

# ***How Rapid is Rapid? How Quick is Quick?***

*By David Vickery*

Exactly five years and six months after Richard made his wish, it was granted.

Kavarian liked to make people's dreams come true, but not all at once.

That way religion lies.

It was a commonplace sort of wish, and like many such desires, negative in nature. Richard wished that his life was different. More interesting, certainly, but more importantly different, not recognising that he could change his life that day if he really wanted to.

But like most people, Richard didn't want what he wished for *that* much.

So he carried on. Each morning he walked to his work in the administrative department of an insurance company. Despite the entrance of revolving doors, he told himself he could hear the doors slamming shut as he walked over to the lifts. Each morning he sighed as he pulled open the little tray which held his pens and pencils, meticulously ordered. The windows, he noted once again, could not be opened. Was it like breathing at someone else's pace?

At lunchtime, the little office girls and boys clustered round an article written in *Cosmopolitan*. Looking over the huddle he read the title. *Your sex life is great – could it be better?* They laughed. He laughed also.

Some lunchtimes he lost himself in the local music store, buying the sounds of escape. He liked good intelligent modern music, the kind that doesn't get into the charts any more.

Only once there was some kind of mistake and when he got the bag back to the office there was a classical recording in amongst the others. Albinoni concertos. Richard played it all the same. It was good, but it wasn't *The Art of Noise*.

About three years after he'd made his wish, self-indulgently wrapped around a glass of wine in a darkened music-filled room, Richard suddenly decided he'd had enough. With a delicious sense of rebellion he turned left instead of right from his front door, jumped onto a train and spent the day at the coast. It gave him an illicit

pleasure to phone in to the office sick even though he had plenty of holiday time to spare, a feeling that he was in control of his life, even for just one day. It pleased him to think that he was out, free, while everyone else was breathing at somebody else's pace.

But the problem was, it couldn't last. Nobody was fooled. Everyone he saw seemed to sense it wasn't a permanent escape. And going back to work the next day, politely describing his symptoms and his recovery, just depressed him even more.

That gesture turned out to be the last rebellious act Richard made. After that, he carried on getting up, going to the office, sighing, looking around him, ploughing through the riveting world of insurance, and going home again. For another two and a half years.

The day that his wish was to be granted was like any other. He was conscious of the usual sense of heavy boredom hanging over him – and why not, since he'd put it there? He ate his cornflakes with a conspicuous lack of the *joie de vivre* that characterises people who eat cereals on television. There was almost no leaping out of bed singing, for instance. Then he dressed and picked up his briefcase. Opening the front door, it once again struck him how ridiculous the idea of combination locks on briefcases was. Who were these industrial spies desperate for such vital information? And how was the lock going to stop them?

Walking along the road to the office with the unique slammable revolving door, he followed his occasional habit of looking above street level to the architecture above. He had observed that office workers hardly ever looked up and he was proud of being an exception.

It was at this point that Kaverian intervened in Richard's life: and, no doubt because his gaze was elevated, not to say aloof, he failed to notice the car spinning off the road. When he did become aware of it, his muscles locked, but he felt no particular fear: more a sense of inevitability and an astonishing feeling of time being stretched out. The car seemed to have forever to hit him, and seemed to be taking all of it.

Then the car ploughed through the shop window, taking with it with hundred packaged holidays, two telephones and a desk. Richard, having been standing between the car and the window, was similarly what he would have described in his work as a write-off.

Richard felt the impact but no pain. At the moment the car hit he seemed catapulted out of his body. Then everything, from the wreckage to the scream of the bystanders, became ineffably *remote*. He swiftly passed above all such irrelevance, then almost immediately found himself in a twisting black corridor which made him think of the inside of an umbilical cord. He was being drawn to a soft, warm light so he surrendered and let himself be propelled along.

Next he was in a featureless zone, feeling comfortable and in no pain but outside of time. Outside of space too, if it came to that. He sat down.

“Stand up!” came a voice, harsh around the edges and yet somehow not annoyed. Richard scrambled up.

A flux, wavering in the indeterminate air, seemed to command his attention.

“What are you doing here, do you think?”

Richard considered. Obviously his life had ended, but he could feel no great sorrow for that. “I suppose you brought me here.”

There was a laugh from the flux. “That is a better answer than I anticipated, and just for that I won’t destroy you.”

