

# **A Switch In Time**

A Novel  
by  
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To the doers of the world...

Make it so

(please)



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# Part One

## What

"...what are the criteria for the validity of any statement, of right and wrong, of true and false, of good and bad? There are none, independently of certain arbitrary points of reference, assumptions, or premises. And we can never be sure whether our arbitrary points of reference, assumptions, premises, or ends are actually valid."

Michael Wertheimer, *A Brief History of Psychology*





# 1

## The Earth Moves

No.

I'm sorry. I won't be going into sordid details. There won't be any car chases, either. No guns or bombs. No shootouts. No torture or harrowing feats of physical punishment or endurance. No dismemberment or gore. No teenage lesbian sex scenes. And no genitalia exploding in slow motion. Nothing more violent than bruised toes.

Remember—you were warned.

We had sex. That's all you need to know.

Call me old-fashioned, a prude, whatever—I've never had much time for descriptions of the mechanics (hydraulics?) of sex. They remind me too much of instruction manuals for DIY model planes. Tabs, slots, insertions, rotations... Titillating, stimulating, perhaps, but how relevant? So someone's good in bed, or pedestrian, easily amused, inventive, submissive, athletic, fond of strawberries, or yodels a medley of national anthems during climaxes? Would you buy a used utopia from them? Would it make any difference?

Anyway, Yvette and I did it. In our bedroom. A thunderstorm raging, animal instincts ageing.

A relevant detail: Yvette was on top. Compensating for my alleged tiredness (and doing an admirable job of it). Not that I hadn't been interested when she'd made her desires clear to me, I was just worried another chest pain would flare and let the cat out of the bag. For once, my thoughts were dominated by my heart, not my groin. And a long forgotten memory of a trashy tabloid headline reporting an ex-politician's death as occurring 'on the job'.

"Has it been a fortnight already?" I had said to Yvette, trying to replace the tabloid with my most reliable anti-arousal image: a protracted film clip seen years before of a gaunt prime minister and prim wife—his tie fluttering, her hair blowing—waving, endlessly waving dutifully at a jet taking an eternity to lift off (inside: the Queen, undoubtedly wearing the same grim bored expression, longing too to get away).

A mouth-corner smile from Yvette, clearly not amused.

*Spring fever?* I mused. After all our years together?!

An especially loud roll of thunder erupted, and rain finally fell, pounding on the roof and windows, soon drowning out all other sound. The storm, building for hours, now unleashed itself in a fury.

*An omen?* I wondered—but I could never have guessed to what extent.

The house blacked out. Common enough in storms. Annoying, but it made the lightning even more dazzling.

Yvette drew closer—but not from fear of the storm. With familiar assured means, she soon made it impossible for me to resurrect the image of those poor duty-bound

people, waving, waving. Instead, they saluted, and against my better judgement and claims of tiredness I gave up.

What followed was marred only by intermittent anxiety about my abilities to disguise the agony of a chest pain as a surge of ecstasy.

I'd never before experienced pains like those of the preceding few weeks. Always sudden, brief, and occurring unpredictably only after sudden activity, my doctor couldn't decide whether they were muscular or a sign of heart trouble.

There was enough circumstantial evidence for either option. Desk-bound, with no more regular exercise than paperweight-lifting, why not cramps on the rare occasions I did do anything vaguely strenuous, like running for a train? But then, why always in the chest? Were clogged arteries warning me of an impending heart attack? My father had the first of his seven attacks when he was 48—for me, less than a decade away.

Heart or muscle? I'd been fretting about the results of the tests ever since taking them but I only had a day to wait before I'd know (so I thought). I hadn't told Yvette—no point worrying her about what might be nothing. Especially when I was doing enough worrying for both of us. Even during...

When the inevitable overtook me, my arms were outstretched, grasping the steel frame of the bed's headboard. Yvette and I were not touching except in the obvious way, she riding frantically towards her own inevitability, the rain thrashing the windows with white noise, thunder bellowing, lightning flaring...

You know... the usual...

... then, in my last gasps, Yvette in the midst of hers: lightning bright enough to have been Hiroshima. Blinded for several seconds, thunderstruck even more than usual for that stage of proceedings, I was nevertheless aware of Yvette suddenly ceasing her motions.

It was as if she was not there at all—I felt no weight pressing against me, no tactile sensations of any kind, not even of the headboard I was gripping; and beneath me, a similar absence of feeling. Had my sense of touch been obliterated, confused by precedings?

Unable to see, feel or hear anything but the rain's roar, wind and thunder, the thought came to me that perhaps we'd been strenuous enough to bounce from the bed.

Then, gradually, a feeling—something beneath me: not carpet, and certainly not soft sheets—something rough, uneven, scratchy.

We couldn't have bounced out the window?!

Vision returned, snail-pace...

Yvette was nowhere in sight.

More to the point, I was no longer in bed, or even in my bedroom or house. I was alone, lying on my back on soft buoyant wet grass, my arms stretched behind my head but gripping nothing. And it was no longer the early hours of the night but day-time.

I sat up—abruptly, to say the least. A jittery scan of the surroundings...

I wasn't even on the lawn of my house.

I was on tall native grass in a place I didn't recognise: thick bushland full of towering trees and dense shrubs, devoid of people, houses, any sign of civilisation.

"Ooooookay," I said, eyes darting from side to side. "The earth moved, but..."

It was warm, despite skies full of storm clouds rapidly receding. All around me: signs of recent rainfall, though none was then falling. Occasional lightning.

To say I was mystified is about as much an understatement as suggesting a basketballer would be inconvenienced by having a leg amputated. Had I lurched into a dream? It didn't feel like one—it felt eerie but real.

I stood up in something of a panic, only to immediately feel worse. My head swam, and my entire body felt uncommonly tired, out of proportion to recent (relatively) leisurely activities.

I sank back down to my knees—absently noticing that I was not simply still naked but proudly so, anatomically speaking (though not for long).

I massaged my temples, perplexed, thinking: *I must be dreaming, after setting a new record for falling asleep after sex. I'm going to pay for this in the morning.*

Then I noticed the grass beneath me was marred by a narrow line that curved back on itself, its shape that of my own, arms outstretched. The grass within and around the line was tall and healthy—but along it, burnt almost to the ground.

It reminded me of a chalked outline in a murder case.

I started to panic.

Wild desperate paranoid explanations sprang to mind. Was I a victim of a high school or university initiation prank? Or were the perpetrators myopic buck's night celebrants who'd mistaken me for the groom? Had I been kidnapped and drugged, my tiredness an after effect? By aliens who'd wiped my memory? Perhaps I was simply hallucinating. Maybe someone had spiked the water supply, and not just me but the whole city was in a state of delirium. I'm just a bank manager, after all. Why single me out?

I even wondered if Yvette was behind it all, if one of her many interest groups was more sinister than appearances suggested and had persuaded or brainwashed her to play some grim joke on me for their own deluded reasons. Could she somehow have spiked our sex!?

Or had she suffered a similar fate?

Perhaps the worst idea: had a heart attack left me deliriously immersed in the phantasms of my own mind? Had I been blinded by a lightning flash as I thought, or was this a side effect of a massive coronary? Like a tunnel of light in near-death experiences. Hallucination by oxygen deprivation.

What the hell was going on?

Staying put was not going to answer that question, so I gradually quelled my panic by dwelling on the realisation that wherever I was, I could not be far from civilisation, and sooner or later I would find it—*then* I'd discover the true explanation for my baffling transportation. Or wake up. Whichever came first.

Summoning my energy, I again stood up, this time more cautiously. I scrutinised my surroundings, scanned a full circle, sought for a direction.

Distinctive white-barked trees were oddly familiar. One was like a gum outside our bedroom window, only taller, and with thicker limbs. Another was positioned relative to the first just like another at home, with a neat scar, too smooth to have occurred naturally but in the same spot as where I'd sawed off a dead branch on the tree at home. I was sure of it. But this tree too was taller than I remembered ours, and the scar was much older. And it had other branches missing.

Had I been dumped here deliberately, so the contradictory familiarity of these trees would heighten my confusion? Or was it just the sort of thing I could have expected from an hallucination? Or from exhaustion? Or maybe to me, all trees simply looked alike.

Endless thoughts, when the need was for action. Nothing hinted at an obvious direction, so I chose the one least likely to drain my depleted energies. Downhill.

"It could have been worse," I reassured myself. I was naked, but not cold. And the grass was thick and luxuriant enough for my soft feet not to greatly miss their habitual protection of shoes.

After a featureless, seemingly endless, gently sloping hundred yards or less, the bush suddenly ended at a narrow bitumen road, devoid of traffic, curving across the sloping ground. I could not see far in either direction, but it was not familiar.

Exhausted, dazed, and disoriented, I took to the road. Again, downhill.

The next hour or so is a bit blurred. The road curved back and forth, with no streets crossing it, and I kept walking, slowly, fighting weariness. Several times when briefly moving uphill, chest pains struck. Mercifully, they passed quickly, but they did nothing to help my state of mind. About the only other thing I remember is my hands cramping from being held so long in the same position—over my crotch.

At no stage did I see a car or other vehicle, nor people, not even a farmhouse or power line. Just thick bush on either side of the road. And a profusion of wildlife: mobs of grazing kangaroos; occasional wallabies and echidnas; a dozen or more varieties of snake and lizard; uncountable species of birds, from tiny blue wrens to wedge-tailed eagles; even koalas and one small herd of emus. And surprisingly close to the road but too big to be anything else, several wombat burrows.

"I must be a long way from home," I decided. I'd seen many of these creatures near our house at one time or another, but they were rare sights, and never in such numbers. I couldn't think where so much wildlife might be found. Even the more distant national parks I'd visited hadn't seemed so abundant.

I found it threatening, and my apprehension and sense of dislocation increased—especially when I almost stepped on one large black snake as it suddenly darted onto the road, before slithering back as soon as it saw me. I hate snakes.

The terrain did not alter until the road crossed a creek with steep banks, clear flowing waters, and frog choruses. Thirsty, as well as tired, I stopped to drink and catch my breath. It hadn't rained since I'd started my trek, but the light was dimming as another thunderstorm built, deep rumbling thunder and dazzling lightning bolts gradually drawing near.

I stretched out on the grass adjacent to the creek, and found myself gazing at a nearby hilltop, again vaguely familiar. It had an odd shape, something like an ancient Mayan truncated pyramid. Its very flat broad top was covered in thick tall gum trees. Without the trees, I'd have sworn it was a hilltop a few kilometres from home—also not far from a creek, though one more often dry than not, and dirty and impoverished despite Yvette's and others' efforts to re-vegetate its banks.

A sharp splash in the creek prompted me to turn in time to see a platypus gliding gracefully near the far bank. "Definitely not the same creek," I said. Just another coincidence, like the trees I first saw. Or some side effect of the drugs I'd been slipped.

