

Origins and Descents

(A Novel in Two Paces)

Chapter 1

1.1

They tell you there are stars when it happens. Never mind the intervening elements, like branches and leaves, and yes, headstones looming lofty on the hill alongside if you're lying supine in context. But I don't remember the stars from the outset. I do remember the leprechaun, however, pirouetting and whirling like a grinning dervish on the grave of Asa Gray, which, my mind informed me, afforded me a current locus in Mount Auburn Cemetery. Then the clouds parted and the stars appeared, braided into a necklace that gleamed off white and all of a sudden there was a throat and a face besides. I blinked and took in lips widening from apprehension to relief.

"You're not Asa Gray?" I blurted out, then remarked a silent 'daft one, she's the wrong sex.'

She shook her head. She didn't resemble the leprechaun either. And I wasn't in Mount Auburn Cemetery but on a four-poster bed with the covers back and me in pyjamas that were not familiar. Doubtless there had been an undressing, doubtless a...

She shook her head again, and the smile played with the softest touch of mischief. "Not to worry. It's all very virginal yet."

Damn, I thought. Nice accent. English. Thames side. All the same who the dickens was...

"Thelma," she said, anticipating again. "Cunningham."

"Oh, er...Jo.."

"I know your name." That smile again.

"Thank you. I'm flattered. Did you look at my license? Where am I?"

"271 Clarendon Street. Back Bay. Why did you say Asa Gray? Not that I'm surprised."

"You're not?"

"Well, considering what you did at O' Sullivans.

That was it. O'Sullivan's was an increasingly yuppie pub in Southie that I visited every year for St. Patty's. 5 years on the trot and counting. There was a great band this time, lots of Irish fiddle, the inevitable dirge, a call to mind of Danny Boy and progressive inebriation until, until....

"...you stood on the table and declared that you would give your life for three brothers or nine cousins, even if the mathematics was wrong. Then you collapsed and I knew I'd found you."

"I didn't recall being lost." I blinked again and my eyes hardened in some suspicion. "What do you mean?"

"I've been looking for you," she said patiently. "They said you'd gone incommunicado for a bit, that it was natural for you to do so every so often, and that you'd surface eventually with three new papers on punctuated equilibrium. Then your colleague Ahmed Khan, (I grimaced) suggested that I might try O' Sullivan's on St. Patrick's. So I did, and you obliged so magnificently, doing Haldane to the crossed t. I couldn't have scripted it better. A virtuoso performance, I might add."

"Why are you looking for me?"

"Because you're the possible key to the greatest mystery in evolutionary biology, you nitwit."

Such familiarity! I did a quick mental cost-benefit analysis and realized, not for the first time that in sum, a fetching face was entitled.

"Please elaborate. I gather you're in the field yourself."

"I'm a populariser of natural science based out of Oxford. You know, school of Dawkins, although I think he's stuffy. You haven't heard of me, not yet anyway, I don't have any nifty attributed concepts like 'the selfish gene' or 'the extended phenotype' but I'm getting there. And you're going to help me."

"Me?" I blanched, as much as my complexion would allow.

"Yep."

“How?”

She looked at me archly. “Blyth.”

1.2

“So you’re telling me,” I spluttered over the coffee that she had obligingly provided and just as obligingly scalded, “that when I was out for the count, you lied at O’ Sullivan’s that I was with you, hauled me into your car, drove me to your bed and breakfast place, deposited me in the lift, dragged me to your bed, undressed me, put me into pyjamas and left coffee on the boil until I woke up, and all because you wanted to ask me about Edward Blyth? What in Heaven’s name could have possessed you to go through that rigmarole? Why didn’t you just try the telephone?”

“I did,” she said simply. “And reached Ahmed Khan. He didn’t have your mobile.”

“I don’t have a mobile,” I muttered, then with some lameness, “alright, it’s unlisted.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said briskly. “The point is Blyth. What’s the scoop?”

“Are you a populariser of evolutionary biology or an investigative journalist?” I asked with some suspicion.

“A bit of both,” she said and the necklace seemed to grin. “Are you going to the Black Hole?”

“You mean Calcutta?”

She shrugged.

“Because your history’s wrong. He got there 84 years later.”

“Fine.” The exasperation was evident. “This is what is important, though. Did he get it first?”

“What?”

“Natural selection.”

“Eiseley would like to believe so.”

She snorted. “Oh, come. No one takes Eiseley with any sense of seriousness.”

“Are you baiting me? I do.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“I read your article.”

“I’m surprised. Pleasantly, of course. I thought the Norwich Naturalists’ Newsletter took the cake for obscurity.”

“Here’s the thing. Wallace is in South-East Asia. Bates is off to South America. Darwin’s sitting on this mine of information post the Beagle, and rearing pigeons. And all the while, Blyth is curating animals at the Asiatic Society of Bengal and musing on how selection might work. You said it yourself when you mentioned his paper of 1835.” She rummaged through a stack of papers and came up with one that I recognised immediately. She read aloud, “*It is a general law of nature for all creatures to propagate the like of themselves: and this extends even to the most trivial minutiae, to the slightest peculiarities; and thus, among ourselves, we see a family likeness transmitted from generation to generation.*”

I raised a hand. “I know what it says. I did quote it after all.”

She stopped me with a glare then continued.

“*When two animals are matched together, each remarkable for a certain peculiarity, no matter how trivial, there is also a decided tendency in nature for that peculiarity to increase; and if the produce of these animals be set apart, and only those in which the same peculiarity is most apparent, be selected to breed from, the next generation will possess it in still more remarkable degree; and so on, till at length the variety I designate a breed is formed, which may be very unlike the original type.*’ So there.”

“Look, Eiseley himself says this is artificial selection.” I yawned. “He isn’t making that drastic a leap. Everyone who has ever studied Blyth, including his biographers, to whom you should have spoken

first, by the way, knows how conservative he was. He believed in the immutability of species, he believed in God and the effect of the environment and locality, he...”

“...paved the way for Darwin’s eventual ideas on sexual selection. You’ve seen the letters, ten in 1855, nine in 1856 and then the dry out. The Mutiny has started and then there is one missive in 1857. Then one in 1858, at which point the colonial is shining through.”

“There you have it. Blyth wasn’t going to do much more than speculate with the greatest circumspection and continue to believe in hierarchies of his time. That’s why he couldn’t be Darwin. Eiseley writes beautifully and he can be persuasive. But so was Arthur Koestler. In ‘The Case of the Midwife Toad’ he almost converted me to Lamarckism.”

“But I thought you said you believed Eiseley,” she said with some accusation.

“My article suggests Blyth may have something there. Oh, alright, I did say as much to you. Fact is, he even wrote to Darwin in 1855 saying that he thought Wallace was on the money on the question of how races become species – it may well have been a driving factor in Darwin’s subsequent haste in publishing ‘The Origin of Species.’ At the very least, what is true is that he had oodles of data, he tried to make some sense of them, and it’s worth an exploration.”

“In the Jewel of the Crown, no less.”

“It’s home,” I answered simply.

“It’s more than that,” she challenged. “You’re obviously not going there simply to make a case for the primacy of India in the history of evolutionary theory, surely.”

I paused. This was the moment I was dreading.

“Do I have your trust?”

She smiled easily. “Sure.”

I inhaled and took my chance.

