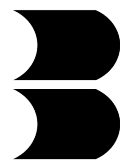


Twenty Twenty

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NIGEL WATTS



Billington
Publishing

Extract from 'The Heart of the World'
©Alan Ereira, published by Jonathan Cape

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At the time of writing, the Kogi are thought to number eleven thousand. The Tairona Heritage Trust was established in 1990 as a response to Alan Ereira's book and film. The aims of the Tairona Heritage Trust are:

- a) to publicise the Kogi message
- b) to buy back ancestral land within the Sierra
- c) to allow all the surviving peoples of the Tairona civilisation the opportunity to benefit directly from world-wide interest in them.

Find out more at: www.taironatrust.org

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Written by Nigel Watts, 1995

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Sahera Chohan, 2020

FOREWORD

In April 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I pulled Nigel's novel, *Twenty Twenty*, from the bookshelf; I hadn't read it for twenty-five years. Reading the cover jacket, I couldn't believe what I was reading. *'The year: 2020. The place: a deserted village in the wastes of northern Canada . . . an ageing writer has taken refuge, infected with a deadly virus . . .'* I continued reading, turning page after page in amazement. References to a global pandemic causing the world to communicate largely through virtual technology, people wearing masks, a drastic reduction of air travel leading to 'virtual tourism', nature fighting back for its survival due to mankind's destruction of our planet - read Climate Change.

Nigel was a visionary, a seeker and a truth-teller. He started writing *Twenty Twenty* in 1993 and it was published in 1995. Written for his Ph.D. in Creative and Critical Writing, the book plays with levels of reality in order for the reader to question their perception of identity and, in Nigel's words, to 'slowly disintegrate the boundaries between fact and fiction': *'A man who dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he is a man?'*

If you're looking for a definitive answer in this novel, take some comfort from Nigel's critique in his Ph.D.: *'There is no answer . . . there is only 'presence', or what western mystics have gropingly called 'Is-ness' (Meister Eckhart), or 'Suchness' (Aldous Huxley)'*.

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Nigel used his writing to shake people awake, which at times makes for difficult reading: *'We deserve the plague, every viral cell of it. Not some post-AIDS moral bullshit about divine retribution, but the even-handed comeback of nature. Civilisation is finally dying, killing itself off with an excess of cleverness.'*

He uses the teachings, or rather the warnings, of the Amazonian Kogi tribe, brought to prominence in 1990 by writer and filmmaker Alan Ereira, to push this point home. The Kogi consider themselves to be the guardians of the Earth and are worried by our attempts to destroy it. They refer to us as *Younger Brother* and to themselves as *Elder Brother*: *'Our generation knew our cleverness would be our undoing . . . it was our children, born into the twenty-first century, who could truly see it was not a bullet to our heads that would kill us, but the seeping of poison into our bloodstreams. It is too late now. We have almost killed the Mother, just as the Kogi foresaw. We are killing her with our ignorance and ugliness'*. I can't help but think of the many school children around the world who marched in protest to help protect the planet in 2019.

When I re-read the first few pages of *Twenty Twenty*, I posted about it on social media and had similar amazed responses, with people saying they wanted to order and read the book, or re-read it, as, like me, they hadn't read it since it was first published. Suddenly this book, that had lain dormant for twenty odd years, came alive in the interest it was beginning to attract. As a result, I decided to republish it in the year it was set and in the same month it was published in 1995.