I resumed my walk, worried that if I rested too long, I might fall asleep. But I'd barely covered any distance when my tiredness grew extreme and I indeed found it hard to stay awake. The mounting thunderstorm began to spill its rain, in a handful of large drops. "Not a favourable development," I muttered, before lurching at the shock of the first cold drop hitting my bare back. The ordeal mounted—but my attention was diverted.

From where I stood, the road now stretched straight in front of me for some distance, and through the increasingly heavy rain, the dim light, and the blinding lightning, I could see, perhaps a kilometre away, a vehicle of some sort, approaching. I knew I could not expect to be seen from so far away, yet I could not resist waving my arms and jumping in the air, trying to catch the driver's attention, in the process gradually growing used to the shock of the rain's coldness on my skin. Closer the vehicle came, too far away still for me to detect any details other than that it was a car of some description, with an unusual deep violet colour.

Just when I thought it was definitely close enough for its driver to see me, I suddenly remembered I was naked. Still uncomfortable about this, and also abruptly aware the car might have people inside responsible for my situation and perhaps ready to make it worse, I darted off to the side of the road and crouched behind a thick bush. I peered between the bush's branches, but my view was hampered by the dense vegetation, the dim light, the pouring rain now draining constantly through my hair into my eyes, and the glare of occasional lightning bursts.

Without a sound, the car stopped almost directly in front of me, mere metres away, its middle portion dimly visible between a narrow gap in the bushes, the rest hidden. I grew even more unsettled—the thunder was loud but I thought I should have heard some engine noise. And try as I might, I could not see inside the tinted windows.

The driver's door opened and a tall figure left the car, its build too burly to be anything but that of a male. His back to me the whole time, he hurriedly put on a voluminous raincoat, and placed its bulky obscuring hood over his head. He extracted something small and rectangular from a coat pocket and tried to shelter it from the rain by bending over it. He watched it studiously, pointing it first away from me, then gradually swinging it round to point directly at me—even though the bush I was hiding behind must have obscured me completely from his sight. He moved forward, out of my view briefly as he went round the car bonnet, then approached, a small waterfall tumbling over his hood. When he stopped barely a metre from me, I could still not see his face, but I knew he was looking straight at me.

"There you are at last," he said in an unusually deep voice, with a slight but quirky accent. "Are you all right?"

If his words implied that he knew me, indeed that he was expecting to find me, then I did not recognise his voice. I didn't reply. Instead, I remained motionless and wary, trying to study him through the bushes.

"What happened to your clothes?" he said, pocketing his rectangular instrument.

Still silent, I moved the bush's branches in a mostly futile attempt to better hide myself.

"Well?" he said. "Are you coming with me?"

I hesitated. I was not just uncomfortable about being naked, but unsure whether to trust him.

"You prefer to just stay here in the rain do you?" he said. "Come on. I think I have some sort of explanation."

I was too tempted by this—and surprised—to resist. Abruptly, I stood upright, but was overcome by a wave of giddiness. More exhausted than ever, I gripped my head, staggered a step around the bush towards the stranger, then stopped aghast.

A particularly intense lightning flash behind me lit up the stranger's face, allowing me to see it for the first time.

It was the face of a scaly horned demon.

Fresh horror clambered feverishly onto the back of my exhaustion and disorientation, and they tumbled together in a heap. I managed to turn to flee, but probably didn't take even one step. Instead, as a massive burst of thunder erupted, I felt the now familiar pain in my chest strike without warning, and much more intensely than usual.

With a vague sense of falling, darkness overwhelmed me.

## 2

# Mistaken Identity

In the darkness, an indeterminate time later: a distant, familiar, high-pitched screech, ever louder. I struggled to activate other senses, but had only the dimmest impression of being warm and comfortable.

Then, over the screech, a voice: "Are you going to turn that off or not?"

A female voice... Yvette's voice.

My eyes opened. I was lying in our bed, my arm around her, snuggled close, she facing away from me, her face burrowed into a pillow. Impeded by curtains, daylight clamoured for entry.

The high-pitched screech was my bedside alarm's. Abruptly, I sat up and turned it off.

The welcome familiar sight of our bedroom evoked a loud sigh of relief. It had been a dream.

"Judging by that noise," came Yvette's voice, partly muffled by her pillow, "you slept well."

I looked down on her still form, then leant over to kiss the nape of her neck, elated. "Not exactly," I said.

"O," she said, stretching. "Bad dreams?" She turned to face me.

On the verge of responding, I froze: now facing me fully for the first time, Yvette's face was not her own but that of a scaly horned demon.

I lurched out of bed away from her—or it.

The next instant, I was back in bed, sitting bolt upright, the demon nowhere in sight.

Frantic scanning of the room confirmed the creature was not there, but also made me realise I wasn't in my bedroom—I was alone in another, one I'd never seen before, dimly lit, compact, sparsely furnished.

Disorientation... belated realisation...

How much of what preceded the episode with Yvette was also a dream, I was not willing to guess, yet I could not shake the feeling that another demon was lurking—nearby.

A mild dull throbbing on one side of my head eked into awareness. Probing behind my right ear, my fingertips found a small but sensitive lump. *Into the frying pan*, I thought. Had I been clubbed the moment my chest pain immobilised me? What was I doing here? Where, for that matter, was here?

Cautiously, I left the bed, moved toward the door. Almost at once, a figure in the gloom approached.

In shock, I halted. As did the figure.

We gazed fixedly at each other.

Sudden embarrassed relief flooded me when I realised the dim shape was none other than my own reflection staring back at me from a floor-length mirror in the

central panel of an old-fashioned dark-grained wardrobe occupying almost the full length of one of the room's mud-brick walls.

Wanting more light, I moved to the window and peered between the dark curtains. I squinted as bright daylight flooded my eyes.

Outside: a dense garden with native shrubs and small trees a short distance from the room, vegetable plots beyond them stretching to a distant row of screening bushes. Beyond that: the tops of tall native eucalypts. The sky: a rich blue devoid of clouds, with no sign of recent storms.

How long had I been unconscious?

Long enough for my bladder to be close to bursting.

I approached the door again, and discovered beside it neatly laid out clothes atop a plain wooden chair. Still naked, I could not help but wonder if they were intended for me to wear. I inspected them—they were about my size, but odd. None had any brand insignia except on washing instruction labels, all of them unfamiliar. The maroon shirt had a soft collar, wider than any I'd seen, and buttons made of an eye-catching material which reminded me of quartz. The dark green trousers seemed to be made of coarse wool. The shoes were clearly leather, but slip-ons, and with pointier toes than anything I'd seen since my earliest memories of my father's collection. And the well-worn and heavily patched woollen jumper looked like a refugee from a child's kaleidoscope, with more colours than could be counted and no discernible pattern. I'd never had much dress sense but this combination struck me as deranged.

With the alternative being naked, I chose deranged. The clothes were a neat fit, but looked every bit as ridiculous on me as I expected. The person who had selected them, I decided—gazing dubiously at my reflection—could not be a woman. Perhaps a vision-impaired clown... who'd skipped his medication... while on a bender.

My bladder compelled me to abandon these thoughts. I grasped the door handle—an unusual, almost square, wooden type—and turned it.

Then I hesitated. Is this such a wise move? What if I'm in the hands of the demon? Or someone else with nefarious purposes? Should I simply walk into their arms in meek surrender?

I left the door closed and moved to the window. It had no lock, only a fly-screen I easily and silently removed. I opened the window and started clambering over its metal frame. But one leg out, the other in, my trousers hooked onto something.

I tried to free them, only to hear footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. More feverish attempts failed to explicate my trousers, as a gentle knock at the door sounded, and was soon repeated. Straddled across the window frame, fidgeting frantically, I watched helplessly as the door opened.

A man—not some denizen of hell—took one step into the room, saw me and stopped. No more than thirty years old, he was tall and muscular, with piercing grey eyes. Brutally short eyebrows and lashes matched the conciseness of his haircut. His clothes were more conventional than those I wore, and far more subdued in colour.

"Are you so desperate for fresh air?" he asked, softly, his accent similar to the demon's though his voice not as deep. He strolled into the room, smiling, casual. If he intended it to be reassuring, it wasn't working. "I thought I heard you rustling about. How are you feeling?"

I didn't know what to say. Physically, I felt fine, apart from the throbbing behind my ear. I was no longer tired. But I was disoriented and confused, and not sure if



this person could be trusted. Or if I wasn't again in some dream, with him about to turn into another demon. I groped for words, but only odd noises came out.

Was it concern I saw in the man's expression? Or its masque? "Are you all right, Ernest?" he said.

I performed a classic double take. Initially thinking to answer the question, I was suddenly hit by the significance of his last word, and blurted it out myself: "Ernest?!"

It was his turn to struggle for a reply.

Hesitancy vanished as I forcefully defended my identity. "Steven," I said, redundantly pointing to myself. "My name is Steven."

"You don't say," he said, lightly but with a distinctly disbelieving tone. "How come you've always let me call you 'Ernest'?"

"But we've never met before," I objected, my disorientation and confusion steadily increasing. My need to urinate also prompted much fidgeting, atop the window frame.

"Who are you kidding?" he retorted, a fresh smile bursting across his face. "How could you forget *me*?"

Mutually stupefied moments later, he must have decided I *had* forgotten him. His smile vanished, and he pointed at himself. "Wilbur. Remember?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "I've never met you. How can you say you know me?" I felt on a knife edge, ready to panic and crumble.

Perhaps recognising my parlous state, he became cautious and conciliatory. "Why don't you come down from the window? We can move to the living room and have a cup of tea. Clear your head. After all, you've been through quite a bit."

That set me going. "You know? How? *What* has been happening to me? Tell me."

"All in good time," he said, soothingly. "First let's move to the living room and get more comfortable, eh?" Smiling cautiously, he moved sideways and beckoned to the door with an outspread arm. Despite my state, I was momentarily distracted by an unusual, ornate, golden bracelet dangling from his wrist.

The possibility of an explanation of what had happened to me whetted my curiosity, yet still I felt wary of this 'Wilbur'—*if* that was his real name. For all I knew, he could have been part of a larger masquerade meant to confuse me further. If so, it was succeeding admirably.

Still, there was no better option presenting itself. And the need to relieve myself was pressing. So I decided to accept his offer.

I swung my leg back from outside the window, and stepped away from it—only to belatedly realise that the motion must have somehow achieved effortlessly what my struggles had been unable to accomplish: the trousers were no longer attached to the frame.

Wilbur led me through a short hallway towards a large room. His gaze never left me, but he said nothing.

I noticed several other doors in the hallway, one of them to a room clearly small enough that it had to be a toilet—I pushed it open hurriedly and rushed in, muttering, "Be with you in a minute." (Depictions and descriptions of sex abound in the media, often justified because it's a natural part of life, yet other equally natural bodily functions receive no such attention. Greater consistency would lead to the event which followed being described in a similar style, perhaps something like: Frantically, I unzipped and extracted my feverish organ. I didn't think twice about it, I just pointed it at the bowl and let nature take over. Almost at once, a rush of

golden liquid erupted, crashing onto the porcelain with animal violence. The sensation of my fingertips gently grasping and directing my manhood was electric. A soft moan left my lips, unbidden, as relief surged through me...)