There was a pause, one which Richard seemed called upon to fill. His immediate reaction was to say “Thank you,” but he realised in time the triteness of such a remark. Instead he said, “Are you God?”

The flux seemed surprised. “They call me Kaverian Four-Twenty. What made you think I might be God?”

“Various things I’d read about that tunnel I came through –”

“Oh, that!” laughed Kaverian. “No, that’s just something I use from time to time. It might be something of God’s. I really couldn’t say. I’m not interested in God. I’m only interested in me.”

Richard looked briefly around him but found nothing to meet his gaze. “Is there anything I can do for you?” he ventured.

“Oh, the politeness of the English!” said Kaverian. A hand emerged from the flux: spiny, dark-skinned and with long talons. Richard eyed it, but the intention was unmistakable. He took it gingerly.

“No, it’s more what I can do for you,” Kaverian continued, holding Richard’s hand firmly. Richard noticed it was neither warm nor cold.

“Five and a half years ago you expressed a wish. I wonder if you can remember what it was. No? I thought you wouldn’t. It was a wish that your life might be made different.”

“Ah,” stammered Richard. “Well, you know, everybody –”

“Not everybody, but many people, certainly. It occurred to me – since you were so obviously a self-opinionated boring little fart – that it might be fun to grant you your wish. So let’s get to it, shall we?”

Something in Richard, cowed as he was by the events and the self-assurance of Kaverian, rose up at this. Perhaps he realised it was the last opportunity to protest. His voice shaking, he said, “What gives you the right to play with people like this?”

“What else is there to play with?” answered Kaverian innocently.

An undefined period of time later, Kaverian and Richard stood upon the surface of a planet. Dull, lifeless rock was all around but it was difficult to see far because of the soupy atmosphere. Richard was aware of something enclosing him without confining him, creating an effective barrier between him and the noxious stuff outside. Kaverian seemed not to need any such aid, he noticed, although he couldn’t look at him for long even though he had now emerged fully from the flux.

“What about this?” Kaverian said. “Different enough for you?”

“I don’t think I –”

“Know much about biology? I mean microbiology, not birds and flowers.”

Richard shook his head unhappily. Kaverian seemed untroubled, though.

“What do they teach them in schools these days? Never mind, you’ll have plenty of time. If I were you, I’d start with these glucky little pools. Concentrate on metabolism first, it’s much easier. Well, goodbye.”

“Wait!” Richard wailed. Kaverian turned back.

“All right,” he relented. “Here’s a couple of clues. No more, mind, because I don’t want to give the game away or influence you unduly. Clue number one: cells can reproduce, but only molecules can replicate. You can introduce replication later on: smuggle it in using nucleic acids as cellular parasites. Tricky work introducing them, but anyone who can copy with reversionary bonuses must be up to it. Then you’re up and away.

“Clue two: this is reducing atmosphere. I like it, but I’m the first to admit that it’s a matter of taste. And, speaking of taste, no doubt you’ll be able to detect the enormous abundance of carbon dioxide in the air. A connoisseur like me can also pick up an aftertaste of free hydrogen. There’s no free nitrogen, although you can find it in the form of ammonium ions in the oceans. And oxygen is of course completely out. With ultraviolet radiation for an energy source, get some bacteria started, pump oxygen into the air, use it to bleach the atmosphere. Next step: life as you know it. You’ll find it’s not so bad a place when you get used to it.”

“Please,” said Richard, overwhelmed by his own inadequacy for the first time in his life, “What do you mean I’ll be able to detect carbon dioxide? I can’t detect anything.”

“Not now, perhaps, but you’ll evolve, won’t you? That’s what you people do best, I understand.”

“What do you mean?” cried Richard in anger and fear. “How can I evolve?”

“Well, as I say, time’s no object. Look, I’ve removed your biological needs and cut out everything harmful to you. You’ll be surprised how quickly things start moving.”

“But –”

“You’re procrastinating, Richard. Study. Meditate. Enter into your observations. I’ll drop in later and see how you’re getting on.”

And with that Kaverian faded away like the Cheshire Cat, except that his expression could not be described as a grin, a snarl or even ecstasy, but perhaps a combination of all three.

Fear, rage, despair and identity: all of these pass in time. When they had, Richard was bored. And boredom is the mother of invention in the long run, which was quite definitely where Richard was.

After he turned to the practical study of microbiology, time passed rapidly. Over the uncounted eons, certain faculties expanded, unusual powers developed. Thought and action increasingly became identical.

