

SOLSTICE

An unusual invitation.

BY JOHN GILBEY

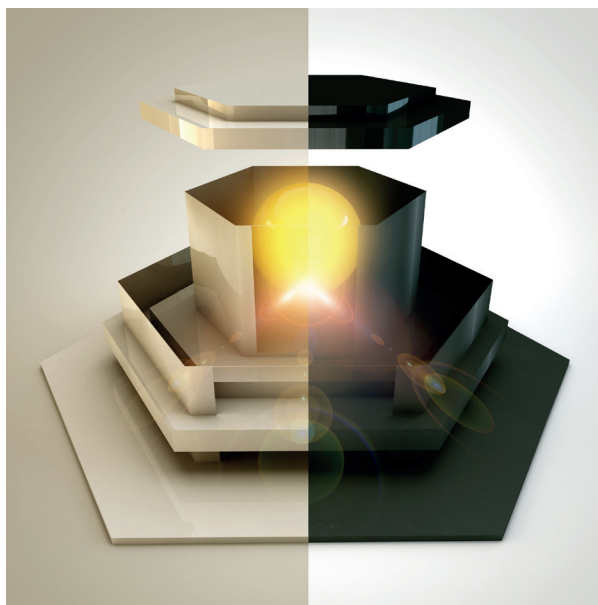
The letter on my desk wasn't from Human Resources, which was a huge relief, but from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor — inviting me to "The University of Rural England's Traditional Celebration of the Winter Solstice". I'd never heard of it, so assumed it must be one of those subtle traditions known only to the cognoscenti. Still, I was intrigued enough to e-mail my RSVP, pin the invitation to the shelf above my desk and blank out the evening of Friday 21 December on my calendar.

In my borrowed dinner suit, which smelt vaguely of mildew and old wardrobes, I presented myself at the anteroom of the Council Chamber just after 10 p.m.. The invitation was worryingly punctilious about timing — pointing out that "You will be admitted at 22:23 precisely", which a moment of study revealed was the local time of the solstice. At 22:22 the Head Porter appeared in his bowler-hatted splendour and unhitched the silken rope that barred access to the historic chamber. Then, as the clock ticked over to 22:23, he opened the double doors with a flourish and stepped aside.

The room was large, hexagonal — or maybe octagonal, it was difficult to judge — and walled with a mixture of oak panelling and huge mirrors. A capable team of hospitality folk circulated silently with trays of drinks and nibbles, both of which I took full advantage of. I wandered around munching, sipping and enjoying the music of the talented string quartet that was half-concealed behind a bank of festive shrubbery. The piece they were playing seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place it — so I sneaked a look at the cover of the cellist's part and made a note to get a copy.

As time passed, the crowd seemed to swell — or maybe it was just folk getting louder as the booze took effect. I was wondering whether to look for the door and make my escape when an old gentleman, bald and bearded, stopped beside me. "John, isn't it? I wondered if I might see you here. I'd very much like to discuss your work, if you have a moment." I decided that I did, and the next hour passed

in a blur of conversation as I poured out to my new friend all the torment of my



current research failures and laboratory catastrophes.

He nodded, enquired, suggested solutions and alternative approaches until I began to wonder why I hadn't met him before — and why he wasn't my supervisor. Then it was over, the doors were opened again and the staff were easing a cheerful, very relaxed group of academics back out of the room — a million reflections echoing our departure.

I deserved the hangover I woke up with the following morning, but after a few extra coffees I started on the changes to my project that the old gentleman had suggested during our conversation. At lunchtime I trotted over to the library to find a copy of the quartet music, but returned frustrated, confused yet oddly fascinated.

Roll forward a year and I'd ironed out the major problems with the protocol, and the pilot hardware would be ready for beamtime in the spring — but there were still important things I wanted to discuss with my mysterious mentor. Without any contact details I'd failed to track him down and assumed he must be some visiting dignitary — so I was delighted when I got my second invitation to the solstice party.

The ceremonials were the same, and we filed into the Council Chamber a little before four in the afternoon. This time I found the old gentleman almost straight away: he was watching the string quartet and seemed pleased to see me. He asked about my work, but I pointed to the players — and asked him if he knew the music. He smiled, and

looked into his glass for a moment. I pressed on.

"He only wrote six quartets, yet this claims to be number seven." He looked up at me, evaluating my expression. "Ah, a subtle point, but illustrative nonetheless — and this is your field, after all ..." He steered me round to look at the room, the other guests, the chandeliers reflected in the mirrors.

"Have you ever noticed that there are those people you only meet at parties? Yes? Well, perhaps you could say this is just an extreme example of that phenomenon. This chamber, how many entrances would you say it has?" With the doors I'd entered through shut, they were indistinguishable from the panelling — it was impossible to say.

"Each guest has only one door available to them, but there are many more here than might be assumed.

Perhaps it was the monks who first built this chamber that grasped this, or maybe it was other, older folk. The university has certainly understood the special nature of this nexus for several hundred years — and used it to good effect."

When I asked him which door he had arrived through he shook his head. "It's difficult for me to judge — it may just be the one you used, although that is vanishingly unlikely. A myriad streams flow through this spot, yet by some quirk of celestial — or quantum — mechanics, they cross only at the moment of the winter solstice. Some guests, like us, find that we can talk to those from other realities — whose experience is subtly different, like the music of the quartet. A few of us have elected to remain within this nexus, never returning to our own space — to collate and distribute the benefits of truly parallel thought. Which reminds me, there is something I'd like to ask you ..."

I tried to picture the infinite intellects spiralling through the virtual space of the chamber, exchanging their most profound thoughts with the curators of this place. I took a glass of red wine from a passing tray and, holding out my free hand to the old gentleman, I smiled for the first time in months.

"I accept ..." ■

John Gilbey writes from the academic seclusion of the University of Rural England, where they worry an awful lot about this sort of thing. He is still waiting for his invitation, and tweets as @John_Gilbey.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY