

## *Euclid Drew a Circle*

The Ferryman works as a lift operator these days. I met him just after checking in; old Phlegyas, dressed in a white shirt and tailcoat, and with a carnation in his buttonhole as orange as flame. He drew aside the latticework divide and gave me a friendly nod as I entered. A quick look at my key-card and we were heading up the eighth floor. I dug in my pocket for a bit of silver, but he put up his hand.

“Not necessary, Sah.”

He’s got a poster of the Decembrists on one wall; a shelf holding *Pride and Prejudice*, *White Teeth* and a collection of poems by Ted Hughes. It’s like he really lives here. It’s no life, being a forgotten god, though it wasn’t much different back in the days of Plato. One side of the Styx, other side of the Styx. Now it’s up and down, up and down. Wax on, wax off.

I’ve got a lunch date with Caroline in the hotel restaurant. I don’t mean date in the romantic sense; Caroline is Caroline, and I’ve never thought of her any other way. We chat a lot. There used to be a group of us but all the others have moved on – now it is just we two, drifting around each other like twin suns. The other guests think we’re an item, or, at least, we assume they do. We would, looking in from outside. Caroline says they should look closer: then they would see we’re just damaged goods.

Today, Caroline is wearing a light green flapper dress, set off with a pillbox hat-and-veil. It looks surprisingly good for what is effectively a fez for the It girls. She’s got thick black lashes, a cigarette in a matchstick-thin holder and lips like the juice from a raspberry.

“You smoke?” I ask.

She looks at me like a rock star. “I do today.”

The waiter brings our starters. Caroline has a tossed leaf salad, drizzled in one of many pretentious kinds of drizzle. From her dress, I suspect she will pick at it for a while without ever bringing a scrap of food near her mouth; it would fit in with today’s style of debutante-chic. I, with my doublet and hose, have rough-ground bread. I tear into it and crack teeth on the grit. Caroline pokes a lettuce leaf.

“Charlie Edwards has checked out.”

“Charlie? Really?” I look to Charlie’s habitual seat, and sure enough it’s occupied, but no Charlie. “Sure?”

“I asked the manager.”

“Oh. Who do you think that is, who’s taken his suite?”

“Don’t know?”

“An Assyrian prince? A fading starlet? A young man with ideas that will change the world?”

“Maybe.”

I set the bread down and lean forward. My voice lowers, though there’s so much noise in the restaurant there’s no point in doing so. “Are you alright?”

She pokes another bit of leaf. Comes dangerously close to eating it. “I’m fine. Just having a bad thinking day.”

The waiter returns for our food, performing a Venetian Switch with a pair of fortune cookies. I take one and break it open. “Old Euclid drew a circle,” I read. “That’s a fortune?”

“It’s a poem. Guy did it. What’s he called – Lindsay. Met him once up on sixth. Had a suite there for a while. It’s the one that goes... that goes... old Euclid drew a circle. That one.”

“How does it go after that?”

“Don’t remember. It’s good, though. There’s this kid and the moon. Memorable.”

“What’s in yours?”

She crushed it, took a peek. “Nothing interesting.”

I want to talk to you about history. Let me sum up the story so far: Caroline and I, along with a multitude of nameless others, are guests in a hotel. The Ferryman of Greek myth works as a lift operator here – this was introduced in the first paragraph, so you accept it a little more readily as just another part of the fantastic world I am creating for you. From this we can deduce two things: firstly, the appearance of a figure from Greek myth is a little odd, so you assume it’s likely to be significant, and that the world itself is a little bit offbeat. I suspect you are correct on this point. Secondly, the hotel has lift operators, so it’s not some weather-beaten cockroach-farm, but a building with firm pretensions. Inside these walls, it’s still the 1930s. There are probably drapes and faux-classical columns adorning the walls of the lobby. None of this modern sleekness – this is a hotel with Flounce. Or so you assume. This may not matter so much. The other point of note is the emergence of the poem. This is also a little odd, and its entrance just before the first section break has to be significant. It is, if you’re wondering, a rather wonderful piece of verse by Nicholas Vachal Lindsay.

Now: history.

