

The Pupil

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Dedicated to my wife, Sharon, and our children: Erin, Chris and Vanessa.

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ALPHA

The sun is rising again as it has done four times now in the past few weeks. It is a glorious spectacle; one that conjures up visions of 'Purple Haze' by Jimi Hendrix – vibrant, mesmerising, inspirational. The dawning rays filter deep purple and mauve through the atmosphere of Planet 6; by the window my white tank top reflects the fluorescence, reflects in me an inner self that has grown from weak water pascals to deep vibrant purples and a cascade of shades of clarity. Where the hell do I begin? How the hell do I paint a year and a half of my life when words are all I have?

* * * *

My grandparents lived in an old cream weatherboard place on a back street in the small coastal township of Kindera. Kindera is situated on the Highway 1 a couple of hundred kilometres south of Mid-Coast City and like most south coast towns of the state it thrives on summer tourism. People flock in their thousands to places like Kindera throughout the summer in an attempt to thaw out and to score a tan. However, once those radio stations begin to predict the onset of winter again everyone packs up, goes home and hibernates until the following summer season. Kindera and places like it virtually grind to a halt in the winter months.

I arrived at my grandparents' place with the tourists in December about a year and a half ago feeling very lost, empty and angry. My parents had recently been killed in a car accident in Mid-Coast City and there was no way I was going to forgive them. As far as I was concerned, they had no right to go and die on me. It was wholly because of them that I had to move away from my friends in Mid-Coast City - to go and live in some town that I

didn't like, with grandparents that I hadn't seen in years. How totally inconsiderate was that? Without a doubt I was completely disconnected and in utter denial.

Looking back, I realize my grandparents handled my arrival quite well. They weren't out to lay sweet nauseating lines on me about how happy or lucky they were to have me or how unhappy I must be feeling after the death of my parents. They didn't lay any of that stuff on me at all. They showed me to my room, left me to settle in, and then called me out to the kitchen. We sat around the kitchen table with cups of coffee and more or less in silence. Granddad was dressed in a loose grey shirt, grey working shorts and boots. Grandma had on a new floral blouse and pink slacks. Both had white hair, and although they appeared elderly, they had the faces of generous, friendly and lively country folk.

After only a few minutes they looked at each other and grandma kinda nodded at granddad. It wasn't like he was the top gun or that he was the one wearing the pants in the

family or anything like that. In fact, I reckon they must have drawn straws for the situation and Granddad had lost. Granddad drew the short straw and it was up to him to make that all-important opening speech. I was expecting the worst...

You see, granddad was born in Mid-Coast City and had been a school teacher for almost thirty years while Grandma, like most women of her day, was a housewife who had worked at various times in supermarkets and for voluntary organizations. You know the type! Anyway, they both moved to Kindera about five years ago when Granddad decided to retire. With backgrounds like that what the hell else could I expect but a sickly and an incredibly nauseating welcome.

"George," he began - then paused to think. "We can't bring them back. We can't live in Mid-Coast City for you. We can't promise you new friends. And we can't make it all better." He paused for another moment. "And what's more, we have no intention of trying. We're here for you, we'll feed you, we'll give you a

place to sleep, we can buy you clothes and we can send you off to school. But we can't undo the past and we can't really do any more for you unless you ask. How you are feeling right now only you know. They're your feelings. If you ever want to talk about things or want our help in any way, then just let us know."

Granddad stopped and sipped at his coffee. It was brilliant! There was none of that 'we really love you' stuff or 'we're really sorry about what happened to your parents and we know how hard it must be'. They were leaving it all up to me to sort out. They were giving me permission to wallow in my own self-pity if that's all I really wanted to do with my life. What a low down dirty act! They'd passed off all responsibility to me. That really showed a stroke of genius.

It was only a week or so before I began to take them up on their offer. I wanted to get to know some of the kids my age around town and sport seemed my best option. I'd been a good volleyball player at my old high school and had great touch football skills.

Nevertheless, Kindera was a different place to Mid-Coast City - and when in Kindera, one must do as the Kindera-ites do. So it was off to the surf club to join up. I held all of the essential lifesaving badges, I could hold my own on a surf ski and I was a pretty mean swimmer in the surf.

Granddad took me out to the club and introduced me to a few of the surf lifesavers and to the woman president of the club. Everyone was really friendly and sincerely happy to meet me and to sign me up. They all seemed to respect Granddad which made me feel proud to be with him. They showed me around the club and explained about the various surf carnivals that were coming up in the near future and about the types of races I could enter. As a senior in the club I would be expected to do weekly beach patrols as a surf lifesaver and participate in various club activities.

The surf club is situated on Kindera's south headland several kilometres away from the town centre. The club itself overlooks one of

the south head beaches and at the time of my arrival it was a relatively new building. Many of the tourists came to this beach in the summer because of the regular patrols. The local surfers, however, preferred to ride waves on the north headland where an artificial wall had been constructed at the mouth of the Kindera river. I never was sure why they'd built this great wall, but the local surfers assured me that they'd built it themselves to generate a tidal pattern that would carry them and their boards out to sea without them having to paddle. I guess there must have been people around who actually believed their story.

My first surf carnival came up three weeks after my arrival. It was held in the neighbouring town of Surftown and teams from all over the south coast were represented. I still wonder how the hell I was able to walk around at the end of the day. I'd almost forgotten how totally exhausting a surf carnival can be. Apart from a major dose of sunburn, I scored a medal for the beach sprint event and one for the long distance swim

event. I think the other guys and girls in the club were pretty surprised to see a newcomer do so well. I was just as surprised as they were.

It seemed that the usual thing after a surf carnival was to regroup back at Kindera surf club to celebrate or commiserate the day's events. (On this particular occasion, we were commiserating.) After the Surftown carnival however, we felt we needed a few drinks to get the evening started in the right vein so we dropped in at the Riverside Hotel on the main street before heading out to the clubhouse.

The Riverside Hotel beer garden faces out on the Kindera River as it passes under the Kindera River Bridge. Fishermen, ignoring various 'No Fishing off the Bridge' signs, spend most of the day trying their luck in the river while touring families gather on the foreshores to picnic in the Memorial Park. The Riverside Hotel itself has a character all its own - a two storey weatherboard place and virtually as old as the town itself. I fell in love with this pub the first time I saw it.

On the day in question, the Riverside Hotel was being haunted by a mixture of locals and tourists though it was difficult for me to distinguish one from the other. We settled around one of the wooden tables in the beer garden and I insisted on buying the first round. The conversation at the table was boring me somewhat and I found myself looking around at our fellow drinkers. There was one table of oldies next to ours. The old men, dressed in their Sunday best, were trying to entertain their wives by loudly talking over one another and laughing at their own jokes. Standing by the beer garden door were two touristy looking guys chatting up three quite attractive young ladies who were probably tourists also. From where I was sitting the girls didn't appear to be put off in any way by their advances. But then -why should they? They were probably on holidays. Just inside the lounge was a group of locals joking and laughing and calling out to familiar faces as they passed by. In front of me at the next table were four punks who looked like they were taking a vacation from their Mid-Coast City scene. The rest of the

crowd were like us - surfies with loud board shorts and tank tops.

Except for the two guys seated at the end of a table by the bottle shop. Now these two were even more interesting than the punks. They seemed quite an odd couple - a fairly young Asian guy and someone's grandfather. They'd arrived at the pub before us and seemed to have settled in. I kept wondering what they might have in common. Maybe the Asian guy wanted to marry the other guy's granddaughter, and granddad was having trouble explaining his prejudices clearly enough. Or maybe the granddaughter had shot through and they were both drowning their sorrows. I remember scratching my head over these two, then giving up trying to work them out. There are some pretty strange people in this world! I'm not sure why they fascinated me so much; after all, half of Mid-Coast City's population is a scream if you sit and watch them in public places.

"Where are you from?" someone asked me. It was Ego. That was his nickname. Ego. They

all had nicknames and each nickname had its own story. Ego believed that the world revolved around him, even though his gangly appearance and lack of tact did little to validate this belief.

"From Mid-Coast City," I replied.

"Did you come down with your parents?" Lobby asked. Lobby, like Ego, was 19 years of age and had recently completed an apprenticeship with a local tradesperson. Unlike Ego, Lobby was built like a competitive swimmer or rower - broad shoulders, toned chest and arm muscles, and flat stomach.

"No, they were killed in a car accident about two months ago," I replied.

"Really!" Lobby exclaimed, quite shocked. "I'm sorry."

"So am I." It was all I could say.

"So... What? You're staying with someone here in Kindera?"

"Yerr, my grandparents."

"How are you finding Kindera?" Sparrow asked. Sparrow, as the nickname suggested, was a small wiry character, younger than the

others, who sort out every opportunity to impress and be noticed.

"It's okay, I guess. I really miss my friends in Mid-Coast City though."

"I can imagine how you feel." There it was, that comment. How the hell could he know how I felt?

"Yerr," I muttered.

At that moment three bikies rolled into the car park. They dismounted, pulled their bikes up on their stands and removed their helmets and gloves. 'Jesus, they must be hot,' I thought.

"So, are you going to Kindera High this year?" Lobby asked.

"Yerr, I've got Year 12 to finish."

"Lucky you," Sparrow cut in. "I've still got Year 11 to do."

"What subjects are you doing?" Lobby continued.

"Double Stream Maths, Single Stream Physics, Single Stream Chemistry," I could see their mouths fall open as I ran through the list.

"Mid Stream English and Single Stream History."

"Struth, what a load! What the hell are you going to be? An engineer or a doctor or something like that?" Ego asked.

"I'm not sure yet. But I'd like to know that my options are open."

"Well, George, I know who to come to for help with my homework!" Sparrow put in.

"You must have done well in Year 11," suggested Lobby.

"I didn't sit the final exams - you know, my parents and all that. I'd like to think that I would have done well. I studied hard."

Everyone around us seemed to have stopped talking and were looking at the bikies. One of them was having a bit of a go at the Asian guy and his grandfather companion:

"Come on, what the hell are you looking at, Chinaman?" he asked in a loud voice. The Asian guy replied, but what he said was too soft for us to hear.

"Get up Chinaman!"

Grandpa made an attempt to interject but the bikie told him to shut up. He repeated his demand. Grandpa got up and suggested to the Asian guy that it would be best if they left. The Asian guy got to his feet slowly, not taking his eyes off the bikie. The old guy touched his friend on the shoulder.

"Come on, Lao, let's go!"

They collected their keys and wallets and left via the lounge bar. The bikie laughed as they left, seeming content enough to let them go.

"Go on Chinaman! And don't come back!"

The bikie joined his mates as they loaded beer onto their bikes. They dressed and rode away.

"Sometimes they get a bit drunk and find someone to pick on," Lobby began. "It seems to keep them amused."

"Yerr, they grabbed some guy in the car park here a coupla months ago, and beat the stuffing outta him," said Ego, looking quite excited. "They're pretty mean when they want to be!"

"I tell you what, I'd be walking just like that guy did," Sparrow commented. "No way I'd mess with them guys!"

"Who were those two? Does anyone know?" I asked.

"I've seen them both around town quite a bit," Lobby answered. "I'm pretty sure they live out of town, though."

"I saw the old guy at school once," added Sparrow.

We finished our drinks and moved on to the surf club where the bkie incident got more of a mention than it probably deserved. Something new to talk about, I guess. The bikies were getting mixed reviews. Some bikies, apparently, were quite amiable, while others got pretty mean once they'd been drinking for a while.

The incident remained on my mind for some time. I found myself thinking more and more about the couple and trying to fathom what their connection might have been - if any. Needless to say, there were no immediate answers to my questioning. Nor were there

answers to questions relating to my parents' deaths and my lot in Kindera. Both of these issues remained at the forefront of my mind for quite some time; the latter seemed to cause more and more pain as time went on.

The South Head Beach offered itself as an excellent place to try and find some answers, or at least to calm the conflicts that were haunting my mind. I'd go down to the beach often during January, walk its length alone, watch the sea gulls and feel comforted by the sound of breaking waves. 'Why me?' was my number one question. Why me? What had I done to deserve this? Did God hate me that much? A comment that kept coming to mind over and over was one I'd heard in a movie once - 'Life's a bitch and then you die.'. That was exactly how I was feeling. There was no one I really felt I could turn to. I was alone. And I really was wallowing in my own self-pity. Somehow, I found that state very comforting. I liked feeling sorry for myself. I liked not having to be honest with myself. I could just mope around without having to take responsibility for sorting out my life. I guess

deep down I wanted someone to sort it out for me, but no one was jumping at the opportunity - least of all my grandparents. I was in nowhere land; I'd been there for much of December and most of January, and I was still there in early February when I started school. It had taken hold of me and there seemed to be no escape, no relief. My soul was empty and bitter, my life had no direction, and nothing really seemed to matter any more. I was going under in a big way.

Suicide was never a topic for dinner conversation with my parents and so I had no real guidelines for action when a crisis of this magnitude struck. I recall fantasizing about the option of suicide on several occasions in early February but I never had the courage to go through with it. Even now, I look back and wonder how I had managed to let myself get so low that I could even consider suicide as an option. I used to sit in my room at my grandparents' place and contemplate taking sleeping pills or cutting my wrists in the bath while they were out. I would huddle in one corner shaking, crying, feeling intolerable and

indescribable pain that I couldn't place. Two broken legs would have been easier to take. Any sort of physical pain seemed so much less of a torture than that of emptiness and the futility of existing in the state I was in. I had no control over it. I had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. And I was scared as hell!

The days were okay on the whole. School kept my mind occupied with classes and meeting new people. In fact, school was quite good and I enjoyed being the new kid in town. I was drawing my fair share of attention and everyone was really friendly. The one big positive for living in a small country town is that you get to know more or less everyone and there is excellent potential for developing really strong bonds with lots of people, even if you're a dork. With all that was going on in my life outside of school I guess I wasn't giving myself much credit. I was seeing myself as some misfit that didn't deserve all the attention I was receiving. It was 'George the dork'! In fact, that was the whole problem. I had very little self-esteem or self-respect. I couldn't pull myself together enough to ask

anyone for help. I thought they'd think I was weird or something. And in not being able to do this I was further proving to myself how useless and weird I actually was - making it even harder to ask for help. And so, on it went in an endless downward spiral, with suicide seeming to be my one and only option. The world's a bitch and I wanna get off!

No one really came to my rescue as such. It was more a matter of circumstance that finally brought me my salvation in late February. My grandfather had offered to organize me a Physics and Mathematics tutor and came up with the goods three weeks after I'd started back at school. I'm sure that neither he nor grandma ever really sensed how depressed I was, let alone had any idea that the tutor they selected for me would be just the person to put life back into my otherwise pointless existence.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, about an hour after I'd arrived home from school. My hair was still wet after my shower and I was decked out in fairly daggy floral shorts and a

white short sleeve shirt. I'd been fumbling about my room avoiding working on my Physics practical report when Granddad knocked at the door and called me out. He directed me to the living room. In one of the large old leather lounge chairs sat the old guy from the Riverside Hotel who'd been involved in the incident between the bikie and the Asian.

"George, this is Mr Ryan," introduced Granddad. "Mr Ryan, this is George." Mr Ryan hopped out of the chair and shook me by the hand. We exchanged greetings.

"Mr Ryan has offered to help you with your Physics and Maths," Granddad continued. "He says that he should be able to help you every Wednesday evening. He was a Physics lecturer at Mid-Coast City University for many years." There was a moment's silence, after which Granddad said: "Well, I'll let the two of you get down to it."

"Thank you, Bill," Mr Ryan replied. "Are you ready, George?"

"I'll just get my Physics work." I was still in a state of shock and finding myself staring

at Mr Ryan in disbelief. The coincidence was quite phenomenal. I left the room and returned with my Physics notes.

Granddad had set up a temporary table and two chairs in the lounge room for us to work at. I was still having trouble coming to terms with the coincidence. I put my folder down, opened it and pulled out my Physics practical notes. I sat down and looked at Mr Ryan for a moment. He had on a purple patterned shirt and a fairly freaky multicoloured tie. He looked pretty cool, actually, like a hippy who'd just come off a 60's commune. And what's more, this hippy was my Physics tutor. Unbelievable!

"There's no need to be embarrassed," he said in a quiet voice.

"Okay," I replied, still not able to take my eyes off him.

"You seem a little surprised," he added.

"Yerr. I'm sorry," realizing that I was staring.

"That's all right. What is it that you need help with?"

We filled much of the next hour sorting out the details of my Physics practical. He was quite competent and his explanations were very easy to follow – it was almost as if in really knowing his physics, he could explain the various concepts in terms that were simple enough for me to follow. Things were looking up - at least as far as Physics was concerned.

"Now, don't forget that the conclusion must be short and concise, and ought to start with a line like 'The aim of the practical was... and the results were... suggesting that...'"

"Yes, I'll do that," I replied.

"Okay, do you think you'll be fine then?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"I might leave you then till next week. Same time?"

"Yes." There was a pause as Mr Ryan began to rise. "You know I saw you at the pub a while back? Some bikies picked on your friend." I added.

"Oh, is that it? I thought you looked a little surprised to see me this afternoon. It seems

that the bikies around here sometimes have nothing better to do with their time."

"Yerr! The guys talked about it all night." I paused for a moment. "How are you and the Asian guy connected?"

"Lao? Well, he's been a good friend to me for a long time now. I couldn't have done without him."

"What are you doing in Kindera, Mr Ryan?"

"Lao and I are doing some private research here. We really like the area. It's a very congenial area for the type of work we're doing."

"What are you researching?"

"Ah, you know, this and that. How about we leave that for another week?"

"Okay," I conceded, feeling a little disappointed. Things were just getting interesting.

There were questions I was burning to ask, but I felt like I was prying into private business. Nevertheless, I spent the rest of the evening quizzing Granddad about Mr Ryan although he didn't really know much more

than he had already said. Granddad had met Mr Ryan on various occasions in town and they had got to know one another on a social level. Mr Ryan lived, apparently, out along the Kindera River. There were a few commune type places out along Kindera River and this probably explained why he had been dressed like a hippie. But what the hell was he researching here in Kindera? On a hippy commune of all places?

Questions about Mr Ryan raced around inside my head for the rest of the week. By the following Monday, however, they had been forced to the back of my mind. My debilitating feelings of self-pity and depression had returned. Monday evening found me huddled in the bedroom with my homework in front of me soaked through with tears of frustration. Granddad nearly walked in on me when calling me for dinner. I made a bee-line for the bathroom when I heard him coming, washed up and managed a good front over dinner. I don't know why the hell I maintained this front for my grandparents, but somehow I couldn't let them know. I couldn't make an

exhibition of myself in front of them. The whole masquerade was really weird. I still scratch my head and wonder why I was so determined to keep my suicidal drive to myself.

Tuesday night was probably the worst night of my life. Granddad and Grandma went out visiting friends and - stupidly - I chose to remain at home, claiming I had homework to do. Once they had left, I switched the television on and managed to tolerate a half hour's viewing. Giving up on the T.V., I showered and retired to my room.

Ten minutes was all it took before it struck me. The pain, the churning stomach, the tight chest and the deep heavy breathing with regular sighs of frustration. NO! GO AWAY!! LEAVE ME ALONE! It was like I was possessed. Like it knew when I was weakest. Like it knew when to attack. GET THE HELL OUT OF MY LIFE! Frustration was building. My chest was getting tighter and tighter, my stomach muscles were beginning to ache. My whole body was tight, muscles tense and

beginning to shake. Fear! WHY ME? Tears poured from my eyes as I collapsed on the floor in a corner. Looking into nothing, staring, seeing pain, feeling pain, focussing on pain, the tears flooding my eyes, dropping from my chin. GOD, I CAN'T TAKE THIS!! I was gasping for breath, my chest would not let me take in air. Gasping like my chest knew I wanted out, like I couldn't take the pain . . . PAIN!! WHAT THE HELL'S WRONG WITH ME?? Focussing on Pain. Pain! Pain! Tears streaming from my eyes! Why? Why? WHY?? A moment, a pause and I saw my eternal escape, my final salvation from the pain. Pills! What sort? Any bloody sort? What does it matter? Where the hell are they kept? Try the bathroom! NO! Don't do it! I HAVE TO! I CAN'T TAKE THIS PAIN!! It struck again. Worse this time. Shallow gasps for air was all my chest allowed, shaking, muscles taut and tears clouding my view of the room. GO! BATHROOM! GET UP! GO! I crawled, shaking, gasping, to the door, reached up and opened it. That distant voice was still pleading for a rethink but the stronger half of

my mind was urging me on. GO!
BATHROOM!

The bathroom floor was cold, as I sat huddled in one corner shaking with the pain, the frustration and the fear. Time to get off! I rolled over, stood and reached into the cabinet. Toothpaste, antiseptic, suncream, that other voice was making its final pleas - Don't! Stop! Take the pain, you wimp! Sleeping pills. A moment for second thoughts as my mind in its two halves argued the pros and cons.

My chest relaxed for a moment, the shaking subsided, but my mind was still in turmoil. The suicidal side was far from defeated. I walked, quivering and cold, slowly back to my room, sat on the bed and put the tablets on the desk in front of me. I opened the bottle. There were five left. GOD! ONLY FIVE? WILL THAT BE ENOUGH? My mind slowly focused more closely on the task at hand. I'd fantasised this moment a dozen times, and now it was time. I changed into my pyjamas, folded down the blankets and climbed into the bed. I stared at the five tablets sitting on the

desk. I stared long and hard, my mind mulling over the pros and cons. I must have remained fixed in that position for 15 or 20 minutes.

I couldn't do it! I couldn't! I just sat up in bed and looked at the tablets. I was too scared. The better half of my mind had finally broken through with its endless list of justifications for why I shouldn't do it. Maybe tomorrow will be better. Maybe there's a better way. Maybe I'll get over it. Maybe deep down I was just a coward. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't bring myself to take the tablets. I just couldn't do it.

BETA

The purple haze has cleared somewhat, my fluorescent tank top has faded to grey, and my mind is firing furiously with this backlog of memories, thoughts and ideas that I desperately need to record on paper. Sitting here at my desk by the port hole, empty writing pages stare back at me and force me to focus. Focus on the trip that is, focus on the recurring nightmare that was, and focus on the rays of a new day sun.

Over the past three weeks, ever since we landed on Planet 6, I've been plagued by a recurring nightmare. I see a hazy outline of an orchestra conductor trying hopelessly to direct a group of musicians to their places, assist them in the tuning of their instruments, and finally try to conduct them through 'Water Music' by Handel. Every night it's the same dream, the same turmoil, the same frustrating

sequence, until three days ago when I came down with the fever.

In unsettled fevered sleep came my first clear vision of the conductor. She was a woman, a brunette, and her approach to the job at hand had changed dramatically. This time she was assertive, she had purpose, she knew exactly what she wanted and she called on all her experience to pull the performance together successfully. The conductor was in control of her situation for the first time in three weeks. The performance of Handel's 'Water Music' was brilliant.

Since waking from the fever an hour ago, I've sat at my desk mulling over the dream and watching the dawn of a new 'day'. I know the conductor is me, and I know the orchestra members are my ideas, my thoughts and my memories. This dream and this trip are one in the same.

* * * * *

Somehow Tuesday night broke me. It was like my heart, my mind and my body had put up for long enough. They had had enough of self-pity and pain and frustration and anger and hate and thoughts of suicide. They were taking over, taking control, ejecting my soul for a long overdue spring clean. Get out of our road, we want retribution and we want this trash to stop! NOW!!

All I could do was cry. I just cried and cried. On Tuesday night my heart, my mind and my body were cleaning out! With every tear was washed away frustration and anger and hatred; with every tear was cleared out thoughts of self-pity and all the intricate plans of suicide. They were letting it all go. They were washing out the dust and making space for forgiveness and insight and consideration and love. I focused clearly for the first time in months. I focused on my parents. I focused on their rights, or at the very least their right to rest in peace. I saw them clearly, my parents, after so many months, waving at me, smiling. As if they'd never gone. Smiling as they had

always done, reaching out for me. Reaching and touching my soul. And then I cried for them. It was the first time since they'd died that I'd actually cried for them. God, I'd been a selfish and self-centred individual. Not once in three months had I cried for them, considered them. It had been all me, all ME! My loss, my anger, my problems, my self-pity. Hadn't life been SO unfair to me! THEY had died, for Christ sake! What the hell did I have to complain about?

The tears kept coming and coming until I finally cried myself to sleep. Somehow on Tuesday night my heart, my mind and my body cleared up three months' backlog of crippling self-centred emotion and thought. And only then was my soul permitted to return.

On Wednesday night I welcomed the return of Mr Ryan. Feeling a great deal more positive, or at least a great deal more aware of my situation, I was ready to open up my bag of troubles to someone. And possibly Mr Ryan sensed this need as Wednesday's lesson drew

to a close.

"Newton's laws of motion are still valid in most instances," Mr Ryan was saying.

"Where aren't they?" I asked,

"For very small particles and objects travelling near to the speed of light."

"Relativity comes in there, doesn't it?"

"And Quantum Mechanics," he added.

There was a short pause. I wondered if Mr Ryan would end the lesson at this point, though he wasn't saying or doing a great deal. He was looking down at the table and obviously thinking about something. So I waited. Mr Ryan's grey hair gave him that absent minded scientist look. If not for his gaudy clothing, he would be the perfect image of a modern day Einstein. All he needed was a smouldering pipe to puff on.

"Tell me, George," he began. He looked up from the table and focused on me. "How are you handling the death of your parents?"

The question caught me off guard and I felt

the tears come to my eyes. It was my turn to look down at the table.

"Okay, I guess."

There's some psychological term used to describe those situations where a person's words and their body language are telling two quite different stories. Mr Ryan paused, possibly not knowing quite what to say or do.

"Not real well," I conceded. "The last coupla months have been pretty hard. Last night I wanted to...", I caught myself. "I, uh, I think last night I worked a lot of it out for myself."

Mr Ryan nodded. It's kinda hard to describe the way people look at you sometimes, but I felt that Mr Ryan wasn't seeing me as some kinda weirdo as I feared he might. He seemed genuinely concerned about me.

"What have you been feeling?" he asked.
"Oh, anger... frustration... and self-pity, I

guess,"

"Anger at whom?"

"My parents. I don't really feel anger toward them any more, though. I don't think I had any right to feel that way."

