

Etc Etc Amen

HOWARD MALE

Extraordinary how potent cheap music is

Noel Coward

A number, a dream, a coincidence can affect me obsessively - though not in the sense of absurd fears but as fabulous (and on the whole rather bracing) scientific enigmas incapable of being stated, let alone solved.

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PROLOGUE

When Zachary C noticed his audience were no longer beguiled by his best Zachary B smile, he had his char-grilled-sweetcorn teeth replaced by a mouthful of ultraviolet-sensitive acrylic. Much to his delight, shop windows, car windscreens - even a puddle he awkwardly traversed on the way to the gig - all threw back at him a grin of searchlight intensity. On arriving at the Kings Theatre, Portsmouth he found his backing vocalist wife, Fountain, immersed in her reflection in the dressing room mirror. He sat down beside her and unleashed his new teeth.

“Perfect.”

He waited for her agreement - or at least some acknowledgement that he'd spoken - but Fountain was far too busy assembling her own stage persona to indulge him.

Zachary C flashed his fluorescent fangs for the second time.

“So?”

Fountain continued to ignore him; the application of turquoise eye shadow required her full attention. She lifted her chin a fraction so as to better inspect her shimmering lids.

Fountain Penn's tragedy (apart from Ma and Pa Penn's African-American predilection for inventing Christian names) was that she had once sung backing vocals for Zachary B, but now sang backing vocals for Zachary C. And that she had once been a member of the Now, but now she was just a member of the New Now. Yet for fifteen months - *but what a fifteen months they'd been* - this Detroit girl from the projects had sung with Zachary B. She'd even endured the infamous Trafalgar Square concert.

“Well?”

Finally she gave up and granted him an audience. But with her smile on the edge of laughter it was unfortunately a comedy club audience.

“It's the teeth isn't it?”

“No, the teeth are great.”

“So what is it then?”

“Okay, it's the teeth.”

“But you just said the teeth were great!”

“You're not going to let this go, are you Zac. The teeth *are* great. It's just that they're...” Fountain strained for the gentlest way to put it. “It's just that they're not you.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t sulk, baby.”

“So whose bloody teeth are they then – Brad Pitt’s?”

“Well, you did ask.”

The empathy Fountain had found hard to muster in the first place turned into a bluntness more in keeping with her personality. “I’m sorry sweetheart, but they’re just not working.” Eye shadow was returned to her bag, lipstick unsheathed. “Every time you flash those things, it just gives me the creeps. They do have different hues, you know. Now, can I get on?”

“Different *what*?”

“*Hues. Shades*: Like with paint; ivory white, seashell white, dove white... anything’s got to be better than goddamn *Nuclear Flash White!*”

“Okay, okay. I get the picture. *Jesus*.” He closed his mouth.

“Phew, that’s better,” risked Fountain. “Now I can take off my sunglasses.”

Poor Zachary, she thought. How much longer could he go on doing this for? She’d answered the ad in *Melody Maker* back in... 1995 was it? He’d recognised her as soon as she’d stepped into the rehearsal studio - and no one had recognised her in more than ten years. “You’re in!” he’d laughed, before she’d even sung a note. And of course the fans loved seeing a living breathing member of the Now, in the New Now.

When Fountain went to the loo, Zachary C treated himself to another quick examination of his teeth. *What was her problem with them?* Next on the list was the hair: he wasn’t balding exactly, it was the thickness. Although he dyed it (*coal black, cat black, black-bloody-hole black!*) it had become as insubstantial as candyfloss: one day the wind machine would send it flying off into the audience like a tumbleweed on a mission.

But otherwise he was in good health: he ate the right food, had cut back on the booze, and exercised regularly. Yet several nights a week spent up on stage trying to *be* Zachary B, was causing gravity to press down on him more forcefully with each passing day. The great man himself had been saved from this undignified task of performing his own sexually-charged music as a sixty-year-old by dint of the fact that he was dead: why did all trains of thought eventually lead Zachary C back to this cold hard fact, which in turn led him back to the crime scene photos he’d made the mistake of googling a year or so ago? Memory is wilfully perverse, and so while countless childhood daytrips to the seaside remained tantalisingly just out of reach, those

awful, awful photos had become a permanent slideshow on the hard drive of his brain, always springing up unbidden, making him dizzy with nausea. Despite all that KUU bullshit he'd loved Zachary B, he really had. He remembered the vertiginous LSD-induced insight he'd had at the Rainbow in 1972; that just as slack-jawed cavemen had thought the wind was created by excited trees waving their branches about, he had believed - for a moment anyway – that it was Zachary B who radiated the light the greedy spotlights vacuumed up.

1

The street was so narrow that when a scrap-heap of scooter wove past her in one direction, and a distressingly overburdened donkey nudged past her in the other, August almost stumbled into the path of a small oncoming truck. It responded with an abrasive blast of its horn. *Shit! Why didn't I change flights and travel with Damian? Why am I always trying to prove something?* She rummaged in her bag for the map she knew she'd put there only minutes earlier, but her blind hands recognised only water bottle, guidebook, camera and purse. Did she want a henna hand tattoo like the one the teenage girl was showing her? *No-no, not now.* She gave the desperate apologetic smile she'd have cause to fall back on a lot over the next few days.

That morning, August had been surprised to find it warm enough for shorts and T-shirt despite the fact it was still only February. However, the rising hubbub outside her riad had brought on a creeping sense of vulnerability, so she went for a blouse, linen jacket, and jeans instead. After a ten-minute mull over earrings she was on the disconcertingly uneven street. But having escaped the unapologetic stares of the Riad Bahja's thickly moustached owner and his small coterie of female staff, there now seemed to be a whole city's worth of people intent on giving her one kind of attention or another, with none of it welcome.

Still no map, but, sunglasses! She put them on as if she were a welder donning goggles: *now* she felt more protected. But of course they made little difference: the stall holders, snake-charmers and fortune-tellers still approached her as if they *could* make direct eye-contact, even if they couldn't - looming into her field of vision with colourful merchandise or just their colourful selves. It was still early in the tourist season and so every Westerner represented a possible feast after the famine. August noticed that women in particular were targeted as potential buyers of rugs, vases, spices and all manner of

gaudy trinkets and tired tat (including models of the KUU Tripod of various size and quality.) She watched indulgent men stand to one side while their partners pointed at objects with feigned indifference. The stall holder would then rush to get that particular brass lamp down from its particularly high hook (even though there were countless identical ones on the ground) wary that even this short break in eye-contact with his sun-weary customer might dissolve the tenuous spell they were under. Just as she found the map she realised she no longer needed it: the apex of the KUU Tripod was visible from just about any part of the old city, and all she had to do was keep it in her sights until she reached it. As the structure's revolving globe winked an indifferent star of sunlight at her, she cursed herself for becoming flustered and determinedly set off towards it. Within five minutes, meat, fish and vegetables replaced tourist temptations, as narrow streets narrowed even further into unnamed alleyways which in turn became mere passageways not wide enough for even the smallest of vehicles. She wasn't sure if this quieter world with fewer tourists made her less or more nervous.

Marrakech buildings rarely had windows facing the street and this emphasised the impression that the city was a gigantic maze. Instead, windows looked inwards onto central courtyards leaving outer stone walls to soak up the heat and keep the interiors cool. These blind walls were only occasionally punctuated by small inscrutable doorways beyond which might be a palatial courtyard or the most dejected slum or brothel.

Stopping to get her bearings, August noticed two women in a small cave-like workshop, one standing, the other seated. Only their hands moved, intricately busy with some kind of needlework. They looked up briefly but didn't acknowledge her. From their dispassionate demeanour, she imagined this work was what they'd always done and always would do. A skin-and-bone cat insinuated itself between the seated woman's feet before disappearing under her robe. It reappeared a moment later with a small scrap of red something hanging from its mouth.

August momentarily panicked when she thought she'd lost sight of the Tripod but then there it was, not only back in her sights, but looming above her. A steel exoskeleton of three turquoise legs defined its shape, and at the building's apex these three legs crossed to form a cradle for the revolving globe. The whole building was wrapped in glass, making visible the eleven floors within. It was such a relief to be out of the labyrinth of biblically ancient streets and standing before this vulgar yet oddly austere symbol of the civilised world. It wasn't

that intimidating by modern standards but it still towered above the mostly squat, raggedly utilitarian architecture surrounding it. And to the consternation of many of the locals it was a metre taller than its nearby rival, the stolid tower of the tallest Mosque in Africa; the Koutoubia Mosque. Was this a deliberate provocation? This was one question August was keen to ask the KUU Foundation's Leader Who Is Not a Leader tomorrow, which was precisely why she'd decided on a surprise visit today; it never did any harm to catch your subject off guard. After all, the KUU Foundation claimed it had nothing to hide.

She was wondering just how much of old Marrakech had to be razed to the ground to make room for the KUU Tripod, when a rush of anxiety threatened to make her turn around and head straight back the way she'd come. *Get a grip - this is what you're here for!* She got out her camera: maybe taking a few photographs would calm her down. A few minutes and a few deep breaths later, she'd regained her composure enough to approach the glass and steel facade. It seemed like an age since she'd last seen anything this dazzlingly 21st Century (even though it had only been twenty-four hours since she was last getting lost in Canary Wharf.) A young Japanese woman broke away from her camera-happy group in order to give one of the turquoise legs a hug: she couldn't even get her arms halfway round its girth.

The doors gave an electronic sigh as they delivered August into a spacious concourse, electric with human activity, yet disconcertingly quiet: there was obviously something about the building's acoustics that sucked all the sound away, creating an underwater ambience. But there was air, vaguely scented air in fact - *sandalwood with a hint of lime?* It seemed even brighter in the Tripod than outside, so much so that she was tempted to put her sunglasses back on. Further visual disorientation was created by the searchlight beams of African sunlight which ricocheted in every direction and created occasional mini-rainbows where they came to rest. She joined the lengthy queue at Security.

The turquoise T-shirts worn by the two girls who guided her through the check-in procedure were a welcome reminder of the domestic and down-to-earth (she'd half expected KUU officialdom to be clothed in the iridescent one-piece costumes favoured by the denizens of old sci-fi movies). One girl's T-shirt was emblazoned with the words **Entertain the Possibility**, the other's asked, **Tri-Curious?** As the Tri-Curious girl checked her passport, August tried not to stare at the perfect curves of her eyebrows which looked drawn on with a compass.