Twenty Twenty is semi-autobiographical: the main character, the 'Author', is 63 years old in 2020, as Nigel would have been. He is a Professor of Creative Writing at the University where he lives in Vancouver, Canada. Nigel and I were planning to move there at the time he was penning this novel, as he had applied to lecture at the University of British Columbia. His wife's name, Carla Shoal (which Nigel references in his Ph.D as more or less an anagram of my name)

is also loosely based on me: she's an Asian TV presenter with an English accent and a diamond stud in her nose; at the time of writing I was a Broadcaster with BBC Television and I still wear that diamond stud! Reading about our life together in these pages, or rather what could have been had he not died, I felt and continue to feel a range of emotions, including a deeper level of grief for the twenty years of living that exist in this book, but not in true life. Nigel's life was a spiritual quest, which in part, led him to take his own life in November 1999. To read references of this in this book made for painful reading: *'I was longing for something with no form. It made no difference what I tried: from alcohol to fame, nothing made the difference. Carla's patience was tested: I had everything a happy man should have. What was the problem? How could I explain that the home I was seeking was that of selflessness . . . I wanted to not exist . . . experience unity'*.

In the process of republishing *Twenty Twenty*, I have had to forensically proofread his work, and in some sense this activity has brought him alive in me as I give his work new life. At times it's as if he's in the room with me, guiding my hand and inspiring the actions that have had to be taken in order to undertake this project. Nigel said he wanted his writing to change the way the reader sees the world, to help us to find freedom. *Twenty Twenty* is a result of that intention. I see it as his wake up call to humanity - particularly pertinent for the times we are currently living in.

In my opinion, this quote from Nigel's Ph.D. sums up the message of this book: *'I believe the consequences are clear enough: consider yourself a bag of bones separate from your environment, and you will have the moral immunity to treat the world and its contents as things. Taken to its extreme we have alienation and its concomitant fallout: crime, neurosis, the trashing of the environment. However, 'see' yourself as a leaf from a tree, quasi-autonomous perhaps, but essentially connected, and (so I wanted to propose) natural harmony will result.'*

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It is an honour and a privilege for me to re-launch my late husband's work back into the world, twenty years after his untimely death and I hope, somewhere, he's smiling.

Sahera Chohan

August 2020

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This is it. Seven hours of bone-shaking, freezing ride through almost total white-out, and here I am. Tulkina. I can hardly believe I've made it. From a distance I wasn't sure; the blankness has been playing tricks on my eyes and at first the village winked in and out of sight like a mirage, white roofs and walls appearing and disappearing against the backdrop of snow. But now I'm closer I can see its familiar ugliness is real: power lines criss-crossing the sky, squat bungalows like the shanty towns I had flown over the day before. Civilisation.

I drive past a triangular sign stuck into an oil drum and weighted down with rocks. Tulkina, pop.143 it says. The number clicks over in my mind as I drive past: 144. Into the village and I'm in the street's embrace, looking left and right at the buildings. The settlement is low and flat and desolate, but I don't think I've ever been so pleased to see the handiwork of an architect. I hate myself for my irresolution. Here I am, the first day of my new life and I face the very thing I'm running from with the idiot grin of a junkie.

Telegraph poles line the road like crucifixes, black against the snow, their lines slack and swaying in the wind. From where I am, I can see that the town consists of two streets, laid out in a giant cross. Pausing at the junction, I kill the engine and open the cab door to listen, but my ears are ringing. It's too cold to keep the door open for more than a moment, so I slam it and then realise I was warned against switching off the engine. I pump the gas pedal and then press the ignition button. The halftrack roars into life, starting up its rattling again. It's so cold up here, people keep their motors running for six months rather than face the task of unthawing a frozen engine.

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The street is almost as wide as it is long. The snow is unmarked, no sign of the other one hundred and forty-three residents. Jack said a lot of folk had left; more polar bears than people, he told me. Should suit you fine.

I drive down the street, steering with my elbows, my fingertips in my mouth. The cold is slowing down my thoughts. The most extraordinary landscape I've ever seen, and my mind is as blank as the snow. Every building looks the same: flimsy white-walled things that look like retirement bungalows. I pause in front of one and look through its window, but it seems empty, what sort of people live here? This is supposed to be Canada, the year 2020, and I could be on the moon for all I recognise.

You can't miss the factory, he said. A two-storey white building on the end. I pass boarded-up shop fronts, snow drifts half way up their windows, metal shutters padlocked against God knows what. A movement catches my eye, a length of detached clapboard swinging in the wind.

