

Chapter Twelve

Seminar days at the Phi had their own special rituals. The centrepiece, perhaps even including the seminar itself, was lunch in town at a restaurant. To begin with, the site had changed from one eatery to another; Prof Fields would invite suggestions for that week's venue from everyone he passed. Although he still ritually took recommendations each week, over time Fields had settled on his favourite, a rather expensive fish restaurant just off the main street in the centre of town. It was a regular joke amongst the postdocs, as they sat down, to earnestly ask who had recommended fish and then list all the alternatives they had put forward to no avail. The Institute pretty much over-ran the place on these occasions with a single long table running the length of the dining room. The permanent staff, the speaker and Geoffrey Montford had tradition-enshrined places at the end nearest the kitchen. Then the visiting academics from the local Universities would cluster in the centre, before finally at the foot of the table the postdocs took their places.

Tom Buchard had opted for the less stuffy conversation at Carl's end of the table. Kay was swearing about the drive down into town; she'd had a sports car on her tail the whole way.

"I don't care if they speed in their own sweet world but they don't have to incite me to! It's like standing behind someone with a knife shouting 'go on, stab him'!"

"Only a few years and they'll track every car by satellite," cut in Tom, "then the socially required speeding will stop. Those yellow boxes for random road taxation can be scrapped too. Can we grab one of those bottles of wine from the other end so we can drink to that?" Discussions ensued up the table to recover a bottle.

Carl noticed that the visiting, academic contingent was amusing itself by discussing why aliens hadn't made contact yet. Apparently the Earth was either a nature reserve or, according to another, the only planet fool hardy enough to broadcast it's willingness to be enslaved. It didn't take long for the most depressing conclusion to come to the fore though. There are so many natural disasters that might strike a planet that no civilization ever makes it to first contact. Now everyone's favourite catastrophe circulated. Super-volcanoes periodically cover half the planet in ash. Asteroid impact would do the job too, of course. A single gamma ray burster in the galaxy would cleanse pretty much the whole galactic region. Prof Fields now jumped in with his usual joviality to try to cap even that,

"Of course whatever it is will almost certainly happen very soon," he declared. "It's a simple fine-tuning argument; the population of Earth is growing wildly and there are more people alive than have ever lived. In a population growth like that most people will be alive when the world ends. Therefore if we are typical members of our species we should be alive to see it," he grinned at the rest of the table enjoying his apocalyptic vision. Prof August chirped in a slight dig,

“Yet Roy, you were discussing the expense of life insurance only the other day. Surely you shouldn’t bother?” Although quiet, her voice still projected to the rest of the table. Fields took the comment in good spirits though and merely boomed a laugh in response.

For the first time their guest Prof Ash Burnley chose to enter the fray. Carl had been surreptitiously adding his features to his internal who’s who of physics. He was quite bulky in the face with large lips and a grey cast to his skin under slightly ginger hair. Carl couldn’t help making comparisons to the large trout head on the restaurant wall behind his chair. Like Fields, it was soon clear he too enjoyed the limelight and saw this as an opportunity to make a physics point,

“We’re lucky then that just such a fine tuning argument tells us that if the Higgs is light, supersymmetry must be close at hand. It would be a shame not to have found it before we perish.”

Tom raised his eyebrows knowingly at Carl across the table at this pronouncement. They were both clearly wondering what world someone could live in to make such an assured statement about the unknown. Well argued confidence seemed one path to success in physics though; Carl had been told once too often at conferences that such and such a theory was “obviously” correct to wish to enter such a battle. He was relieved to see that the food had arrived disrupting the possible combat. The speaker’s end of the table was amassing a variety of large seafood, including a lobster. Carl’s end of the table was marked more by chowders and calamari, reflecting the lower salaries of the postdocs. The battle to not split the bill evenly had been won by the postdocs before Carl had arrived at the Phi and he was always grateful for that rebellion.