"You were angry at your parents because they died on you?"

"Yerr. For leaving me all alone. It was their fault that I had to move away from my friends in Mid-Coast City. But that's pretty unfair of me to think that. It wasn't really their fault - I mean, what have I really got to complain about? THEY bloody died. At least I'M still alive."

"True. Sounds like you're feeling quite guilty?"

I looked at him and nodded. He nodded back. There was a pause for a minute or so and then he asked:

"And how long do you intend to feel guilty?"

'What's this?' I thought. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "I don't know!" I replied. I looked up at Mr Ryan to see whether he was serious or not. He was smiling

in an odd sort of way. Not really sure how to take him, I shrugged my shoulders and looked away again. It was like he was attacking me. But why?

"I guess while you're feeling guilty you still have an excuse to feel sorry for yourself."

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling almost defensive.

"Well, your parents have made you feel angry and now they're making you feel guilty as well. They're still making life hell for you."

"NO! That's not how it is at all!"

"You sure?"

"YES!"

"Okay..." He retreated. This whole sequence caught me right off guard. He was making me feel uptight and uncomfortable and yet at the same time it wasn't as if he was trying to be nasty.

We sat in silence for a number of minutes. I tried to think about what he had just said, but I was still reeling with shock.

"I was wondering, George," he began

again, "if you'd like to come out to the lab this weekend and see what we do."

"I'd love to!" I could feel my spirits pick up almost immediately. "That'd be excellent!"

"How about I pick you up at 9am on Sunday then?"

"Great!" I replied.

All of a sudden I had something new and exciting to focus on. I was going to get a chance to see a real physics laboratory. What an opportunity! What a privilege! I felt sure few other students in Kindera had ever been offered such an opportunity. What a buzz!

To my surprise, though, for the rest of the week I thought more of Mr Ryan's questions about my guilt than about visiting his laboratory. Maybe he was right in what he'd said about still feeling sorry for myself. Self-pity was definitely still lurking inside me, but it was nowhere near as strong as it had been before Tuesday night. I wasn't really sure though whether my guilt added to my self-pity. It seemed unlikely, but then why did his questions upset me so much?

* * * * *

Over the past few thousand years, Kindera River cut its way down through the hills and mountains inland from Kindera township. The dirt road, which looks down over the river, had been fashioned into the hills on the northern bank of the river. Some twenty minutes after leaving town, we turned off the river road and made our way upward into Central Forest Range. Another fifteen minutes and we broke from the forest to a grass clearing housing two quite distinctive buildings - one, a log cabin, and the other, some distance away, a large two storey galvanized shed completely covered in sack cloth. The log cabin was excellent! I'd always wanted to stay in a pioneer-style log cabin.

Lao, the young Asian guy, was outside the cabin moving about very slowly and deliberately, like he was impersonating a praying mantis. He did not look up when we

passed him in the four wheel drive.

"What's he doing?" I enquired.

"Tai Chi," Mr Ryan replied. "It's a form of martial arts you might say."

Mr Ryan parked the car behind the cabin, and we made our way in through the back door.

"We won't disturb Lao. He'll be in when he's ready," suggested Mr Ryan. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please. Two sugars, milk, thanks."

The cabin was brilliantly decked out inside. Virtually all the pieces of furniture were antique, redressed in burgundy. At Mr Ryan's suggestion, I wandered through the rooms. The kitchen had a large fire place housing an enormous stewing pot. Above this were pots and pans of all shapes and sizes. A variety of cooking implements hung around the room, and in one corner was an old wood stove. Under the kitchen window was a food preparation bench topped with a marble slab. The kitchen window faced out on the back of the place and from the window one saw the large sack-covered shed set against large

eucalypt-covered hills bordering the clearing.

The dining/lounge room was relatively small and yet a dining table complete with four chairs, a lounge, stereo, video, television and fire place fitted comfortably inside. The far wall was completely covered with a library of texts. Physics texts, chemistry texts, texts on biochemistry, electronics, computing, agriculture, astronomy, Chinese and western philosophy, Chinese and western medicine, Chinese and western history. There were a few odd-titled novels, poetry books and a few books from the Wilderness Society.

There were two bedrooms. Mr Ryan's room contained a bed, wardrobe and desk, all antique. On the desk were a number of loose hand-written pages and a computer terminal. From the walls hung several old photos, frames containing university degrees and such like, and a cork board. Lao's room was quite a contrast to Mr Ryan's, presenting an overwhelming Asian flavour: a futon bed, Chinese artifacts and paintings, and Chinese medical charts. Lao's desk was covered with

Chinese texts, Chinese-English dictionaries and a small statue of Buddha.

Mr Ryan handed me a coffee and led me into the lounge room.

"I really like this place!" I commented.

"Thank you," he replied.

"So, what type of work do you do up here?" I asked.

"We're working on a number of projects," he began. "I am trying to simulate human behaviour using a very powerful computer system. We're both expending a lot of time tracking bodies between earth and the Alpha Proxima solar system. And we have a number of projects that we are putting the final touches to."

"Wow!" I felt the same as the guys had done at the Riverside Hotel when I listed the subjects I was doing at school - admiration and disbelief.

At that moment, Lao came into the room. He was dressed in white string pants and a loose buccaneer shirt. He was about 5 foot 8

tall, slight build, clear tan complexion, brown eyes, and wavy black hair. He also looked very fit.

"Lao, this is George. George, this is Lao Tzu."

We exchanged greetings. He looked a little puzzled. He shifted in his stance and scratched his head.

"Is not the name 'George' for a man?" he asked politely.

"Yes," I replied, "but George is also short for Georgina."

"Oh," he nodded, seeming less perplexed. He spoke quietly and I couldn't help but notice how calm he was. He had an aura of calmness about him. I felt calm just being in the same room.

"Xen has told me much of you," he continued. "You study at Kindera High?"

"Yes, that's right." It was my turn to be puzzled. "Who is 'Xen'?"

"Oh, Mr Ryan is 'Xen'."

Mr Ryan broke in at this point.

"Xen is short for Xenophanes (Zen-off-an-

eze), the ancient Greek philosopher. Lao's father gave me the nickname. In return, I called Lao's father Chuang Tzu, and Lao, Lao Tzu - both Chinese philosophers."

"What happened to Chuang Tzu?" I enquired.

"He died five years ago," Lao responded.

"Well, what about that tour of the lab?" Mr Ryan cut in.

"Okay!" I replied.

Coffee in hand, I headed out the back door with Lao and Mr Ryan and walked out to the cloth-covered shed.

"Why is the shed covered with cloth?" I asked.

"We have a sprinkler system which wets the cloth on hot days. The latent heat generated cools the shed. It's important that the computer systems don't experience excessive heat," Mr Ryan explained.

The foyer to the laboratory looked somewhat like a motor mechanic's garage. There were two large roller doors which

served as an entrance, tools hung on the walls, and a number of jacks sat about the concrete floor. Mr Ryan led us across the foyer and through a door on the far side. We stepped into what appeared to be the control room of the 'U.S. Enterprise'. The room was circular in shape with computers and control panels covering every square inch of space. Window panels and television monitors were positioned adjacent to the doorway through which we had just passed. I must admit that I did not fully appreciate what I was seeing until some months later.

Mr Ryan ran the guided tour, explaining in very general terms the use of each panel and each device. There were devices to study gravity, devices to create electro-magnetic waves, devices to study the heavenly bodies, a computer system that could do almost everything from deriving Einstein's Theory of Relativity from first principles down to peeling an apple. There was a large array of curious and novel machines that Mr Ryan and Lao had built between them. Machines that broke carbon dioxide into its elements, that

synthesized proteins and various vitamins, that recycled human waste, that propelled vehicles at great acceleration, as well as many others. All of these devices were in various stages of completion in two fair-sized rooms. The whole complex was incredible.

"This place is unbelievable!" I exclaimed. "I find it hard to believe that the two of you have managed to put together all this equipment. It must have taken years and years."

"It has taken twelve years," offered Lao.

There was a moment's silence, and then I plucked up my courage and asked: "Would there be any chance of me coming out here regularly and helping?" I really felt as though I was pushing my luck.

"We don't know how well you work," responded Mr Ryan jokingly. "But then maybe you could show us. Lao has been working on the text scanner..."

"Okay, what do I have to do?" I cut in, not caring what job I was being offered.

"Lao will show you," Mr Ryan smiled.

Lao turned to me and motioned to me to follow. We made our way into the second room and stopped by a device that looked somewhat like a photocopy machine. Lao pulled up a second chair for me and in a quiet voice asked me if I remembered what Mr Ryan had said about this particular device.

"No. Not really. It looks like a photocopier though," I replied.

"You are very close," Lao responded. "Xen felt it would be good to have books stored on computer disk. It would save a lot of room in a laboratory like this if a library of texts were stored in this way. So Xen wrote a program that stores book pages. When someone wants to read from a book they put in the relevant disk, call up the book and then the page number they want. You can read most books very clearly on this large screen."

Lao pointed to the large flat screen just above the computer terminal and then at a pile of books sitting on the floor. "Xen wants us to copy these books into the computer. If you

would like, I can change the page on the scanner and you can enter it on the computer. We can swap in about fifteen minutes."

"Okay, that sounds great."

Lao showed me how to enter each page at the computer terminal and while I was doing this, Lao busily turned pages and sat the book face down on the scanning device.

"How do you like school?" Lao asked.

"It's quite good," I responded. "They certainly hand out the work."

"Xen says you are doing physics and chemistry. You must be smart."

"No, not really."

"I think you must be."

It was interesting listening to Lao speak. He spoke slowly and carefully and deliberately. It seemed important to him that his words were correct and accurate. And he spoke with his hands. You know how people wave their arms around when they speak. Well, Lao was kinda like that, but he didn't

wave his arms, he moved them like he was still doing Tai Chi.

"What does that Tai Chi do for you?" I asked.

"It helps to circulate the Chi around the body."

"The what?"

"The Chi."

"What is Chi?"

"It is like a form of energy that flows around the body."

"What, is it like blood taking sugar to the cells of the body?"

"No, not really. Chi is often referred to as 'Life Energy' by many western people, but it is different to the energy you learn of in Western science. It is very difficult to explain in English.

He paused and looked at my face. I think he was checking to see whether I was interested or not.

"Go on," I said. "I'm really interested."

Lao stopped for a moment and thought. "In English many words have very complex meanings that are not easy to explain. Let me take an example. Let me say 'dog'. And now I ask you, what is a dog?"

"It is a four-legged hairy animal," I replied.

"But a cat also is a four-legged hairy animal, and yet it is not a dog! So what makes a dog different to a cat or a horse or a guinea pig?"

I thought for a moment and conceded that I didn't really know what made them different.

"It is very difficult for us to explain what a dog is exactly. You understand this much?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Now let us say that I was a person from China who could not speak much English. How would you explain to me what a dog was?"

"I would show you one," I replied.

"Very good. But now, how would you explain to me what gravity was?"

"I would drop something and try to explain that it is gravity that is pulling the object down."

"Okay, but now try to explain to me what gravity is. What is it exactly?"

"It's a force that brings two objects together," I explained.

"But 'Force' is just a name. Gravity is a type of force, yes. But what exactly IS gravity?"

I thought for a moment. I really didn't know. What is gravity?

"I don't know," I replied.

"There are not many people who DO know what gravity is. It is very difficult to explain and it is very difficult to understand. But yet we see it every day." Lao paused for a moment. "I asked you what gravity is and you find it difficult to explain. You ask me what Chi is and I also find it difficult to explain. I know it is there but it is not easy to show someone who has not looked for it before."

"But what does it do?" I asked.

"Allow me a moment to explain further. You see, the word 'dog' or the word 'gravity' have concepts attached to them. It is not easy to define either 'dog' or 'gravity' with just one phrase. These words have very complex meanings, a whole set of meanings or

descriptions are needed to define them exactly. In the same way Chi is a concept. And it is Chinese. When it is translated into English it is often translated to mean 'life energy' or 'life force'. It is the energy that flows around living things, but it is much more than just the process of respiration that occurs in living cells. And it is here that it is difficult for me to explain in more detail. Chi is that which makes a living thing living."

"Can it be measured?" I asked.

"Not by scientific instruments. And that is why Chinese medicine has been dismissed by many western doctors. If it cannot be measured, then it cannot exist."

"How do YOU know that it exists then?"

"Because I have seen it work in both Chinese medicine and Tai Chi.

"Okay." There was a short pause.

"I think we ought to change jobs now," Lao suggested.

"Okay," I responded.

We swapped jobs. Lao went on to explain some of the background to Tai Chi. After about twenty minutes Mr Ryan came into the

room and suggested we all break for lunch.

Lunch was salad sandwiches and coffee, after which Lao left us and wandered back outside somewhere. Mr Ryan and I sat back in lounge chairs and drank our coffee.

"So, what do you think of our complex?" he began.

"It's great," I answered. "A little hard to believe the work you two have done out here."

"And you're pretty keen to come out again and work with us?"

"Yes, very much."

"That's great." Mr Ryan stopped and thought. "George, there is one thing I'd like you to understand. We haven't openly publicized the work we do here, either in Kindera or anywhere else. We really don't need people coming up here and looting the place while we are out. Nor do we want members of the scientific community stealing our new developments before they are fully trialled. So, George, we would appreciate it if you kept what you have seen and done up here to yourself for the time being. Can you do

that?"

"Certainly," I responded.

"I have discussed the type of work you might be doing up here with your grandparents and so you can discuss things with them in fairly general terms. They also know how important it is to us to keep the whereabouts of this place, and the work we do up here, secret. Can we count on your discretion?"

"Yes, you certainly can," I vowed.

"Great! I also spoke to your grandparents about your coming up here on Sundays and they thought it would be fine. Is that all right by you?"

"Yes." I was trying to hold back my excitement. Mr Ryan bit his lip and then began again.

"One other thing, how are your feelings in regard to what we spoke about last Wednesday?"

I thought for a moment. Mr Ryan was referring to our talk about my parents. "I don't know, a little confused I guess," I replied.

"What is confusing you?" he asked. I felt my level of anxiety rise.

"I'm not sure." I paused and thought. "I

don't think my guilt is adding to my self-pity."

"Okay. Though my suggesting it bothered you."

"Yes. I thought about that. I guess that's what's confusing me."

"I'm wondering what situations usually make you angry then?"

"When someone has said something about me that's wrong," I responded.

"Is that all?" he continued. I felt I was under scrutiny again, and yet a sense of caring was still in Mr Ryan's voice. I thought about specific situations in my past where I'd been angry.

"When someone has done something to me that I don't deserve."

"Like?"

"Like someone calling me a name, or hitting me."

"So people make you angry when they've been unfair in their treatment of you?"

"Yes."

"Any other situations?" continued My Ryan.

I thought for another moment. "Well, actually I remember getting angry with my

father once when he said I was lazy. And I had actually been lazy."

"And so you also get angry when people pick up things about you that you do not like about yourself?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes it is quite hard to tell whether a person is being unfair to you or just picking up something you do not like about yourself. Can you work out the difference?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think so." I shrugged my shoulders. I thought for a moment, and then added: "Sometimes I can."

"It's interesting, isn't it?" Mr Ryan stopped for a few moments. He looked at me but appeared to be thinking rather than expecting me to say anything. I relaxed for a moment, sat back and thought about what had been said. After a few moments Mr Ryan added:

"You know, it is interesting to note why we condemn different sorts of people, or why some people bother us more than others. Robert Pirsig said: 'We always condemn most in others that which we most fear in ourselves.' In other words, we seem to reject the idea that we might have some apparently distasteful

characteristic that we see in another person. And, rather than accept the characteristic in ourselves, we reject or despise the other person." He paused, then added: "It's really quite odd."

We sat in silence for a minute or so. Mr Ryan seemed to be in some kind of trance. This was a character trait of Mr Ryan that I came to expect after a while. It was hard to get used to at first, but as others pointed out, it's the sign of a genius at work. After a minute or so he snapped out of it.

"So, how are you feeling now?"

"Okay. I still have a lot of thinking to do." I replied.

"Good. Though don't forget to listen to your feelings from time to time. Feelings can tell you a lot about yourself. Take time out to ask yourself: 'Why am I angry?', 'What is my anger telling me about myself?', 'Why do I like that rock so much?'. Those types of questions."

"Okay," I responded.

At times Mr Ryan seemed to talk down to me, which bothered me somewhat. I spent some time thinking about why this bothered me and realized that he was highlighting my inexperience in dealing with feelings and emotion. I needed to accept my pupil status. And yet I appreciated his concern for me. He was a person I felt I could trust with my feelings. He didn't treat me like I was a child or some kind of freak. He listened to me when it counted. And he made me look at things more closely. With all the events of that week, especially Tuesday night, Mr Ryan's words and the visit to the lab, I was certain that I had survived the worst. Things were looking up.

GAMMA

As a child, a trip for me was usually an outing with mum and dad that lasted a few days or a couple of weeks. We usually went on trips to a beach-side resort or to relatives in another town or city. Often these trips were something we all looked forward to and got really excited about. A trip was also when I stumbled over my own two feet or some other miscellaneous item. Both of these still fit within my present concept of "trip".

The concept of trip, as I see it now, is not easy to define. It involves emotion. It includes having objectives or goals. And it involves going somewhere, physically or otherwise, experiencing and learning something about the world or universe and learning something about oneself. Visiting Mr Ryan's laboratory was a trip. The emotion was one of anticipation and excitement. The

objective was to experience people working in a laboratory setting, something which was new to me. I was going inland from Kindera to experience working in the laboratory and learn about equipment which I had never seen before. And I experienced working with Lao on a text scanner.

Not all trips, though, necessarily involve travelling somewhere physically. It's important not to confuse the concept of "going on a trip" with the idea of "travelling somewhere". Being in school, for example, is a trip in which a person does not necessarily travel anywhere. They are taking the trip seated in a classroom and it is a trip based on personal growth. The emotion generated at school can be anything from happiness to boredom to perpetual anxiety. And there are a huge number of experiences and learning outcomes: some may relate to how much one hates school and the strategies necessary for dealing with that; some may relate to the actual work presented by the teachers; and some may even relate to what is learnt about the world from the way teachers talk and act.

Trips require full emotional commitment. To be on a trip, a person has to be committed to it fully for a significant period of time. It may build up over time and fall off at other times, but some period of full commitment is essential. And, by its very nature, a commitment must be emotional, based on anger or excitement or frustration or whatever. A person cannot be committed without being committed emotionally. Drawing on one's full emotional commitment to reach a certain goal is the very thing that gives a person's life its meaning. And, since a trip requires this full emotional commitment, then a trip must be that which gives life its very meaning. Or taking it another way, trips are defined as those things which require a person's full emotional commitment. If one were to remove commitment, and consequently emotion, from their life, what would that person have left? A void. A shell. A person unable to think, unable to feel, unable to set goals, unable to chase ideals, unable to hold values and beliefs. A person without life! Remove trips from a person's life, and you remove all meaning from

life.

They are more intense trips involving a high level of excitement, anticipation and/or anxiety. They involve a gamble. The greater the odds against, the greater the intensity and the greater the emotional commitment required - exploring the unknown, surviving in the "wild", and going off to war. In all of these, the stakes are high and consequently the intensity is great.

My wanting to commit suicide involved extreme intensity. I was certainly facing the greatest unknown known to all people. In my case, though, I focused more on escape than on the unknown that was to follow. Interestingly I met my original objective but not by the means I had originally intended. My objective was to escape from the emotional pain that life seemed to be affording me. In most situations in a person's life there are options from which to choose, and in this particular case I saw suicide as my best option. That is, until I focused on the sleeping pills on the desk beside me. It was at that moment that I chose

a second option for resolving my pain. I had fulfilled my original objective, but the path I had chosen changed in mid trip. This is not at all uncommon. Neither is it uncommon for a trip to stop short of reaching its original goals or objectives. Quite often a second trip can come in over the top of the first and steal all the emotional commitment. For example, studying and getting good grades in my Year 11 exams was an important trip to me with a very clear goal. I never had the opportunity to reach this goal, however, since my parents died before I sat the exams. And yet, although the goal wasn't reached, the sequence of events leading up to the exams still represented a trip taken.

There are many examples of trips unfinished in my life, as I am sure there are many examples in everyone's life. And this brings me to my final point about trips. Timing. The timing of trips, the build-up and the wind down are as variable as trips themselves. Some trips begin very slowly, creep in on a person, and end in much the same way. Other trips can begin and end

abruptly. They might come in a flash, last for weeks, months, or even years, and then disappear as quickly as they appeared. Lengths of trips are also extremely variable, depending very much on the people and the circumstances involved.

Whenever I consider the timing of trips, I see almost direct analogies with chords in a music score. Some chords build up and cut out very abruptly, some build up and wind down very slowly. Some chords are held for longer than others. The volume of a chord played is analogous to the intensity of a person's emotional commitment. And the pitch of the chord can be as variable as the type of emotion involved in any given trip. A minor chord might be sad, a 9th might be very beautiful, a major might be happy. And clarity of presentation can be as good or as poor as a person's approach and response to a trip.

Timing is also significant in highlighting the difference between a trip and the idea of "travelling somewhere". Often when people travel somewhere, they say they are going on a

trip. And rightly so. However, the beginning of the trip may not necessarily coincide with the beginning of their travels. Some trips begin long before a person leaves on their travels with emotional commitment being given to various plans, daydreams and expectations. Some trips may not begin until after the person has begun to travel. And in the same way trips may end long before or well after the travelling has concluded. Taking this trip as an example, we have travelled away from earth out to the sixth planet of the Alpha Proxima solar system. For me, this trip began long before we left earth and is now soon to finish, long before we are due to return - if we're able to return at all. A recurring nightmare in the last few weeks has been telling me it's time to put all my ideas, thoughts and feelings together, and realize the major objective of this trip. This story is, in a sense, a description of my trip, a trip that began almost a year before we left earth.

* * * * *

"What is gravity?" I asked Mr Ryan. It was our first tutorial session since my visit to the laboratory.

"It is the force that two masses exert on one another and is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them," explained Mr Ryan.

"I know all that. But what exactly IS it? How does it work?" I persisted.

"Well, I have a theory of my own which I know to be true, but it certainly doesn't appear in any text book or science article."

"You made it up?" Mr Ryan was turning out to be a regular Einstein.

"In a way, yes. I used experimental and theoretical results from quantum mechanics, relativity and various half-baked unified field theories to base my ideas and support my conclusions."

"And?"

"Well, you must appreciate that it's difficult for me to explain in two minutes. The background to my conclusions is quite extensive."

"That's okay," I replied.

The comment: 'It's difficult to explain' is a classic example of the type of comment that leaves you thinking, 'what are they trying to tell me?'. There are at least three possible statements a person is making when they use this comment. They may be saying, 'It is complicated and may take quite some time to explain' or they may be saying, 'I don't really understand it myself, so how the hell do you expect me to explain it to an incompetent like you!', or they may be saying 'I can't teach it to an incompetent like you when you haven't even taken the time out to learn the very basics for yourself'. An example of this third option is a layperson asking Beethoven to interpret his 9th Symphony when the layperson has never listened to classical music. Or a reporter asking Albert Einstein to explain his General Theory of Relativity to the public, when even his contemporaries were struggling with it.

Obviously, from his comment, Mr Ryan was indicating that his ideas were going to take some time to explain. But even so, every

time someone says to me 'it's difficult to explain', I shudder. I guess I'm pretty sensitive about being told, subtly or otherwise, that I'm an incompetent.

"You are aware that Albert Einstein won a Nobel Prize in 1921?" Mr Ryan began.

"Yes".

"Do you know what he won it for?"

"For his theories on relativity, I suppose".

"No, surprisingly enough. It wasn't for relativity, it was for his work on the photoelectric effect." Mr Ryan paused and thought for a moment. "You see, some years earlier Heinrich Hertz and J.J. Thomson discovered that, when ultraviolet light falls on a metallic surface, electrons are given off. What do you think might be the big deal with this?"

"Oh, I remember being told about this in school. It had something to do with electrons being particles and light being a wave."

"You're on the right track. Three or more centuries ago, Newton showed experimentally that light can produce an interference pattern when shone through a spherical convex lens.

Unfortunately, Newton believed that light was made up of a stream of particles, a stream of little light particles. And as a result, he had difficulty accepting that his experiment proved that light was actually a wave and not a particle.

Ever since then, however, scientists have accepted that light has wave properties and therefore cannot be a particle. You see, particles don't move about in waves - it'd be silly to think they did. And that is why it was difficult for the scientific community to accept the implications of the photoelectric effect.

The photoelectric effect showed that a light wave could collide with an electron and make it move. The only explanation was that light must be able to act like a particle. There is a little more to it, but in effect, only a particle can make another particle move in a photoelectric effect collision. Therefore light is both a wave and a particle. It shows wave properties when tested for wave properties, and shows particle properties when tested for particle properties.

Mr Ryan stopped, and looked at me. Then

he went into another one of his trances for a moment.

"But what has this got to do with gravity?" I asked finally. Mr Ryan snapped out of the trance and apologized.

"Well, we have a group of scientists running around believing that light is both a particle and a wave. One scientist, Victor De Broglie, even went so far as to suggest that everything in the universe moves about in a wave, only the waves for everyday objects are far too small for us to measure, let alone see. Don't get me wrong, though, his discovery is not as silly as it sounds. In fact it is a very important theory.

"The problem as I see it comes with this dual nature idea - that things can be both a particle and a wave. And at this point I always pose the question 'What the hell is a particle?'. It is some solid object that can collide with another solid object. But what is this thing that we call solid? Something solid has mass. It takes up space, it has a certain number of atoms in it, and it can be weighed when placed near to another solid object like the earth.

Okay, so it has a certain number of atoms in it, but what are atoms made of? And this is where things become really uncertain.

"The general feeling among scientists is that atoms are made up of protons, neutrons, electrons and a whole spectrum of other subatomic particles. There's that word 'particle' again. What is a particle? It is an object which can collide with and displace another particle. But what is it? What is it made of? And the usual scientific answer is that they're still looking for the smallest subatomic unit. And it's costing billions of dollars to build the next super-doooper high energy atomic accelerator. And for what? They're still not answering the fundamental question. What is a particle? They're just finding smaller and smaller particles. And to test these new particles they use particle model tests, like colliding particles together. For goodness sake, guys, if something's not working, try something different."

