

Utopia's Children



Ferggus

Prologue

In the far north of India, on the border with China, the herd is galloping across a vast savannah. A high plain at more than five thousand metres elevation where the air is so thin to run takes an extreme effort. As the rest of the herd trail to a standstill neither of the still racing horses will give any quarter as they continue their gallop across the flat, hard ground. For what reason? Really, what reason does a horse need to run at the full, mane flying in the wind, neck stretched, and hooves pounding the turf? But these two have reason, and it is always the same: to beat, in every way possible, the other. After so many lifetimes of unrelenting conflict you'd have thought they'd have realised that neither of them would ever win over the other conclusively. But when a mind is confined by hatred, an obsession to defeat - not just defeat, they must crush the other - then has logic flown and emotion holds complete sway over their minds.

They have no need to tell the other the distance mark. Instinctively they know. As they approach the finish she, a little smaller, gets close and under him, causing him to stumble. But he's more powerful than her and she'd been impatient to win, her strategy for victory executed a little early, so he has time to recover and beat her by some lengths. She doesn't take defeat well, so as they cross the finishing line she takes a chunk out of his rump. Angus turns with eyes blazing and bites Tanah hard on the neck. She reacts by spinning around on her forelegs and kicking him as hard as she can, catching him in the stomach, which draws a low groan from him. Enraged now he rears up, but she matches him, climbing onto her back legs and trying to make contact to some part of his body with her hooves. He neighs, a deep, earthy sound that reverberates through his chest, whilst hers is high pitched. She doesn't like the sound of her voice, but when fighting she can't help it, and her high pitched neigh is as distinctive to the rest of the herd as the sound of a certain bird, or the call of the wildcat. After some minutes Angus tires of the duel, his anger having subsided. He gives her a short kick in one of her rear legs, numbing it and making it impossible for her to continue the fight. As she hobbles back towards the herd, who have long given up interest in their rivalry, plans for revenge form in her mind. But she discards them all for none would inflict enough pain to match the bruises to her pride at the loss of the race, and to her body, which has started to ache all over.

Angus has already joined them by the time she gets back to the herd, where they've halted at a broad patch of grass a little greener and sweeter than the rest. The stallion and the mare ignore each other completely. In truth neither of them

take defeat well, but it's rare that one would beat the other two times in a row, as has happened on this occasion. However, this was only a minor contest, nothing that would influence their primary objective. The war between them is for the position every stallion covets: to be Leader of the Herd. However, no one, not even the oldest mare of the herd, has ever heard of a mare commanding the pack. But if she ever overhears anyone question her right Tanah will lash out, biting and kicking at any horse that denies her until they reassure her that she has the equal right to pilot them. Whilst all the stallions to some degree seek this role, there are really only three horses in this particular race: Angus, Tanah, and a huge black stallion, Erik. All are determined to claim the mantle but so far none have yet proved themselves superior to the other two. However, the previous day circumstances put the leadership of the herd within Tanah's grasp. Later that evening she calls a Meeting of the Herd.

The day before a number of yearlings were found dead, their heads stove into the ground so as to be almost unrecognisable even by their mothers. Tanah tells the other horses, all gathered at the lake, "I saw Angus running away from three stallions from the other herd. They wanted to take some of our best pasture because areas of their land are drying out and some of their watering holes are becoming undrinkable. There seems no explanation for these changes, but WhiteMan is sure to be responsible in some way. He is so ignorant, so careless with the land, as if we have an infinite supply and can squander it without concern." Tanah shakes her head in distraction, "When I first got there the yearlings were still alive, but as soon as Angus ran away - when he should have been protecting them - it was inevitable they would be killed." Tanah goes on to recount in detail all she claims to have seen.

Many of the herd look incredulous, knowing Angus to have demonstrated his bravery a thousand times since he was a young colt, even in the most dangerous of situations. Some go so far as to voice disbelief and question Tanah about her own actions over the incident. She responds angrily, "You don't need to take my word for it, Erik was there too. He fought gallantly alongside me but was knocked out and was in danger of being killed himself." Erik, the black stallion, steps boldly into the centre of the circle formed by the herd staring accusingly at Angus, who appears unmoved by the imputations made against his courage; disinterested even. Erik confirms Tanah's version of events. "No horse that allows our yearlings to be left defenceless should be permitted to stay in the herd. Angus should be banished. Who agrees with me? Step forward!"

"Wait! Let the truth guide the decision of the herd, not some version of it which suits your ends. It is true one of the stallions of this herd ran without

putting up a fight to protect the yearlings. Even before the horses from the other herds had approached them. Even given any indication of attacking! But as soon as those horses saw the yearlings left defenceless they took the opportunity. When we saw what was happening it was I and Tanah that did our best to defend them. But by the time we'd managed to get through to the foals there were at least ten of their stallions attacking our youngsters. With three of us we might have stood a chance. As it was we were forced back, separated from the foals, by the sheer weight of their numbers. Then we could only watch helpless as they tormented and tortured the yearlings before trampling them. Yes, that stallion should be banished. But it was Erik, not I."

Erik sneers, "A clever version of events Angus. But it's your word against ours. Who is the herd to believe?" Angus roars back, "We are all aware you seek the mantle, and with me gone who is there to stand in your way?" Erik pounces, taking the opening he's been waiting for, "I do not seek to lead the herd. Even though it is unusual for a mare to lead the herd, Tanah is the natural choice." What was the herd to do? If Erik had no motive then which version were they to believe other than that of his and Tanah. The decision is quickly made, though not without remonstrance from some who still believe in Angus. He's immediately forced to leave the herd. Without their protection like any horse he is easy prey for the wildcats that roam the mountainside looking for an easy kill. The remains of Angus' decomposing carcass are discovered a few weeks later. For Angus it was his karma to die so ignominiously, an outcast, since in their previous life he'd raped Tanah, taking her whenever he chose as his right as the leader of the herd. And when once she'd resisted he'd reared up and brought down a great hoof, smashing her skull in an instant. He'd only intended to subdue her, knock some sense into her. But violence is not neat, not accurately measurable. The consequences often fail to match the perpetrator's intention.

For Tanah the frustration has been building over several lifetimes. She believes it is her right – more than any other horse in the herd - to lead them. In her opinion it should not be based on gender, but measured against a combination of strength and intelligence. Times past brute strength might have sufficed, but these are unusual times and strange stories are circulating about the arrival of a new breed of man. But Tanah's plan, which had appeared flawless when first conceived, is doomed from the start. She would never be leader, and Erik knew that when he agreed to put her forward. This because he had over the previous few weeks worked assiduously to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of the rest of the horses. In fact had begun his campaign the day he agreed to conspire with Tanah to rid the herd of Angus. It is unheard of. None of the herds in

the valley are led by a mare. If nothing else they would be a laughing stock. And worse, it might encourage another herd to attack. And so when, at the same meeting, Tanah claims her right to lead the herd the other horses refuse to accept her. Just as Erik had planned. And, against his continued protestations, he accepts their demand that he lead them. Tanah had felt she held a trump card – knowing of course that it was Erik that had been the coward and abandoned the yearlings. Exactly as Angus had described. She thought she could at any time reveal the secret but at the crucial moment she realises she's been outsmarted. With the leadership of the herd at stake and Erik preferred she has a strong motive to discredit him. The herd would believe Erik – still declaiming interest in the leadership – over Tanah. In consequence she might suffer the same fate as Angus, and so she keeps quiet.

Several months later Erik accuses Tanah, in front of the entire herd, of desiring to take him for herself exclusively. The other mares don't hesitate to retaliate. The next day as the wild horses are crossing a narrow pass the mares force her off the path, sending her tumbling down the mountainside to her death.

Through these lives of incessant conflict as enemies the pair have come to know each other intimately. Better even than lovers might have done. For in their contests they test the other's strength to find its limit, and press their weaknesses. Always, always, looking for an opportunity to inflict a decisive victory over the other. And if this fails, at least make note of any weakness they uncover. One to be exploited at a later, more opportune, moment. Angus knows Tanah is fearless and except in conflict with him, virtuous. And though she masks it in his presence she's full of love and kindness. She spends hours playing with the foals, particularly the young mares, teaching them to be strong and assertive - any match for the young stallions. In turn she recognises Angus' right to lead, for the natural qualities he possesses in abundance. But she will not relinquish. Why? Because she sees just the same qualities in herself, and in at least the same degree. Though she conceals her kindness – to her a sign of weakness - he considers it her greatest strength, the redemption for her failings, and real weaknesses.

Two horses stand close to one another, heads touching from time to time as they compete for the sweetest blade of grass. A large fir tree, which shades them from the midday sun, stands on the top of a broad ridge which overlooks a wide plain where in times past a vast river must have flowed majestically through it. The ridge, which rises a few hundred metres above the plain, is sparsely populated with a wide variety of trees in full bloom, for the season is early spring. The grass covered plain extends for many kilometres, empty save the several herds of wild

horses that count it as their home. Each guard the boundary of their territory ferociously, and many are the decomposing remains of horses defeated in one of the border conflicts that regularly flair between the warring herds. This is how this pretty corner of the world has existed for many tens of thousands of years. Into this finely balanced ecosystem, in only recent millenia, stepped The First Men. They moved with caution and perception. Guardians of this land they considered theirs, but regarding it as a resource to be shared equally with the native animals of the plains. They were mindful of the natural environment, which they considered themselves a part of, not as its master. The First Men made little impact on the balance of nature, and coexisted for thousands of years without damaging it.

And then stumbles clumsily in WhiteMan, a wholly different breed of human, whose aim is to dominate his environment and make only personal advantage of it. With such ignorant intentions calamity is inevitable. In order to exploit the land to its fullest extent he requires transport and horse - strong, agile and docile once broken - are ideal for the purpose. There being no place in this particular wilderness to purchase such an animal WhiteMan is forced to capture and, by any means they prefer, to bend the will of the horse to their own. For reasons unknown some months previously WhiteMan had established his presence in the valley where the herd of Angus and Tanah have long belonged. In this existence Tanah is a young mare only just reached maturity and Angus is the unquestioned leader of the herd. Unusually he's allowed a select group of stallions to take the other mares, which includes Tanah, whilst he has only a single female, jet black in color and of a sweet temperament. Recently she bore him a foal of the same color, but emblazoned with a white star on his forehead.

Despite the well established order of things, in this as previous lifetimes Tanah is a constant thorn in Angus' side. She has not forgotten the previous ones. Whilst she can readily accept Angus as leader - having some admiration for his ability to guide the herd so far through all obstacles obstructing them - she sees not one of her generation having attributes of leadership superior or even anywhere near equal to her own. She is therefore determined in this lifetime to fulfill her ambition to become leader of the herd. And Angus, having also recalled their earlier existences, sees no impediment to promoting her on his demise. Of course at first the herd resists this unprecedented arrangement but when they listen to Angus, bringing highlight to her attributes, its obvious to all that she's the natural choice. That is of course excepting those jealous colts who'd assumed the role as theirs by innate right. She is brave, resourceful and wily. None of the young colts are a match for her. They more resemble children alongside her: carefree,

irresponsible, and unwilling to be tested. In the races and other challenges Angus sets to reinforce Tanah's position as the heir apparent she beats them hands down, every time, even when they conspire against her. And then, invariably, they only manage to make greater fools of themselves and therefore enhance even further Tanah's standing amongst the adult horses.

Whilst Angus sees advantage to the herd in promoting Tanah he does not trust her personally. He does not in fact particularly like her, for he readily recalls several deaths at her hand. But in leadership one must often stoop to such means for the greater good of the group. Angus is certain that Tanah, above all the others, will best ensure the survival of the herd in these rapidly changing times. He has no qualms with breaking with the tradition of a male leader. These are new times - WhiteMan is intruding on their idyll, threatening everyone and everything. It's a time for both strength and ingenuity, and whilst Angus possesses an astute mind he knows Tanah's to be superior, as she's demonstrated in numerous competitions. Based on strength alone he should have beaten her soundly but her cunning is unsurpassed and she's confounded him with ruses that later he can laugh at but at the time drove him to frustration. For example, in a contest of strength to move a boulder, as one might find in the herd's path, whilst the others tried and failed with brute force, she'd dragged a fallen tree trunk and placed it as a lever under the boulder. Once in place she'd simply sat on it, sending the huge rock tumbling down into the river below. At the sight of this the colts fumed with frustration, claiming a foul, whilst she was nearly choking herself with laughter at the expression on their faces.

The stallions are generally wary of her, and avoid contact with her. But one of the older ones, of the same generation as Angus and a friend of his, had taken to her and she'd acquiesced. He has little to say, but has a reputation for courage and loyalty. These are traits she admires above all others, though she would admit to lacking in the latter herself. He adores her and she comes to love him. After some time she bears him a handsome young filly, strong and full of life's energy. His father is justifiably proud of his daughter and to the two stallions' immense pleasure Angus' colt and Tanah's young mare are soon inseparable.

The herd have lived in peace for close to twenty years when WhiteMan comes in search of new blood. One day, dawn just breaking, they arrive on broken down horses that are no match for the wild mustangs. Whilst the rest of the herd escape with ease, one of the young colts manages to get himself trapped in a dead end gully, and is duly captured.

The foals, at this time numerous for it's still spring, are safely hidden high up on the ridge in caves whose whereabouts only Angus and Tanah know. For only

the leader of the herd and the anointed are privy to this information, which is handed down through the generations. And it's the duty of the anointed, Tanah in this case, to take the foals and yearlings up the mountain at night and bring them down safely the following morning. It is on pain of exclusion from the herd if any other horse attempts to discover the location of the caves. Yet The Colt, hoping somehow to use the information in his quest to usurp Tanah's position, one evening had followed her and learned The Secret of the Caves. Foolishly he'd bragged about his knowledge to the other colts, and it filtered back to the adults, who in turn informed Angus. Learning of his imminent expulsion, it was in fact The Colt's intention to be captured by WhiteMan. Better that, he'd concluded, than being ripped to pieces by a pride of wildcats.

Several weeks after The Colt's capture, with the morning mist still being burned off by the rising sun, Tanah comes galloping down the mountainside into the densely wooded area where the herd had camped the previous night. She comes into the clearing calling out the alarm signal that all horses know. On hearing her call and seeing her, it's immediately clear to Angus what's happened. Tanah is covered in hoof marks and blood oozes from a hole clean through her neck. This is a sight the horses have never seen the like of before. The Colt had led WhiteMan and his horses straight to the caves where the foals were concealed. Tanah, alone, had fought valiantly and, the cave having a narrow entrance, had managed to hold them off for some time. She might have continued to do so indefinitely but for the shot which distracted her attention sufficiently to allow one of WhiteMan's horses to rear and knock her out with a well placed hoof. Coming a few minutes later she'd found all the young horses gone. When she tries explaining the firing of the gun none of the horses can comprehend her story.

That evening, almost approaching midnight, Angus leads the entire herd to WhiteMan's camp, which consists of decrepit looking tents staged around a large camp fire which is still burning when the mustangs first arrive. They wait until all WhiteMan have staggered – some of them almost incapable of walking - off to bed. The horses wait patiently a further half hour, until the camp has descended into complete silence, before galloping into the clearing around the fire and trampling on all the tents with the intent of killing the occupants. Unaware that WhiteMan had posted sentries, who begin firing the weapons Tanah had described, a number of the wild horses are killed before the sentries are overcome. They're either killed by the horses or forced to run for their lives into the forest. The foals are quickly found. Most are unharmed, but one is almost dead from lack of food and water. The wild horses tear into the mounts of

WhiteMan, who are tethered and anyway are no match for Angus and the other stallions. But The Colt somehow manages to escape.

The next day, taking no chances, the herd moves to the far extent of their territory. All is quiet for the first few days but one of the scouting horses reports to Angus that he's seen - high up on the ridge - WhiteMan in the company of The Colt. They'd been showing considerable interest in the movements of the herd. Angus posts more sentries, in even closer formation, but neither WhiteMan nor The Colt are seen again. Gradually, as days turned into weeks, the horses relax. After all, the number of WhiteMan that survived were few - the scout had only spotted two or three on the ridge with The Colt. It becomes accepted they'd decided to leave the plain. Still, no chances are taken, the scouts still patrol the boundaries and at night the foals are safely hidden in new hideout caves which The Colt has never seen.

Normally the herd only use this section of their territory at the height of the dry season. Whilst the other lakes and ponds might dry up there's a flat section half way up the hillside and on it there's a small pond fed by an underground stream which ensures it never empties. Apart from this the area holds little attraction, particularly since it's next to the border with the land of the most aggressive herd in the valley. Also the grass is not the best and there are few trees, except around the pond, to provide shade. One morning, though still early spring, the heat appears especially strong and the herd is drawn to the small lake where the air is always a little cooler. All the foals are there, a little older now and so bolder. Gamboling, they extend the distance between themselves and their mothers until the point where she'll call out a stern warning for them to return. That is, all but one, for Tanah's foal is still recovering from her mistreatment at the hands of WhiteMan, and therefore spends her days in the mountain cave. The horses fringe the lake, some nibbling at the rich grass which extends a short distance from it, others have their faces buried in the sweet tasting water, occasionally letting out a low whinny - at the pleasure of the day, and a general contentment with their life amongst the herd. In the shade the sun provides a pleasant heat on their backs, food is plentiful, and there's been no sign of WhiteMan for several months. Angus has even allowed the scouts to rejoin the herd, only occasionally being required to make an extended reconnaissance of the boundaries.

The first sign of anything untoward is one of the young foals who, after taking a long draught of water, begins staggering. She then falls to her knees, unable to carry the weight of her body. Her eyes roll and she begins frothing at the mouth. Before long the same symptoms can be seen in another, and another.