Kaverian dropped in from time to time, suggesting here, guiding there. Sometimes Richard ignored him, or pretended to; Kaverian took it all in good spirit. So it was that, another unmeasured period of time later, Kaverian emerged out of nothing to stand beside Richard once again. This time he had discarded his fiendish

appearance and was flamboyantly disguised as a nineteenth century gentleman complete with bathing costume, boater and improving book.

Richard looked up and smiled. Kaverian smiled back, then looked around him. They stood at the fringe of the shore. A warm sun beat comfortingly down. A gently pink surf crashed in on itself and a bracing breeze followed it in.

“You’ve done wonders here, Richard,” said Kaverian, slapping him on the back.

“Thanks,” said Richard modestly.

“Ah, you’re speaking to me this time.”

“Yes, sorry about that. Childish of me.”

Kaverian gestured gracefully. “Not at all. Quite understandable. Perhaps it was just as well anyway; my news last time could have depressed you.”

“News?”

“Earth. The old alma mater. Yes, it would have depressed you.”

“Nuclear war?”

“Heavens, no! Where have you been? Oh of course, you’ve been here, haven’t you. No, nuclear war never raised its ugly head, I’m happy to say, but a new set of viruses, playing as a very effective team, put paid to mankind on that planet.”

Richard sighed, unconcerned. “Just viruses? Hard to believe.”

Kaverian laughed. “Even viruses evolve, you know.”

“Yes, I can safely say I do know that now.” Richard straightened up and stretched, filling his lungs with fresh air.

“Nice sky, Richard, very nice. I like the ocean too. But pink?”

Richard looked a little uncomfortable. “Yes, sorry about that. Something to do with the bacteria I used – never got around to changing it.”

“Why bother? This isn’t Earth, you know, so why try to make it an exact copy?”

“True, I suppose. What’s the book?”

“Samuel Smiles. *Self-help*, you know. It’s really jolly good.”

Richard laughed. He gestured, and a squadron of fulmars dived lazily from the cliffs to the right and hovered above the sea ahead of them. He gestured again and the birds burst into distinctly unbirdlike song. Kaverian listened for a moment.

“Yes, I recognise that...Albinoni, Concerto for Oboe in D, yes? Splendid, Richard! Your taste in music has changed, I see. And you’ve added genetic material from some of the mimic species, eh?”

“That’s right. Plus a touch of humming bird DNA – for the hovering, you know.”

“I always knew you’d make out, Richard. No people, though?”

Richard looked away, across the pink sea. “I haven’t bothered yet. To be honest, I wasn’t entirely sure whether to or not. They seem to make such a mess of things. Besides, there’s so much genetic material to play with. What about salmon and homing pigeon? I’m working on that for my first biological spaceship.”

“Yes, it’s always fun.” Kaverian, clearly entering into his role, fixed his gaze on Richard over horn-rimmed spectacles. “But if I were you, I’d make some people. People are so interesting. Have a tribe or two. Several.”

“Mmmm, perhaps. It would keep the line going, I suppose, now that mankind is no more.”

“Wrong, Richard. Enough colonisation had already taken place to keep your species going. They’re across a fifth of the galaxy already.”

For the first time, something like dismay filled Richard’s face. “You mean they might come here? And ruin all this?”

Kaverian smiled. “Different galaxy. Different dimension, in fact. It’ll be a long time before they get here. If they ever do.”

“They haven’t worked out dimensions yet? After all this time?”

“Don’t be too hard on them, Richard; they haven’t had your advantages. Their problem is having too much to work with. Have you ever heard the story of the study they did back in your time on Earth? They took a class of students, gave them two planks and some rope, and told them to cross the room as quickly as possible without touching the floor. Sooner or later, each student worked out what to do: they tied a plank to each foot and shuffled across. Then they did the experiment again – but with one plank. This time they tied the plank to both feet and jumped across. More quickly.”

Richard smiled. “What about your race, Kaverian? Did they make mistakes?”

“We made all the mistakes there are to make, Richard. That’s why we’re experts now.”

“And where are they?”

“We’re all here. In me.”

Richard looked at the Victorian gentleman beside him with awe. “Impressive, even by your standards, Kavarian.”

Kavarian shrugged. “Not really. Just more portable. Anyway, I think I’ll leave you to it. I’ll drop in again before you know it.”