"So what is a particle?" I cut in, becoming quite impatient.

"It's a wave, of course," Mr Ryan replied, "or, more correctly, it's a set of waves."

Subatomic particles are no more than a set of complicated standing waves. When one set of standing waves collides with another set of standing waves, they both act as 'particles', or act in accordance with the particle model as we now call it. Everything we see is made up of trillions and trillions of minute standing wave patterns. And herein lies the secret of what gravity is. It is the combination or interaction of outer shell standing wave patterns. The further away objects get, the weaker the outer shells get in their interaction. How simple!"

"But how do you know?" I asked, feeling a little sceptical.

"Because it works!" Mr Ryan was becoming quite excited. If I had not known him better, I might have thought he'd gone a little strange. He had momentarily taken on the appearance of a crazed scientist. His grey hair, which normally gave him the appearance of a distinguished gentleman, now made him look like the aging mad scientist. It took him a moment or two before he calmed down and resumed his usual manner.

"There is an interesting parallel here," Mr Ryan suggested, "between Chi in Chinese thought and the idea of all particles being a set of standing waves." Mr Ryan appeared thoughtful as he spoke, then paused and asked: "Do you know what Chi is?"

"Yes," I replied, "Lao explained it to me."

"Okay. I think I know how the Chinese must have felt when they realized that white doctors were scoffing at their traditional form of medicine. If it can't be seen or measured, then it's not to be believed. And the only way to prove the existence of Chi, and prove the existence of standing waves in atoms, is to show them to people in action. Show people that Chinese medicine actually works, and in so doing, prove the existence of Chi. Show people that particles can move from one place to another as a wave, and in doing so, prove the existence of standing waves in atoms. What do you think, George?"

"I suppose so, Mr Ryan," I replied, caught a little off guard. I didn't really understand what he had meant by moving particles from one place to another as a wave, but I chose not to pursue the issue.

Mr Ryan suggested that we move on from our discussion to the physics lab report I had due the following day. I was impressed by Mr Ryan's theory, and thought about it a lot after the lesson was over. I also came to realize, after the lesson, how little I really knew about physics even after having learned it for a year or more. And this thought made me feel very small, very insignificant in the eyes of Mr Ryan, and very impatient in my quest for a greater understanding of the universe and its workings.

As a result, I decided to spend more time reading and finding out about things. When I mentioned this decision at the lab on the following Sunday, Lao suggested that I begin with self-development, that I concentrate initially on reading books that would help me find out more about myself.

"If you know yourself, you can understand the universe more clearly," Lao stated in his usual calm and profound manner. We were sitting down by the creek on the eastern side of

the clearing. It was lunch time, though Mr Ryan had chosen to remain in the lab to continue with work he had started that morning. Lao and I had worked for an hour on the text scanner before Lao led me outside to teach his new apprentice a simple Tai Chi movement. Lao spoke of the flow of Chi in the body as we worked our way through each step, each body movement. I found Lao very easy to get along with. He inspired me with what he said and what he did, and his calmness never ceased to amaze me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Our ability to perceive the world comes both from within and without. If we know ourselves, we can better understand why we see what we see, and better understand why we do what we do. As Xen often says, it is important to always ask ourselves 'why' questions when we notice something and when we feel something." Lao stopped and looked about him. He pointed to the water in the creek. "Why did I notice that the creek water sparkles as it does? What did I feel when I noticed this? Why did I feel this way? And

what did the sparkling creek water tell me about what is important to me?"

"Yerr, Mr Ryan has spoken to me about this before," I offered.

"And I also think it is important. But it is not so easy to learn to do this. It takes much practice."

"But then you spend all your time thinking why you noticed something or why you felt something," I suggested.

"No. I am sorry I have not been clear. Balance is also very important. It is important to have the skill of asking these questions, but also it is important to know when one needs to ask them. Too much focus in this way is not good for the person. You are very correct."

I nodded in agreement. I hadn't actually noticed that the creek water sparkled. But now I saw it clearly and I was almost mesmerized by the rays reflecting from the little ripples in the water. I seemed to focus on it for a long time. And then the strangest thing happened. I felt that I actually rose up and out of my body and was looking down at myself looking down at the ripples in the water. It was the

eeriest of feelings. It freaked me out a little.

"Are you alright?" Lao asked. I seemed to return to my body at the instant Lao's voice reached my ears. I felt very relaxed. I felt emptied of all my troubles, all my worries, emptied of all thoughts. I slowly looked up from the water, and turned to look at Lao.

"You have just experienced meditation," Lao whispered. Slowly his voice soaked in and my mind began to hear his words. My first response was one of surprise. 'How could he know what had just happened to me?' I thought. I looked at him in amazement.

"The feeling you have been experiencing I know very well," he said casually, almost as though he was inside my mind. And that made me freak out even more.

"I don't understand," was all I could stammer out.

"It is okay," he reassured me. I was too freaked out to say anything more. I turned away from Lao and looked back at the water,

and then at the trees on the other bank. I felt myself slowly return to reality. I felt my breathing. I was breathing quite deeply and quickly. My adrenalin had been running wild in my absence. I worked to calm my body and to slow my breathing. I felt my sanity return.

"I'm sorry," I began, "I think I freaked out."

"I do not think you have meditated before," Lao suggested.

"No."

"There is no need to be scared. Meditation is very important in making the mind quiet. How do you feel now?"

"Okay, I think." We sat quietly for a moment and then Lao suggested we go up to the house and pick out a book for me to begin my reading.

"'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance' is a difficult book to understand in parts, but I think it is very good," Lao suggested as we stood by the shelves in the lounge room. I took the book from him and looked closely at the cover. It had an object

on the cover that was half spanner and half flower. I raised my eyebrows a little and Lao noticed and laughed.

"It is a very good book. Robert Pirsig is a very profound author," Lao added.

"Okay," I said, "I'll give it a go."

That afternoon, Lao and I finished scanning the remaining texts that Mr Ryan required. Lao was pleased to have finished the job since it had taken him three weeks of full time work. Six hundred and thirty-two books had been scanned in total, one hundred of them novels. And all these fitted neatly onto twelve compact laser disks. Disks much the same as the laser disks used for recording music, only these were for storing data for a computer. At the time I found it difficult to believe and to comprehend that so much information could be stored on only 12 small laser disks. The 80's have certainly seen some pretty neat technology come into being.

"I can begin on the next task tomorrow," Lao commented.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Xen will know. He will tell me tonight. For the moment, though, I think he is busy with his computer program."

"What is he doing with the computer?" I asked.

"At the moment, he is finishing work on a program to simulate human behaviour."

"What, like 'HAL' in '2001 A Space Odyssey'? A computer that you can talk to, and that can talk back?"

"Yes, I think this is the idea," Lao responded.

My mind was filled with possibilities for such a computer. I had watched the movie "2001" several years back. The idea of a talking computer was excellent. Mr Ryan was really a very smart guy. It amazed me that one person could have so many skills and so many new and brilliant ideas.

"How does Mr Ryan come to be so smart?" I asked Lao.

"It was part due to my father, I believe. Chuang Tzu helped Xen some years back to focus more clearly on ideas, and make his

dreams come to life," Lao replied. Lao's father had been mentioned a number of times now, and there seemed to be some mysticism surrounding him.

"How did Mr Ryan and your father meet?" I continued, curious to know of their connection. Lao stared into space for a moment, and then in his usual quiet way, began the story of Chuang Tzu and Xenophanes.

"They met, according to my father, at a party in Mid-Coast City. There were lots of university people there, professors and lecturers and people like this. My father had been invited by a professor whom he had treated many times. But my father was sad at this time. My mother had died in China a year before. And now he wanted to have me come out from China so we could be together. But he did not have enough money to sponsor me.

"Mr Ryan was also at the party and he was also very sad. His wife had died only two months before. A wife that he loved very much. And I guess the sadness of each man brought them together. They had something in

common.

My father said that Mr Ryan was almost going mad when they first met. He was torn up inside from his grief. He was suffering from too much grief. He was very unbalanced. He could not concentrate on any one thing for more than a few minutes. And he was physically very sick. It is difficult for me to describe his condition much better than this in English. Chuang Tzu explained all this to me in Chinese medical terms.

"Anyway, Chuang Tzu spoke with Mr Ryan for some time that evening and told him that he could help him if he wished. Mr Ryan agreed to visit Chuang Tzu and went several times for treatment. After only three weeks, Mr Ryan was feeling well again. I think Mr Ryan was very surprised. He did not believe in Chinese medicine before this.

"Chuang Tzu had told Mr Ryan earlier of his problem getting me out from China. After Mr Ryan was treated by Chuang Tzu, Mr Ryan promised to help bring me out. Mr Ryan had inherited a lot of money from his parents. His money paid for all this." Lao pointed at the

equipment surrounding us in the lab.

"And that is the story of how they met," Lao concluded.

"And so twelve years ago the three of you moved to Kindera."

"Yes. Chuang Tzu and Xenophanes formed a very strong friendship. My father taught Xen how to concentrate on his work, and Xen asked my father and me if we would come with him to Kindera to help build this lab".

"How did Chuang Tzu help Mr Ryan think more clearly?" I continued, quite curious.

"My father taught Xen to relax and to use meditation." Lao stopped and thought for a moment. "When a person meditates, they clear their mind of all thought and all feeling. It is like clearing the ground for the foundations of a new building. Clearing away all the undergrowth and unwanted soil allows a person to build foundations for a well-balanced building. And, in the same way, once a person clears all conflict and unwanted thought from the mind, they can put thoughts, ideas, even difficult theories together piece

upon piece, in a logical and ordered way."

"And this was how Mr Ryan came to make all of these devices?"

"Yes. He has spent much time over the past twelve years meditating and looking for the truth with a clear mind. He has uncovered many secrets of nature in this time. Even I am amazed by the genius of Mr Ryan."

"What is the relevance of the name Xenophanes?" I asked, remembering that I had wanted to ask this for several days now. Lao stopped to change his chain of thought.

"Xenophanes was a Greek philosopher, as you know," Lao began. "He believed that no one could know anything for certain in relation to theology. He believed that truth in this area was not really possible and that none of us could really know anything for sure about God."

"Okay. So how does this relate to Mr Ryan?"

"Mr Ryan believes much the same. He too is very sceptical of things people hold to be true in this area. In fact, I believe Mr Ryan is sceptical about almost all truth. He says he agrees with a quote from Socrates: 'All I

know is that I know nothing'."

"But that's a little ridiculous, isn't it?" I asked.

"Maybe," Lao responded.

"Well, I know..." I scanned the room for an example, "that I breathe in air. That's true!"

"That is true because almost everyone in the world would agree with you. Truth is usually that which everyone agrees is true. But what if I were to say that I did not think you existed at all, and that therefore your statement was not true."

"I'd say that you were crazy. Of course, I exist! Here I am!"

"And now, what if I were to say that the shortest distance between two points need not necessarily be a straight line?"

I had to stop and think about this one for a moment or two. The shortest distance between two points? It must be a straight line.

"Again I would think you were crazy," I replied.

Lao stopped momentarily. I was sure I had won the argument.

"I am not very familiar with mathematics," Lao began again, "and so I suggest you talk to

Xen about this one. He understands it much better than I. Besides, I do not agree with Xen either, because I see the world in a different way to him. The Chinese philosophers, Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu, saw the world a little differently to the Greek philosopher Xenophanes. And my father taught me the Chinese way of looking at the world, not the western way."

"Does that mean that western thought and Chinese thought are complete opposites?" I continued.

"Not at all. Some western philosophers thought very much the same as Chinese philosophers. But in many ways western people think about things in a different way to Chinese people. This does not mean that they are complete opposites - they are just different."

I didn't really understand what Lao was getting at here, but I chose not to pursue it further. In some ways I was becoming very confused with everything we had spoken about and I had developed a nasty headache. I was trying to think about too much at once, and all

I could see was how ignorant I was. I definitely lacked some fundamental knowledge about the world, but I was determined to change this. Lao's suggestion to read books to help with personal development sounded good. And meditation certainly seemed like the way to go. It obviously did wonders for Mr Ryan, so why not me?

I was looking for anything and everything that would help me feel less ignorant in the presence of Lao and Mr Ryan. I was still a kid in their eyes - and in my own eyes - and I was constantly having it shoved in my face. It was really hard being a pupil of life everywhere I turned. I wanted to be an adult! And I wanted to be one now!

DELTA

It seems that Robert Pirsig deliberated on the concept of quality for quite some time. He deliberated on its definition. He deliberated on its significance. He found enlightenment reading the 2400-year-old text 'Tao Te Ching'. And then he deliberated on the unification of religion, art and science. He seemed quite convinced that quality was better left undefined, since defining it prevents one seeing quality as it really is. His thoughts on quality have been difficult for me to comprehend fully and yet his comments have left me struggling with the concept. I especially find it difficult to accept that quality cannot be defined in some way.

Quality resides partly in the object being judged, whether it be a university student's essay, a song, a piece of music, a poem or a piece of art. And it resides partly in the

subject, the eye of the beholder. Quality is that which induces some form of appreciation for an object in the eye of the beholder, the subject. Judgments of quality depend on both the subject and the object.

The idea of temperament keeps coming to mind whenever I try to define quality for myself. If quality has to do with both an object and the subject, then surely it must be dependent on a person's temperament.

Temperament is a person's nature or disposition. It defines or determines the interests of that person, the needs of that person, the values and beliefs of that person, the type of art that that person likes, the type of university essay that that person may say is quality. A person's temperament is that which brings a person to call something quality. It is that which makes a person who they are.

Some of it depends on genetic makeup, and some of it develops by way of interaction with the environment in which a person lives and grows. It is the tendency of a person to act in a particular way in a particular situation.

So why then does a given temperament see a particular item as being quality? Only the person concerned can answer this. Only that person can determine why something is quality to them. And quite often they don't know why. The reason is too deeply buried in their subconscious or in their genes. They really don't know why. And this to me seems to be the reason why quality cannot be defined in simple terms. Quality for each individual is different, and quite often the individual is completely unaware of why something to him/her is quality. It has to do with his/her temperament, his/her nature, and often this is hidden deep within the individual.

The trips that a person chooses to embark upon are very often closely dependent on the temperament of that person. He or she has a tendency to embark upon certain trips, certain adventures, certain travels that fit with his/her nature, his/her disposition. And the level and type of emotional commitment that a person gives to all trips is also very much defined by their temperament. Temperament is the foundation upon which the person builds

his/her life, chooses those trips which he/she sees to be potentially fulfilling, and approach those trips and situations that confront them during their life.

Temperament is in no way a static entity. Each trip has an impact on an individual's temperament. And the individual's temperament strongly influences the impact of each new trip. No two people's temperaments are the same. And no trip is the same for two different individuals for that very reason.

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"What's religion got to do with motorcycles, George? That's just weird!" Sparrow commented, when he saw the cover of 'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance'. I cringed slightly and felt a bit embarrassed in front of the other surf club members who were within earshot. "What are you reading stuff like that for?" he asked, with

an air of smugness and superiority. What could I say? I know now what I should have said, but at the time I didn't have the self-confidence to stand up for myself.

It was a Saturday night, and the surf club members were having a beach party on South Head. It was coming on dusk, and we were sitting around on the sand listening to Radio Birdman, a heavy Australian band from the 70's. The older club members and some of the younger guys were drinking beers. Some were already beginning to get a little drunk.

"What the hell would you know about books, Sparrow?" Lobby asked, coming to my defence. "You've never read a book in your life!"

"I have so!" came the retort. "I've read lots of books."

"Yerr - what?" cried Zombie. Zombie was a hulk of a guy. He was about six feet tall and about the same across the shoulders. He spent all day doing weight lifting at a local gym, and swimming and surfing out at North Head.

"Well, I've read lots of westerns, and all those novels you have to read at school," Sparrow defended himself.

"Big deal!" Zombie sneered.

I put the novel away in my haversack. It was getting too dark to read, anyway, and I was wanting to go for a walk on the beach. Even after four months of being in Kindera, I still didn't feel all that comfortable with the surf club crowd. They were nice enough people, but somehow my interests were a whole lot different to theirs. For relaxation, they always wanted to go out and drink, whereas I would rather sit around and read or watch television. And yet I did enjoy their company at times, especially when we all got together and played volleyball or soccer on the beach, or went surfing together. I also found the guys easier to talk to and to be with than the girls. I was pretty certain that a lot of the girls hated me. I was the new girl in town and they somehow felt a little threatened by my presence.

"I think I'll go for a walk down the beach,"

I announced.

"I'll come with you," responded Lobby. Lobby had been a great friend to me ever since I'd arrived in Kindera. He often stuck up for me whenever Sparrow or one of the others started having a go at me, and he was probably the most thoughtful person I'd met at the surf club. I really liked him.

"How have things been for you?" Lobby asked me as we started our walk down the beach. The sunset was bright pink set against a deep blue sky. Waves crept in and broke very close to the shore. The swell had not been up for a few weeks now and the surfers had been forced to go elsewhere.

"Pretty good," I replied.

"How's it been with your grandparents?"

"They're great. I get along well with them. A lot better than I thought I would."

"Sparrow upsets you a bit, though, eh?" Lobby observed.

"Yerr, at times he's a bit hard to take."

"You shouldn't let him bother you. He's still pretty immature."

I nodded. Lobby and I talked for some time about various people attached to the surf club. We had this place in common. It was odd, though, that I found this type of talk a little empty. It made me very restless, and I found myself thinking about other things while we were talking. Eventually we ran out of things to say and it felt as though we didn't really have a lot in common. Or, at least, the things we had in common didn't lend themselves to meaningful conversation. At least not for me.

We sat on the beach for a while and listened to the waves breaking on the beach. The sun was almost down and the last of the sea gulls were heading inland for the night. Lobby was leaning back on his hands and thinking. He sighed and lay down on the sand.

"George," he began, "do you want to 'GO' with me?" He suggested in a joking kind of way, though I knew he was asking me a serious question.

"I don't know," I replied in an equally frivolous manner. "I suppose we could give it a go. If I don't like it, I can always opt out

later."

"True," he agreed.

I was beginning to feel a little nervous. Lobby was actually asking me to commit myself to him in an intimate way. I wasn't sure whether I liked him enough for that. He'd been a good friend, sure, and he was very good looking. But did I know him well enough? Did I love him? What the hell is love? God only knows! I guess I was easy enough to look at. I always kept my long brown hair well groomed, my fair complexion had been spared the ravages of teenage acne, and I looked fairly slim and fit. Obviously Lobby thought I looked okay. My mind was racing away with all sorts of crazy thoughts - a veritable bundle of nerves.

It wasn't the first time I'd let myself get involved with a guy. I'd had a couple of boy friends in Mid-Coast City, but the relationships never amounted to much. Was this one going to be any different to the others? Who could say? I didn't feel I had any other option than to give it a go. What did I

have to lose, after all?

I looked down at Lobby on the sand. My chest tightened somewhat and my breathing became shallow and quick. He propped himself up on one elbow, reached over and kissed me lightly on the lips. My heartbeat began to race. We met again, this time for a longer kiss. It was wonderful. I was his, hook, line and sinker. All conflict was expelled. My body took over, rejecting any attempt by my head to rationalize the situation. Lobby pulled me down on top of him and we kissed long and hard. I was certain this was love. We kissed and rolled over in the sand. The closeness I was sharing with this other human being was magic. I felt as though I was glowing all over. I wanted to hold on to this moment for an eternity.

We kissed for quite some time before Lobby touched my breasts and I felt the electricity run through my whole body. I was no longer just glowing. I was burning up. I could feel Lobby's heart pound next to mine and I could feel the warmth of his body. I held

him close and we kissed for what seemed like an hour.

Time was lost somewhere in all the emotion, all the feeling, all the electricity. I finally let go of his body and rolled back a little on the sand. I looked at Lobby. His expression was strangely new to me. It was partly serious, partly something else, I didn't know what. He was somewhat like a stranger to me at that moment. He lent down and kissed me again. I felt his hand move down my body and pull my shirt from out of my jeans. I panicked and grabbed his hand. I wasn't willing to go any further. I was quite anxious about getting pregnant. Stories I'd heard in school were enough to scare me into setting myself limits - limits on how far I was willing to let a guy go. Especially on a first date.

"No!" I insisted. I felt the whole mood of our encounter slowly slip away. He'd killed it, or at least I had. My mind had been woken from its slumber, and it was filled with avid discussion, conflict and a bag full of

justifications. I gave Lobby a quick kiss on the lips and sat up.

"Sorry," I added.

"That's okay," he said softly. "I'm sorry I upset you." He sat up next to me. He dropped his head as though he had just been told off by his mother. I couldn't understand it. Why was he feeling guilty? I'd expected him to do what he did and I'd been prepared for it. There was no need to be ashamed.

"It's okay," I offered. "Really, I don't mind. I just think I'm not ready yet."

My words were not really reaching him. He didn't pike up as I had hoped he would. He still looked very sheepish. I thought it best to let it go.

"Would you like to go back now?" I asked.
"Okay," he replied.

We got to our feet and made our way back along the beach, hand in hand. Lobby seemed to have clammed up on me, and I felt a little

uncomfortable. In fact, I was becoming a little annoyed with him. I wasn't upset by his actions, so why the hell should he be? But I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I just walked along with him in silence.

The rest of the evening with Lobby was not much better. He seemed to overcome his guilt, but I found that we had very little in common to talk about. It was easy for the two of us to talk about things within the group, but whenever we had a moment alone, we were faced with an awkward silence. I was sure that Lobby felt as uncomfortable as I did.

Our relationship only lasted a couple of weeks. We would go out together on our own or occasionally in a group. We would kiss as we had done on that first Saturday night, but finally we both admitted to one another that it didn't seem to be working. There was definitely something missing. We weren't connecting well when it came to talking about things. And yet we liked one another and we both wanted to remain really good friends. At the time this didn't seem to be much of a

consolation.

The relationship left me a little empty. It hadn't been much different to the relationships I'd had in Mid-Coast City, except that Lobby was the best kisser I'd ever been with. Most everything else seemed somewhat like another re-run of a bad movie. What the hell was going wrong? Was it me? What was I doing that destroyed every relationship I got myself into? Maybe love was just an illusion. Maybe other people thought love existed in their relationships, but God was only playing games with them. He'd promised everyone that He'd put love in the world, but had only be misleading us. There was no such thing as love after all. And after having watched so many movie screen romances, this thought left me feeling ripped off.

My parents had certainly loved me. And as time passed I thought more and more about how much I still loved them. My anger had long since gone, along with my guilt. In a way I had forgiven the universe for taking them from me, and I'd forgiven myself for being so

utterly selfish and unfair. Forgiveness turned out to be the key to all my troubles.

Forgiveness had allowed me to accept that I was only human, that maybe I had done the best I could at the time under the given circumstances. It had certainly been difficult coming to terms with my own finiteness, my own human nature.

* * * * *

"Lao mentioned a while ago that the shortest distance between two points is not necessarily a straight line," I began. It was late March and I was sitting down with Mr Ryan at one of our Wednesday afternoon tutorial sessions. He was dressed in a baggy floral shirt and flared black pants. I'd settled for a printed T-shirt and shorts. My wardrobe definitely suffered in both colour and style when compared to Mr Ryan's. "How can that be?" I asked.

Mr Ryan paused and thought.

"You never cease to amaze me, George," he

began. "You come up with the most incredible questions. It's excellent to see."

"Thank you," I responded, feeling quite proud of myself.

"The shortest distance between two points is a curve..." he began. "It's interesting, isn't it? It was always said that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That certainly sounds more rational."

Mr Ryan looked up at the ceiling and massaged his chin.

"Well," he began again, "you may well have heard of Euclid, the famous Greek mathematician, have you?"

"No!" I replied.

"You haven't heard of Euclid?" he responded, sounding quite surprised. "I would have thought they'd teach every Mathematics student about Euclid. Have you heard about Euclidian geometry?"

"Yes, isn't that the one where you draw circles, and then draw triangles and arcs and stuff like that in and around the circle, and then prove all sorts of different things about the circle and the shapes you've drawn?"

"Yes, that's the one. Although, one of the

significant things about Euclidian geometry isn't about the circles and shapes as such. You see, Euclid, who lived around 300 B.C., was famous for having collected together all the geometry that had been discovered up until his time by other Greek mathematicians. He more or less just formalized the geometry already known. He took all the known proofs, assumptions and theorems and presented them in a more ordered and logical way. He wrote thirteen books or chapters in total, and collectively they're known as Euclid's Elements. You can still rush down to your nearest University bookshop and buy your own personal copy of Euclid's Elements."

"Can you?" I cut in.

"Yes. Though Euclid's Elements might not make the best bedtime reading."

Mr Ryan smiled.

"One of the most important parts of Euclid's Elements is the list of ten axioms at the beginning of Chapter 1. Euclid didn't call them axioms, but divided them into 2 groups of 5 and called them common notions and postulates. These names aren't all that important for the moment. In effect, the

axioms were a set of assumptions that Euclid and others held to be true and did not require any kind of proof. For example, one of the common notions said that things which are equal to the same thing are also equal to one another. That is, if A and B are equal to C, then A and B must also be equal. Obvious?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And so it was decided that these ten assumptions didn't require any more proof. The very first postulate more or less said that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line. And again this is obvious and shouldn't require proof. The problem that often occurs though, when people assume that something is obviously true, is that someone else comes along later and proves that it isn't necessarily true. And Euclid's 10 axioms are a classic case of this.

"The axiom that seemed to be the most dubious and uncertain to Euclid and to others that followed him was the one he listed as his fifth postulate. It said something like: you draw a straight line across two other straight lines making two interior angles on each side of this line. If you add these pairs of internal

angles, then the side whose angles add to less than two right angles will be the side on which the two lines meet. It's very confusing when said this way. So let me explain it another way.

"Imagine a single railway line crossing a very flat desert. The second half of the line has yet to be laid down. Are you following me so far?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Now imagine that a railway worker has laid down a sleeper beneath the railway line. And he has the second railway line ready to attach to the other side of the sleeper. He measures the correct distance that the second line has to be from the first and makes a mark on the sleeper. Still following?"

"Yes."

"Now the railway worker has to line up the second railway line with the first so that they are both parallel and the train doesn't derail. And he has to make sure that the second railway line passes over the mark he has put in the sleeper. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Okay, now, how many different directions

can he lay down the second track such that it passes over the point on the sleeper and is parallel to the first track? One? Any number? Or none?"