Within an hour every foal and horse in the herd is dead, their bodies strewn about the lake. This is the scene Tanah and Angus find when they return from making a short inspection of their territories. The pair stand stock still for some minutes trying to absorb what they're seeing. Angus walks slowly over to the body of The Mare, whom he's loved above all others he's had through all his lifetimes. What need is there to rush to her? Death has already taken her. Time is an immaterial measure. Even in death she'd sought to protect her foal, with her body shielding him. His young colt had obviously died in an extreme of agony: eyes staring wildly, mouth wide and teeth bared, letting out an endless silent scream. His long legs stretch out rigid, back arched as if trying to outrun death. Angus nuzzles The Mare's face for some time, his eyes vacant, recalling memories of their life together. Tanah seeks out the old stallion: unlike the other horses he is contained in death, and has the appearance of having merely fallen asleep. So much so that when she first sees him hope briefly flares in Tanah's heart. Over the ensuing weeks the pair are forced to remain in the area, as Tanah's young foal slowly recovers. Every day they have to pass the watering hole where the remains of the herd lie. They're now little more than bone and strips of fur since the big cats came down off the mountain and gorged themselves, after the pungent smell of carrion had drifted up on the wind to their lair. Within hours their own trail of death leads back up the mountainside. Fortunately here the tragedy finally expires, for the other cats would not eat their own, and the bodies of the dead simply dry out in the powerful heat of early summer.

In this time Angus and Tanah are able to console each other in their grief and shared loss. All prior conflict is forgotten, all hatred dried up in their breasts, as again and again they see the look of utter despair whenever some small event evokes a memory of their loves lost. Such is the spirit of the soul: we cannot hate when we see such tragedy. Even our worst enemy we can pity, setting aside all prior feeling. Eventually perhaps even come to love. The sharing of grief, and we the witness of it, is enough to make the irrevocable shift, and so it is with Angus and Tanah. Angus even comes to trust Tanah, for the first time in all their lifetimes. At the start he didn't care whether he lived or died, yet she took no advantage. And, which was a surprise, he sees how much she'd loved the old stallion. Her sense of loss surprises even her, a great void appearing in her heart which she has no means of filling, even with the love she holds for her young foal.

Angus, in his despair, wanders aimlessly up and down the mountain, first to The Graveyard of The Herd, then back up to the hideaway. Here Tanah's foal has by now regained her strength and is the very essence of life, champing to be allowed out of the confinement of the cave. Tanah had expected with the foal's

recovery to leave the area, but Angus cannot. Tanah talks to him, quietly, comforting, but insistently trying to shift him into action. But with his intransigence eventually impatient anger gets the better of her. "Stop this! There's nothing to be gained by hanging around here. The other herd has found out what happened and has started to roam across our territory. If they find us they'll surely kill us. And if not them, the wildcats have a sixth sense. We need to move and join a friendly herd. There's many would have us."

Angus knows she's right, but he is guilt ridden, and by leaving it feels like the final betrayal. "No, I can't leave. We failed them. This was WhiteMan's doing in revenge for an attack I ordered. I should have anticipated this outcome and taken greater precautions. I don't know what he did, but I know he's responsible. They have ways of harming us that we have no means of defending against. Though they look puny and ugly with their sticklike limbs and ball of a head they have a power over us. They always will! It doesn't matter where we go, they'll find us and destroy us." He stares imploring at her, "In our next life Tanah we must become human, and make them change their ways." Tanah says nothing for some time, absorbing all that Angus had spoken. There is truth, a bigger truth, in some of his words. But what is the point of giving up and simply trusting in a better life next time around? After all, it could be far worse. Reflecting, she is in no doubt that you must make the best of this life and learn whatever lessons you can along the way. Not drift in improbable hope for a better next.

The two wild horses are standing outside the mountain cave: the cool evening breeze has begun to sing through the tunnels carved out of the solid rock by the winds of a billion years. Angus, his eyes vacant, is staring blindly down the hillside, playing over what he could have done to save the herd, and the consequences of his failure. The young mare is running races with herself over a short circuit she's mapped that starts and ends at the cave entrance, taking in a stretch of the ridge that extends a few hundred metres in either direction. Tanah, her manner decisive, nuzzles his faces insistently, determined to attract his attention and release him from his stupor. "My dear, she is gone, let her go. She's moved on to her next life, as has your child. Don't hold them back. You only cause them pain. By your despair you recall them to this existence, and make it difficult for them to move forward in their next." Angus at first gives no indication of having heard her words, or even awareness of Tanah's presence, so absorbed is he with thoughts of The Mare. But the sense of what she's said captures his attention and for the first time since the tragedy Tanah sees him smile. He gathers himself to his full height, lifts his head, and allows his gaze to take in all of their surroundings. "You are right, Tanah, I must let them go. Not only The Mare and

our child but all of the herd. More importantly, we must find safety for The Foal. We are in grave danger here. The wildcats will find us soon. We must leave. Leave now, and join the herd by The Great Lake. They will take us."

Two horses with a young foal to protect are easy prey for a well organised pride. The big cats, having over the last few days become aware of their vulnerability, are at that moment approaching the cave. For twelve fully mature wildcats it should have been a foregone conclusion. But amongst them is a youngster, impatient, eager to make a name for itself. As soon as it sees The Foal galloping on the homeward stretch of its race it leaps after it, a little clumsily, but closing fast. Angus, alerted by its noisy approach, kills the wildcat in mid flight as it makes its final leap – catching it with a hoof that comes crashing down on its back, shattering its spine instantly. Tanah, with only thought of protecting The Foal, screams for her to run and follows closely behind, leaving Angus to fend off the cats and give them time to escape. At the foot of the ridge, after a mad, headlong dash down the steep mountain slope, she finally pulls up beside The Graveyard and looks back up the hill. For the first time she thinks of Angus and his plight. The night is still, almost silent except for the chattering of the birds. A clear, pure sound which pierces the failing light. There is no movement amongst the trees. To all appearances it's another idyllic night - the sun settling below the horizon and the sky a crimson flame. No sign of the cats. But also none of Angus. Suddenly she hears the sound of beating hooves behind her. For a moment

Turning, hope dying as quickly as it is born, she sees the leader of the herd from the adjacent territory, with several stallions and younger colts fanned out behind him. He slows to a canter, stops a few lengths from her, before walking slowly around her as if measuring her for some purpose. The Foal tries to get under Tanah but she's too big and instead can only press against Tanah's flank. The stallion makes a move towards Tanah and she stiffens, bracing herself for the inevitable attack. He lets out a huge roar, rears up and as he comes down lashes out, killing The Foal instantly. Tanah is forced to join his herd as one of his brood of mares. For the remainder of this life she has a constant image in her mind of Angus' expression the moment she turned to escape the big cats. Without hesitation he'd placed himself between her and their attackers, a look of fear mixed with determination on his face.

In their next life, building on the tender feelings that grew as they comforted each other in their mutual grief, as adults the two become lovers for the first time. Almost from birth they're inseparable. As yearling mare and colt they can always be found together, playing, laughing. And talking. Always talking incessantly. The

other horses, when they can be bothered to listen, are unable to fathom the topic of their conversations: it sounds complete rubbish, madness even. "In our previous lives we were enemies, can't you feel that a little still? The energy of it?" Angus asks her querulously. As is invariably the case she does recall, and a deep frown will form on her brow, at the implications of all that she remembers. Angus laughs, "Really, you still feel guilty about what you did with Erik? You shouldn't, because that I can forgive. It was about power, and in its pursuit all is justified. All's fair in love and war. Or let's just say - in war." Tanah shakes her head, "It wasn't that I was thinking of. When you gave up your life to protect me and The Foal I didn't stop to think of you. Not until I knew we were safe. And by then you were already dead, ripped to pieces by the wildcats." Angus presses his forehead against hers. They roll their noses over each others, occasionally allowing their lips to touch as their conversation turns in different directions. And so they remain preoccupied all morning. The afternoon they spend frolicking near the broad river which flows through the herd's territory, along a narrow plain bounded by steep mountains on both sides.

"It was my choice to stay, though yes you might have given a little more thought to my sacrifice. But The Foal, you had to protect her. What kind of mother would you be if you didn't?" He tries his best to comfort her. However the look of dejection remains, as if she's not lived up to the expectations she has of herself. But she can never remain unhappy for long. Not when the sun is high in the sky, and Angus is teasing her, claiming she could never beat him in a race to the other side of the river and back. Without thinking, or perhaps to clear her mind of the unpleasant memory of the morning, she gallops headlong down to the water. Angus trails her, doing his best to close the distance between them. In this life they are of similar size and strength so he can do no more than maintain distance. When he finally reaches her he finds her standing in the middle of a patch of grass, a rich green and looking particularly succulent. She casually tugs at a clump of it, as if what she were doing were an every day; mundane. She stops in mid chew, staring at the water's reflection, mesmerised by something she sees within it. Angus calls out, "Hey! I was only joking about the swimming race. You know we're not even supposed to come this close to the river. It's full of snakes here." The river, except where narrow paths cut down to it, is bounded either side by a continuous thicket of pampas grass that extends to the shoulder height of a full grown horse. Which means that at this moment the two yearlings are hidden from the rest of the herd.

Tanah replies, "No one's going to know, are they? They can't see us. Swim across and back and they won't even notice we've been gone. Come on!" Tanah

spins around in the middle of the path. Just as she's about to jump into the water Angus cries out a warning. Straight ahead, exactly in her path, is a nest of Tiger Snakes, the most venomous of all serpents. The babies young look innocuous but they're just as deadly, their venom the same strength as a fully grown adult. There are enough of them in the nest to kill Tanah several times over. She steps back in alarm, one hoof still raised, but just at that moment two adults appear, parents of those in the nest. Tanah is surrounded, without means of escape. The serpents approach. While most snakes will generally only attack when cornered Tiger Snakes are renowned for their aggressive behavior, attacking without provocation. Their bodies slide silently over the grass, the only sound the hissing of their tongues. Tanah stares around wildly, her mind blanked by fear. In another second the pair of Tiger Snakes would be upon her, their teeth sunk into the soft flesh just below the knee. Bringing her down with the first bites they'll then attack her body again and again as she weakens. In death they'll wait for the flesh to putrefy, then strip it off the bone and either feed it to their young or gorge themselves. "Jump! Jump! Into the water!" Angus cries.

Her legs feeling like jelly. She's not sure if she can make it but with no other means of escape she's nothing to lose. Gathering herself she leaps out as far as she can. Clearing the nest by metres she lands full in the fast flowing water. Immediately she's carried away from the bank and into the midstream. Breathless, still shaken, she's unable to resist its force, which carries her rapidly downstream, and further away from the safety of the riverbank. Still recovering from the ordeal with the Tiger Snakes, it takes some moments for her to realise that the current is so strong there's no way she can swim against it and recover to the bank. At that moment she hears a loud splash. Looking over her shoulder she sees Angus swimming towards her. As he approaches she can see there's something wrong: his eyes are glazed over and his head flops loosely from side to side. There's nothing she can do to close the distance except slow her own progress. After a few minutes he reaches her. In that time he's weakened even further and it's immediately obvious to Tanah he's almost no strength left. But without a thought for himself he shouts to her, "Quickly! Swim with the current but also heading towards the shore. Don't try to swim directly against it, you'll just wear yourself down, and drown." His voice is weak, slurring on the words.

It's evident to Tanah that without her help Angus will drown. She cries out in anguish, "No, I'm not going to leave you Not again." Somehow, summoning strength she didn't know she possessed, she does as Angus instructed but swimming with his body draped half over hers, having swum underneath him. Slowly, ever so slowly, they creep towards the bank, but they're being pulled down

the river, getting closer and closer to a two hundred metre waterfall located a few kilometres downstream from the herd's camping ground. Heart pounding she puts on an extra spurt and, with the very last dregs of her energy, she manages to make it to shore, barely fifty metres from the falls. Here the bank has leveled off to a sandy beach, which makes it relatively easy for Tanah to drag Angus out of the water. He lies inert on his side, eyes rolling and breath shallow. Tanah gallops back to the other horses and minutes later the herd leader, accompanied by several of the stallions and an old mare, return to find Angus completely lifeless, his breathing ceased.

Old Mare studies him closely, scanning his legs until she finds the tell tale signs of the puncture marks. In her mouth she has a bunch of yellow flowers which she'd been chewing. "Cut this hind leg open along the vein," she instructs the stallions tersely, her attention fully focused on Angus' condition, "Then piss on it." She is known for curing ailments that regularly kill horses in the other herds so the horses follow her orders without hesitation. Moments later blood is oozing feebly from Angus' leg. Repeatedly she carefully rubs the poultice along the length of the wound. In only a few minutes, as if by a miracle, Angus is on his feet again and, albeit walking a little gingerly, he manages to rejoin the herd. Their parents are simply glad the two are safe so they avoid the rebuke they justly deserve. Anyway it's quite obvious they've learned an important lesson which has been taken fully to heart.

With their incessant companionship and adventures such as this binding them closer, it's a surprise to none when they become lovers. Which they display openly and freely if they have no option, though they prefer to share their love in private at a secret pool deep within the bush. There they'll lie side by side, necks intertwined like swans, or kissing passionately, biting into each other's necks, or she into the white blaze on his forehead. She will stand beneath him as he mounts her, turning her head at the moment of death to bite him, drawing blood from his face or neck, while he will sink his teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulder. Their cries of pleasure can be heard across the forest, sending small birds screeching into the sky. At other more tender times she will lie on her belly, legs tucked beneath her, and he will gently lower himself onto her, embedding himself deep within her. They will remain like that sometimes for hours, their heads close, kissing and biting each other.

Tanah can feel Angus jumping inside her and he, whenever he feels her muscles tighten around him, smiles at her languidly. She coyly returns with a pursing of lips, her eyes sparkling. Theirs is an easy love, one developed over considerable time. It came naturally. Was never forced, except when she hesitated

to explore feelings so strong she was sometimes afraid to release them. In these instances Angus would indulge her for some time, then gently push her off the cliff and watch her soar. He would not allow her turn away or slow the progress of their intimacy. Into this Utopia, a world of almost complete perfection, one day idly sauntered a large grizzly bear, of slightly disheveled and roguish appearance. This occurred one morning as Tanah dozed by the pool, replaying images of her recent love making with Angus, who'd only just left to join the other stallions.

Without preamble he says, "You desire, above all else, to become in your next life a human being. I can grant your wish, in return for a small fee of course." The Bear smiles knowingly. Alarmed at first by the bear's unexpected appearance, despite herself Tanah is drawn to this mischievous fellow, finding him amusing. Appealing even. She replies somewhat haughtily, "If by a fee you mean to use my body, it is not for sale." Apart from Angus she's never experienced another horse and has no desire to share herself with any other. She's quite certain any coupling with another would be a mechanical exercise, paling beside the intimacy and sensual passion with Angus that is sometimes almost too much to bear. Between them their intercourse is the most pure and intimate expression of, a reflection of, the layers of feelings they have for each other.

In a low voice Bear responds, "Bravo my dear. But, no, it's not your Sex I want." He leers, and laughs inwardly. "Oh, and please, call me Balthazar." Tanah shudders a little, picturing quite graphically how this rogue would fulfill his sexual cravings. And that he does so almost whenever, and with whomever, he chooses. She also senses that these desires would involve the most perverse and disgusting acts. Some beyond the scope of her imagination. What does surprise her is that she's not disgusted in him. Rather, if anything, intrigued. "Very well, Balthazar, what is it that you do want in return for what I can't deny I would give anything to experience." She smiles, inviting, provocative, rather enjoying the mental joust, and in the process letting her guard down somewhat. Her voice, for effect, has taken on a rather languid drawl. "Those were just the words I needed to hear, my dear," the crafty bear purrs in reply.

Countless are the hours Angus and Tanah have discussed what they will do if ever they have the good fortune to take on a human existence. They both recall the lifetime in which Whiteman, by some magic, was able to injure them though positioned some distance from them. Furthermore, had killed an entire herd by poisoning the water. Hours are spent, which afterwards are recognised as a fruitless waste, trying to fathom how karma might be bent in their favor in order to realise their dream. The more they talk about it, the more they crave it. Of course these discussions only ever take place between them. Never do they

discuss such matters with another horse. For they know they would think them mad, which might possibly, in the extreme, lead to their expulsion from the herd. Already some of the young colts who've overheard their conversations have started making snide remarks. Comments which they mostly ignore. Though from time to time Tanah – only for Angus' sake - will lash out. She'll catch one a painful blow to the knee or some other vulnerable spot, causing them to squeal with pain and a fight ensue. As the biggest mare she's far superior in combat to the other mares, and more than a match for the stallions of the herd.

Until this day it had remained nothing more than a fantastic, fascinating topic of avid conversation. Yet now, all of a sudden, here is this thoroughly untrustworthy bear, calling himself Balthazar, dangling the golden carrot before her eyes and within the easiest reach. For Tanah there isn't a moment of hesitation. "What then should you have of me in return for this truly priceless gift you offer? I cannot think of anything of sufficient value to tender in exchange." The bear covers a snigger with a large paw, "Oh, I will be fairly recompensed, I assure you. All I ask is that you say nothing of this to Angus." Balthazar settles himself on a large fallen trunk, and crosses one leg over the other. In one paw he idly tugs at the head of a large salmon he claims to have drawn from the river. Though Tanah is certain no one has ever seen one in their stretch of the water. While engaged in this increasingly intimate conversation up to this point Tanah had been slowly circling the log on which Balthazar's plump posterior rests. At the mention of Angus' name her step falters. She comes to an abrupt halt. Balthazar smiles slyly, momentarily looking up into the sky and whistling a rather engaging melody. Tanah's expression is first one of guilt, for since Balthazar's arrival she hasn't thought of Angus for even a second. Not even when Balthazar made his irresistible offer. And then a look of great sadness descends, for she glimpses in a flash all that's expected of her. A betrayal. And how willingly, knowingly, will she commit it. And she would do it again, ten, a million times over if it means the fulfillment of her dream. What makes it even worse she senses without a shadow of doubt that Angus, though he craves it not one iota less, would never betray her in this way. As if he can read her mind Balthazar, in a rather off hand tone, suggests, "Oh, Tanah, of course he would do the same in your shoes. Don't you both want it just as much as each other?" His already deep baritone drops an octave. "Wouldn't you do anything to get it?"