I'm out of my depth and I know it. I'm a speck on a map, a hundred and sixty miles from the nearest town. Seven hours into the Arctic, and scared out of my mind. Nobody told me it would be like this. I lost the road from Inuvik three times, only aware I was driving over the tundra because my compass said so. I had to retrace my tracks, inching along with the headlights on, not daring to think about what would happen if I lost them. Three times I found my way back to the road, sweating in spite of the cold. Perspiration cooled down the inside of my shirt and though I stuffed a hand towel against my skin, my back is still clammy. The warmth of the air heater doesn't get past my ankles.

But at least I've arrived. This is what I was looking for, the huge horizon, the scraped clean landscape. I want to take my mask off and breathe the air, but the cab is full of diesel fumes and I'd probably throw up. Gasoline: another thing I'm reacting to.

The end of the street opens into a snowfield. This is as far as I can go. Any further north and I'll be off the map. But there it is on the end, unbelievable - Berry Lofgren's Twine Works. How many thousand miles have I come? A miracle I have

found it.

I stop the halftrack and rub the fog off the windscreen with the back of my hand. It's a factory, just as he said. Square as a sugar cube, big as a castle; two storeys. And the last building on the block, nothing between me and the north pole but snow. A sudden gust rocks the vehicle, gritty snow thrown against the windscreen.

The ice rink in front of me is the Beaufort Sea, nothing to mark where the land ends and salt water begins. It's beautiful, in a frightening way. This was here all the time, this frozen backdrop, more space than I've ever seen. Why didn't I come here before? Why wait until I was suffocated by the city? The snow is baby blue, like the sky on a spring day. In the distance it edges into white, the only marks in its uniformity caused by the shadows of pressure ridges off shore, mounds of ice forced upwards like waves. Animals live in this desert, I realise, human beings as well. And I thought the hothouse I have come from was everything.

There's a kind of covered docking area to the side of the factory, so I park in it and leave the engine running. I check the outside temperature: minus 28. They told me at the airport that the weather should be getting warmer from now on. But don't blink they said, or you'll miss summer. I study the walls before I get out, waiting for the exhaust fumes to disperse. Concrete blocks, smeary hand marks over the whitewash, a painted sign: ALL VISITORS TO REPORT TO OFFICE. A stack of tyres is in the corner, a red oil-can perched on top. I struggle into my down-filled jacket. The price tag is still attached to the sleeve and I snap it off. They cheated me in Inuvik, charging me ten per cent surtax because I couldn't pay hard cash, but I couldn't care less. That is the last time I will ever be cheated. I am free now, free from ambition and automobiles and money and talking. I have washed my hands of society. From now on, it's me. Nothing will break my silence. I pull my lumberjack hat on, take a deep breath and open the van door. Here I go.

The cement floor is icy, and the first foot I place on the ground slips from under me. I twist and catch myself against the door handle, tearing an L-shaped rip in the arm of the jacket. Shit. I steady myself and then the cold hits me like a

body-tackle. I cling onto the door, but the skin of my fingers is sticking to the metal and I have to let go.

I put on my gloves and pull the hat tighter onto my head. An image comes to me: freezing to death, mummified like a mammoth in a glacier. They'd find me in ten thousand years time, after all this is over, alien scientists defrosting my corpse: *homo nonsapiens*. Good luck to them, they are welcome to every last frozen corpuscle.

Steadying myself against the walls, I gingerly explore the ground floor. It feels as though somebody is pressing a line of ice cubes to my belly, but it's just where I haven't buttoned the wind flap over the zip. The cold is pinching my face and my vision is sparkling with tears. Through a doorway I can see a drive-in loading bay. Ice has drifted against one wall, melted and then refrozen, looking rotten like the insides of a defrosting freezer. Wooden pallets and a mound of unidentifiable vegetable matter are piled against the wall of an office. It looks as though it has been deserted for years. I can feel the cold coming through the soles of my boots, so I stamp my feet.

