

Opening extract from
**The 20th Century and Then
What? - A Philosophical
View of Life**

Written by
Audrey Kerry-Ward

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PROLOGUE

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Adam gazed at the skies to see the dawn breaking on the day that would bring his plans to fruition. As he had slept in a bed for the night, and not in a shop doorway, he had gained the bodily strength he needed to fulfil his purpose. The stale smell of sweat hung around his body, but today he had the luxury of a sink and water. He made his way to the washroom of the hostel carrying the last of the clean clothes that he had. How wonderful it would be to feel clean and alive again.

At the street door he stretched away the sleep of the night and took a deep breath. The ubiquitous stench of exhaust fumes was so intense that Adam had to step back into the building to let a little unpolluted air into his lungs. As he sat on a chair in the corridor his thoughts were filled with visions of good health. Having to cope with asthma was very hard and proved a hindrance to living a full life sometimes. However, he had had the condition since his early teens and had learned to live with the situation. His thoughts carried him deeper, to think of the number of babies who were born with it nowadays, and those who soon contracted asthma if they evaded it at birth.

Thoughts of his own ill health nudged memories of his life. He began to remember Jane and their life together. It seemed a lifetime, and not a mere six months ago, that they had separated. They had been reasonably happy for the four years they had been together. They had had a lovely home in a suburban area and all the trimmings of a successful couple were theirs – two large cars, huge television, video recorder, a large collection of video tapes, CD player, automatic washer, dishwasher, three telephones, two mobile phones, a boat, holidays abroad and a very large mortgage. By means of Jane's high salary as a computer advisor, and Adam's mediocre one as a laboratory technician at a drug company, they managed

their financial commitments adequately. However when he lost his job a year ago funds became inadequate and everything went wrong. He tried desperately to find another job but with over three million people unemployed, most job applications went unacknowledged.

Jane remained in her job but she was not prepared to tolerate his unemployment. She was not going to support him and continue to pay the mortgage, even though her salary was much higher than his had been. This was the age of the woman; she could manage quite well on her own without having an unemployed man in tow to drag her down. Separation came quickly and he was left with the responsibility of selling the house and finalising the finances. However houses were not selling – the market was at rock bottom, with properties remaining unsold after periods of years. No one had the money or security to contemplate house moves these days. The mortgage was already in arrears, as they had not paid it for six months because of other financial commitments. When he went to the building society to explain his joblessness, they swiftly repossessed the house. It was sold at auction at a greatly reduced price so that the building society could recover the monies outstanding to them. To his dismay he learned that there was no exoneration as to the interest incurred on the loan. Thousands of pounds were still due to be paid so this would render him a debtor for the rest of his life, even in the event of his acquiring a well-paid job. Everything else that he and Jane had owned was also repossessed when creditors learned of their plight. Homeless and in debt, he began his new life on the streets: sleeping wherever he could and begging the food he ate. He was not alone: there were thousands like him who shared the same fate.

It was a matter of principle that had lost him his job. Although the animals used for experimentation at the laboratories where he worked were fed and housed very well, their purpose was to endure suffering. He was reaching a point where inflicting this on them was making him unwell. He couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat, he couldn't think rationally. Jane, however, stepped in to do the last by impressing on him that people would die and suffer if experiments on animals were not carried out. He battled daily with his conscience, trying to persuade himself that she was right. However, one day at work he heard a horrific scream that made him shiver. "That sounded as if someone was having the skin ripped from their body," he said to a colleague, who smiled in reply – "Probably was just that, who knows what the big boys along the corridor are up to." Without hesitation, Adam left the room and began to run along the passageways. Reaching an area marked 'No Unauthorised Admittance', he waited. As he did so he recalled rumours saying that experiments on sheep, pigs, chimps, etc. were being executed within the building for the purpose

of cloning them to produce organs for human transplantation. There seemed to be jubilation amongst the workforce about the prospect as it would create great wealth for the company and the country's economy, when people around the world started to buy the hearts, kidneys, etc. that were to be produced. The scientist who arrived to tap in the entrance code to the high security unit was unaware of Adam's presence. As the door began to open he pushed the man away from it violently and took his place. The sight that greeted him beyond the doorway took his breath away as no more did he wonder about the horrific screams. The creatures that had been given life in there consisted of legless torsos showing malfunctioning organs attached to them. They were suffering an agony that only sudden death could end. Within minutes he was being held by security guards and was escorted out of the building. His job was over.