Once she'd been through the BodySearch X-ray machine she moved on to Enquiries which was adjacent to the central lift shafts and service ducts. T-shirts were clearly the anti-uniform here: the old Moroccan gentleman who looked up wearily from his computer had the words **Don't Pray, Dance!** incongruously written in glitter across a T-shirt which was too big for his slight frame.

"Yes?"

"Is Mr Merrick around? I'm from London. I'm here to interview your...er... Leader Who Is Not a Leader, tomorrow. But thought I'd just come by to say hello?"

She hated herself for adopting the question-at-the-end-of-every-sentence speech mode. But she'd already decided how to play this: she wouldn't be sarcastic; she wouldn't be impatient; she wouldn't be patronising and she *would* be respectful. It wasn't going to be easy.

"Aah yes, London." The man's face brightened. "Buckingham Palace! I have a cousin in London." A white-punctuated-with-gold smile flashed briefly. He consulted the screen; spoke briefly to someone on the phone, and then directed August to the lifts. "Level 10. Entertain the possibility, and the possibility will..."

"Yes-yes. Thank you." She was slipping already - *be polite, be polite!*

The glass box of a lift granted August a tantalising glimpse of each floor as it silently passed. She was still mentally chastising herself for snapping at the man at Security, when the doors opened and she found her hand being shaken before she'd even stepped out.

"August! Delighted! Barney Merrick. Although we like to just use first names here. How was your flight?"

"Oh, you know..."

"We weren't expecting you until tomorrow. I hope they didn't give you too much of a run-around at the airport. I could have sent someone to pick you up if you'd given us a bell."

August took stock of this middle-aged man who didn't seem to want to let go of her hand. Obviously eyebrows were going to be the theme of the day: why would someone who took so much care over their hair (a lacquered-back silver helmet) and smart but casual clothes (navy-blue linen suit, open-necked white shirt) let their eyebrows get so out of control? He'd look at least ten years younger with a bit of judicious pruning.

"How's your accommodation? We hear so many stories..."

August felt the gentle presence of Merrick's hand in the small of her back as he ushered her into a boardroom dominated by a large triangular glass table. The window-walls offered a 360-degree view of

the Medina, with the snow-tipped Atlas Mountains beyond looking suspiciously like a painted backdrop.

“If there are any problems, you can always stay with us here you know,” Merrick continued. “We have more than a hundred guest rooms: all with their own Wi-Fi-enabled TV/PC. It’s not La Mamounia, but it’s clean and functional.”

“I’m fine where I am,” August replied with as much warmth as she could muster.

Twenty minutes of small-talk and a glass of white wine later, August decided it was time to address Merrick, and the other two younger male KUUists who had joined them, on the reason for her visit. The atmosphere turned from genial to awkward as soon as she placed the small DAT recorder on the table between them: this was the impartial witness she carried everywhere with her; she always felt less nervous as soon as its tiny red light started blinking. Conversely, the three men became more nervous, exchanging nano-glances as their smiles stiffened.

But Merrick only took a moment to regain his composure. “I’m afraid you’re not going to get much of interest on your little machine today, my dear. And in all honesty, as we weren’t expecting you until tomorrow...” His tone hardened a little. “Was your surprise visit meant to catch us off guard?”

“Not at all. I was at a loose-end and so thought I’d drop by. Maybe chat with a few visitors and staff - get a bit of background material. I wasn’t expecting you to just drop everything.”

Merrick turned away, ostensibly to admire the view. “Well, it might all be academic anyway. I’m afraid the Leader Who Is Not A Leader has a touch of gastric flu; one of the downsides of living here. Obviously everyone else will do their best to accommodate you, by answering any questions you have. So if you’ll excuse me...”

August bit her bottom lip - *where to go with this next?* “Do you have a mobile, Barney? So you can keep me informed of developments? You do realise that the KUU Foundation is in for a lot of bad press, whether I get this interview or not. And trust me, it’ll get worse. But at least if the world gets to hear your side of things first, there is some chance of damage limitation.”

August suspected that the young man who leant over to whisper in Merrick’s ear was a lawyer, despite his red **You Can Laugh** T-shirt, chinos and Jesus sandals.

Merrick returned his attention to August. “*The World*. I see. I hadn’t realised you were here representing *the World*. Well, good for you, my dear! But nevertheless, there’s still nothing I can do. Perhaps

if you come back tomorrow. In the meantime maybe do make use of our extensive leisure facilities - there's table football, cafes, shops..."

"Thank you, Mr Merrick but..."

"Barney. Please, call me Barney. If it's more sophisticated entertainment you want, we have art classes on Level 5 where there's also a small library of KUU-related books and an Internet cafe. Level 7 is virtual reality booths; pretty state-of-the-art, I've been told. And on the Lower Ground Floor there's the dance floor and swimming pool. There are also shops and cafes on Levels 6 & 8. We..."

"Thanks, Barney. I'm sure when my photographer Damian gets here we'll..."

"And no chains, I hasten to add - that would be very un-KUU. So you'll have to wait until you get back to England if you want a Starbucks fix, or any M&S undies."

This time his guiding hand landed on her shoulder as he escorted her back to the lift.

"No, really. I think I'll just get back to my riad."

August had begun to find the sterile ambience of the KUU Tripod oppressive: *did every floor have a different smell, or was it her imagination?* The smell as the lift passed through Level 5 reminded her disconcertingly of the dentist, and made her feel momentarily woozy. She wanted to get back to reality, even if that reality was as unpredictable and overwhelming as the streets of Marrakech. But it was still only ten-thirty; Damian didn't arrive until early evening. So she steeled herself for taking a look around after all.

Being compulsively methodical, August began by exploring the lower-ground level, with the idea of gradually working her way up.

Every shade, shape and age of humankind seemed represented in the divers, paddlers, splashers and screamers crowding the triangular swimming pool. But the density of noise, the smell of chlorine, and the feeling that she might be thought voyeuristic, made her quickly step back into the corridor in order to follow the bass thuds to the adjacent dance floor.

She was surprised to find this area was just as densely populated despite the fact it was still only mid-morning. A Saturday Night Fever-style chequered dance floor flashed red, blue, yellow and white, and Rihanna's 'Umbrella' acted as a reminder that you were never far from a ubiquitous pop song. The strobing lights made her feel less self-conscious about staying and people-watching for a while. A digital jukebox that claimed to have more than two hundred-thousand songs on its database (with more being added everyday at the request of visitors) was accessed via touch-screen. Visitors were allowed one

selection each which, the screen promised, would be played sometime within the next two hours. If no selections were being made, the computer went into random play: August was delighted to hear Lieutenant Pigeon followed by Issa Bagayogo.

As she watched people drift in and out, August became aware of a pattern emerging. Most people were having a dance, showering, and then going for a swim. Why hadn't anyone thought of such a cool and practical set-up before? Eventually, after a necessary dance to 'Lady Marmalade,' she began to tire of avoiding attempts at sustaining eye-contact from lone middle-aged men, and she headed back to the lift. Back on the ground floor she was disconcerted by the KUU subtext of an English lesson taking place in the main auditorium. The tutor and his students were engaged in a call-and-response repeating of various KUU non-commandments and maxims.

"You can laugh!"

"*You can laugh!*"

"You can doubt!"

"*You can doubt!*"

So she stayed in the lift and let it take her up past the accommodation levels, where two women with mops and buckets were labouring away, and on to Level 4 which appeared to consist entirely of a forest of old fairground games. One-armed bandits stood in ordered ranks and the dozen or more table-football tables were all in use. A bar running the length of one wall was already doing a steady trade, but the fug of cigarette smoke and other dubious male odours made her step back into the lift.

Now what was this? The Surreal Therapy Department? She was back at dentist-scented Level 5. Another diverse mix of people were making photo collages out of pictures from old magazines. Their tutor was a pony-tailed young man in a baggy purple shirt and faded denims. He noticed August immediately and gave her a wave and a broad smile. "Care to join us?"

"Another day perhaps. Wrong floor." She cursed her English reserve. *Where had her shyness come from? Certainly not her parents.*

This was more like it: Level 6. The smell of fresh coffee was instantly subsumed by a hundred other smells: cumin, garlic, char-grilled meat, cinnamon. And just as Merrick had promised, it was free of any familiar shops or eateries. There was a Turkish coffee house, a Mexican fast-food joint, a Japanese sushi bar, and much else besides. Because of space restrictions each outlet had only two or three tables in front of it. But it's the thought that counts, she thought: All the world together under one roof, sort of. She wasn't going to explore

any further today. She opted for Japanese, selected some sushi and a beer, and found herself a table from which she could watch the people around her, as well as the city below. She felt like a time traveller looking down from this pristine structure at the chaotic bustle of just another day in Marrakech. Because the Tripod was soundproofed, the cacophony of battling car horns came through as just distant muted toots.

The strong Japanese lager worked its magic and gave August a temporary sense of expansive well-being. Perhaps there really was hope for mankind if all these different cultures could coexist under one roof. *Hope for mankind – get a grip, girl!* But nevertheless, it was amazing what the KUU Foundation had achieved in just a decade or so. So what had gone wrong? Twelve suicides scattered across the planet in just two short months: London, Tokyo, San Francisco, Mexico City, Amsterdam, and now Marrakech. All linked by method, and the fact that a copy of ‘The KUU Hypothesis’ was found in close proximity to all the victims; was ‘victim’ the right word for someone who commits suicide? *Yes, or course it was.* To any reasonable open-minded person, the KUU Non-Belief System seemed perfect in its open-ended inclusiveness and its refusal to lay down rules. August felt it offered more hope and practical wisdom than any other political ideology or organised religion. So what was going wrong? But on a more personal level - perhaps it wasn’t a mistake to have come here after all. If things didn’t pan out with her newspaper feature she could still have a good time. Maybe she’d give Surreal Therapy a try. When her mother had said, *try to have a good time*, it was clear to August that she suspected her daughter wasn’t capable of having a good time. But she’d show her!

After all, only two hours earlier she’d been in heaven just sitting on the roof of her riad, drinking coffee and taking a disproportionate pleasure in opening and deleting emails. As she had closed her laptop, an inadequate PA-system was turning the muezzin’s call-to-prayer into a distorted howl which seemed to fill the whole cloudless sky. She thought it sounded more like the plaintive cry of some wounded or lovelorn mythical beast, rather than a joyful invitation to praise Allah as the one true god. But at least the sound’s eerie omniscience had reminded her of the thrilling fact she was in an invitingly alien world on the threshold of a brand new day.