Tanah, her mind now fully alert to the situation, responds acidly, "Then why are you only offering it to me? Why me, and not Angus? Is it because, in fact, you know no one and nothing would induce him to betray me?" Balthazar releases a tinkling laugh, a little incongruous for a very large grizzly bear. For a moment it

seems to flitter round Tanah like chirping birds. "My dear, don't be absurd. And don't underestimate yourself. I could not make this promise to Angus simply because I could not fulfill it. Karma is a powerful force. And though I have some abilities...." He pauses to feign modesty with an excess of theatricality, "But there are limits. Darling you are ready, being a little more advanced in intellect and wisdom in the ways of the world than Angus. His time will come." Tanah's anger flares and she moves quickly, bringing herself within striking distance of the bear. "Be careful my dear, we are alone," the bear warns in a flat monotone.

She screams at him, "But it won't will it? That's the deal isn't it? I get to become a human many lifetimes earlier than karma judges me ready, and in return I must agree that Angus will be prevented from ever experiencing the human condition. That's it, isn't it? And you know I'll agree, so why are you sugar coating it like this?" A look of disgust flits across her face. Balthazar rises to his full height and stares Tanah coldly in the eye. "My dear.... Forever.... Pooh, pooh, poor-ever." The briefest glance. Only momentary, but enough always it seems for him to judge precisely what needs to be said to break down Tanah's increasingly flimsy defences. "Humph! Forever is a very long time, I'm sure in time karma will allow Angus the privilege of a human existence. He is after all thoroughly deserving. And as I said, my ability to influence is limited. My powers are of only finite duration." He pauses, allowing only just sufficient time for the sharp edge of Tanah's indignation to be dulled by his soothing words. "Right ho, so it's all agreed. Now comes the rather fun part, well for me at least."

The bear had sidled a little closer whilst Tanah was preoccupied with her thoughts: of how once again she will willingly betray he whom she shares the greatest love it is possible to own. Within immediate striking distance Tanah has no time to react. With a single practiced movement, knife like claws extended, the bear's paw opens an artery in the horse's neck and her lifeblood spurts in great gushes onto the ground. She tries to rear up, to defend herself, but her hind legs give way and she collapses onto the ground. She expends the last moments of life by the lake where for countless hours she's made the most abandoned love with Angus. Where they've talked of the changes, together, they'd make to the world. Never had it crossed their minds that one would experience it without the other. Her emotions contain a mixture of desolation at her betrayal and the sudden realization that she'll see Angus never again. But mixed with it, which she makes no attempt to contain, an extreme of excitement, almost climactic, at the prospect of the fulfillment of Balthazar's promise. It is with these two thoughts in conflict with one another that her life ends by the water whose reflection has mirrored

the happiness and contentment Tanah and Angus had created. And of course love, in all its intimacy, tenderness and raw passion.

Balthazar was a liar.

Tanah, at Karma's direction, would spend the next several lifetimes as one of life's downtrodden. It gives her more than ample opportunity to reflect on Karma's calculation of the loss of merit accrued through the betrayal of one we claim to love. Frequently would she be a lowly beggar kicked by everyone from one corner of her miserable existence to another. Or a street prostitute in the poorest and most violent cities of the world where sailors might use then discard her once their momentary pleasure was satisfied. And then as a wealthy heiress, forced all her young life to obey the demonic demands of a psychopath of a father. And then an even more sadistic husband whose clutches she was driven into in order to save the family's waning fortunes. This might be followed by a sojourn into the world of political intrigue as a diplomat for one of the weaker and more corrupt South American countries. Or preceded by a brief period as a criminal lawyer pandering to the more brutal of the criminal classes. In instances such as these a lost case would signal the end of her life by some grisly means, or by her own now practiced hand. So many lifetimes. Countless are the times she has, in despair at her circumstances and still guilt ridden, committed suicide, only to be thrown back into an equally awful or even worse existence.

Angus, meanwhile, is not forced to remain for time eternal in the not unpleasant surroundings of the animal kingdom. Karma had, in fact, already determined that both Angus and Tanah were more than ready to make positive contribution on man's stage. Balthazar knew this. But more importantly he knew Tanah's weakness. And his only interest was to exploit it and in so doing destroy something delicately beautiful. The finest crystal. Such a thing, love, should never be taken for granted since like glass, though containing great strength, once broken it can never be repaired. It can only be melted down, to form the love others will share. We should revel in love but be ever vigilant of anyone that might usurp it. But mostly we should reflect upon ourselves because we will at times become complacent and not appreciate the riches beyond measure we hold in our heart. At that moment we may let it slip from us. Or not cherish it sufficiently so that love cools and distance forms between us, through misunderstanding or disappointment in our lover's actions. We must guard it with our life if it means anything to us. Because it is more precious than life itself.

It would be several thousand lifetimes, on a planet called Utopia, before Angus and Tanah would meet again.

Part One

Insignificance

The future is a distant planet from which we may, with greater clarity, observe our present follies.

As Angus was telling the story of the horses the flying carpet had been flying high above the vast flood plains that extend from the sea deep into the interior of Utopia's largest continent, named by The Settlers as Arcadia. A small boy, Dhurba, was sprawled comfortably in Tanah's lap. "So this is your favorite story is it Dhurba?" said Tanah's husband Angus, ruffling the boy's hair. Dhurba's eyes kept half closing, on the verge of sleep, but he'd still managed a nod and a sleepy grin. Angus had looked deeply into Tanah's eyes. She'd blushed and glanced down, still unable even after all these years to hold his gaze when, as they did on this occasion, his eyes had blazed with the intensity of his love for her. "I think it's everyone's favorite story, love," Tanah had murmured. Angus had come to her side then and she'd clasped one arm in hers. With her free hand she'd played a finger dance on his palm.

As the carpet had sped across the open sky several children – eyes bright, curious – peered over its edge. One of them had interrupted Angus by asking, "Is this where the horses fought each other?" He'd taken the child's hand in his, gripping it a little tighter than he'd meant to, "No, my dear, though it is very similar. They fought out their duration on a distant planet where no living things survive now." The child had persisted, "But why were they fighting, why did they hate each other so much?"

Later that night as they'd talked, lips occasionally touching, Angus had said to Tanah, "That's the hardest question to answer. However many times I tell this story, I still don't know why we fought so viciously, why we hated each other so much then." Noticing a fleeting sadness and uncertainty in her eyes he'd pulled her to him. "Never again, love. Forever seems so easy between us. We must have exhausted every ounce of anger and hatred in all those lives we shared, those years ago." She'd smiled then, placated. In fact whenever he tells this particular story - when they'd loved and hated to the extremes of passion - it would make her heart tighten a little. And the sense of guilt she can never quite expunge would resurface. Her voice gets an edge to it, her manner a little strident, "But how do we know for certain it really happened? It could all be in our imagination.... But then again, we both remember it the same...." In fact Tanah's belief in reincarnation is as strong, as certain, as in birth and death. For her it

completes the cycle. But she likes to argue the point, to test each other's certainty and the logic of their arguments. Angus had said nothing, allowing her to answer the question for herself.

At the end of the story of the horses Angus points up into sky, "See the clouds, kids? We were still outside its atmosphere when we were first able to see Utopia with our own eyes. We didn't have a name for the planet then. We wanted to see it first otherwise.... Well, it would be like naming one of you before you were born."

Dhurba's father Panit recollects, "Imagine it children. Waking one morning – and there she was. A slowly revolving bright blue football! But as we broke through the atmosphere - getting close enough to differentiate the sea from land - we wondered. This is the only home you know, but would we ever be able to think of her as my home? You see, unlike all of you, Angus, I and a few others come from a planet which no longer exists. That's right, and it's called Earth. Children, can you imagine travelling to another planet? Maybe you will when you're older. If you do, you too might get the feeling of how The Settlers felt then."

As the children swap their favorite adventures from The Story of the Horses Angus and some of the other settlers reminisce to the adults born on utopia about their excitement at finally reaching Utopia: the end of their long journey from earth. Angus recollects his feelings at seeing it for the first time. "There was a huge sense of relief to finally make it." He smiles though his manner is quite sombre, "Hmm, yes, and of our great insignificance. But unexpectedly, also a feeling of intense sadness." He raises his eyebrows, still surprised by the recollection, and shakes his head, uncomprehending: "After all the years, the millions of miles we'd distanced ourselves from her, and the mess that she'd become. I thought I'd only feel elation. I still get that feeling of loss from time to time. I suppose I always will." He smiles dolefully again, turning to the parents born on Utopia, "I'm just glad none of you've ever had to experience what we went through." Another Settler agrees. "'How fortunate we were to escape the violence and rage. But still having mixed feeling. A sense of finality. An ending, I suppose...."

"But also a new beginning!" As always when discussing their leaving Earth the mood has turned heavy. Determined to shake it Angus shouts, "Hey kids, what story do you want to hear next?" When a moment before the children had been engrossed in the view over the side of the carpet as it speeds across the night sky over a pattern of open plain and isolated, brightly lit towns, at the mention of another story Angus is the immediate centre of attention. One of the girls asks,

"What did you like best about it, when you first saw Utopia?" Angus whispers something in her ear and tickles her. She shrieks with laughter. In fact only a few on the magic carpet may justly claim to be the man's grandchildren. There are in all thirty seven direct descendants of his, spread over five generations, dotted across the planet of Utopia. This man, Angus, and his wife Tanah are known throughout all of Utopia as having shared their lives far, far longer than any other man and woman bonded by the tying of their hearts. What makes them even more unusual is that neither has ever taken another partner and are therefore truly unique. Some have remarked, an aberration - though without hint of criticism. For who would not wish to find all they seek in one person? In fact, they did not wish it to be like this. Both had wanted other partners to guard against the inevitable - or what everyone considers inevitable - completion of their relationship. But still, after two hundred years, the man and woman have no impetus to look outside for something they find missing in their lover, or through boredom with each other's company.

While their parents, in groups of three or four, sit around the edge of the carpet, the children take up familiar positions. The smallest, though not the youngest, returns to Tanah's lap. Others are stroking her arm or playing with her hands, while the remainder press as close as they can, all ensuring at least some part of their body is in contact with hers. She looks fondly down at them, seeing in each one a reflection of a parent or sibling. But also what makes them - their energy - uniquely different. She murmurs, as if to herself, though the children can all hear, "Yes, each of you have a gift. Something at which you will excel." A little louder, "Don't give up looking until you find it. Never accept a life of mediocrity, children - wasting your days doing something at which you're at best average. That will only lead to a life full of frustration." Noticing some of the looks on their small faces she smiles, "Don't worry, my darlings, once you find your gift, life will take care of itself."

Angus asks them, "OK, so you want to hear about when The Settlers first got here. Where shall I start?" From Durbha, buried in the Tanah's lap, comes a sleepy voice, "Tell us about how you first came here...."

"We've just heard that - go back to sleep!"

From the boys a raucous chorus loud enough to startle a flight of birds passing close by: "Start with the dragons! Please!" The story of The Monsters is always popular among the children. They never tire of it. "Tell us how the dragons transformed themselves into monsters. And witches and things." Angus is now positioned at the front of the carpet, cross legged and chin in hand, listening only with one ear to the children. His expression is one of indecision, with a gentle

smile playing around his lips. Looking down briefly at the ground flashing past them, his look changes to one of surprise, and a broad smile forms. "Children, a story should always start at the beginning, shouldn't it? Look down, what do you see?"

The magic carpet when at rest has a rich crimson tapestry, typical of the design of the famous Persian rugs of a thousand years before. This one is a particularly fine example, albeit a rather unusual one. Not only is it a flying carpet but when in the air it becomes translucent, allowing its passengers to see everything beneath them. In its centimetres thick pile a rich palette of fragrances is fixed in it. One of the children is lying face down – imagining herself a bird in flight – and pressing her face deep into its soft warmth. Inlaid into the carpet's weave are the pungent aromas of exotic spices that in times past were transported by camel thousands of kilometres along The Silk Road to supply to the voracious demands of wealthy merchants across Asia, The Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. Or she might catch the faint whiff of the scent of the woman who weaved the carpet. Whose sweat fell on it as she worked patterns of an ancient design passed down to her by generations of women before them. But there is always something of their individual flair in the pattern: creativity and love are embedded indelibly, giving each carpet a unique character.

"Where are we, grandpa?" the youngest asks. What she sees means nothing to her, having never passed over this part of Utopia before. And never having heard the story Angus is about to recount. Below is a vast expanse of bushland, full of huge trees that seem to reach up to them. The carpet, as if following its own desire, swoops down until it almost touches the treetops. The children whoop with delight. The boys at least: some of the girls scream and clutch Tanah a little tighter. The night sky brightens as the carpet lifts high into the sky and passes over the brightly lit city of Arcadia. It is still one of the largest settlements on Utopia. In fact, now several hundred years old, it was the first real town built by The Settlers.

A look passes between Angus and Tanah: "This is where, you might say, you all began." A smile and a knowing look crosses the faces of all but the very youngest children, who retain an expression of innocent inquisitiveness. This story, as with all of them, is one the children have heard for as long as they can remember. And yet never tire of hearing because Angus brings it so to life they feel as if they were there themselves. "That open space - now a park in the middle of the town we're flying over- is the area The Settlers cleared soon after the spaceship landed. And then," Angus laughs at the recollection, "Oh, those first few months were crazy! Flat out building, clearing, planting. SO busy, so preoccupied,

that no one ever noticed the animals.... Yes, the young ones.... VERY nosy, just like you!" More tickling and shrieks of delight. "Oh, grandpa, tell us what did the spaceship that you came on look like? Did it look like a horse? Or a rhinoceros? ... What's a rhinoceros?" Of course most of them know what it looked like but they find fun in adding their own imagination to The Stories. One of the older boys says in an authoritative voice, "It wasn't any of those things. It looked like a two headed monster with a hundred arms and a tail a hundred metres long. And it breathed fire ..."

"No it didn't! You just want to hear the story of the dragons ...

"No I don't! That's what it looked like. Didn't it grandpa?"

Angus settles himself, giving his audience all the time they need to build up their imaginations before commencing the story: "All right then.... I suppose if we're talking about beginnings we really should start with the spaceship.... No, don't worry boys. We'll get to the animals straight after. Mmmm, the spaceship! Well it was painted mostly pink, and after we landed someone actually did paint a face on it, so as much as anything I suppose it looked just like a very fat pig."

The Pink Pig

The spaceship does resemble a pig. Though it seems even the pink wasn't enough – a splurge of rainbows and multicolored stars decorate its full length. In the early days of their voyage into the unknown one section of the exterior was set aside for portraits of everyone on board. To which were later added the faces of those born on Pig. In the end the pictures – cartoons mostly, exaggerated caricatures of someone's features – occupied half of one side of the vessel. Many of the portraits - exposed to the elements of numerous galaxies - faded to be beyond the recognition even of their owner. However all the faces, in whatever state of decay, still retained a common expression of joy and carefree abandon. Competing favorably with the rainbows spiraling along its length, the other side of the ship was daubed in huge multi colored lettering. It boldly stated: "Hate is power, but Love is stronger". From the beginning a concerted effort was made by the Utopians to avoid comparison with craft of a military nature. Which as we know are invariably distinguished by their bland paintwork. By their displays of enormous flags of their nations, or emblems of their corporate sponsors. No one in their right mind could ever make the mistake of imagining The Utopians' craft harbors any martial ambitions.

Similarly within the craft it appeared that an anarchic chimpanzee had been let loose in the paint room. Every door, every wall, even the ceiling, was painted in all colors and designs imaginable. Some walls were made up of panels with computer generated images. These chameleoned themselves in response to coding in the identity disc embedded in the BPOD identity chip of the person passing by. For some as they made their way around Pig natural landscapes stretched out before them. Perhaps suddenly they found themselves within a grove of trees. Also their personal space could change. From a bedroom to a workspace, or to a place of entertainment. In concert with this the furniture could flip over, to be replaced by something more suitable to the selected environment. At night again the change. Perhaps a romantic tryst setting. Or for the kinked a torture dungeon could be conjured up at the crack of a whip. Some of The Settlers programmed their space, whilst many had their bpod visualiser on Random setting so that through the day the ship transformed itself into a never before seen street scene or landscape. Whatever the scene, it was accompanied by its sounds and smells. Perhaps a busy café precinct. Which would be complete with ROD waiters and restaurant customers at their table. And the pungent aroma of different foods, changing as they passed by each one.

One place, however, contrasted starkly with the rest of the ship. The Operations Room - containing the transport and environment controls – was devoid of all paintwork. This was necessitated – though done extremely reluctantly - after a near miss with a small planet. The pilot of the ship at that time explained that with the urgency of the moment and the fantastic shifting images and colors in the control room he'd been so severely distracted that he compared it to being at the controls of Pig whilst at the height of a glorious acid trip. Fortunately a computer override - which kicked when a certain level of danger was reached - allowed Brains, the ship's main computer, to take control and avert disaster. In an effort to counter the bland surroundings of the control deck, the crew on duty always went to extra effort in their choice of attire. They'd dress themselves in the most outrageous costumes, of which color was but one weapon in their arsenal of creativity. Clearly this band of space travellers - already calling themselves Utopians to make clear distinction of themselves from the human species - were determined to avoid any confusion as to their motives and pleasures. And anyone still in any doubt need only read a portion of the graffiti which still daubs the craft's interior and exterior.