That night Jane arrived home to find him curled upon the floor crying unstopable tears, but regarded his plight as that of a loser. Like most other ladies of the age she preferred to disregard sentiment in the belief that life was to be played to be won.

Rising from the chair Adam sighed and headed for the street door again. It was five in the morning and time to move on to the long journey ahead. As usual the streets were blocked with motor vehicles. They were parked at all angles – on pavements, street corners and alleyways as though they had been dumped there, never to be retrieved. This, together with the shrieking rats that were tearing frantically into the piles of refuse in the streets and alleyways, portrayed a vision of devastation and decay. The early morning skies received no respite from attack as aeroplanes thundered across the skies, one after the other, to leave their foul-smelling fumes to pollute the atmosphere.

Adam's pace was slow going as he had to rest from time to time. He heard the bells of a distant church and realised that it was already 8am.

"Watch where you're going, mate." He had reached a main road where the vision before him had rendered him sightless for a moment. "I am sorry," he offered the man whom he had accidentally bumped into. It was crazy. The road was filled with vehicles, their horns hooting, their brakes screaming. Two cars had actually come to a standstill whilst their owners stood in the road shouting at each other – then they began to fight. Other vehicles were swerving around the situation, blaring their horns as they went. Adam absorbed this familiar sight with the increasing belief that the average motorist depicted the failure of the human race.

Another half an hour on and he had reached the High Street of the city where throngs of people marched to and fro. Some were there just for sake of shopping, whilst others were 'pre-work' shoppers. The only venues left for this pursuit were the large superstores, where everything from a pin to a penguin could be bought.

The small shops had each in their time been forced to close with the coming of a competition they couldn't match. Shopping for most had developed into a kind of religion – no longer was it just a case of necessity.

Adam stopped and looked through the large window of the superstore. Inside people were being shackled to wheeled trolleys and then, quickly and unsmilingly, joined to lines of others. They were all shoving each other; frantically reaching out at the items piled high on the shelves. Soon their trolleys were laden to the top. Piped music percolated through ceiling-high speakers. At three-minute intervals the music was stopped whilst promotions were announced. Rote-trained voices told that fish was selling at well below market prices today, whilst dustbins were being offered with £2 off. Feet immediately clambered to the left and to the right, ambitious to secure the items before stocks ran out and depression set in. At the checkout tills, queues of people were stamping their feet, waving their hands, and shaking their heads. Anguished words were being exchanged between customers as to their rights of service priority. The sense of urgency hung savagely in the atmosphere; there was no time for delay. The clock was ticking away these people's lives – they had so much to do with little time left to do it.

Walking on, Adam had to pass the back of the store where cars were parked. There he saw a hotchpotch of squashed and dented shopping trolleys. The speeding motorists, who were so intent on reaching the exit points, did not seem to notice the innocent, abandoned vehicles, even as they drove into them.

Moving on, he pondered the movement of time where the week had become a day and a day an hour. As for the minute itself, well this had become extinct when everybody realised that they had none to spare to give to anyone else.

Back on the main road his thoughts were shattered by the sudden sound of gunfire assaulting his ears. Further ahead was a young man running along the pavement. In his hand was a revolver smoking with the shots it had fired. The pavement was strewn with bodies – some still, some moving. People were diving into doorways or passageways trying to escape the bullets. No one was saved; the young man's aim was accurate. People dropped to the ground one by one. Whilst Adam had seen newspaper headlines reporting these sorts of horrific happenings, he never thought that he would witness such a scene himself. There was a telephone booth on the other side of the road but he could not reach it because of the dense march of traffic. Despite the gunfire, and the horror accompanying it, no vehicles had come to a halt. The speeding, weaving and hooting continued on both sides of the road. He would have to go in search of another booth on his side so that he could call the police. Doubling back on himself he ran as fast as his breathing would permit. He could see another booth in the distance. Reaching it, he gasped for breath before stepping inside. The telephone dangled before him – the coin box was

missing. A robotic voice gurgled from the mouthpiece, “Out of order – out of order – out of order”. He remembered the superstore – there would be a telephone there that had not been vandalised.