Extract from the KUU Hypothesis by Zachary Bekele

A Disorganised Non-Religion

There is no entrance exam or ritualised rite of passage to becoming a KUUist unless you'd like to invent one. Needless to say, if you did, it would be for your own personal use only. Every faith refugee, agonised agnostic and entertainer of the possibility is welcome to join this disorganised non-religion. As are their pets.

The KUU HYPOTHESIS

An Introduction

Coincidences are often entertaining and intriguing. Sometimes they even generate feelings of indefinable and unquenchable expectation: what did that confluence of events mean? Was I meant to meet that old friend today of all days? But these feelings soon pass; we move on. But perhaps coincidences are more than just coincidences. Perhaps they are the subtlest form of supernatural phenomena visited upon us by a benign force wanting to challenge our narrow perceptions of the world around us.

The Naming of the KUU

The naming of The KUU was almost accidental. But then a synchronistic chain of events cemented its aptness. But let's start at the beginning.

In the beginning was the acronym, and the acronym was -

The KUU

The Knowing Unknowable Universe

This precise yet imprecise definition of my proposed deity needs to be meditated upon a word at a time.

The Knowing

The first word proposes we are speaking of something that demonstrates intelligence. **Knowing** also implies knowledge beyond intelligence; beyond our comprehension. The implicit implication is *all knowing*.

Unknowable

Unknowable because this is all guess work: that's all religion ever is. We can never just be happy with unresolved guesses. People *think* they need answers, so they turn their wild guesses into answers, and then get defensive if anyone dares suggest they are just guesses.

Universe

This third element symbolises that which we find impossible to grasp or understand. The universe is an undeniable reminder of the incomprehensibility of life and our fragility and contingency. We have more *knowledge* than we've ever had before, but with each step forward, the universe recedes two steps. By ending this definition-within-a-name of my bespoke non-faith with the word **Universe** I acknowledge and embrace the limits of my understanding and accept our comical insignificance in the face of the vast unknown.

warm beer and wan music **23rd August 1971**

After a couple of hours spent flicking through dog-eared LPs in Soho record shops, I found myself on Wardour Street. I did a cartoon double-take as I noticed *Rock On*'s bulbous red logo blinking arrhythmically above a blistered brown doorway. I stopped, backtracked a few feet, and without giving myself any time to talk myself out of it, rang the bell. I was buzzed in (twice - I was new to all this) and found myself climbing some unfeasibly steep stairs, like those in an Amsterdam pension. At the top of the stairs was a small landing and three inscrutable plywood doors, one of which - the unpainted one - was slightly ajar. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, switched on 'cool and confident me' and boldly crossed the cracked linoleum threshold into my new life.

But doesn't everyone act it, before they can become it? Doesn't everyone, in a situation like this, summon an actor to play a better version of themselves for as long as it's needed? Perhaps because of

my uncharacteristic spontaneity in ringing the bell in the first place, my confidence was bolstered for just long enough to make a good impression. But Jake, who I would later learn was the features editor, didn't make it easy. He wasn't even aware of what a life-changing moment in time he was sharing with me, as he looked up briefly from last week's *Melody Maker*.

"Be with you in a mo. I can't believe they've done a spread on that Colin Blunstone poof." He was addressing no one in particular, scanning the competition as if it were a schoolboy's scrappy homework. As my presence had been noted but not fully acknowledged, 'cool and confident me' ebbed away to leave 'wobbly-legged and embarrassed me' facing the music editor. *What was I thinking of? What was I doing here?* I then made the mistake of looking down... Because I'd not planned this, I'd made no effort with my appearance. The pink scoop-necked T-shirt with its ghost of an iron-on Stones logo was okay. But *I was wearing shorts* - for anyone over eight or under twenty-five, an absolute no-no regardless of the temperature. It was as if I was seeing their slippery nylon unpleasantness for the first time (although at least the *elasticised waistband* was hidden beneath the hem of my T-shirt.) But then there was the real horror of my feet: tan Clarkes sandals. *I'd had them since school!* Their latticework straps made them look like Danish pastries. I tried to distract myself from my escalating anxiety by pretending to read a flier I'd picked up from Jake's desk. The rest of the high-ceilinged open-plan space was deserted apart from two men chatting conspiratorially, their feet up on a shared desk. A static ionosphere of smoke lingered above them, illuminated by weak shards of sunshine which had somehow made it through the grime-laminated windows. It was the first time I'd even *smelt* grass never mind smoked it. This atmosphere of ennui pleased me. I wanted to be a part of this.

So I pulled myself – together; my T-shirt – down a little, and my shorts – up a little, just as Jake, perhaps out of a dawning sense of my throbbing discomfort, creaked out of his chair to introduce himself. He then claimed, unconvincingly, to remember the pieces I'd sent him weeks ago.

"Yeah, that *Hunky Dory* review – you really got the essential... er... vibe of... er... what's-his-name?"

"David Bowie."

"Yeah, of course, David Bowie; the one-hit-wonder, *Space Oddity* dude."

Because Jake expended a lot of nervous energy keeping his shoulder-length red hair out of his eyes, it left him no time to deal

with the improbably large sideburns which were doing a pincer manoeuvre on his narrow freckled face. He introduced me to Barney Merrick (offhand), Andy Morgan (friendly), and the only person doing any work, Debora, typist and tea girl (sweet but shy) who had just appeared with a tray of mugs. Jake then led me down a short passageway to what he proudly - or rather, mock-proudly - called The Music Room. No it wasn't a delightful sun-filled space dominated by a grand piano, it was a cork-lined cubby-hole containing three orange plastic chairs and a rudimentary shelf supporting a dusty turntable and a pair of speakers. I was told by a beaming Jake (clearly regurgitating an oft-used line) that The Music Room also served as The Drugs Room and The Private Meeting Room. We were clearly there for all three of its functions as he handed me a flier, rolled a joint, and unsheathed *LA Woman*.

I was disappointed when his first question was, 'So what qualities do you think you can bring to *Rock On*?' But I took a tentative drag of the joint, stifled a cough, and resisting the temptation to go with, 'Well, I'm a fucking genius, Jake,' and instead opted for, "Well, Jake, I think I can offer *new blood*. New blood and a spirit of adventure. You see, I have an explorer's attitude to music. You know, the heart of darkness, and all that. There's just nothing which says, *this is now* - or even better - *this is tomorrow*. So, er, yeah..."

My gift-from-the-gods speech tailed off when I noticed Jake wasn't even listening. He was staring myopically at something on the cover of 'LA Woman' he'd apparently never noticed before. But the fact I'd stopped talking seemed to pull him back into focus.

"Look, as I said, we liked your stuff... er... Paul. And, to be honest, we're all too fucked to move a muscle here, what with the heat and everything. So why don't you just do us a favour and give us three hundred words on that lot..." With an effete wave of his hand he indicated the flier I'd forgotten I was still holding. "We'll see how you handle it, and take it from there."

So that was that. I got my lucky break reviewing the grim-sounding Axe Grinder whose morose, unsmiling faces glared up at me from the crumpled piece of paper I now found myself looking at with renewed curiosity.

But let's backtrack a bit. What made me want all this in the first place? That's easy enough to answer. My older brother, Phil. He'd get back from gigs in the early hours of the morning, burst into my room with the electricity of the night's music still animating every muscle of his lanky body, and with a DJ's dexterity he'd whip Captain Beefheart from my Dixons deck and throw on the white-label James

Brown I just *had to hear*. Then he'd breathlessly berate me in his usual good-natured manner.

"Paul, Paul, *Paul* - how can you listen to that stuff, man? It's just white boys getting black music *wrong*. They're just *trying too hard, man*. Trying to be spaced-out and different. Look, dude, get your lug-holes round this..."

He'd dance lankily round the limited space between my bed and wardrobe as if he needed to emphasise how much better this music was than the stuff *I* listened to (which he said was music to read sci-fi novels to.) And he was right. There was a natural fluidity to the things Phil force-fed me while still high from a night's DJing. But I could never admit it to his face. I'd just go back to my paperback and pretend to continue reading about killer plants taking over the Home Counties, while James Brown's kick-drum tried to force its rhythmic will on my consciously stilled feet. This weekly Friday or Saturday night ritual played itself out in much the same way for a couple of years.

"Oh come on, Paul - listen to that sax solo and the way the bass and drums are just so *out there!*"

"Yeah, it's okay," I'd say, "but, you know. What's it about? It's about nothing. There's no *depth* to the lyrics. He's just singing about sex and dancing isn't he? The lyrics are crap."

"So what are the lyrics of bloody *Take Up Thy Stethoscope And Walk* about then, Paul? Come on, tell me. If you want meaning, I'll give you meaning - "

With dizzying speed, *I Got a Feeling* would be put back in the box and *Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud* would fill the room with its urgent, necessary message and its jumping, syncopated beats. He knew he'd got me: a record which so joyfully and succinctly demanded racial equality had to ace a record which self-indulgently documented some art school hippy's mescaline meltdown - however much the pretentious gatefold-sleeve resonated with my imagination.

I envied Phil's certainty when it came to music. I was still finding my way, following trends, making sure I liked the right thing and belonged to the right tribe. But Phil just didn't care. From Miles Davis to Ray Davies; if the barometer of his tapping foot liked it, that was all that mattered. Before the stylus had completed its final, graceful journey back to its cradle, Phil would be ruffling my hair (because he knew that's what older brothers did) and taking himself and his box of 45s off to bed. More because I wanted to have the last word than because I needed to hear anything else, I'd put the Small Faces or Floyd back on. But they'd always seem stuffy and staid after whatever

Phil had played. Rock would always remain either theatrical, intellectual, or macho posturing. Whereas Soul and R&B were life, love, pain, and lust, made manifest in music. Perhaps that's why Zachary B was something special. His father was Ethiopian, and although he left Zac and his English mother and returned to Ethiopia when Zac was only ten, he would send Zac LPs of the music being produced by bands in Ethiopia. There was one singer in particular: Mahmoud Ahmed - I still have a cassette Zac made for me. The influence was never explicit in Zac's music but it was there nonetheless; the musculature, the otherworldliness, the spookiness. I always said that Zachary B and the Now were part Rolling Stones and part Sly Stone.

