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Opening Extract from...

The Whispering Swarm

Written by Michael Moorcock

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CHAPTER ONE

MY REALITIES

Every day of my life, after all I have learned and the many dangers I have survived, I still reflect on the circumstances which drew me to that part of the City of London I know as 'Alsacia', which her inhabitants call 'the Sanctuary'. I learned that magic is as dangerous as we are told it is and that romance can be more destructive than reality. Worse, I came to know and fear the fulfilment of my deepest desires.

I suppose I'm a pretty typical Londoner of my generation. Born at the beginning of the Second World War, in 1940, I was brought up in Brookgate between Grays Inn and Leather Lane. We never moved away, even when the whole city surrounded us in yelling flame. By the time I was born, my family worked chiefly at the lower end of the entertainment business. People had to go on making a living as best they could. And they wanted to be entertained. We were settled Roma intermarried with Jews, Cockneys, Irish. Culturally, we were metropolitan Christians. We had barely heard of Alsacia, which was no more than a bit of local folklore. There was plenty of that in London.

SEEING GHOSTS PROFESSIONALLY

From the age of eleven in 1951, I earned my own living, first in The Gallery, Oxford Street, then, after I left school at fifteen, as a journalist (mostly a stringer for the *Evening Standard*) and writer of fiction. As an early reader, I especially enjoyed P.G. Wodehouse, Edgar Rice Burroughs and George Bernard Shaw, and when I first began writing I habitually used my middle initial because I thought the best authors all had three names. I had been telling stories since I was four or five, mostly as little one-act plays. Adults said they were amazed at my imagination. I had the sense not to tell them that I could see ghosts as well. I knew I could impose images on the air and taught myself not to be frightened by them, that they were a phenomenon which could be explained. Occasionally, I glimpsed trails not much wider than a high wire, stretching off into shivering emerald and silver. I took it for granted that this was some occasional trick of the eye. It went away soon enough. As I grew older and read Jung I became even more convinced that what I saw wasn't real. Not, at any rate, in any other shared reality. Jung had analysed perfectly rational people who believed they had travelled in flying saucers. I was a perfectly rational person and I didn't believe in flying saucers or any of the other stuff Jung wrote about. It soon became second nature to check when I saw something odd and remember that only crazy people had visions.

MY MUM AND SHOW BUSINESS

My mother, who let people think she was a widow, seemed to understand. She loved me unreservedly but didn't spoil me when I was growing up. She was the first to understand what my 'visions' really were and try, with her friend Mr Ackermann's help, to channel that imagination. She ran a tent show in Brookgate Market, where it widens, near the church, putting on melodramas like *Sweeney Todd* or *Rookwood* to audiences of the elderly and lonely. 'And the downright creepy,' she'd laugh. But it kept a few old actors in work. She was a kind-hearted if eccentric woman whose own life, in the telling, was a bit of a melo-

drama. When I was eight or nine my friends and I grew bored during the school holidays so she let us perform a couple of my pieces on slow afternoons. To the applause of an audience mostly made up of other market traders, *Red Swords of Mars* starred me as the hero, my friend Keith Rivers as the villain and a bunch of little girls we'd recruited in all other parts. It ended with everybody dying, including the hero and heroine. My first successful stab at pulp SF, with the accent on the stab! Mum had encouraged me to channel an overactive imagination into a useful craft. But Mum's shows weren't to last. Public taste changed, so she switched to running mostly short silent film comedies and cartoons until TV got into its stride. Then it was over.

Mum's brother, Uncle Fred, who lived upstairs next to my room, owned The Gallery. This was long before Centre Point was built. The place was bang next door to Tottenham Court Road Tube station, round the corner from Charing Cross Road and opposite the Lyons Corner House where a 'gypsy' orchestra still performed for lunch, tea and supper. They played selections from *Maid of the Mountains*, *The Desert Song* and *The Bandit King*, as well as *In a Monastery Garden* and *In a Persian Market*. Cheap romantic music to go with cheap romantic adventure books and films! My mum used to say I was born out of my time. She loved taking me to the revived silent classics at the National Film Theatre and the Dominion.