The silence after the constant row of the halftrack seems complete. I feel like the last man on earth, so cold I could be naked. I was warned against the wind, but I didn't imagine anything like this. There's nothing to stop it blowing as hard as it likes - no hills, no trees, no buildings. I hurry round to the back, almost losing my footing on the corner, and find the generator where Jack said it would be, in a lean-to by the back door. The doors have been painted green and pink, and are held together by a frayed length of nylon string. I have to take off my gloves to unknot the string, and within seconds my fingers refuse to bend, useless as frozen sausages. I scrabble at the knot, and then yank at it until the string frays into nothingness. I open both doors wide and shelter behind one of them. Even with my gloves back on, my hands have lost all their feeling. I've never felt so cold in my life.

The generator looks like a giant cockroach dipped in treacle. Jack was worried that I wouldn't be able to get it started, and I can see why now. If I can't get this thing working, it's going to be candlepower and seal fat lanterns.

I wipe the grime off the fuel gauge - half full. Jack made me

bring a ten-gallon drum of gasoline, but it looks like I won't need it for a while. My calf muscles are so tight with the cold they hurt. I jog on the spot, looking for its start button. I feel as though I'm in the grip of a huge animal, squeezing the life out of me.

I turn the fuel on and press what looks like a button, but nothing happens. Forcing myself to concentrate, I try to work out how the thing functions. There's a mystery here I don't understand. I trace the fuel line from the tank to the body of the beast, but the only thing I recognise is a spark plug. I wipe it with a rag and replace the cap, but it makes no difference. I'm tired and cold and it's time a miracle happened.

Suddenly I can feel fear snapping at my heels. I can remember being a child, cliff scrambling at the seaside, climbing up to a ledge and getting stuck. Can't go up, can't go down. It's a long drop and I'm praying to God to get me out of this mess, vowing never to do anything so stupid again.

Now what have I gotten myself into? I could be at home, in a warm bubble, watching the end of civilisation on TV, but here I am fumbling with numb fingers in a shed in the middle of nowhere.

Not even two weeks ago, I was living my life according to plan. A year or two from compulsory retirement, pension fund at the ready, comfortable home. And then I started sneezing.

I straighten up and smear the tears of cold from my eyes. I'm not used to physical threat. I can't believe that if I don't get this generator working, my life could be in danger. I laugh in spite of myself. My life *is* in danger - guaranteed.

Then I spot the crank handle. It's like an old Model T. It doesn't want to turn at first, but I push against it until it moves, and then jerk it into action. Two more turns on the handle and it coughs into life.

I hurry out of the shed while the machine disappears in a cloud of acrid smoke. I make sure I'm upwind of it, and watch until the smoke clears and I'm sure that the shed hasn't caught fire. The generator is chugging erratically, pausing to clear its throat, but after a minute it settles down to a steady hum. I kick the doors shut and then hurry round to the front of the building. My exposed skin - an inch between the bridge of my nose and

my eyebrows - is burning, my eyes watering so badly I have to blink almost constantly.

Jack said a service elevator would take me to the second floor. I find it in the corner and the door opens when I press the button. Bravo - electricity! The lattice gate is fixed with a padlock, and I try the most likely looking key from the bunch Jack gave me. The steel padlock is too cold to hold for long, even with my gloves, and I have to jiggle the key into place. It opens easily, and I push the gate back. I can smell diesel even through the mask, so I stay on the threshold. The elevator is like a small room, its metal sides scored with marks from a forklift. Only one way: up. My toes are curling under the grip of the cold. So I go back to the truck and start unloading.

I would have come with nothing, but Jack insisted on compiling a list for me. He's done a good job. There's something we're bound to have forgotten, but I haven't discovered it yet. I was reluctant to buy more stuff. The tyranny of shopping is one of the things I was glad to escape, but I guess it was sensible: food and water, solar still, pneumatic mattress, hollowfibre quilt, silk underclothes. Medication. Together with the hire of the halftrack, it has cost me an arm and a leg, but what price Custer's last stand?