I want to talk to you about history because this is all about who we are, where we are and where we are going, because these things are important. This wasn't intentional, this emergence of life. We are not predestined, we are not the chosen sons – we are nothing more than some joke of chemistry. Pre-Cambrian April Fools. I want to talk about who we are, and you can't tackle a subject like that without a bit of backdrop.

It started several hundred thousand years ago, on a Thursday, with two men named Fred and Barney. (As you can probably guess from the preceding paragraph, this is almost entirely a lie, but the period between two amino acids colliding and here contains little to no good dialogue and so will be omitted) (The two men in question were probably also not called Fred and Barney).

Fred and Barney were flint-knappers, and on that day when Fred knapped flint a burst of sparks leapt from the stone and fell on a crush of dry leaves. Fred and Barney looked on in amazement as the flames leapt and crackled, drawing life from the dead vegetation. Fred bent to touch the miracle, and jumped back crying as his hand was scalded. Barney ran, but not before grabbing Fred's magic flint. He demonstrated this new power to the tribe elders, who praised Barney as a demi-god. Fred, with his crippled hand, could no longer pull his weight and was cast out. He died of hunger two weeks later, so the greatest discovery in the history of mankind was rather less than great for him.

Thanks to Fred, we got going. Some will claim the wheel was the more important advance, but the wheel will just make jobs you could already do easier – it wouldn't kill disease in raw meat, or keep the cave warm on cold winter nights.

This permitted the second great event of history. Now we had fire we could set up home in any cave – we didn't need to stick to the easily defended slopes that held the heat of the day. One day, one of Barney's descendants decided he didn't want to find a new cave, and built his own on the hillside next to the spring. A few days later, Eddie Two-Sticks came walking by, and thought 'That's a good idea.' So he built his own cave next door. This is now referred to rather ponderously as 'The Beginning of Civilization.'

And this, after a few thousand years of love, sex, war, death, art, wine, treaties, thoughts, trade, plague, royalty, tragedy, embarrassment, lust, stories, songs, politics, truth, enlightenment, madness, profit, science, idiocy and sleep brings us to Euclid. He drew a circle, y'know.

I spend an evening in the hotel bar. I had hoped Caroline would be here, but she seems to be elsewhere tonight. There's a few groups sitting round who would probably be willing for me to drag up a chair, but to be honest I'm not feeling that sociable. I've found myself a corner table and a waitress who knows an endless variety of cocktails, and I let the place hum.

The waitress in question arrives back at my table, bringing with her a confection of red, purple and blue. An umbrella has skewered a glace cherry and bobs about on the surface like a lost duckling.

"Do you know a man named Lindsay?" I ask.

"Know plenty," she says, bending over the table and balancing her chin on bridged hands. "Got a particular one in mind, tiger?"

I pull over the glass and swill a mouthful across my tongue. I taste rum, gin and countless varieties of fake fruit drenched in sugar. "Some poet. Got a suite up on sixth."

The cute-as-peaches face takes on an expression of deep thought. "Yeah. I know one who used to be up there. He checked out a while ago."

"Oh. Okay. Thanks."

She unbends herself and struts to another table. I sit there poking what I believe to be a Cuban Sunset and wondering if there's likely to be any books of poetry hanging around the hotel.

I drink more of the cocktail and it sticks to my throat like honey. I decide that I've had enough of tonight and stand up, but I do this at precisely the same moment as a sudden earthquake that sends me skidding. I cling to the table and wait while the room slowly rights itself. No-one else seems surprised by the floor suddenly jerking. Not so much as spilled their drinks.

As I head for the door it comes to me that I barely recognise anyone here. Time was when I could name nine out of ten faces in this sad little gin shop; now all those faces have checked out. This Lindsay came and went and I never knew he was here.

I think maybe I've been here too long.

I think maybe I'm catching moroseness of Caroline. Her withdrawal seems to be catching. I'm tempted to march up to her suite and drag her to somewhere we can meet some alcohol, force a bit of sociability out of her, but I'm still feeling aftershocks from that quake and I don't fancy a long night.

I nod to the Ferryman as I enter the lift. He says 'Sah' and sets it in motion. This is the extent of our conversation.

As I enter my suite I see a note lying on my pillow, lamp-lit, crisp hotel-headed notepaper. I pick it up to find it covered in Caroline's swirling navy-blue hand.