MY MUM'S SENSE OF DRAMA

In order to pay for the extra archery and fencing lessons my friend Keith and I took at Brookgate Institute, I worked for Uncle Fred after school and at weekends. I gave change or cashed up the slots. Our family had survived the Blitz but Uncle Fred got a gammy leg at Dunkirk. My dad, a radio operator on Lancaster bombers, was shot down over France in 1943 and hidden by a French family for the duration. He became so comfortable that he stayed on there after the war, with the daughter of the house. My mother said she hadn't minded much – she wasn't cut out for marriage. She had me and the business, which, she said, was actually all she wanted from the bargain. I've never known how much of that was really true but I'm pretty sure I

benefited by his absence, and it meant I spent my holidays with Dad in Toulon and Paris when most of my contemporaries were lucky to have a few days at Butlin's every year. I had to tell strangers that I was visiting a family friend. Our immediate family knew the truth about Dad leaving her, but my mum, though sweet-natured, was an habitual fantast. To hear her tell it, she'd travelled all over the world. Actually, she'd hardly been out of Brookgate. She went abroad once, on a day trip to Boulogne, and didn't like it. All foreign food, she would proclaim afterwards, was greasy, fantastic and inedible.

They used to say that Mum would climb a tree to tell a lie rather than stay on the ground to tell the truth. Nobody believed most of her stories. Only Uncle Fred and Mr Ackermann, a local tailor who spent quite a lot of time in our front room, visiting, continued to be sympathetic and supportive of her. Mr Ackermann had lived in Czechoslovakia before the war. A tall, slender man with pale, ascetic features, he dressed like a prewar dandy. His voice was very soft, his face gentle, with long jowls and large brown eyes that gave him the appearance of droll melancholy. He was very well educated. He had been a scientist doing something with radium but he needed fresh qualifications in England, where they were suspicious of him as an 'alien'. He eventually took over his cousin's thriving bespoke tailoring business at the Theobald's Road end of Brookgate Market. He was a kind, rather introspective man, who also gave me books to read. Years later I came across his rather frustrated love letters to my mum. I wasn't shocked. I'd known he loved her and I think, by association, me. He had left all his family behind. Few had survived. He was the only man I ever told about my 'ghosts'. He was sympathetic. 'When they begin to tell their stories, that's when you should be worried.' He smiled.

LONDON SEASONS

Keith and I got bored with the archery but we kept up our fencing, particularly after seeing *The Prisoner of Zenda* at the Rialto, Clerkenwell. I broke my mum's favourite chair trying the trick James Mason played on Stewart Granger and Keith wasn't allowed to see me for a week. Soon after that his mum and dad moved the family out to Ep-

ping. They said our neighbourhood was getting too rough. I felt very sorry for Keith, being so far from the centre of things. He wasn't even living in a suburb of London. He was in the *country*!

To this day I still love London. There's nowhere else worth living, even knowing what I know. Holborn Viaduct, that monument to art, science and industry, connecting the West End to The City, spans what used to be the Fleet River, now Farringdon Road, from Brookgate to Smithfield. I liked to stand on the viaduct, looking towards the Thames, inhaling health-preserving fumes from the traffic below. There was Blackfriars Bridge and the rich waters of the river, marbled by rainbow oil, poisonous and invigorating, buzzing like speed. What immune systems that environment gave us! It was an energy shield out of a science fiction story. The city lived through all attacks and so did we. Our bit of it – almost the eye of the storm – was scarcely touched. I grew up knowing I would survive. We all knew it.

BROOKGATE

I think the Blitz only killed twelve people in Brookgate. Thirteen at most. That's luck. And London's still lucky for me. Its familiarity gives me a feeling of security. Repetition is important, too, so when I go through Brooks Passage at lunchtime, Ron the escapologist and his dwarf wife are always there, drumming up trade from the office workers. Gamages decorated their display windows every Christmas. Tinsel and coloured glass and cotton-wool snow. They had a Santa inside. So did Ellisdon's, the big joke emporium on the corner where little drawers of practical jokes stretched from floor to ceiling: *False noses (sm.)*; *nail thru thumb*. *Blackface soap*, *bad doggy (lge)*, *black eye*, *edible goldfish*. Endless entertainment for generations. We went there for dress-up clothes, too. For under a pound they would rig you out as a highwayman, a princess, a pirate, a cowboy or a nurse. Both big stores are gone now.

