

Chapter Two

The pharmacology for the Deathday boy or girl was simple yet complex, essentially little different from the cocktail that artists, hippies, students, dropouts, mystics, statesmen, tribal elders, the young, the old, had been dabbling with since the beginning. Fashion had swung it this way and that: now the preserve of the intellectual elite, now the folly of youth; now glamorous, now sordid.

Its simplicity lay in the ancient preparations: opioids and benzodiazepines to annul any acute anxiety and relieve chronic tensions. The recipient would float suspended on a warm cushion of total peace and assurance.

Lysergic acid took the psyche to another plane. Not the ham-fisted transcendence that the mid twentieth century dabblers had flirted with. No, this was utterly 'real'. (A slightly weaker version was being ingested by the onlookers courtesy of the Dispensors.) It brought them face to face with their Maker, revealing the life eternal as they would have to live it. And the reason for this, most significantly of all, was it revealed the Truth: there was no room for propaganda or delusion. How they had lived their life would be laid bare and indelibly imprinted on their souls.

This was the main impetus for society's mass embrace of the righteous life. It gave people the broader picture, and the flocking back to Christ's vision of eternal life was inevitable once the masses had seen a glimpse of it with their own eyes. It was as sobering as warfare, as adultifying as new-found, life-dependent responsibility. Crime, grudges and subjective poverty shrivelled in the light of a

universal nirvana; longevity may have brought new challenges for swathes of people, but the traditional cankers faded into history for all bar a tiny minority.

The drug's complexity lay in its delicate and finely balanced synthesis. It was not a drug that demanded dependency; its revelations were a *fait accompli* whose factual aspect penetrated into the rational thought of everyday life. It didn't necessarily make people feel good; it just made them understand. The State was quick to realise the massive social (read 'economic') benefits of such an experience and graciously made the Deathday epiphany accessible to all.

A respiratory depressant usually sent the passer into a delicious but terminal slumber just before the defining moment in their chosen scenario. Perhaps surprisingly this was not always the preferred option but either way it was a painless exit. The best scientists had long ago developed the perfect antagonist to fit into every pain receptor such that the person could be completely awake to watch the fascinating writhings of flames as they illuminated and nibbled, then devoured their flesh before their eyes: has no one else enjoyed the satisfying crunch of flesh as they bite down on their inside cheek still numb from the dentist? Only stopping knowing that agony would ensue.

Cyto's shoulder nudged Jacoby's. Most people were touching someone else and all eyes were on the elephant. The animal had swollen before them into a pachydermal vehicle of gentleness; it could do the greatest violence now, yet present the cataclysm of a dandelion seed colliding with gossamer; appear as an exploding supernova at the end of a telescope. This was the bearable *levitas* of the Deathday.

'Sublime', exhaled Jacoby.

'Superall,' added Cyto and shut his eyes. He swayed. He hummed. Most Deathdays included the Hum as the moment loomed. There was a background of music that

rolled around a melodic scale, that built, then ebbed to build again to a crescendo only to die away repeatedly. It made the heart flutter very slightly with its temptation of a rhythm which never asserted itself. This was the only frisson of discord during the day; it very delicately held everyone, aurally, at a safe distance from the cinematic action. It also maintained a resonance which further connected humanity at the point of someone else's fragmentation: a distant lawnmower, the tick of a grandfather clock, a cat's purr. Music of the womb.

Silences did occur at Deathdays too. One was falling now as the King and Queen started to descend from the howdah. But it was the sound of silence as heard when waking to snow that has fallen during the early hours, or that causes children to strain their ears when roused during the night of Christmas Eve.

Now Cyto shut his eyes and his lips moved in prayer. No one swayed. No one hummed. Total calm prevailed. Every Deathday was unique but somehow they had acquired the same punctuation.

The commentator rejoined the viewers' experience with a whisper. 'King William and Queen Catherine will now take their seats ready to move into their chosen world for transcendence. They will settle themselves in the open-topped vehicle strategically placed right in the middle of the arena; it is authentically equipped for all terrains but will in fact be going nowhere; the spectacle will come to them. Suitably lavish, this promises to be one to remember.

'As you may well have already observed, William and Catherine will be making their celestial ascension while on safari: imaginative yet personal, not of course available to many but we are at least able to share the feast of exotic flora and fauna on display today.

'It is now almost dark on the ancient parade ground and I believe the *son et lumière* is about to begin.'