Even with everything else crowding my mind, including that unique sense of liberation that comes with the emptying of a bursting bladder, peculiarities of the toilet took my attention: there was no water in the bowl which had a tilting lid at its bottom, the cistern was no more than a tenth normal size, and the flush lasted only a second or two—it reminded me of some outdoor toilets I had used, only more sanitary. But I did not dwell on it.

Wilbur was on the kitchen side of a wide bench when I found him, setting up cups. I kept my distance, in the adjoining lounge.

"Why don't you sit down while I prepare your tea?" he said, beckoning to a large sofa.

"Could you make mine a coffee," I said, making no move to sit. "I don't drink tea."

A lingering surprised look gave way to a nod. "Of course. How do you like it?"

"I thought you said you knew me," I probed.

"I do."

"But not so well that you've ever made me coffee before?"

"You've never wanted one before, Ernest. You've always drunk tea."

"Steven. Remember? No, apparently you don't or else you'd know I don't like tea. Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"When we're seated and comfortable. Please be patient." A short pause and an ostensibly benevolent gaze later, "Now, how do you prefer your coffee?"

I told him. He prepared our drinks, while I roamed the room: a large bright central space dominated by wide floor-length windows on two sides. One set of windows overlooked the back garden and adjoined a narrow verandah with timber decking, three cane chairs, a small low wooden table, and a pergola covered by a concise, very abundant grapevine. Beyond the other set of windows, which let in most of the room's light, was a line of dense screening shrubs about three metres high. Of the adjoining rooms, the door of only one was open. Through it I could see a neat desk, filing cabinet, and a narrow high bench covered in white cloth. Feigning nonchalance, I wandered closer and looked in. Near the desk was a stethoscope, a blood pressure meter, and other medical equipment, including several unfamiliar electronic gadgets. A diploma hung on the wall, the recipient's name emblazoned boldly: Wilbur Edmonds.

*That explains it*, I thought. He was a doctor. No wonder my sense of conspiracy.

But if this was a private practice in his own home, how strange the room was not more isolated. Patients would need to move through the living room to reach his office. And where was reception? Or the receptionist for that matter? My mind abuzz with questions, I distractedly put my hand to the lump behind my ear and rubbed it.

"Is that lump bothering you, Ernest?" said Wilbur, filling a bright silver kettle with water.

"Steven," I shot back with irritation.

He looked at me, blank-faced, before turning off the tap. He put the cord-free kettle on the bench, and pressed a button near its base. A tiny light lit up on its side.

"Is it bothering you?" said Wilbur in the same calm voice as before.

"It hurts," I said. "A little. If that's what you mean."

"There's no fracture of the skull, but you'll probably be a little sore for a day or two until the swelling reduces. Best if you take it easy for a while, to minimise the effects of any concussion."

That took me by surprise. "Do I have concussion?"

"It'd be consistent with your injury. Although amnesia wasn't expected."

"Amnesia!?"

He gave me another of his lingering looks. "You don't know your name. And you've forgotten me. Sure sounds like amnesia."

"I'd like a second opinion on that." He seemed a little taken aback by the remark—had I offended his professional pride? Wondering if this was a common event for him given his relative youth and what must have been limited medical experience, I surprised myself by trying to ease his discomfort. "Nothing personal. For all I know you're the best doctor in the world, but I know my memories are real."

Wilbur's expression grew more ambiguous. A moment's hesitation later: "Of course a second opinion can be arranged if that's what you want. But I can see no other explanation for your loss of memory."

"Look," I said, perhaps more loudly than was warranted. "I don't know what this is all about, but I do *not* have amnesia. My name is Steven Stone, and I *do not know you*."

Another lingering look but no words.

I turned away from him in frustration, my glance falling on an object plugged into a wall socket—it looked like a phone recharger. Inspiration struck. I could kill two birds with one stone by phoning Yvette: not only could I stop her from needless worry by telling her what had happened, and that I was at least in one piece, she could confirm my identity to Wilbur.

"Can I use your phone?" I said, my voice suddenly enthusiastic.

"Phone?" he said, obviously surprised, then suddenly sure. "O, you mean... of course."

He put his hand in his shirt pocket, extracted something, and passed it to me. It was small and rectangular like most phones, not as slim as most and with unusually precise square edges. It also had no brand name or model number, nothing visible at all, a completely black object. The only thing that distinguished it from being a smaller version of the monolith from *2001 A Space Odyssey* was a small socket at one end—for recharging presumably—and a slight difference in texture distinguishing front from back. Seeing nothing to press to activate it, I turned it over and around, struggling to figure out how to use it. I tapped its front, but it stayed blank. "How do I...?"

Wilbur held out his hand, with a quizzical but concerned expression, and I passed the "phone" to him. He took it, tapped the *back* of it lightly with a finger, and returned it, watching me studiously the whole time.

The phone's screen now alight, I could see several icons, one of which was an old fashioned handset. I tapped it and a number pad appeared under an address book icon. I tapped in my home number, but when it rang through, all I heard was an auto-message suggesting there was no such number and that I should check it before trying again. Ignoring the advice, I tapped the same familiar number, more carefully, a second time. The result was the same.

"Is there an area code here?" I asked.

Wilbur's quizzical expression was almost answer in itself. "Area code?"

I stared at him in disbelief. "Never mind," I said angrily. "Do you at least know what number I dial for information?"

The number he gave was not only unfamiliar but also had more digits than any phone number I'd ever seen. And the voice that answered was digital. At the prompts, I provided Yvette's name and our address, but the response was not what I expected. "There are no records of that name at the address given." I tried again with my own name, and got the same result. I tried a third time opting to not specify an address, but was equally puzzled by the results. There were two records in the system for Yvette Stone, both with suburb or town names I'd never heard before: what sounded like Wunsa Pond and Beedale.

I handed the phone back to Wilbur, confused beyond imagining.

"Perhaps we should take this on the verandah," he said, indicating two steaming cups. "It's perfect weather for it."

"Sure," I muttered, relieved to have a distraction. "Whatever."

We walked together to the verandah, sat down on the cane chairs, and drank. Judging by the shadows and temperature, it was early afternoon.

Confused as I was, I could not help admiring the view from the porch. In the background were nearby wooded hills, about all I could see beyond the perimeters of the yard other than occasional tall eucalypt trees. I wasn't sure but I thought the screening hedge at the far end of the yard had a discontinuity, a section at one corner where it ended and re-started further out.

My attention was soon taken by the garden's abundance of spring colour. Birds chirped merrily all around, flitting into view to sip nectar from a profusion of large native flowers giving off delicate familiar scents. Insects hovered, bees buzzed, flies pestered. It almost seemed like home, but I was not in a state that permitted me to relax and enjoy it for more than a few distracted moments.

Perhaps the coffee cleared my head though, because after several sips, I suddenly realised, with considerable surprise, that I hadn't so far thought of asking the obvious question. "Where am I anyway?"

"My name's not *Any*way," replied Wilbur, straight-faced. When he saw me frown and narrow my eyes as response, he continued with obvious discomfort. "Just trying to relieve the tension with a little joke."

"I'd like a second opinion on that too," I replied sourly.

He showed no sign of offence, merely took another sip of tea before answering. "I suppose even if you don't remember this place, you must have deduced it's where I live."

"Which is where exactly? What city?"

"Chord, of course."

My expression must have reflected my puzzlement—soon he repeated the name.

"Chord. Jibilee locality."

"Locality?"

"Yes, locality SW9, Jibilee."

This made no sense. I'd never heard of Jibilee or Chord. Or for that matter of localities. We had shires and towns and cities, local government electorates had wards, and churches had parishes, but what the hell was a locality? "Ok, let's try it from another angle. This is Australia, right."

His eyes widened, clearly surprised by the question. But just when I thought he was going to say otherwise, he said, "Yes. Of course it is."

In other circumstances, this would have been the most unremarkable piece of information imaginable, but hearing it then and there I almost breathed a sigh of relief. I pushed on. "Victoria?"

His surprise mounted. "Dianne's daughter? What about her?"

"Not funny," I moaned. "Victoria! The smallest mainland state. South-east corner. What am I doing telling you this? You must know!"

"Yes, Ern—" He stopped himself in time to smile wanly, then, with obvious emphasis, "Steven. Yes, we're on the south-east corner of the continent, but the region's name is Hillbeach. Australia doesn't have states."

An alarm inside my head erupted. Previous desperate theories about my predicament paled beside the one now springing to mind: had I shifted to an alternate universe? With different suburb names? And phone numbers? Blame it on all the sci-fi I'd read, but it was hard not to form a similar conclusion given Wilbur's responses to my so simple questions. Even so, it was not a conclusion I could accept. A conspiracy to delude me seemed more plausible if no less explicable.

"This is some kind of joke," I exclaimed. "Right? Friends and family are going to leap out from behind the house and yell 'surprise' any minute now, yes? Ok, well, you've all had your fun, but I've cottoned onto you now, so why not drop the charade? Australia doesn't have states—very funny!"

He looked long and hard at me: his expression—instead of relenting and breaking into a prankster's satisfied grin like I hoped—grew more concerned. Indeed, I thought I saw doubt creep across his face. "Everything I said is true, Ern—Steven. Where do *you* think you are?"

I grappled for an answer, then plummeted into a daze. "I'm not sure. Somewhere near Melbourne, I suppose."

"Melbourne?!" His expression was one of mild incredulity.

"Melbourne! Capital of Victoria," I blurted out, my frustration blossoming into anger. The prank was definitely starting to outstay its welcome. "For god's sake, it's the second largest city in the country."

He did not reply, but his expression gave me the impression he was contemplating which mental health service had the most to offer me.

"But..." I began before realising I had nothing further to add.

Could he possibly be serious? If he was acting, it was an impressive performance.

"It would seem you don't have a simple case of amnesia after all," said Wilbur, sipping quietly on his tea.

"It's not amnesia. I'm telling you the truth."

"You're telling me what you *believe* is the truth, but they are clearly false memories. Probably filling in the void of your amnesia."

"That's ridiculous. I don't have amnesia. And I know who I am. And where I come from."

"Perhaps you should fill me in."

"I told you. Steven Stone. I live in Melbourne—an outer suburb anyway. What I don't know is how I got *here*! Wherever here is!"

Wilbur hesitated before saying, "What is the last memory you have before waking?"

I hesitated before replying. If this wasn't all some elaborate put-on, I must have already seemed unhinged to Wilbur, and my case would certainly not improve if I answered his question with, "O nothing much—I just ran into a demon." It was all starting to seem like a dream anyway, and *surely* it had been a dream, so why

mention it? Besides, even without the demon, the rest of the story was going to be hard enough for him to believe.