I thought about it for a moment. There was no doubt that this was a trick question. It seemed obvious to me that there was only one way that the railway worker could lay down the track given these constraints. But what was the trick?

"One way," I responded.

"Yes, that certainly seems the most obvious answer, doesn't it?"

"So what's the real answer?" I asked.

"Well, in a way, that is the correct answer. It was certainly the only correct answer that was accepted for about 2100 years after the time of Euclid and his 'Elements'. And even today it is still one of the three correct answers to the question."

"What are the other two correct answers?"

"Well, firstly I need to explain the rules. You must realize that Euclid's fifth postulate is an assumption. Euclid was a little uncertain about it, but evidently he couldn't find a way to prove it or to justify it, so he just assumed it

was true. You see, whenever you build up some argument or logical structure, there must be at least one, usually more, definitions and/or assumptions. You have to start somewhere. If you wish to prove that an assumption is true, then you have to have another assumption or definition on which to base your proof. Ultimately you must start somewhere with something that is accepted by all as being true without question. And so Euclid based most of his 'Elements' on a set of definitions and 10 axioms. That was his baseline - his foundation."

"But there must be some way to prove them," I insisted.

"Yes," Mr Ryan agreed. "There is a way, but it requires quite a bit of work. You see, when a person develops a set of logical arguments based on unproven assumptions, the assumptions must fulfil three very important conditions. They must possess the properties of completeness, consistency and independence."

"What are they?"

"Well, completeness means that the assumptions given must be complete and self-

evident in themselves and contain no unstated assumptions within them. Consistency means that it is impossible to derive two contradictory theorems from the assumptions, and independence means that no one of the assumptions is a consequence of another.

"In the case of Euclid's ten axioms, it turns out they fell down in the area of completeness, although this was corrected earlier this century (1900's) by a guy named Hilbert. As to their consistency and independence, there has been long standing controversy among mathematicians. As far as the 'Elements' go, there are no two contradictory theorems, so you might say that the axioms are consistent as far as anyone can tell."

Mr Ryan stopped for a moment and looked at me. It had been difficult for me to follow some of what he was saying, although most of it made a lot of sense.

"Am I confusing you?" Mr Ryan asked.

"A little," I replied.

"I'll try and get to the point then. It seemed that Euclid's axioms were reasonably acceptable. Even though his fifth postulate caused some concern, it was not really

challenged until some 2100 years after Euclid had written his 'Elements'. There were a number of people involved in challenging his axioms: Carl Gauss, one of the three greatest mathematicians of all time, Lobatchevsky and Bolyai and sometime later, Bernhard Reimann. Each of these guys, in effect - roughly speaking - replaced one or more of Euclid's axioms and then proceeded to more or less rewrite the thirteen books of the 'Elements' to see if the changes produced any contradictory theorems. It seemed that they didn't find any. The ultimate outcome of their work was the production of two new geometries, known as non-Euclidean geometries. They produced geometries of the universe that don't really match with common experience or common sense. And yet they were mathematically correct.

"Going back to the railway line that we discussed earlier, it is interesting to see what Lobatchevsky, Bolyai and Reimann would have said to the railway worker. Reimann would say that there's no way to lay down the second track without causing the train to derail. Reimann's geometry of the universe

turned out to be global in shape. Conversely, Lobatchevsky and Bolyai would have said that you could lay down the track an infinite number of ways and not cause the train to derail. In so saying, these two produced a third shape for the universe. One that looked like two curved ice cream cones put together."

Mr Ryan paused for a moment. We sat in silence for a moment. I was feeling quite excited. No maths or science teacher had ever hinted that this sort of maths even existed. I hadn't understood everything that Mr Ryan had said, but that didn't seem to matter much. The topic of non-Euclidean geometries really interested me.

"So now," Mr Ryan said, catching his thoughts, "getting back to your original question, these non-Euclidean Geometries, one of which Einstein used in his theory of relativity, suggest that the shortest distance between two points need not necessarily be a straight line, it may well be a curve of some kind. It's a little hard to fathom, but the proof lies in the consistency of these non-Euclidean

mathematical models."

Mr Ryan sat back. "And do you know what all this proves, George?"

"No," I replied.

"It proves that, just when you think you've stumbled across the truth, you can be sure that some time later some other person will come along and prove that what you've uncovered may not necessarily be the whole truth or any part of the truth. And of this, you can almost be certain!"

EPSILON

Rust red hills present an eerie foreground to the darker volcanic cones that spot the horizon. Dark and menacing storm clouds are forming in the west, promising us a fresh supply of drinking water later in the day. To the northwest is forming yet another huge dust storm that often threatens our little valley. Hopefully it will have come and gone before the rains. Needless to say, no vegetation secures the sandy ground here, making Planet 6 quite inhospitable at times.

Expectations were destined to be shattered from the very moment we landed here. Alpha Proxima's planetary system has offered us no tropical oases, no bug-eyed monsters, no Doctor Who visits, and no chocolate frogs gnawing at our toes. All we got for our money was sobering desolation, dust and lunar-like landscapes. Disappointment was inevitable.

And yet looking out the window, seeing this very foreign and uninviting planet, I have incredible trouble appreciating what the other planets of this system would be like. What does it mean to land on a planet that is worse than this one?

What does it mean, even, to be here on this planet? It seems so foreign and hard to come to terms with. And yet the surroundings seem so very real to me, so very novel, even exciting, but disturbing nevertheless. This planet is 4.28 light years away from earth! What does it mean to be 4.28 light years away from home? What does 4.28 light years mean? At the very least it means there's no time out for volleyball on the beach with the guys, no phoning home to check on my grandparents, no catching up on the latest music clips on the T.V., no anti-nuclear demonstrations, no one-sun-blue-sky, no eucalyptus trees full of character and twists, and no supermarkets with familiar biscuits. It means being away from home, not the summer-camp-type being away from home, but the 4.28-light-years-type being away from

home. Gone! Really gone!

And what's to show for all our efforts? Lots of dust and rock samples and a native single-celled bacteria. Mr Ryan stumbled across a single-celled bacteria sample four days ago in a stagnant pool not too far from the craft. We almost had to tie him down fearing he might cause himself injury through all the excitement. He spent most of the rest of that day engaged in a whole battery of scientific tests and investigations. Needless to say he was wrapped in his discovery. Lao and I thought it was somewhat of an anticlimax after all our efforts.

None of the three of us even considered for a moment that this most primitive cellular life form would find haven in human bodies, and cause as much havoc as it has done over the past three days. In retrospect, it isn't at all surprising. Mr Ryan set up a wonderful open air environment for the bacteria and, of course, it flourished and multiplied prolifically, both in the culture and in our lungs, and brought on the fever that we've all suffered the last three

days. Without Lao and his Chinese medicine we may well not have survived.

The fever seems to have really shaken me up. Especially with respect to my thoughts about being here, about Lao, about home and about life in general. So much has changed around me that I'm beginning to wonder whether I'm losing 'it'. I guess the only real stabilizing factor that has kept me together up till now has been the company of Mr Ryan and Lao. They seem to have kept it together really well. And this has helped me no end. In fact, they've been there for me in all sorts of ways for the whole of the past year. They've given me new ways of looking at things, new ways of doing things, new ways of approaching life and even given me models upon which I could structure my concept of reality.

Even the ideas I'm putting together in my head right now have virtually come directly from Lao and Mr Ryan. Their ideas seem to me to be well thought through and their individual views of life tend to complement each other in a very special kind of way.

Between them, they seem to hold an awesome amount of knowledge and understanding of both human nature and the nature of the universe. Mr Ryan's discussion of non-Euclidean geometries is a good example. I may never have heard of these alternative geometries had it not been for him. I'm very surprised they were never mentioned at school. They're far more interesting to learn about than exercise after exercise of algebra problems. And they're the basis for modern day physics.

After discussing non-Euclidean geometries with Mr Ryan, I took time to read up a little on Greek mathematics and western philosophy. Just enough to get a clearer picture of what actually happened in the time of the Greeks. Surprisingly enough, I found it interesting. There were some pretty amazing people who lived at that time - some highly creative people. The reading helped me considerably in understanding and even accepting Mr Ryan's scepticism.

You see, mathematics is probably the most structured and exact science in all of human

thinking. It is based on a minimum number of assumptions and is carefully built up, each step being substantiated and justified on purely logical grounds. Yet even in mathematics there is still great conflict of opinion by the experts. If this is our most exact science, then what hope in hell do all the other branches of human thought have in uncovering the 'truth'? How does a person know when he or she has uncovered the truth when it ultimately comes down to agreement by a majority of well-informed people?

Securing 'truth' is a very difficult goal or objective for any person or group of persons to attain. And the reason for this is quite obvious. Human perception and cognition are fraught with a whole bunch of deceptions. Whichever way we turn, we are being deceived. Our eyes are deceived whenever we see a stick appear to bend in a glass of water, or when we see two railway lines appear to come together on the horizon. Our ability to rationalize or think through things accurately can be distorted when we are angry or depressed, or when we're in love. Ignorance

can cause us to do things that we later regret, or to misjudge events that occur in our lives. We may blindly accept things that we are told by our teachers. Unquestioned acceptance of Euclid's 10 axioms for 2000 odd years is a perfect example. Or we can develop inaccurate values or beliefs subsequent to all sorts of events in our lives. A person can develop a fear of all dogs purely because they were bitten by one dog when they were young. There seem to be all sorts of ways that life can deceive us - almost to the point where one wonders how we are able to uncover any truth at all.

So how is it that we know as much as we do? Or do we really know as much as we think we do? There's no doubt that a group of people working together is important. A group of well-informed people, at least, is able to uncover and reveal the deceptions of others in their field. Different people have different temperaments and often look at the world in a slightly different way to others. Where one person is deceived by something, another (possibly less emotionally attached) may be

able to see the deception clearly and correct it. Throughout history there have often been people who have shattered strong positive feelings of achievement of others by finding fault with their ideas or their beliefs. The efforts of these people were important.

And so I've come to consider Mr Ryan's scepticism as being quite credible. People are very easily deceived. What we accept as truth may not necessarily be so. Coming to terms with a belief such as 'truth is little more than an illusion' is extremely difficult. It's taken me months. And yet it's a very powerful belief.

* * * * *

I first realized that Mr Ryan and Lao were building a space craft one evening in early April while listening to Bob Dylan deliver 'All Along the Watchtower'. It's something about the rhythm of this song that gets me thinking... Jimi Hendrix or Dylan, both

versions are great.

"We intend travelling to the Alpha Proxima - or, more correctly, the Proxima Centauri - solar system," Mr Ryan remarked, as we made our way out to the lab the following Sunday morning.

"But that's 4 light years away!" I responded, pointing out the obvious. Mr Ryan often scolded me for pointing out the obvious. "It'll take you years and years to get there," I added.

"It's 4.28 light years away to be exact. And, yes, it will take us about that many years."

I paused for a moment and wondered whether I'd heard him correctly. I was sure he'd implied that it would only take them 4.28 years to get to the Alpha Proxima Solar System. But there was no way they could do it. They couldn't travel at the speed of light.

"Did you say it'll take you 4.28 years to get there?" I asked, seeking clarification.

"Yes." Mr Ryan looked at me sideways and smiled.

"But nothing can travel at the speed of

light," I retorted.

"Except what?" Mr Ryan replied. 'Here we go again,' I thought. Everything had to be a guessing game with him.

"Except light," I replied. Mr Ryan nodded but remained silent. I knew he wanted me to put the rest together for myself. But how could a person travel at the speed of light? Was he suggesting that he could make his space craft into a beam of light? Maybe! Actually there was some sense in that. Some kind of transmit beam, or whatever it's called, like in Star Trek. 'Beam me up, Scottie'. You know the story!

"Have you invented some kind of beam for transporting stuff like in Star Trek?" I asked.

"Something like that, I suppose," Mr Ryan replied.

"What do you mean 'you suppose'?" I asked impatiently. He was deliberately teasing me again. "Come on, Mr Ryan, give me a break. I'm trying as hard as I can."

"And that's the best that you can come up with?"

There was a long pause. It took me some

time to overcome my frustration. And even then I couldn't think of a more plausible solution.

"Let me give you a hint," Mr Ryan finally suggested. "We had a discussion a while ago about particles. Do you remember?"

"Yes, you said they were made up of a bunch of standing waves." That was it! The penny dropped. "I get it! You can change the standing waves in particles into another sort of wave and make them move from one place to another."

"Very good!"

"Have you done this already?"

"Yes, we've done it a number of times in the lab. There's no question that it works. In fact, I've uncovered a number of factors about transmitting objects from one place to another in the form of waves."

My excitement was building again. My mind filled with all sorts of possibilities. You could transport objects from one place in the world to any other part of the world in virtually no time at all. Incredible! You could send a whole space craft and all its contents

light years away from the earth. But then, what about transporting people? Could they survive?

"It seems plausible," Mr Ryan suggested. "We transported a mouse in this way and it didn't seem to suffer any noticeable side effects."

"But what about people?"

"Would you like to be the first to try, George?"

"No, thank you."

Mr Ryan laughed. "I'd like to test the idea later this year when the space craft is complete. I intend to go on the trip myself and see what effect it has on me."

"Aren't you scared?"

"No, I've a lot of faith in this discovery. And even if it doesn't work, then the loss is not one I'll have to live with in years to come."

There wasn't much I could say to that!

I asked Mr Ryan about how the space craft and its contents could be changed into a wave for transmitting. It seemed that he had developed a highly complex device that could

transform the craft and its contents into electromagnetic waves, similar to white light. I've never fully understood the whole process even though Mr Ryan has tried to explain it to me a number of times. Understanding the structure of the transmission wave is difficult enough, let alone understanding the device itself.

It seems that the particles of the craft and its contents can be changed into an EMR (electromagnetic radiation) beam of finite length. That is to say that the beam has a set beginning and end and has a set length. There is a wave structure running along the centre of the beam which acts like a gravity core, holding the beam together as it travels through space. The craft and contents form a complex set of EMR rays around this core, and their energy content is maintained by the gravity core. This ensures that the EMR rays do not deteriorate while in transit and prevent the craft and its contents being destroyed. Further, the gravity core has a highly complex wave pattern built into it which acts as a timing device. Timing waves are set out of phase

according to pre-programming and after a given time period, whether it be 8 minutes or 4 years, the waves come together in phase and reverse the wave generation process. Only then can the 'solid matter' be reconstituted.

Mr Ryan spoke solidly for 20 minutes on his EMR device and I understood only a fraction of what he said. It was painfully clear that Mr Ryan's understanding of physics was light years away from my own. And his explanation had been tempered to suit my level of understanding. I couldn't even begin to imagine the level of understanding he must have had in order to develop such a device. All I could see was my own self-image being crumpled by my ignorance.

Mr Ryan indicated that he hadn't told my grandparents about their intended trip. He asked if I could keep it that way and I assured him that that was fine.

We arrived at the lab as usual at about 10.00am to a hearty breakfast prepared by Lao. Lao always prepared excellent meals.

His main evening meals especially were superb - a chef of the highest order.

"Coffee, George?" Mr Ryan asked.

"Yes, please," I replied.

"So, Lao, George has worked out our little enterprise," began Mr Ryan. "It seems she worked it out the other day while resting in bed."

"WHILE SHE WAS RESTING?" Lao exclaimed loudly, as if I was some sort of complete weirdo.

"It's surprising, isn't it?" Mr Ryan continued. Mr Ryan's voice had taken on that tone again. He spoke slowly and carefully, almost sing-song, emphasizing the most important words in each statement. It was pick-on-George-time again. "And you said she couldn't think at all."

"Thanks, guys!" I cut in.

"I don't think I said that, did I?" Lao acted perplexed, in a comical way.

"Well, maybe they weren't your exact words."

"I did say meditation would do her good," Lao continued. "But I still think she is very

slow to realize what we do here."

"Yes, that crossed my mind, too. Maybe she's not as bright as we first thought."

"Do you think she is worth keeping?" Lao continued. "When she is this slow?"

"That's certainly a point worth considering," Mr Ryan responded. "Although she is good fun most of the time. Who else would we pick on?"

"True," Lao contemplated. Neither Lao nor Mr Ryan had looked at me or addressed me once during their attack on my intelligence. It was as if I wasn't even in the room. They had this little routine down pat. They found something about me to pick on and then made up lines and bounced ideas off each other as they went along. I'd come to accept the routine and worked out that the best I could do was just keep quiet. After all, their little routine actually amused me. They put on such comical voices, and seemed to take themselves so seriously. It was something like a Monty Python skit, live.

In another way, it was quite comforting to see that the two of them had such a strong and

close friendship. They were able to joke around, support one another and feed off each other's ideas in a relaxed and clever way. It was like they shared their own little culture, full of positive feeling and founded on mutual respect. They had a oneness that made me feel envious.

"So, what are we doing today?" I broke in, hoping to change the subject.

"So, what are we doing today?" Mr Ryan repeated thoughtfully. "Well, I guess you and Lao will spend the morning doing your usual thing. And then this afternoon the two of you can continue with the wiring."

Usually on a Sunday morning Lao took time out to teach me some Tai Chi and some meditation techniques. He'd taught me two complete Tai Chi movements by this stage and seemed happy with the way I was progressing. I really enjoyed Tai Chi, and I couldn't have asked for a more patient teacher. Lao then usually took me down to the creek to practise meditation. We would sit for an hour or so and Lao would help me clear my mind and

experience things I'm sure I'll never be able to describe adequately with words. Nevertheless, it was a very relaxing way to start the day and I think Lao really enjoyed having a student.

Lao apparently had spent quite a deal of his youth in China learning all about Chinese medicine, Tai Chi and other various forms of martial arts. He'd had a number of teachers and had taken years and years to master some of the techniques properly. Lao's father, Chuang Tzu, had been a master in several martial arts. As far as I can tell, Lao had always worshipped his father and had always striven to be as he was - to be a competent Chinese doctor, to be spiritually and mentally attuned, to master Tai Chi and other martial arts and to be a worthy teacher of all of these disciplines.

I'd asked Lao a number of times to teach me some martial arts, some of the fighting techniques, but his usual response was something like 'it is not yet the right time'. I couldn't understand this. What did he mean it was not yet the right time? Was I too

immature or something? Did he think I was going to go out and punch up everyone on the street? What was he suggesting? 'It is not yet the right time' was all he would say.

I'd never seen Lao fight, nor train in other martial arts except Tai Chi. In fact, I was beginning to wonder whether he knew any fighting techniques at all. And yet something inside me suggested otherwise.

"You and Mr Ryan must think I'm a real idiot, eh?" I asked Lao as we made our way out to the front of the cabin. "Not realizing earlier what you were doing up here?"

"Not at all," Lao responded. "Mr Ryan has done much to hide what we do here from you. He has given you very vague explanations of equipment we have here."

Lao looked at me closely, almost searching my face for something. There was a pause after which he added: "Do not worry too much what others think of you. You know yourself better than others. Sometimes they are blinded by their own minds." Lao paused for a moment. "It is true, however, that Mr Ryan

thinks you are a very bright person. He has told me so."

This comment made me feel somewhat relieved. I really appreciate remarks like this coming from Lao because he's always sincere. His remarks always seem to come from his heart and aren't fabricated or plastic in any way.

"How do you feel about travelling away from the earth?" I asked. "I mean, won't you be scared? Won't you miss the earth?"

Lao stopped for a moment and looked toward me and yet seemed to look right through me. "I will miss the bush. I will miss country air. And I will miss the creek and the sparkling water. But scared? No, I am not scared." Lao focused on my face and smiled slightly. "People in the west sometimes say that home is where they lay their hat. I think this is how it is for me. Home is where my heart is. I live with my soul inside of me. I am centre. Life for me comes from within. Do you understand?"

"Sort of," I replied.

"Many people look for their meaning outside of themselves. Some people spend all of their life looking for money, or for power, or some other thing. They forget to look for life inside themselves. They have their soul outside of them. The centre is outside and they are not very happy. They never reach happiness, because they only look out in the world, and not inside themselves for happiness."

Lao looked at me and probably realized that I wasn't following him all that well.

"You see," he continued, "a person can be happy if they find centre within themselves. If they have centre within themselves, then they can reach out for things in the world without losing balance. And they can draw happiness into themselves. If they have centre outside them, then they will have need for support to hold them up, or they will fall over. To have support or to fall over is not to be happy."

"What? Like an alcoholic? They need alcohol as some kind of support?"

"Yes. Or a person who is very sad or very depressed or very angry must lean on a support. If someone like this leans for a long

time, there is a good chance they will fall."

Lao stopped momentarily. "And so for me I hold my centre inside of me. I can go to Alpha Proxima and feel I have not left my soul here on earth. And so I will not be scared as you say. I will miss some things but I can also let them go, for they are not supporting me. My centre or my soul will stay here within me." He pointed to his heart.

Lao took to searching my face again and thinking.

"I have an idea," he said finally. He clasped me by both shoulders and directed me to sit down on the grass. He sat down opposite me and we fixed stares at each other. I waited a few moments. I always wonder what is going on in his head when he looks at me like this for a period of time. Lao is a very intense person at times, and has an incredible depth about him. He looks for and is concerned about things the average person rarely thinks about. For instance, surf club members are usually concerned about their own appearance and that of those around them. Lao, on the other hand, always seems to concentrate on the inner nature of people, and rarely comments

on their looks. Finally, he broke the silence:

"I want you to see what I see. I want you to listen to my words and try to picture in your head what I am describing. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Okay. First, I want you to close your eyes." I did as I was instructed. He continued: "Now relax your eyelids. They are putting no pressure on your eyes." He paused and waited. I felt my eyelids relax. It forced me to relax my breathing and I felt my shoulders slump. I sat up and pulled my shoulders back. My eyelids felt light, almost weightless.

There was silence for a minute. I could hear a kookaburra laughing in the trees behind me, and the melodic trickling of the creek water off to the right. The sounds around me sharpened. I could hear other birds chirping off in the distance. I concentrated on the sounds. It's incredible what you can hear when you finally shut up and really listen. There were the sounds of bugs in the grass not too far away. There was a very light breeze blowing, leaves rustling, a few falling and

twigs cracking. And there were other sounds, some loud, some faint, but quite a few I was unable to decipher.

"I want you to listen closely to your breathing," Lao began again. "Slowly breathe in. Then slowly breathe out again. With each breath in, let your stomach rise, and with each breath out, let your stomach fall again."

I listened to Lao's instructions. His voice was so quiet and calm. I think his voice alone was enough to make me relax. It seemed to be one with the background noises that were filling my ears. I concentrated on my breathing as he had instructed. Breathe in, stomach out; breathe out, stomach in.

"I want you to let your whole body relax," Lao continued. "First your legs. They are beginning to feel weightless. They are relaxing. Becoming less and less heavy. With every breath you exhale you feel the stresses and tightness flowing down your legs and out the end of your feet."

Again he paused while I took in what he had said. I let my legs relax, sitting cross-legged, I let my knees drop a little and let the stress flow out my feet with every breath I

exhaled. It was a strange kind of feeling, but I could actually feel the tightness in my legs flowing out of my feet. Slowly they became numb and I began to lose all feeling. It was as if my legs were no longer attached to my body.

"Now your body. Feel the stresses and tightness of your body flowing out through your legs and arms. Concentrate on your breathing, keeping your eyelids relaxed."

I began to feel stress flowing out of my body, slowly becoming more numb. I found myself concentrating my whole presence in my brain. It was as though I only owned my head, that I only existed in my head, and that my head was separate from the rest of my body. My whole being had become incredibly relaxed.

Lao remained silent. I continued to concentrate on my breathing. Finally, Lao spoke again. His words were soft and unobtrusive:

"You look up and see a forest of eucalypt. The trees are the twisted type. They cover the whole side of the hill in front of you."

My mind slowly began to picture the forest of eucalypt, a mountain side covered with

trees, a creek flowing near to me. It was incredibly peaceful.

"A bird flies past and lands near you. It begins to sing sweetly."

Lao paused between each statement to give me time to picture what he had described. It was like I had my own personal television locked up inside my head. He would tell the television what to display, and sure enough it would appear for my own personal and private viewing. I never realized how many scenes I actually had locked up inside my head.

"...there are skiers slowly twisting their way down the side of a huge snow covered mountain, white as white can possibly be... you are floating up and looking down on the mountain, looking down on the skiers turning gracefully as they slowly make their way down the snow-white mountain side... your wings carry you away from the mountain across green fields, a land that looks like a patchwork quilt... there is a creek flowing in front of you... you are sitting by the bank watching fish dance in the water, jumping in and out as they make their way down the stream... you are sitting on a beautifully sandy

beach, the sky is as blue as it possibly could be, the waves are coming in, you love the sound of them crashing on the beach in front of you..."

Lao went on and on with the instructions. I was in heaven. My private little television tuned into scene after scene. I had never had so many good scenes and feelings flow through me at any one sitting. And all the while I remained incredibly relaxed and weightless. All body feeling had vanished. After what seemed like an hour, Lao paused for several minutes while my mind took control of its own viewing program. Finally, Lao began again:

"Now you are stepping into a spacecraft. It is Mr Ryan's space craft... you sit at the control panel and look out of the front panel... it is taking off. You rise up, looking down over the forest. You can see hills and hills of trees... you can now see the trees becoming very small, and in the distance you can see Kindera, Kindera River, and now the coast line... they are becoming smaller and smaller as you rise higher and higher."

There was a pause as I watched Kindera

and all the surrounding area become smaller and smaller.

"You look up," Lao continued, "and see the stars of the night sky all about you. They look absolutely beautiful. You can see the whole of the Milky Way. You've never seen so many stars and clusters of stars before."

Lao stopped for a time to let my mind tune in and take up the screening of the Milky Way in all its glory. It was beautiful. There was the Southern Cross, there was the Magellenic Cloud. There were stars everywhere. Stars I'd never seen before. It was like a busy street in the evening, there were lights absolutely everywhere.