Andre had brought up a new job advert for a permanent position in a New York university that had been posted on the net that morning. Tom was appealing to them all to stay postdocs as long as they could because the uncertain future was, he claimed, more than compensated for by never having to look an undergraduate’s work in the face. Carl suspected Tom protested a little too much and that he secretly enjoyed his teaching. The conversation seemed to have splintered around the table, when Prof Trant loudly and in his rather plummy voice returned everyone’s attention to what had gone before. Trant was renowned for having a bee in his bonnet about the supersymmetry and string theory crowd whom he considered not to show enough humility in their predictions.

“How Ash can you be so certain we will find supersymmetry?” he gently probed at his own wound. Prof Burnley smiled, like a spider luring a fly into his web. Oh God, here comes a monologue, thought Carl.

“Well, it’s really inevitable,” was the first gambit. “You know that supersymmetry is the biggest possible mathematical extension of the rotational symmetries of a relativistic space. For nature not to make use of it would be a dereliction of duty surely?” This Carl agreed was an emotional argument close to the heart of any theoretical physicist, yet not quite convincing of inevitability. “Supersymmetry combines particles with the different spins we see in nature into single manifestations of a super-particle with rotations in

superspace interchanging them. It's precisely the sort of unification a theory of everything must surely incorporate?" Yet it would be more compelling, thought Carl, if it could be made to actually link two observed particles rather than you having to add in a second particle of different spin for every one you see. "The mass of the Higgs must be stabilized too, of course, which supersymmetry does at a stroke – why complicate things by assuming that that isn't a clear signal?" Yet there are variant Higgs or Higgsless theories that don't need supersymmetry – Burnley was dismissing them as too complicated. More complicated than all the possible masses and interactions of the undiscovered superpartners, wondered Carl?

Prof Burnley went on, but Carl's headache had reached the point of throbbing and his prawns were rapidly cooling. Supersymmetry would be a beautiful discovery Carl conceded but it wasn't inevitable. He decided to leave it at that and started to eat.

Norman Clark stood up at the front of the lecture theatre to introduce the seminar but before he could speak was interrupted by Geoffrey Montford. Their benefactor usually kept a low profile at these events partly because he could rarely follow the details of what was said. Today though he had a solemn announcement,

"We have had a rather unfortunate week here at the Phi. One of our excellent young talents, Andreas Born, has unfortunately passed away. His parents have asked me to invite everyone here to a short ceremony. I have arranged for it to be in the Cathedral at 11am on Monday. I hope we can all attend. I propose we should stand for a minute's silence before we continue with our work." Everyone rose to their feet leaning forward against the desktop in front of them or back against the raised seat base behind.

Carl stared at his shoes. It was typical Geoffrey theatricality to use the Cathedral, he thought. No doubt Geoffrey was pleased as punch he'd been able to use his contacts to arrange it.

This was not the preparation he needed to think physics. He was too tired, in any case, to take in much of the seminar that followed. The atmosphere was dark and hot in the lecture theatre with so many people crammed in. He watched the multi-coloured equations flying in from left and right on the powerpoint display and prayed for release. He was going to have to try to sort things out with Amber tonight he realized. Sasha was working over night but she was going to have to be faced soon too. Did he own a dark suit for Monday he wondered? Suddenly everyone was clapping and the presentation was over. A number of highly technical questions that were way over Carl's damaged head seemed to drag on interminably. Finally he could bolt for his office; he'd apologize to Tom for not saying good bye over e-mail in the morning.

As he turned into his office door he realized that there was no escape from life here either. WPC Thatcher was sat in his desk chair this time waiting for him to appear. She regarded his haggard and white face.

“Friday huh?” she reflected, “Sorry, but I need you to redo these translations.” Carl nodded accepting the inevitable. He pulled up the other chair in the room to the desk and reached for a pen. The WPC passed over Andreas’ diary and watched him write out the 3.3 grid.

“I know you were brewing all of these conspiracies this morning about forging documents being linked to Andreas’ death,” she said gently, “but the evidence is stacking up against anyone but Andreas being involved.” Carl looked up quizzically. “We’re pretty sure that he poisoned himself on the chemicals in his lab.”

“How sure is pretty sure?”

“Well, very, really. It means the attack on you last night may have been unrelated.”