Few children could have enjoyed growing up quite as much as I did. I lived more or less on the cusp of East and West London, where 'Town' ended and The City began. Everything was in walking distance – cinemas, theatres, restaurants, shops, museums, art galleries,

antique places. Pretty much everything you might ever need. And behind the rebuilt main streets there were the endless ruins.

In the '50s London was still characteristically navigated by bomb sites, rather than her midden heaps and church steeples. Almost every little red-brick street had at least one gap in it from some sort of bomb. In the east, people had trodden paths between shoulder-high stretches of rubble. Our hedges were broken brick, stone and burst concrete out of which shot branches of rusted steel rods, vibrating like fresh shoots.

THE DOCKS

The South Bank of the river was even more of a wasteland, with hardly a warehouse standing. It didn't matter. Better roads began to bring goods to the nearest train stations or even to the growing airports. But the Pool of London was still packed with ships, wharf upon endless wharf. You had to take trains between so many docks. For one summer during the school holidays I'd worked for Flexhill Shipping Company delivering bills of lading. But the commercial, trading heart of the city was already beating slower, anticipating the death of the trades which had created it.

Piles of blackened and soil-smeared remains, blazing with purple fireweed, lay between Billingsgate and the Royal Mint, between the Bank and the Monument, St Katharine Docks and Smithfield, everywhere Bow Bells pealed. As if God in his mercy had left us at least a tourist trade. They showed clearly how the city had been designed before Charles Dickens's time. Much of it was seventeenth century, from the Glorious Revolution. If this had happened forty years later they would not have rebuilt it. They would have preserved it as a theme park. Much more profitable. Ye Olde London Towne World. Wrenland. Hawksmooriana. Only the dead worked in London-land.

THE PRESS

There was enough work for everyone. The back pages of the papers were thick with job ads. All the little twittens and lanes around Fleet

Street yelled and clattered with the sound of linotypes and printing machines. They sweated ink and pissed hot air, stank of oil, sweat, exhaust fumes and beer. So many had survived, working through the war, the Blitz and the V-weapons.

There was hardly a basement without a roaring rotary press thumping out multiple editions of national and weekly newspapers, linotypers whirring and rattling away. The entire area ran on electricity and alcohol and was dedicated to the printed page, turning fact into fiction for the magazines and fiction into fact for the newspapers. Interpretation and prejudice; sensation and sobriety; a quarter filled with services for publishers and printers, for block makers, photographic developers, typographers.

Equipped with loudspeaker horns to announce their arrival, newspaper vans ripped through already lively streets or waited with chomping engines for the latest editions to come off the presses before hurtling away to train stations and distributors. Men in crumpled, grey three-piece suits and trilby hats stumbled straight from offices to pubs and chopshops, tea rooms, self-service cafés and automats and back again. Swapping gossip. Putting a bit on a horse. Scouting for a job. Boys ran up and down the streets carrying satchels and bundles or rode their big sit-up-and-beg delivery bikes through the traffic, whistling at the office girls, shouting insults one to the other – noise which became elements of its own symphony as certainly as Messiaen's birds were elements of his. It only stopped on Saturday afternoon and Sunday. By Sunday night it had started up again.

If cynics sitting at bars foretold the death of print, when radio and TV would deliver all the news on three or even four channels, their environment contradicted them. Fleet Street and her surroundings were dedicated to the printed word, to thousands of morning and evening daily newspapers published almost hourly; Sundays; weeklies; fortnightlies; monthlies; quarterlies; magazines; comics; pamphlets; textbooks; paperbacks on newsprint, pulp paper, art paper or vellum, printed by letterpress; offset; photogravure; fuzzy black and white; sepia; vibrant colour. Each publication had its individual scent and texture. I can recall every sound and smell, every glimpse and panorama of a world now utterly vanished.