As well as a visual kaleidoscope, music or other sounds could accompany a settler through their day. The BPOD can be programmed to allow each person to have a personal soundtrack to their life as if they're in a movie, and they its star. Alternatively, as many did, groups shared a common aural experience. It might be something as mundane as an album, or a film soundtrack. For the more determined pleasure seeker, a fuelled clubbing. These Cyrenaics might allow themselves celebrations lasting days. Even more intense, An Arthouse Happening. They got everything thrown at them. An assault of the mind and senses, leaving them breathless and their brains disfigured for its duration.

Reserved for the artists was a long section of deck at the rear of the ship with a huge transparent domed roof. For some the depths of space might be all the inspiration they required. Whilst others, depending on their mood or the subject of their work, could choose a private visual and aural experience defined by their motivation. Since generating an original virtual reality would consume a considerable proportion of Brain's capacity, early on she decided to utilise a collective of the artists' imaginings. In real time the Utopians aboard Pig could enjoy a truly unique experience. And gain a glimpse of the artists' minds at work from moment to moment. Such distractions were important, since the inhabitants of Pink Pig lived on her for many hundreds of years. Having bpods they were able to choose to sleep for long periods. Easy enough – no different to programming an alarm clock – which allowed them to hibernate for days, weeks or even months.

But of course in all that time and limited space there were days of boredom. When it was impossible to think of something to occupy their time. Despite this, and the gnawing sense of uncertainty that never left me until I finally set foot on Utopia's fertile soil, I think these were my happiest times. Or at least when I was most at peace.

"So children, that was The Pink Pig. Now, let's get back to the story I promised, of when The Settlers first landed on Utopia.... And their first ventures into the forest that surrounded where they'd landed. You remember how we first met the animals?" Not knowing quite why, the youngest join in with the squeals of excitement of the older children. They hardly hear Angus as, looking a little sheepish, he goes on, "Before I begin there's something I must tell you." Angus looks at Tanah and she smiles in encouragement, nodding her head so imperceptibly only Angus notices it. "Children, your grandmother, after the last time I told the story of our meeting with the animals, asked me to tell you the complete, should I say, the correct version of events the next time I told it." The children are rather inattentive at this point, distracting each other while waiting for the story – a tapestry of adventures in which they can furl themselves.

Angus gives a loud cough which startles the children into attention. He does this because he doesn't want to have to repeat what he's about to say, which will make him feel a complete fool. He couldn't tell you why the lie began, beyond as some misguided gesture to protect Tanah. He knows it will lead to awkward questions from the children because all of them would have heard the incorrect version of events. "It was not in fact your grandmother that accompanied me into the forest that morning but another woman that you have also heard of, by the name of Alana Umani."

There's a few raised eyebrows and surprised looks from the Utopian born adults. Which is accompanied by an explosion of questions from the children. To which Angus, still tight lipped, responds. "Well.... in fact.... Well, it was like this...." Angus squares his shoulders and sticks his jaw out – to Tanah, at that moment he looks exactly like a bull about to charge a gate: "I didn't meet your grandmother for another sixty years. Alana and I were married, in the sense we'd shared our lives for several decades before we arrived on Utopia as part of the group we call The Settlers. Alana, before I met her, was a well known scientist. In fact she was closely involved in the development of that greatest of man's inventions, the BPOD, that we all now benefit from. But after this invention created not the greater freedom and quality of life she'd expected but in fact greater subjugation

of the 99% of mankind she became a fighter for freedom. Which in fact is when and how we met."

With the children having largely lost interest by this point Angus addresses the other Settlers among the parents. "Do you remember those first heady days when non violent rebellion seemed so guaranteed of success?" A few smile dolefully, "When the Elite, knowing only violence, floundered. Their brutal suppression only drew more to our side. But then, as they were so good at, they adapted. Defeat followed defeat. R85 was so powerful - its control so entrenched - that we came to realise that we could never beat them. We were compelled to change direction and seek out a fresh start. Plans were formed to build The Pig and travel to Utopia. Then just a remote planet discovered by a lone scientist. Kept secret from R85. I think most of us saw Alana as our leader. Though immediately we escaped earth she relinquished her power."

Angus coughs loudly again, "Children! I'm sorry I digressed somewhat. But I thought you should know a little about Alana Umani. As I was saying, it would be another sixty years before I first met your grandmother. And it would be some time after that we were married.... Oh, because she was only ten years old then, living alone, the sole survivor of a tribe on one of the most beautiful islands you could ever imagine. Though sometimes lonely she had many friends among the animals on the island and the fish in the seas that surrounded it. But she sought company of her own kind and willingly accompanied us.... I was with a group of friends on a trip to the island. She came all the way back here with us to Arcadia. We met again by chance years later." Angus looks lovingly into Tanah's eyes, "We've been together ever since. Two hundred years have passed very fast." The children stare up at Tanah, wide eyed, goldfish mouths, an unspoken "Oh!" on all their lips. "Actually we didn't meet by chance, but that's a story for another time children, when you're a little older." Tanah puts her hand to her mouth but fails to hide her smile, and the laughter which bubbles up at the sight of Angus' look of surprise. "Another time, darling. Go on, you can tell them the story now, how it actually was."

Angus takes a few moments to collect himself, glancing several times at Tanah, smiling and shaking his head. "Very well. We - Alana and I - weren't busy that morning, so we'd gone for a walk that took us to the edge of The Great Forest. Alana, as much as your grandmother, loves nature. She probably loves it more than most people, but she's also a little afraid it." Angus adopts a stern expression, "And boys I'll take this opportunity to remind you once again not to hide worms where you know Tanah's going to find them. However much she loves them, all the same she's not at her best around things that creep and crawl."

Laughing, the boys jostle each other, "Anyway, as I was saying, Alana and I had decided to do some exploring." Angus doesn't mention that at the point where they stepped from the neatly cleared land into the deeply wooded forest Alana's grip on his hand had become a vice grip and he'd seriously thought she'd crush it. "We were only a few metres into the bush when we stopped to look at some beautiful flowers that were abundant in that part of the forest. I might have picked a few and given them to Alana."

On waking the next morning, lying in each other's arms, looking and finding in each other's eyes the familiar signal of their love, they laugh at themselves, as they often are forced to do. "Will we ever find a time when we have nothing of interest to talk about, love?" She rests a hand on his chest, seeking the beat of his heart. The sea is just over a low rise, close enough that the sounds of the ocean are each distinct. For Angus its steady rhythm provides catharsis to the turmoil of his thoughts when driven to recollect his life before Utopia. Before Tanah. He looks into her eyes, enfolding her a little tighter, "Last night on the carpet, I don't know why, I got to thinking of how many times we came close to disaster."

Friendly Nature

After all that we'd escaped from, what dangers we subsequently encounter here on Utopia seem trivial. Any outcome could only be better than what we'd have faced if we'd remained on Earth. It was our last throw of the dice. And if it hadn't been a lucky pair then it was oblivion for us. But all fears and doubts are forgotten once we see her. I'm drawn to her instinctively as if coming home. Almost immediately - and I think it's true for the majority of us - Earth is forgotten. Though I remember the look on some faces. Lost. Longing. I can't believe anyone would miss that broken planet! Have any feeling but relief to be finally - with somewhere new to live - to forget about it. For fuck's sake, it was a horror movie. That lasted a hundred years.

When the ship first lands the ground feels so hard and solid. Everyone is standing at a window or looking up at the large screens that for so long have only showed the same picture: a dark space, dotted with an infinite theatre of light. Look out now and what do we see? A cacophony of life. But all I can think is to imagine, *What's over the horizon?*. And wonder, how many others have the same thoughts? Oh, that explorer's weakness! We crave to see what we cannot contain within our vision.... To conquer.... To control.... A hunger never satisfied. But without this unquenchable curiosity there can be no progress towards new learning. To inch us closer to The Knowledge. I pray this urge never dies within me.

At the scientists insistence we remain in the spacecraft, though our feet are now itching intolerably. We hate the feeling of constriction but at the same time ... Yes, it's so much like the womb. In fact the ship was a prototype that we commandeered which was designed to be a self contained ecosystem. And who knows - there were several built - there may be other small remnants of our species that escape and now cruising around the infinity of space. For all time, never leaving the confines of their ship. I couldn't imagine living forever in a spacecraft, however big it was. I am a planetary being. But children born in a spacecraft, how would they feel? I like to smell the rain. Feel the wind in my face. Though of course, if there were no alternative anything would be preferable to have remained on Earth. But I can't imagine us as the raucous, free and impulsive beings Utopians are if we'd been confined to a spaceship forever. I imagine it would breed secrecy. And the feeling of never being able to escape one another. Something we all need to do from time to time, however much love there is.

Seeing the outside but being unable to leave the ship, for the first time Pig feels like a prison. I think that's how most of us feel seeing the ground, and the

trees upon it. Birds flying. The sky; clouds. But we must wait until the scientists have finished checking the atmosphere and soil. A team of five of them take our first tentative steps. It's as if we're all walking in their thick, heavy boots together. Our new home? The cradle of a new civilisation? We watch, holding our breaths, as they step out of the craft. Already excavation machines have created a deep moat around the ship to keep the animals, if there are any, at bay. We follow the scientists progress as they set up their equipment and begin testing the atmosphere. It doesn't take long. But it takes forever! The first signal: thumbs raised. A discarding of protective clothing by the most adventurous of the scientists is immediately followed by a cheer and mad dash for the exits by a large group from the ship. The other scientists, more cautious, observe him for a while - he an experiment now - before they too are confident enough to shed theirs. But by then the first of The Settlers, in nothing more than their day clothes, are gamboling like horses in a paddock. Chasing, laughing, whooping.

I remember standing there, looking up at the two moons of the planet. In my mind's eye an infinitesimally small planet and us microdots upon it. Nothing in the scale of the universe. But beware! How easy it is to fall on the sword of false modesty. We, all living beings, influence. A ripple out from the flung stone. We should never become complacent. Otherwise we can, oblivious, cause untold damage. But then everyone's streaming out. And I must join them. Was I one of the last to tread her soil for the first time? Ha, ha, who knows, at that moment weren't we all just a stir crazy band of jailbirds at long last released from captivity. How it reminds me of those adventure stories which fired my imagination as a child and made me want to follow in their footsteps. For me it was of the early mariners when Earth was a universe unexplored, unknown. After months cooped up on a tiny wooden ship flung by the sea onto some distant landfall. For a while going crazy. Fighting. Fucking. Drinking themselves into an oblivion.

The scientists join us in the revelry, but later in the day they'll begin a methodical examination of the cleared area within the moat. At this stage it's just half a hectare around the ship. Five hundred hectares in all we plan to cultivate as farmland, across which the community will be distributed. A small but totally self sufficient village. Already the robo excavators have begun digging the foundations of accommodation and communal buildings. We chose this location so we'll be above the large river we saw as we came into land. But close enough for it to supply our water needs. In those first few months there's no holding us back. We feel indestructible. Some Higher at our side protecting us from all possible dangers. Hadn't we made it this far? Surely nothing could go wrong. Of course that's our hearts talking. Our heads said different but we only wanted to hear our

hearts then. It was a good choice for a first settlement. But better still the first town, Arcadia, which a year later gets built around the river which a few kilometres downstream flows into Big Ocean. From the new Arcadia all our needs are within easy reach. We move to this location once Brain's tells us we can build there without risk of flooding. After the move there initially we were going to abandon The Landing Place. But – and I suppose we all had different reasons – it was important for me we should not forget. We should mark where we started.... For me, yes.... To me it was a kind of pagan shrine. A Totem. A place for remembrance. A place where we could leave our past, yet have somewhere to return to if ever the need arose. For me it never has. I am glad to forget.

A race is on. Families take to light planes; individuals don jet packs. They fan out in all directions across the forest's canopy, competing to be the first to see beyond the immediate horizon. On returning from exploring they download to Brains what they've seen and a map of our immediate surroundings starts to take shape. To the east, only a few kilometres away, the waves break on a sandy shoreline. To the south west a flat plain runs for hundreds of kilometres inland, bisected by a single line of high snow capped mountains which are visible from The Pig. To the north west, the sun shimmers off a lake dancing with life. Birds of brilliant color. Fish arcing high out of the water as if nothing could contain them. The lake is only a short distance from us, but we're separated from it by the dense Bush. It's fringed all around by trees that weep over the banks, dipping their branches into the clear blue. In the autumn season their leaves are of every color. They have a subdued beauty, austere. But when in bloom.... the flowers are vivid, almost glaring in their brightness. As Earthlings we never saw so much color in nature. Over the next twelve months Brains will send out drones until she has the whole planet mapped.

Though it IS different I used to think, *Have we really come so far for something so familiar?* How many planets are there essentially identical to Earth? And if so, how many civilisations are there in every way our twin? "They warned us, told us we were fools to look elsewhere. Didn't we have everything we could want on Earth? R85 might have done, but we did not. We'd never have it so good. That we'd die, throwing it all away for an impossible dream. Of course R85 would tell us that! They needed us. Slaven." The expression on the faces of the Utopian born is always the same when I try to explain what it was like on Earth. A somewhat bemused disinterest. They don't – can't - understand. The desperation - when every day was a struggle to justify living another day. Or the alternative – which is worse? - driven to kill someone blamed for all the wrongs in our life. I

wonder still, if there had been more certainty about the existence of Utopia, having it as a fallback would we have been able to rally enough people to overthrow them? It was only one scientist, though he was adamant it was there. And so at the crux there was only a relative handful of us desperate enough to plunge ten million light years into the void. With greater certainty might we have defeated R85? And made Earth the beautiful place it once was. A planet not so different to what Utopians have now. Or had human civilisation gone too far by then to recover from its collective insanity? Ah! I will, to death, be unable to answer that question: were we too quick to leave? But R85 were so good at breaking opposition, in whatever form it came at them. It's only now, with the knowledge we have, that we can speculate on the possibility of beating them. Given reason to live instead – as R85 wanted – the empty, purposeless of existence as a Consumers. No more than Battery Chooks. But who wants to speculate about that now? Ancient history to The Settlers still alive. And for Utopians Earth is a distant, dead planet. It has no attachment. Holds no interest.

Utopia, I would never leave you! Even when she sometimes becomes an adversary. Or when some of the tribes - anachronisms of primitive times that out of obscurity have managed to cling on to an existence - like clumsy, ungainly giants they disturb the gentle balance the Utopians have created with nature. No, not ever would I leave if I had the choice. Because there is one great difference. On Utopia good is the dominant force, driven by the love and kindness of all sentient beings here. Whereas on Earth anger and willful misunderstanding subsumed all that was good in mankind. We only allowed our weaker traits, greed and self interest, to run wild. In this alone we can see how much more advanced Utopians are. But it was like we'd struck Heaven! Before tragedies befell us fools that we were in those halcyon days we got it into our heads that this planet would never think of harming us. And so with abandon we set forth, taking uncalled for risks for which we would later pay and pay. The more inquisitive want to explore the jungle, since it completely surrounds the settlement. In fact it covers most of the continent of Arcadia. A blanket of secrets. Because none of the electronics can penetrate the thick canopy. No discernable heat patterns to indicate a concentration of life. But everyone feels – it's not logical I know – that with all that wildlife we can hear in the Bush there must be more advanced life too. God, how narrow minded could we be! Stuck looking through an Earth lens. It takes The Settlers to be outnumbered by Utopians for that to end.

Every day is a new adventure. Down at the seashore the weather's permanently balmy with a cool, refreshing breeze. After living for so long in uncertainty – who's to say Utopia would be as The Scientist said? - and travelling

so many millions of light years and then to find this place so familiar. Like we'd just driven out of town for a day at the beach! There was a feeling – more powerful still in my present circumstances – that we'd been here before. My only solace in leaving is that I will one day be reborn on Utopia again, or somewhere like it.

A Sunday afternoon. The beaches along the endless coastline utterly pristine. Utopia's beauty can make your heart stop. There's nothing you'd change about it. Not a single thing. With the children strapped to a parent's front, a group of twenty of us in jetpacks take to the skies and head for the blue horizon. Within minutes beneath us we see pods of dolphin cavorting in the shallows. Further out there's huge tentacled creatures. Whale swim languidly, keeping a line parallel with the shore. After landing on a solid looking section of the sand we wander along the beach. I joke with one of the single girls that I've long had a fancy for that we're actually actors in a slushy love story movie. That it will break box office records. She smiles politely, indifferent as ever.

The chime of birdsong is backtracked by the swash of breaking waves. The children dance on the sand and play in the water. Lovers are at last free from minute observation. Half of us stay by the jetpacks. I form a seat in the sand and gaze out over the blue, as ever overwhelmed into silence by her beauty. Others seem to take her more for granted, quickly absorbed in conversation or by the antics of the children. For some time I'm preoccupied, reflecting on all that's happened since our arrival. A little distance from The Pig gives some objectivity to it. But she brings me back. Her aching beauty. Near offshore the leaping fish shimmer, the sunlight reflecting off their lithe, twisting bodies. Curious: some approach the shore and turn their eyes upon us. Their language - for what else could the noises they make be? - is beyond us. But clearly we invite interest. Though after only a few minutes it wanes and they turn and dash out to sea again. Racing and bounding out of the water like hounds in fox pursuit. Alongside them what beauty can we claim? Stick like arms and legs and the puniest of bodies. How they must pity us our physical being! How wonderful in my next life to be here, an animal. Powerful, free. Action, reaction driven only by the adventure of wild existence and survival. Thoughts a pure, fast running mountain stream untainted by the poison of convention. A being at the peak of its potential.