"The moon is appearing close by. It has craters all over it," Lao continued. "It is coming closer and closer, the craters are getting larger and larger." I began to focus on the moon, all brown and covered with huge craters. "The space craft is going to land on the moon... slowly it comes in lower and lower over a huge crater... slowly the craft lands on the crater floor... you find you are in a space suit... you walk outside, there are rocks and dirt everywhere around you... you look up in

the sky and see all the stars again... but the earth is nowhere to be seen... you begin to feel lost, scared, you strain your eyes to see the earth... you feel your soul leave your body and float away from you, floating up to find the earth... this makes you panic... your heart begins to beat wildly, your breathing is shallow and quick."

Lao stopped for a few moments. I was actually panicking, my heart was beating quickly and I could feel my adrenalin running wild. I was watching my soul slowly disappearing above me. And I had no way of bringing it back.

"You stop looking up. You focus on a rock in front of you. It is large and black. Your body relaxes as you concentrate all your attention on the rock." Lao paused. "You now command your soul to come back to you, you are not calling out loud, you can command it back by only thinking the command... your soul is returning to your body... you feel in control and in command again, you feel whole, and you feel very relaxed again."

Lao stopped talking. I felt my panic slowly subside, and my body relax again. I wondered

whether Lao was going to continue with the instructions but he did not. I waited quite some time, finally deciding to concentrate on being relaxed as I wandered around the crater of the moon. I found I could really take in what I was seeing without feeling anxious about where I was, how hostile it might appear, or how far away from home I had travelled. I felt as though I was a whole person with all the strength in the world. I felt happy and self-assured, I had my soul back and I felt I could face any problem, any situation and deal with it. I was whole. And being whole made me invincible.

I slowly opened my eyes. Lao was sitting in front of me with his eyes closed. I looked around me in order to re-orient myself. Lao opened his eyes and smiled at me.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Very relaxed," I replied.

"Where are you now?" he continued.

"On earth."

"Good."

"That must be one of the best experiences I've ever had," I offered. Lao smiled and

nodded.

"What did you learn?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Do you think you could face travelling away from the earth now?"

"Yes. I felt very secure on the moon once my soul returned to my body. I guess now I know what you were saying about having your soul or centre inside of you."

"And that is all a person needs to prepare him/herself for a trip to Alpha Proxima," Lao commented. He paused momentarily. "All of the visions you experienced of life on earth are carried with you wherever you go, whether it's out on a boat or somewhere out in the universe. The visions that you saw were yours, they belong to you, they are in your head. I didn't put them there, they were already in your memory."

"When I head off to Alpha Proxima with Xen I know I'll have memories like this that I will be taking with me. And I know I'll be taking my soul with me. Knowing this will make the trip easier."

We sat in silence looking at one another for

quite some time, though we were both lost in our own little worlds. I was thinking about what Lao had said and trying to envisage what travelling to Alpha Proxima would really be like.

"I wish I could go with you to Alpha Proxima," I said finally. Lao smiled and nodded. We sat for a moment longer and then Lao reached out for my hands. I clasped his hands and we both stood up. I looked at Lao and felt close to him. He was a very special person.

"Let us do some Tai Chi," he suggested.

ZETA

He was running toward me screaming in agonizing pain. I stood and watched horrified as the flames engulfed him and he fell to the ground still screaming, his face contorted, his body twitching violently. I pressed my hands over my ears but still his screams found their way in, my stomach knotting tighter and tighter, my whole body feeling faint. But he just went on screaming and screaming, rolling around in the middle of the road, lost to the flames.

The second explosion came only blocks away. I turned and ran down an empty freeway, panic stricken. Then came the third mushroom directly in front of me, then the fourth and the fifth. There was nowhere for me to escape. I looked down to the street below. People were vaporizing before my eyes. No time for pain or screams of agony - there one

moment gone the next. Someone tugged at my T-shirt. I flinched and turned. A little boy stood with a face all burnt and deformed, clothing torn, and hair already white and falling from his head. I screamed and ran, wanting out, but the nuclear warheads continued to fall all around me. Any moment I expected to be vaporized or burnt alive.

The sky was completely lost to the mushroom clouds, black smoke and the fallout already descending. The smell was of death, the overwhelming smell of burning flesh and the distinctive odour of nuclear fission. The buildings were a mass of flames, high-rises falling before my eyes, crashing loudly, disintegrating in a pile of rubble. The world was dying a loud and horrific death.

Over and over came the vision of that guy burning alive screaming in agony. I saw his black and charred, writhing figure before me. I watched him open his eyes and look up at me. Again he screamed, the sound piercing every part of my body, twisted violently for a few moments more and then his eyes turned a

gross yellow colour, poured out of their sockets and trickled down the side of his deformed and contorted face. The skin had been burnt off the lower cheeks and facial bones protruded, blackened, and holding that expression of agonizing death.

Stomach churned and knotted, I looked up to see a hundred burning figures stumbling out of a thick cloud of smoke and screaming down the freeway toward me. All I could see was a wall of agonized faces contorted and screaming, and all I could smell was roasting flesh. I fell to the ground, put my head between my knees and covered my ears with my arms. I felt my stomach retch. My hand came away from my head clutching a fist full of dead white hair. I don't want to die now! Not like this! I DON'T WANT TO DIE LIKE THIS!!

* * * * *

Mid June was when I first began to deal with things like death and religion and the meaning of life. We had just begun to learn about nuclear physics at school and it sparked off a number of recurring nightmares for me. And I was beginning to appreciate the radical music, lyrics and views of the Australian band Midnight Oil. The issues relating to nuclear physics concerned me very deeply, and I became very paranoid and anxious about the state of the world, the build-up of nuclear arms and the construction of nuclear power plants.

It seemed that whichever way I turned I was being reminded of these issues. At school, in the music I was listening to, in the papers and magazines I was reading. I guess subconsciously I was looking for more information relating to nuclear issues, and finding more points of view to fuel my growing anxiety. I'd become a little too fanatical and emotionally involved – it had become so very real and so very frightening.

Life had otherwise been fairly mundane for most of April and May. The tourist trade

slowly dropped off with the onset of the colder weather. Year 12 at Kindera High seemed to be turning out okay. I'd found a group of friends, and we were all working hard preparing for the Year 12 Examinations at the end of the year. Since February I'd felt much better about myself and subsequently felt more comfortable with friends. We regularly played sport at school, and we all found sport an excellent break from studies.

South Head Beach still offered me somewhere to go to get away from everyone whenever I felt the need. It was long enough for me to walk, to sit, to meditate and to escape the crowd. I didn't need it as much as I'd done in January, but on occasion it helped me to get away and think about things going on, think about events that had occurred, and ideas that I needed to work through. Occasionally I'd take a pad and pen with me and write a few poems.

I guess the nuclear issue forced me to think about the value of life, especially the value and worth of my own life. After the suicidal

feelings I'd had in February, I found myself reflecting on my own worth and the value that I held for my own life. I'd come to believe that I was a worthy person, a deserving person. People like my grandparents, Mr Ryan and Lao helped me greatly in this way. They accepted me as a person in my own right, accepted that I had worthwhile views and that I deserved to be loved. And I'd started to accept myself and love myself for who I was.

When a person chooses to suicide they are doing just that - choosing. They are in control of their own destiny, no matter how out of control they may appear to be to others around them. But when two countries decide to kill millions and millions of people because they can't come to terms with their differences or can't play fair, then that to me is incredibly unfair. Those millions and millions of people lose complete control of their own destinies. It is far more out of control than one person choosing to take his/her own life.

And I guess that was the basis for my paranoia. I wanted to live and enjoy life, but

at any moment I could have life stolen from me in probably one of the most horrific and cruel ways ever known to human kind. How ripped off would we all feel? Would we feel anything? And at this point all the questions become rather philosophical. What is death? Where do we go after death? Do we go anywhere? Do we really have a soul? What is this thing we flippantly call god? Does he/she/it really wander around the clouds carrying a staff with some guy Jesus at his right hand side? And so on and so on.

* * * * *

Mr Ryan scored a severe case of food poisoning, one Thursday, in early July. And although Lao treated him several times, Lao felt it best to admit Mr Ryan to the Kindera Hospital as a precaution. Apparently Mr Ryan had suffered quite a deal of discomfort, and Lao felt significantly concerned. They never

did agree though, on the likely source of the poisoning, possibly a meat dish or sea food eaten the previous day.

I came in alone to visit Mr Ryan the following Saturday morning. I sat down on the chair by his bed and we exchanged greetings. He looked quite good, well rested and relaxed, sitting up in bed reading some high-tech physics text. I think he was pleased to see a familiar face.

I'll never forget the pyjamas he had on that day. They stood out and clashed severely with absolutely everything in the ward. They were as freaky as the clothes he usually wore around the lab, multicoloured with swirls of purple and orange and green. I often wondered whether he'd inherited Jimi Hendrix's wardrobe.

"You know what I'd really love, George," he began, "is a cup of coffee. Only the doctors keep telling me I can't have any yet. They only let me drink this horrible soup water tea."

I screwed up my face in response. He

picked up his cup and showed me the tea. I smiled. We sat in silence for a few minutes. Mr Ryan lost himself in another of his characteristic trances. It was kind of reassuring to see that he hadn't changed much. Finally, he returned to earth.

"You know, George, death is a funny thing."

This comment caught me by surprise. Mr Ryan was obviously recovering well. I wanted to reassure him that he wasn't going to die, but that seemed a little ridiculous given the situation. So I remained quiet. He continued:

"What is there for us after life? If we go through life and then there's nothing at the end - a void..." He paused. "Life, laughter, conversation, then nothing - then it's just a horrible cosmic joke."

I nodded. He looked very solemn.

"There has to be something after life. There has to be something. I've spent most of my life rejecting the Christian religion because the Bible and the church have made little sense to me. Christian ethics are fine, but the church... I'm not so sure about."

Mr Ryan paused again.

"There must be something in control, something that created the beauty of the flowers, the harmony of the universe. To say it was mere coincidence is crazy. There's TOO much order and perfection for it to be coincidence. There must be something at work here.

"You know, George, no matter how much I've thought about God and life and the universe I've not yet come up with one concrete clue as to how it all really works. Sure, I've uncovered some things about particles, invented a few machines, but I haven't yet found out anything really substantial about the universe. I've spent my whole life trying. And a whole bunch of ancient Greeks tried, and thousands of people since then. Yet what do we know? Nothing! We're absolutely sure about nothing. What happens to us after death? What's the primal substance? Questions we as a species have asked for thousands of years. We know it's not air, or water, or fire, or earth. Maybe it's energy. Maybe Einstein uncovered it. Maybe he didn't. All we have is 3 thousand years of philosophical mumbo jumbo and a few

mathematical proofs. We still know nothing. Except maybe how to take control and to alter our environment; and we're even having trouble doing that properly. What do we know, George? What do we really know?"

"We know we're going to die sometime," I replied.

"Yes, I guess we know that! But then one day maybe even that will no longer be true."

Mr Ryan paused and thought for a moment.

"We know about entropy. We know that the universe is becoming more and more disordered as time goes on. But then even time goes into the 'we're-not-too-sure-about-you-either' bag. Interesting to know what Einstein would think.

"But entropy is a curious one. Everything in the universe is running down and becoming disordered. So how in the hell did it get ordered in the first place? Answer that! And there we are, back where we started.

Something or someone ordered the universe. Who or what? And why can't we even come close to understanding it or uncovering it?

What are we missing? What is it about human beings that prevents us from knowing for

certain how the universe actually works?"

Mr Ryan paused and waited for me to answer.

"I don't know," I replied. What else could I say?

"I guess we'll always have trouble coming to terms with things that are infinite. We're too finite. Our lives are finite in length; the buildings we build have a finite number of storeys. We can put a number to almost everything: the earth's population, the number of chickens we consume in a week, the number of atoms in a mole. And if a number is bigger than the last biggest number we just invent a new name for it - millions, billions, trillions, zillions. And then we even invented scientific notation to cope with all the zeroes in these numbers. We can't accept, let alone cope, with things that might be getting closer and closer to infinity. Cantor offers some interesting ideas and proof on this, which initially only seemed to cause uproar in the mathematical community."

He paused and stared off into space. He laughed to himself.

"Who's Cantor?" I asked.

"Georg Cantor," he repeated. "You want to know about Georg Cantor? Georg Cantor lived in the 1800's, worked on profound new mathematical proofs, but struggled to gain acceptance in some spheres. He did a lot of work on infinite sets. He showed, among other things, that the set of points in any finite line segment is the same size as the set of points in an infinitely extended line. And that any two infinite sets of points whose members can be placed in one-to-one correspondence must also be the same size."

Mr Ryan paused and thought for a moment. Then he continued.

"And philosophically this may be of some value, now that I think about it. Let us say that a person's life is a line of finite length and that the creator of our universe is a line of infinite length. Then, according to Cantor, these two lines could be placed in one-to-one correspondence."

"So you're saying that any one person should be able to relate to and understand everything about the creator of the universe?" I suggested.

"Yes, that would seem a reasonable

conclusion. Or if the human race were to live for an infinite length of time, then eventually we should be able to accumulate enough truths to come closer to understanding the almighty, whatever or whoever that may be."

This all sounded fairly logical to me.

"No! I might have to give this one a bit more thought." Mr Ryan continued. "This hospital is starting to send me round the twist."

Mr Ryan sighed and looked off into space.

"So, when do you get out of here?" I asked.

"The doctor said in a day or so, but then I'm not allowed to go back to work for another day or so after that. I'm sure I'll go batty in that time. I'm already starting to go a little batty."

"You could meditate," I offered.

"I guess that's true. And I suppose I could catch up on a little reading. It seems so long since I've read a good trashy novel."

I laughed, and Mr Ryan joined me. We both sat in silence for a few minutes. He was obviously frustrated with his lot in the Kindera hospital. He was stuck and was taking it hard. In fact, I found myself feeding off his rather unsettled conversation. I realized how closely his thoughts tied in with the anxious feelings

and bad dreams I'd been experiencing over the past month.

"Mr Ryan," I began, "I've been doing some thinking about the nuclear issue. I guess it worries me a lot. I feel that at any moment we all could be blown up. I've been having this recurring nightmare about it."

I paused. I felt almost like a little kid talking to her father. I felt ashamed about having had nightmares. It was a curious feeling. In the eyes of this person I considered a genius, I always saw myself talking about rather immature ideas and feelings. He always seemed to have grand ideas and discoveries to talk about. And here I was still having nightmares and needing someone to tell me it was all going to be okay.

"Well, if it's any consolation, you're not alone there," Mr Ryan responded. "I for one don't have any answers in respect of nuclear politics. And I suppose, like everyone, I've done my fair share of worrying, too. To the point where I've virtually given up worrying. But you have to keep it in perspective, I guess. Right now, you and I are alive. We all have to make the most of the time we have, and hope

like hell that the third world war never happens. I can't see any other way of coping with the anxiety that the nuclear issue causes."

Mr Ryan paused momentarily.

"Have you ever seen the movie - 'Apocalypse Now'?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"No? Well, it's set during the Vietnam war, and it depicts the problems that come from being off-balance for extended periods of time. The supposedly crazy General in the story speaks about people accepting 'horror'. Not just accepting that horrible things happen, but really coming to terms with horror. See it and accept that it is a necessary part of life, just as death is a real part of life. Horror and death and loss are all very real, and are all very much apart of life's balance. Without them the world would not be balanced. The world would cease to function properly. So, George, rather than refusing to deal with things like horror, death and loss, because they may be unpleasant, come to terms with them, accept them and live in harmony with them."

"But how do I do that?"

"How did you accept the death of your

parents?"

"I sort of forgave them," I replied.

"So, how might you use this experience to help you with the nuclear issue?"

"Forgive the people concerned?"

"That may help, but I doubt it. How does it make you feel, that a bunch of political lunatics can steal life away from you?"

"Angry," I replied.

"And what sort of anger is it? Is it the unfair type of anger, or the we've-picked-up-something-about-you type of anger. Are you the only one being threatened and angered by this?"

"No, lots of people are."

"So, which type of anger is it?"

"It's the unfair type."

"And can you do anything about it?"

"No."

"WHAT? Of course you can!"

I sank back a little. Mr Ryan was about to go on, but stopped himself. There was that little-kid feeling again. We sat in silence for some time, Mr Ryan watching me closely.

"I think you've missed something here," he continued. "Your parents died on you. This

made you angry. But you forgave them.
Forgave them for what?"

"For dying on me."

"Was it their fault?"

"No. It was an accident."

"So why are you forgiving them? They didn't do anything wrong. It was an accident. Shouldn't you forgive God or the universe or whatever for taking them away from you?"

"I suppose."

"Could they help it?"

"No."

"Wasn't it that you were angry at life for taking them away. After all, aren't accidents a part of life?"

"I suppose."

"Did you have any control over their deaths? Could you have done anything?"

"Not really."

"So you're telling me that you were given no choice about whether your parents lived or died."

"No, not really."

"Did you have any choice, then, about how you responded to their deaths? Was committing suicide your only option?"

How the hell did he know about this?

"Well, did you?" he persisted.

"No, but..."

He cut me short. "So you had no choice when it came to the death of your parents, but you did when it came to you wanting to suicide. What does this tell you about life?"

"I can choose things that happen to me but I can't choose things that happen to others."

"Is that what you think?"

I was starting to get very confused. On the one hand, I was trying to fathom how Mr Ryan knew about my wanting to suicide, and, on the other, trying to work out what the hell he wanted me to say.

"I don't know," I said, giving up. 'I don't know' is always the kid's last resort - 'I give up, you tell me the answer. After all, you DO have all the right answers.'

"Don't give me that cop-out of an answer George?" Mr Ryan came back. "Is that what you think?"

Damn! I got my mind back on the task. I thought about my parents and my wanting to suicide but still couldn't think of what he wanted me to say.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked finally, feeling rather defeated.

"How do you feel right now, George? How do you feel?"

"Annoyed."

"And do you have any choices right now, George? Do you?"

"Yes, I COULD leave."

"And the nuclear issue, George, how do you feel about the nuclear issue and the political mongrels that want to destroy your life?"

"Infuriated!"

"But what can you do? What the hell can YOU do about it?"

"I could tell them where to stick their nuclear warheads is what I could do."

"Ahh, so you have options then... you can feel angry and powerless, or you can feel angry and empowered, or you can just not feel," Mr Ryan said, raising his eyebrows and looking across at me. He lay back on the bed and said nothing further.

It took me a while to calm down and realize what had occurred, and to see what Mr Ryan

had been getting at. I had more control in some situations than in others, and yet, in all situations I had choices. With respect to the nuclear issue, I could choose to worry and do nothing, or I could choose to worry and do something, or I could choose to just not worry. I had choices. I could choose how I wanted to respond to the nuclear issue, or to my parents' deaths or to any other horrors that occur in the world. I had choices.

"I have choices when it comes to the nuclear issue. I could protest or I could just sit back. I can also choose whether I want to worry myself sick about the issue or not. Have I got the point now, Mr Ryan?" I asked rather bluntly.

"I believe you have, George," Mr Ryan responded. He was beginning to look very tired, and only then did I realize that our discussion had taken a lot out of him.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I've really worn you out with my little problem."

"It wasn't a little problem when you brought it up, and I really didn't mind discussing it with you. After all, I have

choices too."

"So do I," I responded.

I gave Mr Ryan a kiss on the forehead, thanked him for his time, and left.

ETA

'Infinite Higher Order' seems to me to be a much better descriptive name for the creator of the universe than 'God'. 'God' has such a confused concept attached to the word. Is 'God' a person as depicted by the Christian religion? Is it a 'He'? And if it is a person, then how the hell can He be everywhere at once? What does He look like? Where does He live? It seems no matter what question one asks about God, whether it be the Christian God or not, there are no concrete answers being offered by the church or by anybody else. No one really knows the answers. No one really knows for sure who or what God is, where he/she/it lives or how he/she/it manifests itself. For instance, what is God's form and essence? Is God a spirit, and if so, how did this spirit come to create the universe and overview its progress? What must it be in order to achieve these ends? 'It's a matter of

having faith in the scriptures', some would say. You have to believe in and have faith in the uncertain writings of people from past ages. And, unfortunately, Christian writings leave me with too many unanswered questions.

Robert Pirsig discussed spirits or ghosts in reference to our common acceptance of the concept of gravity. We all know it's there because we can see its effects. But so few of us can say we really know what gravity is or boast about actually having seen it. Much the same for the concept of 'God'. Whenever I think about life, the universe and such like, I feel I have to accept that there must be something that created it all and directs its progress. Something must have given us red roses, given us heat and light from the sun, and the stars in the night sky. There must be something. What other explanation is there?

And so I have come to believe that there must be something that created the universe and directs its progress. I don't know what form this 'something' has. I have absolutely no idea what it is, what it looks like, or how it

operates. And why is this? Because I am a finite entity in this universe, and this 'something' must be an infinite entity. How could I, in my finite life span, expect to fully understand the workings of something that has been in existence for an infinite period of time. I even have trouble catching up with Mr Ryan and his wealth of knowledge. It has remained illusive to generation upon generation of philosophers and scientists against whom I rate very lowly. It is an infinite higher order. And all I really know about 'Infinite Higher Orders' is that I know nothing!

* * * * *

Lao came with me to the hospital the following morning. Mr Ryan looked well and greeted us both with a big smile. He said he felt good but still needed that cup of coffee.

Lao laughed at him and Mr Ryan play acted the role of someone incredibly offended. He rolled over in the bed and faced away from us. Lao looked at me, smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Suddenly Mr Ryan rolled back again and shouted:

"YOU KNOW WHAT? You know what George here discovered yesterday?"

"What did George discover yesterday?" Lao responded.

"She discovered that she actually does have choices in life. How's that for a monumental leap in cognitive assimilation? Eh?"

They were at it again! Time to amuse themselves at my expense.

"Incredible!" Lao returned. "All she needs now is to practise this."

"Maybe we could give her a few choices," suggested Mr Ryan.

"Do you think she is ready?"

"Let's see!" Mr Ryan paused and looked directly at me. "George?"

"Yes, Mr Ryan," I responded, rather belligerently. What other option did I have but to play along?

"I want you to choose between coming with us to Alpha Proxima or staying here on earth and fighting nuclear politics."

"Can I really come with you?"

"Just answer the question will you, young lassy!"

"I wouldn't mind coming with you... but..."
I paused to think.

"BUT?" Mr Ryan screamed.

"I think that she will need many more days of practise, Xen," Lao cut in.

"Maybe so," Mr Ryan responded. "But I must admit I did give her the difficult one first."

Mr Ryan stared off into space for a while. He took on a rather serious look. I sat back in my seat and looked over at Lao. He smiled at me, but he too looked rather serious. It was as though Lao had picked up some serious vibes from Mr Ryan. I smiled back rather sheepishly.

"Lao," Mr Ryan began again, this time in a rather serious tone, "how would you put it? George is having trouble coming to terms with

the nuclear issue. She is overly anxious about having life stolen away from her in the event of a nuclear war. Have I got that right, George?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And she is wondering how to come to terms with this anxiety. I am curious to know what advice you would give her, Lao?"

I looked away from Mr Ryan and turned to Lao. Lao paused for a moment, obviously thinking. He was his usual calm self, dressed in his usual baggy white shirt and white pants. He began to speak carefully and deliberately.

"There is an imbalance in your emotion, George," he began. "It is caused by factors from inside you and some outside of you. There is something in your thoughts that makes you worry about something that you see in the world outside you. And your balance is now outside of you. Remember I told you about having your centre inside you?"

I nodded.

"Well, you now have your centre outside of you. You have not come inside of you and

made peace within yourself. Should you find this peace within you, only then can you reach out from within and act on the imbalance that is in the world."

Lao paused, and I thought through what he had just said. It seemed to fit in with what Mr Ryan had said the day before, only Lao was giving me a way of first coming to terms with my anxiety before facing the world with my protests. Lao continued:

"The world at this time has much that is not balanced. And this is what you see when you look out into the world. But it is important not to forget to keep your centre within you."

"But how do I do that?" I asked.

"Maybe you can do this with meditation. Clear away all the worry, and start again with a quiet mind. In this way you may find strength within you to act on the imbalance in the world outside of you."

"Okay, I understand," I responded.

"I always find the yin/yang concept very interesting," Mr Ryan broke in. "It can be

used to explain so much about the way the world operates."

"What is the yin/yang concept?" I asked. Mr Ryan and Lao looked at each other, both wondering who was going to do the honours in explaining the concept to me. Mr Ryan motioned for Lao to explain.

"You have heard someone say they sit on the fence?" Lao began.

"Yes," I replied.

"Yin and Yang is a little like this. Except it is different."

This comment from Lao was a little confused to say the least. I sniggered.

"With the fence," Lao continued, "there are 3 choices. You can be on one side of the fence or on the other side or ON the fence. You understand."

"Yes."

"Well, with yin/yang you can be at one end, or at the other end or somewhere in the middle. Understand?"

"No."

"Let me give you an example. Let me say that yin is good and yang is evil. Everywhere

in the world there is some good and some evil. But there are very few people in the world who are all good or all evil. They have a balance of the two. Some people are more good than evil and some have more evil than good. But there are very few people who are all good or all evil. Understand?"

"Yes, I guess."

"You could draw a line that has two ends. On one end is good and on the other is evil. These ends are extremes. If a person was at one end then they would be all good or all evil, and they would not be very balanced."

"So, to be balanced, a person would have to be in the middle?"

"Maybe or maybe not.."

"I don't understand," I said, feeling rather confused.

"We have a problem here. When you think of balanced you might think of a see-saw with the pivot exactly in the middle. Yes?"

"Yes."

"But if you put a heavy person on one end and a light person on the other end, then the see-saw does not balance."

"The heavy person has to move closer to

the middle," I suggested.

"Yes. And then the pivot is not in the middle anymore. It is closer to the heavy person."

"That's true," I agreed.

"And so balance does not mean in the middle."

"Okay, I understand," I responded.

"There is a word in English for this type of balance. Xen?"

Mr Ryan nodded. "The word 'homoeostasis' is a more accurate description of what the Chinese call their balance. You know what homoeostasis is?"

"Not really. It has something to do with the water and minerals in a cell or something like that."

"Close." Mr Ryan continued, "One example of homoeostasis is the balance in pressure inside and outside of a cell and it is dependent on the chemical concentration on either side of the cell wall. Some chemicals can't move into or out of a cell, but their concentration can affect the pressure on the cell wall. If the pressure changes outside, the inside of the cell must change to compensate.

It is an ever-changing balance."

"And in the same way," Lao continued. "a person can sometimes have more good in them and at other times have more evil."