MEMORY AND IMAGE

For me, linear time continues to be measured by the circulating seasons in St Giles's churchyard, where big chestnut trees drop bright, bronze leaves on gravestones in autumn or stand stark against the grey stone in winter and swell with blossoms in spring and summer. London is the smell of tar from hot streets. Liquorice. Melting vanilla. Sudden quiet falling over Clerkenwell Green on early-closing day. The reflecting rain on pavements, the wet-dog smell of piled snow, veined with mud and topped with dust in St James's, Piccadilly. Blooming spring in Hyde Park, the early daffodils, the scent of summer roses, sight of glinting conkers in autumn. These sights and smells carry me on uncontrollable moods, deep into vivid memory. That smell is a powerful drug, able to drag me back to specific times and places. Too painful. Not fair, that pain. I was a child of the innocent '60s and '70s, we thought we'd abolished misery, when it seemed so little effort was needed to build utopia.

When altruism wasn't silly. Or didn't cost you your life.

LONDON AFTER THE WAR

We had done so much for ourselves since the war. In Britain hunger had been abolished and health care was available to all. Manpower was what we needed. Unemployment was a thing of the past. Poverty was a lifestyle choice and everyone could have a free university education. Best-fed, healthiest, best-educated generation anyone ever knew! We were proud of that. The postwar Labour Party was the builder of our courageous new world. Labour leaders had their eyes on a visionary future. I always had some elder to give me tips, tell me books to read, explain how to make a radio or shoot a gun. The British Museum was ten minutes away. I spent hours there, looking at the ikons of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Strange, beast-headed deities for whom I felt an odd affection. There were film theatres of all kinds. Art galleries from Whitechapel to the Tate. Every day I was introduced to a new book, a painting, a film. At sixteen I was reading Huxley, Camus, Beckett, Firbank. The International Film Theatre showed Kurosawa, Bergman, Resnais, Truffaut and Cocteau as well as the likes of Fritz

Lang, René Clair and Max Ophüls. And then there was Brecht, Weill, *The Threepenny Opera*. Lotte Lenya live on stage at the Royal Court. Ionesco absurdist plays a short walk from home. Camus's *Caligula* at the Phoenix, Charing Cross Road. Merce Cunningham or the Royal Ballet at Sadler's Wells, just down the road from where we lived. There was nowhere better to be in the world than London. Society's last injustices were being taken care of. Slowly, not always graciously, we were giving up the Empire. Abortion- and homosexual-law reform were on their way. In my romantic imagining London was the centre of the cause of the White Lords of Law and I was at the centre of London. It was so good to be a Londoner in those days as we came bouncing up out of the damp, dull decade of the austerity '50s, when we all wore grey and were too cool to smile at the camera. And we had the reality of the Blitz, our defeat of Hitler, only recently behind us. The Gallery had remained open all through the war.

TRY YOUR LUCK

Long and narrow, marinated in the fumes of tobacco and gunpowder, stinking of sweat and damp, the Oxford Street Penny Arcade and Shooting Gallery was an old-fashioned game emporium with a selection of dowdy slot machines and noisy pinballs whose nicotine-stained chrome and gaudy lights promised a bit more than they delivered, and a couple of cranes in glass boxes where you operated a grab to try to pick up a toy, all bundled in there bright as liquorice allsorts. We had a Mystic Mary fortune-telling machine, whose paint was faded by the daily sun, a couple of 'dioramas' where you paid a penny to turn a handle and make a few creaky dolls go through their spasmodic imitations of life against some forgotten or unrecognisable historical drama browned by cigarette smoke on cracked linoleum.

AUNTIE ETHEL AND THE CARDS

For a while Mum's sickly eldest sister, Auntie Ethel, gave tarot readings in a curtained-off corner of The Gallery. She believed in what she

did. 'The trick is to put yourself in touch mentally with the person you're reading for,' she told me. 'It's something you do with your mind. Sort of telepathy. Empathy, really. It's only guessing, Mike, but I'd swear you're in touch with something. You tune them in. It's the way they sit or talk. You can either read them or you can't.' I got the hang of it. The readings would sometimes exhaust her. Shortly before she stopped she let me dress up in a bit of a costume with a veil and do a couple of readings on my own. People were impressed and grateful. I got a strange feeling off it. Then Auntie Ethel disappeared. Uncle Fred said she had serious cancer and didn't want anyone to see her. I think she died soon afterwards.