But back to Axe Grinder. After an evening spent in the simian company of a couple of hundred bikers and hippies, I dictated my honed hatchet job (appropriate don't you think?) to the lovely Debora from the communal pay-phone in my Peckham bedsit. And so it began. For the first few months I loved the idea that one night I might discover some astonishing new band that would go on to change the direction of popular music, etc etc. But it wasn't long before I realised such finds were rare. All I was ever likely to see was just another bunch of denim-clad rockers playing their first London gig, trying to emulate Rod Stewart or Deep Purple. Warm beer and wan music. Twenty-minute guitar solos would pour like treacle into my begging-for-mercy ears, and my body-temperature pint invariably tasted like it was better suited for sprinkling on the bag of chips I'd have on the way home than for drinking. Where was the charisma and glamour of the singers my parents used to listen to? Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Billie Holiday. Or the power-packed jazz and soul pioneers Phil worshipped: Little Richard, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke - this was what Britain needed in 1971 - a bit of showbiz *pizzazz*! I'd scribble down song titles slurred by the singer and distorted by the beleaguered PA, and ache to go home through invariably uncalled-for encores. Occasionally rather than phone in my report, I'd catch the bus to Piccadilly Circus and deliver it by hand. I got used to climbing those tricky stairs three at a time, and pushing open the never-locked door (there was no breach of security expected from the accountant or the dressmaker who shared the communal landing) before slapping down my increasingly predictable copy on to Jake's straining donkey-of-a-desk.

"So how's it going, man?" he asked me one morning, clearly at a loose end. I'd turned up with a review of some art student folksy who

had been heralded as the next Bob Dylan (the third ‘next Bob Dylan’ that month)

“Oh, you know, so-so - still waiting to hear something which really blows me away.”

“So what was James Blake like then?”

“Well, you know, he’s like Bob Dylan.”

“Great!”

“No, not great. Dull, very dull.”

“Get out of the wrong side of the bed did we?” interjected Barney.

“Not at all. It’s just that I happen to like the Bob Dylan we’ve already got. He more than satisfies my Bob Dylan requirements. So I don’t feel the world needs a second third-rate one, or even a third second-rate one.”

I handed Jake my review and turned to leave. I really didn’t feel like listening to any of Barney Merrick’s sarcastic asides. But he reeled me in anyway.

“I do believe you’re beginning to sound a little jaded already, Paul.”

Jaded, no. Bored, yes. That bullshit speech I’d given Jake a few months back (it already seemed like a lifetime ago) had more than a grain of truth to it. I really was greedy for something new, and perhaps even the deferred glory of discovering something new.

Hendrix was the only rock artist my brother, Phil had had any time for. The night we heard the news of his death on Radio Luxembourg we stayed up all night playing his stuff.

“You know me, Paul,” Phil had said. “I don’t like to talk about this shit, really. Its music – what’s to say? You’re the words guy. But Hendrix *was the future*, and now the future’s been cancelled.” Phil looked down at his beer can and absentmindedly swilled its contents around before tipping the last metallic drops into his mouth. “Do you know what? His death is a kind of up there with the death of Martin Luther King or even Jesus. I mean it, man.”

“Oh, come off it, Phil.”

“No, really, I mean it. Think about it: we *both* dug him - he was black music *and* white music. Okay, so some cats didn’t get it, or couldn’t deal with it. But that’s always the case with the greats. It’s a fucking tragedy man. A fucking tragedy.”

I have fond memories of that night at Phil’s squat listening to the electric screams and howls of *Electric Ladyland* until the dawn chorus eventually made itself heard in the gaps between the tracks. Then we both crashed out on the damp double mattress which, besides his stereo and his DJ gear, seemed to be the only thing Phil owned. So

yes, I was ‘the words guy.’ I was the one who escaped. But after five months of missing the last tube home and spending half my writer’s fee on a cab, I was already dissatisfied with my lot. It was no longer enough to just see my name in print above my cigarette-packet-sized reviews. So I asked Jake if I could have a more prestigious assignment - and I knew exactly what I wanted that assignment to be.

Extract from The KUU Hypothesis by Zachary Bekele

An Introduction. Part 2

Be graciously ignorant

All is conjecture and wishful thinking. The KUU is just an inspired guess. I was led to this guess - and convinced to expand on this guess - by a number of what I have decided to call Knowing Unknowable Universe incidents (**KUU-incidences**). The word **Unknowable** had to be the second part of my deity equation because it graciously admits ignorance. It is the safety catch in my name-with-a-built-in-definition. If all religions started with this premise - which is intrinsically part of the KUU name - then there would be nothing to fight over. Etc etc, Amen!

The Dazzling Surface of Science

Scientists invent bizarre hypotheses such as parallel universes, just as their ancestors invented bizarre gods. They know as little as their ancestors, but dress up their ignorance in facts which create a dazzling shiny surface of apparent knowledge. Scientists have contributed immeasurably to society, but they’ve not made a dent on some of the central mysteries of mind, soul, or creation.

The Knowing Unknowable Universe is a phrase not a personifying name

It offers hope with the **Knowing**, takes it away with the **Unknowable**, and then plunges you into the infinite **Universe** at the end. It’s one part conjecture to

two parts an embracing and admission of limited knowledge. By contrast, science and other religions would have you believe that we and our world are two parts understood to one part mystery. But why should we suddenly have all the answers now, any more than we did two hundred or even two thousand years ago?

2

“That grilled squid’s fucking delicious!”

It had only been half-an-hour but Damian was already tiring August. It wasn’t so much the fact that every sentence he uttered included the words ‘fuck,’ ‘fucking,’ or ‘fucked,’ it was the fact that this extravagance of expletives was obviously an affectation. This young man was clearly ex-public school trying to be Streatham High Road. And what was it with goatees? What did these boys think they were saying about themselves with their carefully delineated patches of facial hair? Damian’s effort was particularly risible in its desert-scrub sparseness and the fact it was two shades more ginger than his mousy shoulder-length hair.

They were eating in the Jemaa El Fna. At sunset dozens of long trestle tables transformed the square into a huge open-air restaurant where food sellers competed with charm and guile for the opportunity to feed the crowds. Tables was assembled around a central cooking area hung with swaying acetylene lamps and manned by all-male crews in pristine white hats and coats. Damian’s hashish-heightened senses were already busy perceiving the clouds of lamp-lit smoke issuing from the butane gas cookers as a visual manifestation of the primal blues that the gnawa musicians were playing a few yards away. Every shout, clang, and sizzle of food preparation seemed to add perfect offbeat percussion to the cyclical music, which already occupied a sonic terrain somewhere between harmony and dissonance. Although Damian was disappointed that the neat twist of newspaper he’d just bought had only contained enough hash for one small joint, he knew that even if he’d been completely straight, all this sensory input would have still made him *feel* stoned.

“This is fucking superb!” He shovelled another dripping spoonful of lamb-something into his mouth. “Four hours ago I was in London

and it was pissing it down and cold as fuck. And now..." He plucked at his plain white T-shirt and waggled his shorts-clad scarily white legs in August's general direction. "Fucking amazing!"

August did her best to keep any note of condescension out of her voice. "I take it this is your first trip abroad then?"

"No, no, of course not. You know, I did Europe and shit - in my gap year. But this is, you know. This is different. *We're in Africa for fucks sake*. Yet it took no time at all to get here. That's what's freaky."

August stared at Damian with the detached fascination of an anthropologist as he took a lump of sausage from one plate, some deep-fried eel from another, while cracking and peeling a hard-boiled egg by rolling it under the heel of his hand - all in the time it took her to take one tentative sip of sweet mint tea.

"So, are you *into* the KUU then, Damian?"

"Yeah, of course. Who in their right mind isn't."

"Have you been nudged lately?"

"Not lately I have to say. Though if you're watching out for it, it's not gonna happen. You know - don't push the KUU, and all that. But I've had some great cosmic nudges in the past ..."

He was clearly waiting for August to persuade him to relate his favourite KUU-incidence. And as she was more comfortable as a listener than a talker, she put him out of his misery. "Well, go on then, let's hear it."

"Yeah, well, the best one was back at college. It's a bit of a long story so just tell me if I'm boring you. Me and a couple of mates, Dave and Jess, we're getting stoned, watching TV..."

"As you do."

"Yeah, as you do. You know Derren Brown, the mind control dude? Well, he's doing this trick of making bookmakers at a greyhound race pay-up on a dog that came last in a race. Anyway, we start riffing and Dave says, 'So, which greyhound would come last?' And I reply, quick as a flash, 'the three legged one.'"

Damian started giggling but quickly composes himself. "As we were all stoned this was the funniest joke we'd ever heard. But anyway, as soon as the program ended I stuck on a *League of Gentleman* DVD - it was probably just the first thing that came to hand. We're about ten minutes in, and Jess sits up straight on the sofa and points at the screen. 'Wasn't that a three legged greyhound?' she says, kind of freaked out a bit. There'd been this scene of a group of carnival freaks barging into this woman's house. It had all happened very quickly, but me and Dave hadn't seen any greyhound. But because we're KUUists we needed to check to make sure. So I

rewound about thirty seconds, pressed pause, and sure enough there's this fucking three legged greyhound bounding up the stairs - the picture was a bit blurred but there was no question he was one leg short of a full set. We couldn't believe our eyes..."

"Interesting..."

"No, wait, that wasn't the end of it. Jess says that to complete our KUU set, all we need now is to see a real three-legged greyhound. So, a few weeks later I get a call early one Saturday morning. It's Jess. She's got this Saturday job in a shop in Covent Garden, except she was meant to be off that weekend. But the owner has asked her to come in, because his other girl couldn't make it."

At this point Damian pauses for effect, except the effect is lost on August who isn't actually feeling the sense of profound expectation that Damian had hoped she was. But once again August politely gives him his cue anyway.

"And, so?"

"Well, apparently this girl was always coming up with one excuse or another for being late, or not coming in at all. But on this occasion she'd opened her front door...and... Yeah you've guest it - there was a fucking *three legged greyhound* standing on her doorstep! So the girl had decided it was her duty to take it to the local police station and didn't reckon she'd be able to get into work before lunchtime. So Jess calls me on her mobile to tell me and I tell her to get her arse over to this girl's place to take some pictures! Fucking brilliant eh? You know that bit in the book about KUU-incidences having to involve the most unlikely elements in order for them to be, you know, valid? So, how many times do three legged greyhounds crop up in life?"