Both Lao and Mr Ryan paused for a moment.

"George, there are a few things here," Mr Ryan continued. "Firstly, Lao was explaining that yin/yang represents a continuum. It is a line with two ends. A person or a family or a country or whatever, can be at one end or the other, or anywhere in between. But if the person, say, was at one end they would be severely unbalanced. Usually people or whatever are found to be somewhere in between the two ends. And they are constantly moving along the continuum as things change around them, or change within them. Follow?"

"Yes."

"People are not usually all bad or all good. Even criminals have good in them. They have their good days and their bad days. So their balance - or homoeostasis - is changing day to day, minute to minute. And the reason people are not necessarily balanced in the middle is

because of factors inside themselves and factors outside themselves, factors which are constantly changing. A whole matrix of possible factors."

"Okay, I understand," I offered. I sat back and mused. I was satisfied with their joint explanation of the yin/yang concept.

After a short pause, Lao went on to quiz Mr Ryan about his release from the hospital. Mr Ryan was looking forward to returning home and being able to sit in his own chair, with his own books and be able to cook his own meals.

"What is left to do on the space craft?" I asked Mr Ryan.

"Well," he began, "we have completed almost all of the support systems, you and Lao have completed the last of the wiring. I guess all that is left is the remaining programming for the computer system, and all the flight testing."

"Do you think the craft will fly?" I asked. Mr Ryan looked at Lao and smiled.

"I damn well hope so," he replied.

"And so, can I come?" I asked, sounding

rather cheeky.

Mr Ryan and Lao swapped glances again only this time their expressions were a little more serious.

"I don't know, George," Mr Ryan replied.
"I have a number of reservations about that."

I felt my spirits drop.

"Lao and I will discuss it. How about that?" Mr Ryan added.

"Okay," I responded, not feeling at all hopeful.

* * * * *

That afternoon Lao came with me for a walk along South Head Beach. It was a warm, clear day and the waves were up. There were a couple of surfers surfing in wet suits not far from the club house. Lao was especially quiet and I wasn't quite sure what to say - or whether I should say anything at all. We just walked along in silence locked into our own thoughts,

our own worlds.

I was giving some thought to the yin/yang concept that was discussed that morning. It was evident in so many areas of life and I felt as though my mind was tuning into the concept. I was realizing its relevance to so many things. For example, atoms maintain a balance of charge. When electrons flow or chemicals react, the balance of charge may alter but the atoms always seek a favourable balance. We all strive for a balanced diet each day. And we should exercise regularly to maintain balance in our health. There is, or at least needs to be, a balance between the unemployment and inflation rates. There is a balance in the seasons, in the motion of the stars, in the daily tides, and there should be in our planet's ecology. Whatever I turned my mind to, there it was: a yin/yang balance.

And with this came a whole list of things that could well be out of balance: a planet not looking after its ecology could well stray toward one end of a continuum and possibly toward self-destruction. Politicians who do

not attend to both unemployment and inflation at the one time could well see an economy fall into disarray. And a world that does not balance out its dependence on nuclear arms for peace could well end up destroying a planet.

"I have been thinking about our trip to Alpha Proxima," said Lao, finally breaking the silence.

"In what way?" I asked.

"I think your comment at the hospital, George, has left me wondering about our quality control. I am worrying whether there may be some minor detail that we have not checked carefully enough."

"You and Mr Ryan seem very thorough in your work," I offered.

"I guess so," Lao responded, though not seeming convinced.

Conversation stopped for a minute or two while we puzzled over the problem. We had walked about half way down the beach by this stage and the sun felt very warm against my skin. It had shaped up as a very pleasant winter's day.

"Maybe mention your concern to Mr Ryan when he comes home," I continued.

"Maybe you're right," Lao conceded. "I think it is my turn for my centre to be outside of myself. I am over anxious, I think."

"Lao, I do not fully understand when you talk about having your centre outside of yourself. Surely it is natural for you to worry about your safety in this way. It's important to your well being and survival."

"Yes, it is." Lao paused and thought for a few moments. "The word 'centre'," he continued, "comes from the English language and maybe I am not using it correctly."

"What are you doing when you centre yourself?" I persisted.

"When I am not centred, I am worrying too much or searching for answers too much in the world outside of myself."

"And so, to centre yourself, you need to look more for answers inside of yourself rather than outside."

"Yes, I think that is what I mean," Lao replied.

"But surely some answers are only to be

found outside yourself."

Lao stopped walking, looked across at me and thought for a moment.

"Yes, I guess you are correct again, George."

Now I was really confused. What was centering then? Was it always looking for answers inside yourself? Was it looking for answers while meditating? Lao, you've not been very clear about this term 'centering'! I'm pretty confused!

Maybe it had something to do with balance. A balance of what? A balance of looking inside yourself and looking out into the world for answers to things. Maybe one had to start with looking inside and then focusing on the world outside. Maybe a person had to settle the emotion that was raging inside them before they could adequately focus on the world outside. Maybe 'centering' was a process of quietening the emotion inside.

"Lao, I am still quite confused," I continued. "Let's take the example of me being worried about nuclear arms build-up. I

have been worrying too much about what was happening to the world."

"Yes. You appear to worry too much about this."

"And so what I need to do is to meditate and try to quiet this worry that is inside me."

"Yes. So you can look at the problem more clearly."

"So, to centre myself I first have to quieten the emotion that is running out of control within me. And then focus on the nuclear arms problem in the world outside of me."

"Yes, that is what I think you need to do," Lao responded.

"Would 'centering', then, mean a person needs to have a balance in the way that they focus. They should balance how much they focus out into the world and focus on things happening inside themselves."

Lao paused again taking in what I had said. He looked out toward the ocean.

"In a way you are correct. You need to focus on the world but also you need to be aware of what is happening inside of you. You are worrying a lot about the nuclear arms. First, you have to ask yourself why you are so

worried. This means you have to focus inside of you. This is returning your centre to you. Then you can focus outward. By knowing what is happening inside of you, you can focus much better or more clearly on the nuclear issue. As you are now, you do not understand your worry and this is stopping you from properly focusing on the problem and acting in the best way. Does this make sense?"

"Yes," I replied.

"You are correct, though," Lao continued. "It is a balance. It is a balance between looking inside and understanding yourself and looking outside and understanding the world. But I do not think you can understand the world before you understand yourself. Understand yourself first."

We walked along in silence again until we reached the end of the beach. We agreed to sit for a while and look out at the ocean. The birds behind us were making quite a deal of noise in the trees. There was a sole wispy cloud in the sky and the ocean before us reflected the sky's deep blue colour. I felt very relaxed. It was kind of special sitting on the

beach next to Lao watching the waves coming in.

"You're very close to Mr Ryan, aren't you?" I asked Lao.

"Yes, he is somewhat like a father to me. Ever since I have been here I have known Xen. He has always looked out for me, especially after my father died."

"How did your father die?"

"He became very ill." Lao looked rather remorseful.

"I'm sorry," I added. I suddenly began to wonder whether I had opened a can of worms that I shouldn't have. Lao was looking rather depressed. He looked at me and shook his head. I clammed up, not knowing what else I should say. A few minutes passed in silence.

"I really respected my father," Lao offered.

"I suspected that," I returned. Another uncomfortable silence passed.

"I did not know him all that well. I was only a child at the time and he did not discuss a lot of things with me. But he was a very special person. I would love to be as he was."

"And you do not think you are already?" I

asked.

"No."

"I think you are a very special person," I offered. Lao looked at me and smiled.

"Thank you," he said.

"Do you think you may have built up your father in your mind to be a person you can never be?"

"Maybe I have, but I do not think so. He was a very talented and capable person. I have a long way to go before I reach his level."

"How will you know when you have reached his level?"

"I will know," Lao replied. "A master holds special qualities that I know I do not have as yet."

"Like what?" I persisted.

"A master can look in and see the souls of others; a master has perfect balance in all areas; a master has a life time's worth of experience; a master knows when and how to act."

"But you are only young, Lao! Masters are old people, aren't they?"

"Yes, maybe you are right. Some masters are older people. I guess I am just impatient."

And this impatience I must lose before I can be a master."

"YOU? IMPATIENT? Lao, you have more patience than any human being I have ever met. How can YOU be impatient."

Lao smiled at me but said nothing.

"So what was your mother like?" I continued.

"She also was special. She was a teacher in China. She taught mathematics to young children. I also loved my mother very much. I have just realized," Lao commented, "that we both have lost both of our parents. I guess I should be asking you the same questions."

"Maybe."

Lao and I spoke about each other's families for an hour or so. We definitely had different upbringings. Lao was taught to be a very obedient child by his parents, while I was left to run loose a little by my parents who had both worked while I was at school. Lao had grown up in China and had worked with his family at one thing and another ever since he was able. The most I had done for the family was to wash up every second night and

vacuum the floor occasionally. I think I got the easier upbringing. But then I guess that was why Lao was the next best thing to a master and I was just another ignorant kid.

We walked back along the beach talking about things we remembered. I liked to listen to Lao talk about China. Apart from the fact that he was very easy to listen to, his stories were also very interesting and novel. I wished I had been there with him as a child in China. He made it sound like China was a very special place to grow up in.

Lao suggested that we drop in at the pub on the way home, which suited me fine. I was really enjoying his company and didn't want to go home and face the homework that I had to do for the next day. We left South Head Beach and pulled in at the Riverside Hotel.

"This is where I first saw you and Mr Ryan," I commented.

"Yes, I remember Xen telling me this."

Lao bought two drinks and we sat out in the

beer garden. At a nearby table were a couple of older locals discussing their day's fishing. It had been some time since I'd visited the 'Riverside Hotel'. I had come a couple of times with the surf club crew and once with a group from school. Usually, however, we went to one of the other pubs that had a band playing and danced away our Saturday nights, though I still liked this pub the best. It had a very homely atmosphere about it.

"So, what will you and Mr Ryan be working on once he returns home?" I asked.

"Different things," Lao replied. "I believe he wants to continue work on the computer system he's developing. I have to complete work on the last of the support systems."

"This computer system is taking a long time," I commented.

"Yes, but I think it is very complex. Xen is trying to get the computer to simulate his own behaviour. He said that he can program the computer while lying and meditating on the couch."

"How's he going to do that?" I asked rather bewildered.

"Before the food poisoning, he finished developing a device he calls a 'computer-mind interface'. He attaches two probes to his head and he has programmed the computer to read his brain patterns and to interpret and code what he is thinking."

"You have to be joking!" I exclaimed in disbelief.

"Well, that's what he says. And I suspect that that is what he has done. I have long since given up being surprised or amazed at what Xen is capable of inventing."

"I guess so. Another achievement notched up to our resident Einstein, eh! So, has he used it yet?"

"Yes. He claims that it works very well."

"Unbelievable!"

At that instant a group of bikie-looking characters rocked out of the lounge, walked past us and sat at a table behind me. My heart jumped a little, although they did not seem to take much notice of us. Lao must have noticed my response, and told me not to worry. He reassured me that the bikie he and Xen had had a run in with was not among them. I

relaxed, but just as I did the bikie in question came out of the lounge carrying four beers. My heart jumped again.

"There he is," I said softly to Lao. Lao made no effort to turn around. He just nodded. "Maybe we ought to go."

"If you like," Lao responded, but before we could get up the bikie walked past, turned and recognized Lao.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't my little Chinese friend."

The bikie put down the beers on his own table, grabbed a chair and sat down between Lao and me at the end of our table.

"How's ya both doing?" he asked rather gruffly.

"Fine," I snapped. "We were just leaving..."

"Don't be in so much of a hurry!" the bikie ordered. He paused. "So, my little Chinese friend, didn't I make myself clear the last time you were here? We don't want Chinamen in this pub."

"Why the hell don't you leave him alone?" I cut in.

"You're a fiery little lady!" The bikie exclaimed. "Are you the Chinaman's body guard?"

Lao had stood up by this time and motioned me to come with him. I rose and walked around behind the bikie to Lao. The bikie kept a keen eye on Lao. We turned to leave. The bikie laughed.

"See ya later, guys. Glad you could drop in."

I could still hear the bikie laughing all the way out on the main street where we had left the car.

"Why do you let them treat you that way?" I finally asked Lao.

Lao passed me a rather serious look. He stopped for a moment. "I remember you once asked me to teach you some martial arts, did you not?"

"Yes" I replied.

"And what did I say?"

"That I was not yet ready."

Lao remained silent.

"But what has that got to do with anything?"

"The first skill a person trained in martial arts has to grasp is to know when to use his or her art, and when not to use it. May I drop you home now?"

I turned to Lao. He looked very serious and it was evident that I had offended him deeply. "I don't understand," I cried. "What have I done wrong?"

"You have done nothing wrong," Lao replied very calmly. "In your eyes it is I who has done something wrong."

I didn't know what to say. I just sat in the car and thought about the whole situation. Boy, had I put my foot in it! I should have known better. I began to feel incredibly upset with myself for having offended Lao in this way. I had no right to judge him in the way that I had. After such a wonderful day with Lao, I had gone and ruined it with just one stupid comment.

We pulled up at my Grandparents' place. I turned to Lao and, feeling emotionally distraught, said :

"Lao, I am really sorry."

I could feel tears well up in my eyes. I looked away, jumped out of the car and ran inside.

Lao drove away.

THETA

We rematerialized about a million kilometres short of our final destination and about 4 billion kilometres away from the Alpha Proxima star. We had beamed ourselves very close to the plane of the Alpha Proxima solar system, and from this position Mr Ryan hoped to gain more accurate information about the planets and satellites that were present in the system.

The re-materialization was somewhat of a shock to our bodies. I came away with one hell of a splitting headache that lasted for at least 24 hours. And it felt as though my whole insides had been repositioned or reassembled - which I guess they had.

I have had no end of difficulty coming to terms with the fact that 4.28 years passed in the instant between our dematerializing

100,000 kilometres away from earth and our rematerializing in the Alpha Proxima solar system. I still find it incredibly difficult to comprehend. I mean, what has taken place on earth in the last 4.28 years? Have governments successfully agreed on an effective nuclear disarmament strategy? What's the status of the polar ice caps? Have there been advances in saving the world's rainforests? Has Dr Who reached his ninth regeneration yet? How many albums has Bruce Springsteen brought out? (Several I hope. Where's the nearest record shop?) How are my grandparents? How are Lobby and the surf club crew? God only knows! GOD ONLY KNOWS! There's no way I can answer these questions when we're 4.28 light years away from earth. And I've had to work really hard to stop myself thinking about such things. And yet Lao seems to do it with virtually no effort.

Mr Ryan did not look well on arrival. He also complained of a massive headache. Lao, on the other hand, did not seem to suffer much from the trip. I guess his fitness and strong

constitution had a lot to do that. In fact, Lao was the first on his feet. He had the computer working and the life support systems functioning before Mr Ryan and I had managed to come to our senses. Lao's ability to bounce back after physical shocks such as a re-materialization never ceases to amaze me.

After about 2 days of rest and relaxation, Mr Ryan set us all to work on the computer seeking out any and all relevant data on the Alpha Proxima solar system. The computer was instructed to scan for any distinct radio frequency signals, to photograph and plot heat and chemical composition charts for all planets within a 5 billion kilometre radius and to find and graph any and all bodies floating about in the vicinity.

The computer came up with 9 planets within the 5 billion kilometre radius. There were 5 between us and the sun, one more or less on the other side of the sun but positioned second in the system. A sixth planet was seen about two weeks' flight time from where we had rematerialized - a planet Mr Ryan called

'Planet 6'. To the disgust of both Lao and Mr Ryan, I wanted to name the planets after 9 well known Australian rock bands. At least it would have made the names a little more novel than something like 'Planet 6'! Sadly my system of naming did not meet with democratic agreement and I was rudely voted out as 'Person-in-charge-of-Naming'.

The computer also detected a number of radio signals being emitted from various sources around the solar system. There was a radio signal pattern coming from planet 7, and from a source outside of the computer's tracking range. Mr Ryan decided on Planet 6 for our first stop since it was nearby and because its surface temperature seemed reasonable enough for our bodies to tolerate. The computer estimated the temperature to be somewhere in the range of minus 40 to plus 10, an estimate that turned out to be reasonably accurate. However, the chlorine content of Planet 6's atmosphere has made it impossible for us to venture out on the surface without spacesuits.

The planet is, as I have described, quite inhospitable. In fact, it falls short of my worst expectations of what an alien planet should be like. I guess that's what one gets for watching too much television. I only hope that one of the other planets or satellites in the system might be slightly more conducive to supporting the human metabolism. 'Maybe Planet 5 or one of the Planet 6's satellites,' suggested Mr Ryan. It is unlikely, he said, that any of the lower order planets or any of their satellites would be comfortable to visit. 'We might visit one or more of the outer planets, though,' he added.

Within the week we were heading off toward Planet 6 and some 12 days later had arrived and begun orbiting. Mr Ryan wanted to spend about a week viewing the planet from above in the hope of determining the best place to land. The surface of the planet was 60% solid rock, with a few huge lakes scattered about, somewhat of a contrast to the surface of the earth. After some discussion we decided to land on a "northern hemisphere" location about 2 kilometres from one of the

huge lakes. My Ryan suspected that the lake water would also be contaminated with chlorine, but would likely give rise to more life forms than a dry continental interior.

So we landed and set to work with the computer, scanning the planet's surface for mineral types and any alien life forms. Some two weeks after landing, the computer spotted the bacteria cell (previously mentioned) in shallow water at the lake's edge, and Mr Ryan went out to retrieve it.

Inevitably, Mr Ryan was the first to be attacked by the bacteria. It came on something like food poisoning, as though he had eaten something that had gone off. He had trouble keeping food down and he suffered severe headaches and weakness. On realizing the cause of his illness, Mr Ryan suggested that Lao place the bacteria cultures outside. Lao then set to giving Mr Ryan some strong Chinese medical treatment. He used acupuncture and massage and a number of other techniques necessary for the strengthening of the body. We also dosed

ourselves with some of the anti-biotics we'd brought with us.

It was only a matter of hours before I began to feel similar symptoms. We all prayed that Lao would not be infected since neither Mr Ryan or I knew how to treat Lao, nor had we the energy to try. As far as I could tell, Lao only contracted a mild case. He complained of the symptoms but said they were mild in comparison to what Mr Ryan and I had suffered.

Three days later my body is still very weak. My bones and muscles ache all over and I find it very difficult to stand, let alone walk anywhere. I would like to venture out to see how the other two have fared but my body is definitely not up to it yet. I was hoping that Lao might come in and keep me company. I could do with some moral support right now. And I could really do with a hug.

Mr Ryan came home from hospital two days after our visit. He and Lao apparently sat down and discussed a few of Lao's concerns. Lao explained to Mr Ryan that he was anxious about their quality control in relation to the space craft. Mr Ryan apparently acknowledged Lao's concerns and reassured him that they would spend a great deal more time ensuring their safety and the quality of their work.

The second Sunday after Mr Ryan's arrival home, Lao picked me up and drove me out to the lab. I was still feeling very disturbed about the incident with Lao two weeks previously.

"It is a lesson learnt for both of us," Lao commented.

"You were pretty angry with me, eh?" I suggested.

"No, I was more disappointed."

Conversation ceased between us for quite some time. I had no idea what Lao was thinking. I still felt rather defeated and on reflection this raised some odd thoughts. Lao finally broke the silence with a few comments about Mr Ryan. He indicated to me what he and Mr Ryan had discussed regarding the safety checks for the craft and their quality control program.

We arrived at the lab to find Mr Ryan lying on the sofa in the lounge room with his eyes shut and two probes stuck to his head and a set of headphones on. The probes and headphones were wired to the back of a computer terminal which sat on the lounge room floor. Mr Ryan certainly looked relaxed enough. Lao motioned for me to come outside, suggesting that we ought not disturb the genius at his work.

Once outside Lao led me down to the creek where we sat by the bank. The sound of trickling water blended with the laughs and cries of kookaburras and other familiar birds.

The sky was overcast with the threat of a storm any time. The air was quite cool and a light breeze brushed its way past the willow and eucalyptus foliage that lined the banks of the creek. The sounds were familiar and somewhat comforting.

Lao sat down next to me and calmly searched my face. His breathing was slow and very deliberate. He presented his usual aura of calm. His eyes scanned mine, his expression was thoughtful and yet caring. I suddenly had this overwhelming and incredibly eerie feeling that Lao was looking right into my head and reading what I was thinking, looking right into my heart and knowing exactly what I was feeling. My soul was being searched, scanned sector by sector, invaded. A cold shiver ran down my spine. I looked away.

"Lao, you freak me out sometimes," I said.

"I am sorry," he replied. "I am troubled." He looked away at the creek.

"What about?" I asked, knowing full well what he was troubled about. Lao could read me like a book. Even when he wasn't scanning

my soul.

"You are very bothered about what happened outside the pub two weeks ago and I am not sure how to help you with this."

"Why bother?" I asked rather belligerently. Lao responded with a rather comical gesture. He very slowly twisted his head round and looked up at me. His expression was one of surprise and bewilderment. I had to laugh.

"Okay, Okay! I am bothered," I admitted.

"So what can I do to stop this feeling in you?" Lao asked.

"I don't know," I replied.

"What did I do that upset you so much?"

I stopped for a moment. I focused on the incident, and thoughts I'd had about it. I looked down at the creek, and then at Lao. He was looking at me in anticipation. My stomach knotted. How the hell could I say what I really wanted to say? A thousand thoughts raced through my head. Conflict and possible scenarios, statements and their probable consequences. How would Lao respond? How would I respond? What consequence would it have on our friendship?

Would it change anything at all? I raised all the gumption I could muster.

"I've thought about this a lot over the last week or so." I paused, still not feeling completely sure. "I think I love you, Lao." I looked up at Lao. He leaned back slowly, thought for a moment and then nodded.

"I think I understand it now," he commented and paused. "Do you want to explain how you come to think this?"

I felt myself relax a little. Lao hadn't freaked out. That in itself was a relief.

"Well, I'm not real sure I know what love is," I began. "But, when I said what I did, I knew that I had offended you. And I was very angry at myself for doing this. We'd had a great day together and the last thing I wanted to do was upset you. I felt really defeated that I had ruined the day with one stupid question."

"But you did not offend me," Lao commented.

"I know that now, but I didn't know that then," I cried. "And I've spent the last two weeks dealing with the thought that I had offended you."

"Okay," Lao conceded.

"So, anyway, I started to think about why the incident upset me so much. And I realized that you are very important to me and that the last thing I wanted to do was to upset you with my stupid comments and questions. I really care about you a lot and I don't want to be some little ignorant kid in your eyes."

"I think I understand. But does what you say mean that you love me? I hear you say you respect me. And I hear you say that you worry about what I think of you. Does this mean that you love me?"

"No. I do respect you. But I feel more than that. It's hard to explain. It's different to what I felt for other guys I've gone out with. You have a lot of strength. You are very intelligent. And you care for people a lot. I don't know. Maybe that isn't love. I just know I feel for you like I have never felt for a person before." I was beginning to feel incredibly embarrassed.

"Maybe I am just different to all other guys you have met before."

"Maybe." I was defeated. Maybe I didn't love Lao after all. What the hell was love

anyway? I remained silent. We both sat in silence for a few minutes.

Lao reached over and took my hand in his and we looked at each other for a few seconds. I searched Lao's face. He was smiling in an odd sort of way.

"George, thank you for all your compliments. You are also very special to me. You are still learning but I do not see you as some ignorant kid. You are very bright and you are a beautiful person. I care for you a lot also, but I am not sure whether this is love either. Maybe you do feel love for me. I do not wish to tell you otherwise. They are your feelings and only you can tell if it is love."

Lao stood and helped me up. We looked at one another and I felt relieved that our friendship had not been destroyed by my comments. I wanted to give Lao a big hug but something inside told me to hold off. I smiled at him instead.

* * * * *

"This computer system is beginning to sound like some mammoth achievement, Mr Ryan," I commented as the three of us sat down to lunch. "What exactly is it capable of doing?"

"Well," Mr Ryan sat back on the lounge and thought, "it is capable of extensive mathematical calculations, it is capable of talking, it is capable of storing and retrieving huge volumes of information, it can think virtually like a human, it patches into all the systems that we've installed in the ship and it can navigate the ship through space almost on its own. Is that the sort of thing you wanted to know, George?"

"Yes," I replied. "It sounds a lot like the computer out of '2001: A Space Odyssey'."

"Actually, that's where I got my inspiration," Mr Ryan replied. "Though I hope I haven't programmed it exactly the same

as the computer on '2001'." He laughed.

We were sitting around the lounge room, Mr Ryan on the couch, Lao and I on chairs and it was sandwiches again. Mr Ryan looked quite well and very relaxed. His clothes on the other hand were a 'statement' as usual, bright green satin shirt and woollen purple pants. Where the hell did he get these clothes from? At least Lao had a 'normal' dress sense. He had on a plain, tight-fitting, blue T-shirt and baggy black string pants.

"Lao says that you have constructed a mind-machine interface for the computer. How does that work?" I asked.

"Well," Mr Ryan stopped. "Actually, George, you should be able to answer that one for yourself."

There was a moment's silence. "Well, somehow the computer can pick up your brain waves and translate them into machine code," I responded. "But the programming for that must have been astronomical. There must be a million different types of brain patterns."

"Ahh, not so! Human brain waves are

made up of only a finite number of patterns. And once I had read up on the various patterns, and realized how they fitted together, the programming was simple. It's very similar in fact to programming language recognition and usage. First, there's the vocabulary, and there are a lot of dictionaries on disk nowadays. And then all one has to do is to program in the rules."

"The grammar?" I cut in.

"Yes, that's correct. I must admit English grammar is not the easiest to program in but I managed it over a couple of years. And then the mind-machine interface fits very well with the language interpreting software that I've written. All I really had to do was to ensure that the machine could pick up and distinguish the various brain wave patterns, and then have the machine code them into language. Complicated in theory, but not as difficult as one might think."

"But, on top of all that, you said you could get the computer to think like a human," I continued.

"Yes. Well, that one I came to terms with years ago. You see, human thinking, again, is

not as complicated as it might first appear. The human mind performs a finite number of logical processes even though we are able to think about, analyse and make sense of a whole range of topics. All I had to do was to realize and categorize each of the logical thought processes that humans undertake. And once I had done this, I was able to write computer code to simulate these processes.