On his way back to the store he found a little smirk lurking in his mind. He was thinking of the telecommunication system, recalling how difficult it was to speak to a human being by telephone. Phones these days were answered by technological robots that requested that one tap a series of numbers into the telephone, to give, or access, information required. He recalled the occasions when this time-consuming procedure had left him so frustrated that he had slammed down the phone, particularly so if his call had been answered with a recorded message saying – “there is a queuing system, please hold the line,” followed by recorded music and advertising slogans. On top of this, frustration had increased knowing it was he who was paying for this wasted call. His thoughts made him stop in his tracks and turn back. He never wanted to make any more telephone calls, and what was the use of contacting the police anyway – by the time they had weaved their way through the congested traffic, the gunman would have shot everyone in sight and escaped the scene of the crime. He shrugged his shoulders and realised that he was succumbing to the attitude of society in general – ‘what’s the use of bothering, nothing I can do’.

Continuing his journey, he listened to the message in his footsteps. Perhaps his mind would clear once he had rid himself of the portrait of selfishness. If he could reach the countryside the touch of nature might renew his energy, and let him forget the people who were long lost in a fever of consumership and greed.

Though many vehicles had left the sanctuary of parking spaces, the back roads were still cluttered with immobile cars. The only sounds were from moving traffic in the middle of the roads – aeroplanes in the sky – car alarms – and blue-flashing, screaming burglar alarms on houses. There were no sounds of people. All the roads that Adam had walked along had been empty of human life. There were rows and rows of houses, but all gave the appearance of vacancy behind the closed silent doors. It was like walking through a ghost town. His loneliness would have cherished communication with another person. Just a ‘hello’ or ‘nice day’ would have spurred him on, whereas a smile from someone could have inspired him to think that life was worth living after all. But then another sound filled his ears. It was the grouped voices of children – a noise seldom heard these days. Because of reports of children being murdered, raped or abducted, parents were afraid to allow their kids to play out on the streets anymore. Instead, fun-seeking was now a solitary activity for children, with television and the computer their only companions. As he walked on he remembered the time of his own childhood and that of children throughout history. Times when groups of children played happily together in the

roads, repeating games that their own parents and grandparents had played. Hopscotch, marbles, rounders, cricket, cowboys and indians, tick, top and whip, doctors and nurses, mummies and daddies, skipping, football and a never-ending list. Most of these historic games were being lost to time.

He reached the source of the voices – a school playground. He dared not stand and watch the children in case an adult attendant saw him as a potential child offender. His thoughts sank to the pit of despair. How very sad that the trust we should learn to have for each other had been reduced to the total mistrust of everyone. No longer did the measure of good outweigh the measure of bad. Walking slowly he allowed himself to observe the children in the playground. They looked so pale and lethargic. Many of them were gasping for breath – some were pulling inhalers out of their pockets and applying them to their mouths. The government, and health authorities, repeatedly insisted to the public that asthma was caused mainly by cigarette smoke. Adam reflected his own asthmatic condition and its exacerbation when he was subjected to the horrors of vehicle exhaust fumes. Smiling, he pondered the number of people who chose to disregard the real problem of the nation's failing health, for surely air pollution could not be masked indefinitely. He heard one child shout to another, "I am not allowed to run about – it might damage my heart, I could have a heart attack". Adam could not believe his ears. Six, seven and eight year olds showing the stress and neurosis of their elders. Why should this be when all a child should know is fun and laughter? Could it be because of the pressure of the classroom where a child is made to learn those things beyond the comprehension of its own mind? Where it is made to conform to the rules of government and powers beyond, stating that all children must be at a certain level of learning at specific ages? That all children should be the same? Having succeeded in taking away the individuality of the public in general, was it now the beginning of cloning the next generation? He pitied the kids' lot in life. Already their freedom of living was controlled, with restrictions never before imposed on children throughout the history of the human race. The whistle blew and the children began their miserable march back to the classroom where they would stay until home time, when waiting parents would bundle them into cars for the journey home.

It felt as if the sun was becoming hotter and Adam's feet were beginning to burn. He sat on a nearby wall, a handkerchief protecting his head. Everyone was being urged to stay out of the sun. The reduction of the ozone layer meant that now there was little protection from the sun's rays. There was much warning that they could rapidly cause skin cancer. This was just one of the many health risk warnings that came daily from the media. The government and health authorities were so intent on implementing preventative healthcare schemes that the country was in a

permanent state of neurosis. When he stood to walk on, he could hear the radios of passing cars. Warnings were being issued about the weather. The announcements stated that with the heat of the day, and the lack of wind, carbon dioxide levels were dangerously high and could cause death. People were being urged not to use their cars unless it was really necessary. But then, how else could they get from A to B? The public transport systems were only readily available on main routes, and fares were unaffordable anyway.