"All right," I said, sullenly. "This is undoubtedly going to seem as ridiculous to you as it does to me, but I was at home in bed at night, then all of a sudden, a flash of lightning blinded me, and when I could see again I was somewhere in the wilderness in the daytime, naked and alone. *And* exhausted. I found a road and walked for maybe an hour, before I felt a tremendous pain in my chest, then I must have lost consciousness. The last thought I had was that I was having a heart attack."

"Hmm," said Wilbur, after an inordinate silence. I could not tell what he was thinking—his blank-faced expression gave nothing away. *I certainly wouldn't want to play cards with him*, I thought. After another deep silence, he continued. "Well, at least you should be pleased to hear there's no evidence of a heart attack."

I took a while to digest the information. "That's some consolation," I finally said, "I suppose."

"You remember nothing else?"

"A few other things. Minor details like the weather, crossing a creek, some animals I saw." Another long still silence. "You think I'm making it up, don't you?"

"Frankly, I don't know what to think. But though I'm sure it seemed real to you, on the surface other more plausible explanations suggest themselves. The fact that you were in bed when it began suggests you might have fallen asleep and dreamt it all, or perhaps you walked in your sleep and woke up the next day in the bush."

This hadn't occurred to me, and for a moment, I struggled to find words to reply. "But I could never have walked so far. I woke up nowhere near home."

"What if your memory of your home is nothing but the memory of a dream you have mistaken as real? Since I remember you as Ernest, that seems to me the most plausible explanation."

More confused than ever but irritated by his calm surety that I was not who I knew I was, I responded angrily. "Who knows! Maybe I'm dreaming right now."

He ignored this completely. "Were there dream-like aspects during your walk?"

The face of the demon sprang to mind, and then the vague familiarity of the landscape. Doubt crept into my head, and I responded more calmly. "There was a sense of some things being similar but different—exaggerated—like in a dream, but still it felt more real than any dream I've ever had."

"Was it at any stage surreal or hallucinatory?"

"No," I answered loudly. "Look, for all I know I did hallucinate the whole thing. I've thought of any number of unlikely explanations—including being slipped hallucinatory drugs—but none of this makes any sense to me. Even if you told me right now it's all just some sort of grand prank, I can't think why anyone would go to such extremes to trick me. And if I dreamed of being Steven when I'm actually Ernest—and I know I'm *not* Ernest—then why wouldn't I recall knowing you? Or this house?"

"I would assume the bump on your head has prompted a very *extensive* form of amnesia."

I could not think what to say. His explanation was starting to make sense, even though I had the strongest feeling that it was simply wrong. Another long deep silence ensued, with Wilbur and I both lost in thought. As much to break the silence as anything, I finally asked, "After I lost consciousness, how did I get here?"

Wilbur hesitated before replying, only briefly, but for an instant his poker-face seemed to waver with uncertainty, filling me with suspicion. "I don't know. There

was a knock at the door late yesterday afternoon and there you were lying on the doorstep, unconscious, with no one else in sight."

Astounded that I'd been unconscious for the better part of a day, but even more disappointed that this only further heightened the mystery, I reacted with sarcasm. "Was I in a picnic basket, with a change of nappies and a note from my mother?" Thinking of the demon, I massaged the lump behind my ear. "And why did she bash me on the head?"

"I'm not sure anyone bashed you. Perhaps after you lost consciousness you simply fell onto a rock."

"Why didn't you put me in hospital for observation? Instead of just putting me to bed."

"Your injury's not that severe. There was certainly no indication it would cause amnesia."

"It is not amnesia! How many times..."

"Please calm down. No doubt, this is all very disorienting for you, but I'm sure things will sort themselves out soon. When you look back on it, it'll seem like a storm in a molehill."

"A what?!" I said, feeling even less calm.

"A storm in a molehill. You know, like making a mountain out of a teacup."

"Is this another joke? Or is English not your first language?"

"It isn't actually." Wilbur put his now empty cup on the table, and looked me steadily in the eye. "If you're feeling well enough to take a short walk, there's something that may be of value for you to see. Would you be willing?"

I hesitated, half expecting this to be another trick, some new development in the masquerade. But then I realised there was little point refusing. It was not like staying put had anything to offer. On the other hand, following Wilbur would probably give me my best chance of gleaning some hidden truth from some overlooked detail in the conspiracy. Yes, I was starting to think in terms of conspiracy, even if it was a grandiose word to describe what was surely just some outrageous and unwarranted practical joke. Why it was being played on me I had no idea, but what else *could* I think without accepting that something strange and unknown had befallen me. I certainly did not want to think any further about Wilbur's explanation—that I was not who I knew I was.

"Why not," I finally said. "What is it you want to show me?"

He stood. "You'll see for yourself when we arrive."

Somehow, that did not seem reassuring.

## 3

# The Historian

Wilbur led the way along the verandah and side of the house into the front yard. It was small but with a dense native garden. After we moved through an empty carport onto the footpath, I was struck by a sudden thought. "Aren't you going to lock up?" I asked.

Wilbur kept walking but turned to give me a quizzical look. "Why would I do that?"

I was ready to make the obvious reply, when I decided I'd had enough obfuscation for one day. Rather than have to deal with some new piece of information probably intended to further unsettle me, I shrugged my shoulders and walked in silence next to Wilbur for the rest of the journey.

It made no difference—I could not avoid being further unsettled. We turned into two other streets along the way but they were all the same: not what I was used to. Sure, there was the usual arrangement of houses, paved roads, footpaths, gutters, kerbs, gardens, even the odd fence, but that was about where similarities ended.

On generous blocks, separated almost always by screening hedges not fences, houses were made of mud-brick, ordinary brick, concrete, several of rendered straw, but none of timber. All had very modern but unorthodox architecture, full of passive solar efficiencies, with large north-facing windows. A surprisingly large number had stained-glass front doors. In several yards, water tanks could be glimpsed behind large bushes, fed by downpipes from roof gutters. Better hidden tanks were probably on nearly all other houses, judging by the arrangements of most gutters and downpipes. I saw no power lines, although that didn't surprise me—increasingly, new estates were putting them underground.

Notably absent was the gratuitous over-the-top obsession of recent years with expansive double-storey indulgence. Most houses were modest single-storeys, and yet none looked cramped. Even more strikingly, while each house had its own identity, choice of colours, and idiosyncrasies of style, somehow they managed to harmonise, again in contrast to the often glaring contrasts that corrupted most suburbs. Urban character guidelines might have been in force for some time at home but usually they could not contend with the accumulated visual pollution of previous generations, or even the varying tastes of new home builders. Here, however, it was as if the entire neighbourhood had been designed carefully and built as a single entity, guided by a strong sense of urban aesthetics and visual harmony, yet somehow avoiding sterility and artificiality.

All of which further begged the question: where the hell was I? If this was the city of Chord, why had I never heard of it? It was certainly unusual enough to have attracted attention. Unless it was a classified military installation engaged in top secret research. If so, I saw no uniforms.



My sense of discomfort only mounted when I noticed a car. All houses had carports (but no garages)—some apparently joined to that of an adjacent house, others separated from, but side by side with, their neighbour's—but most were empty of cars. The first one I saw was utterly unfamiliar, like no make or model I'd ever seen. Relatively small, though big enough to seat five, it was even lower to the ground than a sports car. Its lines were smooth and curved, unfashionably so given recent trends, but distorted compared to older models. Its wheels were almost completely hidden by long pointed front ends and equally long but blunter boots. Overall, its contours reminded me more than anything else of the Concorde jet. Completely missing were the exhaust pipe, and manufacturer logos and labels.

I stopped walking and turned to Wilbur, ready to hit him with questions. Then I saw another car, identical to the first except for its colour, approaching rather slowly along the road. As it drove past, there was a slight dull noise from air resistance, but whatever powered it was all but silent. I decided to follow suit: to avoid any further disorientation, I kept to myself the questions tossing in my head, and resumed walking. Soon, I noticed more of these baffling cars parked under other carports, and in the street. Apart from being in various colours—across the spectrum but always dark, with no pastels or muted shades—they differed in only one way as far as I could tell: as well as the five-seater I first saw, there were smaller two-seater versions. But they were much less than ubiquitous—rather than the standard two-car family, there looked to be no more than one car every five or so houses.

Where the hell was I?

It looked eco-friendly enough to have given Yvette a wet dream. Her phrase for it, I'm sure, would have been 'visionary'. But where was it? The topography was not exactly flat, but neither was it as hilly as home. It was nowhere near home, I was sure of that if nothing else. There was no way I could have overlooked a place like this in the vicinity, not after having lived where we had for almost a decade.

Wilbur and I continued along the shady footpath, my mind in uproar. I grappled for explanations, but quickly rejected each desperate idea. An elaborate set for a new big budget film? Too large, surely. The world's biggest and most secret timeshare resort? No sign of a beach. A secret enclave of a maverick group of environmentalist millionaires? Or organised crime barons? Cars and houses weren't ostentatious enough.

Soon I saw several people riding bicycles on the road, and several others walking ahead of us, some approaching. One young woman, pushing a pram, her face shaded by a wide cane hat, smiled when she drew near and, looking straight at me, said "Hello, Ernest." By now starting to get used to the name, I was able to put aside my momentary shock quickly enough to return a stuttered "hello". "Beautiful day," she added as she passed, to which all I could think to respond was a feeble "yes". Two other people made similar greetings to both Wilbur and I before we reached our destination.

"Here we are," said Wilbur, stopping at the fenceless border of one typical mud-brick house. Perhaps I was growing paranoid, but I thought he was watching me very carefully, despite affecting an air of casualness. He gestured to me to walk ahead of him along the short path to the front door, and I did so, warily. I was suddenly aware that, like every other house we'd passed, there was no lawn. Nor had I seen any in Wilbur's back yard, nor even on the nature strips which were invariably native grasses mixed with small shrubs and ground covers. Small sections of many gardens resembled lawns, but even my untrained eye could tell they

actually consisted of low, usually mossy, ground covers. Not many mower retailers round here, I decided.

When I stopped in front of the door, I waited for Wilbur to indicate what next. Without removing his gaze from me, he opened the apparently unlocked door, and gestured for me to enter. *Trusting neighbourhood this one*, I thought, as I warily stepped inside. Could it all be a clandestine project of some religious sect? No, Wilbur didn't smell of incense, or mention deities, prophets or sacred texts every other sentence.

I stopped in the entrance, looked about me, and asked, "Are we meeting someone here?"

"In a manner of speaking perhaps. Why don't you just have a look round?"