“But it was the same guy who was hanging about outside Andreas’ flat,” Carl was starting to wonder if they believed what he told them.

“I know, but you were concussed so maybe you’ve misremembered?” Carl thought he was sure but he had to be honest that he might be confused; he shrugged, too tired to argue the point. “It might have been someone attracted by the police activity but otherwise unrelated to Andreas – it happens you know, far more than you’d think.” The WPC leaned back to let him translate. He passed over the first piece and she read it through.

“This bit, ‘Out of C, must cut back – the bank and down to the Ferry tomorrow evening’, sounds like C is cocaine,” she mused. “The Ferry is a pub down in Southampton by the Isle of Wight ferry docks. It’s a common haunt for pushers.”

Carl continued translating and the WPC read the remaining entries. Carl explained about their false physics dawn.

“SukieG is a girlfriend we’ve tracked down,” the WPC filled in. “As you say the rest reads as him selling fake documents to this S – not Sukie I guess. I haven’t managed to pick up a lead on another S though. It would be nice to tie up these trails. I guess the Ferry is really a lead for my colleagues,” she said this whilst clearly thinking something different.

“You look like you’re thinking evil thoughts,” laughed Carl. The WPC gave him a hard stare,

“Well, the diary is our find,” she smiled, “but you are quite beat up enough already. I wouldn’t want to check it out totally on my own and my husband will have to do baby

duty. So that makes it somebody else's problem." Carl was thinking of the diary as his part of the case, and a more important part than the police seemed willing to accept. He was surprised how quickly he leapt in to volunteer.

"Come on, it won't be dangerous just to go to a pub and ask whether they know Andreas? I bet he'd befriended the people there. They might want to know he's died, even if they were selling him drugs. I'll come to support." The WPC was torn between the desire to see through the lead and the nagging feeling that she'd already stepped outside the realms of good policing by involving Carl at all. Hadn't she resolved that he wasn't going to participate further? "We could go down tonight or tomorrow night," Carl pestered her.

"OK, OK," she didn't feel like she was making the right decision here, "it will have to be tomorrow night. I'll drive, but let's meet outside the train station at, what 9pm tomorrow?" Carl nodded confirmation.

Carl's next attempt to leave for home was disrupted by a concerned Geoffrey Montford. He came through the door of Carl's office just as Carl was heading out.

"Carl, I saw the scrapes on your face. Are you alright?"

"I got mugged last night. I went back to Andreas' flat to read some more papers for the police and this guy jumped me as I left. It was pretty late so I guess I should have taken more care." Montford looked suitably appalled, perhaps even more concerned than was merited.

"You're sure you are alright though?" he pressed. Carl shrugged and nodded. "I'll let you get home – I'm sure you need the weekend's rest."

Montford set off down the corridor briskly. Carl watched him go, surprised at the speed of his departure. He would have been more surprised if he had known Montford returned straight to his office and hit the speed dial on his mobile.

"Cyril?" Montford spoke sharply as soon as his call was answered. "Do you know anything about the attack on one of my staff on the Green last night?" He listened to hasty denials, wondering if they were rather too quick and too prepared. "That had better be true." He clicked off the connection, hoping his fury had been communicated.

Carl knocked on Amber's door that evening with some trepidation. He wasn't sure what reception would wait on the other side but desperately wanted a return to normality. His head wounds were throbbing and he felt in need of some unchallenging human contact. Amber opened the door slowly. Her hair was a little askew and she was wearing a paint flecked black top and scruffy jeans. She looked tired.

“Oh, you,” she said rather flatly, “come in then.” She was already on the wine and swung the glass gently in her hand as she headed into the main room. “What did you do to your face?” she asked.

“Someone mugged me.”

“You probably deserved it.” Great, thought Carl, she’s still mad at me.

“Heh! Come on, I spent last night in hospital with concussion. Can’t we just drop it?” Amber looked genuinely concerned and came over to examine his wounds.

“Shouldn’t they have stitched that?” she asked gently running her finger above the livid cut on the back of his head.