“Do you want a nice time love?” The voice behind him brought Adam quickly back to reality. He looked round and saw a girl at his heel. She was small and pretty, and looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old. She smiled sweetly at him.

“Do you not want a nice time then?” she said. He innocently smiled back at her.

“I am sorry, what do you mean?”

Between the moment of his asking and her answering, he knew exactly what she meant. He could not believe that a little girl was asking him if he wanted sex with her. “I am sorry,” he said, “I don’t want a nice time.”

She turned away from him and walked away raising two fingers in the air as she went. He looked about him and realised that he was walking through an estate of houses. His questioner was not the only girl he saw. There were several young ladies standing at different points along the road. He watched them approach slowing cars, and climb into the passenger seats as vehicles stopped.

Through the open doors of houses he passed, he observed groups of young people lying about on furniture or floors. Their faces looked blank as he walked by unobserved. Further along the road, young men sat on pavement edges. Some of them were talking in blurred speech whilst others leaned one against the other saying nothing. They looked at him without expression as he approached – a syringe lay on the floor beside them. The drugs they had used had not yet taken over their whole being. It would be later when their nightmares would begin to render their minds out of control. This would be the time when crimes of theft, murder or rape might occur.

“What are you staring at?” a voice came behind him. He turned to see a tall well-built man standing there. He felt apprehensive but ventured to speak.

“I suppose I’m wondering just what makes people sink to this level”.

“Are you now,” the man gruffed, “I suppose you’re round here looking for a bit of pleasure. Don’t suppose you know what it is like never to have had a job or had anyone to care for you. Don’t suppose you’ve ever been in a no-hope situation.”

Adam smiled at the man and asked him to have a good look at him. Then he

told him his own story. The man's attitude quickly changed and he slapped Adam on the back.

"I'm sorry mate, but all the same you have at least tasted the good life."

A large car drew up at the kerbside and the man glanced over his shoulder.

"Don't look up," he warned.

Four men got out of the car and looked about them. Two of them made their way up the front path of one of the houses whilst the other two scurried around to the back. When they had gone the man tugged at Adam's sleeve.

"Don't look back. Just keep walking."

The sound of gunfire echoed behind them and shouting was heard. Without conversation, the two of them walked the length of two roads. At the third, the man tugged at Adam's sleeve again.

"Not safe for you to walk on your own - better come home with me for a while."

The man opened the gate of a property numbered 17 and ushered Adam along the path. Inside the house, he made a pot of tea for them both and explained the happenings they had just witnessed. The men who had alighted from the car were some of the big boys in the drug world. The house they visited would have been that of a drug dealer who owed them money. Without preamble they would have gained access to the house and killed the offending debtor.

"It's not usually guns they use," he told Adam, "they're too noisy. "Knives are their favourite weapons, quieter you see?"

"It happens a lot then?" Adam asked.

The man nodded "Oh yes, all the time, it's a drug empire around here. Nearly all the kids are on them and there's a dealer on every corner making a fortune out of them."

"But how do they pay for them if they haven't got jobs?"

"Honestly mate, were you born yesterday? By selling their bodies and thieving, what else? Girls round here are prostitutes from the age of eight upwards. Mothers too; they are all on the game. And the lads? Well thieving is all they know, same as their dads, uncles and friends."

"What about the police, don't they do anything?"

The man shook his head. "What can they do mate? The only way the police are going to catch anyone at it is to have a tip-off, and no one's going to risk getting shot or knifed are they? Anyway they're just after the big boys aren't they? The drug kings so to speak. Mind you, if they succeed in catching any of them what happens? They get them into a courtroom and some clever-speaking lawyer gets them off the hook. It's a charade right enough."

It was Adam's turn to shake his head.

“Yes, you’re right there”.

The man continued, “The drug problem is so widespread that it would take an army of police to curb it. It’s completely out of hand. Even little kids in primary schools are into it now”.

Adam sighed, “It’s frightening to realise that children are committing horrible crimes as it is. What will happen if they become drug addicts as well?”

