

Chapter One

Describing the peculiar circumstances of my upbringing, the formative characters, my early education, the departure from my maternal home, my schooling, my fellow pupils, my dissatisfactions and my dreams.

My name Pi is a poor pun. My mother claimed that I was but four years old when she first noticed my propensity to abstraction. Hence Pi. Apparently by that early age I had already developed the habit of standing on one leg and staring into space. It is a habit I still own. To others it appears that I am in a trance: few believe me, when I tell them, that at such times my thoughts are tumbling pell-mell over one another.

Pandy was my mother's name. Of my father I know little, save that he was an itinerant technician. From him, I assume, I have inherited my physical wanderlust. While, from my mother, I have acquired the urge to know more, and which forever prompts me to move to places new.

I suppose that, in this brief summary of my early life, I should start at the beginning.

I was conceived out of a liaison between my mother and father on an outstation in another corner of this galaxy. My first memories, though, are of the outstation which my mother made her own.

The outstation existed to monitor a distant quasar. As everyone should know quasars are not to be trusted as natural phenomena; so my earliest thinking was bound about with the idea that things are not always what they seem. And my mother, being head technician, overseeing the machines which monitored the quasar, in explaining to me her function, she emphasised to me the singular importance of our intelligence, and the paramountcy of innovation within that intelligence Machines cannot innovate: people can.

Added to that was my mother's passion for music. On her early wanderings she had begun a collection of old musical Instruments and ancient musical scores. If I were to picture my mother now it would be with a cello between her legs, or a violin tucked under her chin, or frowning red-faced over a clarinet. For my mother was not content to simply collect musical scores, she also played and recorded them — recording first one instrument then another. Her ultimate ambition was to play a symphony. However, when I left, she was still puffing and scraping at quintets.

My mother, of course, tried to pass her enthusiasm onto me. Every day I had to practise one instrument or another. By the time I was eight I was playing violin duos with her. But, although I became proficient in the playing of all my mother's instruments, I lacked her zest. The best my mother would say of my playing was that it was 'technically competent.' That too gave me pause for thought: why, when my mother and I played an identical piece, would my mother's playing be lyrical and mine only an accurate rendition? Thus, at an early age, I was given to pondering intangibles.

To do justice to this sketch of my early years I feel that I must also tell of the other two inhabitants of our outstation, both of whom owned similar enthusiasms to my mother and which they too tried to press on me.

One was a horticulturist whose ambition it was to cultivate a nutritious plant which could be grown without light. Although while I was there all that he managed to produce were various forms of stinking fungi. Even so I was often inveigled into helping him with his seed propagation, indexing and research.

Our other neighbour's interest was metallurgy. His was the only enthusiasm on that outstation which was intended to bring self-aggrandisement. Consequently he was the most short-tempered with his failures. His dream was to manufacture an alloy as malleable as an infant's modelling dough, which at the same time would be as hard as tungsten. The intention being to make the alloy malleable only from the inside: the benefits of such a metal being readily apparent to all of us who dwell in space. The benefit he hoped to gain from it was to be the owner of the sole patent, and so become wealthy. I was also induced into helping him with his experiments; most of which ended in the alloy being either as hard as tungsten or as malleable as dough. Never both. His only real achievement lay in the manufacture of bizarre ornaments.

Add to that my own conventional education and you can imagine in what a rarefied atmosphere I was raised. I hope too that you have the imagination to see how limited it was. And by the time I was ten I began to sense this lack. My teaching machines had taught me the variety of life, and I knew only three living beings.

By the time I was twelve I had persuaded my mother to let me go to school. At first opposed to my leaving her care, my mother soon came to see that it was for my own good. She saw that I needed a tutor, someone disinterested to guide me, to show me what was worth learning — a task which she did not think herself fitted to undertake. And she harkened back to her own childhood, in circumstances similar to mine, said that she too had longed for companions her own age. I hastened to correct her, for I had no inclination to be with those my own age. That could they teach me? They, whose ignorance would be equal to my own? No, what I wanted was to meet with those who knew more than I did, who knew what I did not, so that I might learn from them.

When the supply ship next called my mother delivered me up to the Captain. She left me with many an injunction to take care of myself — to be careful of my diet, to exercise regularly, to be diligent in my studies, to keep her posted of my progress. But only one promise did she exact of me — to practise my violin every morning. For she had decided that the violin was the instrument best suited to me. Apart from a change of clothes, and a few of my mother's recordings, the violin was the only luggage I had.

"In time Pi," she said, "you will become one with it. Promise me."