In one direction the beach extends as far as the eye can see. In the other, northward, a high rocky promontory protrudes some distance into the ocean. One group heads off in that direction while the rest of us continue swimming. Again, again the monster waves crash down on us, pinning us to the ocean bed before tumbling us up the beach, leaving us breathless and hearts racing. But then those at the cliff are shouting and waving, calling for us to join them. As we approach

they start pointing up the cliff, the kids jumping up and down in excitement. Shortly, there are twenty people staring up at a vast stone monolith, clearly not naturally formed. To my mind it's not dissimilar to the ancient Polynesian carvings which dotted their island beach heads. The experts bemused as to how they carried those huge slabs such distances. These are carved from a dark purple rock, having a smooth, glistening finish. It has a power that I can't define. But in the faces of the others I see they feel it too. In fact there's more than one of them. From down here on the sand three are visible.

On the high promontory, at the cliff's edge, they appear as guardians of the land against the sea. Or ambassadors to it. Until now we'd believed ourselves to be the first intelligent species on Utopia. Of course this changes all that. Means that this planet had - or has! - its own indigenous people. I'm thinking of going back for my jetpack and flying up to have a look around. But then Billy, the most adventurous among us, starts to ascend the cliff face. Half way up he's turned back by a swarm of toxic looking birds. Or should I say winged creatures. Because they have a body the size of a largish dog which is covered with a blotched, wiry looking coat. When they begin barking the confusion is complete. Several of them swoop down, obviously intending to attack us. We run into a cave, a little too shallow for my liking but fortunately the frenzied beasts appear unwilling to enter it. But Billy is fully exposed to the merciless attack by the pack of Dog Birds. After an awful, helpless, few minutes his screams abruptly cease. A moment later a bloodied mass of flesh thuds onto the sand in front of the cave. With a final banshee screech which curdles the blood the Dog Birds disappear, presumably back whence they came from the clifftop, returning to stand sentinel over the statues.

We remain in the cave for some time, unsure what to do. The greatest fear is that at any moment the dog birds might return. But then another danger presents itself. First warned by the thud of hooves - heavy enough to shake the ground beneath the feet - fast approaching down the beach is a herd of riderless horses. Twice the height of a normal one, their long manes trail in the wind and the water sprays up around them. At any other time it might have been a sight to behold: freedom personified. But this is no time for poetic dreamery. Immediately one of our men runs over and throws on his jetpack. In the air in seconds he harries the rearing, snorting beasts - diving down among them, or coming in a low run over them. Their cry is a growling snarl, and the image of an attacking tiger is completed when they throw their heads back and bare the teeth of a carnivore. Thankfully the diversion works sufficient for the rest of us to get back and don our own jetpacks. And with that we're all able to escape the wrath of these beast

warriors. Just a few minutes later we're back to the settlement. Now safe, released from fear, everyone's talking over each other, regaling the rest of the tribe with what happened. Accompanied by wild, reckless laughter, they embellish the telling with stories of imagined heroism – theirs or someone else's. I call for us to remember the fallen climber and there's immediate silence. It soon becomes oppressive. For this small band of ours, to me it's a stark reminder of our vulnerability. And a dispelling of the fantasy. Utopia is not some Shangri La dream. There might as yet be no threat from another species such as ours. The danger is from the planet itself.

That night, alone with my thoughts, I'm glad it happened so soon after our arrival. Had we not gone to the beach we might have dawdled, holidaying for months longer. The reality of the situation has been brought home to us. Is an indigenous species here still? Our equal? There's no indication of a continuing presence. But then again, we've only charted about 10% of the landmass and that only sketchily. The jungle remains an impenetrable uncertainty. And the seas and vast inland lakes – who knows what we'll find in them. The thought of this brings me up with a jolt. Our terrible vulnerability. Knowing so little of our new planet. And how long it will take to know it. But as weeks turn over the pages of the calendar and no further attacks occur, a more steadied reason settles over The Settlers. The forest, without having to extend too far into it, yields much to us. As does the nearby river, which also offers up its bounty. That's not to say that fear is completely abated. Frequently from the jungle – a little too close for comfort – come sounds made by unseen animals that send the imaginations into spirals of dread. I don't see anything myself but a few of us catch glimpses of rapid movement, too obscured to define. This only heightens the mystique the jungle holds for us. In fact with each passing day, the uncertainty of what's in there grows stronger.

It becomes increasingly obvious that someone, some group of us, must go in there. But we put it off. And there IS so much to see, to discover, elsewhere. Explorers of The Snowy Mountains report sighting huge cast figures – similar to those on the beach – evenly spaced along the ridge line. Also sightings of those same strange birds. And the monstrous tiger horses, galloping madly, wildly, freely, over the mountain's peaks. Every night at meetings we describe what we've seen during the day. Brains is deluged with data – audio, video, climate measurements – but she faithfully processes it all and builds up the map of our surroundings. Though small our hamlet is soon well established, with all the rudiments of a community. A small clinic, shops, a few workshops. Homes are dotted along the sides of the roads that divide up the fifty hectares of cleared land. But everything

stops abruptly at the jungle's edge. The pressure mounts. The forest has taken on a living form, and presses in on us. Our leaders when we were still journeying in The Pig – Alana, Angus – they become insistent that we must explore it. Alana explains, “We need to shake off this weight. For our sense of well being. But also for our relationship with this planet. It should be our ally, not an enemy of which we’re uncertain of. Better to determine the extent of the dangers we face. Better to know the worst.”

“If none of you will come with us, we’ll go alone. And sooner rather than later. We must not become attached. We must be willing to take whatever risks are required of us to live well here.” It’s true, some of us do still cling to the Shangri La fantasy. But life is to be lived. Joy and pain come in equal measure, and we should not flinch from either.

Geographers and geologists, along with their drones, continue the comprehensive mapping of the planet. Once completed they will make recommendations of suitable sites for other communities, farmland, and where industry should be located. With the advantage of technology we can avoid the haphazard and inefficient ways that human civilisation developed. Mankind’s early lack of technology is no excuse for what happened as they became more advanced. When so many opportunities to provide for all were wasted. Simply for the gain of a powerful few. How R85 came to embody all that was wrong with humanity! And it was wholly justified. When 85 people have amassed the same wealth as the remainder of the population combined you know something is wrong. Humans, for all their huff and puff, are a sheep like and cowardly race driven largely by the illogic of the weakest emotions. This led - when there was any at all - to uncoordinated and misdirected retaliation which was ineffectual against the powerful, organised forces of R85. Only rarely were they collectively galvanised. They should have learned from their few successes. But they never did. Never built on them.

Angus reminds the children, "Now kids, to really appreciate the story you have to remember that Forest was not as we know it now. Then it was The Great Unknown! We weren't sure what we'd find in there. Or even if we'd come out alive!" The older boys ooh! and pretend to the younger ones to be frightened. They smile, a little sleepily, because it's getting late now and it's been a long day full of adventure. "It contained such terrifying monsters as were only limited by our imaginations! So you can understand that we were more than a little nervous when we first stepped into it."

“From the spaceship it looks impenetrable. As I said almost anything could be lurking in there. But actually, once we were into it the trees were quite thinly spread and it was possible to see some distance. The feeling of something malevolent almost immediately lifted. Though never completely! After all, we'd seen enough of the Dog Birds and Tiger Horses to know that there was plenty to be justifiably afraid of on our new home. Alana and I were in two minds, still not sure in which direction to break out. But then we gradually become aware of a chattering some little distance from us.” Angus laughs, “Sounding exactly like you lot actually! At first we couldn't tell where exactly it was coming from but then Alana noticed them. Or at least the rustling of the undergrowth which gave us the clue as to their whereabouts. The sound and movement was coming from low shrubs some distance ahead and to our right. We circled round to the left to come behind the bushes. From there we had a broken but still clear view over the area that we'd cleared for building and growing crops. From this vantage point the activity of The Settlers could easily be observed without any possibility of being seen. The animals still hadn't noticed us, though to be honest I don't think they'd have noticed a herd of elephants they were so busy clowning around. As I said, just like you lot!”

“Hidden in the low shrub were twenty to thirty small animals watching the activities of the Settlers. It was impossible to tell exactly how many there were since half of them were running around like mad little wound up toys. Squirrels, rodents of every size and shape, rabbits, mongeese, and several brightly colored lizards and snakes. All were of obviously youngsters, of varying ages. I noticed a baby chimp because he was still and silent, looking out with big, sympathetic brown eyes. On the top of the bushes fluttered a flock of birds of every rainbow color, and it was they in fact were the main source of the noise. Most of the animals were so busy pointing things out to each other – something to make them laugh to falling over – we were allowed to get to within only a couple of metres of them. Others amongst them, more cautious, were silent but just as preoccupied, digging each other in the ribs and giggling. In fact it WAS funny, to see the scientists so head down, so Sherlock Holmes like yet completely unaware of the animals, and all they were up to, so close by.

Apparently - they told us later - it had been the responsibility of the mongeese to stand guard. But like all the rest of them they'd been mesmerised by these strange new creatures to their planet. It was Alana that eventually alerted them to our presence. So taken was she by the chipmunk that without thinking she bent down to stroke it and the poor thing literally jumped a metre in the air and turned a perfect somersault. At the same time letting out a squeak that drew

the attention of the others to our presence. Poor Alana was mortified. The animals were frozen like statues. For me, suddenly in the position of Observer, it was comic to watch them both staring at each other, competing for who's eyes could pop out the most. In fact a few were so preoccupied they still hadn't noticed us, but a dig in the ribs quickly alerted them. Complete silence. No one moving. Lots of eyes darting: wondering what was going to happen next. They weren't exactly afraid but as they looked up - up and up again - their eyes got bigger and bigger. We must have looked like complete giants. But for the guinea pig, how long this impasse might have lasted who knows."

"For some reason, which no one ever fully explained, one of them was perched on the head of the largest of the mongeese. As they are prone to do the mongoose was constantly swiveling its head this way and that. The clown antics of the guinea pig balancing precariously on him had the others in stitches. Unfortunately, when the mongoose noticed us and too became stock still the guinea pig was so dizzy it fell off and started staggering around like a drunk and bumping into its friends. Everyone's attention, ours included, was diverted by his desperate attempts to regain his balance. But the more he tried the worse it got, until finally he fell over on his back and started waving his short legs in the air. When Alana started laughing and bent down to pick up the poor fellow the other animals couldn't help but join in, and completely cracked it. The balloon pricked, the tense atmosphere was broken in an instant. Of course the guinea pig, apparently the class clown, made the most of his moment and planted a kiss full on Alana's lips."

"At first we couldn't understand what they were saying, but as soon as we started talking to each other a few started to pick up our language, and the rest quickly followed. By now we were sitting down, more on their level, and they all came gamboling over. Some of course were more adventurous than others. But all of them stopped just short. That is until one of the baby apes, completely trusting, jumped straight into Alana's lap. She gave a muffled shriek, and grabbed my hand, but when the chimp lay down in her lap looking lovingly up at her with its huge dark eyes she was captured. A few minutes later the animals had persuaded us to visit their home, and we began walking into the jungle, very careful not to tread on the smaller ones who were so excited they couldn't help but get under our feet. The birds, with their bright, bright colors, were flying in halos about our heads. The music they made was impossible to imagine, or describe. It was so breathtaking we sometimes just had to stop and listen. Each time this happened someone would bump into someone else and there'd a round of apologies before we could continue our slow, much interrupted, progress."

Angus stops for a moment to recall the sounds of the birds. Though of course I've heard them sing on many occasions, but the first time you hear them is something magical. Other worldly. For me it was a defining moment of the early years. "Please grandpa, tell us the story of the miners and the monsters," shout the boys in unison, taking the interlude to plead their case. Angus smiles indulgently, "Well I suppose we have nearly finished this story. As we got deeper into the forest, and it started to thicken, Alana became a little worried. After all no one knew where we were, and we'd no idea whether the adult animals would take to us. She stopped abruptly and said very apologetically, "I'm so sorry children, I can't really explain but we'll have to come and visit your homes another time. I hope you don't mind." At first they looked a little put out, but when she assured them we'd come back, that we should meet up at the same time, same place tomorrow, their little faces all lit up."

"It's still quite a bit further, so perhaps it's a good idea. You can come to our homes next time," the mongoose suggested. On the way back Alana and I agreed not to tell anyone except Brains about the young animals. At least until we'd met the adults, their parents, and learned more about them." As the carpet continues its meandering flight through the night sky and with the children playing amongst themselves, Angus draws Tanah to him and points out a majestic river running from beneath them all the way to the sea, "Darling, look down there, that's the reason we located the first settlement where we did. And then built the new Arcadia to straddle it."

The river declares itself. From a high mountain plain it strikes out for the sea. As it winds its way through the dense jungle it seems in constant likelihood of being swallowed up by it. A thick rope of blue, bisecting two lands, irrepressible twins, constantly tugging at its shores, probing for any weakness. Where the bed's a trifle shallower the mangroves spread themselves, slowing the water's flow sufficient that the carried silt settles. From bird droppings seeds impregnate the rich red soil, and shoots cautiously emerge. Later, with trees established, a cancer of low vegetation spreads across to the other bank, choking the water's passage. Like a last drawn breath the river flows no more. But it's not so easily beaten: a million tiny veins still course unseen through the soil. Over generations the river changes its meandering path. So definitively one would think it a new tributary and give it another name for it could not be the same water course. It is a master of disguise, eluding all description. Such is the relationship between the river and the land it divides.

The color is one of the things I will miss most. Lush and verdant. The trees and grass: no different except the green richer, more vivid than anything I ever saw on Earth. The sea a thick, turquoise blue: the definition of color. Birds with long looping necks, impossibly pink, effortlessly glide high over the treetops, then back over the water to suddenly stone drop - wings close drawn, kamikaze, an arrow - to shatter the glass blue. The spray scatters a shower of smaller birds whose proudly puffed chests are a metallic purple sheen. Seconds later the hunter emerges - its prize already swallowed whole - to regain its serene drift on the wind. So many, this is but one example of the times I didn't realise how fortunate I was just to be alive on Utopia. Never did I fully appreciate it. Until of course it was to be gone from me. Never to revel in her beauty again! But I know that I must leave. They believe in me. Believe I can be rehabilitated. They will always give me another chance. That is the Utopian way. I love them for that trait. An unbridled generosity their first instinct. But I know I am not changed. Cannot change. How can you change when the very core is rotten? Evil. And yet in my choosing to end it I WILL finally be a true Utopian. It is my Catch22. Because it's the only way to excise the evil in me. The reward will be in my next life - free of it. I do not hesitate on the horns of uncertainty. Dithering. No! It will be a bold, certain act. Oh, why could I not have seen this life wondrous as I see it so clearly now? But is it not always the way? Once a familiar we take it for granted. Only when it's stripped from us do we appreciate it again. Crave it. Or as in my case treat each remaining second as precious as a lifetime.

This planet is an exotic island. An island in the space of mind that I will carry with me to wherever next I emerge. I imagine it was similar for those explorers of a bygone age. When men were driven to leave England's familiar shore - to break out of the grey and small mindedness - in search of adventure and wealth. Knowing that most of them would be dead within the year, but believing they out of all of them would not. And some did find all they sought. And so much more. The Utopians are their children, but they have greater care for the land they tread - seeking not to dominate and exploit but to live in careful unity. Remote figures in history books, those competitors for the riches of the East, The Dutch and British East India Companies, must have felt as The Utopians. Enthralled by the exotica, yet feeling dwarfed by its endless shift and scale. Trees that have never been leveled by man's greed; their girth a testament to their timeless presence. The animals show no fear, only a light, somewhat detached curiosity. They, those ancient mariners of the Earth's oceans, would have heaved a desire for domination of all they saw. To extract, to exploit. To own what is no one's covet. Those that try are always broken and quickly forgotten. With the

indigenous wanderers of Australia their model, the Utopians instead seek to blend, to co exist in as perfect harmony as they can make it. They are confined only by the limits of their knowledge, but with time this will be grow and then they will harm less and nurture more. How I would wish to witness our continued evolution. Wishes. So many. To be unfulfilled.

As time passes we build more homes. Arcadia soon had the makings of a small but industrious town. By now we'd decided to relocate Arcadia to the river. Yet still we're unable to drag ourselves away from the ship. Every night we meet at the same place, a clearing next to The Pig, in the middle of which there's always a large fire. We talk far into the night of our plans, hopes and fears. The shadow of the ship, physically and mentally, is still over us. Nearly two thousand people, men, women and children, yet how small we feel, and how impossibly gigantic the task we've set ourselves seemed.

"We were like you, children. Every day something new and amazing to shock us. And remember, this after all those years cooped up in The Pig." As the children brag - trying to outdo each other in what THEY, and they ALONE, have seen - Angus asides to Tanah, "Darling, you remember I told you about The Dream? All those recollections this evening, I'm sure to have it tonight. In the first days it was every night. I had no idea what it meant but it so got under my skin it was part of my day as well. I still wonder what it all meant."

The Dream

Yes, Angus told me he had The Dream too. And like him I've no idea what it means. Except that it's real. It happened. Or will happen? I'm not sure.