A little bit of exercise and I'm warmer already. I pause from unloading the van and take off my mask. The air is sparkling with tiny ice crystals, and it's too cold to inhale, so I take nips of air, trying to smell what's on offer. Nothing - just coldness. I pause to listen, but there is no sound other than the muffled drone of the generator.

Calculating food intake on a calorie per day basis, I have enough canned and dried food for one month. I was assured that there would be a local store, but it's nearly thirty years since Jack was last here, and things look quieter than he described. A month is enough, anyway.

I put my mask back on, and go up in the elevator. The machine wheezes and judders, but it gets me to the second floor. I pause before I press the button to open the doors. I've come fifteen hundred miles on the strength of a childhood memory, so let's hope Jack remembers well. He had inherited the factory from Uncle Berry - dead five years, but out of

business twice that long. Jack used to play here as a kid, helping the machine operators load the twine, being teased by Eskimo women with unpronounceable names, scared to death of the black rats that used to live in the bales of hemp. The keys had been sent with a bundle of letters and a collection of mildly pornographic nineteenth century postcards via a lawyer. Jack was a good friend, he wasn't about to refuse my request, but I could see he wasn't too happy. We went through the motions of agreeing how long I would stay, but nobody was fooled. I wanted to reassure him that when the time came I would leave it tidy, but how do you form the words in your mouth?

I jab the button to open the door and slide open the gate. The first impression is one of size. The room is probably sixty feet long, twenty feet wide. Windows line two sides; the street and the snow field. The lift doors want to shut, so I wedge them open with a heavy box of canned food, and step into the room.

I can't believe I'm going to live here for the rest of my life. It's a factory, for Christ's sake, fifteen foot ceiling, half an acre of wooden floorboards. The floor is grey with dirt and littered with spools of twine. Some kind of dusty machinery is jumbled at both ends of the room. Empty tea chests, cardboard boxes bulging with ledgers and files, burlap bags - doubtless home to the famous black rats. It's going to take me weeks to make it habitable. And there are probably twenty things I'm allergic to here.

I walk to the windows at the far end and look out. They were designed for illumination, not the view. This is north-facing, looking over the bay. It's like being on a ship on a misty day, the join of the horizon invisible; just a pale grey void. I could be facing a whitewashed wall for all the difference it makes.

Carla tried to persuade me to see the medics, but I dismissed the sneezing as a summer cold. I wasn't about to admit anything. When the rash appeared I kept it a secret from her and made an appointment for the Test.

It was a day like any other. It was dry so I cycled to work, a couple of tutorials in the afternoon, and then an appointment with the university doctor. The Test takes thirty seconds; half a minute to turn a life around. The results were no surprise. I was

issued with a mask, given an appointment with a counsellor and a prescription for the pharmacy. The doctor declined to shake my hand when I thanked him for his time. My card would be amended as soon as I was out of the room: INFECTED.

In the corridor I pocketed the mask. Illegal, I know, but I wasn't ready to advertise my health status. I strolled outside, calm as ever. It was when I found my bike had been stolen that something tore inside me. It wasn't as though it hadn't happened before. The third time, in fact. I didn't bother to report its loss, instead I went to the bus stop, caught the bus and sat at the back. When we passed my road I didn't move. By that time some part of me had already decided I would never go home again. I turned to watch the bus stop receding as we drove off, and then I just sat and looked out of the window. The sun was shining, it was just another day. We drove through the suburbs, an area I knew well enough, but it was as though I was seeing it for the first time. The roads, the neat houses, the gardens.

I had no idea how long the journey would last. I wasn't really thinking. We drove for a couple of hours, people getting on and getting off. The suburbs seemed to go on for ever, a gradual degradation until it was one ghetto after another. The road became so bumpy with the pot-holes I had to hold onto my seat. I wondered how I could have lived in a city for twenty-five years and never seen this side of it.