Old Euclid drew a circle  
On a sand beach long ago  
He bounded and enclosed it  
With angles thus and so  
His set of solemn greybeards  
Talked and argued much  
Of arc and of circumference  
Diameter and such.  
A silent child stood by them  
From morning until noon  
Because they drew such charming  
Round pictures of the moon.

Love,  
Caroline

So, Euclid drew a circle. And what does this have to do with the discovery of fire and the beginning of civilisation? Well, not much, in the sense of one thing leading directly to another. Geometry would probably not have been discovered without either but there was an awful lot of vital stuff that I left out. I did not, for instance, mention the time when Euclid's mother downed an entire amphora of wine and declared herself open to absolutely anybody, which some would argue had rather more of a direct bearing on the matter.

Well, it didn't. Euclid, genius as he was, is not the point. Someone would have worked it out, sooner or later. That it happened to be him is a tribute to just how smart the man was, but had Momma Euclid been a bit more frigid it would have just have been someone else, a bit later. The point is the idea, an idea which is with hindsight earth-shatteringly simple, but takes a genius to think of because it requires you to look at the world in a whole new way. Once a Euclid or a Two-Sticks has made that first mental leap, the rest of the world can only wonder how it hadn't thought of it first.

These discoveries are important because they represent a new way of looking at things, and it's this kind of thing that keeps mankind moving. No caves where you want to live? Well, make your own damn cave. It is a charming picture of the moon, but add a few lines here, here and here, and you get the basis of a system that can describe the physical world. This ability to work at quirky angles, think strange thoughts and do some really stupid things is what separates us from, say, koalas.

Koalas are the archetypical specialists of the animal kingdom. They fill the same role that, in other continents, is taken by the sloth; but whereas the sloth will eat almost anything that can't run away fast enough (some commentators have suggested it had to be this catholic since almost anything can run faster than a sloth) the koala has developed a lifestyle based entirely on eucalyptus. It eats eucalyptus leaves, it lives in eucalyptus trees. It usually has Chlamydia, if only because eucalyptus is not contagious. Nothing else on the planet is adapted in this way – eating eucalyptus is, for anything else, a slow, tedious form of suicide. The koala has evolved its way into a comfortable little niche, and shows no signs of going anywhere.

So tell me, does this sound like a pleasant way to live? You probably think yes. Individually, most people share a mindset with koalas. We like this to be safe, familiar, with tomorrow following logically on from today.

The problem comes when our niches start to look a bit less safe. The Australian bush has a habit of burning every few years, and the eucalyptus trees go up like firecrackers. Where does this leave the koalas? Homeless, no food and, frequently, dead – it's hard escaping from those flames.

It is geometry, or the ability to think about geometry, that keeps the species moving. Show a box to enough people and eventually you'll find someone whose first instinct is to work outside it. Show a box to a group of koalas and all they will think about is whether or not there is eucalyptus inside. This kind of thinking stands between us and stagnation, and means we can survive when our eucalyptus burns.

And believe me, it does burn. Civilization may seem pretty solid, for all you reading it at your desk, in your bed, on the train to work. It seemed pretty solid to the Greeks, back in 550AD. The golden age of their civilization may have been hundreds of years earlier, before being absorbed and their legends claimed by the Romans, but Greece was still the cradle of world culture and the jewel of civilization, her monuments powerful and her legacy proud.

And all it took was some joker not clearing the rats from his grain shipment to bring the whole shining edifice tumbling down.

Today, I am a pirate: I wear a pirate's hat. Not a real pirate, of course; I am a romantic pirate, a swashbuckler, with curly hair, a frilly shirt and a sword that has never known the clash of blades. I tried being a real pirate once and didn't like it much. The lice in my beard bugged me all day, and the waiter served me biscuits that could hammer nails into concrete and a flagon of grog for dinner. I am, however, very fond of being a romantic pirate. The calf-high leather boots and flouncy velvet coat work very well on me.

I strut to the lift and push the call button. In the wall, machinery grumbles. The Ferryman rises into view like a sailor from a shipwreck, one hand on the lever.

"Sah," he says.

"Good 'morrow, sir!" I exclaim, clicking my heels. "How the Devil are you?"

"Still moving, Sah. Breakfast hall?"

"Indeed."