I cannot see the man's face, but I know him. And I know exactly what he's doing without him having to tell me. No craft is invulnerable, and this one is no different. The man is programming the craft's weapons to be fired in a rapid sequence. Propelled out - only to turn back, the ship itself their target. Though I know, I'm powerless to stop him. Not only has he bound me hand and foot, over my head is a tightly fitting mask with only small eye hole slits so it's impossible to cry warning. However, even if I had been free I would not have raised the alarm. Because on some level I understand his need to blow up the spaceship, with the two of us and the several thousand others on it. We, the Settlers who've escaped the insanity Earth became, in the Universe scale are a momentary spark of light before ever extinguished. So many billions of years in its intricate making and the R85 - one cannot really blame them, lost in their madness - willfully engineered its destruction. For nothing - NOTHING - more than slaking their ego's thirst. Which in their monstrous lunacy is unquenchable. A giant among a race of pygmies. Swooning beauty on an ogre's subterranean planet. Still it would not be satisfied! This testy, demanding child devoid of any attribute worth lauding. Why do we fight it? Better, ignore all its attention seeking wiles.

How could we let the lunatics run the asylum? And so, yes, I agree with him: it is the only sure solution. There must be no escape for any of us. The risks are too great to allow it. Even though it means my own death I would not stop him. The man works quickly, without pause or hesitation, performing the most intricate of tasks with the dexterity of a surgeon. Wires are cut or joined; micro devices connected to the electronics system. Software installed, or modified. Whatever is necessary to ensure the spaceship and its passengers will not see the morning. In a few hours the preparations are complete, in which time no one disturbs him. Throughout there's been no sound but those made by him. And so my heartbeat is a thunder roll; one of those big drums a marching bandsman straps to his chest and beats out a tattoo that sets the pace for all to follow. The room echoed to the sharp clip, clip of wires being cut, the tap of a keyboard. At last finished, he stands and steps away to survey his work. Turned away from me I still can't see his face, but he has an expressive back. It reveals a certain resignation, but also determination: to do what must be done. Disregarding all other thought. Anything that might chink a crack in his resolution.

But still his finger hesitates as it hovers over the button which will trigger The Holocaust upon those sleeping. Unaware but not innocents. The Settlers. Every second The Pig widens the physical and psychological gap between them and Earth's broken shores. A grunt, what does that indicate? Then he lets his finger fall. A guillotine. Immediately he turns away, never once looking back. In the last moment before leaving the deserted room a light falls across the man's face. John Fury is crying. And he clearly has been for some time for his shirt front is drenched. At the same instant, as I have every other time I have the dream, I wake up, my own tears streaming down my face.

Somehow I know the man's name even though I've never seen him or heard his history. I still have no idea why he did what he did. Tonight - how many remain me? – I cannot sleep. I must at last try to fathom some meaning from The Dream. How many times minutely have I examined each segment of it? But even the slightest meaning, the vaguest, eludes me. As the months passed it became less frequent, but like Angus I had The Dream every night. What was the connection?

As a new race we had such grand hopes. We were, not surprisingly, a little overawed by the responsibility. Jittery, a little forced we were. Firstly, not to screw up Utopia as we so royally did to Earth. But as the remnants of a once great tribe there's a sense of duty to survive and make good on our potential: a better showing than the last time we took the stage. Was that all it was? A warning? I don't think we, the original Settlers, will ever completely shrug off the weight. That sense of personal failure. Responsibility for a collective failure. A beautiful planet, just as good as Utopia, totally destroyed. Why were we so easily persuaded by R85's bland assurances that Earth was indestructible? That anyone that said otherwise was only an hysterical scaremonger. A warning of what? Our actions? Or who, intrinsically, we are. Of what we're capable of. A warning then of the threat we pose to Universe? In the time left me on Utopia I try to instill in those born here how fragile our planet is. Remind them how delicately balanced any perfection is. Now – too late! to enjoy her beauty everlasting – do I realise my immeasurable fortune to have ever shared it.

Every day is a thrill of immeasurable possibilities. We plan to grow organically. But we set ourselves limits, guided by the scientists and Brain's analysis of the data. At the start of course we know next to nothing of what the planet can sustain. And so caution is our motto. Not to hurry. In our building, nor exploitation of her resources. We tried to live by that maxim but looking back you'd have to say we did the opposite. We were on a helter skelter. But that I can forgive: we were children with much to learn. My Love.... Oh, forgive me for taking all this away from you. I tried so hard, how ever shameful my actions appear.

Honestly, I tried.... Damn! I promised myself I would think no more of you. But your love as always intrudes. Your words, softly teasing, come back to me, when I talked of these things: "It's OK my darling, we forgive you for being little bulls in china shops." For some reason when I'm reminded of you, a Utopian, I immediately think of Earth. What went wrong. It was terrifying to watch a beautiful planet disintegrate. And our descent, our reversion, into a violent and primitive society. You had the sense that any passing stranger might punch you in the face because at that moment they could no longer contain their fury. So broken by life. One might wonder how an advanced society would ever let things get to such a pass. And therein lies the proof – humans were always primordial savages. In fact, I now firmly believe, they are one of the most primitive civilisations in all the universes.

Of course the most important constraint we placed on ourselves right from the start was to limit our population growth. Though we had an almost empty planet over which to run, we got the scientists to work. They did a very good job - the limits we came up with then are almost the same as those we live by today. Not so hard really, and yet on Earth serious attempt was never made to contain it. When it is the key to sustainable existence! But R85 didn't care. In fact WANTED us to breed. They needed Consumers. An overcrowded prison - the more gutter our existence the easier we were to control. Encaged, we had the same expectation as a Lifer. A view through the bars.

Though we have the feeble gene, we will not be constrained by it. It is how we raise our children that distinguishes us most obviously from humans. Utopia's Children are full of love, full of wisdom, and full of compassion for themselves and any living being they cross paths with. Raising children is not for the unconscious. For the selfish. For the ignorant. For the cold. The faint hearted. Why does it seem animals are so much better at it than humans ever were?

"I used to picture us as cells crawling out of the mud, from which a new species emerges. Or the astronauts from Venus and Mars that brought unheard of sophistication and advancement to the simple inhabitants of the planet Earth. What coincidence of time and space was it led US to be the shapers of Utopia's civilisation?" Whenever the topic is brought up and thoughts turn to the distant planet we escaped from we Settlers talk of it with a morbid dread. As if we could allow it to happen again if we're not vigilant. And of course it could. A heavy silence settles over the carpet, only broken, lightened a little, by the occasional snore or dream riven whimper of one of the sleeping children. Angus gives a weak laugh. Feeling guilty he tries to recover the earlier lost mood: "Ha, ha. Of course

most of the time we felt such frauds. We, were we really capable of such greatness? And yet, don't all civilisations start out like that? A few mad men, believing in something better?" The Settlers among us let out a collective sigh. Too much happened to us personally. Saw too much horror. There remains in us still a sense of unreality that we survived it. I wonder if we will ever actually feel *settled*?

Midnight. A perfect night for flying. The moons are so full it's as daylight. Angus calls out softly so as not to waken the children, "Look everyone, The Fringe Dwellers." Angus takes the carpet down lower, following the razor line of the high mountain peak which encircles a rich plain almost completely cultivated. Everyone has heard of the people that live here but almost as something mythical. The Settlers were still busy bees making their first hive when some of them, The Fringe Dwellers, broke away and set out for their promised land, the land within the volcano.

The Fringe Dwellers

The men and women are working in fields they or their friends had planted. For most the experience is a new one. Dragging themselves out of bed at 4am because all three harvesting machines have broken down and so far the mechanic hasn't received the replacement parts. As the rains are imminent they cannot wait. It needs all of them to help out, doing work by hand which they've not had to do since the first Fringe Dwellers crossed the ridge through narrow passes and claimed this place their home.

As far as the eye can see the flat plain is covered in wheat fields. But the world of this community is a narrow one. Not more than fifty kilometres in every direction a steep escarpment rises which blocks out the view beyond. A shallow basin in which the community established itself long, long ago. In fact they live on top of an extinct volcano which once threw up molten lava high in the air, raining down and destroying overnight a large and well established population spread over the continent of Arcadia. Over the millennia the rock has been beaten and pulped into rich soil in which almost any plant flourishes. "The Fringe" itself is the high mountain range, the remnants of the extinct volcano, which bounds the community and is a barrier of the mind as much as a physical one. Some Fringe Dwellers have never ventured beyond it, finding all they need from life within its confines. The sun shines on this corner of Utopia all year round, for it is close to the equator. And the hills which protect it from prying eyes also ensure regular and prolific rainfall. What business there is, though quite substantial overall, is made up entirely of small scale industry connected in some way or another to the land. There are stores for farm supplies. Merchants to distribute the harvest to the world beyond The Fringe. Mechanic shops. Small workshops to repair broken farm and homestead equipment, or manufacture ingenious devices to complete a frequent task more efficiently.

The few larger industrial operations that exist specialise in original manufacture. Some of what they produce is used by the local farmers but most of it is shipped beyond The Fringe. Their machines are in constant high demand. The Fringe Dwellers are renown for the quality of their workmanship which has enabled farmers - a parsimonious breed wherever one finds them - to utilize a piece of equipment manufactured there sometimes upwards of a century before it finally expires when so many pieces fail concurrently that repair is impossible. Then, often is the case, a large hole is dug and the contraption carefully wheeled into it: the ritual and funereal atmosphere so much like a signal of the departure

of a dear family friend. For such it is, having been in a family through the birth of many its children, and all the ups and downs a farmer will face as the seasons come and go.

The Fringe Dwellers are a contented community: in sufficiency of their needs. There is no striving for excess. But it is a long time since they've needed to sharpen and oil their scythes, and the extra effort to bring in the harvest, and the aching limbs at the day's end, draw complaint from some. And from others, who've had to leave their regular jobs to help out before the rains destroy the crops, there's frustration at the work's slow progress. But once joined in community - only the sick or too infirm are absent - a sense of festive occasion arises. The pace slows.

Men re-enact their idle youths. Playing pranks on friends, telling jokes that everyone knows and tall stories no one believes. And they will boast of what they want from or with the prettiest women amongst those working in the fields. Women that have never looked more comely than they do on these halcyon days. The sun shining down on them, turning their skin a light brown; the work putting color in their cheeks and a spring in their step. Physical tiredness is shared between the men and women that work side by side. For many it's something unfamiliar but it leaves them with a pleasant lassitude as they walk home at the end of the first day's work. Over a drink and a hearty meal they sift over that first day's events, mostly laughing at someone's clown behavior or ineptitude when undertaking so many new and unfamiliar tasks. This day friendships form into something deeper, stronger, or arise where merely passing acquaintance existed before.

The third morning a fight breaks out between two men. One accuses the other of not working as hard as he could or should. Solid punches and deft kicks find their mark on both sides, but the adrenaline is pumping through their veins and they feel nothing. That will come later, when repairing their wounds, where to their friends they'll make wild claims of their fighting prowess. Blood smears across their faces, oozing from split flesh. A broken nose for one of them. His head was jerked back by the first punch, then came forward just as the second one fired out, catching him square. The perfect one – two. The crunch of breaking bone, and the spray of blood over the both of them. No one tries to stop the two brawlers, but eventually exhaustion overtakes them and the desire to inflict pain is sated. And with that the fight is over. Now neither could care less how much the other produces. The anxiety that clouded their mind has been released - a burst boil - by the physical act. They return to their work standing side by side, the awkward atmosphere completely expunged. Occasionally they'll smile at each

other, recollecting some moment in the fight. They are bonded by the bathing in each other's blood, and the inflicting of pain which makes them know they are alive, which was necessary since one of them had come to doubt it. And by the courage each showed, never giving quarter.

The morning of the sixth day there is much talk. After lunch all toil ceases. For talk must - in a tight knit community it must - be turned to action. In every secret corner. Or more frequently carelessly exposed under the bright sunlight on the cleared plain now harvested of its bounty. Bodies lie strewn, feigning the death of sleep, or the agonies of climax. She, pinned beneath him, lets out a squeal of pleasure which draws laughter from all who hear it. For others only their lover hears the sigh of deepest satisfaction. A giant of a horse mounts one of his mares: her legs buckle as he gains purchase on her, but then she stiffens, and he pounds himself to an ecstatic death against the wall of her. As his penis swells, a rod of heat, in the moment he ejaculates into her, she turns and sinks teeth into the soft flesh of his neck. A cheer goes up as he stumbles from her, his great phallus now limp. Recovering, the two horses stand close, sharing a blade of uncut hay.

The man and woman have known each other long, side by side in a small workshop they've shared their life's ups and downs: celebrating or commiserating. In their free time they'd mostly, in a raucous group, spent evenings laughing at someone, something or at themselves. Until this time it was never more than that. Though unbeknownst to either of them a castle had been taking shape, building sturdy walls and a great drawbridge. Today it is completed. At the start of the week he'd watched her struggle with the unfamiliar toil, but still persist, careless of the number of times she failed. He admired her perseverance and a warm respect arose in his breast. And she saw him deftly perform the task assigned to him: the loading of the hay cart. She wondered how, with the merest flick of the wrist, he could pierce a great wad of hay and in one expert movement swing it high over his head and have it land neatly on the very top of an already mountainous pile. He, whenever he had a spare moment, helped her gather the wheat. And at the end tried to bind it into sheaves with a twist of stalks. But they were as equally inept and instead ended up in tears of laughter, sitting in the middle of a pile of hay which, however hard they tried, they could do no more than create a dilapidated heap that fell apart even before someone tried to pick it up. The foremen with good humor berated them for their wanting effort. But as soon as he turned his back they'd be laughing again. Today, without thought or intention, he puts a hand on her shoulder to save himself from falling over. She places her hand over his. Eyes turn toward one another and they see the castle for

the first time. That afternoon, along with the rest, they make love. It is the first time for both of them. Later still they will make a home together.

The last day. As each cart is filled a group of Fringe Dwellers, along with their horses and oxen, drag the laden wagons down the broad, almost deserted, high street. At one cart a conversation breaks out between Simeon, a direct descendant of the first colonists, and the horse at his side. The pair of them are harnessed to pull one of the largest of the convoy. A forebear of Simeon, some time in the very distant past, must have joined with a horse for Simeon possesses the body, arms and head of a human (though in gigantic proportion), above the sturdy legs of a cart horse. Thighs as thick as a good sized tree, which taper to plate sized hooves. The brute beside him, a huge roan colored stallion, Hamit, is the leader of the mustangs that offer their services for the price of regular food and shelter. Hamit snorts with the effort of shifting the heavy load into motion. The muscles on their necks bulge, and tendons taughthen like harp strings. At first imperceptibly the wagon finally gives in and allows its wheels to turn. It expels a creaking laugh as the two locomotors let out a great roar in unison, and stamp their hooves into the sun hardened ground in order to establish greater purchase. The wain chides them, "You insisted I only needed the pair of you to shift me. What say you now?"

This particular transport, a bright red one, has an unusual manner of speech. Some of them in fact never speak, preferring to look and listen, and reflect on all they witness. CartRed once had the good fortune to be in the employ of a farmer that loved to recite his favorite works of fiction when driving about on his carrier. These masterpieces tended to be of the adventures and romances of eighteenth century Scottish writers. And when drunk this same farmer would attempt to imitate the vernacular of Burns and Stevenson, his favorite two favorites. CartRed in turn would effort to imitate his employer's outdated vocabulary and peculiar accent with its thick burr. In fact, so popular became these stories that whenever he was observed to arrive in town the farmer would quickly find himself surrounded by an expectant audience. They had not the faintest idea what he was talking about. But it didn't matter. They'd fall about, adult and child alike, as he'd try to wrap his tongue around the strange and unfamiliar words: words which sounded most like the whirring of a loud machine about to self destruct.

Hamit finds himself now pulling with greater ease since the dray has broken into ponderous motion. He gives a flick of his shiny black mane, causing one of the mares of his herd to tremble with anticipation and sigh at the recollection of their recent love making. Snarling, to the cart he says, "Pipe down, Red, I could have pulled one twice your size across the mountain and back without a break in sweat,

but Simeon was in need of company." Simeon grunts in agreement, giving the wain a sudden tug, causing CartRed to escape a high pitched shriek. He is renown for being at the mercy of his emotions: too many swooning romances can do that to you they say. Simeon turns his head and says to Hamit. "You know, we should do this every year. Hasn't this brought everyone together? You see the look on their faces at the end of the day? Exhausted but smiling as they look over the long line of carts piled high and stretching the length of the high street. There's a sense of achievement when they can point out which one they contributed to its filling. And a sense of camaraderie, bringing the whole community closer together. It would be a missed opportunity not to do something."

Feeling the cart has been sufficiently put in his place and can now be safely ignored, Hamit turns and smiles at Simeon, "Why not? Before it was just a job for us. Not that we didn't appreciate the rewards, and I know the townspeople are always grateful for our help. But this is different. Hard physical work is good for the body and soul. And when you can do it in the company of friends it creates a house of shared experience you can visit again and again, and can build upon at the years. The clown has his audience, and they love him for it. It's a chance for men and women to meet. To get to know one another in a natural way. To observe each other's strengths and contemplate how they might help them overcome a weakness. So that next time the opportunity arises they can save each other from a failure. It can be a time for our children to see us joined together in common purpose, which will set the foundation on which our community can build its future." Looking ahead, Hamit bends his legs and leans into the harness, "Now you bastard pull with all your strength: this hill is going to test us, and I don't want that red arsed fucking pantechnicon to have some gossip to take back to his tittering menagerie."

Without everyone pulling together, with the rains coming early the wheat and hay would have lain dead on the prairie, wasted and useless. The dwellers in The Fringe Country would have gone without, unless they were willing to buy from another community which had been more fortunate, or made better provision for such a calamity. The next year, for a different reason, every able bodied Fringe Dweller will down their regular job for a few weeks and turn themselves towards the golden fields. Having played their part when called each man and woman feels a greater bond to their community, and looks forward every year thereafter, to be reminded of that feeling of brotherhood and belonging. It gives them a sense of a place in the world. Of being part of something greater than themselves. And should they face disaster in their life they now endure it with a collective strength and not alone. They feel comforted when sad, lost or abandoned. Which we all

must experience for that is a part of being. We should in fact embrace these feelings because they make us finer beings. More understanding and better able to help someone through a suffering. We should wish for pain as much as joy and pleasures.