Some Hispanic kids got on and started making threatening noises, swinging from the straps in front of me, calling me names, but I was too tired to take much notice. I thought of showing them my mask to frighten them off, but they were probably infected themselves.

Some time in there my phone rang, but I didn't answer. Carla, I expect, checking where I was. I just let it ring, meeting the annoyed stare of an old woman who turned in her seat to look at me.

At the last stop, the driver switched off the engine and told me I had to get off. I was the only remaining passenger and the driver waited impatiently as I walked the length of the bus. I was in no hurry. I neither knew where I was nor where I was going. I paused to have a word with him, but he'd switched his intercom off and only stared at me, just as the old woman had

done. For a moment I wondered if there was something about my appearance I was unaware of - perhaps my infection was visible to everybody? I asked him where I was, but he couldn't hear me, and made no effort to switch on his intercom. Presumably all he heard was the muffled voice of an old man mouthing something through half inch glass.

I went to a cheap hotel and checked in. I had only the clothes I stood up in, a briefcase with my students' assignment cards and a reader. Hotel Belleview, room 306: the belle view was of a football field, which I sat and stared at until it was dark. I phoned Carla and told her the news. She cried. I refused to tell her where I was.

I smashed my phone to pieces on the mock fireplace of my room and considered ways to kill myself. I suppose I slept that night. On the second night it rained. It was years since I had walked in the rain, but now there was nothing to stop me. I walked round the football field, my head tilted back, my mouth open, tasting the bitterness of the rain. Crossing the road back to the hotel, a car swerved to try and run me over.

When the hotel owner saw how wet I was he took a pistol from under the counter and told me to leave. He kept the gun on me while a bellboy fetched my case from the room. It was the first time I experienced the power the plague gives its victims.

My reactions had been getting so bad I had to leave the hotel anyway. Weals had appeared under the skin on my legs. They itched like hell, and as I stood dripping in the foyer, scratching one leg against another, the discomfort was all that mattered. I couldn't think about the future.

And then I remembered Jack and his uncle's factory. I got in touch with him and explained I needed a holiday. No point in scaring him over the phone. He knew the sound of a man in trouble, and didn't ask me about it. When I collected the keys from him that night, he could see the state I was in. I did him the courtesy of wearing my mask, and waiting on his porch. He did me the courtesy of not asking how long I'd been infected. He compiled a list of things I would need, explained how to find the factory and then drove me to the airport. Brave man.

I managed to book a flight for the next morning. My

datafile had already been changed. Nobody said anything, but I was allocated a seat in the secluded zone of the airplane. Another advantage of my changed status, I had the place to myself.

I ate nothing on the plane. I was beginning to discover the extent of my reactions. Milk was out. Flour products. Coffee. I drank bottled water and stared through the window, imagining myself a tiny person flying over a beach at low tide. It went on and on and on. Sometimes we passed over settlements like elaborate sandcastles, and then it went white. The first sight of snow was like surf. And here I am.

My skin is already tingling with all the dust in the air. The dust is penetrating my mask, making the base of my nose itch. I haven't seen so much filth for years.

In the corner is a door. It's unlocked, and I open it. It's supposed to lead to a fire escape, but the metal staircase has come adrift from the wall and is hanging uselessly in space. The drop to the snowy ground is twenty-five feet. This snow is as hard as cement, enough of a fall to break a leg. I shut the door and turn to face the room.

'Perfect.'

Judging from the angle, you are lying on your back, staring upwards. It's so dark, you could be outside, but you know the walls of the hut surround you. So easy to get lost in here. You count seven concentric rings of reed woven into the thatched roof, circles within circles. You guess there are more, but the conical roof disappears in smoke and darkness. The murmuring of conversation from the shadows is like an erratic engine running. No good focusing on the sound, it's dipping in and out of auditory threshold level. A rooster crows outside. It must be morning. Letting your eye drift upwards with the smoke from the four fires, you slip past the cross-beams of the roof and through the gap at the apex. You can't be more than six inches across to make it through the chimney vent. The smoke is plausible, but no unpleasant stinging in the eyes. Out in the open, you breathe deeply, smelling the morning: a fresh lettuce thrust into your face.