The lift moves like silk, it's amazing. The Ferryman is again wearing his tailcoat and buttonholed carnation. I think perhaps he has no other clothes. He dresses himself as rich as an English lord, but is this only because he has nothing else? Is he in fact a tramp in aristocrats' clothing?

"Did you ever meet Euclid?" I ask.

"I did, Sah," he says. "Back when I still held a paddle."

"I've been thinking about him," I say, "and that circle he drew."

The doors to the lift slide open; I'd never noticed it had stopped moving. I want a ceramic floor, something my boots can click on, a floor of tile and sound, but the corridor is covered in thick red carpet that grabs a your feet like quicksand. Even here, you can't have everything.

I go into the breakfast hall and sit down, waiting for Caroline. I am awash with the conversation of people I have never met, and smothered by the smell of warm bread and bacon. I switch it off, as much as I can. I want to work out what I am going to say to Caroline; I can feel the idea forming, but now it is just a half remembered dream about Euclid and koalas. I need her mind.

The waiter brings me ship's biscuits, but without the weevils.

A man approaches. New here, I can tell. He's wearing a suit and it's beautifully cut, just like he always wanted to own. That's the giveaway of a novice – no imagination.

The other giveaway is sitting in a seat which is clearly not yours.

"Pardon, good sir," I say, "but that chair belongs to a lady, and t'would be very ingracious of you to take it without asking."

"The lady doesn't appear to be using it," says he.

"That's no excuse for a lack of manners," say I. I start to think this cur may need to feel the flat of my sword.

"I'm not going to worry about my manners to your imaginary friend. Besides, this seat is mine."

"That seat, sir, belongs to the occupant of suite 6.25, and that, my friend, is not you."

He produces his key card, holds it between the tip of his index and middle fingers. "Would you care to make a small wager on that?"

Now that sends me reeling. I stagger upright staring in disbelief, and dear God do I feel sick. I grope and trip all the way to the Manager's office, only to find that he isn't there. The secretary directs me to the man lobby, where I find him standing with one hand on forehead, in the company of the Receptionist, a bell boy and a confused new guest.

"We have an infinite number of rooms in this place," the manager says. "How can we be full?"

"We've got an infinite number of rooms," the Receptionist said, with the air of one coming to the end of his patience, "but they're all occupied."

The new guest looked at the floor, and the Bell Boy put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

The Manager paces a couple of steps away, then spins on one heel. "I've got it! You –" he gestured at the Receptionist "–put out an announcement. Over the loudspeakers. I want all the guests to move to the next highest room number to the one they've got now. And you, you my young confused friend, will have room 1."

The Receptionist stares at him. "You do realise we're going to have to change everyone's key cards? This isn't practical."

"It's not meant to be practical, it's meant to be mathematics. Now get to it. And tell me," he turns to face me, as if he knew I was there all along, "what can I do for you?"

I explain about the scene at breakfast.

"Ah, yes," he says. "She checked out. Last night, I believe."

"Do you have any idea where she went?"

“Not my decision.” He smiles at me, the sympathetic, patronising, besuited git.

“Why did she go?” I ask. This question was not intended for the Manager, but he answers it anyway.

“No-one stays here forever. Have you spoken to the new chap in 6.25? He seemed a decent sort.”

I say, “No, no, I haven’t seen him yet,” and I head back to the lift. The Ferryman will be waiting; the only constant left. The Manager keeps smiling behind me, fixed and plastic, like he remembers the theory but little of the practice.

I met Caroline not long after I checked in; perhaps a week after. She was sitting at the breakfast table in small round sunglasses and a flop-brimmed hat and she said “So, you got the first clue where we are?” And now she’s gone.

As I return to the lift, I no longer feel like being a pirate. Maybe I will be a poet, filled with velvet melancholy. Maybe I will be a priest, and mourn for those who have passed before their time.

Maybe I will not bother.

The Ferryman doesn’t greet me as the lift doors open – I think he can tell when I don’t want to hear voices. Still, as we approached my floor, he says “Euclid drew no circle, Sah.”

“What?”

“Euclid. He didn’t draw no circle. The boy drew the circle. Euclid just saw it as he walked along the beach. Gave him an idea.”