Wilbur silently followed every step I took through the house. It had a different layout of rooms to his house, and a considerable art collection—not just paintings but also abstract sculptures and mobiles. But what struck me most was the dishevelled state of the furniture, and an overall untidiness. Unwashed dishes were strewn throughout the kitchen, some still containing leftover food. A few plates in similar states in the living room kept company with many books and an e-reader left presumably where they'd last been used. There were a *lot* of books in the house—one whole wall in what looked to be a study was full of shelves overflowing with them. The few titles I noticed all concerned history. Only the second bedroom was orderly, an apparent sign of its disuse. The floor of the main bedroom, by comparison, was littered with several items of clothing. The wardrobe was wide open, revealing clothes similar to the atrocities I was wearing, and equally as colourful, spilling over shelves and each other. I could not make up my mind whether the owner was simply untidy or if the house had been ransacked.

"Well," I finally said, returning to the main living area, "what is it you thought I'd find of use here? A spare set of clothes?" When Wilbur did not answer, I pushed on. "Whose house is it anyway?"

"It's yours," said Wilbur, his eyes fixed on me, it seemed at the time like a fox on its prey.

"Really? You shouldn't have." Sarcasm seeped from my voice. "How generous of you."

"You've lived here for I think five years," said Wilbur, unperturbed by my reaction.

"Think again," I retorted.

"Have a closer look at the house, it may jog your memory."

"It would need more than a jog."

"Perhaps a marathon then."

"You can't expect me to remember somewhere I've never been."

"Have a look anyway. Humour me."

"Why not," I sighed. "If it gets you off my back."

I returned to the study, wandered over to the bookshelves again, and reaffirmed that the books were mostly historical non-fiction. One shelf was devoted to novels, many science-fiction, several in my own modest collection, others by well-known living authors but with unfamiliar titles, others by authors whose names I did not recognise. Was I so out of touch?

"So," I said, as I returned to the living room and continued my inspection, "am I supposed to live here alone or am I married?"

"You live alone—have for two years, since your divorce."

That surprised me. I turned to face him. "Divorced, huh? Any children."

It was Wilbur's turn to be surprised, for some unfathomable reason, although he quickly recovered with a quiet "no".

I resumed my browsing. As at Wilbur's place, a recharger was attached to a wall, but here, a phone—identical to the mini-monolith he had used—was sitting in it. My suspicions mounted. "Mine, no doubt?" I said, with sarcasm as obvious as a Sumo wrestler's waistline.

"Of course," he replied.

"And yet it's clearly a mobile device. How come I didn't have it on me when I was deposited on your doorstep?"

But any hopes of trapping him quickly vanished. He reacted with a hint of a smile. "No pockets."

With embarrassment, I remembered being naked on my bush trek. My suspicions eased back to their previous level, merely extreme.

"Besides," continued Wilbur, "you have a notorious reputation for leaving your babel behind when you go out."

"My bible?!" *O no*, I thought, *this is an enclave of religious fundamentalists.*

"No," he said, with fixed expression, before gesturing to the phone and enunciating more carefully. "Babel."

I said nothing, just gave a suspicious nod, and moved to a small set of shelves devoted to miniature art objects and mementoes. On one shelf, prominently displayed: a large framed photo of a couple perhaps in their late fifties. Though they evoked memories of my parents, I did not recognise them. "Who are they supposed to be?" I said indicating the photo. "Mum and dad?"

"Yes," he said, with a suddenly lighter tone. "Is it starting to come back?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I've never seen them before in my life. Just an educated guess on my part, based on their age." Gaining no apparent reaction from him, I browsed further along the shelf. I saw nothing of note until I noticed a peculiar, transparent, hard plastic statuette shaped like a small pick axe, fixed to the top of a long rectangular column. Beneath it, an inscription: 'To Ernest d'Alembert, in recognition of invaluable and original research. Australian Historical Society'. Next to it: a framed copy of the front page of a newspaper, 'The Chord Times'. Beneath its prominent headline, 'Local wins award': a photo of two men shaking hands, smiling for the camera, one handing the other a statuette identical to the one on the shelf next to the photo. The man receiving the award wore the same jumper I was wearing.

More shockingly, he looked *exactly* like me.

I'm sure my heart skipped a beat. Just the same, I wasn't going to accept this at face value. "Do you really expect me to believe this? Anyone could have cobbled this together on a computer. Whoever received this award was not me."

"You don't remember?" said Wilbur, somewhat sheepishly I thought.

"No. Not the award, not the presenter, not the location. Hardly surprising, since it never happened."

"But it *did*," said Wilbur, walking closer and pointing at the photo. "I was there. *This* is you. There's your name."

I looked at the caption, but read only as far as 'local historian, Ernest d'Alembert'.

"I'm not an historian," I said. "I'm a bank manager."

To my surprise, Wilbur cut short a derisive laugh, oddly shrill and, to my ears, not altogether sincere. Then, almost with embarrassment, he said, "A what?"

"A bank manager!"

Clearly worried and quizzical, Wilbur started shaking his head, but I cut in, pointing at the photo. "This isn't me, I'm telling you."

"It is you," he replied. "It happened only last month."

I said nothing but looked back at the photo, trying to think of a more caustic denial. Inadvertently, I noticed the newspaper's date: August 18, 2065.

"Hell of a misprint," I said. "You'd think they'd have picked that up."

"Picked what up."

"The 6!" I said peevishly, pointing at the printed year.

Wilbur glanced at it quickly, before responding. "It's not a misprint," he said, quietly.

I snorted derisively until I realised Wilbur was serious—his face was filled with unmasked concern. "So you're telling me," I scorned, "this is the year twenty-sixty-five?"

"Yes," he stated matter-of-factly. "Of course it is. What year do you think it is?"

"Twenty *twenty*-five. Of course."

He did not reply, but I thought I saw a shimmer of uncertainty rapidly cross his face.

"O come on!" I began.

Suddenly, I was hit by an impossible realisation. An unbidden profanity leapt from my lips only to fall quickly onto jagged rocks...

Odd clothes, quiet peculiar cars, unknown city and region names, unfamiliar architecture and town planning, even Wilbur's damned kettle, and his ignorance of Melbourne and Victoria. All this, and more, fitted. It made sense...

Somehow I had been transported forty years into the future.

# Part Two

## When

“The fatal blow to the conventional wisdom comes when the conventional ideas fail signally to deal with some contingency to which obsolescence has made them palpably inapplicable.”

John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*



## 4

# Time and Motion

"I suppose the next thing you'll tell me is that time travel's as common these days as catching a bus."

Wilbur's expression altered, but too briefly to fathom. "On the contrary. No time machine has ever been built. Indeed, the debate continues as to whether it's even possible."

"Then how did—?" Another realisation struck... This was just what they *wanted* me to believe. Whoever *they* were. "Now wait on. All right, I give you full marks for ingenuity in arranging this, although I can't imagine the point of it, but you can't seriously expect me to believe this is the year 2065. I mean..."

Wilbur said nothing, though his expression grew darker, more full of concern.

"This can't be happening," I muttered, immediately recognising and forgiving the well-worn cliché given the trying circumstances. "Why are you doing this?" I implored, my voice sounding creaky even to me. "Why kidnap me and pretend all this? What's the point of such a grand masquerade?"

"I assure you there's no masquerade," said Wilbur in his usual calm voice—his increasingly infuriating calm voice. "Everything I've told you is true. Everything I've shown you is just as it appears." He drew closer and placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "You have amnesia, complicated by some unusually thorough false memories. But it will pass, Ernest, and you'll remember everything."

His touch had been oddly if only slightly reassuring at first, but when he said 'Ernest', I pulled away. "No," I said, "I already remember. I *know* who I am. And this"—I pointed at the doctored photo of 'me' receiving the award—"never happened. Again—why are you doing this? Who else is in your conspiracy?"

"No one is doing anything. There is no conspiracy."

"What's happened then? Are you telling me I've been transported to a future where Melbourne no longer exists? Or to a parallel universe where perhaps it *never* existed?"

"You have not moved to a parallel universe. You are where you always have been. Melbourne did once exist, as recently as a generation ago—indeed, you yourself made me familiar with the name—but boundaries have changed, and other names have been adopted to suit."

I must have stared at him emptily for some seconds, both of us unsure what to say next. Finally, my state of mind simply demanded the vacuum be filled. "It might still be a parallel universe, one where Melbourne *used* to exist." My voice was oddly calm. "I could have been shifted to a parallel universe *and* to the future." My voice grew oddly shrill. "At the same time!" I almost shouted. "That's possible!"

"Not very," said Wilbur. "Perhaps on a par with a pig that can float."

"Fly! You mean, fly."

"Flies do float, don't they?"

I gritted my teeth and shook my head in frustration. I could not tell whether he was trying to be funny or had genuinely confused the saying, but I had enough else to deal with not to care.

"My point is," continued Wilbur, "your theory is far less believable than mine, that you're Ernest d'Alembert with amnesia from a bump on the head."

"But why would I think I'm someone else? Why would I remember an entirely different life?"

My question prompted an answer from my own mind—a very unwelcome one. Perhaps I'd been hypnotised. Perhaps Wilbur was telling the truth, that I was Ernest, only hypnotised to believe I was Steven... Or was it more far-reaching? Was I unknowingly caught in some far-future role-playing virtual adventure which had temporarily replaced my memories? Was what I knew of as my own life nothing more than an invention? Was what I saw all around me, Wilbur included, not real at all, but a mere phantasm projected by the game? Or by a post-hypnotic suggestion?

"Perhaps it is not so different," answered Wilbur, interrupting my thoughts. "Perhaps just key memories have altered—that's been known to happen. Or perhaps what you think you remember as your own life is merely something you learnt during your studies. Something you read or perhaps even saw—a fictionalised documentary about someone named Steven Stone living at the turn of the century. Something that impressed you greatly or had a significant effect on you for whatever reason. The bump on your head could have brought it to the forefront of your mind in such a way that you've mistaken it as your own life."

"No, no, no," I said, with agitation. His explanation made a certain sense, but I could not accept it. "It was real," I insisted. "It *is* real." I pointed and swept my arm round the room. "This is the fiction." I clutched for straws. "How could your theory explain how I moved from the bush to your front door? Who put me there? For that matter, how did I get to the bush from my bedroom? My *real* bedroom, not that experiment in chaos theory next door."

"Sleep-walking would explain both movements."

"Sleep-walking!" I started to pace back and forth across the room. "Maybe I'm *still* sleep-walking. In which case, I'd like to wake up now. Right now please." I stopped and slapped my cheeks. "Come on, wake up." I slapped myself harder. "Damn it, *wake up*." I almost shouted the last words, then slapped harder again.

None of it had the desired effect. Instead, my cheeks stung so much I had to rub them.

"Sit down, Ernest," said Wilbur, motioning me to a three-seater couch. "Please."

I looked at him and, despite my state, saw nothing but well-meaning compassion. "Sure," I said, calmly. "Why not? A little sit-down might do me the world of good. Who knows? I might sit down and then with a great flash of light, find myself back in my bedroom where this all began, back in my real time, my real life."

I sat down, with Wilbur beside me. Some silent pregnant moments passed. "No," I announced, serenely. "It didn't work. Still here. Can I stand again now? Maybe that'll work. Or perhaps I should lie on my back, like I was when this all began. Yes, that makes sense."