Nice one, Jarnier.

You see your words print out as you speak them - blue subtitles across the bottom of your vision.

Up.

You let yourself go higher and higher, floating twenty, fifty, a hundred feet above the hut. Looking down, you assess the regularity of the compound: a wheel of thatched huts, the larger meeting house as their hub, a streamer of smoke being pulled from its pronged chimney vent. Beaten earth, a black pig nuzzling in a heap of vegetable compost. Two palominos tied to a post. It's cooler up here. You rise further still, the ground becoming hazy as you glide above the jungle flanks of the mountain. A macaw screeches below you and to your left. Layers of mist hang like cobwebs between the trees. Higher

still, and you're in low cloud, your skin prickling with the cold damp.

Stop.

You roll onto your back, tempted to close your eyes and sleep here. But it's uncomfortably fresh, almost burning your lungs as you breathe in.

The two operators hadn't seen Dr Beecham come in, and when he spoke, they looked up in surprise.

'What's going on?' Beecham said, referring to the screen.

'He's lost in cloud.'

The project director watched the high resolution screen for a moment. Glimpses of trees were visible through the mist, but there was no telling where he was. 'How long has he been in?'

'Forty-seven hours, fourteen minutes.'

'And sleep?'

'Just under eight hours in three periods.'

Beecham wished he had that sort of energy. He was sleeping more and more recently, afternoon naps as well. Old age was catching up on him. He pushed back his old-fashioned spectacles and nodded at the screen. 'How long has this been going on?'

'A couple of minutes. He's tiring. Getting clumsy.'

Something had gone wrong with the air-conditioning. This was the third time in as many weeks that maintenance had had to be called out. If only they were allowed to open the windows, at least some of the desert breeze would stir the stuffy air, but until the air-con was fixed everyone would just have to sweat in their one-piece, disposable suits.

The temperature was nothing compared to what William had gone through over the last two days. Jarnier had ruled out ambient temperature control. This was to be as authentic as they could get, and if he was in a South American rainforest, he would have to stew. No tourist comforts here; the only parameters in the program were those of Jarnier's imagination. There was a control override. They weren't going to risk losing a valuable test pilot through stupidity, but the haptic feedback mechanism could snap a human arm as easily as a twig. But it wasn't the exoskeleton which posed the problem, the danger

was in such extended immersion. Nearly forty-eight hours, Beecham knew he was pushing his luck, but there was no secret about his remit: iron out the kinks in the system and see how much their best pilot could take. If they stood any chance of selling this on the open market, they would have to convince the HSE it was safe. Any more civilian casualties and Omnisens could be litigated out of business.

The director walked to the data bank and ran his eyes over the read-outs. Temperature, heart beat, brain waves, blood sugar level. William's core temperature was 35 degrees and dropping. With bodily activity lowered, even the best test pilot's metabolism turned sluggish. If this ever made it as a commercial program, they would have to do something about that. A visual display, probably. Likewise nutrient and liquid levels. William had lost 250 grams of body fluids in the heat of the hut, and though he may have thought he was sucking up moisture from the cloud, the vapour existed only as minute electrical impulses. The sweat in his suit had vacuum-dried as soon as it had left his body; if his salt level dropped any further, he'd have to be signalled to take a drink. It hadn't taken them long to learn that the body would forget itself once lost in a synthetic reality.

The monitor above their heads showed a mass of swirling grey and white clouds. William was supine at an altitude of seventy-two metres, and rising again. Much longer, and he'd be off the program.

The pilot was young and in good shape, no sign yet of dislocation. He could probably endure a lot more of this, but it was too early to be reckless. He pulled the microphone towards himself. 'William. This is Dr Beecham. Respond, please.'