“It’s the other side of the correspondence, see. What Darwin said. No one knows. But there’s just the possibility it’s squirreled away in the confines of the ASB, in some long forgotten cupboard. And if there’s the slightest chance the letters are there, I’m going to find them.”

“Sweet,” she said and whistled softly.

Something struck me.

“How did you know I was going to Calcutta?”

She laughed.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“How do you mean?”

“You’ve got half the puzzle. You leave your article with the intriguing quotation from Darwin, *‘Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.’*” What’s the major piece of the puzzle still shrouded? The India connection. Who is likely to do the sleuthing? By your own admission, a home-turning Indian. And besides,” she added carelessly, “it didn’t hurt to have a little heart-to-heart with the editor of the Norwich Naturalist’s Newsletter.”

“Blanche is a friend,” I protested.

“Silence has its price,” she returned.

I sighed. “What price yours?”

She considered me for a long moment and then reached into her handbag.

“Cigarette?”

“No, thank you.” I held my breath.

The mandatory ring of smoke held the silence. Then she said, “What if I told you I’d just have to come along?”

“Ah.” I thought for a moment, and the cost-benefit analysis came into play again.

“More coffee?” she enquired.

And I wondered as I nodded as to whether it really was worth taking my chances with the scalding.

1.3

Outside, the rain was falling in sheets. Blyth looked disconsolately through the window upon a road with little traffic. Behind him, the room, small, dark and dank with the steady drip of water through the roof, offered little relief. There was a mouldering carpet on a wooden floor, a small table bearing a multitude of books and papers with a fortitude befitting a beast of burden, and all illumined by a single large candle, casting long shadows along lines and interstices and a row of mounted birds, wide-eyed to the stuffing. Blyth considered one of them - a Himalayan Mountain Quail, and thought about the expedition to China for which he had just been passed over. A cloud of censure from the Asiatic Society of Bengal, made known in 1847 continued to hang and drift over the periphery of his thinking nearly a decade later, and more practically, stood in the way of a raise in his honorarium. Times were decidedly bleak for Edward Blyth in Calcutta.

Turning from his thoughts, he walked to his desk and sat down heavily. He closed his eyes for a moment then opening them, looked at the letter he was composing, already seven pages long. It was one of his chief joys, framing letters to the estimable Mr. Darwin and responding at length to his questions on breeding and domestication. He had met Mr. Darwin before his departure to Calcutta in 1841 and was delighted to hear from him at a time when his immediate circumstances were less than salubrious. Mr. Darwin had taken the long trip with Captain FitzRoy around the world on the Beagle and was possessed of the most wonderful insights on natural history as a consequence. Oh, and his speculations on origins. Delicious. It was a matter of considerable pride to be associating with men of his ilk. “Fodder for the intellect,” he often thought. He missed being in the company of clubbable men.

“My Dear Sir,” he read aloud. A slight smile played about his lips as he skimmed the pages he had penned, and when he came to the end, dipped his quill in ink and resumed his writing.

1.4

“Poor Blyth,” Darwin murmured. He was standing by the hearth, his back to the fire, and reading a letter aloud to his friend Joseph Hooker, botanist and son of the Keeper of Kew Gardens, Sir William. “You remember what I said to you of him when you went to India?”

Hooker smiled, “Almost verbatim.”

Darwin raised an eyebrow then permitted himself a delicate, “oh?”

“Did you see Mr. Blyth in Calcutta; he would be a capital man to tell you what is known about Indian zoology, at least in the Vertebrata; he is a very clever, odd, wild fellow who will never do, what he could do, from not sticking to any one subject.”

Darwin clapped, very slowly. “My dear Hooker, you never cease to amaze. However did you remember that so well?”

“On account of the fact that I was struck by an assessment that proved to be accurate in the extreme. When we met, I could not but remark to myself what a nervous bundle of energy he was, writing papers on a host of organisms, now cranes, now dogs, now reptiles, and directing field naturalists of no mean stature themselves, guiding, cajoling, even arguing. The arguing is really...”

“what is and will be his undoing,” said Darwin, then stopped in some embarrassment. To interrupt someone else’s train of thought was uncharacteristic for him, even impolite. “Forgive me. I spoke out of turn. You were saying.”

Hooker shook his head and smiled. “As Blyth might put it, n’importe.”

The men laughed. "It's true," Darwin mused, "he does enjoy peppering his efforts with French, does he not?" A shadow passed over his face. "Oh, but his altercations with the establishment can only be to his misfortune. Listen to this:

"If I meet with any more unworthy opposition from the old quarter (that medical clique who have uniformly opposed me always), I certainly shall not mince matters at all; but republish and circulate widely, to the discredit of the Asiatic Society, a correspondence on the subject which passed about 10 years ago, respecting which our present Secretary who has just read it, writes me word that he thinks the conduct of the Council then to me was 'most illiberal and narrow-minded.'"

"Ah," said Hooker.

"This was approximately at the time when you met, I recall."

"There were rumblings then, yes. Is he merely seeking a sympathetic ear now, or is there aught else."

"He has sent me a copy of the letter he has circulated. I gather he seeks my assistance."

"To gain an increase in his pension?"

"Among other things. The good man is obviously in dire need of like-minds. I wish for his sake he could benefit from such company as we enjoy at the Royal Society, but I cannot but confess that his presence in India is fundamental to the explication of the race question. It is altogether vexing.

"What will you do?" Hooker enquired.

Darwin regarded his friend, then turned to the fire as he considered the question. "I shall do whatever is in my power to help, Hooker. Edward Blyth has been invaluable. He deserves nothing less."

Chapter 2

2.1

She looked at me intently.

“Are you given to studying curmudgeons?”

“Blyth was not a curmudgeon. He was generous, helpful...”

“...difficult, contrary, and dependent on Darwin and the Viceroy Lord Canning to get him an increase in his pension and expeditionary opportunities that reached him all too late or never. You know this. Why are you standing up for him so stoutly?”

I wasn't entirely certain, but something in me suddenly rankled, and there was only one way I knew how to negotiate it.

“If we are to consider working together,” I said with as much loft as dignity could muster in borrowed clothes, “we're going for a walk.” She handed me my garments without comment and disappeared to the bathroom. As she did, I took in the curves of her body through the movement, my eyes widening before I caught myself crossly and rehabited my shirt and trousers.

Outside, the air was crisp on Commonwealth Avenue. Down we walked, now past Dartmouth, now past Exeter, always at a fair clip, Gloucester, Hereford, past the wrought iron fences, past the statues, and always the trees, and from the vantage perspective of the covert eye-corner peep, I could see the beads of sweat rise above her upper lip. Soon it would run rivulets, etching gorges along laugh-lines before the cascade line would hit that trim collar. We turned on to Massachusetts Avenue and the traffic squealed impatiently as we jay-walked to the other side. Students hummed and chattered their way into the Berklee School of Music; she looked longingly at a No.1 bus pausing in front of the Virgin Megastore at the corner of Newbury Street, and I shook my head. And we walked. At the Harvard

Bridge, I turned to her, breaking the silence cheerfully with, “my record’s 8 minutes and we’re going to break it,” and I viewed her horror commingle with determination as we marched over the length of 364 smoots. “Smoots?” she asked breathlessly, a third of our charge over the Charles. “Chap from MIT whose body length was used as the unit of measurement for a bridge called Harvard since no MIT’ian would want to claim it – it’s about 5.5 feet, which is about half a mile.” “Ah,” she wheezed, and I hastened pace. Behind me I heard a sigh, and then a redoubling of a tread. All the while the balances in my mind were keeping track.