I moved to the floor, lay down, and stared at the ceiling, waiting, hoping. "Nope, still here. Got any other suggestions? Maybe I should dance a little jig?!"

Wilbur loomed into view above me. "Please, I can only imagine how disorienting this must be to you, but you have to accept this is the year 2065. I and many other people have known you for some time as Ernest d'Alembert, historian. Whatever you think you remember about being Steven Stone in 2025 is *not true*."



"What?" I said, quietly, almost calmly. An ancient Firesign Theatre album title came to mind. "Everything I know is wrong?"

"No," he responded, "not everything—just some things you *think* you know."

I remained on the floor, but placed an arm across my eyes and forehead, hiding everything from sight. "So how do I get restored to proper functioning? You going to cure my amnesia by dropping a bowling ball on my head?"

Wilbur exhaled slowly and deeply. "As tempting as that is, how about we try something more subtle? Like taking you to places and people you've long known—the likelihood is they'll reawaken your lost memories."

"This house didn't." I uncovered my eyes and stared at him. "You'd think *it* would have worked."

"Not necessarily. The most obvious things might not work. And yet something as unremarkable as a faint smell might suddenly restore you."

"Like a familiar fart from a close friend? Want to give it a shot?"

Wilbur, clearly taken aback, did not reply. The truth is, I had heard of such things. And I could see that from Wilbur's perspective, it made sense. But I was still absolutely sure that Wilbur was wrong, that I was *not* Ernest d'Alembert.

*Almost* absolutely. As much as I wanted to, I could not entirely dismiss his explanation. Everything I'd seen struck me as consistent with it being the year 2065, and if, as I had tried to maintain, I was, for some unknown reason, the victim of an elaborate hoax, how could anyone have afforded the resources required to arrange it? As far as I could figure, and putting aside the more extravagant ideas I'd come up with, that left two options: either I was an amnesiac full of false memories giving me a *mistaken* impression I'd been transported forty years into the future, or I was who I said I was but I *really had* travelled in time. I did not want to believe either possibility. Nor was I convinced by them.

Easier to believe I was simply lost in a labyrinthine dream.

"I'm going to wake up any minute now," I said. "Any minute."

But I did not then awake. Instead, the brief silence that followed was rudely interrupted not by some further reasoned attempt at pacification by Wilbur, nor by another frantic denial from me, but by something far more banal: the unmistakable sound of an empty stomach rumbling.

"O," said Wilbur, "I do apologise for my lack of hospitality. It must be 24 hours or more since you last ate. Perhaps we should take an early dinner."

It took me a while to realise it was *my* stomach that had rumbled. As soon as I did, I realised just how hungry I was.

I'd always had the impression, no doubt because of films and novels, that anyone beset by the sort of disorienting difficulties I was facing would be far too pre-occupied to feel hungry. Perhaps I was an exception, but in hindsight I suspect I was simply relieved to have something ordinary to have to deal with for a change.

"Good idea," I said, moving rapidly to my feet. "I could use something solid, like a nice steak."

Wilbur raised his eyebrows, clearly surprised.

"Don't tell me I can't get steak?" I groaned. "Let me guess: food is now only in pill form."

"No," said Wilbur, calmly. "It's just... you've been a vegetarian since your late teens."

"Really," I said, starting to feel vindicated. "You'd think false memories wouldn't negate a decision like that."

"That's still to be seen," replied Wilbur, after a long deliberation. "Where would you like to eat?"

"How would I know? I'm a stranger here, remember?"

Wilbur nodded without conviction. "Well, you've always liked the local restaurant."

"How far away? I'm famished."

"No more than ten minutes' walk."

It was an accurate estimate. He led the way, partly back-tracking the way we had come, then diverging. Every street we walked along had the same features and style of the ones I saw travelling to Ernest's house.

On the way, another two or three people greeted me as Ernest. But perhaps because Wilbur and I had spoken so much already, he and I barely said a word the whole time.

We arrived almost without me noticing. We turned from one residential street into what initially looked to be another, until I realised one side of it was occupied by a group of about fifteen shops fronted by parking bays, and bicycle racks under a wide shady vine-covered pergola. Perhaps a dozen bikes were in the racks—none with clamps, all with carry racks—but only three or four cars were parked, each like the same odd ones I'd seen earlier. Several people were walking on the footpath in front of the shops, moving in and out of them, a few pushing something resembling the old-fashioned two-wheeler shopping trolley my grandmother refused to give up until she was too frail to use it. The other side of the road was undeveloped—an uninterrupted stretch of thick native bush.

Like the houses I'd seen, many of the shops were made of mud-brick, and all had large windows. Though individually designed, they looked coherent, simple yet subtly sophisticated, creatively functional, harmonious, inviting. On each shop's door or window was a single sign—all with the same-sized lettering—no advertising, no prices or special offers, no product or brand names, no promotions or contests, just the shop's name: Anton's Clothing, Mother's Milk Bar, Midge's Hair Salon, Hillview Takeaways, Gabriel's DIY, Barry's Bakery, The Health Store, Alice's Restaurant.

Another reason for thinking this was *not* the future—a joke that weak would have to have been long buried.

"Outside?" asked Wilbur, gesturing at a handful of seats on the footpath. "Or in?"

Through the restaurant window, I could see not a single customer, though there was enough room for about fifty. Five or so people were eating on the outdoor seats. It was clearly as much a café as a restaurant.

Feeling a desire for relative privacy, I indicated indoors. We moved in and took a window table. The décor was very low-key: muted colours, unassuming landscape paintings, round tables with high-backed chairs of curved wood. My appetite, already aggravated by the walk, soon reeled under the assault of alluring cooking odours. Unfamiliar instrumental music, vaguely jazz-like, played faintly, overlaid with indistinct voices and kitchen sounds emanating from a partly screened doorway at the back of the shop. Above it, a tall window stretched to the high slanted ceiling, letting in luxuriant light.

"Still too early for most," said Wilbur, glancing at his watch.

To my disappointment I could see no menu on the table. I looked about the shop, hoping to see a waitress walking toward us, menus in hand, but I saw no-one. It was entirely an eating area, I could not even see a cash register.

When I turned to Wilbur, intending to communicate my impatience to him, he was staring down at the table, rubbing his thumb on it. At first puzzled, I soon realised he was studying the menu—the table top was like a bright liquid crystal display, and his thumb actions were causing the page it presented to scroll down. Assuming I had a similar display on my side, I searched for something to activate it, but quickly grew frustrated. On the verge of asking Wilbur, I noticed a small button inset on the edge of the table, and pressed it. My menu lit up immediately, small images of each dish accompanied by their names and descriptions.

I was as pleasantly surprised by the choice as the prices. There was the standard light fare of a café, as well as the more common meals of a hotel's counter lunch—although with more vegetarian options than I considered usual—but also half a dozen or so more relatively exotic dishes, including a Thai beef and spinach salad, sushi, and a Rendang curry. Tempted as I was to try many dishes, I ended up deciding on a steak. Something tried and proven seemed in order, rather than yet another novelty.

Having made my choice, I looked about with increasing impatience for someone to take the order. "The service here could be improved."

"What is it you want?" said Wilbur, looking up from the menu.

"To order," I said. "What do you think? Directions to the local museum?"

"What dish have you chosen?"

"Steak. Number 14. Medium rare."

With a sceptical expression, as if he'd just been offered a blank cheque from a hobo, Wilbur almost squinted at me, then pressed the image of the steak dish on his menu, and scrolled down. "I'll have the vegetarian lasagna today," he said, tapping that image. "What about drinks?"

I nominated a mineral water, watched him select that and his own, then press a large red unfamiliar icon at the bottom of his menu. A new screen came up, showing two large buttons also with unfamiliar icons. "My shout," he said, extracting his phone, the so-called babel, from his shirt pocket. "Especially since you wouldn't bring your babel with you," he added, directing a strange smile at me, one suggesting he hadn't convinced even himself there was any reason to be amused.

I ignored the temptation to repeat what I'd said before we left Ernest's house, when Wilbur suggested I not leave the phone behind: that it wasn't mine. Instead, I just watched as Wilbur held his phone over one of the menu's icons, which was replaced by another which he pressed immediately. The tabletop returned to its original featureless state.

"Let me guess," I said, "you just ordered and paid at the same time."

"Yes, of course," he said, returning the babel to his pocket.

"Very impressive. An all-purpose communication device cum smart credit or debit card. Probably even makes the coffee. Yet it's not much different to a smart phone's e-wallet. And if you *really* wanted to convince me this is all like being in the year 2065..." I paused, waiting to see his reaction, but he was his usual closed book. "...the prices would all be much higher, not *less* than what I'm used to. You can't tell me there hasn't been inflation over the last forty years."

"You still think I'm part of some hoax?"

"No," I said, surprising myself at the certainty I felt. "I think I'm dreaming all this. A hoax this elaborate wouldn't have such an obvious slip-up, surely. My subconscious, on the other hand—well, it's only human." Everything was far too detailed to be a hoax. No one could have set up such a radically different town

simply for the sake of fooling me into thinking I'd travelled to the future—not even a covert government security agency, whatever paranoid reason they might have invented for doing so. It *had* to be a dream. A very realistic dream. Perhaps even a vivid dream. Although, unlike what I'd heard about vivid dreams, I was unable (so far at least) to steer this one anywhere near where I wanted it to go: home.

"There's another quite simple explanation," suggested Wilbur.

"I'd like to hear it."

"Prices in 2025 were indeed higher than they are now, for most items."

"O really. What happened? A depression or two with deflation? Or maybe a period of hyperinflation prompting removal of some zeroes from the currency—like in Germany after World War I?"

"There was some deflation earlier this century, but that's beside the point. Prices are now what CAPE calculates them to be."

"CAPE?! What the hell is that? A masked superhero?"

"You don't remember CAPE?"

"No I don't!"

"CAPE is the principal procedure used to stabilise the economy. Cost And Price Equalisation. In the simplest terms, all of the economy's costs are summed, and the figure partitioned proportionally across prices of all anticipated output."

"Those are the simplest terms?" He was about to respond, when I cut him off. "Never mind. The last thing I want this dream to turn into is a fantasyland macroeconomics lecture." I turned from him and gazed through the window. "Tell me one thing, though." I pointed at the store sign on the window. "Why such limited advertising? Every shop in this street is so inconspicuous it would be the easiest thing in the world to drive right past them without realising they had what you wanted."

"I doubt that. Besides, anyone wanting to find a particular item only need use the Net to track it down."

"The Internet?"

"Yes," said Wilbur, with a partly quizzical, partly amused expression, "the *Internet*. Every store or supplier has its own site, with as much advertising as they could ever need, all directly and easily accessible via the usual search engines."

"Some things haven't changed at least. But even with a webpage, how can a business compete if it doesn't draw more attention to itself than this?" I pointed again at the window sign.