So now among The Fringe Dwellers no one ever feels completely alone. Even when, as for some, their home is a remote farmhouse on the slopes of The Fringe. When they have no partner to share their bounty and the beauty of the view over the plain. This picture, this vista from their small quarter, is theirs alone: something private, unique and priceless. Theirs to share as a gift with anyone that passes their way: its tranquility and shocking beauty. It provides an uplifting to the soul at the mere sight of it. Such is the life of The Fringe Dwellers. And in almost every detail it is the same from year to year. For most this reliable constancy forms the mainstay, the backbone, of their life. But there are some that are driven, by the excitement of change and uncertainty, to leave The Basin and take bold steps into new and unknown places. They have too much of the explorer's gene to find comfort at the hearth, instead only finding peace as they roam. To test themselves against some unspecified foe, which later will they find is only themselves, or at least one element of.

Before the homeward journey the carpet is making a detour that several of the adults requested after Angus mentioned the story of how he and Tanah had first met. The children are all long out for the count. Having flown for some time over the sea the mainland has disappeared from view. Just visible on the horizon is their destination. An island, a place that Angus and a small group of Settlers once visited for no other reason that it was an idyll, more Utopian than Utopia itself. They discovered a part of themselves there. Angus tells the adults, "We're going to visit a place I haven't been to for over a hundred years. No other Utopians have ever been there and I've never told anyone the story of The Lovers."

The Lovers

She sits astride him. It is the first time with her for him. And the very first time for her. Blood slicks down her thigh, thick and pungent. Neither of them take any notice or care of it. They cannot stop laughing, and every time she does he feels her grip on his penis tighten, the full length of it. And she feels it inside her, deeper, higher than she'd anticipated. How often had she thought about this time, and now it is so totally different to what she'd expected. More pleasure. More joy. And yes, more laughter. They cannot stop laughing. It peals out, joining with the sound of the birds: singing as they gorge themselves on the fruit in the orchard that, so laden down are the branches, they almost hang to the ground. The orchard lies at the back of the house, a little distant from the water, but they can still hear the noise of the breaking waves. But the sound is not consistent: each wave has its own distinct music. Differing in the combinations of cymbals clashing, drum rolling, and the throbs of the double bass. He lies comfortably on his back, his head propped against the root of a large tree under which they shelter from the sun. He looks up at her, "You did ask me to split you in two, so what did you expect?"

Still smiling she leans forward, again feeling him moving, something rigid, inside her. Something inflexible that would not bend to her. This time it's a little painful, but it's that addictive pain that so melds with pleasure it's impossible to distinguish one from the other. She places a hand on the side of his face and traces the outline of his lips. He pulls her down. She lets him, her head sinking onto his chest. Listening for the first time, in wonder, at the sound of his heart's tremor. As if it will never stop. As the sea's waves she hears but only faintly now. The beat contains her. A deep, regular throb that begins a tattoo on her own heart strings. She feels its reverberation as it echoes in his chest. He in turn feels the pounding of hers, but then it slows, and their hearts are in perfect rhythm. It drowns their consciousness. He slides his hand down her stomach, to just above the line of her hair. The mirror pulse of her, a faint quivering under his fingers. The steady jerk of his penis, a mind of its own. The passion once again rising between them.

They lie like this as the several suns wane in the sky and the moons peer their faces above the horizon. To him it always seems a little overcrowded at this time, but isn't that like saying a color is too rich or too opaque? It is what it is.

He broke her in the morning. And then they had played with one another. A new toy; a playground. Children. All day. And as she lies on his chest now, her

head rising gently with each breath of his, she thinks to herself that she's glad it is him. She'd heard so many stories and had been a little afraid. Had put it off many times for this reason, giving explanations which the man of the time had not understood. And so she'd gathered about herself a reputation of aloofness which would cut her whenever she heard someone talk of her in that way. For she, of all the women, has so much love within her that it sometimes becomes a burden she wearies of carrying. Isn't it something to be shared indiscriminately? Not miserly contained within us, hidden. To be only let out in small, furtive portion? She feels this way and so has always showered love upon the children. And over her friends, so much that it overwhelms the more reserved of them so that sometimes, suddenly awkward, they withdraw from her. This would make her only want to hold them tighter, longer. Squeeze the life out of them if she only could. But she doesn't want to change. No, even if it sometimes hurts.

Some time in the afternoon, as they're making love, a friend of his approaches and asks for help to gather food for the evening meal. Casually she ceases her writhing and lies still upon him, once again her ear pressed to his chest. As he speaks she hears his voice, and then its echo within his chest. She could have lain all night listening to this strange music. "Of course, we will fish together tonight." As he's talking to his friend he occasionally stops and kisses the top of her head. An arm is thrown protectively across her shoulder. A hand caresses her back or runs fingers through her hair. The man's friend from time to time also strokes her, almost unconsciously, as the two men continue to discuss their plans for the evening's catch. She becomes lost in her thoughts: thinking of him; recollections of the day and the new experience. Only dimly aware of the movement of their hands and the sensations within her that it creates. .

An island. Thatched huts set back above the high water mark among the palm trees. Children running into the sea. Laughter. Dogs barking at the wind, because they have nothing else to bark at. A fire that is not a fire. It pulsates with a dull red glow in the early evening grey. A hole dug in the sand; a grating placed over it on which later fish will sizzle and pop, the smoke drawing dogs and children alike to the fringes of the perpetual flames of the Firerocks. Fruit, placed away from the strongest heat, turn gently brown and form a hard crust, containing within soft oozing flesh. Its distinctive taste and aroma captured, to be released in that first delicious mouthful. Women sit around the flames, warmed by the fire's intensity, succor against the night's chill. Their faces glow, eyes sparkle, teeth over bright against the backdrop of the blackening sky. Voices; switching. The low rumble of laughter. Others mesmerised by the dancing flames, silent and drawn inward. Picturing them clearly in her mind's eye, the girl woman sits atop the fire.

Heated, she rises slowly over the other women. Higher still, above the rooftops now, where the wind catches her and as she rises further she drifts out to sea, towards another island. A pile of boulders only a few metres above the sea, with a line of sandy coves scooped out by a giant's paw. Most of the children are sitting attentively on a sandy spit that fingers out a few hundred metres from the shore. They're with the dolphins. Studying all there is to know. Evolved from the water, the children can breathe for long periods under water. They delight in the dolphins play while teaching them.

One woman has a child at her side. He sits quietly content, but occasionally he looks towards the entrance to his home, a hut some little distance up from the communal fire. Half an hour passes, yet the boy doesn't move from his mother's side, nor does his gaze waiver from the doorway. His mother whispers something to him and he nods his head and smiles. His body leans further against the woman, and he takes the thin material of her dress in his hand and rubs it between his fingers. Releasing it he puts his hand to his nose and takes a deep draw on the distinctive smell that, in his lifetime, has never changed. It is the signature of her. He smiles at a thought. His face looks peaceful as if on the verge of sleep.

Suddenly his body straightens and his eyes come into sharp focus. Two men step out of the hut and walk slowly towards the water. With the tide now rising it's only fifty metres from the small group of dwellings. A few metres from the water the two men kneel down, facing out to sea. They spread their arms wide in supplication but no words are spoken. After a few minutes they join their hands together and place them on the crown of their heads. In voices bursting with feeling, in unison they tell the fish: "You will give your life today. We thank you and pray that one day we may serve you. We will never forget this sacrifice you make today. From it we learn. We are once again reminded of our constant interdependence on one another. However we might be more powerful without you we would be nothing. We would also wish that your sacrifice were not necessary. You are a being of great beauty and wisdom. Your colors mesmerised me as a child, and until this day. The transport of the shoal, as if one, is a constant wonder to me. A miracle. Would that we too could emulate your unity and harmony in this life. And your silence. The silent music. Oh, how I wish I could hear it."

With this the two men rise to their feet and, each taking a corner of a finely meshed net, walk slowly into the water. A huge shoal of fish, a phosphorous shimmer of light in the black water, suddenly appears and surges towards the net. At the last moment the bulk of them split into two smaller sets and veer each side

of the net, leaving a small portion of their number to be captured. The men, still in total silence, slowly encircle the fish, trapping them, and then drag the laden catch from the water onto the sand. The women approach, each with a blunt instrument in hand. A steady torrent of raised arms smash down on the small fish, extinguishing their life force and transforming them into sustenance for the tribe.

The men turn away from the women and once again kneel down at the water's edge. As one of the men begins to speak, the luminous shoal reforms into one. They take on a variety of different shapes, each one more complex, more intricate, than the last: a tree, a galloping horse, a flower, a lattice of coral. As the man concludes his prayer of thanks, the two of them drop their hands to their sides and bow their heads. At this the fish take on another shape, which makes one of the men smile. As quickly as they came, they are gone. The men rise even more slowly this time, turning away from the sea, never looking back, they walk back to the hut with measured steps, each one a thought turned carefully over in their mind, looking at it from every angle for the learning it contains. As the man passes close to the fire he rests his hand on his son's head, and speaks softly to him. The boy looks ecstatic. Meanwhile, the women are a flurry of noisy activity, punctuated repeatedly by raucous laughter as they discuss the girl's initiation. Her birth into womanhood, so that she may join the other women at the fire when there is secret business to discuss.

The next day the man and woman are again making love, under the same tree. She looks down on him, staring at his face as if seeing him for the first time. Her nipples tighten as a surge of passion wells up in her almost too much to contain. Her body shudders and spasms involuntarily. At this she pushes her hips down harder upon him: a cry escapes her, of pain, of pleasure. Of The Immortality. She bites her lips, so hard she draws blood. He pulls her to him, licking away the blood, then kissing her closed lids. A blind man, his fingers trace every contour of her face. And then once again, as if he must remember. Every detail: her lips, her nose, the intricate indentions of her ears, around her eyes. The crease of flesh on either side of her mouth, a reminder of her smile, and a signal of its imminent return. He presses his lips to her ear and whispers. The words have no meaning but she understands the intent. His soul converses with hers. Words unspoken that would fill a library. He kisses her brow and she sinks further onto him, while her head rests on the crook of his shoulder. Their nakedness is a collusion. He lifts her hair to expose the vulnerability of her neck and bites her there. Into the soft flesh, hard enough to leave the clear imprint of his teeth that will remain for days to come. A branding. She slowly turns her head and sinks teeth into the side of his face. He presses her to him, encouraging her to take a firmer hold of him. As the

grip of her teeth heightens he throws his head back and lets out a roar. She feels its energy vibrate through her whole body. As his body bucks against hers, clasping her hands tighter around his neck she clings to him as upon a wild beast in mad flight.

He rolls over, now on top of her. She sinks into the soft grass. Her legs twine themselves about his torso. The press against the other is unyielding, a single movement becoming ever more frantic. Scaling heights until in unison they shudder. Deep sighs and a lessening of their hold, they roll onto their sides to face each other. Still one; melded. Sweat. His hand slides down her silken back. She feels his laughter and turns to look into eyes that tell her all she wants to know. "When you play dead you sometimes frighten me," he says.

Thirteen months later a great storm blows up. Waves, of a height never witnessed there before, rise up out of the water. A great swiping hand which obliterates the village where the man and women have lived together ever since their first love making. Wipes clean the ground of every village that emerged over centuries along the narrow coastline which fringes the dense jungle. That unwilling landlord, from which they'd carved a space on which to build a home and cultivate their crops on plots in constant battle with that hungry beast which sought to reclaim itself from them. With their deaths the natural vegetation slowly reasserted itself, cautiously at first, a few tentative shoots only. But when The Settlers came upon this place, when the child the man and woman had conceived had reached ten years, the laden orchard trees with their gorgeous fruit are long buried. And the huts now merely remnants. A reminder. A clue which would never reveal, unless a magician of the wildest imagination were to come upon it, what had once been harbored here. Had sheltered laughter and love. But there would be births of other places like this, and their deaths. For such is life on Utopia. It is simply how it is. And will be until a greater change engulfs them of which we have no knowledge. And have no desire to find out until The Time. How Tanah survived no one knows. She has recollections – so vague they seem like dreams – of the dolphins succoring her.

Angus whispers to Tanah, "Darling I was thinking about your parents when we visited The Island tonight. Of them as a model of pure love. Oh how I wish I'd had the chance to meet them. How much I'd have learned from them and their people."

The First Tribe

Our future is here, to the grain of Utopia's rich soil. The ship is no longer at the centre of us, neither physically nor psychologically. It's started to shift into the past, not forgotten but becoming opaque, at times even invisible. Every night we sit in the amphitheatre to discuss the days events and plans for the next. In the early days it's nothing more than its natural formation. Created by a volcanic eruption, it comprises a shallow depression bounded by low hillocks. Due to the natural acoustics of the place the Settlers may lounge some distance from the Speakers yet still hear them without difficulty. On a night of The Meeting a fire is lit at its entrance. We dance around it before entering the amphitheatre. Taken from the rituals of the American First Tribes we remind ourselves of our wisest forebears. No longer there to guide us in person, we recall their failures and their victories. From them have we been saved from having to endure ourselves some of the hardest lessons ourselves. And we are guided by all Indigenous people. Even their youngest child, who never lost touch with where they came from, their metaphysical being and connection to the soul of their planet. When seeking their guidance we call upon their WisdomLove by dancing around The Fire. Sometimes long into the night, inviting their spirits to join us.

On the stage at the front of the amphitheatre is another smaller campfire around which The Speakers sit. There are no leaders in Utopia's tribe. Since arrival on the planet we've always had a collective voice. As we must. A good example is the Settler's Moral Code, the precepts by which all Utopians agree to live by, grounding them firmly. These were determined by a majority decision. Since we defined them they have real meaning to Utopians. The Precepts tell us that we are loved by many. Tell us that we can trust each other to help us in any need. But also it pushes us to be our best. Knowing that found among the tasks that fill the day we will be better at one, and worse (perhaps THE worst!) at another. And so we're always learning from one another. Mindful, we can emulate the greatest wisdom of the tribe. In those early days I was too arrogant – and yes too stupid – to appreciate the great library of wisdom available to me. Finally though, lost in a sea of confusion, I came to cling to The Code as a guiding light by which I might find my way back to sanity. The Code does not confer on them rigid, constraining obligations which can turn people into unthinking robots. The way humans lived. Utopians are a palm tree in the wind, which allows them to follow their own moral code within the broad scope of their collective value system. How I respect the

wisdom of Utopians in the way they live their daily lives. Now, they are a constant lesson to me.

Among The Speakers tonight - those who guide the discussion - Angus sits with Alana. They talk avidly, with great emotion. Not surprising: this is our most important Meeting. Taking Brain's recommendations, distilled from all the information she's processed, we will decide on our long term direction. The next hundred, five hundred years. I never understood why governments on Earth limited their planning to such short periods. They had the means to make accurate predictions for many decades ahead, and so thinking for the generations after them. Not just themselves. And yet at times it seemed they could not think beyond the week's end! How frustrating it was to watch them. It seemed almost a willful act to fail in making anything worthy of their capabilities?

I have heard and read much about the Buddhist monks of Tibet. Their land was usurped by the powerful Chinese Empire, the most insidious civilisation to ever exist on Earth. It was the rest of the world's good fortune that the forced exile of the monks caused their wisdom to flower across the planet. If only the Chinese had let them be the Tibetan civilisation would have gradually been absorbed into the mainstream, and their dangerous ideas forgotten! When the monks talked the ideas and events they discussed spanned millennia. Consequently they were rarely caught off guard, and developed in a considered efficiency. Though fewer were their actions they progressed faster and further. By contrast, for most world leaders it was all emotive, knee jerk reaction. Or a calculated manipulation. A five year old child would have been more consistent. They chose band aids when long term solutions were an equal option. I never understood them. There were intelligent men and women amongst them and yet.... But then again, I rarely understood anything humans did.

One of The Speakers takes up the burning torch, The Speaker's totem. It is Zani, the peacemaker, who begins the discussion this evening. "We were led to believe this was a docile planet, but we now know that's not the case. We must delay development of more communities until we've done a complete survey of our new planet. Really, we've barely any idea what other dangers are out there, do we? Without caution we will make mistakes catastrophic enough to jeopardise our survival. We may cause damage to the environment and our brother Utopians. That is not the Utopian way." Larry, another of The Speakers that night, disagrees. "What have we to be afraid of? A few wild beasts; what problems did they present us on Earth a thousand years ago? We can deal with whatever's thrown at us. Anyway, we've nothing to worry about: God is at our side. He will protect us." Rumors circulated when The Settlers were still on The Pig:

conversations overheard between Larry and a few others discussing how their religion could be proselytized on Utopia. This, however, is the first time he's spoken openly. There's a worrying assurance in his manner, reminiscent of the religious bigots at whose hands many of The Settlers suffered for simply who they were. The shock of finding one of them in their midst is compounded by his brazen arrogance. In dismay they're taken back to that distant time and place. Fear ripples through the audience in the amphitheatre. Visible in a movement. An expression.

Zani herself looks afraid but when she responds her voice retains its warm strength, "I'm disturbed and ashamed to discover we've brought a Christian with us to Utopia. We have a responsibility to protect her from danger. Your presence can only mean one thing." There's a flippant defiance in Larry's response; a sense he holds the upper hand. "Why don't you enlighten us? Why so secret, what are you afraid of?" Jeering laughter can be heard from a small group near the front. Uncertain why his manner is so uncharacteristically assured, Zani responds with hesitation, "Not you, Larry. It's your ignorance, your selfish arrogance, unassailably convinced that you're right. Your like will always remain deaf to concerns about the consequences of your actions." Zani sighs. Wipes the back of her hand across her face, looking suddenly tired, "But getting back to the point. Are you serious about attacking The Sentinels? They are the custodians of this planet, and appear to have protected it well. We must seek them out as friends."

