



EXPLORING THE CLOUDS



IT'S A SMALL WORLD. I don't have much time to find out all about it.

My despatcher, sponsor, Odette, pulls sprigs of willow from her soft hair, pushes, pulls, at my shoulder.

'Go with God,' she says. We laugh. The park is empty. I suspect we should not be here. She says:

'There's no more first person. That's finished. No more 'garden door closing softly', no more 'the ghost her father's parting gift....' No reminiscences – we all have them. Dull. No quest for justice or an ending – it's all been said. We're waiting. Bring me back – earth, blood, life. Something I can sell, diffuse – in quantities you can't imagine.'

The little waterfall makes foam, that lingers. We turn away. It's all been said.

A SWIFT TRIP TO MEXICO

'I used to be more colourful, Manlio. Now, I'm reflective.'

I talk too much, I confess: there it is.

He too reflects – maybe goes blank, scans the bus as if the voyagers are all his postulants. He says offhand:

'No! You're the same; profligate as a fruitfly. But let's move down – that guy at the end is sick. His eyes are sucked, his nose runs detergent, his trunk sags like a bag of chestnuts. I'm a doctor – I'd tell you what he has, if you could understand.'

We all squeeze away from the dying one, down the bus that bucks and squalls.

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'Pill or mushroom?' the driver said. 'Don't look up or down. You can't look out....' It's true – each window is a saint, who died for us, left a slim volume, spells you shouldn't try. Transfers block the view – blue, brown and yellow....

Manlio peers at the sick passenger: 'He's in full spate – but he will leave a skeleton that's wonderful. Clean, absolutely white. You, Torsten, what have you decided you will leave?'

'Fossilisation's too long a shot,' I say, as we stop to lay the late guy in a stratum of sphagnum mud. 'It's too protracted for me. Unpredictable too, after those dull years, the millions. I had in mind something more philosophical. Each species, as it peaks and drops, should leave its core idea carved on a redoubt. Indecipherable, perhaps. Who cares?'

'For humans – that idea's the discovery of time. They count their years, their seconds. That's their emblem: big time, long and short times. The Big Time. Time's short. As long as it takes. Space time, jail time. Time of the essence, time wasted, time revisited, time spent, time lost. Time's up. Out of time. You've had your time. It's economies. Everything must go, closing down. Sell before you starve.... The base of action and emotion, of sequence and of consequence. Everybody living knows it. Time flies. Time wounds. Wrinkles and dentures, boredom, adultery.

'But how to pass it on? To what? The discovery of what's invisible but gnaws at everything? What you know, remember, what you forget, what you give yourself and don't allow other people? What has time brought us anyway? Extinction, and an heir quite not like us at all, with buggy features, slippery skin?'

'It's true,' says Manlio, not much impressed. 'The dinos thought they were for ever; millipedes don't even need to count. They have abundance of their spares. Extinction and eternity – neither's painful.'

Death: leaves its banal thought. And – this time, it wasn't yours.

I thought Brazil was trees and mountains. Here, it's flat, there's nothing much at all. Green and yellow food: for the cows that we can't see? Or for the humans, staring at us, in ragged clothes?

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