"There's an old-fashioned word," smiled Wilbur.

"Which word?"

"'Compete'. Not to mention 'business'."

That took me by surprise, but he continued before I could think of a reply.

"Most *providers* have all the attention they desire, sometimes more than they want. And they *don't* compete. Enufism makes that unnecessary—along with many of capitalism's other more arbitrary excesses. There's certainly no perceived need to treat people's foreheads and exposed flesh as spaces for hire, something capitalism achieved shortly before its demise."

"Demise?!"

"Yes." He looked at me quizzically before understanding suddenly dawned. "O, of course, you've forgotten that too."

He was about to say more, but I cut him off again. "Never mind. I'll hopefully wake up from all this before I need to 'remember' it."

A young couple with eyes only for each other walked into the restaurant. They took a table some distance away, and chatted at great pace, just barely below our hearing level. Wilbur and I grew silent.

Almost immediately, a young woman carrying drinks on a tray walked through the screened doorway at the back of the shop and approached our table. Smiling, she nodded to both of us, then looked me in the eye. "Mineral water for you, Ernest?"

I felt like sighing again but restrained myself, and answered with a muted "Yes, thanks."

"Surprised to see you here," she said, placing my drink on the table, then doing the same for Wilbur. "What with your needay tomorrow."

"Needay?" The way I was reacting to all the new information I was encountering, I risked turning into a parrot.

"You forgot?" asked the waitress.

I must have looked completely dumbfounded, because Wilbur stepped in. "I think it might be best, Alice, if someone else took over Ernest's spot tomorrow." At this point, he surreptitiously winked at me. "He hasn't been feeling himself lately."

*You can say that again,* I thought.

"O," said Alice, concern apparent as she turned from Wilbur to me. "Sorry to hear that. I'll take over your spot if you like."

I was not sure exactly what was going on, but I saw Wilbur looking at me, nodding gently, so I said, "Sure. If you don't mind."

"Happy to," said Alice. "Still need a few more needays to take next year off."

"Ok," I muttered, without a clue. "Thanks."

"Your food'll be along any minute," she said, moving away.

As soon as she was out of earshot, I grilled Wilbur. "What was that all about?"

"You were rostered to work here tomorrow. But now Alice will do it for you. And hopefully by next week, you'll be back to normal."

"I work *here*? I thought I was supposed to be an historian."

"That's your vocation. Not how you spend your needays." Seeing my blank response, Wilbur shook his head. "In antiquated terms, which seem to be the only ones you're currently capable of understanding, you work here to earn a living."

"As a waiter?!"

"Waiter, cook, dishwasher, cleaner—the usual variety of services." My expression must have climbed a notch or two further on the dumbfounded scale, because his eyebrows lowered and his voice took on a more serious tone. "I'm beginning to think we're going to have to spend a lot of time re-educating you if your memory is ever to be jogged back to normal. I guess a good starting point will be to remind you how to transfer your needay, so Alice can take over tomorrow. We must remember to do that after the meal."

I shook my head, hoping it would settle into a state of understanding—without success. I decided to give up and change the subject. "How come a waitress owns the restaurant?"

Wilbur did not respond immediately. Increasingly, he seemed to be taking time to digest my questions and, presumably, conceive a response. Not surprising, I realised, if my questions were forty years out of date. My dream was a consistent one, I had to admit. Or else Wilbur was a consummate actor indeed. "She does not own the restaurant," he said at last.

"So the name of the place is a reference to sixties culture after all?"

"No, it's named after Alice because she is the principal founder, and many dishes are her own recipes."

"Then she *does* own it."

"No one owns it. Alice stewards it, along with everyone else who spends their needays here."

"*Somebody* must own it."

Smiling slightly, Wilbur just shook his head.

I started rubbing my temples. "Why is my subconscious doing this to me?" I groaned. "Why couldn't I just dream I was flying? Or something else normal?"

Before I could indulge any further, Alice returned, carrying our meals. She was about to put the steak in front of Wilbur, when I said, "That one's mine." She gave me a look as if I had climbed onto the tabletop and imitated a gorilla on heat. The look never left her as she put both plates on the table, then, along with Wilbur, watched me carefully as I took my first bite of steak. Her eyes widened. Then, without a word, she returned to the kitchen. With no apparent reaction, Wilbur directed his attention to his own plate.

For a while, I was too famished to waste any valuable chewing time on conversation. It was a delicious dish, everything cooked perfectly. About halfway through it, Wilbur asked, "Enjoying your meal?"

In mid-mouthful, I did not even try to respond with words, settling instead for exaggerated animal grunts and moans accompanied by rolling eyes. "This steak is unbelievably lean," I commented finally, when my mouth was empty.

"It looks about normal," he said.

"What sort of cows have such lean meat? I hope they're not treated like veal calves." I was a seasoned carnivore but I had at least given up veal many years before, once I became fully aware of the atrocious conditions endured by the poor young beasts that provided it.

"The steak is not from a cow," said Wilbur. "Not directly at least. It's vatbeef." My full mouth mercifully prevented me from performing another parrot impersonation, but my blank look was enough on its own to prompt Wilbur to continue. "All meat is now grown in vats. Animals have not been slaughtered for meat for more than two decades—although a few reclusive types out bush reportedly still do so."

"It tastes like real beef," I said, disbelievingly.

"It *is* real beef. Years ago, when the process was first developed, a genuine piece of prime beef—from a cow—was used as the starting point. All meat since has been grown from that piece and is identical to it in every way."

Suspicious, I prodded the steak with my fork, but my taste buds over-ruled my doubts, and I soon continued eating. Perhaps the meal was helping me feel better, because I felt like I was starting to settle down a little. Rather than resisting, I began to feel like I might as well go with the flow. Whatever was happening or had happened to me, I seemed to be in no immediate danger at least. And if it was just a dream, I might as well enjoy what I could of it.

"These are unusual beans," I said before long, poking at one before putting it in my mouth. "Quite tasty."

"They're winged beans. Originally from New Guinea, they're now a staple part of most diets world-wide. Been around a while."

I gave a subdued groan, which prompted confusion from Wilbur, making me think his 'joke' had been inadvertent. The question suddenly occurred to me that if I had to be dreaming all this, why hadn't I dreamt up someone with a better sense of humour?

"The entire plant can be eaten," he added. "Not just the beans themselves, but also the roots, leaves, stems and flowers. Even the juice, which tastes something like coffee."

"With all that going for it, I suppose it must be fattening or carcinogenic."

"On the contrary. It's about as healthy as soybeans. And a very rapid grower as well. I have some in the garden at home. I'll show you later if you're interested."

"At the moment, they interest me only as a stomach filler."

By this stage, the young couple at the other table, having become well and truly lubricated by the bottle of wine they were sharing, were conversing loudly enough to be overheard in parts.

"He's a real worko," said the man, with amused contempt.

"Whereas *my* brother's a burdo," said the woman, with genuine disdain.

I looked across at Wilbur, as he ate the final mouthful of his meal. "Burdo?!" I said, shaking my head slightly. "Worko?!"

"Burdens and workaholics," he replied when table etiquette allowed. "People who work considerably less and more needays respectively than is standard."

I thought I understood. "And what is standard? A 35-hour week still?"

Wilbur, dabbing his mouth with a napkin, stopped in mid-motion. "No," he said, resuming his motions, "this year the needay was reduced for the first time in three years. It is now seven hours."

"So, like I said, a 35-hour week. Or has it been cut down to a nine-day fortnight?"

"No," said Wilbur, putting his napkin on the table, and looking me steadily in the eye. "There is just the one needay each week."

For some seconds, I did not move other than to blink in astonishment, unsure whether I'd heard or understood him correctly. "Are you telling me you have a *one-day* working week?! A *seven-hour* working week?!!"

"Yes."

## 5

# Crash Course

"I simply can't believe it," I said to Wilbur, more loudly than necessary. I had said the same thing, more or less, several times during our walk back from the restaurant to Ernest's, and several times more in the hour or two since, but I still could not get over it. "It's absurd," I said, re-seating myself in one of Ernest's sofas.

"Why?" he replied calmly.

Having just discovered an identical toilet to Wilbur's, I ensured another visit by refilling a glass of very fine port. "Well, for a start, it took centuries just to get a five-day working week. Are you telling me you've had a five-fold reduction in just forty years?"

"Yes. It was easy to arrange once the economic engine had an off-switch installed."

This was too cryptic for me, but he must have realised. He took a long sip of his port, declined my offer to top him up with a polite shake of his head, and continued.

"Technological advance has always reduced the need to work, but the five-day working week nevertheless persisted because of antiquated economic rules that demanded ever more work, ever more jobs, ever more consumption—in other words, economic growth. Yet much of the manufactured work was not simply unnecessary but often counter-productive, or worse. It's been estimated that forty percent of all work in the early part of the twenty-first century was devoted to cleaning up the unwanted side effects of the rest. There was another estimate, by Fuller, back in the seventies—you yourself drew my attention to it..."

I was ready to deny that, but stopped when I realised I *had* read Buckminster Fuller, in my teens. I even had a vague memory of what Wilbur then cited: "He claimed only thirty percent of all work was really needed—that was the proportion devoted to genuinely productive work. The rest either made no real wealth or was even destructive. Arms manufacturing, insurance under-writing, banking."

"Banking!" I erupted, only to be diverted by a sudden concern that my next words might be 'Polly want a cracker'. My concern proved groundless: "How could anyone regard banking as destructive?"

"Not destructive, perhaps, but certainly unnecessary. All that energy and time, all those resources, wasted on meaningless numbers in constant flux. No wealth created, not even distributed. No wonder it was one of the first jobs done away with."

"What are you talking about? Done away with?!"

"Just that. Banking no longer exists. You said you're a banker, but that would make you unique, in this country at least. Unless the handful of people now involved in financial account-keeping proved willing to adopt that antiquated term for their work. I doubt it. It's rarely used these days except as a term of derision."



I was flabbergasted. Speechless. I had already been told that I did not exist in this world, this alleged future—not as Steven Stone. Now I'd been told my job did not exist either—my career!

This simply would not do. I had to exist. As myself. And with my career intact. Wilbur was trying to confuse me—that was it. Well, it wouldn't work. I silently resolved: I would find the flaw in his logic, the weakness of his arguments and claims. I would listen and learn, so I could *disprove* what he was saying. No system, however futuristic, could eradicate banking. Or me for that matter. I would survive. I was determined.

I was also powered by port.

"All right," I said, expecting Wilbur to trip over his tongue with the slightest prompting. "For the sake of argument, let's assume banking doesn't exist, nor any other of the allegedly useless work. I still don't see how that leaves a seven-hour week."