2.2

“The man’s a bleeding sadist,” I muttered to myself. It was ludicrous. Granted, my methods had been somewhat forward, but the cause was worth it. The walk was not part of the grand design. I’d tentatively suggested a taxi when we reached Boylston Street and he fixed me with an air of such condescension that I subsided at once. And it was hot. Not the weather, but the pace, such that sustained conversation was largely precluded and even rain would only match the clamminess of a starched shirt against my back. It had been raining in Oxford when I left and it was pleasant because I had an umbrella and people walked at sensible clips and oh, it was home, and I had been away for a fortnight, and I missed it. At Heathrow, the man at the departure counter had fixed me with an avuncular eye and said, “Now do take care of yourself,” and I’d smiled both my appreciation and my confidence. The confidence had lasted through the episode at the bar (and was he sozzled), to the cab home, to the coffee and even to the chat – all the way to the proposition. And suddenly something shifted. I guess it was inevitable. I had dared to suggest with considerable sangfroid that I was inviting myself willy-nilly into the private realm of the bailiwick of his research. It was tricky. It was time to negotiate selfishnesses, to contend with the sway of shifting power-dynamics. And the tick-tock of his mind, increasingly alert to the coffee and the morning, were evident. All of a sudden, I was scared. What the devil was I doing

here? What the devil was I doing at all? Unbidden, a tune came to throat and I found myself whistling in great gasps. He looked at me with some amusement.

“Are you apprehensive or do you merely break into ‘The King and I’ on a whim because you like it?”

I was horrified. The tune was its own betrayal – Anna staring at the overwhelmingly large Siamese royal reception committee and singing timorously to her son, “Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head erect, and whistle a happy tune, so no one will suspect I’m afraid.”

“Oh, er...because I like Anna,” I said in something of a rush. It wasn’t a lie. I did. But the circumstances had little to do with my affiliation with the play and the character. I liked many musicals. I could have chosen ‘Wouldn’t It Be Lovely’ from My Fair Lady or ‘Don’t Cry For Me, Argentina,’ from Evita. But no, I had to pick the one dead giveaway. I wondered if he would sense any dissimulation. But he smiled, perhaps for the first time without a sardonic twist to the uplift. I realised, with a start that I wanted to know this man, well beyond the confines of his project. And somehow, I was not reassured in the seeing.

“We’re here,” he said, and I looked up at a building called ‘The Cantabrigia.’

2.3

If she believed that she was going to have a moment to put her feet up, she was mistaken. There wasn’t even the semblance of reciprocal politesse, the quid pro quo of “would you like my pyjamas,” or even “care for a cuppa?” Instead, I pointed to a book-case next to my computer and said, “could you possibly extract ‘The Correspondence’ for me – Volumes 5 to 7?”

She gave them to me. I hadn’t needed to say ‘Charles Darwin.’ She knew. There was an interesting level of professional intimacy that was entering the equation, the kind on which you could

call with colleagues who you might never have met before yet spoke a language you knew and revered. And it didn't need to be a card-carrying academic. I'd long since learnt that with bird-watchers.

And a bird-watching we were going. She looked at me with some surprise as I deposited my 7X35" binoculars into my khaki back-pack, along the Correspondence Volumes comprising the years 1851-1859.

"Why the binoculars?" she ventured.

"You'll see," I returned, and we walked out onto Massachusetts Avenue again.

2.4

Even by my standards, it was a long walk. Leaving Harvard Square behind us, we turned onto Brattle Street, or Tory Row so named for those loyalists to the Crown occupying houses along it during the Revolutionary War before summarily fleeing in the wake of the ultimate result. The pace had changed to a loping stride, there was little to have to prove anymore, the cascades of perspiration had glistened to the sunlight and I was satisfied. I pointed out Henry W. Longfellow's house, bright and cheery in its yellow clapboard then turned through the park named for the poet and bearing his bust, in order to gain Mount Auburn Street.

"Arbitrary enough connection," I said, indicating Mount Auburn Hospital, "but who is the only reigning monarch to have been born right here in this building?"

She shook her head and looked at me questioningly.

"The King of Thailand," I said, and grinned. "Alright, Siam," and then I added, "eh, Anna?"

She laughed.

"Speaking of coincidences."

We pressed on.

2.5

I had wondered about the binoculars. But watching him sling them around his neck once we had entered the cemetery, I began to understand. The place was welcoming, its sombre contents notwithstanding. There was a large ornate stone gateway, Egyptian, he informed me, built at the behest of the horticulturist and physician, Jacob Bigelow, who was the originator and overseer of the project to create the first garden cemetery in the United States in 1831. Near the gate was a green board, with bird sightings for the day chalked on it. I had never taken to the avocation, and the names were consequently foreign. He pointed at a large tree in front of which several elderly people were standing, their binoculars trained on an upper bough on which there appeared to be some mild twittering activity.

“European beech,” he said. “Recognise it? Your neck of the woods.”

My expression pleaded ignorance. He did not comment. He looked through the binoculars for a space and whistled.

“A Blackburnian,” he said. “It’s one of the prettiest warblers you’ll ever see.” He passed me the binoculars. “Take a look.”

There is always a strangeness about an activity you’ve studiously avoided as a child and suddenly comes upon you with its air of ‘it’s my time’ and you’re obliged to pay it heed. I raised the binoculars to eye-level. Plenty of leaves and branches, a little unfocussed, and then a flash, and disappearance. I tried again, more leaves, then a whispered – it’s gone up on that branch – it’s out in the open, see – and the spirit suddenly leapt inside and I swung the glasses and looked and did not see and swallowed disappointment and began to lower the binoculars.

“Try again,” he said. “If you are to understand Blyth, you need to feel at first hand what animated him.”

Which were certainly not American birds, I wanted to retort, but in the silent phrasing, I knew I was quibbling over semantics. Resigned, I looked through the lenses once more, and gasped. In my view was the most gorgeous specimen of beak and feather I'd ever seen move.

"Describe it," he said, shortly.

"Er... it's got orange on its head."

"Wrong, it blazes orange on its head. Yes?"

"I suppose."

"That's it. You have to be passionate. You have to see the fire between the black – that's the key. And then it gives over to the black and white. But it's the head that makes it memorable. It's a male in spring breeding plumage and it can carry itself with the hauteur of a model on a cat-walk because it deserves it. Take another look."

I sighed

"I'm afraid it's gone."

He smiled slightly.

"Then remember."

2.6

Again, I found myself hurtling after him. A second wind, he called it, and just when I thought he was relenting. All the while he called out the names of some luminary or the other buried in the cemetery, and was surprised that I hadn't heard of most of them. Finally I enquired if it was on account of the birds that we had walked half way across the cities of Boston and Cambridge to come to the spot. It couldn't be for the interneers. If that were the case, he could have just tried me with the names from the start, I'd have looked suitably blank, and saved us both the trouble. His face flushed, a strange pall of dull red on a ground colour of brown, and the stride lengthened even more.

“Stop,” I called. “This is unfair.”

He stood at the top of a grassy knoll where the signs suggested that Central Avenue met Willow, and the image of the Blackburnian Warbler blazing fell away. Compared to this, it didn’t even come close.