I readily and gladly promised, and my mother, weeping, left the ship. As the airlocks closed, and we began to move away from the outstation, which until that moment had encapsulated my whole life, the Captain kindly turned to me and, to lessen the sadness of departure, to turn my thoughts to the future, he said,

"Well Pi, you've just taken the first and hardest step of all your future journeys." So it was that I took the name Pi on my travels with me. Subsequently I have been known to all I have met as Pi Pandy.

The school was on a supply station. Every week a freighter arrived from, or left for, another part of the galaxy; with, occasionally, and much to my excitement, an intergalactic freighter stopping by. When not in school I invariably found myself loitering about the docking bays eavesdropping on the crews' conversations. Where they had come from, whence they were bound, with my imagination making up for my ignorance of those places. Or I listened, enchanted, to strange beings conversing among themselves in even stranger languages. While I was at school many of the crews came to know me — the lone boy who hung around the dock bays.

For, despite my mother's indulgent smile, I had already known myself well enough to have foreseen that I would not enjoy the company of those my own age. I shared none of their facile enthusiasms. Few seemed as hungry for knowledge as I. So long as they did enough to satisfy their tutors the majority were content, were far more interested in playing

games, in competing with one another in silly contests. While I was at that particular supply station free-fall diving through the gravityless centre was the fashion. A dangerous fashion. Several hit the sides of that long tunnel, suffered cuts and broken bones. It seemed that they had to artificially prove their daring, or their endurance. For, after the freefall diving, it then became the fashion to run around the rim of the station, the person who ran the most laps being acclaimed the winner.

To me this all seemed very foolish, as any excess must seem to a rational mind. The daily exercises I did in the privacy of my room were enough to maintain a healthy body. To take such exercises to extremes was injurious to health.

Nor did I share my fellow pupils interest in one another. On my mother's outstation everyone had been permitted their own idiosyncrasies, here they had to outshine. And that desire to outshine manifested itself in what, to me, was the most ludicrous of affectations.

On my mother's outstation the four of us had worn the simple tunics that all space dwellers wear — identical except for length and girth. Yet, on that supply station, as fashion dictated, they painted their tunics, cut pieces from them, stitched pleats into them or added bits to them. All it needed was for a crew to arrive from one of the cities with a slight alteration to their tunics and, within a week, all the tunics on the station were thus altered.

Indeed, on that small supply station, the adults were as childlike as the children. So competitive were they with their peers that they seemed to go perpetually in fear of being usurped. So it was that the majority of adults there unreasonably expected all children to be polite to them while they were not in the least polite to the children. Of all the inhabitants their sole ambition seemed to be to become envied by their peers. To that end they even daubed their faces.

I must confess that even I, when I had first arrived, not wishing to appear conspicuous, I too had tried to keep pace with those changing fashions. Although I had quickly relinquished all such attempts. For I had seen that, if I was a week ahead of fashion, then I was laughed at for a fool; and, if I fell a week behind fashion, then I was also laughed at for a fool. So I reverted to my simple unadorned tunic, which for a while became The Fashion; and so I was heralded as a trendsetter. When the fashion had passed I was told that I was out of date. In my weekly letter home I told my mother to tell the metallurgist that his fortune probably lay in selling his ornaments to the gullible inhabitants of supply stations.

As you will probably have gathered I was not popular with my fellow pupils. They mocked, not only my tunic, not only my refusal to take part in their games, but also my diligence in my studies and my faithful practise of my antiquated violin. They also took a puerile delight in making fun of my name — for a time I became ridiculously known as Twenty Two Sevenths.

I was not alone in being mocked by them. But those others who were like me, who were also assiduous in their studies; like me they did not seek the company of their fellows. The butt of many jokes we kept ourselves apart and aloof. So I made no friends on that supply station.

When I was fifteen I passed all the exams to qualify as a fully-fledged technician. But, although I was deemed to know the mechanics of machines and machine languages, I still felt that my learning had only just begun. I also knew that I could learn no more on that supply station, so I wrote to my mother asking if I could go to university.

She consented.

My tutor, a kind man, helped me to select a university. I wanted to study comparative technologies. The university that accepted me did so because I was able to play the violin — they had an orchestra. The university was in a city two galaxies distant. Where the supply station was at least a hundred times the size of our old outstation, I was told that the city was (at least!) a hundred times larger than the supply station.

My final weeks at the supply station passed in a fever of impatience. In her last letter to me my mother made me promise to send her recordings of the orchestra. Two days after I received that letter I boarded the intergalactic freighter, the Yilan.