

Long Paddock

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Hierology

There is a lot of you to start out with, all noisy and clustered in some large, central chamber. Indeed, there are so many of you that it's hard, at times, to figure out degrees of separation: who was acquainted before you all got here, where you all fit in and so on; rather, you're an umbral mass of individuals stuck against one another like grains of caviar, or bits of cereal in the morning mash.

Upon closer inspection though, once I can manage to get in amidst the noise of all that self-important chatter, you do not all appear to be completely identical. Some of you have been groomed, already, for what is to transpire hereafter, and are wearing your showiest, most eccentric clothing, and assuming the mannerisms of someone older and more educated to engulf the nervous laughter that nevertheless glows through your posturing.

Some of you, though, are more openly abashed by this scenario, perhaps those of you who came from country towns, from interstate, and even from overseas: yes, I can see you keeping to the edges of the crowd at first, darting your eyes all about and hoping, desperately, that someone will come up to you and say the first *hello*. That will be the person you stick with, for now; I see couples of you converging in certain parts of the room to trade life stories with a strange, nervous stammer, your two pairs of eyes darting about the place in tandem, seeking to join up with another pair to form a micro-cluster of newfound acquaintance, and thereby gathering strength to combat the density of this loud, strange chamber.

And those of you who appear more outlandishly garbed, and significantly louder, don't seem to stick for very long with any particular group that has formed thus far; you scramble about the place, exchanging a new name and number every couple of minutes, laughing loudly and pretending to be everybody's friend.

This goes on for a while, and without any of you realising precisely what has happened, it seems that your large, dense cluster has been divided into six or seven smaller clusters, in

which those of you who were a bit more reticent to make friends at first seem to have gradually formed. Now you circulate more freely, having identified a degree of likeness with a variety of people in each broad cluster; and yes, as a whole, all of you would appear to be much more at ease with this scenario. Those of your number who made a the most fuss and bother about meeting people at the very beginning have toned down, somewhat, and you are all beginning to establish yourselves on more individual terms. In short, I am starting to be able to tell the difference between you all.

So it's at this point, now you've stopped worrying about what other people must think of you, that you can take a proper look at the place you've all found yourselves in. It is rather a queer place, after all; the space is so engulfing that you can't tell exactly what the proportions are, and although its appearance, as a whole, is by no means grand, you find yourself slightly overwhelmed by its lustre, the promise it holds, its ineffable mysteries. Then you notice quite by accident that there are a great number of stairwells leading out through the walls: they had been there all along, since before you were ready to see them.

Some of the stairwells are as wide and ornate as might befit the entrance hall of an imperial palace, each stair tapered at the sides and decorated with rich carpets and carved balustrades; but they strike you as gaudy, somehow, and not to your taste. On the other end of the scale are minimalistic, beautifully proportioned stairwells made of engineered timbers and detailed with thick panes of greenish, reinforced glass, which are very well lit. Other stairwells are unadorned and industrial, hygienic-looking structures with rubber and linoleum fittings and a nice helpful handrail. And still more are gothicky, twisted quagmires, ancient spirals merely jutting into walls that appear curiously as though they lead to nowhere.

You take time to examine your options, for it has become abundantly clear that one of these stairwells will lead to wherever you decide you will be going. Slowly, certain of your number are peeling away from the larger groups, looking around the room for the right passage of exit and heading there, taking surreptitious glances behind all the way to see if anybody is following. One by one, all of you are making your escape from the large, and frankly unwelcoming, entrance chamber.

Perhaps the path that appeals to you most of all, now that we're here, is that homely, slightly battered looking stairwell on the west end of the chamber. That one had a certain appeal to you the minute you noticed it, and as you approach it (meanwhile glancing round behind you

in case someone attractive is following) this chosen route of escape seems to have the pleasing odour of old books about it, an odour you've associated always with your own time, with silence, with contemplative pleasure. Much better than that raucous you arrived in.

Before you head upstairs, though, you take one last look at the big chamber, out of which more people are pouring by the minute. Suddenly, you are aware that you are different from them all, and resolve to establish, as best as you can, your individual identity. And you notice now that the last people to leave, the stragglers who haven't yet sought the right set of stairs for themselves, are the social types, the so-called eccentrics, who sought to make the biggest impression on everybody at first.