“You aren’t going to Calcutta. Not with me, anyway.”

“Oh, that’s rich. After humouring you and following you with hardly a word in edgeways to the middle of Godforsaken God knows where. We made a pact, in case you had forgotten.”

“I said, ‘if we were to consider working together.’”

“And I came with you in good faith.” I found my voice rising. “They said you weren’t easy to talk to, but you were doing such intriguing work and I wanted to try. Now, please, I’m doing my best. Just try too.”

It was a gamble. And it worked. The anger visibly subsided.

“You aren’t reverent enough. You’ve got to be in order to care.”

“Then show me. I don’t have the second sight to divine how you think. And what is it that I’ve got to be reverent about, anyway? People I don’t know? Birds I’m just beginning to see? You might cut me just a little bit of slack in the spirit of being reasonable.”

And suddenly, he was laughing. Big, great guffaws, which only increased with my growing perplexity.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said, his face completely soft, even friendly. “Proof of good faith. I’m taking you to a grave of someone you’ll recognise, someone you even asked me about.”

My astonishment increased. “Me?”

“Just when I was waking. Remember?”

And I did.

“Asa Gray,” I said triumphantly.

2.7

“Your anecdote of Agassiz, ‘Nature never lies’ is most characteristic. Instead of learning caution from experience Agassiz goes on faster than, in drawing positive conclusions from imperfect or conjectural data, confident that he reads Nature through and through, and without the least apparent misgiving that anything would turn up that he cannot explain away. So writes Asa Gray to the admirable Chuck.” I said, looking up from the copy of the Correspondence from which I’d just read. “He’s buried here too, you know. Agassiz. Across the Dell.”

“Do we pay him a visit?”

“Later. He’s part of the opposition, as you know. Gray’s a Darwin loyalist. That’s why we read the Correspondence here. By his grave.”

“Very reverent.”

“Do I detect the slightest hint of a gibe?”

“No, I think it’s nice. Vive the botanist.”

“Speaking of botany...”

“Yes.”

“Listen to this.” I riffled quickly through the book and finding the page, read, “*You will be surprised to learn that there is actually no Sanscrit word for a rose. Any guesses?*”

“Blyth. No prizes on that one, I’m assuming.”

“A rose by any other name...”

“...would smell as sweet.” Her breath was still a little ragged for the exertion of the past several hours. To the right, Consecration Dell plunged into a pool of limpid stagnation, framed in soaring pines, the elusive Great Horned Owl calling out its derisive ‘find me if you can’ and Asa Gray still and ever

out of sight beneath his headstone. “I’ve been wondering. There’s something more about Blyth than the correspondence, isn’t there? Something that’s incredibly personal to you.” Then by way of hasty disclaimer, she added, “Or I might be barking up the wrong tree. Speaking of botany, that is,” and somewhere there was a tinkle and a trill in the laughter. I smiled.

“When I showed you the Blackburnian, it wasn’t just on a whim. It’s warbler season now, and the migrants are the closest New World equivalents you’ll get to a bird family that has been so influenced by the work he did in India. As a child growing up in India, I found myself incredibly interested in natural history. So I found a bird book, and started committing the pictures and accounts pretty much to memory. What this meant was that I remembered a host of bird-names linked to their phenotypic descriptions for easy identification in the field. And right up there among them were Blyth’s Reed Warbler and Blyth’s Leaf Warbler. *Acrocephalus dumetorum*. *Phylloscopus reguloides*. The birds themselves had little with which to acquit themselves – they were nondescript enough jobs. But the names stuck. Then I heard about *Aviceda jerdoni*, an elegant bird of prey I’d encountered in Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley’s Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian subcontinent, which went by the common name of Blyth’s Baza. There was an incredible sense of romance to the connection – Blyth plus trivial name. And I started wondering – just who was this man that seemed to have such influence over our bird life? There weren’t any suggestions in our little collegiate library in South India. Then away I went to study ecology in the United States and hey presto, everything was illuminated. So yes, there you are.”

“You won’t be disappointed if you don’t find the letters, then?”

“Of course I will. There goes my crack at the greatest evolutionary mystery of the century, as I remember your putting it. It’s just that there’s more.”

“It’s about the man, right?”

“Spot on.”

“Do you need to go to Calcutta to feel that you know him?”

“I don’t know. Don’t you feel Joyce by walking the streets of Dublin?”

“Never tried. You?”

“No. But I’ve walked Longfellow, and Winslow Homer and Asa Gray. It does help that they’re all here.”

“Touché.”

“What if there’s no story then. Not even a possibility of one. Do you still want to come?”

I looked at her sideways as she chewed on her lower lip absently. I knew the answer I hoped to hear, but my face gave no sign, even when the moment of a heart’s leap announced itself.

“If Blyth is anywhere as irascible as you, and no matter how much you’re going to disagree because everything I’ve read suggests that he was, then the answer is an unqualified yes.”

2.8

By the time we gained Agassiz’s grave on Bellwort Path, we had begun the fact-trade. It consisted of naming any one thing one knew of Blyth in return for which another fact would be supplied by the other. The exchange was furious.

“Born in 1810, London.”

“Studied chemistry.”

“Ran a druggist’s business to the ground.”

“Published an edition of Gilbert White’s ‘Natural History of Selborne.’”

“Expanded Cuvier’s Regne Animal.”

“Went to India in 1841...”

“...to curate the museum’s holdings at the Asiatic Society of Bengal.”

“Increased the number of specimens manifold and wrote approximately 140 manuscripts on higher vertebrates.”

“Fell out with colleagues and was censured by the Society...”

“...and denied a pay raise.”

“Stop piggybacking. That was my point.”

“You did it first.”

“Alright. Let’s cease quibbling. Generous.”

“But irascible.”

“Point made earlier.”

“In a different context.”

“Fine.”

“Wrote to Darwin on breeding experiments, and sent notes on race.”

“While continuing to bemoan his pecuniary condition.”

“The major correspondence lasted from 1855 to 1858.”

“Married in 1854 to Elizabeth Hodges, a widow and 15 years his junior.”

“She died from hepatitis in late 1857, which caused something of a breakdown.”

“And the fact that the Mutiny was had broken out didn’t help.”

“Passed over for expedition to China, and retired in 1862.”

“Returned to England where he suffered from mania and depression.”

“Continued to write on natural history, nonetheless.”

“And died in 1873.”

“Phew.”

“No letting up. That’s the easy part. What of the arcane?”

“He was irrefutably anti-Islamic.”

“Your proof?”

“The Correspondence, of course.” I drew the relevant copy out of his back-pack. *“I must have told you that the Mussulmans of India refuse to eat Turkey. The last remark I shall offer on this work is that I think the author is rather hard upon the Filates, considering that they were themselves an enslaved nation not so many years back, and are now self-emancipated and converts to Islam; the greatest blight that can fall on any people!-”*

“Well done. He didn’t make much of Indian culture besides.”

“I know that. He thought Indians imitative rather than inventive. You’ll need to come up with something else.”

“Alright. The Mussulmans of India may have refused to eat turkey, but it didn’t stop Blyth from musing on the etymology of the word.

“Your proof, this time.”