THE GALLERY

The shooting gallery itself was in semi-darkness at the back wall. Rows of cardboard ducks and deer cranked their shaky perpetual progress through a paper forest while men, with skinny cigarettes sending more smoke up to cling against the murky roof or spread, thick as enamel, across hardboard surrounds, leaned the elbows of their greasy demob suits on the well-rubbed oak and killed time banging at the birds with post-1914 BSA .22 rifles. It always surprised me how many of those blokes who were at Dunkirk and Normandy didn't seem comfortable without a rifle in their hands. Shooting back as they hadn't been able to do? A funny, distant look in their eyes. Was it some unresolved terror? Were they trying for what people these days call 'closure'? They played the slots with the same intensity. We had an ancient cast-iron post-office red *What the Butler Saw* machine and that was about it. Uncle Fred reckoned his granddad had been a successful travelling showman, putting on circuses and fairs all over the country. He had a few faded posters to prove it. My favourite was MOORCOCK'S TREASURY OF ANIMALS, actually a rather tame-looking menagerie. 'We go back, our people, to the time of the mummers,' Uncle Fred said. He was deeply and widely educated, my Uncle Fred. All from books, of course. His wasn't the last self-educated generation of his kind (mine was) but his might have been the best. He kept his wisdom and knowledge to himself, only answering when

asked. Except within the family, naturally. At work, his longest and most frequent response was 'Right you are, guv'nor.'

He took the *Daily Herald* every day and read the *New Statesman* from cover to cover every week. He gave me my first non-fiction books, like Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* or Wells's *Short History of the World*. He was an atheist but his mind wasn't closed. I read Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* from his library. All my inspiration comes from those books my Uncle Fred recommended. We'd discuss Shaw's *The Apple Cart* on the morning walk to the arcade but spoke in professional monosyllables all day at work. 'Cuppa?' 'Ta.' Or to a regular customer 'Chilly today, eh?' or whatever the weather happened to be.

MY MUM AND THE WELFARE STATE

My mum kept her wealth of common sense but she got a bit weirder as I grew up. Uncle Fred and Mr Ackermann tried to counsel me, told me not to feel guilty. Her upset was inevitable, they said, as she sensed me making my own life separate to hers. So I stayed away from home a bit longer, just for the peace. Sometimes I went home via the Westminster Reference Library where you sat and read without interruption because nobody was allowed to take books out. We were all serious readers, sitting on wooden chairs at rows of lecterns, turning the pages, united in mutual love of isolation.

I had been born into a world that had learned to value important things. The Tories didn't dare mess with that infrastructure. An air of equality and tranquillity filled my world. Class would still be with us for another generation but it was disappearing and the evidence was everywhere. Cheap travel. Cheap credit. Cheap and gentle little black-and-white comedies. Holidays abroad. As a result of our first great socialist government, we became the freest people in the world, if not the richest. Sometimes you had to make the choice between a nice meal or a trip to the West End cinema. The wealth was spread, the country became stronger and, bit by bit, better off. For a while I saw working-class London grow happier, better educated and more optimistic. Before they took it all away again.

UNCLE FRED'S WISDOM

Oxford Street these days, of course, is far too posh for a shabby little amusement arcade like my Uncle Fred's. His lease came up in 1958. There's a tourist shop there now. They pay a fortune for those leases. Mugs and T-shirts. Postcards and miniature Beefeaters. Union Jacks on everything. Red, white and blue bunting. Bags. Hats. Coppers' helmets. Red double-deckers. 'London,' as my cousin Denny always says, 'is ikon rich. And that makes *us* rich, Michael, my son.' They move thousands of little Beefeaters and queens on horseback a day, they turn over hundreds of thousands of pounds. Their turnover makes you feel sick. And crowded! Push and shove is the name of the game there now. Roll up, roll up! Can you blame me if I get nostalgic for my boyhood, when it was cheap to enjoy yourself and people said 'pardon' and 'sorry'?