"Or conversation, or TV shows," interjected August, smiling. She was warming to Damian just a little, now that he was showing a bit of KUU spirit. And his KUU-incidence had been fairly impressive and amusing.

"*And* the tripod KUU is a 3 legged GOD and this greyhound was a 3 legged DOG - brilliant, eh!"

"You can't teach an old god new tricks."

"Exactly... Hey, nice one!"

With a theatrical flourish one of the waiters held a teapot high in the air with one hand, and their glasses low with the other. He then poured a long arc of tea into each glass without spilling a drop.

August continued to sip slowly at the comfortingly hot liquid. She still wasn't feeling hungry. "So what were you before you were a KUUist?"

"Catholic."

“And?”

“Well...” Damian thought for a moment. “It was when I read they were officially thinking of scrapping limbo...”

“Sorry?”

“You know - the doctrine of limbo? Purgatory or whatever you want to call it. I mean, *they can't do that can they?* That's like destroying some amazing listed building or sacred monument - no, worse - it's basically admitting that all that stuff we were brought up to think was the Holy Word can just be gotten rid of on the whim of the powers that be. And because this is coming right from the top - from those who supposedly have a hotline to the Almighty - well, I just thought, that's it, enough already. It's all bollocks anyway, isn't it?”

August didn't answer at first. A 'yes' or 'no' didn't seem appropriate somehow. Eventually she picked up a piece of calamari from Damian's plate and popped it in her mouth. Smiling, she looked him straight in the eye and said, “Maybe.”

Damian laughed. “Yeah; *Maybe*. The KUU always has the right answer.”

Momentarily she felt sorry for Damian. He seemed genuinely hurt and confused in his disillusionment with the Catholic Church. But then his face relaxed again. He looked around at all the rising smoke backlit by a miniature universe of gas lamps. “I fucking love this place. Is there a more atmospheric place to eat on the entire planet?”

“But there's trouble in paradise.”

“Yeah, of course. So what do you make of all that shit?”

“The suicides? Well, it's scary isn't it. And the Leader who is not a bloody Leader has gone back on his word regarding my interview. And then there's Barney Merrick. I didn't get a good vibe from him *at all*. He's just giving me the run around.”

“So you've been to the Tripod already?” Damian looked disappointed. August decided not to acknowledge it.

“I thought it might be useful if I did some ground work. I don't want to just do some one-hour hack job. I came here with the idea of letting them tell their side of the story. I wanted to be on *their* side. But if they're closing ranks what can I do?”

“I can't believe I'm going to be the first person to photograph the Leader Who Is Not A Leader in, what, twenty years? Thanks August.”

“Don't thank me; it was the paper who decided to send you. Maybe they thought that as you're such a Born Again Questioner it might make you a useful go-between.”

August's eyes were beginning to sting from the smoke. When

Damian, on impulse, asked a passing trader how much an ostrich egg cost, she decided it was time to call it a day. “Look, I’m really tired, Damian. So if you wouldn’t mind...”

“No, no. No problemo. I’m a bit fucked myself.”

August again scrutinised the young man who was now taking an age to count out the right amount of dog-eared dirhams for the patiently smiling egg man.

“Can I just say something, Damian?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Were you aware that you use either the word fuck, fucking, or fucked, just about every time you open your mouth?”

As soon as August had spoken, she regretted it. Damian looked so crest fallen.

“Do I? Sorry!” He crammed the crumpled excess notes back into his pocket while simultaneously trying to deny a monkey on a chain purchase on his left shoulder.

“Don’t apologise. I just thought you should know. You could be quite an agreeable young man if you could cut down on the fucks.”

He gave the monkey’s owner a handful of coins. “Yes. I see what you’re saying.”

August tried to temper her outburst with a touch of joviality by continuing, “it’s not big, and it’s not clever,” in her best school-mam voice. “And I don’t think it will be a particularly useful talent if you are going to help me oil the cogs of communication at the Tripod.”

“Okay, okay! Stop going on about it. You’ve really starting to fuck me off, now!”

For a moment August was taken aback, but then she registered Damian’s broad, schoolboy grin.

“Stop fucking with me!” She replied, laughing and relieved.

“Well, fuck you!”

“No, fuck *you*, motherfucker!”

They both doubled up with laughter. Damian wiped the tears from his eyes. “That’s some laugh you’ve got there.”

“It runs in the family.”

As they wove their way back through the crowds, trying not to make eye-contact with the transvestite belly dancers, August mentally chastised herself for being so prudish: *I’m only twenty-five but I’m acting like I’m sixty-five. What’s he - five years younger than me? But it’s just that they’re a very important five years; he’s still a boy.*

“So, do you normally write about stuff like this?” asked Damian, interrupting August’s self-chastising while neatly side-stepping an oncoming scooter whose rider looked about ten.

“Not really. I write about books...”

“Book reviews?”

“No, no, that’s far too labour intensive. It’s kind of upmarket gossip about the publishing world. Up-and-coming trends, that kind of thing.”

Damian looked sceptical. “And there’s a demand for that?”

“Amazingly, yes. I do a weekly column and other bits and pieces.”

“So why did they send you here?”

“I asked to be sent. Well, I begged actually. I want to branch out. And this is personal too, so... Look, can we just walk now? It’s been a long day.”

“Yeah—yeah, of course. Sorry.”

When August woke the next morning, her first thought was that she was never going to get used to her log of a pillow. Her second thought was that she couldn’t wait to show Damian the view from the roof - her discovery, her roof. The interview with the Leader Who Is Not A Leader still looked in doubt, but Merrick had phoned her at 8 a.m to say he was willing to meet up again at midday.

The Riad Bahja, like most riads in the Medina, was an unlikely cross between a B&B and a palace. Two storeys housed eight apartments which were built around an ornately tiled central courtyard. The courtyard contained a stone fountain (apparently inoperative), two small orange trees, which looked artificial but weren’t, and some wicker chairs. Stained glass in all the gothic arched windows, and plush Moorish furniture and fittings, completed the appearance of period opulence. As August crossed the courtyard to knock on Damian’s door, she wanted to believe all this stuff was historically authentic but she knew nothing could be further from the truth. Just as the modern British pub is encrusted with reproduction sepia photographs and fake horse brasses from some pub furnishings warehouse in Slough, so this gorgeous place with its Arabian Knights exoticism, was - like most things on early 21st Century Earth - just an illusion. August knew (thanks to her Rough Guide) that what seemed centuries-old was probably no more than a decade old. Since the early 1990s money had poured into Marrakech from foreign investors and property developers. Crumbling, neglected town houses were converted into the Westerner’s dream of tasteful Arabic ostentation, and even by the mid-90s you could still buy a palace in Marrakech for the price of a studio flat in Battersea. This was why it had been relatively easy for the KUU Foundation to get permission to flatten a

sizeable chunk of abandoned real estate and build the KUU Tripod.

While some locals and a liberal contingent of expats mourned the destruction of a whole neighbourhood, the Moroccan government just saw Big Money upfront, and Big Money from future tourism. However they did allegedly take the largest back-hander in Morocco's history to get the city to bypass a ruling made in 1985 that no building, unless it was a mosque, could exceed the height of the tallest palm tree. But, like everywhere else, Marrakech wanted desperately to become a part of the future (despite its pride in its past) and there was no better way to do that than to have an instantly recognisable piece of cutting-edge architecture redefining its skyline.

"I want to show you something," said August, with girlish glee, as she stood on the threshold of Damian's room. She was determined to dispel any lingering notions of fustiness he might have been harbouring about her from the previous night. Damian was about to rub some sleep from his eyes when he found his hand in her hand, and his bare feet following hers up the short run of stone steps to the roof.

"I've already asked them if we can have our breakfast up here. You won't believe the view."

"Nice."

"Nice? Just nice?"

"I'm not really a morning person, August. Maybe it'll be 'fucking amazing' once I've had a coffee or two."

They sat down and within moments had coffee and pastries placed in front of them. August was simultaneously impressed and embarrassed that Damian had wasted no time in obliquely referring to her comments the previous night on his swearing. She changed the subject. "You haven't told me your thoughts on the suicides."

She was pleased that Damian immediately sat forward in his chair, all previous concerns forgotten, and began to get stuck in to what was obviously his favourite subject of the moment. "Do you know what freaks me out the most? That each victim used the *exact* same handgun – a Smith and Wesson, Model 340 revolver. It's a tiny gun, J-frame, less than four inches in length..."

"But it does the job," interrupted August, curtailing Damian's depressingly enthusiastic reporting on the gun's 'spec.'

"It's also weird that each gun had *two* empty chambers and not just one..."

"Why so?"

"Oh come on, August, keep up! Usually only one shot is fired when someone shoots themselves in the head."

“Sorry, yes, of course. But where did you hear about the empty chambers? I knew it was the same gun, but...”

“Oh, you know, websites. Maybe it’s all bullshit – there’s always conspiracy theories with something like this. But it’s a very odd thing for someone to make up. Most conspiracy theories go somewhere; they have their own internal logic, they make some kind of sense. But this just...” Damian threw up his hands in a vague gesture of defeat. “And no suicide notes. Not one of them left a suicide note. I checked up on the statistical likelihood of that, and found out that in Canada and Mexico, for example, between 15% and 37% of people leave notes. In the elderly it goes up to almost 50%. Another site recorded that in Hungary, New Zealand, and Sweden figures were between 10% and 43%. So, although it’s not as high as I might have guessed, it’s a lot higher than zero.”

“You have been doing your homework.” August patted Damian’s hand.

He tried to disguise the pleasure he felt at getting her approval by wolfing down the last of the cinnamon pastries while simultaneously telling her what else he’d found out. “Yeah, well... thank Google not me. But it tells us that, statistically speaking, at least a couple of these victims should have left notes. And there’s been very few statements from family and friends either. I think the father of the nineteen-year-old in Tokyo just said his son was a good kid and loved his football and computer games - plus, of course, all the usual stuff about it being a complete shock.”

“What we can do is look into the background of the Marrakech victim, Malika... something or other.”

Damian brushed crumbs from his shirt front. Now she was casually referring to them as a team, he was even keener to impress her. “Let’s see if we can find an address for the poor kid on the KUU Foundation website.”