I don’t know what to say to that. It means something, I can tell, something important, and I want to say something meaningful to show I have grasped that. Something that will take in the creation of ideas and the sweep of civilisation. Something that shows I have understood what he just said. But then the lift doors open on my floor, and I have to substitute “Oh.”

There’s a vague idea floating around that the collapse of the ancient world set humanity back one thousand years. It’s ridiculous, of course – turning the clocks back is impossible; not even a shipment of rat-infested grain and the blood-coughing, pus-soaked bubonic death that came with it can manage that. What it did manage was a lot of burnt eucalyptus. Saying it set us back is incorrect, but it did force us to change direction.

And this, I would now like to argue, was the best thing that ever happened to us. The ancient world had produced marvels of architecture and the arts, great feats of engineering and, most importantly, ideas. You know my favourite example: Euclid, and his circle. It doesn’t matter that it wasn’t his circle – he was inspired. The boy and Euclid looked at the same thing, and when one saw the moon, one saw a mathematical construct. This is called perspective, and when trying to understand anything on these scales it is important we have some.

For instance, the disease of 550AD killed an awful lot of people, and bubonic plague is not a pleasant way to go. But what would have happened if that grain shipment had been cleared, or sunk somewhere in the Adriatic? The ancient world had stalled. Euclid had been dead for six hundred years and his ideas were gathering dust. Socrates, Plato and Aristophanes were memories, and people pretended they were civilised by pointing out all the things their ancestors had done.

We could still be there. We had found ourselves a rut and we were sticking to it. Someone had to strike a match. That careless merchant, unwitting perpetrator of genocide, is a hero to all mankind.

A lot has happened since Euclid. A few people built empires and a few others tore them down. Wars have been waged to a fairly steady rhythm, borders have been redrawn weekly and, just when it looked like things were settling down, some funnyman suggested sailing west instead of east and what do you know, now we’ve got a whole new continent to do it on all over again. Move on a couple of hundred years and we’ve run through all the usual cycles of Pilgrims and pacification, but just when it looks like we’re developing a nice comfortable same old same old, what happens? Someone just *has* to watch their kettle boil over and think ‘hey, there’s an idea’. Next thing you know, we’ve got an industrial revolution tearing up the countryside and nothing will ever be the same, all over again.

So, why this compulsion to throw civilisation-size screwballs just when things are settling down? It’s because we’ve got to move, got to change. To remain standing is to stagnate, and to stagnate is to become extinct. We are a species which individually craves normalcy but as a whole realises it has to keep going, and so breeds enough cranks, madmen and lunatics to ensure it can do so.

The truest thing Sartre ever said was not written down in any of his books, but instead shouted at a waiter in Tuscany one Wednesday afternoon, when he said that “Life’s too short to drink bad wine.”

I’m not convinced that helps my argument, but it’s a nice fact, nevertheless.

I am alone now. I drift between the restaurant, the bar, aimless corridors lined with portals into other people’s lives. I force movement from my body with a cocktail of caffeine and alcohol, and I think about Caroline. Now she’s gone, it’s far easier to get into her head.

I go to see the Ferryman. Not as some one you meet between A and B, but... no, exactly like someone you meet between A and B. That's who he is. If you weren't going anywhere, you wouldn't see him at all.

The iron veil slides sideways. He is wearing tails again, of course, and a carnation the colour of a fresh-plucked cherry. I get in the list, and pause. Pat my pockets. "I don't have any silver."

"S'okay, Sah," he says. "These are modern times. I take MasterCard now."

His hand moves from the lever and the veil slides shut. His fingers hover over the buttons, one for up and one for down. I realise I have never before seen him use them.

We stand like this for some moments, me clasping sweaty palms and he letting his fingers float.

"So," I say, eventually, "where am I going?"

He shrugs. "Your choice."

"What's the difference?"

"Perspective."

"Oh," I say. "May I?"

He nods and clasps his hands behind his back. I shut my eyes, put out my hand, and lean forward.

And that's it. I'm not going to try and sum up the argument, since quite honestly even I'm not sure what I was going on about for most of it. Lost the plot when I started wittering about koalas. I did have a point, but these things get lost so easily. It's like Heisenberg said to me, one night when we got drunk together in the hotel bar: "Look, kid, it works like this: a man knows where he's going or he knows where he is, but there's not one man-jack alive who could ever tell you both, and that's the God-honest truth."