“Oh this one is positively delightful. Letter to Darwin, January 1856. *‘How came we by the word Turkey’; surely not because the strut recalls to mind the haughtiness of the ‘grand Turk’! A queer conceit, rather! In the narrative of a sporting excursion in China, I saw an undescribed species of Bustard (clearly), frequently denominated ‘wild Turkey’. As Otis tarda abounds in Syria (in the dominions of the Grand Turk), could it even have been known, to the Crusaders for instance, as the Turkey-fowl, or Turkey-cock?’”*

“Congratulations. Do we call a draw for the moment, for further engagement at a later date?”

“Agreed.”

2.9

It was only a month since his beloved Elizabeth had passed. He continued to stare out of his window, remarking no sound, even at the peak of the commercial day. The Mutiny had put paid to the normal flow of correspondence to which he would customarily devote himself, and in some odd form, he was grateful. There was little enough to be grateful for, these days. Day after day the city of Calcutta had been greeted with news of reverses that British outposts had suffered. In May of the previous year, siege had been laid to Delhi; the next month British women and children had been massacred in Cawnpore. Eventually, the tide began to turn and the relief of Lucknow was announced. It was only when the survivors of that garrison straggled into Calcutta that Blyth was moved to resume his pen. When he did so, his natural irrepressibility would not be withheld any further, his enthusiasm running as amuck as the *pogla hatti* (mad elephant) he once described for the engine of a train as bandied about in the Bengali vernacular.

“.....will cover she-Donkeys readily; but not so always the converse. The famous Ld Clive, you will remember, had a Zebra mare which rejected the advances of a Jack-ass; when his ldship hit upon the notable expedient of painting the latter with Zebra-stripes, upon which the scruples of the lady Zebra were overcome! Well, suppose this Zebrified Jackass (or were it even otherwise harlequinized) had put to a few Jenny Asses. Would the foals resulting from such intercourse exhibit an unusual amount of striping? The experiment might be tried also with mares, or even with bitches. An affirmative result would certainly be most interesting, and be applicable too in procuring new varieties of colouring in various animals...”

But the moment of sanguine observation did not last. Blyth could not help a dash of bitterness towards the Indian insurrectionists as his muse continued through the writing, and in its despatch to Charles Darwin.

“As I write, a royal salute is firing in honour of the arrival of the glorious garrison of Lucknow, i.e. the wounded officers, & the ladies and children. How amazingly the force of character of our countrymen & countrywomen has been evinced in the course of this terrible struggle! The wonderful superiority of the European to the Asiatic, from the days of Xenophon and Alexander even unto now! Against such overwhelming odds, nobody here ever conceived the possibility of the insurrection proving successful, — this grand struggle of barbarism against a higher civilisation ennobled by the application of all the sciences.”

Ever Sincerely Yours, Edward Blyth.

2.10

Where might a footfall lead? Where a warbler? Where that extra glass of beer? There is no gainsaying the power of effect. There is a woman in the guise of a journalist who flattered me early with her active interest in my work, and in the space of a single day, has insinuated herself into my scheme of being. We sit next to each other on a bench in the cemetery, content to let moments pass, watching ripples on Halcyon Lake across from the prime real estate occupied by the mausoleum of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Christian Science faith.

On our way to the lake, I showed her a tomb with a green lyre on the top. It marks the final resting spot of Frances Sargent Osgood, close friend and arguably last great love of Edgar Allan Poe. After his death in 1849, she wrote a poem called ‘On A Dead Poet’ opening with the lines, “The hand that swept the sounding lyre with more than mortal skill, The lightning eye, the heart of fire, the fervent

lip are still!” and so it was that when it came her time to pass, the lyre was brought to her. Not long after, the melody had ceased for Edward Blyth with the passing of his own beloved, but there were no poems. Only more observations on natural history, and ratiocinations on society predicated upon the constraints of an outlook as blinkered as it was imaginative.

But we do not speak just now of Edward Blyth. Not because he is not central to our thoughts and our considerations. But we want to keep him for little tastes, sinful nibbles along a journey that promises to be long and nary a whit straightforward. Somewhere there will be an embarking on a plane, somewhere a trans-Atlantic flight, sometime a landing at Dum Dum airport, and a taxi to take us to No: 1, Park Street in Calcutta, the address of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. We will comb its dark repositories for the letters containing the questions that Charles Darwin posed to a man and curator for whom warblers and birds of prey were named in India. It is all too possible that we may come up short. But we are determined, if nothing else, to walk in the place his world inhabited, perhaps in significant postlude, but nonetheless.

And what might the journey do to us? For one, it is a homecoming of sorts, but to a part of the country that is all too far from home. For the other, it is a journey half the world away from home. Self-discovery, however, is not of the moment. There are other stories that clamour to be told.

Such as this. In 1862, there was a circular sent by Charles Darwin to the Army Medical Department in India, seeking from surgeons in the service information along the following wise:

“As several well-marked cases have been recorded with our domestic animals of a relation between the colour of the dermal appendages and the constitution; and it being notorious that there is some limited degree of relation between the colour of the races of man and the climate inhabited by them; the following investigation seems worth consideration. Namely, whether there is any relation in Europeans between the colour of their hair, and their liability to the diseases of tropical countries.”

There were no responses.

It is intriguing to think what might have happened were Edward Blyth still in the country when the circular arrived. Might he have made a difference in terms of active response? There is little doubt that the Blyth of the mid-1850's might have forced the issue by sheer dint of energy. A more broken Blyth in the early 1860's may have less so. But then again we may never know. All we have is one coy statement, made by Darwin to Sir Charles Lyell that speaks volumes in its brevity. "I have got some rays of light on the races of man, but the mutiny in India stopped some important questions."

From the underbrush, there is a sudden movement and a fox emerges into view. It stands framed for an instant against the high sun and the Eddy mausoleum, then suddenly witting of company, makes good its escape the way it had come. We rise to follow, and find ourselves in front of a fluted pillar topped with a Corinthian capital. On it is a plaque bearing the words, "In memory of Eleanor H. Porter, who by her writings brought sunshine into the lives of millions."

She touches my arm and said, "The author of Pollyanna, right?"

I nod.

"We needed that."

We both smile. It is time to make arrangements for a journey.

Chapter 3

3.1

The traffic was particularly insistent that morning. Charles Helmhurst noted three car-honks in the space of a minute behind him, discounting the cyclist that had almost run him over as he made his way from Euston Square to the Wellcome, London's most famous institute for studies in the history of medicine. The lack of vehicular etiquette did nothing to improve his already distempered mood. He entered the lobby with little ceremony and signed in.

“Good morning, Sir. Is it the Library today?” the desk attendant chirruped, a pretty 22 year old brunette that Helmhurst would ordinarily have chatted up.

“No. Is Dr. Barrington in?”

“She came in early, Sir. Ahead of the packers.”

“The packers?” He looked at her with some incomprehension.

“Why, she is leaving in a week, Sir. To America. Didn’t you know?”

How could he have forgotten? It was the big coup. The University of Pennsylvania offer to join the history faculty with a dangled plum from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia to curate the most extensive Darwin collection in the United States. He had been so envious he had tried to put the offer out of his mind with little success. Then this latest turn of affairs and it had all flown clean out of his head as he made his way as quickly as he could to see Dr. Jill Barrington.

“Well,” said the attendant, uncertainly. “If there’s nothing else, Sir, would you like to go on upstairs?”