Although August was touched by his enthusiasm she still needed to know more about him before letting her guard down.

“So anyway, Damian. Are you a practising KUUist?”

Damian’s eyebrows rose and he lent back in his chair slightly, as if dodging a passing wasp. But he quickly composed himself. “What the fuck’s a practising KUUist? There are no rules to obey, no substances to not eat or not drink, no rituals to fit into your weekly diary...”

“Just testing,” interjected August, pleased to have hit a nerve. “But what about the Eleven Non-Commandments?”

“Well, it’s all good stuff isn’t it? Who could argue with any of it:

you can laugh; you can doubt - just those two non-commandments alone strike at the very heart of every other religion. Laughter and doubt; two things which make us human yet are conspicuously absent from, or frowned upon in....”

“I’ll take that as a yes then,” said August, smiling.

“Okay, I see where you’re coming from. You were just wondering how seriously I take The KUU. In that case, I suppose I’d have to say... pretty seriously.”

Suddenly Damian looked vaguely uncomfortable, embarrassed even. August felt sorry she had pushed him into having to defend his non-faith. KUUists are always on a tightrope of spider’s silk. But the *passionate* KUUist is close to being a walking contradiction. Over the past decade KUU sects had sprung up which wilfully reinterpreted and distorted the philosophy of The KUU Hypothesis, the most prominent being the Coup KUUists, the Doubting Doubters, and the So & Sos (The Solipsistic Socialists, or the SS to their detractors). They shared the view that there was a great deal of wisdom in The KUU Hypothesis but that its apparent open-mindedness actually veiled a deeply conservative faith-based subtext. They interpreted non-commandments such as, ‘You can doubt’ as meaning, you *can* doubt - *but under the weight of all the KUU evidence it would be ludicrous to do so*. They also used the enigma of the Third Near Proof to go that extra step towards being the complete antithesis of KUUism as most people understood it.

August recounted some stories she’d heard about the Coup KUUists and Damian laughed. The convivial atmosphere was restored.

“Yeah, they’re absolute nutjobs. For one thing they place most of their hopes on the missing Third Near Proof.”

“Putting all your eggs in a basket that probably doesn’t even exist, is never a good idea.”

“Exactly. Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Yes I do. Sorry.”

“No problem.” Damian quickly returned his tobacco and papers to his canvas shoulder bag. “Look, when I reread The KUU Hypothesis - obviously I’d read it in my teens, everybody does - I realised, as an artist, that I’d let myself down. I’d suffered from failure of the imagination. It takes guts to take onboard some of that stuff. But if you don’t go along for the ride then you’re just a victim of a culture which has annihilated your ability to think ‘outside the box’ as they say. So where do you stand on all this?”

Like most journalists, August didn't like having the tables turned on her. But she knew it would happen sooner or later, so she was ready with an answer.

"It amuses me."

"Okay..."

"Okay, what?"

"Just, okay."

Damian's camera made him a far greedier consumer of form, colour, incident and detail than he ever was when he wasn't taking photographs: as he focused the lens, the lens focused him. As he stretched up, crouched down or swung around, his eye revelled in every confusing refraction of sunlight in the dazzling concourse, delighting in the incidental ambiguities he was able to make new pictorial sense of – and then with a perfectly timed, whirring click – freeze in time. He found his senses further disorientated by the fact they weren't used to computing a triangular space; both horizontally and vertically. Even the floors were made of reinforced glass so that, as you looked up, you could see the progress of peoples feet making their kinetic patterns everywhere. Damian felt it was like being in a computer simulation of a building rather than the real building itself. He trained his camera on anything and everything as he followed August across towards Security.

As Barney Merrick watched their progress on one of a hundred CCTV monitors, his hand curled slowly into a fist. But he managed to stop himself from bringing it down hard on the desk in front of him.

Extract from the KUU Hypothesis by Zachary Bekele

The liberating certainty of uncertainty

I will not be pushing the KUU Hypothesis with the usual passionate conviction that accompanies a new manifesto, for the simple reason that passionate conviction is one of the human inclinations that the KUU Hypothesis questions. The KUU is the third option (the KUU is generally the third option, as you

will learn) between the dual proposals of scientific truth and religious faith, which are our paradoxical life-support systems. I am an idealist who doesn't believe in ideologies. My only passionate conviction is that passionate conviction is dangerous.

Vagueness as a virtue

I will therefore resist the blinkered bloody mindedness and rampant egotism that seems necessary to get new ideas accepted, adopted, or discussed, because the very nature of this non-religion ('non-religion' because the dictionary defines a religion as a *belief*) is that it shouldn't be blindly believed in. Its vagueness and uncertainty are in fact its main virtues. However I will sometimes assume the mantle and forceful tone of the preacher - or if you prefer, the scientist - but this will be for rhetorical purposes only. So I'll start - as expectations dictate that I should - by proclaiming:

The ideas in this book have the potential to save the world! Etc etc, Amen!

Not bad. Now all I have to do is deliver.

men will be boys London. May 1972

This book is really *for* Zac as much as being about him, God rest his soul. But it's more of a tribute than a biography: if you want all the anorak minutia then look elsewhere; there's countless biographies out there by callow young hacks who weren't even born when Zachary B was at his peak. They no doubt list every tour and record, every group member and groupie, but they won't tell you about the *real* Zachary B. Phil Kirby's *Zachary B - Man and Myth-maker* isn't bad (at least Kirby interviewed Zac once or twice), but avoid *The Star Guru* by Ray Gunner, *Rock God, Stone Idol* by James Renton and *Sects &*

Drugs & Rock & Roll by Dominic Barker: they're inexcusably exploitative and full of schoolboy errors (everyone knows Bowie didn't play Stylophone on *Do the Rocket!*)

So... in the beginning was the Warhol-meets-flower-power 'happening' on the South Bank in the summer of 1967. I was up in London for the day with a couple of schoolmates and we were handed this screen-printed flier. As far as I recall, Zac was one of about six acts, only two of which were singers. The Small Wonders were a troupe of dwarves dressed as astronauts whose act consisted entirely of throwing a large inflatable silver moon to each other, then there was some skinny mime artist doing the usual invisible wall stuff, and last but not least, nothing could have prepared me for the prepared piano played by a naked woman painted to look like a clouded blue sky (her act was prematurely cut short by some passing bobbies.) Eventually a disorientated-looking Zachary Bekele strolled onto the stage with an acoustic guitar. Vocally he was somewhere between Scott Walker and Marvin Gaye, although he wasn't yet confident enough to live up to either of those lofty comparisons. His long thick hair was tied back in Native American plait and he was wearing a purple velvet tunic brass-buttoned-up to the neck, and vibrantly clashing scarlet loons. His songs already mixed strong melodies with funky riffs, despite only having a half-asleep percussionist and a double-bassist as back up. He went down well, although it helped that the other acts were either pretentious nonsense or just plain run-of-the-mill nonsense. I even kept the flier, feeling sure I'd come across his name again. A year later he'd become Zachary B: he was shrewd enough to realise that in Britain an unpronounceable foreign name would have been the kiss of death, commercially speaking. But Zac was proud of his Ethiopian roots and so didn't pick some new sparkling name at random. He just kept his initial and to let it be B. And so his name still sounds cool today in its graffiti-friendly, hip-hop brevity. Here's a snippet of pop trivia that isn't in any of the other biographies: Zachary's English mother chose his first name. He once told me (with a mixture of pride and ironic detachment) that it was Hebrew and meant 'remembered by God.'

From the earliest interviews it was clear that Zac had a keen intellect, which makes pop music an odd career choice. But of course our lives often choose us, rather than the other way around. He once said of his childhood, 'I was a bookworm as well as a rock'n'roller, so CS Lewis and Jerry Lee Lewis were of equal importance.' It was obviously a well practised line but the sentiment still rang true.

When I first pitched an interview to Jake I claimed that - like the rest of the *Rock On* staff - I was indifferent to Zachary B's disconcertingly funky and insidiously commercial style. I just thought he had *something*. Jake saw through my ruse but nevertheless indulged me. These were desperate times.

Rock On folded in 1984, so I'm not going to hold back in telling the truth about the paper. I never even spoke to the editor, Nick Hyde (or was it Hider?) in all the years I was writing for them. I just remember a ruddy lump of a man with a toothbrush's worth of pigmentless hair in each rosy ear, occasionally glimpsed when his office door was ajar. As for the rest of them, Jake was okay, but the others suffered from the kind of self-importance which paranoia feeds on. Opinions weren't formed by open-mindedly listening to the band in question, they were formed by covertly finding out what their colleagues or even their readers thought. Perhaps they'd have followed their gut instincts if they'd had any guts, but they didn't. I sometimes wondered who in the music press *did* stick their neck out in the first place, to create the thumbs up or thumbs down which they would then all go along with. A typical office conversation:

"You don't *really* like Wizzard do you, Paul?" Barney would say incredulously, nonchalantly twiddling his biro.

"Yeah, they're okay. Roy Wood's a good songwriter and their singles are epic." I'd reply, trying not to sound defensive.

Andy had to then weigh up Roy Wood's credibility score (*plus-points for being in the Move, minus-points for dressing like a Zulu scarecrow and being on Top of the Pops*) to decide if he would side with me or take up his usual position of backing-up Barney: when it comes to music, men will be boys until the day they die.

But the real irony was how few people read *Rock On* anyway. Let me put it like this. It was the most independent of all the rock rags - and this was *before* independent was the buzzword for trendy and cutting edge. Back then it just meant *you had no money*. BZ (Before Zac) the only way you could have got a more obscure music paper than *Rock On* was by writing it yourself and just handing it out to your friends. So you could say (and damn it, I *am* saying it) I rolled up just in time to save their sorry arses. In retrospect, I realise I was taken on so that Barney and Andy didn't have to go and suck up to the Pop Ponce of the Month. But having taken the plunge with Zachary B, Jake decided he wanted two-thousand words: if *Rock On* was going to have this pretentious pansy in its hallowed pages, then he wanted something in return. And so Zac got the cover and *Rock On* suffered an unprecedented and deeply unsettling doubling of its circulation,

which was only the beginning of its tragic downward spiral towards commercial viability.