Perfectly on cue, colonial music played and against the backdrop of Horse Guards a fantastically sharp projection of the Rift Valley appeared. It rolled out beneath them apparently for miles. The audience gasped and put out their arms to steady themselves, such was the strength of the *trompe l'oeil's* illusion.

'That is absolutely stunning! Could anyone have predicted we should be so convincingly transported to the emerald green, to the lushness of this vast landscape? The way the land drops away so suddenly to extend mile upon mile as far as the eye can see. I expect you heard the reaction of the spectators here. It's so true, the old saying, 'the sky is bigger in Africa'. Quite extraordinary.'

All the time as he spoke the projection was shifting very slowly. It wasn't noticeable if you looked directly at it but on second glance the view was slightly changed. More gasps of delight emanated from various quarters. Some live dikdiks trit-trotted round the front of the stands. The ears of a warthog twitched in the long grass and beyond them grazed a family of wildebeest.

'While we're feasting our eyes on this incredible scene I want to bring in, if I may, Howard Symington who was charged with masterminding the King's chosen Deathday theme. Howard, welcome.'

'Hello Simon.'

'Howard, you were chosen because of your experience with Africa and specifically with the game reserves. But this is quite a long departure from your usual working environment.'

'Certainly.'

'Can you just explain to us how you've managed to recreate a safari in the centre of London? It sounds fraught with complications.'

'Well, firstly I couldn't have done it without the input of the technical staff: the production team who have put together the film you're watching now are the very best

and I think it is they we have to thank for locating us in Tanzania rather than simply having 'A Day At The Zoo' as it were. The art department and the lighting technicians have been absolutely key as well. I've been very lucky to be surrounded by so much talent.'

'Indeed, but I think you are being somewhat modest! You have in a comparatively small space recreated a national park complete with waterhole for the hippos, lake for flamingo and pelican and so on,' Simon added.

'The biggest challenge was segregation,' Howard continued. 'Clearly these animals don't all live cheek by jowl and there is a complex system of lightly electrified fencing hidden within the grass which persuades them to stay put. I can raise or lower them by remote control, switching the power on and off as I want. There is in fact a whole control room coordinating just that,' he explained.

'And I'm assuming they've all had their supper?'

'Yes, it was very important no one looked at anyone else thinking 'snack'!'

'That would, indeed, be very bad form here but one couldn't blame them; they're not averse to the odd Deathday out in the bush.'

'And I should point out that none of them are wild in the true sense, having been bred in captivity, so they are used to seeing crowds of people close up,' Howard reassured him.

'Yes, perhaps this would be an appropriate time to thank the zoos which have contributed to this masterpiece.'

'Absolutely, we wanted to transport them as short a distance as possible, so London Zoo has been the main supporter; after that we went to Longleat and we are hugely grateful to the Marquis of Bath for his patronage.'

'Well, Howard, I'll let you get back to your control centre and thank you very much for giving us that fascinating insight into their Majesties' Deathday.'

'My pleasure.'

‘So, ladies and gentlemen, as we’ve been talking, you may have noticed a tower of giraffes saunter through the arch and make their way down the end of the right stand. Some of the crowd are even able to stroke their heads. How charming!

‘In front of us here, we’ve got an endless stream of tribesmen and women dressed in the traditional bright colours that they might have worn a hundred years ago. People then would have little imagined how this continent was to change into the commercial success of today. It has been a most conscientious contributor of aid to parts of Europe during our gruelling and generationally long emergence out of economic crisis.’

The flames of the torches flashed their orange light as their bearers danced and whirled and whooped. The enthusiasm was infectious. The audience clapped with the drums then cheered and applauded the arrival of a herd of zebra. The animals jostled nervously. One or two kicked out, ears back, the stallions arched and lunged momentarily to bite the others’ necks. They peeled off and found refuge in some grass towards the back of the ground. Some stared at the African projection behind them as though remembering something in their ancestral past.

Once the tribes were safely out of the way two rhino dashed down the track. They tossed their horns towards the crowd then halted suddenly to look at the royal land cruiser. King William gave them a wave and the crowd laughed. They were moved on by a pair of ostriches. The crowd laughed even harder.

The tempo changed slightly into a calmer pace after the excitement. The scene was now of jacaranda trees and the ground was bathed in a purple light. On the air came sweet smells of exotic flowers. The crowd lifted their noses and drank in the pungency. Some parakeets flapped across and settled in a replica baobab: massive, squat, a cartoon of a tree. Birds called to each other over the speakers and

there was the sound of a waterfall. Now buffalo sauntered through.

