

**Slaves in Eden**  
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Cover design by T.C., based on designs for his other novels by John Needham. Photo by Elisabeth Compton.

**Note by the author:** Unlike Russell Hoban, in his wonderful novel *Riddley Walker*, I have made no attempt to predict slang, word usage or even spelling at the time when this book is set (2082). If you can imagine an attempt by H G Wells to guess today's English vernacular, you will appreciate my reasons.

## CHAPTER 1

It was the day Harim Solaris came back from his God.

This was not the normal way of things. Usually your God called you, and welcomed you to be subsumed into his being, into an existence of consummate bliss. And why?... We dared not ask; it was one of the forbidden questions.

Now all of this is known, published in exhaustive detail and at exhausting length in every medium. So this account will focus on just one person's experience. I will tell my own story and add a dimension missing from the broader reports.

I thought at first to relate this with full hindsight, explaining everything as it happened. But I realized the tale would lose. Much of its meaning lies in what I could not know at the time. I will therefore, as far as I am able and even when it is most painful, write exactly how things appeared to me, as the events and my understanding unfolded together.

The fact that I can write at all, that I am alive in order to write, seems miraculous now, and all thanks to people unknown to me then. Even their existence I would have deemed impossible. To these friends I owe everything.

But enough of preamble. As I said at the start, Harim Solaris returned. He had left five days before, fêted by the usual celebrations blending sadness over our loss of a friend with joy at his coming subsumption and bliss. He had been a good friend to me in particular, helping me when racked by guilt over my evil curiosity. My angel could provide no comfort, only admonition and instructions to the caterer to alter my diet. When this had no effect, I no longer confessed to my angel, compounding the sin with evasion and further reason for remorse. He suspected this and hinted that it was time I saw a different one, older, more learned and more experienced.

But I am straying again. Harim Solaris came back, subdued and with a new right arm. It was young, strong and made subtle noises when it moved. And its little finger was straight. His own had been crooked, the result of an accident many years before. He told us the new arm with perfect fingers was a reward for his exemplary

behaviour, for his friendship with everyone. When we were alone, he told me that it was because he had helped me especially. I stroked his beautiful, long black hair. Had he never returned, I would have mourned his absence as a friend. But I would have missed the touch of his hair too, as no-one else had a head like that; Harim knew this and understood.

Until we told him, my friend had no idea he had been away so long. To him it was just a sleep. His angel had appeared and given him a drink, a present from his God. He went to sleep and woke up still in his bed, though with some soreness in his shoulder and a feeling of strangeness and new power in his arm. When he stretched, it travelled too fast, hit the wall by his bed and knocked off some paint. His angel, sitting nearby, had laughed. He told Harim it would take a few days to learn how to control his new gift.

We celebrated my friend's return with music and gymnastics. Some weeks would pass before he regained his skill with the trumpet, but this did not matter today as he was the centre of the celebration, not a mere participant. He sat on a raised dais, happy and content. Secretly I wondered what befell his old arm; but that was another of the forbidden questions and I told no-one, not even Harim. Wondering was a sin and I could feel my stress levels rising, so I worked even harder at the gymnastics to consume the extra cortisone. I wanted to do so anyway, for Harim's sake. And he appreciated my spectacular vaults and leaps.

The caterer provided excellent fare including wine, only permitted at such events. Having no craving for alcohol, I could drink as much as I pleased. I enjoyed the flavour but felt no desire to drink more than two glasses. Others, like Audeley Black, were restricted to one glass: if he went for a refill only fruit juice emerged from the machine. On one occasion, when my attention was diverted, he borrowed my glass but the caterer detected his presence in conflict with the DNA from my lips. He was refused a drink of any kind and later his angel was forthright about it, though sympathetic and a little amused too. The cartoon on our Advisor next day reminded us to protect our bodies from excessive input of any food or drink harmful to our genetic makeup. It was amusing, with a kangaroo eating too much and failing comprehensively to clear a fence. So no-one felt too stressed about it, not even Audeley.