And then there I was; outside Zachary B's Powis Square basement flat. This time when the buzzer buzzed I took the Pavlovian nudge and pushed open the door. Thick velvet curtains shut out what little daylight might have otherwise crept in. Further visual disorientation was created by numerous candles on every available surface, creating the illusion of a low-slung miniature galaxy of flickering stars. As my eyes acclimatised I realised I was in a picturesquely cluttered, unusually long room. Moroccan rugs covered the floor and walls, the whole of one wall seemed built out of LPs, and African masks made threatening eye contact from the darkest corners. Several busting-at-the-seams bookshelves name-dropped Golding, Huxley, Jung, and Camus. And more prosaically, a Flying V leant against a Marshall amplifier, and a partially dismembered drum kit seemed to be trying to escape from a walk-in cupboard.

I was so busy making sure I didn't knock over any candles or crush any esoteric artefacts underfoot, that I didn't realise there were people at the far end of the room. A flashgun flared and the words 'five minutes' were apologetically fired at me by a suddenly silhouetted hunchback. Then a main light went on and this gothic vision turned into a photographer struggling with a malevolently misbehaving tripod. To his right was Zachary B, reclining on a mass of cushions and playing the exotic foreign prince for all it was worth. The photographer gave up on the tripod and resumed his photographer's dance in a semicircle around him.

Years later I realised that at moments like this Zac was most in his element: when he was being worshipped just for *being* - for exuding Zachary B-ness as a Platonic absolute - rather than having to speak, talk, sing or do anything else the rest of us have to do in this world to make our presence felt. For most of us there is a dismaying disjuncture between our wonderful complex souls and our lumpy, deeply compromised physical selves. But not for Zachary. Zachary knew that if his soul could be as transcendent as his physical beauty, he would be perfect. I watched fascinated as he pushed an errant curl from his forehead while letting others take their rococo course down the side of his face: he was his own sculptor, making last minute adjustments before the camera caught the finished masterpiece.

Well, not *finished* exactly because Zachary B was always a work in progress. One minute the predatory sex god, the next, the androgynous siren (luring innocent seafaring teenagers to their deaths

on his jagged rock.) Then his Gibson Les Paul played a supporting role for a few shots, becoming a machinegun aimed at the camera (don't mess with Zac!), a hugged stand-in for the female form (Zac has a sensitive side too!), and then finally a between-the-legs phallus (so the older girls could giggle at the crude symbolism while teasing the younger girls for 'not getting it.') The cleansing white light of the flashbulb blessed each transformation, turning it into a future iconic image for thousands of pastel-pink bedrooms across the land.

"Could you do something more interesting with your hands?" the photographer implored, knowing he was pushing his luck.

"I could wrap them around your neck," came back Zachary's deadpan response. "Seriously though, you must have captured my soul by now."

I was actually grateful rather than irritated by the delaying of my interview. It gave me more time to acclimatise to the thinner, headier atmosphere of Planet Zachary B. During this photo session, I studied Zachary as a zoologist might study an exquisite endangered species. Beauty is often found in the unusual or the different - it's the model with the asymmetrical smile you remember - so I looked for Zachary's flaws. I would discover years later that his strong features were commonplace in his father's Ethiopia: the deep-well depths of those almost-black eyes and that clearly defined bone structure would have gone unremarked upon in a land where everyone glides along the dusty streets as if they are catwalks. But here - in this moment and in this place - Zachary was otherworldly. Beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder, it also depends on where the beheld and the beholder come from.

However it was a close thing for Zachary: this was the guiltlessly racist 1970s. But because his mixed blood tempered his Ethiopian physiognomy, narrowing his nose and thinning his lips, giving him a safer, more Mediterranean look, the dude could *pass*, as they used to say. In fact Zac once confessed that, as a child, he'd removed a plaster from a grazed knee and noticed how pleasingly pale the revealed skin was. From that moment on he dreamt of covering himself from head to toe in sticking plasters so that he could then tear them away, one by one, to be reborn with the paper-white skin of his school friends. Yes, beauty is also in the eye of the dominant culture.

Eventually the photographer stopped begging for more time and packed away his stuff. As he did so, Zachary asked him questions about his family, but didn't seem to listen to the school sports day anecdotes that followed. Eventually the photographer gave a funny little curtsy and backed awkwardly out of the room.

Zac carefully put down his guitar, as if it was a baby rather than a musical instrument, and then collapsed back into his cushion ocean. He raised a heavily banged arm in order to signal that I should sit down beside him.

“*Rock On* - am I right? You were a little early...”

“Er... Yes. Sorry, was I?” I wrestled my portable cassette recorder from my bag.

I was so nervous. Although Zac wasn't yet huge, a couple of TV appearances had created something of a buzz. But I was ahead of the game: I had the now hugely collectable 1968 debut single *Niagara Falls Again*. One revisionist critic recently described it as ‘a taut slice of proto-punk.’ But even I conceded that its lo-fi credentials were more an accidental by-product of a cheap four-track studio, than Zac uncannily anticipating the punk sound of the late70s. I shakily pressed down the two square buttons: “*Play and Record.*” I didn't think I'd said it aloud, but Zac's laughter told me otherwise.

“Are you sure you know how to operate that thing?”

“Er... yes. Yeah. Of course.”

“Sorry about all that photo session nonsense. Part of a day's work at the moment. All very tedious.”

Before I could answer, a strikingly beautiful black woman appeared in a billowing white trouser suit, carrying a tray on which were three glasses and a bottle. A Siamese cat was following her, but then it changed its mind and trotted back out again. The tidy ropes of hair elaborately piled high on her head miraculously remained in place as she placed the tray on the floor in front of us. She was almost as extraordinary looking as Zac. It was as if an inspired sculptor had boldly sliced off both her clay cheeks with a pallet knife in order to create the most aerodynamically honed face I'd ever seen. She gave me a brilliant white smile, introduced herself as Jody, and then knelt down by Zac's other side. To my horror, I found myself blushing at the thought that I didn't deserve to be breathing the same air as these two higher beings. But they were fortunately too preoccupied with each other to notice.

“What *have* you done to your hair? And your eyeliner's all smudged!” She talked to Zac as if he were a child, not giving him time to respond, fussing with his clothes, and gently chastising him for messing up all the fine tuning she'd done on his appearance before the shoot. When she had finished attending to Zac as if he were a flower arrangement, she offered me a limp hand to shake, and those honed cheeks to pretend to kiss. I think I got through the ritual without seeming too gauche.

“Nice to meet you, Paul. I’m afraid it’s been a pretty crazy day - but then that’s not unusual at the moment.”

Was she African or West Indian? There was a trace of American in her accent too. She went over to the huge stereogram (its coffin-like appearance enhanced by those ubiquitous candles) and slipped the as-yet-to-be-released *An Eye For An Eye* from its paper inner sleeve before handing me the gatefold cover. It was indescribably thrilling to be hearing it before anyone else, and possibly because of this it has remained my favourite Zachary B album to this day. And the *sound* that that stereogram had! Many times I failed to adjust the crude treble and bass knobs on my own cheap deck to replicate it.

As the conversation became more relaxed in direct relation to the amount of rum we drank, I found out that Jody was in fact from Jamaica via America. I also found out that Jody had her own fashion business, and that Jody had done most of the interior decoration in the flat herself, and that Jody... well, you get the picture. I was keen to talk to Zac about the new album but Jody seemed to think I was there to interview *her* rather than Zac. Not in a bad way, I hasten to add. She was simply more comfortable talking to strangers than he was. Although eventually I came to realise that Jody was Zac’s filter system: she worked out who could be trusted and who couldn’t. And Zac clearly adored her, and had no problem with her holding court while he doodled away on the guitar and occasionally interjected.

“Last month Zac took me to the Bahamas to celebrate our third year together. We were thinking Paris - where we met - but Paris is a bit predictable, don’t you rthink?” She paused to light a Pall Mall. “What was the name of that club again, Zac? The one Mick Jagger goes to?”

Zac shrugged. But she wasn’t expecting him to answer anyway.

“Do you know something, Paul? I didn’t even know who he was - Zac, I mean - but you liked that didn’t you, baby?” She looked over to Zac. This time an answer was expected.

“I wasn’t that well-known then anyway, so...”

“Zac played me one or two of his tunes, but I can’t say I was that impressed.” Jody laughed a warm open laugh, her head thrown back. “But I like what you’re doing now, sweetheart,” she added quickly, patting his knee and smiling conspiratorially at me.

Eventually Jody left us alone and I finally got to ask Zac about the new album, his influences, and all the other stuff that we music anoraks find so desperately important.

“We did the album at a great little studio just outside Paris. We wanted Visconti producing but we ended up with this new guy, Justin Hammond who, fortunately, got where I was coming from and we laid down the basic tracks in just two weeks. Then it took just six weeks to add strings and overdubs - like the elephant noises in the middle of *Ghost Lover*.”

“Elephant noises?”

“We ran them backwards. Very spooky in a pachydermic kind of way.”

“How do you see yourself in relation to say, Bowie or the Sweet?”

“The Sweet!” Zac recoiled in horror. “Builders dressed as princesses, and they don’t even write their own stuff! Bowie’s cool. He’ll be around for a while. But we’ve got more edge than any of them.”

“But you wear the platform boots, the makeup; you’re playing the game too...”

“We have to sell records,” Zac replied flatly. He seemed momentarily taken aback by my rum-fuelled front, but hid it well. “But we’re not *really* glam now, are we?” It was clever the way he always turned the question back on me; flattering me that I was intelligent enough to work the answer out for myself. But then he’d give me his answer anyway. “Look, my roots are in Stax, the Stooges, The Stones, and African music - you can’t get more rock ‘n’ roll than African music, now, can you? But this is a business. You do what you’ve gotta do...”

“Including dressing in women's clothes?”

“Come now, Paul. I expected more from you than that.” Zac ran his hand down the length of his red satin jacket as if he were stroking a cat. “Are you threatened by all this then, Paul? Of course you’re not. I enjoy dressing up. You should try it sometime.”

I changed the subject. “You’re from Chelmsford, aren’t you? Don’t you take any inspiration from any British bands?”

“I was *born* in Chelmsford - but what does that mean? I’m a half-caste. My mother, bless her, still lives there. And of course some of my influences are English. The Stones, The Kinks. But we’re about soul music from Saturn, vibes from Venus!”