Left at your leisure, you begin in earnest to ascend the stairwell. The lighting is quite poor in here, and the polishing on the banister seems to have taken quite a beating in recent times. In fact, everything around you is in shabby condition; the foot-worn and moth-eaten carpet, the wooden panels with whole chips missing in places, and the outdated decorative items and public notices. But there is a sense, in this place, of an established community; that is why you continue up the stairs, not looking back down at the space that disappears behind you with each step you take ahead. A community of people who could be a little bit like you, even though, in private, you're not at all sure of who you think you are, and you haven't encountered any like minded folk as yet. Perhaps they are on parallel paths with you in a place beyond the present scope of your vision; you accept that you must be in similar company, because you haven't travelled far enough yet to discover the extent of this solitary flight of stairs.

Indeed, as you climb along, it occurs to you that you haven't really encountered anybody in person since you took this path; every so often you'll arrive at a landing, and there might be a sign over a locked door, but that's all this place has to offer in the way of society, so to speak. You figure that way above your head, further beyond your understanding of this place than you could ever imagine, there must be a big group of people all together like there was before, only fewer of them, better ones, much more like you, as a whole, than the massive clump you left behind. And this is why you continue on your way up the inexorable stairwell, though at rare points you do discover that, should you choose to exit, it is a very easy procedure to do so. For every so often, no matter how high you seem to ascend the stairs, there is a window to be

found marked 'ESCAPE ROUTE – SHATTER GLASS,' which perplexingly always seems to lead to level ground outside.

But that path, the way outside, is of very little consequence to you just now. You are lost in thought, and have been so for some time. You've been expecting a fork in your way to come about for a little while now, and here it is, right when you needed it. But perhaps 'fork' isn't the right word, for that denotes a dilemma, a divergence, a matter of this-versus-that; nothing in this place could ever be as simple as that, you realise. That is something you never would have understood in the beginning, back in the big room, for at that stage the only way you could think of things was in clusters or straight lines.

Now you have been left on a mezzanine, of sorts, and there are several ways for you to proceed from here, should you choose to follow the path you have taken thus far. The window marked 'ESCAPE ROUTE' doesn't seem to close upon narrow ground any more; rather, the world of one escaped looks rather a lot like limbo to one unaccustomed to the gravitational pull of solid ground. But quite apart from that, you notice there are three or four apertures in the ceiling above your head with step ladders leading into them, and it only now occurs to you that one of them should lead to the roof of this place, to somewhere you can get a proper look at the sky, and perhaps watch the sunset if you arrive in time. Perhaps somebody you have been longing to meet for a very long time will already be up there, somebody whose path you may have been following inadvertently.

However, all of the man-holes seem equally appealing for different reasons, and each will surely take you to the place you desire most to end up in, though the journey upwards may appear slightly different. You realise this because, being conscientious by nature, you have taken the time to consider each of them individually, popping your head up through the opening at the top of each ladder. Each ladder, you soon discover, seems to lead into an interconnected series of attic rooms, but their quarters are distinct and separate from each other, sort of like mirror worlds.

Though you spend a while considering which ladder you will commit to, the decision to take the middle one arrives upon you quite suddenly, almost at random. It may be because you hear the strange echo of something from a distance above your head (at least you think you do) or you may have been struck by the moment's glimmer of something that permeated through that particular shaft in the room (though it might well have been a trick of light). In

any case, it's enough to get you going, and so you start working your way through the tricky series of attic rooms.

Up here it's more like a maze than the easy upward trajectory you became accustomed to on the stairwell. Though you take every opportunity to strive upward, some of the interconnected rooms lead frustratingly to dead ends, and you must retrace your steps and orient yourself until you find another manhole equipped with a ladder. The attic rooms are nothing much to speak of, all dusty and dark, and the only way not to feel lonely here is to imagine the company you're sure to find later on, when you'll at last find the others just like you, who have worked through this perilous path with as much patience and stamina as you.