Larry snorts with derision, "You didn't see our friend Billy the other day so I'll forgive your ignorance. I don't think we're going to make friends with them by saying Hi. God will protect his flock. They need to be destroyed before they harm our children. You seem to care more for the safety of these dangerous wild animals than your own people."

"Hold on, what IS all this talk about God? Everyone was asked if they were a Christian. You know you wouldn't have been allowed on The Pig if you'd admitted to that." Larry responds in a suddenly more conciliatory tone which contrasts with Zani's strident attitude. "Jesus preached love and forgiveness and that's what I want to devote my life to. Nothing else. We want to live as He would want us to. The Bible tells us what is right and wrong. And God will forgive us if we give ourselves up to His Word."

Zani, exasperated, turns to the audience, "Does this sound familiar to any of you? The primitive mumbo jumbo.... Pigheaded repetition of a string of words that make no sense...." It appears for a moment she's had enough: she thrusts the totem hard into the ground. But she then turns back. She stares at Larry a moment; gives a rueful smile. "OK then. Let's cut to the chase. What's your

attitude to homosexuality?" Suddenly cautious, in response he only shakes his head. One of his group shouts something: hard to catch, but it sounds like a warning. A hard edge coming into her voice, Zani persists, "You know: a good looking guy sticking his cock into his boyfriend's hole.... Girl's licking each other out. Their faces covered in cunt juice.... Boy's sucking each other off. Jacking over their lover's bodies. Licking semen off their chest. Mmmm! Swallowing cum by the mouthfuls...."

Once Zani started going into graphic detail Larry loses it, beside himself in a fury. The same follower shouts warning again but he doesn't hear it. It takes the strength of two of The Speakers to restrain him. But with a sudden surge of demonic energy he breaks free and runs at Zani. As he lunges at her Zani neatly sidesteps and trips him. Larry sprawls onto the ground, which is mixed with the ashes of many hundreds of fires. Regaining his feet he's a comical sight, almost black from head to toe, which exaggerates the whites of his eyes and teeth when he speaks. Spluttering, Larry wipes a filthy sleeve across his face which only makes his appearance even more disheveled. He faces the audience and shouts, "Man love is the summation of Evil. The ultimate perversion alongside bestiality, incest, pedophilia." A groan goes through the crowd. Larry holds up his arms, head hanging down, his long hair covering his face. Then looks up, eyes blazing, "But I am not afraid! Earth became so Evil it was ripe for God's punishment. He was disgusted with us. The Flood of Noah came upon it! It was a society that rejected him as Lord. In his sovereign judgement he precipitated its eternal damnation."

One of the Settlers stands up and tries to argue with Larry. He shouts over them: "If we allow the homosexual we too will be hurtled to God's final judgement! Read Leviticus! Read the words of The Saint, Paul. All who condone these perversions are repugnant to God! But he offers us opportunity to change. God is Love! It's only if you refuse to change that He will damn you to Hell!" Again Larry throws out his arms and hangs his head. Zani, deathly pale, a look of abject horror on her face, can barely get her words out, "Within us we have a cancer. If we don't remove it we will destroy everything." A desperate cry, "Again!"

One of Larry's supporters, who are sitting close to The Speaker's Fire, takes off their shirt and wipes him down, improving his appearance considerably. Her mouth pressed to his ear, she whispers something. Instantly Larry's manner changes, again adopting a smooth, conciliatory tone. He calls to the audience, "I'm willing to forgive and forget. We are a family after all. Together let's look forward to sharing happier times brothers and sisters." He throws his arms wide in a gesture of embrace. "In God's beautiful world." Zani chokes, her eyes brimming with tears, "I think we've heard enough to know that your version of Christianity

goes against everything it means to be a Utopian. We know this type. Most of us suffered at their hands.”

Larry laughs contemptuously, "Zani, you seem to be caught up in a past that no longer exists. I'm not one of those crazy evangelical creationists. Why do you think I wanted to leave Earth? His words had become so obscured by them that it was impossible to hear His voice. None of us want to go back to that." Larry turns to the audience and, expression serious, he nods several times before suddenly breaking into a broad smile: "Utopians, we can all live in Jesus' love, and share His joy at life on this planet. We have our differences of opinion. But so do all families. What are you afraid of Zani? What is there in His teachings that conflicts with how we all want it to be on Utopia?" Larry cocks his head on one side, "Hmm, maybe it's yourself you need to take a look at sometime?" Alana, always quick to intervene when she considers Utopian values threatened, admonishes him. "Larry, I can see what you're trying to do with Zani. You know, it's a sick mind that tries to control or manipulate another person. You reveal something about yourself." For a second Larry's eyes blaze but then once again he's all obsequious smiles and contrition. As he sits down among the other Speakers – their faces in constant shift of color and shadow from the bright flames – he reaches out and squeezes Alana's arm. She ignores him. "Nor do we use violence against other beings." A low but steady cheer ripples through the crowd. Sufficient to silence Larry, at least for the moment. Though it's clear from his expression that the argument is far from resolved.

"We must seek out our neighbors, and I'm not just talking about The Sentinels. But where should we start? The planet is mostly covered by dense, impenetrable forest. We cannot see through the canopy, therefore we're going to have to travel on the ground. Having gone a little way into it," Alana stops momentarily and grins at Angus, her expression suddenly lightening at the recollection of the antics of the small animals. "We found it's not that dense, how ever it looks it from above." She goes on to give a brief description of her adventure with Angus and the Friendly Nature. One of the scientists suggests technology they can use for aerial survey where the forest canopy is less dense. From the results they might predict what would be found between the known data. After some discussion this strategy is adopted. Alana sums up, "We need to change our relationship with The Jungle. We cannot let it remain the malevolent adversary so many of you see it as."

As Alana was talking, unnoticed by The Speakers a small, dark skinned man had silently joined them on the stage. No one in the audience thought to say anything since he appeared so benign. If anything they're intrigued to know who

he is, and his purpose for being there. But even more so, how it is that The Speakers, even those sitting right next to him, seem not to see him. The man sits quietly, still, looking into the flames. Beside him lies a short spear. It's only when Alana's finished and sits down that he gets to his feet and introduces himself. Cognizant of him for the first time The Speakers are initially taken aback. But again Henna's manner is so relaxed, as if among friends, they're immediately placated. Except Larry. He remains agitated, repeatedly glaring at Henna then looking down, glowering and shaking his head. One has the feeling that at any moment he's going to explode. By contrast the Settlers are completely taken by Henna. His deep, gentle voice is a warm embrace to counter the chilling arrogance of the Christians.

Henna tells them, "If you are going to achieve something different then you have to behave differently. Don't you agree?" The faintest of accents; laughter bubbling over his words. Henna shrugs, smiling as if it's something so obvious even a child.... Everyone bursts out laughing, breaking the tension that Larry and his followers had so carefully engineered. Enraged Larry jumps to his feet. His intent is obvious yet Henna continues talking, his steady, unruffled manner unchanged. He makes no attempt to gather the spear lying within easy reach at his feet. It's as if Larry doesn't exist. Zani, a tall and powerfully built woman, is sitting nearest to the stranger. As Larry lunges at him, ineffectually trying to throw a punch, she grabs him and pulls him down to her side, where she quietly but insistently admonishes him until he falls into a sullen silence. His face is a mask of rage. He is not a man that likes to be crossed: a number of Settlers have already discovered that to their cost.

As Henna continues to educate the Utopians how to live in harmony with the planet, The Speakers shuffle around to form a semi circle about the ancient man. They look like students at the feet of a revered teacher. Henna stands with his back to the fire, warming himself against the evening chill. Henna reminds me of those wise old men from the deserts of Northern Australia. Men whose advice was ignored by Whiteman, and by those Blackman who lost their way whilst trying to emulate their white masters. They were the protectors of that great land for hundreds of thousands of years. It was pristine and beautiful when Whiteman first arrived. Almost immediately, through greed and ignorance, Whiteman went about destroying the land. And killing. Killing everything they came across, including them. The ancient Aborigines tried to help them, as you would a simple child, gently telling them how the land would give up all they wanted. But first they should respect the land, or it would fail them. Those elders, men and women, most who'd never travelled beyond their own lands, had a greater understanding

of the wider world than WhiteMan's leaders who'd seen much of it with their own eyes. Though you can be taken to the four corners if your mind is closed, what will you see? I too am testament to that truth. They were arrogant, which hid a deep seated insecurity. When the elders of the land unmasked their ignorance, theirs was the reaction of a spoiled child. They loudly asserted their way superior. What evidence did they have to justify that assertion? Whereas the old people had only to throw wide their arms for all the proof they needed. Why could Whiteman not have pooled their wisdom, as the elders advised?

To nurture a child to adulthood. To be fully Man. Woman. Whiteman had lost all sense of what that meant and so they remained children their entire life. All members of The First Tribe knew that to become a man we must face death at close quarter and contemplate its meaning. I know not what leads a woman from girlhood. I always imagined it had something to do with blood, the earth, birth, and the practicalities of life. For women are planted in the soil. They know it intimately, and what it will yield willingly. Men glide in the clouds, dreamers of what we might be. It is hard to imagine one without the other: Man and Woman side by side. The original people of Australia held these bonds of their culture closely. Their art. Its significance and its pleasure. Their people had gained wisdom through loss and suffering but were not victims of it. They loved with generous and open hearts. Whiteman had a selfish, childlike view of the world. Did not understand that existence is balance. Were dangerous because, though almost entirely ignorant of their world, they believed themselves its master. Arrogance, stupidity, combined with insecurity, is a strong poison.

The old man is still talking. The Settlers listen intently to all he's saying. His words are as the BlueStone diamonds. They are full of sound common sense that has meaning for all living beings. Hearing Henna's ancient, timeless wisdom for the first time was another milestone in our evolution as a new species. This would be a good test. I'm certain now that if thereafter we hadn't allowed ourselves to be guided by his WisdomLove we'd have been quickly extinct on this new planet. We left Earth with it collapsing about us. We were gods standing at The Acropolis as an earthquake shook the columns from their foundations. In such circumstances it's unsurprising there was no hesitation in agreeing to abide by The Code. But now there's nothing to stop us doing exactly whatever we want.... Now we would see. Would our species be all it had the potential to be? Or like humankind would it fall short?

"You have to live in compassion. You have to abandon conflict. Whatever the risk, whatever the provocation. Open your mind to all possibilities. You will not be the first to have lived this way." Taking in all The Speakers, his voice rises. "You will

face conflict. Attack from within and outside your tribe. You have to decide BEFORE it happens. How will you respond?" Henna's words resonate and fill the small band of Utopians in the amphitheatre with a love they've never experienced before. It is boundless in its embrace. "Can you see a beautiful future if you commit yourself to love? If you can then others will understand it too. And if not understand then at least have faith in you. Later when they see the fruits and flowers in abundance they will begin to understand for themselves. This is how it is."

Zani, a woman full of kind and generous spirit makes to stand up but Larry puts a restraining hand on her arm. As soon as he begins speaking her heart sinks. Not bothering to stand, as custom requires, he leans forward and waggles a dissenting finger at the old man. Henna immediately stops and with arms hanging loosely at his side he listens patiently, respectfully, to what Larry has to say. Larry has put on his once familiar world weary drawl. It used to make them laugh when on Earth: it seemed then the only appropriate response to the impossible, inescapable lunacy. But here it jars. "So, old man who's known us for five minutes. You want us to die rather than fight back. That's your big answer? What do you know? You're a relic from the stone age. You know nothing. God does not call for us to give up our lives if someone wrongs us. And if we do wrong we repent our sins and seek his forgiveness. That is the way to salvation, my friend."

The old man smiles but makes no response to Larry's taunts, which only fans the fool's rage. Alana has the knack of capturing the mood of a group and crystalising it into a few succinct words that everyone can grasp. At this moment she raises her hand and immediately everyone in the amphitheatre falls silent. The actor in her allows the silence to build. I think everyone recognised the pivotal moment. Henna smiles at Alana and sits down. Again the hard edge to her voice, she tells Larry, "I'm not asking you, Larry. I'm telling you. He is only saying what you agreed to before you got on the ship. What's changed?" Larry answers her obliquely. "What happens to anyone that doesn't want to go along with the big plan?" Alana's voice becomes icy, "That would depend on what you do. If your plan is to introduce your warped version of Christianity to Utopia you must leave immediately and find another planet home. We will not allow a corrupted version of Jesus' wisdom to destroy another planet. Take The Pig, we no longer need it."

The old man's voice warm and gentle voice breaks through the tension. "But why would you want to do that? The problem is not resolved, just moved somewhere else. It is our responsibility to educate them. You will never develop into a sustainable civilisation otherwise." Larry laughs, incredulous, and dismissive. "What are you talking about old man? You're making no sense."

Ignoring him utterly, as if not there, Henna continues: "You can resist: the immovable object against which the violent exhaust or break themselves. Or you can run. Running is not weakness if there's a reason for it. But you can only run so far, and for so long. You need to know what you're going to do when you stop running. And now is that time." His ego affronted by once again being so completely ignored, Larry jumps to his feet, determined to be acknowledged. He shouts at Henna. "What do you even know about us? Where have you ever been to talk like this? As if you know everything!" The man's simple words silence us all. "I know your history because I know you. And I know if you approach everyone with love, your future will be different to humans." As I recall Henna's wisdom, I compare it to my (even now) tiny comprehension of The Knowledge. All we had then was a garbled and meaningless version of His teaching. Little more use than pagan superstition. Henna seems to know this: "The words of Guru must be taken verbatim and in their entirety." He then gestures casually in Larry's direction, "Or, as he and his followers have done, a distortion of Guru's message will be promulgated."

Gentle laughter ripples through the audience. At this Larry jumps to his feet: this time a knife glitters in his hand. He advances on Henna. Alana looks resigned to something she does not wish for, but feels she has no other choice. She pulls a small .22 calibre revolver from under her shirt. A few people in the audience scream warning but most of them are too shocked to react. She takes aim and pulls the trigger. Though Larry and Alana could have almost touched hands and Henna is at some distance he still manages, so fast he's a blur, to step in front of Larry. The bullet thuds sickeningly into his chest, throwing him back against Larry. As the explosion of the gun continues echoing around the amphitheatre the old man crumples, obviously dead before he hits the ground.

With anyone else the shooting would have caused uproar. But it's Alana. None of The Settlers have ever questioned, or had cause to question, her actions. After all if it wasn't for her, to put it simply they wouldn't exist. It was she, and she alone, that had guided them out of the hell that human existence had become. And in seeking out Utopia had given them a reason to keep living. Bewildered, they look to her for an explanation. Alana hasn't moved, her hand with the still smoking gun held out. Her face is a blank mask. Angus gets up. He stands squarely in front of her. He pushes her arms down to her side, at the same time trying to take the gun from her. But she resists, shaking her head, "No! I've always carried it.... Since we left Earth."

Angus is rarely fazed by anything. He stares at Alana incredulously, wide eyed, lips moving but seemingly lost for words. With an effort he suddenly he

bursts out, "How could you have had it all that time and I never knew. We.... I was married to you!" Alana shrugs but says nothing. An agonised look on his face, he begs her, "Why though? We're against violence. You were against it. You taught me NVR. How could you!" Again an indifferent shrug. Staring into the flames, she eventually responds in a flat monotone, "So I am.... But sometimes there's a need for it. Not for oneself. In defence of someone.... something.... you love.... I couldn't stand by and see Henna killed."

"But you killed him! That's how violence is. You taught me THAT too!" Alana's face crumples, her body wracked with sobs, "I know. I know! The karma of violence.... I thought we could take it.... I should have known...." She gives a heavy sigh, "I've lived with this from when we first started talking of escape. I had the gun because I knew that eventually I was going to have to use it against one of them.... The Christians! Who else.... There were bound to be some of them got on board. Better to let them group together and reveal themselves.... Contain them. Now is the time.... "

"But that's wrong! There's never any justification for violence. And you think YOU can control karma!" A look of infinite sadness crossed Alana's face, "I thought.... I was willing to give myself up.... What was I thinking! Why did he have to teach me this way...." She shakes her head and in an agonised voice screams, "Oh god, what have I done!" the gun clatters to the ground. None of us have ever seen her like this. So indecisive. So unsure of herself. Never seen her cry either. Despite all that happened on Earth. All she saw. "I have to live with the karma of my doing...." From a moment before when her face was wrent with sorrow, eyes brimming tears, her expression goes suddenly blank. Like an automaton she starts to shuffle across the stage. Listlessly, every movement an effort. In the time since she pulled the trigger she's aged into a feeble old woman. When she'd always been strength, energy. The rock on which we could always rely. Angus goes to her. He takes her arm gently; tries to comfort her. She throws him off, "No!" Shakes her head despondently, "I face this alone." She walks slowly out of the amphitheatre, a small and lonely figure.

While all eyes are on Alana Larry drops to his knees and gently lifts the old man's head into his lap. He shakes him gently as if to wake him from sleep. Surprised, I notice tears spitting onto Henna's upturned face. Incredibly, as soon as they touch it a broad smile forms and he gives a deep sigh. One eye opens and then the other. A few moments later, a little gingerly, Henna sits up. He then gets to his feet and without a word slowly walks into the pitch black night. It's only then that we notice the entire amphitheatre is surrounded by his people. They

hadn't moved; hadn't tried to defend him. The old man and his tribe leave without further word.