We were back to the rehearsed script. But I was thrilled that, as far as I knew, this was the first time Zachary had made public the fact he was mixed race. Intentionally or unintentionally he’d given me an exclusive.

We talked for about another hour before Zachary’s concentration began to falter.

“I know it’s one of those awful, unanswerable questions, Zac, but what inspires you?”

“What inspires me?”

“I only ask because I know you won’t give me a predictable answer.”

“Well now you’ve set me up for a fall...”

“I’m sorry, I’m new to all this...”

“Don’t panic, I’m only teasing. It’s not so much a case of being *inspired* as being receptive. When artists say they are inspired by a woman or a landscape or something - do you know what? I don’t believe them. Or rather, I don’t believe they’re a real artist.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it’s not as *direct* as that. Music always feels to me like it comes from a third place. . .”

“Now you’re really losing me...”

“Look, if you’re any good at what you do, especially with, say, art or music, it shouldn’t be that hard to do it. The idea of the struggling artist – apart from in a financial sense - is bullshit. It just flows out of you, or through you. I’ve sometimes only worked out what a song was about years after I wrote it. The point is it doesn’t seem to come directly from me.”

“So you’re saying it’s some kind of divine inspiration?”

“Your words not mine. All I know is I rarely feel a part of the process when it’s going well, but painfully part of the process when it isn’t.”

“So what do you believe, spiritually speaking?”

“I believe it’s time this interview came to an end.” Zac hand-signalled for me to turn off the cassette machine. “It’s getting late my young friend. And that’s a very big subject. But it’s been a pleasure. “

He scrutinised me, narrowing his eyes. “I like you, man. We’ll do this again.” Then he seemed to become confused, looking about himself, like an old man in need of his nurse. “Jody. *Jody!* Can you show our young friend here out?”

Jody instantly reappeared, as I struggled up from the quicksand of cushions. I bent to receive a gentle handshake from Zac, who remained semi-reclined. Jody showed me to the door.

“I hope you got what you came for, Mr Coleridge.”

I detected a veiled note of aggression in her voice. I was disappointed that after such a pleasant evening I was still being treated as a potential adversary.

“Well I didn’t come here for anything, Jody,” I replied, still emboldened by alcohol. “...Apart from a good interview.”

I needed her to know that her tone hadn't gone unnoticed. She seemed taken aback by my impassioned response. "No, of course not. I'm sorry, Mr..."

"Paul. Call me Paul – you have been all evening."

"Yes, Paul. Sorry, Paul." She nervously put escaped ropes of hair back under ornate hairclips. "You have to understand that Zac doesn't have a great relationship with the media. You know how they like to pigeonhole everything. Most of our attempts to get them to just come to a gig have been ignored."

"Yes, it pisses me off too," I said, thinking of *Rock On*.

"Just one live review in *Sounds* and two single reviews in *Melody Maker* is not much to show for over three years of trying to generate press. If it wasn't for the airplay we'd have given up by now."

"Look, Jody," I began, straightening my back, instantly finding myself comfortable in my new role as Zachary B's champion. "Hopefully that's all going to change now. Get Zac to make an announcement at Sunday's Roundhouse gig telling them all to buy next week's *Rock On*. That alone will triple their sales and then they'll be eating out of your hand."

She looked at me with a mixture of mild astonishment and lingering suspicion. I knew what she was thinking, so I quickly added, "Yes, I know *Rock On* hasn't shown the least bit of interest in Zac up until now, but the-times-they-are-a-changing. They're beginning to realise which side their bread's buttered on."

Her tensed features softened and she laughed. "Yes, I like that - which side their bread is buttered on! Well thank you, Paul." She seemed to look at me with new eyes: Was this the same nervous young man she'd met for the first time earlier this evening? The funny thing was, *this me*, was a new me to me too. Yes, it was partly the drink and the excitement, but I also felt a seismic shift had occurred in my personality. I turned back to see Jody's elegant silhouette giving me a graceful, cheery wave from the door she still held slightly ajar.

I floated back to Westbourne Park Station. Even some verbal abuse from a group of dead-eyed skinheads (*Get yer 'air cut yer fuckin' poof!*) couldn't wipe the stupid grin from my face. I couldn't believe my own chutzpah! I had gone from nervous first-time interviewer to single-minded media champion of Zachary B, in the space of just a few hours, and I felt entirely comfortable in my new glowing skin.

The iced air magnified my tipsiness and by the time I got back to Peckham, I felt stupidly drunk. Even when sober, mounting the creaky stairs up to my third-floor room without disturbing the landlord, was

dauntingly difficult. Mr Koumi, a sallow Greek Cypriot who owned the hairdressers on the ground floor, hated any noise after ten, and it was well past midnight. I usually took off my platform shoes before ascending, but in my less than lucid state I forgot. I was rewarded for this heinous crime by the frightening vision of Koumi, all chest hair and pickled egg eyes, scowling at me from his doorway.

“How many times! How many blood times! Show a bit of consideration, boy. You know I’m in bed by nine, what with my back and everything!”

“Sorry Mr Koumi. Shoes - I forgot to take my shoes off.”

“I can see that! I don’t know how you can walk in those bloody things!”

He retreated back into his flat, cursing multilingually, slamming the door behind him.

How different the brutally lit interior of my room looked to me now, compared to this morning when I’d left it. Then it had simply been my reality. But since languishing in Zac and Jody’s cushioned and candlelit wonderland, my rented wallpaper (vertical waves of chewing-gum pink, French-mustard yellow, and dogshit brown) pressed in on me from all sides with malevolent force. Surely I deserved better than this?

Mr Koumi’s cat, Demis (named after Demis Roussos) was curled up at the end of my meanly narrow bed. He slowly lifted his ginger head in greeting. I sat down next to him and rubbed him under the chin. Then, concentrating fiercely, I spooned out a couple of globs of Kitikat on to a saucer before passing out on the bed.

The next morning I was eased out of sleep by the intermittent buzzing of my faulty two-bar electric fire. A white rum hangover is a rum thing indeed - even my eye sockets ached. But nothing could take the edge off the excitement I felt as the memories of the previous day came skipping back. I lay there for an hour staring at the white stippled ceiling (the only relief from the haranguing wallpaper) smiling to myself. I couldn’t believe how much time Zac had given me - two C90’s worth. Eventually I got up, and heaved my prehistoric typewriter onto my bedside table which doubled as a desk, and pressed Rewind followed by Play on my cassette recorder.

Jake was so pleased with my interview (“Blimey, who’d have thought he was a darkie!”) that he wanted me to expand it. Some American singer-songwriter had cancelled a UK trip and so there was a page that needed filling. Why didn’t I go and have a word with Zac’s manager Nick Valentine?

“Crisp?” As a concession to good manners Nick Valentine lowered his feet from his desk as he proffered an almost empty bag of Golden Wonders.

People say don’t trust someone whose eyes are too close together, but what if they’re too far apart? Valentine’s eyes also bulged slightly, making him look simultaneously bovine and reptilian in his purple three-piece suit. “The single’s doing great - no thanks to you guys.”

My albatross of a hangover made me uncharacteristically blunt in reply. “Hey, don’t tar us all with the same brush.”

“Whatever you say, kid. Anyway, if the airplay keeps up it’ll be Top Ten by the end of the month. Then there’s a UK tour in January to coincide with the second album...” He drew the last life from a cigar before vigorously stubbing it out in the onyx ashtray on his desk. Then resuming his default position; feet back on desk, hands clamped behind his head like a sunbather. A blond in a blousy top and Day-Glo pink mini skirt flounced in, put a pile of post on his desk, and then flounced out again. “Have we sent you the album yet?”

“No, but Jody played it to me when...”

“The forty-piece orchestra on the title track will blow your mind! We just need some good press from the right people to seal the deal, if you get my drift.”

I ignored his spiel. “So who is the real Zachary B?” As soon as the words were out, I realised my question was as clichéd as all the guff he’d been spouting. Valentine didn’t even try to conceal his boredom.

“Don’t let all that peace-and-love bullshit fool you. He’s focused and ruthlessly ambitious. He *needs* fame even more than he needs money.”

I was surprised by the unflattering picture Valentine painted of the man he was supposed to be promoting. My next question sounded even more naive. “But surely the music’s the most important thing?”

“Sure, kid, the music’s important...” Valentine repeatedly stabbed the stud of his ball-point pen into his desktop, in-and-out, in-and-out. He was clearly born bored and needed the heightened reality of the music business just so to feel *something*. “Don’t get me wrong though, kid: the guy *lives* to play. But if you’re that talented you want people to hear you - it comes with the territory.”

And so it continued in fits and starts for another half hour. Valentine was clearly relieved when I said I’d got all I needed. But just as I was leaving he brightened up. “Hey, kid.” (this ‘kid’ thing was intensely irritating; he was from Canvey Island not Coney Island!) “Anytime you want to interview Zac, just call. He was on the

phone earlier saying how well yesterday went. And Zac's not an easy man to please. *Rock 'n' Roll!*"

"Er, yeah. Rock and roll."

He was about to say something else when both phones rang simultaneously. He reached for another cigar before answering either of them.

Extract from the KUU Hypothesis by Zachary Bekele

Entertainment as enlightenment

The central idea of the KUU Hypothesis is that a connection can be cultivated between **The Knowing Unknowable Universe** and the receptive 'entertainer of the possibility' on Earth. By entertaining the possibility that unexplainable events such as coincidences are in fact cosmic nudges from the KUU, we will in turn be entertained, enlightened, and also increase the chances of more of these events occurring.

The evangelical agnostic

If you are reading this you are probably a sceptic rather than a believer. Believers already have their holy instruction manuals and would have little use for this ragbag of deliberately uncommitted musings. But if you *are* a believer, forgive me for underestimating you. I'm part evangelical agnostic and part woolly-minded fantasist myself.

A born again questioner

I'd like to pre-empt your suspicions that KUUism is like all the other spaced-out home-made religions you have encountered. All the events and ideas relayed here are grounded in reality in all its deceptively banal details. I am just a born-again questioner with a novel interpretation of the facts.

Everything is remarkable

If something seems to defy the laws of physics it is no more or less fantastic to a child than the sight of ripples

spreading on a pond from where a thrown stone has landed. The child has no sense of what *should* be possible: the dropped toy could just as easily float away as fall to the ground. The function of education is to prevent every wide-eyed child from becoming a wide-eyed mystic.