"And with this, both Chang Tsu's and Lao's meditation techniques were invaluable.

Without their meditation techniques I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to determine all the subtleties of human logic and thought. But once this was achieved, it was just a matter of writing the computer code. And I admit I had quite a deal of help with this from a computer colleague of mine in Mid-Coast City.

Between him and me, we were able not only to write code for human logic but to create a package that would apply these processes to a huge matrix of information at any given time. The computer program would not only sort through, categorize and store this huge amount of information but also search for any and all patterns in the information, uncover any

apparent causes and effects, and code any underlying theorems, laws or principles that it found. It would seek out and highlight any assumptions that it uncovered in the information and test these and all related theorems, etc, against any new information that was input. It could build up logical structures in much the same way as humans do."

"That's unbelievable!" I gasped.

"Not really," Mr Ryan commented. "All the computer needs is the code for human thinking processes, and the rest is merely a matter of the computer applying these techniques to information that is fed into it. The computer can process much faster than humans and can assimilate and find patterns in information far more efficiently than the human mind. It doesn't have to eat or sleep so it has a lot more time on its hands to search for any and all patterns that may exist in a huge volume of information. Nothing really special in that."

"It cannot understand emotion, though?" Lao broke in.

"Well... I'm working on that one, Lao," Mr

Ryan replied. "I've had a few interesting responses from the computer the last few months. Maybe we'll see some genuine emotion in the future sometime. Like logical thinking, it's just a matter of working out how human emotional responses and processes operate and coding it into the computer. Mind you, it doesn't make it into a person, but it comes some way towards it."

Lao looked satisfied with Mr Ryan's response to his comment and even seemed a little impressed.

"And so, what are you doing with the mind-machine interface?" I asked.

"At present I am entering all sorts of thoughts and feelings that I have into the computer," Mr Ryan replied. "I hope to enter as much of my knowledge into the machine as I can so that I can draw on it any time I need it." My Ryan paused. "It is quite a difficult process in some ways. I have to concentrate quite hard to ensure that the thoughts that are being encoded aren't confused in any way. And when I meditate deeply I can even focus my subconscious thoughts."

"So the computer will have both conscious

and subconscious parts," I added.

"Yes, in a way. I have set up the computer to store the conscious and subconscious thoughts in different ways, which I guess gives the computer the same distinction between conscious and unconscious as us. The only difference is that the computer will be able to access its subconscious more readily than we humans. I have to go into a deep meditative state to access my subconscious thoughts."

"You must have a lot of control over your thoughts, Mr Ryan," I suggested. The very idea of trying to focus thoughts is difficult for me to comprehend.

"Yes, I guess I do. In fact, by concentrating in one way, I can send the computer instructions about what I want it to do: for example, telling the computer to play back what I'd thought. And then if I think in various other ways the computer will record my thoughts as data."

"And the headphones - they are the way the computer can talk back to you?" I asked.

"That's correct."

"That's unbelievable!" I added. "How the hell do you think up stuff like this, Mr Ryan?"

"Ask Lao, he's the magic man," Mr Ryan responded.

"I do not think so, Xen," Lao disagreed.

We finished our lunches in silence. Mr Ryan was suffering his way through a cup of cold coffee although he eventually became lost in his thoughts to the point where he no longer complained. Lao and I swapped glances at varying intervals and I constantly wondered what Lao was thinking.

"You know what the hardest thing to teach this computer is going to be?" Mr Ryan asked, finally breaking the silence.

"No. What?" I responded.

"The hardest thing to get this computer to do will be to get it to think creatively," Mr Ryan admitted. He paused. "How do you get a machine to be creative?"

IOTA

For quite some time love seemed to me an extremely illusive concept. It was there. It hung there, like a rainbow waiting for the right conditions to appear. And in another way it was like gravity or light or any other of those concepts whose effects we see but have been unable to define clearly. People have this feeling about love. They strive to find it, or they find it popping up when they least expect it. People write books about love, they sing about it, they seem to thrive on it. Love is there and people worship its existence.

But what is it? What is love? What is it that people are worshipping? How does one find it? Is it illusive like some infinite higher order? Or is it just another emotion?

People say that they *feel* love. 'I feel love for you.' 'A feeling of love has come over me.'

Love, according to such expressions, would appear to be a feeling. Something that is *felt* by people. An emotion? Like joy or happiness or sadness? How is it displayed? When a person is sad, he/she cries. When a person is happy, he/she laughs; when a person is angry, he/she shouts and goes red in the face. What does a person do when he/she is in love with another?

To me a person who feels love may well do all of these things and more. Two people in love may be angry with each other. Two people in love may be happily doing something together. Two people in love may be sad over something. Two people in love may display all types of emotion and still be in love. Love seems to be independent of the emotion that a person is feeling at any given time. It is separate from all the things that we classify as emotions or emotional responses.

And yet both emotions and love seem to require a balance between the mind and the body. Both can be expressed physically by the body or may require some rationalization by

the mind. Both may be suppressed for a time, but then usually appear later in some other response. Emotions and love have similarities, and maybe this is why it is said that we feel emotion and we feel love. This thing that we do when we *feel* something is common to both love and emotion. And it seems to me that this thing we call *feeling* has to do with both the mind and the body.

But love does not appear to fit into that category of things we call emotions. It is different. Maybe it's a value. We all hold values and beliefs. We value our beliefs, our belongings, and we believe certain things to be true. Could love be a value? If we love something, do we value it? Yes. But is that all we do when we love something? I certainly value Lao's company and his thoughts, but then I also respect his thoughts and I enjoy his company. And I feel that my respect and my enjoyment also make up part of my love. It seems love encompasses value as much as it does emotion. It is not just emotion and it is not just valuing. It is more than both of these.

Maybe love is a trip. Maybe love is something that involves full emotional commitment. That is not to say that love is an emotion or a commitment, but that it inspires in a person full emotional commitment. People in love certainly experience strong emotion for each other, they are very committed emotionally, and they give meaning to each other's lives. Perfect! Or is it? No! The RELATIONSHIP between the two people is the trip... love is merely the driving force behind the relationship. Love is not a trip in its own right.

Something finally twigged for me when I reflected on Lao's comment: "Maybe you do feel love for me... they are your feelings and only YOU can tell if it is love." "ONLY YOU CAN TELL..." Could love be like quality? Could love and quality be one in the same? Quality is that which an individual *feels* for an object, a song, a painting, whatever. Love is that which an individual *feels* for another person. Both are specific to the individual feeling it, and both vary significantly from one

individual to another. Both are dependent on an individual's temperament. And only the individual could hope to explain why they like a given object or love another person.

And so this is the picture that I finally settled on regarding love: love embraces emotions, embraces values, represents the driving force for relational trips and can be likened to quality. It is very much dependent on an individual's temperament. And since so very few people fully understand or appreciate all of the subtleties of their own temperament, few people (including myself) know WHY they love someone. They just do!

* * * * *

October and early November were filled with study and preparation for the Year 12 examinations. The whole of my attention was

focused on the school work of the last two years. My friends and I organized quite a few very constructive group cramming sessions and, in a way, they were even a lot of fun. I was confident of good results. The latter half of November was Year 12 exam period - one exam after the other, some quite difficult. At the time I was a little anxious about how well I did, although my results later showed that our group cramming and my late nights studying had paid off. My results were very pleasing.

My Ryan spent the better part of 2 months programming his computer, lying on the couch. Lao spent time coming to terms with the functioning of the craft and the operation of its various components. On Sundays, he continued to teach me Tai Chi and meditation, and showed me how to clear my head and focus my thoughts in preparation for my examinations. His efforts helped me considerably. I continued to visit the lab on Sundays during October and November, often taking my study with me. During this time Mr Ryan and Lao began preparations for testing the space craft. This stage in the craft's

development seemed to take much longer than Mr Ryan had indicated earlier, though, as he continually reminded us, precision and zero defects were their prime concerns.

The first official test flight was taken mid-week in early December. I was preparing for my Year 12 Formal. Mr Ryan made the flight on his own, leaving sunrise, Wednesday, returning sunset, the same day. The flight involved the craft rising 100km above the earth's surface, 'beaming' from there to the moon, stopping on the moon's surface for several hours, and returning. Mr Ryan seemed very happy with the flight and the behaviour of the craft, suggesting that only a few minor adjustments would be needed to ready the craft for the Alpha Proxima trip.

Mr Ryan was ecstatic about the flight and what he had seen. It was his first space venture and he was obviously very moved by the whole experience.

"The serenity and peacefulness of the moon was overwhelming!" he told me the following

Sunday. We were standing outside the cabin, looking across at the cloth covered shed and the hill beyond. "It was like living inside a photograph. What I was seeing and what I was feeling seemed no more than a fantasy, and yet I knew that I was there, taking in a vision that was as real as any other here on earth. Real in its own right, yet completely unreal to my world view and my experience. I feel as though I lived a whole other lifetime, just on Wednesday. I was seeing the universe from a whole other angle. Incredible! And the taste of success after 12 years of hard work was very sweet, to say the least."

"Any problems?" I asked. Mr Ryan was looking up at the eucalypt covered hill and appeared as though he was still wandering about the clouds. He looked down at me and 'returned to earth'.

"A couple of minor problems, George," he replied. "The computer needs a few additional sensors, and two pieces of the equipment need refining and tuning. But otherwise, nothing major appeared to go wrong!"

"And how did the trip make you feel physically?" I continued.

"On the whole, very well. I guess I was too excited to notice my own well being. I did suffer a headache after each 'transmit-beam'. Though they weren't too severe and soon passed. I had experienced very mild headaches from our tests here on Earth, and so I guess I was prepared for them.

"George, it is an experience of a lifetime!" he continued. Mr Ryan was quite beside himself with excitement. "Nothing else has ever come close to this, my whole life. At least, nothing I can remember. I've waited my whole life to achieve what I achieved on Wednesday, and now I'm probably the happiest man in the world."

* * * * *

The summer had returned in full fury. The days were hot, and tourists were beginning to venture into town. Especially on weekends. The surf was good at the moment and families

were flocking to the beaches to catch an early season tan. The town's winter hibernation was over.

The question of my going to Alpha Proxima with Lao and Mr Ryan had not yet been resolved. I had spent hours thinking about the possibility. I'd even compiled a list of pros and cons. I was keen to go with them because the trip was exciting and incredibly unique. I could learn about things that no one else knew about, no one had seen before, no one else had experienced. I would be a part of the first expedition to another galaxy. An historic journey. I would be among the first scientific group to be transmit-beamed across the universe.

I also spent a lot of time trying to imagine how I would cope with life here on Earth, alone, after Lao and Mr Ryan left. I suppose I would come to accept it eventually, but I would really miss the two of them. They had given my life meaning over the past year, and I loved them both.

On the other hand, there were people in Kindera that I would miss if I did go. Primarily, my grandparents. They had been wonderful to me all year and I also loved them both very much. How was I going cope with the idea of not seeing them again for at least nine years, possibly longer? And how would I cope if one, or both of them, fell ill or passed while I was away – a fair possibility, and a scary one. This factor alone nearly made my decision academic.

And then there was the question of risk. This trip to Alpha Proxima was going to be INCREDIBLY risky. The possibility of error in Mr Ryan and Lao's observations, their calculations, their machinery, or even their theories was quite high. We could be destroyed by some uncharted interference between here and Alpha Proxima. The equipment could break down, leaving us stranded somewhere in the Proxima Centari solar system, without power or without food or without oxygen. We could be eaten by aliens.

The pros and cons were very real to me. I'd

written pages of 'WHAT IF's' and I sat for hours trying to reach some sort of decision about whether or not to go. Meanwhile, I was aware of the other two very important considerations: whether Lao and Mr Ryan would be willing to take me, and whether my grandparents would allow me to go. Very significant factors, though I had to reach a decision in my own mind first.

I really did want to go. The education and the experience that I would gain, and the sights that I would behold, seemed well worth any possible risk. The opportunity was a one-in-a-life-time, and who in their right mind wouldn't want to be a history maker if handed the opportunity. I decided that I would go if Mr Ryan and Lao would take me. IF they would take me! But what was the likelihood of that? They probably saw me as some sort of encumbrance, someone incapable of carrying her share of the load, someone who would cause them to fret and worry unnecessarily. And would I? Of course I would!

However, should Lao and Mr Ryan suffer

some momentary lapse in rational thought - and allow me to join them - then what the hell would I say to my grandparents? How do you ask grandparents for permission to go off star trekking for the odd decade? I had something to gain from the whole experience, and yet I still found the thought of leaving them difficult. How were THEY going to cope? How would I go about breaking the idea to them? What should I say? Should I lie and say I'm going interstate/overseas for a week or two? Or should I leave them a note on the day saying: 'Gone off in search of aliens around the Alpha Proxima Solar System. Will be back in a couple of years... Don't wait up!'? Or should I air the idea of space travel being a worthwhile career choice for the 1990's and hope that they agreed? This was a big one! This was definitely the most difficult and unpleasant consideration that I had to face - difficult enough for me to cope with leaving THEM, but asking them to let me go was going to be even harder.

Lao picked me up on Boxing Day and we drove out to the lab. He indicated that Mr

Ryan was still in good spirits and had been busy with final touches to the craft in preparation for the big trip.

"Hi, Mr Ryan," I said coming through the door of the cabin. "How are you feeling today?"

"Quite relaxed, thanks," Mr Ryan replied. His celestial adventure, had done little to alter his unique dress sense - a knee length robe with loud swirls of mauve, orange, red and deep blue.

"You look like Joseph in his multicoloured dream coat," I suggested.

"How did you guess?" Mr Ryan asked.

"It must have been the Bible on the book shelf," I added. Mr Ryan looked up at me, and then across at Lao.

"Lao, this young lassy is becoming quite cheeky. Are you responsible for this?"

"No, sir. But it seems to be going around. Maybe it's in the town water!" Lao responded.

"Maybe," Mr Ryan muttered as he redirected his attention to the magazine in front of him.

"What's the magazine, Mr Ryan?" I asked.

"It's a scientific journal. There's an article on recent developments in the US space program. They have a few good ideas, but I'll make it to Alpha Proxima first," he gloated. He paused a moment, looked up at me and added: "Knowledge is power, George!"

"And, so, what about the flight?" I asked.

"It will probably go ahead in late January. That is, assuming all modifications are on line," Mr Ryan replied.

"And what are the chances of me coming along?" I asked. It was now or never! My stomach turned.

"Not real good," Mr Ryan replied. I knew it. Mr Ryan looked up at me and checked my response. I remained quiet and managed a fake smile. "Come on, George, put yourself in our position. Both Lao and I would love to take you along. You're a wonderful person, a great worker and a smart young lady. We'd love to take you if we thought it feasible."

"So, what's the problem then?" I thought.

"How would you envisage us telling your grandparents that we have built a space craft and we were wanting to take their precious granddaughter on a very risky space

expedition to Alpha Proxima for about ten years, George?"

"I don't know," I replied, sounding quite defeated. This battle was lost. There was no way Lao and Mr Ryan were going to take me. It was obvious that my grandparents wouldn't go for the idea. I was doomed.

"Would you mind if I asked them?" I continued, now clutching at straws.

"No. Give it a go," Mr Ryan replied. "Only, remember it must not go beyond the family. Security here is imperative. Okay?"

"Okay," I agreed.

It was worth my while giving it my best shot. I had nothing to lose, and I really did want to go. All I had to do was convince my grandparents of the value of this expedition... space travel, a worthwhile career choice for the 1990's!

The very next day I asked my grandparents to sit down with me at the kitchen table. I had spent several hours the night before thinking through what I might say, coming to grips with my needs and desires, and facing the real

possibility of another disappointment. I was facing another round-table meeting, another appeal to authority, another knotted stomach.

"Granddad, Grandma," I began. "I have been with the two of you now for a year and I think I know the two of you quite well. In fact, I already know what your response is going to be. But I've decided to ask anyway." I paused.

"What is it, George?" Grandma asked.

"Mr Ryan and Lao have spent the last 12 years in Kindera building a space craft so that they can travel to the Alpha Proxima Solar System." Grandma looked across and Granddad with raised eyebrows.

"Where is this Alpha - whatever you said?" asked Grandma.

"About 4 light years away," Granddad responded. "And how long do they think it will take to get there?"

"About 4 years," I responded. "Mr Ryan has found a way to travel at the speed of light."

"A-ha," Granddad replied. He didn't believe me. "Let us assume for a minute that what you are saying is correct - and I have no

reason to disbelieve you - then what is it you are wanting from us, George? Permission to go along?"

"Yes," I replied.

Granddad sat back in his chair and looked across at Grandma. Grandma looked horrified. He drew a deep breath, looked back at me and sighed. We all sat in silence for several minutes. I think I'd blown their minds.

"George, would you mind if Grandma and I took a day or two to think about this. It's not the usual sort of thing a teenager asks his or her grandparents. Had you wanted to go off to uni in the states or wanted to move in with your boyfriend, then I might know what to say. But this!" Granddad smiled, shook his head and looked back at Grandma. It was evident that Grandma also needed time to think about the idea.

Granddad spent the next 2 hours quizzing me about the space ship that Mr Ryan and Lao had built and about the expedition they were planning. Grandma seemed to follow most of

what was discussed, and asked quite a few questions herself. After our talk, Granddad seemed convinced that Mr Ryan had - in fact - created a craft for cruising the universe. He seemed very impressed, although he wanted to see the craft for himself.

I phoned Mr Ryan, who suggested my grandparents come out to the lab the next day for a tour. There was still hope! I left Granddad and grandma to discuss the idea and headed out to South Head Beach for the day. I needed some time out to walk and think and swim.

My grandparents drove up with me to the lab a few days later. They spent most of the day with Mr Ryan, looking at the craft, sitting and talking about the achievements of the past 12 years, and about the expedition that had been planned. Granddad and Mr Ryan seemed to get along really well. Grandma hung in there when the conversation became too technical.

On the drive home Granddad and Grandma

discussed, at length, what they had seen out at the lab. They were obviously very impressed, though no more than I had been at various times. I expected Granddad and Grandma to come to a decision about my wanting to go with the expedition, but they didn't offer one. They obviously needed more time.

The decision came two days later, after dinner, as we sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee.

"We've had time to think about your request, George," Granddad began. "And I think we have reached an agreement. It's been one of the hardest decisions your grandmother and I have ever had to make." He paused and sipped his coffee.

"George, it's like this," he continued. "We think this opportunity is one-in-a-million. We know that Mr Ryan and Lao would be quite happy to have you along. But we are also aware that the expedition is risky, George."

"I guess that's a 'no' then," I thought.

"You have already considered all of these factors, though, haven't you?" Granddad

asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"And you still really want to go?"

"Yes."

Grandma cut in at this point:

"George, your Granddad and I sat down at the beginning of this year and talked about what we would say and what we would do once you came to stay with us. We knew you wouldn't be happy coming to stay with us, and we were very anxious not to make your stay any more unpleasant than it need be. We didn't really know what best to say or do. I wanted to wrap you up in cotton wool. Your Granddad thought we ought to give you as much space as you needed. I didn't know, so I accepted your Granddad's suggestion. I'm happy I did. You've really grown up this year, George."

"Thanks Grandma," I responded.

"So, George," Granddad continued, "we have decided to leave the final decision to you. We do not think that we have the right to make this decision on your behalf. It is a decision that will affect the next 10 years of your life and we are of the opinion that you are old

enough, mature enough, to make this decision on your own.

"Nevertheless, both your Grandmother and I are very anxious about the risk involved with this expedition. The risks are enormous. Please do not consider them lightly. You have a lot to gain by going to Alpha Proxima, but you could be killed trying to get there. Are the odds in your favour?

"Further, both Grandma and I realize that, if you go, WE will be losing contact with our granddaughter – just when we've reconnected with you - for at least 9 years. And this is not going to be easy for us to accept. We love you very much and would like you to be around in the years to come."

Granddad paused. There was several minutes silence. I wasn't sure what to say, or whether I should attempt to say anything at all. I looked at the two of them. Grandma was looking very lost, Granddad was looking thoughtful.

"What would you do if you were in my position?" I asked the both of them.

My grandparents looked at each other. Grandma shrugged her shoulders, Granddad

turned to me and said: "I don't know, George.
That's a hard one."

KAPPA

Often a person's temperament is seen as a static, non-changing entity. In fact, I've heard some say that a person's temperament does not change at all from the time they are born. Some parents say that they can see the temperament or personality of their child from a very early age and that it alters little or not at all as the child grows.

Although I don't necessarily agree with all of this, I do concede that a person's temperament may not appear to change over a lengthy period. They may, in fact, appear to have the same temperament for years and years. Their temperament may not be challenged by the environment, and so it has no need to change or adjust. On the other hand, a person's temperament may alter dramatically over a short period of time when the person is faced with some sort of major

crisis.

Having said all that, I have come to the conclusion that all people have some sort of buffer or cushion between the outside world and their inner temperament. Something intercepts the events that influence their lives, for instance, takes the initial brunt of crises or uncomfortable situations. This buffer would receive and responds to stimuli that normally make people smile or laugh or cry or whatever. Otherwise, with every minor event, hassle, every crisis, a person's temperament would change significantly. Something must filter responses to trips and events and cushion the temperament against minor environmental changes.

This cushion for the temperament is a person's constitution. It has a physical component, as well as psychological, emotional and spiritual components. The physical component protects the individual against such things as weather, disease, physical abuse and so forth. It is fairly obvious that the environment will affect the

comfort of an individual and so may have a subsequent effect on the individual's temperament. A person with a strong physical constitution is in a much better position to protect his/her temperament from environmental changes.

Lao has mentioned a number of times that in Chinese medicine it is held that excessive exposure to particular weather patterns or physical conditions can result in an imbalance in emotion. Thus the physical constitution appears to be somehow linked with the emotional constitution. Conversely, a person who experiences an excess of a particular emotion will generate a subsequent physical disorder in their body - an imbalance, a sickness - their physical constitution will be weakened. This conflicts with that famous comment by Rene Descartes - 'I think therefore I am'. Western philosophy holds to the idea that the mind and the body are effectively separate entities when it comes to existence. The Chinese see them as being very closely linked.

In similar ways a person's psychological and spiritual constitutions are likely linked with both the emotional and physical constitutions. It is one large cushion or buffer that incorporates four seemingly different components. I believe that the four components are more closely linked than many people realize.

The spiritual component is the one that really concerns me at present. Before I began to accept the sceptical philosophy of Mr Ryan, I seemed quite content and comfortable spiritually. Maybe I just didn't think deeply about such things. Nevertheless, I was comfortable. Now, when I consider the full implications of a sceptical philosophy, I realize the problems it presents me. What is the meaning of life? My life seems to have lost a lot of its meaning. Who am I living for? There is a good chance that God does not exist. What am I living for? If I want to add anything to human knowledge and understanding, how do I know I am really adding anything of real value? Is what I am adding the truth? How am I ever going to

know whether there is life after death, whether I have a soul, whether there is any benefit in living a good moralistic life? I would venture to say that my spiritual constitution is a little weak at this time, and over the last few months, this has taken its toll on my psychological constitution also.

* * * * *

Although disappointed, Grandma and Granddad accepted my final decision - to go with Mr Ryan and Lao to Alpha Proxima. They appreciated that the decision had not been an easy one.

Mr Ryan and Lao had less trouble accepting my decision and welcomed me to the expedition. They seemed pleased, in a way, that I'd decided to go. It was the first

time I'd really felt a part of the actual expedition and not just some tourist who had been allowed to visit and help out on the odd occasion.

The three of us - Mr Ryan, Lao and I - sat for quite some time and discussed the dangers involved in the trip, the role I would be expected to play, and the code of conduct I would be expected to follow. I had anticipated many of the dangers, although Mr Ryan and Lao raised a couple I had not considered.

Mr Ryan indicated that, over a period of time, I would be expected to learn about the use and internal workings of most of the equipment on board the space craft. I would be expected to learn how to access information from the computer, write computer programs, and enter a range of data into the computer using various input devices. Eventually, I would be expected to pilot the craft alone, with only computer assistance. As had been the case for the past 12 months, I would remain the expedition's apprentice - the pupil. And my code of conduct would fall in line with this

role - obey directives from Mr Ryan and Lao as given and when given.

"As we ascend through the first 20 kilometres, George, I want you to concentrate on staying awake," Mr Ryan smiled. "The computer will be doing most of the work, and the ascent may be quite uncomfortable."

"How many g?" I asked.

"About 4," Mr Ryan replied. "After we have reached the 20 kilometre mark our acceleration will drop considerably. I then want you to keep your eye on this monitor in front of you." Mr Ryan pointed to the television screen in front of me. It had a series of windows, each containing graphical data on the status of the various life support equipment and the craft's operating temperature. It was my job to monitor the various pieces of equipment needed for our life support. I could be called upon to enter instructions into the computer as conditions changed. Otherwise, the computer was programmed to speak up if/when any of the life support equipment malfunctioned, or needed attention.

Mr Ryan and Lao would concentrate on the craft's flight path. They each had a visual display unit to monitor the various external factors affecting the craft, but like everything else that went on, the computer had been pre-programmed to do the bulk of the work. Manual piloting might be required in the event of unforeseen changes in conditions.

"How high are we going before we beam off to Alpha Proxima?" I asked.

"About 100 thousand kilometres," Mr Ryan replied. "Two days travelling time," he added.

"How close will we be to the moon?"

"We'll only cover about one quarter the distance to the moon, George. But 2 days travelling will be long enough for the computer to verify our observations of our path to the Alpha Proxima solar system."

Mr Ryan went on to explain, in detail, how to interpret the data that the computer was displaying on the monitor in front of me. There were graphic details on the cabin air pressure, the atmospheric mix of gases, the air

temperature, the present status of the various recycling apparatus, the flight time, and the craft's velocity and acceleration. My job seemed easy enough, although, if things started to go wrong, would I be able to respond quickly enough or effectively?

The three of us had spent most of January repeatedly going over a computer check-list to ensure that all systems worked perfectly, and would continue to function correctly over an extended period of time. Mr Ryan had carried out some of the more important checks for most of last year. He indicated that he had placed quite a considerable number of components under a great deal of stress for the greater part of a year to ensure that they would stand up to prolonged rough treatment. He also organized, on the lower deck of the craft, a storeroom full of spare parts.