“I know – children used to be taught the difference between right and wrong and knew they had to suffer a punishment if they broke the rules. Now there’s no punishment for them. If they break the law the police can do nothing about it. All they can do is take them into custody for a few hours then they have to release them, because the law states that juvenile offenders can’t be punished. If they break the law at their school there’s nothing the teachers can do either, because they’re not allowed to enforce punishment. At the end of the day children have been given a licence to do anything they want to do. I never thought I would see the day when a whole society could be terrorised by kids. It doesn’t bear thinking about but that’s the way it is.”

Adam nodded his head in agreement and then stood to leave. The man stood too.

“I’ll walk with you until you’re off the estate, too dangerous for you to walk on your own,” he said.

Adam was glad to be on the open road again, and turned to wave to his protector as he walked back in the direction of the main road. The cup of tea and the rest had given him a little more strength to continue his journey. It might be nightfall before he reached the countryside but it did not matter. He could not stand another night in a makeshift bed in the centre of a smelly city – tonight he would feel the softness of the grass beneath his body as he slept.

Another hour of walking left him breathless and tired again. The heat of the sun bore down even though it was nearing the end of September. He remembered not too many years ago when the beginning of October announced the start of winter, when snow was likely to fall. Now the few flurries of snow that came soon filtered into the air without leaving a store of water to fill the reservoirs. Water was becoming scarcer and scarcer. The government had already made an official proclamation that the climate had changed. ‘Weather conditions are becoming warmer and warmer and water supplies are dangerously low’, the announcement stated. Everyone was being urged to use less water and rationing was becoming commonplace. Many trees were dying in the extreme heat, but giving them water to survive was not allowed. Despite the shortage of water, however, commercial ventures were privileged in their use of it. Car washes for instance, for whilst trees were dying, cars were being kept clean. Then there were the football and cricket

grounds – they must be ready for man’s sport at all cost, so the sprinkler systems could offer days of rain for them if needs be. Adam’s thwarted vision of man’s insanity added to the sudden fatigue that had overcome him. He could see a church on the next block. If he could find the strength to get there, he would be able to sit out of the sun for a while until he recovered.

With relief he opened the gate to the churchyard and stumbled his way over the old gravestones. He reached the door of the church only to find it locked. Crying quietly to himself he mumbled into his hands, “If this is the House of God, why does He keep His door locked?” Walking slowly backwards he looked up first to the sky and then to the church. All the windows were covered with meshed wire. On one wall there was a burglar alarm, and on the other, a security light. His tears increased to a sob as he recognised the total abandonment of love. Even the church was preaching mistrust – was there no sanctity anywhere? And why should God have treasures to protect anyway? He sat cross-legged on a gravestone; his fatigue turning to the illness he had felt for a week or so.

His aim that day was to get to the countryside and reach it he would. He sat for as long as it took to gain the strength needed, then continued with his steps slow and lumbering. He was passing a health centre now and wondered if he should go in – perhaps if the staff there saw how ill he was a doctor might give him medication. He pushed open the door to see a room full of desolate people with staring eyes. With the total absence of conversation, laughter or smiles, the whole area represented an abyss of depression. But then, wasn’t it recognised that this was the major illness of the day, and was one which would increase in the twenty-first century, so why was Adam so overcome by the vision? Making his way over to the fortified reception area, he stood to be noticed. A windowed panel was opened and a lady’s face appeared.

“Yes?” she asked.

He suggested that he might see a doctor. The rapid reply was that there were no appointments left for that day nor the day after or the day after that.

“But please, I am ill, I *must* see a doctor”.

The lady asked for his name, address and postcode. Deliriously, he gave the first and pondered the next, deciding that he could only quote his last address. Upon receiving the information she tapped it into the computer in front of her then turned to him.

“You don’t appear to be registered with us, Mr Seymour,” she said, then turned back to the computer and tapped again at the keys. “You are not listed at the address you gave, either”.

Adam coughed on his words – “Er, well – no, I used to live there but I don’t live anywhere at present”.

“Well, I’m sorry Mr Seymour, but people of no fixed abode are not entitled to be registered with a GP. Of course a doctor would see you if there were time for him to do so, but we don’t have any free appointments for the next two weeks. The only thing I can suggest is that you take yourself off to the Accident and Emergency Department at the hospital and they will attend to you.”