“They said not worth it.” The old Amber seemed to be back and it was comforting feeling her hands in his hair.

“Are you medicated or do you still want wine?” she asked. Carl made comic grabbing motions at the bottle which made her smile a little and head for the cabinet in which she kept her glasses. “What happened then?” Carl gave her the run down, accepting the full glass in the middle.

“Guess you didn’t phone Sasha then,” she observed although there didn’t seem to be any heat or compulsion in the comment.

“I want to work out where we stand, or where I stand with Sasha, before I decide what to do.” Amber looked at him bemused and laughed slightly in disbelief,

“God, men and their hormones! Stupid goose - you love her. I’ve seen you together.” Carl was too tired for this and just shrugged,

“I still need to think,” he said quietly. Amber just looked at him and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. There was something else going on here tonight, he thought.

“What’s up Amber?”

“Can I have a hug?” Tears were now streaming down her cheeks. Carl went over and put his arms round her. She let out a deep sob and steadied herself.

“I phoned Trevor after you left yesterday,” she volunteered. “I was really pissed at you and was telling him what a bastard I thought you were being to Sasha. Then he started down the same lines as you of what a bad idea it would be for you to tell her,” Carl feared he knew where this was going. “All high and mighty Miss Amber says she’d want to know. So the bastard only comes out and tells me he’s slept with two girls since we started seeing each other.” Shit, thought Carl.

“Oh Am, so have you split?” he asked with real alarm. This was his fault.

“I don’t know. I just put the phone down and unplugged it. We haven’t talked.” She smiled as if she thought herself being silly. “He said it didn’t mean anything and I don’t think it did. I understand it but that’s not really important.” She fell silent nestling into his shoulder and they both sunk into their gloomy thoughts. “Come on, we need another bottle of wine,” she said suddenly with false cheer and headed for the kitchen.

Carl slowly downed the last few mouthfuls from his glass. The problem with romance was that it was all emotional. Your conscious brain keeps trying to work through what has happened but that’s got nothing to do with what you feel.

Amber was banging about in the kitchen, he supposed she was trying to locate the corkscrew.

Presumably, he thought, there’s this sub-conscious measure of the distress involved and the signals needed for reconciliation that have been finely tuned to perfection by evolution to decide whether the mating should continue. It sure as hell doesn’t feel finely tuned. Oh to be a soul unfettered by a body! Except then there would be no close relationships and that sounded horrible too. What was Amber doing? All had gone quiet.

Amber was leaning against the kitchen doorframe watching him. She’d wiped her eyes dry and straightened her hair. She looked more relaxed than even a few seconds before as if she’d resolved to put the previous conversation from her mind.

“I,” she declared robustly, “have decided it’s my turn to be impulsive.” She then proceeded to start unbuttoning her shirt. Carl watched on stunned as her breasts first bulged against the loose black fabric then fell free as she undid the final buttons. She grabbed the bottle of wine she had opened and smiling broadly asked, “Would you like some?”

Carl had planned for such an eventuality, well perhaps not quite this one, but nevertheless his instincts had been pre-programmed. He was saying,

“No, Amber, no,” without even consciously thinking whether recent events should change his position on this infidelity, “bad idea. You’re drunk and upset and you’ll regret this.” He could see the anger and tears build in Amber’s face,

“So you’ll sleep with your boss’ wife who you’ve never met before and is fifteen years older than you but not me?” she screeched in disbelief.

“That’s not fair, Am. Look I’m going – you need time to think. This is just a mess.” Carl headed fast for the door, vaguely aware that Amber’s face was turning a furious red. As he headed down the hall he felt something fly his way and then a crash of shattering glass

as the wine bottle exploded against the wall behind him. Wine splattered wetly across the back of his shirt. He fled the flat.

A few minutes later he was sat on his bed, naked to the waist, feeling utterly depressed. Was there anything else in his life he could screw up he wondered? Surely an impulsive one off stand didn't deserve this much retribution? He sighed and fell over backwards so he was lying staring up at the peculiar swirling plaster patterns on the ceiling. Amber did have large breasts he reflected.