“Oh yes,” he said, hurriedly, and walked on to the lift. Inside, he pressed the button to the third floor. The lift wheezed gently and levitated. The doors opened obediently in front of the information panel. He emerged and turned left, through a doorway and to the second office ahead and to the right, where a animated conversation in progress proclaimed the packing and parcelling of the academic life of Jill Barrington preparatory to transfer.

“No, no... over there, please. In the box marked ‘Correspondence’.” There was a hint of exasperation in an otherwise friendly if firm female voice. Helmhurst ducked his head in to see Jill Barrington surrounded by piles of paper and cardboard boxes, with two hefty men the colour of beetroot sorting through the morass. She turned at the sound and smiled. “Hello, Charles. What brings you bright and early over here this morning?”

“Something of an incident, I’m afraid,” he said, a little hoarsely. “I know it’s beastly busy for you and I’m sorry, but might we have a quick chat?”

God but she’s splendid, he found himself thinking for the umpteenth time, in spite of himself. It wasn’t a case of classic beauty but of compelling power – the workmanlike hands belonging oddly to a petite frame, commanded by a leonine head and a frazzle of blond that would forever in his mind give the lie to a particular reputation relating to intelligence. She was regarding him now with a mixture of welcome and concern.

“Tea?” she asked.

“That would be lovely,” he assented. “You’ll be alright?” she asked the packers anxiously. “If you deal with the top shelf there and just put all the books in those two boxes marked Philosophy, I’ll be very grateful. I’ll be outside in the kitchenette in case you have any questions.”

“We’ll be fine, ma’am,” said one of the red-faces. “Great, thanks,” she said, and stepped out. “Come along, Charles. I think I saw some Earl Grey. Would that do? Spot of milk and sugar? Marvellous. Take a chair. Now what’s all this about?”

He took a deep breath. “It’s the Cunningham girl.”

Dr. Barrington raised her eyebrows politely.

“Come on, you must remember! From the Giggler.”

“I’m afraid I don’t subscribe to the Giggler, Charles. I’m sure it’s riveting.”

“You mean you didn’t read the article?”

“Why, did a tabloid actually say something of interest?”

“Well, yes, if you consider a broadside on the Bicentennial a matter for, well, giggles. Though that was hardly the tenor of the piece.”

In quiet triumph, he witnessed a sharp intake of breath, lips pursed into a perfect circle, then a shocked, “No!”

“Precisely! It’s this whole spread on the sham that Darwin reportedly was, and how he was anticipated by lots of people and didn’t give them credit, and that the academy has known all along and kept mum.”

“First of all, those claims are old hat. Second, the charge about the academy is hardly true. What of all our biographies?”

“She claims they’re sanitised. That they have the veneer of truth but actually hide far more than they reveal.”

“Alright,” she said. The shock was replaced by a look of pained indulgence. “And we are supposed to take much notice?”

“Jill, people read this stuff. My secretary was the one that showed me. It appeared this morning.”

“Charles, Charles, Charles, what’s life without a little dash of spice? Besides, gauging the readership, it is hardly going to turn up in droves at Down House anyway, wielding pick-axes and threatening demolition. The dear folk will move right on to the next article which is probably a reported séance with Princess Di. Here’s your tea.”

He took a sip. Dr. Barrington sighed and looked toward the office.

“She’s gone to Boston to find Joseph Daniel.”

“Ah!” She considered this for a moment. “I think I’ll make myself a cuppa too.”

3.2

She scanned the article intently then looked up, a smile playing across her lips. “Rather good writing, what?”

Helmhurst was exasperated. “That isn’t the point.”

“No,” said Dr. Barrington. “But it isn’t entire drivel either. There might be disagreement with her position, but she has done her research. To some extent. Besides, she didn’t go so far as to call Darwin a sham – she merely suggested that the case might have been overstated, which of course, is nothing new, and perhaps she might have found, had she read every last account going, that many of us would have pointed this out as well. I daresay I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“To put her straight?”

“Well, no,” she demurred. “To discuss perspective.”

“As though Darwin were a work of art?”

“Isn’t he?”

“Going by likenesses, perhaps not.”

“Ever the literalist. However ‘The Origin’ might take its place next to ‘The Thinker’. Or ‘The Nightwatch’. Or Beethoven’s ‘Fifth.’ Don’t you think?”

“Jill, if you weren’t who you were, I’d accuse you of flippancy.”

“Oh, Charles, stop being so stuffy. It’s a readable piece in a rag. It may actually promote reflection, which is a bloody good thing. I’m surprised she thought to write here. Jobs must be hard to come by.”

“Then she goes off to meet Daniel.”

“Yes, that.”

Helmhurst banged his fist gently on the table, and the residual liquid in his cup made a leap of alarm. Dr. Barrington looked sweetly into the distance.

“A refill?”

“No,” he proffered with little grace, then belatedly, “thank you.”

“Alright. So how did you get to know of her little jaunt westwards? I mean it’s interesting, but Daniel should hardly be cause for such trepidation?”

“After his broadside against my biography?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “I suppose it is personal.”

“Of course it’s personal. It was a vicious, low, mean piece of slander.”

“That *Nature* saw fit to publish. I remember that.”

“So you agreed with it.”

“I don’t make the editorial decisions for the journal, Charles. Besides, I haven’t had an opportunity to get to *The Doyen of Down* yet. Frightfully remiss of me and I am sorry, but as you know, it did come out in the middle of this upheaval of transfer. It’s on my to-do list. Right on the top. The trans-Atlantic even. I promise you it will take precedence over ‘Walk the Line’ or ‘Memories of a Geisha’ or ‘Dumb and Dumber Part 3’ or whatever set of movies they’re showing on in-flight entertainment. Anyway, how did you get to know?”

“I rang the editor.”

“And?”

“She was surprised that I was quite so offended. She said that Thelma Cunningham worked on assignment and had been authorised by the publication to follow the lead.”

“You mean the Giggler has decided to take itself seriously?”

“If you can call that seriousness. Damn it, Jill, can’t you see? This is at all of our expense.”

“At your expense, chiefly, by the looks of things. With some residual fall-out, which hopefully Alex and Jack, and well, I, will cheerfully absorb. Have you told them, by the way?”

“I sent them both e-mails. I’ll call Jack in Cambridge later. Alex is in Malta apparently. Holidaying.”

Dr. Barrington brought her hands together in studied deliberation, the fingers tip to tip, little to thumb, then delicately interlacing. She looked pensive.

“Well, I don’t know what to say, Charles. I can see why you are worried. But we’ve all copped our share of criticism. As for Daniel, he’s an evolutionary ecologist who dabbles in history. He’s just gotten a little press because of his studied commitment to locating the story of natural history in the subcontinent. He certainly has fodder. Haldane for genetics, Brandis for forestry, Falconer for palaeontology, Hooker for phytogeography, Hodgson for all sorts of things – ornithology, mammalogy, ethnology. And of course, Blyth. Well, I could keep going. But it’s a perfectly legitimate approach. Give India its deserved global place in the sun.

Helmhurst glowered. “Oh, India gets its place in the sun all right. Far more than our benighted island.”

“I’m going to take that point of disaffection as your gripe with outsourcing, rather than geographical location. Oh, yes, are you all done?” Beetroot Number Two had emerged from the office, looking consequential in a cake of sweat.

“The shelves are clear, ma’am. You’re going to need more boxes, though, if you want to keep the piles separate as you’d asked. If not, we could mix some together...”

“No, no,” she said swiftly, then, “oh, dear. How many?”