With this the lady closed the window panel tightly and walked away from it. Adam could not move, and felt that his feet were anchored to the floor. His vacant eyes stared into a vacuum of nothingness, whilst he pondered the human race. How had it fallen to such depths of uncaringness that people were able to turn their backs on others in need of help? How had it succumbed to the pressure that advocated that individual privacy was not a right any more, and that personal information about oneself be revealed on demand so that it might be stored in computer databases for all to access at will. He turned around slowly to see each person in the waiting room staring in his direction. However, he could see in their eyes that they were oblivious to his plight anyway. But then, a man stood and began to walk towards him.

“You all right, mate?” he asked.

Adam shook his head but tried to smile a grateful acknowledgement.

“Perhaps if I could have a drink of water!” The man took his arm and led him out of the room into the corridor.

“Wait here a minute, mate, I’ll get the key.”

Adam looked up to see a surveillance camera pointing at him and thought back to the waiting room where he had seen himself on a television screen. There were cameras spying on people everywhere – superstores, football grounds, shopping arcades, seaside promenades, airports, office blocks, blocks of flats – and now, even here in a health centre. Was there no privacy – was respect for people and life gone forever? He shrugged as he recalled a novel, called *1984*, which told of people being watched for twenty-four hours a day by cameras which operated through TV screens within their homes. Not only did the screens watch, they talked too and constantly bellowed out the instructions that the ruler of the land (Big Brother) insisted people follow to the letter. Whilst the event of such a ruler had not materialised in 1984, he reflected present times and wondered if 1996 could be the year of Big Brother’s conception.

“All right, mate?” the man returned, key in hand, and unlocked the toilet door.

Inside Adam felt relieved to detect the absence of a camera. He slouched over the sink and thrust his hands under the cold water tap. First he drank, and then he splashed his burning face with water.

“Listen, you go and sit down on the loo seat for a bit, you look as if you can’t stand much longer,” the man said.

Adam thankfully obeyed and shut the cubicle door.

“Who’d have thought that it would come to this?” the man called from beyond the door. “I mean, that a sick person can’t get treatment when it’s needed. Mind you, these days GP’s have got to devote most of their time to preventative medicine, so they don’t have much to spare to treat people with a current problem. All to do with money isn’t it? Governments want NHS spending cut and think that by doling out preventative drugs to one and all, no one will ever get sick. It’s like me; I came to see the doctor once because I was having trouble hearing. It took him fifteen seconds to discover I had wax in my ears, and for the rest of my ten minute slot, he lectured me on the perils of smoking, drinking, being overweight, not exercising and not taking preventative drugs. And do you know, he was so intent on persuading me to reform my health-destroying habits that he forgot the reason for my visit and didn’t prescribe a cure for my blocked ears.” He started to laugh uproariously.

Inside the cubicle Adam could not fail to smile at the man’s contagious laughter. Nor could he disagree with the words spoken, or wonder what the man would think of the medical future. For example, with DNA testing now established, it would be possible to predict what diseases people were likely to develop in coming years. With this system in place doctors would have the option to refuse acceptance to their list of people regarded as potentially high maintenance patients. In the past it was pot luck whether a GP’s practice had a majority of generally healthy patients on its list to constitute a lucrative business, or whether it had a majority of chronically sick people needing regular expensive medication to render the practice financially unviable. DNA testing would mean that GP practices would never again have to take this gamble.

There came a hammering on the door with a voice booming out “What’s going on in there?” The man called back harshly.

“A sick man is having a drink of water and a sit down, there’s no law against that yet is there?”

Adam unlocked the cubicle door and leaned against the frame. The man looked at him with concern.

“You all right, mate?” he said. “Take no notice of them, if you’re not ready to move yet just stay where you are. They can’t throw you in jail for it you know.”

Adam smiled and the man continued to talk.

“Mind you, that might be a good idea, at least you’d have a bed and three meals a day. Not to mention a television, sports facilities and a chance to get a degree whilst you’re in there.”

He linked his arm through Adam’s to lead him along the corridor. “I’ve heard it said that drug companies give doctors prizes for promoting their wares”, the man

said as they walked. “Not just any old prize, but holidays and the like! Wonder if that’s true?”

Instead of offering the confirmation that pharmaceutical knowledge had given him, Adam merely replied, “I wonder?”

At the street door the man again viewed Adam with concern. “Are you sure you’re going to be all right?” he asked. “I’d feel happier if I thought you’d be admitted to hospital if you weren’t.” He sighed and shook his head. “But with the way things are there’s no guarantee of that”.