Behind them came an encyclopaedic parade of antelope. First the glossy black coat of a male sable shimmered as he nudged his females. Then the Thompson's gazelle with their black streaks vied for attention with the impala, both bouncing skittishly. A more sedate breed followed: the shy but huge eland supported by the kudu, both with the mythical twisted horns of the male. And finally the oryx with its distinctive painted face and metre long horns protruding like lances.

The crowd was enraptured, for as the lighting changed and moved, so they could pick out for themselves a vulture roosting here, a stork balanced there, curious guinea fowl.

The pace changed again. Another band of dancers shook their spears at the crowd in mock hostility, ululating. The background now depicted a dense forest with monkeys that seemed to leap from the walls and race into the stands. The crowd shrieked as colobus and vervet snatched the sweets from their hands and, quick as lightning, ran back into the bushes. Some of the spectators were hysterical but laughed. These were no anarchic troop with rabid bites but trained pets as gentle as lambs. Everyone it seemed was in on the joke.

'I expect you at home felt the electricity that just coursed through the crowd with that display of effortless mugging,' rejoined the commentator. 'Quite a few people are going to have a tale to tell from this evening.' He turned to his co-presenter who had previously been amongst the crowds. 'Like to be down there now, Rehana?'

'I'm not a great fan of monkeys I have to be honest, Simon.'

'No, I think I'm with you. I looked one close in the eyes in India once and they are eerily human, human but amoral.'

'Looks like we're leaving the forest now, Simon, and heading back to the plains,' said Rehana. 'Now the ground has recaptured that beautiful golden light and we have the feeling of infinite space again. We have some special guests yet to see.'

'That's right but I must first comment on those extraordinary trees we can see projected now,' Simon interrupted, 'the baobabs. They are truly fantastical aren't they? They can stand at thirty metres tall and eleven metres wide. I love the way they have no branches up the trunk and then explode into a mad professor's shock of hair. The really tall ones are almost science fiction.'

The commentary was interrupted by a terrific roar.

'Oh my word!' he exclaimed.

'It's not what you think, Simon,' reassured Rehana.

'One of the big cats, surely?'

Further roars could be heard and into the ground came a family of elephants who seemed a little disgruntled with the part they had to play so late in the evening. They were encouraged to take the path to the waterhole which they did with alacrity.

'Look! Now we see one! A big cat.'

Two leopards had made a furtive entrance. They slunk down the track, glancing up at the stands and were followed by two cheetahs who went territorially down the other side. It was an authentically fleeting glimpse of these beautiful creatures but they were pursued by an unfamiliar and slightly sinister sound; it was deep, throaty, throbbing.

It was quite unlike any noise associated with a lion but a lion it was. And in they came. There was an audible crack as one came up against a wire. Clearly the voltage had been increased. It sprang back and spat. They all had a great deal more energy than their safari colleagues and looked around wolfishly. They appeared to be very hungry.

The way towards the antelope was blocked. Another tried to jump into the crowd but was repelled back by another crack. The crowd screamed but it was only the scream of the fairground ride. Everyone knew the Death-day was reaching its climax; the stakes were rising, 'risks' were being taken. It was all the usual choreography.

The lions were running now, up and down the length of the stands. Suddenly the flamingo took off and a beautiful cloud of pink flapped out of the ground. The zebra huddled together and looked over anxiously, one ear tipped forward, the other back. The hippos were defiant as were the elephant. The lion would not be bothering them today.

The King's safari vehicle stood out silhouetted in the ground. It was not illuminated and appeared as a rock coming out of the earth. The figures inside it were barely visible and seemed transfixed by the spectacle of these big cats roaming back and forth. Gradually they turned their attention to the higher ground and the smell of meat. No electrified fences barred their way: One jumped onto the bonnet, then another on the back of the vehicle. They hesitated at what they saw and, lit only from behind, were momentarily silhouetted in a magnificent leonine cut-out. As a third came to join them, the two faced each other and reared up. The lights went out and a flash of lightning provided a snapshot of two rampant lions protecting the Royal Arms. These however brought their mighty paws down on the King and Queen in another flash of lightning. A voluntary of shots was masked by a clap of thunder. The lions scattered but the King and Queen had passed long ago. The drugs had worked their magic and they had watched the final scene from above.

'Ladies and gentlemen, yet again we observe that as one chapter of the House of Windsor draws to a close a new one begins. The King is dead. Long live...