Beetroot Number Two shrugged his shoulders. “Seven, perhaps?”

She nodded. “Alright then. Can you get them easily?”

“An hour or so. From the office. But we’ll probably catch an early bite and be back by about 1:00.”

“Right-o,” she said, briskly and rose. “I’ll see if there is any more sorting out to do.”

“Cheers, ma’am,” said Beetroot Number Two. Beetroot Number One nodded and the men left. Dr. Barrington looked at her watch then apologetically at Helmhurst. Helmhurst got to his feet.

“Well, I’m sure it will all sort itself out,” she said, a little unconvincingly.

Helmhurst snorted.

“Oh, Charles, don’t worry.” The sympathy was obvious.

“You don’t seem to see,” he said, heavily. “This cad from darkest India is going to cast so much of his complexion upon our knowledge of natural selection and upon the person of Charles Darwin that there will be little recovering. Mark my words.”

Jill Barrington’s eyes blazed.

“Very evocative, Charles. And might I point out that it is not to a particular grouping of the world’s population that the corner on Darwin is given. What you have suggested is unbecoming and I hope you’ll have time to think it over on the way out.”

“I’m sorry,” said Helmhurst in immediate penitence. “My feelings got a little ahead of me there. I don’t nurse sentiments of well, you know what, honest I don’t.”

“Well, it certainly seemed that way,” said Dr. Barrington unmollified. Then seeing the somewhat hang-dog look in Helmhurst’s eyes, she softened. “We’ll just pretend it didn’t happen, eh?”

“Thank you.” Helmhurst said, in obvious gratitude. “I just don’t want to see all of our work scuttled, that’s all.”

“It won’t be,” said Dr. Barrington. “We’ve all put in enough hard work for that.” She smiled. “Besides, there’s always room for more work on the subject. It’s a bit like the Gospels, really.”

“Why, I thought you, Alex and Jack had the narrative all sewn up pretty nicely,” said Helmhurst, with the faintest trace of asperity.

“Oh come, hardly. The multiplicity of possibilities is almost daunting. Think about it. You can have the adventurous Darwin, the bold Darwin, the cringing Darwin...”

“The whingeing Darwin,” Helmhurst offered.

“Why yes. I had thought to make my way down the alphabet with suitable qualifiers but since you’re lurking at the other end, we might just sally forth from both sides and meet around M.” She thought for a second then said brightly. “Of course you’ll need to start at Z. What can we possibly say there? Oh, yes. The zebraphilic Darwin. Is that a stretch?”

“Well, he did like equids,” Helmhurst said.

Jill Barrington clapped lightly. “So he did. Very good, Charles. He speaks about them all in *The Origin* – horses, wild asses, even the quagga, that poor little exemplar of extinction. No stripes on its legs, remember? Oh we could have such fun.”

“Fun is the last thing on my mind,” Helmhurst said.

“Well you’ll just need to snap out of it. Tell you what, we could make it something like a game of rummy. You can have three of a letter – such as the defiant Darwin, the defensive Darwin, the diabolical Darwin...”

“Hey, steady on. Diabolical?”

“Why, of course,” Dr. Barrington said, innocently. “He did once refer to himself as ‘The Devil’s Chaplain’. Surely that counts.”

“Hmm...” Helmhurst looked doubtful.

“And then you can have running sequences, in threes or fours. The elegiac Darwin, the fanciful Darwin, the gentle Darwin, the harried Darwin...”

“Why do we need to keep interposing Darwin? We could just throw out a set of adjectives and be done with it.”

“Because we make our careers on him, dear chap. And the challenge is to see if the adjective fits. We have no evidence for the somnambulating Darwin, for instance.”

“Well, anyway,” Helmhurst said, “It’s all besides the point. Confound it, Jill, why did we get off on this track?”

“Because it certainly beats the alternative. Now hurry along and don’t worry about it – let the girl consort with Daniel, get her little story and the whole matter will blow over quite swiftly. Unless I’m terribly mistaken, I don’t see the Giggler defining the implications for our field for all time.”

“Well, you haven’t been pilloried the same way,” Helmhurst said bitterly. He rose and walked to the door. “I could be finished.”

“Or you could write another biography of dear Charlie and win the James Tait Black award and Alex and Jack will be as pleased as punch and so will I. And we’ll all bid you welcome. Just choose your adjective wisely, that’s all.”

“Lightning doesn’t strike thrice.”

“You’d be surprised. Goodbye, Charles.”

When he had gone, she looked across the room reflectively. This had been her intellectual home for twenty years. She had been extraordinarily productive. Her choices had been remarkable, the accolades effusive and plenitudinous. She had even been happy. And on the cusp of departure, this incident. It was perplexing. She decided to make herself another cup of tea.

“Telephone call for you, Jill,” the secretary chimed from the office two doors to the left of Dr. Barrington’s.

“Who is it, Sally?” Dr. Barrington wanted to know.

“Dr. Jack Mirabeau. He sounds quite put out.”

“Of course,” she smiled and then said “Coming.”

“Confound it, Jill,” Jack Mirabeau said without preamble. “Have you heard from Charles Helmhurst.”

“He wasted no time coming here. Are you well?”

“Er...yes...thanks...oh, heck, Jill, what’s to be done?”

“It’s really not that earth-shattering, Jack. Since when have you regarded tabloids as the Oracle at Delphi?”

“It’s not that. It’s the fact that she’s gone off to find Daniel.”

“So?”

“We just don’t need any distraction from the Bicentennial. And what of the Darwin estate?”

“Look, the Bicentennial is three years away. There’s no great advantage to an exposé in year 197 C.D. As for the estate, enough is going on regarding the latest imbroglio over the John Maynard Keynes legacy for this even to register a blip. There’s another ancestor to worry about.”

“So you don’t think...”

“I seldom do. Unless it’s entirely unavoidable. I’ll see you at the Linnaean on Friday?”

The voice on the other end sighed heavily and unhappily.

“Yes. Cheers, Jill.”

“Bye, Jack.”

She replaced the phone in its receptacle then looked at Sally Bing.

“You stepping out for lunch soon, Sally?”

“In about 15 minutes. Why?”

“Could I trouble you for a favour?”

“Certainly.” Sally looked up expectantly.

“Could you possibly pick up a copy of today’s Giggler?”

Sally stared, nonplussed. “Today’s what?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Sally laughed. “I never pegged you for a rag-reader.”

Jill Barrington smiled. “Neither did I, Sally. Neither did I.”

3.3

Loren Eiseley squinted.

Outside, the sunlight played hopscotch with the tiles that lay stiffly in rows, grooved to the rivulets of cement that ran among them, delineating each to the same dimensions. There is something about the shadows that buildings cast, he thought, leaving the campus of the University of Pennsylvania behind him as he walked down Chestnut Street towards Centre City, Philadelphia. He was in a reflective mood, he at all of 51 now, University Provost, esteemed anthropologist and wordsmith of legend. He had turned the last to advantage, even when he fell foul of granite once in Palo Alto, on a visit to that other institution of studied renown that the West Coast featured. Then, similarly preoccupied, he had caught his foot in a drain and broken his nose on the curb. Passers-by had gathered to help, but it was not to them that he had paid heed. It was the ever growing circle of blood that held his attention, dreamlike, and he said, “Oh, don’t go, I’m sorry.” In after days, he would explain, “*I was quite sane, only it was an oddly detached sanity, for I was addressing blood cells, phagocytes, platelets, all the crawling, living, independent wonder that had been part of me and now, through my folly and lack of care, were dying like beached fish on the hot pavement. A great wave of passionate contrition, even of adoration, swept through my mind, a sensation of love on a cosmic scale, for mark that this experience was, in its way, as vast a catastrophe as would be that of a galaxy consciously suffering through the loss of its solar systems.*” Mabel had thought it the most moving passage her husband had ever written and when transcribing the incident to type, she had risen, her eyes awash in tears, to tell him how marvellous

it was. Mabel was at home now, and he would see her later for dinner. Now it was the short constitutional, as he made sense of his project.