"Are you confident that the craft will survive, Mr Ryan?" I asked.

"Yes, I think so," Mr Ryan replied. "It's just the human component, now, that I'm worried about. Though, the computer is

programmed to do much of the work, and Lao seems capable enough now to pilot the craft on his own should I fall ill at any time," Mr Ryan commented, and passed Lao a glance.

"That's what you think!" Lao replied.

"You are!" Mr Ryan retorted. Lao smiled back.

"Anyway," Mr Ryan continued. "both you and Lao are young and healthy enough to survive any of the physical shocks that you might receive throughout the trip."

"We'll soon know, I guess," I responded.

"Our health and fitness should be a high priority when we are travelling," Lao declared. He paused to check our responses.

"I agree," I replied. Mr Ryan nodded.

"I think that it will be very easy for the three of us to concentrate so much on what is happening outside the craft that we may forget to exercise in the gym, or eat correctly."

"Let's hope not!" Mr Ryan responded.

"As you constantly remind us, Lao, if we're not healthy in body, we cannot be healthy in mind. And that's when we'll make bad decisions, and probably get on each other's nerves."

Lift-off was set for the first Monday in February. By this time we were all quite excited and anxious - excited to be going but anxious about what lay before us. Two days before lift-off, I spent the better part of 2 mornings touring the South Head Beach, swimming, sunbaking, and listening to the multitude of sounds - the waves crashing on the sand, the birds in the trees, the people playing games on the beach, the wind across the sand. I was leaving all this behind. In two days all I would have left would be memories. Memories that I would only be able to refresh on our return. Memories that I could never hope to capture in words or film or song to take with me. Just plain old memories... a soft-copy of reality. Sometimes memories don't seem solid enough, don't seem large enough to fill the vacuum that's left, don't engender the same respect or emotional response as nature itself. They are just a living neural photocopy of the real thing.

Negativity can be radiated, so I made an effort not to carry my feelings of loss to the lab

the next day. Instead, I consoled myself with the thought that I had been lucky to experience the wonder and beauty of nature on earth for as many years as I had. Far worse than leaving such natural beauty behind would be to have never experienced such beauty at all. And quite probably, the galaxies that lay before us would offer other natural beauties and wonders I had never dreamt of seeing.

As I had anticipated, the hardest part of leaving was saying goodbye to my grandparents. They both came out for the lift-off. I could see that they were both anxious and unhappy, but put on brave fronts. I was certainly going to miss them. There were lots of tears, hugs and kisses as we proceeded into the craft and prepared for the final countdown.

"Are we all ready?" Mr Ryan finally asked. We were all buckled into individual couches in the control room. We had limited movement, just enough to type computer instructions or to scratch our noses. We each wore a special fire resistant suit with a helmet (to make the suit airtight) only a computer key stroke away.

The craft had been rolled out of its shed and was warming up, ready for the ascent.

"I'm ready," I replied.

"So am I," concurred Lao.

"Then here we go..." Mr Ryan's voice was lost to the whirr of the rotary motors as they spun faster and faster, slowly lifting the craft from its launch platform. The craft tipped to one side slightly and then back again. It continued to rise. The acceleration seemed to be only slight, but then, with an unholy roar, the craft lifted under incredible force, my whole body being pushed into the couch. My breathing was shallow and quick, my pulse was running wild and my face felt like it was being pushed out of shape.

And there I stayed, plastered in the couch for what seemed an eternity. (In reality, it was probably no more than about 35 seconds). Even after the huge acceleration had stopped I could still feel my cheeks flat and contorted. It was as though I had 'pulled a face', the wind had changed and the face I had 'pulled' was doomed to remain.

At 20km, the rotary engines subsided. These engines were of little use at altitudes above 20km because of the thinning air. The craft's Ion Drives were activated in order to maintain a significantly reduced acceleration. Given an overall effective acceleration of about 3g, and a height of ascent of 20km, I estimated the craft's velocity to be about 1000 metres per second, or about 3600 kilometres per hour.

As the huge rotary engine force subsided, I felt more and more able to move, to lift my head and to scratch my nose. The worst of this 'roller coaster' ride was over. I looked across at my computer monitor. It had gone blank. BLANK!?

"Mr Ryan!" I cried.

"George!" Mr Ryan cried back, "You're still with us then?"

"Yes, though my face could do with some massaging."

"Lao will attend to it," Mr Ryan laughed.

"Mr Ryan," I tried again, "my monitor has

blackened out..."

"Check the leads in the back. One may have fallen out," Mr Ryan cut in. I unclipped myself, leant over, reached behind the monitor and fiddled with both leads. Presently the monitor power was restored.

"Got it!" I called out.

"How does it look?" Mr Ryan asked.

I checked each of the gauges in turn and all appeared to be normal.

"Everything's fine," I replied.

Mr Ryan suggested we remain in our couches till we were at least 50 km above the earth. That way any sudden jolts would not result in our being thrown around the craft. Once we had reached the 50km mark, Lao switched on the artificial gravity generator (another device whose workings remains a technological mystery to me) so that we could walk around the craft, rather than float around. This device seemed to be just another way that Mr Ryan sought to cheat mother nature - people travelling in space were SUPPOSED to float around, not walk on the floor as they would in a building on earth.

All the craft's working parts seemed to have survived the initial ascent, and Mr Ryan said that everything was going as planned. In fact, this was the case for the entire trip to Planet 6. A few minor problems were encountered and dealt with, but on the whole all has worked as expected - much to our amazement and relief.

The two days before beaming off to the Alpha Proxima solar system were spent much the same as the days following our initial arrival. Mr Ryan spent quite a deal of time with me going over the devices on the craft to ensure that I was familiar with all of them and knew how they should be operated. He even attempted to explain some of the principles behind many of them, and, to my surprise, I understood a fair proportion of what he said.

Lao and I spent some time in meditation, Tai Chi, a little gym work and a fair deal of time talking through what was happening to us. I guess with the close proximity of our living and working, our closeness was destined to intensify, though quite subtly at first.

Meals consisted mainly of dehydrated foods that Lao had purchased or had especially prepared for the trip. Dehydrated foods were essential given our limited space on the craft. We had a huge supply of water which was constantly being replenished with the distilled water from our recycled body wastes. Similarly, oxygen was being recycled from the carbon dioxide we all breathed out.

Mr Ryan had considered everything - food and fresh water, clean air, comfort, exercise, mental stimulation, appropriate clothing - whatever we needed we had available to us.

"What are you going to miss the most while we're away, Mr Ryan?" I asked. We were sitting down to a lunch of vegetable soup and bread. It was our second day out from earth and Mr Ryan predicted that we would be ready to leave for Alpha Proxima in about an hour's time.

"I don't know, George," Mr Ryan responded. He sat and mused for a moment.

"I think I will miss our little cabin the most. It was home for a long time and we built it ourselves."

"I can certainly understand that." I responded.

"What would you miss the most, George?" My Ryan asked.

"The earth!" I responded without thinking. My Ryan and Lao smiled. "Probably the music clip programs on the television. When we get back I'll be 10 years behind the times. How uncool am I going to look?" Mr Ryan looked across at Lao and laughed.

"Maybe we could organize a survival pack of compact discs to be beamed up while we are away. What do you think, Lao?"

"No argument from me, Xen," Lao agreed.

"So, what will you miss the most, Lao?" Mr Ryan continued.

"My statue of Buddha," Lao replied, smiling. "I left it behind by mistake."

"We could add it to the CD collection when 'Scottie' beams it up," Mr Ryan suggested.

"Good idea," Lao agreed.

"What do you hope most to find, then, Mr

Ryan?" I asked. "Once we reach Alpha Proxima?"

My Ryan thought for a moment, sat back in his chair and sipped at his cup of tea. "Any life form would make me happy," he replied. "I am a firm believer in the likelihood of life on other planets, and this is what I would like to prove conclusively on this particular expedition. I suspect that our chances of finding some form of alien life somewhere in the Alpha Proxima Solar System would be better than average."

Lao and I nodded but said nothing. Each of us seemed to venture off into our own little worlds for a moment. Probably all trying to imagine what sort of alien life forms we would encounter. My thoughts were definitely centred around numerous science fiction stories I had read and television programs I had watched - English-speaking aliens that would take us captive for trespassing on their planet, aliens wanting to stick us in glass jars for observation, or wanting to dissect us to see how we worked.

"Do you think the aliens will be organic like us, or made out of other chemicals?" I asked.

"Interesting question, George. Potentially life on other planets could be carbon-based, as it is on earth, or alternatively, life on other planets could be nitrogen- or ammonia-based," Mr Ryan replied.

"Would a planet with nitrogen-based life have a different atmosphere?" I asked.

"Yes," Mr Ryan replied, "the atmosphere would be poisonous, even corrosive, to our bodies. But we could still look around the planet using the space suits we've brought with us."

"Could life be silicon-based?" I asked.

"Possibly," Mr Ryan replied. "I wonder, though, whether silicon based life would evolve naturally, rather than by the hands of another carbon-based life form. I find it difficult to perceive silicon-based life forms evolving naturally. But then if the creationists are to be believed, all creatures were created by God and God would certainly have no problem creating the odd silicon-based life

form."

"Do you believe in creationism?" I asked.

"The creationists have a considerable number of convincing arguments, which I must admit, puts some pressure on the evolutionists..." Mr Ryan paused to think.

"Getting back to your silicon-based life-form, though, George, and human-made computers," he began again, "it's clear that humans are still very very primitive when compared to the old mother nature. People will marvel at a space craft like this one, yet be quite complacent about life on earth with all its intricacies and glory. It would be unfair to even compare human architecture and design to mother nature. Human creativity doesn't even come close.

"I guess, eventually, humans will realize how powerful nature is, and the electronic/computer age will give over to an age of 'organics' where scientists design animal and human like machines from a purely organic-based paradigm. You thought a laptop computer was a nifty little device! Organics will leave all this equipment in the dark ages."

We all sat in silence again, lost in our own thoughts. Some interesting thoughts came to mind. Among them was the realization that, just as I thought I was coming to grips with the scope of Mr Ryan's thinking, he came up with yet another plane of thought.

"Is this the area you would like to work on next?" I asked.

"Sure," Mr Ryan replied. "But one thing at a time - Alpha Proxima first."

My mind drifted away again on the trip that lay before us, the excitement, the possibilities, the dangers, the experience, and the very real possibility of death. Should we die before returning to earth, would anyone ever realize? Would anyone ever know that we had left earth and attempted to travel to the Alpha Proxima Solar System? My grandparents would know, but when would they come out and tell people, and would anyone believe them? If we died without anyone knowing, I guess I would feel cheated or lost or something.

"If we don't survive this trip, Mr Ryan, how

will anyone know our fate?" I asked.

"Well, George, I left a log back on earth, in the cabin, to explain what we've done and where we've gone. Eventually, someone will find it. I have indicated in the log that, once we reach Alpha Proxima, we will transmit daily signals back to earth to indicate our progress."

"To be received some four years after it happens," I added. "And some eight years from now."

"Yes, but then that's the express mail link with earth once we are 4.28 light years away," Mr Ryan responded.

"Enough of this doom and gloom. It must be near time to buckle up and beam off to Alpha Proxima. The moment of truth is upon us." He raised his eyebrows slightly and smiled. "Are we ready?" he asked.

"I believe we are." Lao replied. I nodded in agreement.

We secured the eating utensils and ventured over to our respective couches. We buckled ourselves in, and Mr Ryan and Lao went

through the final countdown sequence. The computer rechecked the status on all electronic components and the EMR beam device, and verbally reported back that all was okay. There was something familiar about the computer's voice but at the time it eluded me.

That was the last thought that crossed my mind. The next thing I knew I had a splitting headache and my body felt as though its parts had been relocated. We had arrived - we had reached the Alpha Proxima solar system.

LAMBDA

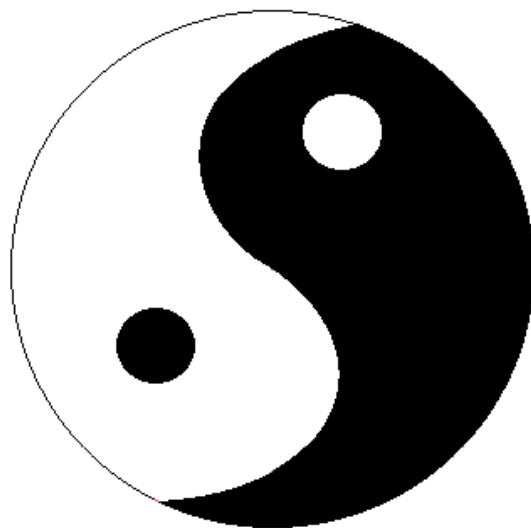
Cascades of brown, patches of mauve and shades of grey shroud the sky like a gigantic curtain. Swirling dusts dance by my port hole, tap on the glass and are whisked away. An eerie, dusty darkness has descended upon us for the afternoon. It is like sitting, rugged up by a fire, in a winter cabin with snow falling all around - cosy, comfortable and secure from the harsh world outside.

Although still quite weak, I am able to sit and sift through my thoughts and memories. Like the musical conductor in my dream, I hope to pull together my thoughts (my various players) and create something meaningful. With a bag full of insecurities I wonder whether this is really possible.

I have begun to doodle on the blank, white bond sheet before me. I have Jean Michel

Jarre's 'Equinox' playing on the compact disc player, his notes, his sounds, his melodies, some eerie, some vibrant, complementing the rhythm of the dust storm raging outside. Jean Michel helps me to relax and to find a sense of clarity in my thinking.

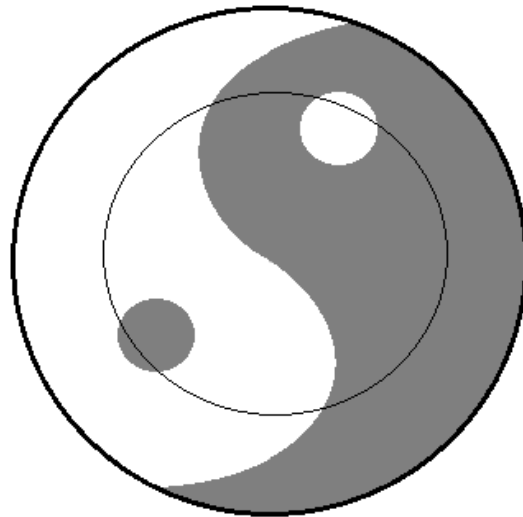
I have drawn a Yin Yang symbol on the paper before me. I look at it closely recollecting an explanation given to me by Lao some time ago. The symbol is round with a curved line flowing through the middle of it breaking it into two equal parts. Each half has a thick end and a thin end and each thick end has a small circle placed in its 'centre'. The two halves have contrasting colours and the small circles also contrast so as to show out against their respective backgrounds.



It must be understood that the Yin Yang symbol is a visual representation or visual model of the Yin Yang concept. Things that I can do or show with the symbol must have an appropriate interpretation within the concept. For example, I take a clean piece of paper from the bottom of my pile and with one of the straight edges try to cover up one half - including its corresponding smaller circle - of the symbol. I find that I cannot cover either half without covering most if not all, of the symbol. Why? What relevance does this have in terms of the Yin Yang concept? It suggests that no aspect of life can be all Yin without some Yang. People for instance, cannot be all bad, or all angry, or all conservative, or all whatever. There is always at least some of the opposite present. To hide all of the Yin, I must cover the whole symbol. Once I try to hide one half of the Yin Yang balance, the symbol, the individual, the country, the universe, whatever, would cease to exist.

I draw a circle inside the symbol such that

its radius is about two thirds that of the circle that encompasses the symbol. The new circle cuts each of the two smaller circles.



I have a whole list of words or concepts in my head - trips, temperament, quality, love, environment, health, constitution – that I would like to add to the diagram in front of me.

Temperament is at the core of an individual's being. It is central to the direction that that person takes in life, central to the emotional responses of that person, central to the trips that that person embarks upon and responds to. It is central. And just as it is central to a specific individual, it may also be central to a specific community, a specific

state or country and maybe even to a specific world or universe.

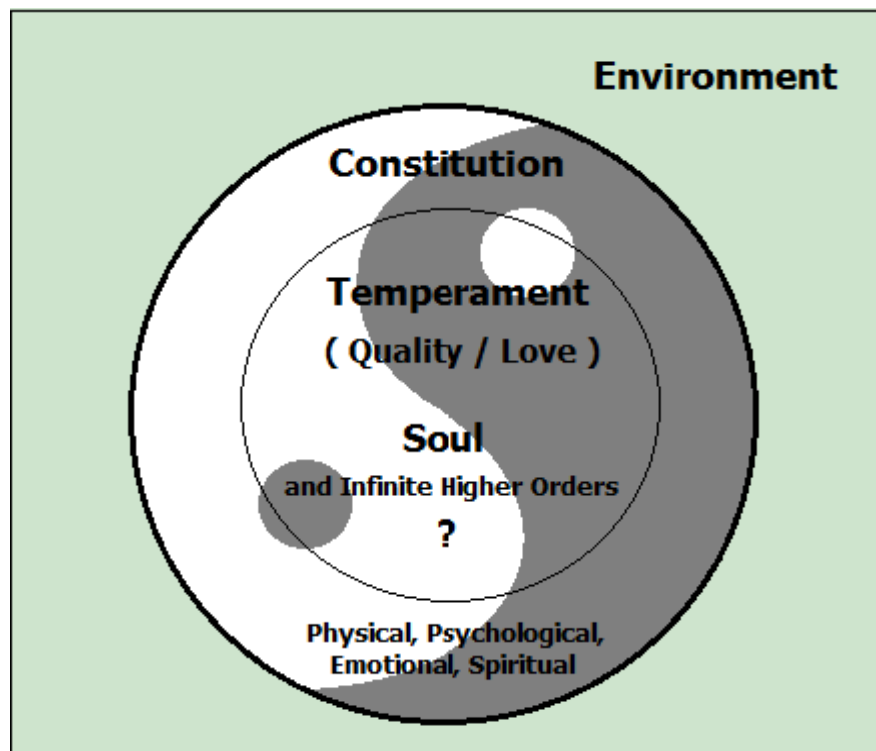
I write the word 'temperament' inside the inner circle across the middle of my Yin Yang symbol.

Attached closely to temperament are both quality and love. In fact, love may even be a specific case of quality, but for the moment I will set them down as individual concepts. Both of these are closely tied to an individual's temperament. It is difficult for an individual to explain why he/she loves someone or something or why he/she sees something as having quality. Reasons are bound up in the individual's temperament.

I decide to write quality and love in small letters, in brackets, underneath temperament, also in the inner circle. This inner circle represents the individual's inner core, their central being, their temperament, and most probably, their soul. A dedicated Christian might also include the word 'God'. Somehow temperament, soul and God are interrelated but

that's all beyond me at this time. I write 'Infinite Higher Order' in the inner circle with a question mark under it.

I decide that the modified Yin Yang symbol that I have drawn represents an individual. I have identified the core component of the individual - the temperament - and decide that the area between the temperament and the outside world is the individual's constitution. This layer cushions the inner core from events occurring in the external environment. This layer cushions the temperament in the event of crisis as well as filters the behaviour that the individual displays outwards to the external environment.



I write 'CONSTITUTION' at the top of the Yin Yang symbol inside the large circle. And since a person's constitution has physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual components, somehow intertwined, I write each of these terms in small letters also in this outer circle.

Finally, the individual or group of individuals must interact with, exist within and depend upon an external environment. The individual or group pursue trips within this environment, while the environment acts upon them in an infinite number of ways. Given our dependence on our environment, a healthy

respect for its well being is essential to our existence... we must live in balance with ourselves and we must live in balance with our environment. I write 'ENVIRONMENT' outside the symbol.

I sit back and look at the diagram on the page in front of me. What have I drawn? A diagram that depicts MY view of the universe (at this time), maybe not so original, but a view that fits with me nevertheless. And given that I am a sceptic, I guess it doesn't really matter whether it is right or not.

Dear Mr Ryan, here is 'Assignment 1', completed and ready for marking. I hesitate. What if he marks me down?

Fatigue pours over me yet again. I sigh and look down at my work. A few flitting thoughts cross my mind, I shrug my shoulders and put my head down on my desk. 'Equinox' draws to a close.

Presently there is a knock at my cabin door. I lift my head from the table and focus on the crumpled pages of notes in front of me - George's view of the world - scribbled on bond paper soaking in the fluorescent green rays of another Planet 6 sunset. Sunrise and sunset are the most beautiful spectacles that this planet has to offer. I have never seen such beautiful natural colour anywhere on earth. It is the sort of colour that the covers of science fiction novels are made of.

Another knock. "George, are you awake?" comes the muffled voice.

"Come in Lao."

Lao enters, white shirt and string pants looking no worse for wear after the fever. He sits down on the end of my bed.

"You do not look the best," Lao suggests.

"I'm feeling a little better. I think I've overcome the fever. Though I'm still very tired."

"So why are you not lying down?"

"I resolved my recurring nightmare last night and I felt I had to get some thoughts down on paper."

"What sort of thoughts?"

"Some thoughts about life in general and some about life over the last year and a half. Last year was a big year, eh?"

"For us all!" Lao responds.

"So how have you been?" I ask.

"Okay. I gave myself some acupuncture. I meditated a little and I slept quite a bit." Lao pauses. "I checked on Xen this morning and he seemed okay. He was meditating on his couch by the main control panel. He was plugged into the computer."

I nod. I look across at Lao. He is calm and seems very relaxed. He smiles. I yawn and drop my head back onto the table. Lao comes over and helps me to the bed where I lie down. I'm asleep before my head hits the pillow.

* * * * *

Another washing of dawn purple and mauve fills my cabin, loud, bright and illuminating. Jimi, where are you now? Bold is Love! Lao has crawled into bed behind me and has his arm around me. He holds me tight, his hand clasped in mine. I smile to myself - the things dreams are made of! We must have slept together through the night. I close my eyes and dose for a short time.

"The sunrise is beautiful in your cabin," Lao whispers.

"Yerr. Purple Haze." I reply. Lao must have been awake already. I roll over and face him. He smiles.

"Good morning!" he offers.

"Good morning.", I reply. There is a moment's silence while we search each other's faces. We kiss, then hold each other close. My mind is going crazy with thoughts. My body wants me to cry with joy, my mind wants answers and clarity (as usual).

I move away slightly so as I can see Lao's

face. "Why? Why now? Where are we at?" Are the questions I want to ask, but before I can open my mouth Lao places a finger on my lips and says: "I don't know. I don't have any answers right now. It just feels right."

There he goes again, searching my soul knowing what I am thinking and feeling before I do. I smile and shake my head.

"Lao how the hell do you do that?" I exclaim. I didn't expect an answer, and one was not forthcoming. We hold each other close for several minutes.

"What do we do now?" I finally ask.

"Check out Xen," Lao replies.

"Okay." We kiss briefly, then Lao sits up and helps me up. My head is spinning, probably from too much sleep, but otherwise I feel somewhat refreshed, revived and much more alert than I have over the past few days. We clamber out of bed and stretch. The room is vibrant purple, the dawn rays chase each other into every corner of the room. My white tank top glows.

We make our way upstairs to the flight deck where Mr Ryan sits in his couch wired up to the computer. He looks very peaceful. Mr Ryan opens his eyes and looks up at the two of us.

“I’m hoping we’ve seen the worst of it.” Mr Ryan declares looking quite serious.

“I am so very sorry to have let my enthusiasm for the bacteria we found blind me to the potential and obvious risks. It was very poor judgement on my part – extremely poor judgement!” He pauses. “I am so very sorry!”

“That’s okay.” I reply. “I think we’re all okay.” I then add: “And maybe now we’ll even have some kind of immunity built up.”

“Quite possibly.” Mr Ryan agrees. He then looks across at Lao and says: “Lao, thank you for looking after us all. I’m fairly certain that you saved our lives. Thank you!”

Lao nods and says” “No problem.”

We take turns at giving accounts of how we are feeling and how the fever had affected us. Mr Ryan seemingly suffered the most, being out of action for almost 3 full days.

We quickly realise that we are all incredibly hungry and so set about preparing a hearty breakfast. We take our time eating – as instructed by Lao – as we are still in the process of recovery.

“In sitting here for a couple of hours this morning, I have had a chance to think about where we’ve been and what got us here.” Mr Ryan began. “And if you both will indulge me, I’d like to express my gratitude.” Mr Ryan paused.

“I am grateful to Lao for his medical expertise, which we so clearly needed the last few days. I am grateful for Lao and Chuang Tzu’s support over so many years in building up the expedition and helping to make this trip possible. And more recently for George’s many contributions.” He pauses and smiles at us both.

“And finally I would like to thank the universe for giving me, or us, the opportunity to find a living organism on an alien planet.” He pauses again. “And then for punishing us in the process!” he adds. “Seriously, I feel

that these many years of hard work have now been notably rewarded.”

Lao and I nod and take a moment to reflect on Mr Ryan’s comments. Lao then clears his throat and says:

“I am grateful Xen, for your love. Your love for me , for my father, for George, and for this project. It is a blessing to be here with you both.”

Mr Ryan and I now nod in response. Mr Ryan and Lao are wonderful people and I too feel incredibly blessed to be here with them. And on hearing their respective comments I start to realise the importance and value of expressing gratitude for things we truly appreciate.

I look at Lao and then across at Mr Ryan. “Can I say that prior to the last 4.28 years, which seemed to really fly by; my previous year and a half felt like a roller coaster ride - so many highs and lows, so many changes impacting on my life! So much happened! I’ve learned so much! I was and still am a

pupil of life. And for much of the last year, the two of you were my teachers, my mentors.” I pause, then add: “As well as my grandparents, and my school teachers, and..., and...”

“So can I offer to the two of you my thanks for being there for me – for everything you’ve taught me, for everything you have allowed me to experience, and for allowing me to share this trip with you.”

I smile at the both of them, then add:

“I know we have a lot more exploring and discovery to come – new trips, new learning, now revelations – but getting to this point has been a complete trip in itself.

I pause.

“So I guess we have a lot more to do, a lot more to see, a lot more to experience, a lot more to investigate, new civilisations to meet, new rocks to turn over, new waterways to paddle, lots of new stuff...”

“But can I just ask... do I always have to be the pupil? The student? Can’t one of you take a turn every once in a while?”