'Years ago,' said my Uncle Fred as we walked home towards Brookgate one night when I still worked for him, 'we all liked to make money but we didn't feel anxious if we didn't make millions. We just wanted to nod along like everybody else. We thought in terms of equality and fairness. I'm not kidding, Mike. Of course there's always thieves and troublemakers, people who are predatory and live off the weak. The stock market depends on our getting into debt. All this cheap gelt, it's making us into addicts. It's a drug culture and we're mainlining money.'

He was talking about hire purchase. Pre-credit cards. A different way of getting the poor into debt, but I think he was right. It was nice when ordinary people could take a holiday in Spain, of course, but easy credit is what started the cultural rot. Tourism depends on lots of people everywhere with loads of disposable wealth, which means all kinds of changes go through a place that cultivates it. The real, messy, informative past disappears to be overlaid with bad fiction, with simplified folklore, easy answers. Memory needs to remain complex, debatable. Without those qualities it is mere nostalgic sentimentality. Commodified identity. Souls bought and sold.

'The more lucrative the story,' Uncle Fred said, 'the more it gives way to falsification. Barnum knew all about that.' Barnum and Marx were my Uncle Fred's twin saints, his Freud and Jung. 'My Jekyll and

Hind,' he'd joke. If he'd wanted to, Uncle Fred could have brought in a few props and called the arcade Ye Olde Charles Dickens Pennye Emporium or some such and done very well. But *Das Kapital*'s terrible Puritanism reined him back. When Fred's lease ran out he couldn't afford to renew it without borrowing, so he retired on a modest state pension ('Fair and square,' he always said. 'You gets back what you pays in'). But of course he also had his savings and his stash of sovereigns to sell when the rate was good and hard times came around. Like all sensible socialists, he hedged his bets in the capitalist world.

Uncle Fred gave me books he was enthusiastic about. His generation had grown up on the Fabians' popular paperbacks of politics, philosophy and history and the Thinker's Library. He had a shelf full of such stuff. Herbert Read's *What is Revolutionary Art?* was one of his favourites and Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul.* Various commentaries on the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita and the Avesta were among the spiritual studies Uncle Fred had read on myth, human belief and the supernatural in general. He was a secular humanist but he was curious. 'It's always worth knowing what makes people tick, Mike.' He'd read most of *Mein Kampf* by Hitler. 'If you know your enemy and can see your enemy, you can protect yourself against him. Or at least know when to run for it. Everything that monster did was in his book. You only had to read it. That's when I split with Stalin, when he signed that treaty with Hitler.' Uncle Fred, like most of his contemporaries, spoke in a tone of taken-for-granted scepticism you heard everywhere in those days, in almost all the papers, on the radio and in films. You heard it in the language of those who had been 'believers' before the war. That tone reflected the common assumption that religion was a thing of the past and it was now time to build a more rational world. The clergy was represented by dotty old Whitehall-farce vicars and unworldly curates. Only Hollywood made a buck or two from God. Religion and the corrupt romanticism surrounding much of that, and the discredited fascist creeds and their actions, had helped create the horrors of the past twenty years or so. The Church of England, which still turned up on Sunday BBC, and was effectively the conscience of Parliament, was associated with the 'caring' aspects of the paternalistic establishment. Nobody thought much about that. The church created colourful traditions, of course,

and probably we were none the worse for having them, but anyone who seriously believed in God as anything but a philosophical abstraction was sadly deluded. Even T.S. Eliot, the Church of England's big catch, wasn't sure Jesus had existed. It was left to romantics like me to ask what a rational world had got for us already if it wasn't Stalinism, Hitlerism and fascism. All of which promised a golden future but without much attention to detail. We would discover romance in a big way in the 1960s.

After Uncle Fred's lease ran out I got a couple of the better .22 rifles and some boxes of cartridges as souvenirs. He wouldn't let me keep Mystic Mary. She was sold off with the rest. He had a share in the Bucket o' Gold down in Leicester Square, which eventually became a rock-and-roll venue and where I opened with the reunited Deep Fix a few years later. Uncle Fred left six figures when he died not long after he retired. He was eighty-one. Left the lot to the Labour Party, for services rendered he said. The gold he divided amongst us the day before he popped off, singing 'The Red Flag' in his reedy old voice. Nobody but me joined in. 'Cowards!' he whispered, and was gone.