Adam understood what the man was thinking because of his awareness that hospitals had to ‘close their doors’ when there was a shortage of beds. In these situations, when ambulance crews attended those who had been taken ill, or involved in an accident, they might have to journey many miles before finding an alternative hospital that could receive their patient. He turned to the man to shake him by the hand.

“I’ll be fine” he assured. “Thanks for all you have done for me. Just got to get on with life eh? Like the unfortunate hospital doctors who have the dilemma of deciding which of two patients is to be admitted to hospital to occupy one available bed”.

“True enough my friend, take care of yourself and good luck,” said the man as he waved Adam a cheery farewell.

It was nearing 5.30pm now as Adam plodded his way towards the hills. Another couple of hours and he should be there. He took a bite of the chocolate bar the man at the health centre had given him, and felt overcome at remembering his kindness. How refreshing it was to know that there was still some measure of kindness left in the uncaring world of today. He popped the bitten bar back into his pocket thinking that he would save the rest for his moments of victory.

Walking over a motorway bridge he began to cough and gasp for breath again. He leaned on the barrier hoping to breathe air. But there was no air; there was just a stale taste of pollution with the atmosphere choking with fumes. Below, eight lanes of roadway were filled with vehicles travelling at a speed no more than a standstill. Engines roared whilst exhaust pipes puffed out vapour. Long, heavy lorries formed parades of tail-holding elephants, whilst cars resembled contrasting lines of wriggling caterpillars eager to develop wings. As the heat spiralled into the sky the blasting horns heralded a road to hell. Adam escaped the bridge as quickly as his ill health would permit. The hills were there, beckoning him in the distance; he must go on.

Passing two large buildings now, he recognised them to be the baby centres. The first was the one where women came daily to acquire the abortion of unborn babies that had been conceived inconveniently. Here 75,000 tiny bodies a year,

after being stripped of their stem cells, were consigned to the belly of the incinerators for consumption. The second was the place where women came daily to conceive a child by means of artificial insemination. As long as she had the money to pay for treatment, a woman could decide how many children she would like to bear and also when she would like to do so. Furthermore, when the technology of genetic engineering became more advanced, there would be the opportunity for parents to select some of the features they would like their child to have. Then, if their babies carried genes which would render them fat, thin, small, big, homosexual, criminal, slow learning etc. these could be replaced with more suitable ones. Genes that might cause illnesses or deformities would be treated the same way, if the parents wanted the guarantee of a healthy child. For those prepared to pay the fee, the centre could also provide genetic therapy for naturally conceived babies, as well as those artificially conceived. All potential parents would be at liberty to choose the child of their needs. Adam shivered at the thought of man-made babies and wondered how these supercilious efforts to deny nature would affect the human race.

Through his gasps for breath, Adam murmured to himself, “nearly there now.” Another half an hour and he would be sitting under a tree looking down on the city. He took another bite of his chocolate bar to give him strength to climb the hill. Exhausted, he reached the top and slumped down on the grass. He smiled to himself, feeling a wave of happiness surge over him. How glad he was to have completed his pilgrimage; tonight he would be sleeping nearer the stars. He leaned his back against an old birch tree and unwrapped the remaining chocolate bar. How far away the city seemed now. In a distant field he could see the large farm buildings that were used to house animals. He remembered his childhood days, when cows and horses, chickens and goats, pigs and geese, were familiar farmyard sights and wandered freely in open spaces. Now all animals, apart from some sheep and a few dairy herds, were locked away in pens inside buildings for twenty-four hours a day. They never saw the light of day from birth till death. All they represented were eating machines, forced to consume any concoction that man chose to feed them. Hormone injections, antibiotics, genetically engineered fodder and the brains and flesh of other animals, all administered to these vegetarians in order to swell their flesh with profit.

He reflected on his thoughts of two years ago. It was then that he began to believe that it was time to re-evaluate his life. Now, here on this lonely hill, life was evaluating him. He wondered if it were not time for society itself to take a good look at its structure to ponder the future of twenty-first century people, for they faced the social and moral dilemmas that signalled that life’s purpose had been lost.

Where could the many, many people who regularly asked of life ‘what’s it all about?’ look for answers? He lay down, his eyes flickering on a sky unnaturally ablaze with fire. Circling his mind were the words, ‘the more man learns, the less he knows,’ and before his eyelids closed he said out loud, “The twentieth century – and then what?”