And with that he was gone. Richard smiled after him for a moment; then he dismissed the fulmars and turned back to his studies. Behind him, the sea-shell-pink waves continued to roll.

The next time Kavarian dropped in, Richard didn’t speak. Nor was he even there to the bustling hordes behind him working on the outskirts of the shining city. But on a higher wavelength, Richard and Kavarian exchanged information the equivalent of fourteen *Encyclopaedia Britannicas* in 2.7 seconds. Hearing that Earth science had finally invented dimensional drive ships, Richard smiled briefly. The smile manifested itself as an earthquake on an uninhabited isle 500 kilometres away.

Fortunately for Richard’s people, Kavarian had arrived with his warning in plenty of time. And with a few well-timed suggestions from the unseen, unheard, unguessed-at Richard, development on the planet began to take a new course. Previously merchants, fishermen and farmers, his people discovered a new interest, almost an obsession, with matter. In fifty years they were alchemists; in thirty more, engineers; and in another sixty, advanced physicists. And in the remaining thirty years left to them, they devised plans of defence.

Soon afterwards, the first Earth ship arrived. It disappeared without trace, but the people of the planet knew it was only a matter of time before it was followed up. And so it was. In fact, several Earth ships were lost in the planet’s atmosphere before a properly equipped battle fleet arrived, bristling with armament. The Earth empire (now based once more on the home planet after a lengthy stay on Vega III) was unused to opposition. The fleet soon found, however, what its scouts before had discovered, that Richard was even less used to it. The ships of his people had the disconcerting ability to be elsewhere when fired upon. The battle was over swiftly and the subsequent war took hardly longer.

So it was that when Kavarian came again he found Richard on the twentieth floor of his old office building on Earth. Kavarian’s twentieth-century business suit

was perfect, offset only by the cavalier's hat complete with feather which he doffed as he emerged from the lift.

"I like it!" he cried exuberantly. "Biological floors up to this one. I see you've kept this floor just as it was in your time."

"Mmmm?" Yes," said Richard. He had taken form (although not one his contemporaries would have recognised), and sat lounging against an exact copy of the manmade fibre chair once so common on Earth.

"What have you been up to lately? I'm dying to hear your news."

Richard opened the office window and looked out. There were no sounds of traffic, no office workers, no commuters in the streets. Where once the view had been choked with office blocks, roads and shops, now there was nothing to meet his eye except rolling hillsides and luxuriant foliage.

"Splendid! A first class job of tidying up," said Kaverian. Richard thanked him; but something preoccupied about his tone made Kaverian look at him sharply.

"Richard, you're not happy."

"I'm not, I'm afraid. Now I can have everything it's all too much."

Kaverian puzzled for a moment. "I don't understand. You can do anything you like and you're *still* not happy?"

Richard smiled wanly. "I know; it sounds crazy. But I don't think I want all this power. It's like there's nothing to strive for any more."

"But what's the alternative?"

"I've been thinking about that. I want to go back to being Richard again."

Kaverian looked aghast. "What, back to the year 1990, pens in drawers, sighing every morning, windows that don't open? You weren't happy, you know – or have you forgotten?"

Richard smiled again, his face reflecting an almost uncountable lifespan. "I think I've got it worked out. I'm going to marry a good woman, settle down and have children. The whole bourgeois bit."

"Marry? Who is this woman?"

"Who knows? But I'll find one. Then I'll engineer it so that we meet, and wipe my memory of all this. I think I can leave the rest to chance."

"But will she like you? You *were* an insufferable little –"

"I know," Richard laughed. "All right, I'll rig the odds in my favour to start with. After all, there's good in me. Look at what I've created."

Kaverian nodded glumly. "Perhaps you're right, Richard. Perhaps you are. Still, I'll miss dropping in on you."

"You could still do that," Richard pointed out. "Even though I won't know you're there."

"It'll take a long time to bring everything round the way it was," warned Kaverian. "Even for you, Richard."

"As you once said, that's something I've got plenty of," answered Richard. There and then in the office, the two creatures, equally alien to the people of Earth, shook hands.

It was a day like any other, with Richard setting out for work just as he did every morning. But somehow he felt different: a little less depressed than he'd been feeling of late. Even the raucous skid sounds from a car taking the corner too fast failed to irritate him as he headed for the familiar office. He had a feeling it was going to be a good day.