The celebration ended half an hour after our usual retiring time and we returned to our rooms. I was still elated from Harim's unexpected return, and not at all tired, so I repeated mentally some of our rules, which usually sent me to sleep straight away:

- 1. You serve your God by keeping fit, both mentally and physically. He will reward you greatly if he finds your body perfect in every way when you are subsumed.*
- 2. To achieve this, you must eat and drink only what is provided and you must exercise as instructed, or more if your medic detects a rise in cortisone levels through stress.*

At this point I should remind the reader that appropriate stress was provided by physical goals, like climbing the hill in our world within a set time. If we succeeded, the next food issue was of a more interesting flavour; if not it tasted bland or even sour. Stress made mentally, like wondering about forbidden questions or deceiving the angels, was detected by our medic as a raised but inappropriate cortisone level. As this could harm us in the long term we needed to work it off immediately, however inconvenient the hour. And such exercise, taken outside the allocated period, showed the others that we had committed some mental misdemeanour and led to embarrassing comments later in the day. Luckily, at Harim's party I could work off the extra

cortisone, from wondering, by carrying out more vigorously what I was doing anyway.

*3. You are required to live peaceably with the other inhabitants of your world, so as not to create inappropriate stress in anyone.*

I had just reached the end of this third rule, and was already feeling sleepy, when my inner door opened.

My room was about four metres on each side and two and a half metres high. It contained a bed next to a small cupboard, which had a continually replenished glass of water on top and different coloured one-piece suits inside, so I could choose a colour each morning to fit my mood. The only other furniture comprised a chair and a small desk, on which sat the Advisor. We observed this every morning, to be informed about special events and reminded about any rules broken the previous day. Everything was explained by angels or talking animal figures like the greedy kangaroo. At the time we assumed that animals like tigers and kangaroos were imaginary. The biggest animals we ever saw on land were mice, though there were a few rats until the angels got rid of them. Sea-lions occasionally visited the shore, so we knew that some larger animals existed.

We could use the Advisor at other times of day too, to review earlier messages or to learn about the animals, plants and rocks in our world. Questions could only begin with "What?" or "When?" as a rule, though "How" was permitted if a mechanism was to be understood, like what caused the stream bed to deepen after heavy rain. "Why?" was strictly forbidden. If we sat in front of the Advisor for more than two hours in a day, we were told to leave our room and the outer door was locked against us until bedtime.

The only other features of my room were a toilet cubicle, a window through which I could see out but no-one could see in, a door which led to the outside world and another in the wall opposite. It was this inner door that opened and broke into my thoughts.

I sat up abruptly, in amazement. I had expected the usual kind of angel to come through, a person with the appearance of a human like myself but dressed in silver. What emerged was an animal I had never seen or even imagined before. It was superficially human, not very tall, with medium brown hair and blue eyes, but it was dressed in a sombrely coloured two-piece garment and its shape and dimensions were quite wrong. In short, the hips were too wide, the waist too narrow and the chest seemed to bulge forward in a disproportionate way. And yet, at the same time, something in the deep recesses of my mind responded to this creature. I felt as though I had been close to a being very like it, before I came properly into the world at my first birth, when everybody about me seemed huge and tripped over me as I stumbled about.

It looked at me nervously, like a bird I once approached too closely, then spoke with a voice human, yet higher in pitch than any I had heard since I was very young.

"Wissen Sie, wer ich bin?" it asked.

I had not the remotest clue what this meant, any more than were it a sea-lion barking. It tried again, this time with problems saying the words:

"Savez-vous ce que je suis?"

That was no better. But at last my shock and dumbness passed and I was able to speak:

"I'm sorry, I do not understand you."

The being smiled, with a hint of relief, then with hesitation and a strange accent it inquired:

"Do you know who I am?"

Well, I thought I did, though no angel like this had ever appeared before. I then remembered that mine was seeking an older and more experienced one to see me. Perhaps angels looked like this when they got older.

"You must be my new angel."

"Yes."

It hesitated again, as if searching for words. This was strange too, as angels knew exactly what they were going to say before they breezed in through the door.

"What is your name?"

I was taken aback once more and had to bite my lip to avoid asking why it didn't know. For that I would have received unpleasant food for a day or more. Perhaps it was unsure which door it had passed through. Previous glances through the crack had shown a very dark corridor outside.

"Cardan Gentle," I replied. The angel's response was to make marks on a sheet of something.

"I need to illuminate you," it continued, taking out a small black object and pointing it at me. It emitted a burst of light. The being returned it to its pocket and hesitated once more, before saying: "Sie dürfen - er - you must say nothing about my visit, to anyone. I am a secret angel. Another angel will see you next time."

It made its way out of the door, which it closed quietly with a click, leaving me in a state of some discomfort. Changes to our routine were unusual and usually unwelcome.

However, since I was born for the first time, I had been taught never to doubt an angel. They were omnipotent, omniscient and immortal, though we had no idea what the last quality meant. So I relaxed, lay down again and went through some more rules in my head before, around number nine - *All angels must be obeyed without question* - I fell asleep at last.