He was anxious. What he was about to propose would not be accepted kindly by the establishment. He was, after all, seen as part of it, especially after producing *The Immense Journey* to extraordinary acclaim in 1957 for the hundredth anniversary of the presentation of the theory of natural selection. There he had struck out boldly on the infinite possibilities of evolutionary theory in a manner that thrummed with poetry in essay after crafted essay that comprised the chapters of the effort. 'How Flowers Changed the World' was a case in point.

"Apes were to become men, in the inscrutable wisdom of nature, because flowers had produced seeds and fruit in such tremendous quantities that a new and totally different store of energy had become available in concentrated form....His limbs grew longer, he strode more purposefully over the grass. The stolen energy that would take man across the continents would fail him at last. The great Ice Age herds were destined to vanish. When they did so, another hand like the hand that grasped the stone by the river long ago would pluck a handful of grass seed and hold it contemplatively.

In that moment, the golden towers of man, his swarming millions, his turning wheels, the vast learning of his packed libraries, would glimmer dimly there in the ancestor of wheat, a few seeds held in a muddy hand. Without the gift of flowers and the infinite diversity of their fruits, man and bird, if they had continued to exist at all, would be today unrecognisable. Archaeopteryx, the lizard-bird, might still be snapping at beetles on a sequoia limb; man might still be a nocturnal insectivore. The weight of a petal has changed the face of the world and made it ours."

It was pansies now that caught his eye. A little patch near the playgrounds that were Drexel University's as he turned a left to reach Sansom and then Market Street. Several gaggles of undergraduates were passing, laughing, slouching to the walk, daring at fashion so completely at odds

with the sensibilities of the 50's. But he was oblivious to the sartorial challenges. Here and now, all he could see were the little bobbers and weavers, members of the aster family and cousins at once to sunflowers and daffodils. Daffodils! Wordsworth slipped unbeckoned to the forefront of his mind. Only that he was as lonely as a cloud in his thoughts now, and no effusion of floral greeting could (and he mentally paraphrased) 'my heart with pleasure fill, so that I might dance with the daffodils.'

The Immense Journey had been succeeded the following year, (the current one), by *Darwin's Century*, a work of sweeping scholastic emprise that had received reviews ranging from the lukewarm to the dismissive at the outset, and then a wave of popularity that had announced Loren afresh to the reading world. Buoyed with the success of it all, he had mooted the possibility of a companion volume, *Beyond Darwin's Century* that would deal with the great propounder's contemporaries and their contributions to evolutionary theory. In 1957, during the course of his research, he had fallen upon the story of an Englishman relegated to relative obscurity who had worked in the corridors of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta in the mid nineteenth century for over 20 years and who had provided immeasurable grist to Darwin's mill as the latter conceived and then executed first *The Origin of Species* and twelve years later, *The Descent of Man*. Loren was intrigued. But the final chapter of *Darwin's Century* was, at that point, still being written, against a deadline that was past due. So he scribbled a quick note that merely said, "In May of 1957 this paper's subject was discovered," on the upper right hand corner of a manuscript that was titled, 'Charles Darwin and the Mysterious Edward Blyth.'

There was something that bothered Loren. It concerned a period of time when Darwin was close to the conclusion of his voyage on the H.M.S. Beagle circumnavigating the world with Captain FitzRoy and his crew and the first flush of recovery succeeding it. In the said period, Edward Blyth had been evincing ideas that smelt pretty substantively of evolutionary selection. Blyth was at the time still in England, failing merrily at the pharmacy that he had bought only a few years before because he was too

busy musing on matters of biological descent and variation thereof. It would not have been startling if his reflections had been confined to simple questions of breeding in domesticated animals. This had been done from time immemorial, well, human time anyway, and there was even Biblical precedent in the 30th chapter of the Book of Genesis, where Jacob cheated his father-in-law, Laban, of the vast majority of his cattle and goats by engineering that streaked offspring outnumbered unmarked ones through the simple expedient of placing striped rods in front of the birthing mothers. But Blyth went further. He wondered if variations might be sustained in nature, such that sufficient distinction could be indicative of species diversity. Looking at it another way, he asked if it might not be possible that “a large proportion of what are considered species have descended from a common parentage?” The line of enquiry provided its own flight of mental adventure. Some variations would be maintained, others perish.

This was certainly the stuff of natural selection, but hardly the whole. The issue was not whether Blyth had elucidated the entire theory in advance of dear Charlie, but whether Charlie had given him due credit. The fact remained that while Darwin spoke admiringly of Blyth as early as page 18 of *The Origin of Species* (or in its first edition *On The Origin Of Species*) itself, it was strictly in terms of breeding experiments, the chapter in question (Number One) being called ‘Variation Under Domestication.’ “Mr. Blyth, whose opinion, from his large and varied stores of knowledge, I should value more than that of almost any one, thinks that all the breeds of poultry have proceeded from the common Indian fowl (*Gallus bankiva*).” All very well, but what of Blyth’s surmises while Darwin was gallivanting around the globe?

Simply put, had Darwin committed plagiarism?

The evidence before Loren was this; there was no mention of Blyth’s articles that had appeared in the Magazine of Natural History between 1835 and 1837 in *The Origin of Species*. The parsimonious

explanation, of course, is that Darwin never saw them at the time, though it was curious that there was no mentioned encounter with them subsequently. After all, Darwin's great book would see the light of print only 22 years later. There was another key ingredient – a single word. Inosculate.

To be certain, it was an obscure usage, meaning intermediate characteristics between similar groups on the one hand and related groups on the other. The term had been associated with the work of William Sharp Macleay, who, in his *Horae entomologicae* (1819-1821) had propounded the Quinary System of classification in which the five main animal groups were represented by what were termed 'circles of affinity'. To show the continuity of forms, circles were arranged in larger circles where the originals were shown to be contiguous or 'inosculant' with each other, something on the order of Venn Diagrams where there were sets and supersets. Blyth employed the term 'inosculate' fairly routinely; Darwin, however, did not appear to have done so until 1836 in one of his notebooks, and again in 1837 in a second. This, to Loren, was proof enough that poor Edward was being shafted.

The prospect of the information making it in time for the Centennial of the publication of *The Origin of Species* was mouth-watering. Not that Loren had any subversive desire to rain on Charlie's parade. But then again, Darwin lay a-mouldering in Westminster Abbey; indeed, had done so since 1882, and it was justifiably hard to determine if he would mind.

At the 30th Street Station he stopped and turned back. His mind was made up. He was going to essay at publication. At the heart of which would be the heterodox suggestion: "Our thesis is somewhat startling, namely, that Darwin made unacknowledged use of Blyth's work."