He glanced at the screen, watching the sentence appearing as surtitles above the swirling cloud. Damn this computer, it could never spell his name right: it had come out as 'Beechum' again.

Confirmation took a few seconds to come. The longest Beecham had tried deep immersion was a couple of hours. He couldn't imagine how disorientating it must be for these youngsters. A couple of days in a make-believe universe, it was a wonder more of them didn't crack up. The test pilot's reaction

time was slowing, but he was still on his toes.

Beecham had flown simulators in the early days, worked on the early reality engines, but his first deep immersion in virtuality shocked him. When the face mask was pulled off, he felt as though he'd been suddenly awakened from a dream. He'd pretended to recover quickly, but it was seconds before he could function, minutes before he could shake free from the experience. If a couple of hours could do that, he could see how extended immersion could loosen the tiny screws that hold our reality together.

Ready.

'Get out of that cloud, and stop clowning around.'

Yes, sir.

Beecham watched a second screen. It showed the figure of a man strapped into a complex harness. William Morrison, twenty-seven years old, graduate of Washington University and the Institute advanced training program. A lot of these young pilots were screwballs, computer addicts whose idea of fun was to spend the day in cyberspace, but those who made it to the top were frighteningly normal. There was no room in psychological endurance testing for anyone less than a complete package. Any cracks and they would fragment under the assault course that had been invented for them. Beecham disliked these elite pilots - mostly women - not just because of their absence of humour and imagination, but because of his guilt. These people were neural cannon fodder. It was only a matter of time before they were invalidated out of the company.

William had been floating there for nearly two days, his body ignored by the programmers. That was just the wetware. It was the large monitor they were interested in, computer graphics so distinct it was like looking out of a window. Eighty million polygons per second, a degree of resolution too sophisticated for the human eye. It would take an eagle with eyeglasses to appreciate the detail it was capable of offering.

Down.

The view on the monitor slid so quickly before their eyes, it was hard to see what was happening. The spinning image of a wooden hut flashed by. Digits in the upper left corner of the screen indicated he was dropping at a virtual altitude of ten

metres a second. The screen suddenly filled with fluorescent green hexagons.

'He's off the program, sir.'

'Pull him out.'

The operator tapped a couple of digits on the keyboard in front of him. 'We're going to unhook you now, William.'

There was a moment's delay before the pilot's words came from the speakers beside the screen.

Okay.

'You ready?'

Ready.

Beecham nodded for the man to go ahead. The huge monitor went blank, and their eyes turned to the second screen. Two technicians entered the test room and began detaching William from the girdle. The body suit had been designed by NASA, and it looked like it. It was an astronaut's suit, cumbersome on the ground, but in the exoskeleton you could swim like an eel, fly like a hummingbird.

'Get Dr Kinderling on the phone for me,' Beecham said. The director watched the catheter being unscrewed as he waited for Kinderling to answer his phone. He remembered the early days when teledildonics was the craze. Things had changed now. Porno had been left way behind; the new puritanism had made sure of that. Sex was for kids and deviants; the serious money was in reality holidays. And in litigation against software companies. Omnisens was surviving only because its lawyers were keeping one step ahead of the pack.

The technician handed Beecham the phone. 'Kinderling? We've taken him out. You'll be needed soon.'

'I'll be right over.'

The camera zoomed onto William's face as the helmet was eased off. He looked dazed, his face still pale from the chill of a South American cloud forest.

'Welcome back, William,' Beecham said. A two-day trip down Jarnier's brain machine; he didn't look too bad.

The young man looked round for the camera, and then gave a half-hearted company salute. 'Thank you, sir.'

The guy was perfect for a test pilot, but Beecham wouldn't want him for a drinking partner. He watched the technicians

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help him out of the suit. William couldn't stand without help, and even supported by the technicians, his legs buckled.

'He looks tired.'

Beecham turned to see Dr Kinderling, the project psychologist, watching the same screen.

'Time for you to do your bit. Let's see if it's scrambled his brains yet.'