But to be honest, the silence does get to you sometimes. You sing aloud to yourself, tell yourself little stories, and otherwise seek to divert your attention from the cavernous void in which you find yourself wandering mired. Sporadically you might pass a little grate in the wall, or a vent submerged in spiderwebs of asbestos, over which the word 'EXIT' is scrawled in chalk. Something deep inside you already knows it is too late for that. It is important to stay positive, to stay on course; to remind yourself that you are not alone in the long term, to feel certain that somebody seeking the same end as you is probably just around the next corner, up the next ladder, and that sooner or later you will reach fresh air and an unimpeded view of the sky. It never occurs to you that this labyrinth only exists because you will it to be there, and continue to follow it.

Every so often you catch yourself wondering who it is, precisely, you are looking for, and why. Will they walk and speak like you, will you tell each other stories? Could you really be seeking the same destination? Perhaps, once you get there together, a new mission will await you both; a new architecture, a different geometry to fathom, a new object in sight; a different set of smells, a spectrum of unseen colours, or a way of fully realising something you've never been sure of. You might walk hand in hand with each other, or else have meaningful debate and leisurely discussion, like the ancients. Just for fun, you stage these little debates with yourself, and take both sides, and imagine realising at the exact same moment that both you and your illusory interlocutor are arguing precisely the same case but in different terms.

At some point in your journey you become aware that the proportions of these attic rooms are diminishing in size; the transition has been so gradual that until you are practically half hunched over beneath the ceiling before you realise what has been going on. By now your

eyes have adjusted to the dim, feeble light, though as yet you haven't figured out where the light must come from. Not that there's very much to see up here, but the advantage is that you don't even have to look around for the ascending ladders anymore; it seems that you know intuitively where they are, and wither they will guide you.

That's when the nostalgia kicks in: recalling how innocent you were when you were first in the entrance chamber, how much fun you had forming your individual cluster, and how sure of yourself you were when you left the circle and strode firmly on your course up the first stairwell. Now you shuffle, you scurry, and urge yourself forward, crawling cautiously as a rat beneath the floorboards of a sweltering kitchen. You do this because you feel you must, that there is nowhere else for you to go now, and you ardently believe that you will be restored to your former bliss once the time is right, once you have proved yourself, when you have covered enough ground. You must believe that there is a better world than this, otherwise there is nothing to strive for, nothing to push you forward, and nothing to prevent you from simply thrusting yourself into one of those wretched little grates, few and far between now, marked 'EXIT.'

In fact, you had tried steering yourself through one of them a little while back, when you first realised that you could no longer stand up straight, or see anything before you but shadows and dust. Fumbling with the handle and coughing up webs of asbestos, you had hoisted yourself belly-down into the narrow shaft, and started to pull yourself forward with all the energy you could muster in the wasted muscles of your arms. But that hadn't worked very well: you'd not even dragged yourself a hundred metres when you realised that labouring back to the regular world through the vent would be more effort than simply carrying forward on the path you'd started on. And your attempt to retrace your steps, at least back to the landing whence you had chosen this attic, had been similarly fruitless; you realised a little while ago that every man-hole immediately snaps shuts as soon as you crawl through it.

Which leads you to the sad conclusion that nobody could be following you at all, even if they did find you attractive, for there is no way to trace your steps. Even if a person got half as far up here as you had, and desired to follow you on your path, there would be no way ahead because of all the traps you set. And the person whom you imagine to be following behind you turns out to be just as illusory as the person you imagine yourself to be following, the one you've been hoping you would meet on the roof to watch the sunset together.

As you scuttle forward through the labyrinth of rooms, meeting ladder after ladder, you occasionally stop to rest and recuperate, and you begin to dream. In the dream – for it is always the same one – you are filled with horror and amazement at the interminable climb, because in the dream your journey is meaningless. In the dream, you never were in that bright room full of people, and you will never discover the place you seek; in the dream, all the exit vents lead back to the same horrible labyrinth of enclosed attic rooms, their proportions ever diminishing, and all the man-holes open wide upon an infinity of scant ladders with little webs of asbestos hanging from them.

You are always relieved to wake from that dream, and remember that you are here with a purpose, and that one day you will discover what it is you are looking for. You came here in pursuit of something, and one day, if you continue to strive and scuttle along the path you have chosen, the labyrinth you are building will bring you to an uninterrupted view of the night sky.