe this man," he said. "In that cabin deep in the woods was a man in a wheelchair. He was wearing a neat and obviously expensive dark grey suit. And wait for this.....he had the head of a fucking elephant on his shoulders!"

IX

"An Elephant???"

I looked at him feigning shock and awe (if I can borrow a term). In fact I was nowhere near as overawed as I had pretended, because I had already got quite emotionally involved with a strange lost little goat person from (presumably) those very same woods and if those woods could produce Panne, the idea of a half man, half elephant in a wheelchair was no real paradigm shift.

I have never been a very convincing liar, and I am a terrible actor, so instead of carrying on pretending to be shocked and awed, I lit yet another cigarette, made a mental note to light a candle to St Bernardino of Siena who is not only the Patron Saint of lung problems, but looks - in a painting by Jacopo Bellini from about 1450 - more than a little like Andy, the current lead guitarist with *The Pink Fairies* who is a vague chum of mine, and asked:

"So what did you do then?"

"Give me one of those fucking things.." he gestured towards my rapidly depleting pack of B&H.

Now I was shocked. I have known Danny for about a third of a century. Not only have I never seen him smoke, but he has always been vehemently annoying in his opposition to the habit.

I passed him a cigarette, lit it for him, and whilst he coughed and spluttered, I made encouraging noises and tried to get him to continue with his story.

"He looked at me for what seemed like hours, but was probably less than a minute, and asked 'Give me one good reason why I should not kill you immediately?'"

He dragged on the cigarette, which despite everything seemed to be calming him down, and continued...

"Well, although I am sure that he knew perfectly well what I had really wanted from the two girls, I couldn't really admit that, so I told him that I was a music journalist who was incredibly impressed by the music that the two girls had played me, and wanted to know more"....

This seemed to have been the right answer. At least, the bestial elephantman had not smote him down immediately, so sensing his tactical advantage, Danny gabbled on. He was involved with a community record company which was being set up, he lied, and both with that and with his unique relationship with the editor of Britain's leading weekly music e-zine he wanted to get involved and help bring this remarkable music to a wider audience than it had at the moment.

As the audience to which he was referring was presently about thirty runaway teenage cultists living in surprisingly Spartan conditions in the middle of the woods, this quest would not be a difficult one to fulfil.

Both his "involvement with a community record company which was being set up" and his "unique relationship with the editor of Britain's leading weekly music e-zine" were of course down to the fact that he had known me, and been an on-off thorn in my side for over thirty years.

"But we are nowhere near being Britain's leading weekly music e-zine", I blustered, but for once Danny seemed sure of his facts.

"Back in February the BBC quoted: 'The NME website gets 1.4m users per week, while the digital edition of the magazine sells 1,307 copies a week, and thousands of people attend NME live events and concert tours'." He said proudly, and looked me in the eye with the face of someone who is particularly proud of his own cleverness.

"Well yeah, we do get more readers than that most weeks", I admitted, "but you are nothing at all to do with the magazine, and while I am editor you won't be..."

"Details, details" he spluttered, and continued with his story...

"For some reason the elephant man whose name was – by the way – Mr Loxodonta – seemed quite impressed by all this bullshit of mine, and I began to think that I might be able to get away with it all, and live to fight another day".

One of Danny's most annoying characteristics has always been to talk in clichés, but I let him get away with it, as he continued his story.

"So I bullshitted like I have never bullshitted before" he said proudly, "and you know how I can bullshit!"

He looked at me as if this was an accomplishment of which he should be justly proud. In my opinion it probably isn't, but I smiled wanly at him and nodded for him to continue...

"So I told Mr Loxodonta that what he needed was a Business Plan, and how he needed to market his cult for all that it was worth"

This was probably true. Cult leader Charles Manson has been in prison since 1969, but his records are still remarkably popular despite the fact that they are bloody awful and that the only USP that they have is that they sound mildly disturbing only because of what and who he is.

Danny continued:

"I gave him all sorts of ideas, and promised to come up with a cogent business plan and some ideas for how to market this stuff. It helps, I think, that unlike most music made by cults and cultists, this music is really pretty damn good"

I nodded, actually truthfully being able to agree with him for once. The music truly *is* pretty damn good.

"He asked me if I would like to be their publicity officer. I didn't answer but thought really hard. Then I remembered your mate Mick Farren who died last year. He was the head honcho of the UK White Panthers, so I decided to steal one of his ideas.

‘No man; I told him. ‘ I want to be your Minister for Information’”.

Apparently this struck some kind of chord with Mr Loxodonta who nodded as enthusiastically as a half man half elephant sat in a wheelchair can do. It seems that on the numerous occasions in the past thirty years that Danny has stayed in my spare room or wherever has doubled as my ever-growing personal library has borne fruit...for him at least. Because I am a ridiculously voracious bibliophile, some would say packrat, and despite regular pruning and weeding sessions I still have over 5000 books on a variety of subjects including Fortean, magick (of various hues), politics (also of various hues), music and animals.

It turned out that over the years Danny had read a lot of these books, and had cherry-picked information that he was now regurgitating to Mr Loxodonta like a mother pigeon feeding her offspring.

Thinking completely off the cuff in a stream of consciousness way that I have to admit that I grudgingly respected, he took the idea of regular ‘Communiques’ delivered anonymously to various media outlets from The Angry Brigade (an anarchist group active in London during the mid-1970s), the idea of Art Terrorism from The Situationist Movement (with a hint of Banksy), more odds and ends from Mick Farren and the leader of the American White Panthers John Sinclair, and then wrapped the whole thing into a business model based on Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett’s conceptual band *The Gorillaz*.

“Their records are fucking great man, but they are cartoon characters and everyone knows that. What if you had progressive hip hop – I’m not gonna call it fucking ‘Urban’ cos its not fucking ‘Urban’ – made by actual double A class fucking Gods! Gods that have real powers and should scare you shitless! Gods that can smite you to dust! Can you think of a better fucking incentive to buy their record?”

I have to admit, that much though I abhor his method of speech, and the way that he said ‘Fuck’ more and more often as he became more excited, and the fact that all the best bits of this were things that I should have come up with myself years ago, he had a point.

Then it seemed things really started to happen. Mr Loxodonta made it known that he was in favour of these plans and that he wanted Danny to go away and think about these suggestions and come back with some cogent plans. He was given a telephone number to ring next time he wanted to get in touch, the bin bag was put over his head (gently this time) and he was (also gently) put back into the trunk of his car and driven back to a layby a few hundred yards from the A39.

It was the huge and (if you didn’t know that he was actually a pussy cat – I knew him back when he was called Jeremy, and I wondered whether he still collected stamps) terrifying figure of Skullfuck, who lifted him out of the boot of his car, dusted him down and helped him into the driver’s seat.

“You’ve been lucky today” he said, and strode back into the forest as Danny took a deep breath and continued his journey back up the A39 towards the link road, the M5 and his long-time boyfriend Basil in the Somerset Levels.

To be continued...