"Well, if only thirty percent of work that occupies a population for five days a week is truly useful, and if that's all that's actually performed, then sharing it would require only about a one-and-a-half-day working week. Right? But of course that's ignoring unemployment rates, and so-called 'hidden unemployment', as well as many technological improvements made since a five-day week was extant. What was needed—and eventually done—was not just to abandon all unproductive work, but to automate as much as was desired of everything that remained, and share the rest. Of course, it was necessary also to learn to build to last instead of to obsolesce—to minimise or avoid pollution, resource-hungry processes, non-renewable energy use—to produce and consume more responsibly and efficiently."

"Is that all?" I grated, sarcastic and unconvinced. "That was enough to leave you a one-day working week?"

"Not straight away. But it fed on itself: with less work, less resources were needed, and less pollution and other damage was caused. Less led to even less. Indeed, a substantial group of people think a one-day working week is too much, that it should be at least halved. Personally I think they tend not to appreciate just how much work that really needed doing, but couldn't make anyone a monetary profit, simply wasn't done under capitalism. By the time it was superseded, the world was in a pretty fragile mess. If it hadn't been, a half-day working week might now be possible."

He'd mentioned some of this earlier (along with the obvious-in-hindsight explanation of the meaning of 'needdays'—days *needing* to be worked), but still it did not persuade me. "It's not possible," I said with certainty, before downing a sizeable fraction of my glass.

"Of course it's possible. It's been *made* possible. It's all around you."

"It's a figment of my imagination."

"It's a *creation* of many people's imaginations. And a *choice* made by society from a wide range of possibilities. The rules, the way it's organised, they simply work better, are better designed, than the ones used in previous centuries."

"But do they come with a free set of steak knives?!" I blurted, the port starting to go to my head. I *had* to be dreaming, I was sure of it now. As dreams went, this one had never seemed exactly normal, but it was starting to wander off into realms too absurd to be mistaken as real. "I still can't believe it. What you've said might explain why less work is possible, *theoretically*, but it can't be reconciled with the need for

economic growth. Any economy trying what you claim has been done would have found itself in a massive depression."

"It would have, if that was all it did. But for an economy, like an individual, depression is a state of mind. Growth is *not* essential. For a capitalist system, with capitalism's rules, it *is*—growth is the only way to avoid collapse—but other rules and arrangements can be adopted which make growth unnecessary. Which is what was done. Necessarily. And just in time. There'd been so much growth that to have had much more would have been suicidal."

"I don't—I can't..." I stopped faltering long enough to realise I had no retort other than to repeat myself. "But growth *is* essential. It's the only way to bake a bigger economic cake, so everyone can have more to eat for the same share."

Wilbur smiled disarmingly. "It was certainly promoted that way. A cure-all. A single easily digestible measure of national success in a complex hard-to-fathom world. But a bigger cake need not be sliced up the same way—too often, a few got bigger slices of a bigger cake, but most got the same or less. Nor need a bigger cake taste as good nor provide as much nutrition, especially when some slices are toxic. In any case, you can't *always* grow. Firstly, you need ideas—even ill-conceived ideas—of *how* to grow, how to make a profit. But since a perpetually sufficient quantity of ideas can never be guaranteed, growth *had* to sometimes turn to shrinkage, and the economic cake had to periodically curdle. Recessions and depressions were inevitable."

"Maybe growth could not spring eternal," I interjected, "but not simply because of a lack of ideas." Vague memories of economics lectures at Uni sprang to mind. "The business cycle is affected by a huge range of factors."

"True, but ultimately they can be traced to a single one: profit. Once the whole idea of financial profit was thrown out, things settled down straightaway."

"What do you mean 'thrown out'? Are you telling me you have a system that doesn't allow profit? That's ridiculous. It was the absence of the incentive of profit that prompted communism's collapse."

"Actually, the inefficiencies of central planning had more to do with it. In any case, fortunately, there are incentives other than profit. Better ones. More effective ones. The urge to avoid boredom. To feel useful and valued—or, if you prefer, to satisfy and please others. The thrill of achievement. Self-development. Even the hope for immortality through exceptionality."

"People are satisfied by that?!"

"Perhaps not by that alone, but the abandonment of profit has had many benefits: one-day working weeks, no more business cycles—"

"And what *costs*?" I interjected before he could swamp me with claims. I was ready to start a list of my own, beginning with inadequate or no investment, but he replied too quickly.

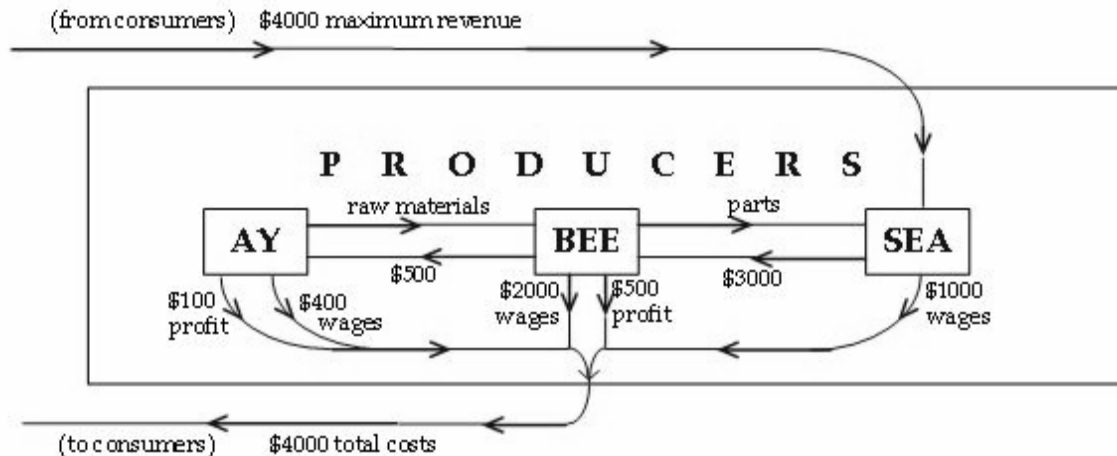
"None that weren't anticipated and avoided by appropriate counter-measures. Profit was always very counter-productive. As well as utterly taken for granted. You win some, you lose some: a truism hiding the obvious, that any profit must have a counterbalancing loss. Which means that even if *everyone* competes with maximum efficiency, there are still losers—and no surety for winners of not joining them. Poor people, poor nations, always."

"Marx said as much ages ago," I exclaimed angrily. "Didn't he? But you said profit is the ultimate factor behind business cycles. Why? You haven't explained that at all."

"Sorry, I digressed. It can be explained very simply. If prices include profits, not all goods produced can be afforded. And if an economy can't afford its own prices, then sooner or later it has to falter."

I was expecting more—much more—but he remained silent. Had he finished his explanation? "That's Say's Law isn't it?" I said, losing patience. "No, wait—that's the opposite of Say's Law. It claimed there was *always* enough money to afford everything produced. Although Keynes disproved that back in the thirties."

"The *nineteen* thirties, yes. But Keynes did not demonstrate how *fundamentally* wrong Say's Law is. Let me show you." Wilbur found a pen and paper and began to sketch something resembling the standard textbook depiction of the economic flow.



"Think of a simple economy with just three producers—or three groups of producers, each at different stages of production. One company or group of companies, Ay, digs up raw materials and sells them to another, Bee, which fashions parts from them which they sell to a manufacturer, Sea, which turns them into completed retail products. The money paid by Sea to Bee covers Bee's wages and profits, and Bee's payments to Ay covers Ay's wages and profits. Add all that up, as well as Sea's wage costs, and you get the total cost of the retail goods. But if the goods' prices exceed their costs—that is, if their prices include a profit—then they can't be afforded. The money paid to people during the construction of the goods is only enough to cover their costs, and even then only if Ay and Bee spend all their profits on Sea's products. If Ay or Bee retain profits, Sea loses by the same amount."

"I don't follow," I reluctantly conceded.

"All right. Let's give it some numbers. Bee pays Ay \$500 to cover its profit of \$100 and its wages of \$400. Sea pays Bee \$3000 to cover its \$500 payment to Ay, its wages of \$2000 and its profit of \$500. And Sea has its own wage bill of \$1000. Add it up—a total of \$3400 has been paid in wages for all three companies, and \$600 has been made as profit by Ay and Bee. So there can only be \$4000 available to spend on Sea's products. Which, of course, matches Sea's costs, but not its profit-inclusive prices. However, if Ay and Bee keep their profits, then there's only \$3400 in wages to cover Sea's \$4000 in costs—it loses by the same amount that Ay and Bee profit. If Sea is a group of producers, some of them might profit, but the total for all of them will be a loss equal to the profits of Ay and Bee. All in all, profits balance losses, and the economy can at best afford its costs but not its prices—not as long as they include profits. But if the economy can't afford its own prices, then sooner or later it has to falter—businesses will go bankrupt and the economy will go into recession."

"There must be some mistake," I said. I'd followed his words precisely this time, and found no fault, but there had to be one. In just a few minutes—this dream was turning into a macroeconomics lecture—he'd explained something fundamental, yet which somehow had never been mentioned in all the years I studied economics at school and university.

"I assure you there is no mistake. Not all profits can be afforded. The issue was raised over two centuries ago, though it received almost no attention after the Great Depression until earlier this century. But since then, it's been verified time and again. Not all can win at competition."

"But some goods *must* sell for a profit."

"Certainly, *some* do, but others don't. There's a mixture of profits and losses, the total balancing to zero. But for those who lose, and any employees they might shed, there is less to spend, so they retard growth, which encourages recession. Capitalism thus has instability in-built, a proneness to fall over sooner or later. A direct and unavoidable consequence of its inclusion of profit in prices."

"Wait a minute." To my surprise, I felt angry. But not so much I couldn't think clearly. "What about credit? People could borrow money to afford profit margins."

"That's exactly what they did. And I suppose you could say it worked—sort of—but only temporarily. It was really just a delaying tactic. Initially, credit allowed more profits to be afforded, but eventually it exacerbated the likelihood of loss, because the lenders themselves were trying to profit. The only way for sufficient numbers of businesses *and* lenders to keep profiting was for debt to increase continuously and at an escalating rate: new debt had to be issued to cover the profit gained by earlier loans *and* their repayment, then the same and more again in the next round, over and over. But injecting credit into economies more quickly than debt repayments siphoned it back out not only reinforced the real problem, it also could not be sustained. For years at a time, the attempts did manage to ensure plenty of profits, but only by putting off the day of ultimate reckoning via a precarious and ever-mounting stack of cards prone to eventual collapse when one decent economic sneeze caused the lenders themselves to lose—as inevitably happened. Then loss could no longer be delayed, with the result that economies sank into recession or depression."

Perhaps I *wasn't* thinking so clearly. The credit squeeze that ushered in the Global Financial Crisis came suddenly to mind. But I wasn't ready to give up. "What about government spending? Can't that afford everything?"

"How? Governments always afforded things by borrowing money themselves, which, as I just explained, doesn't work. Or they tried taxation, which doesn't increase the funds available for purchase—it just redistributes the existing pool of money."

I was momentarily quiet, stymied by his words—and ill at ease because of their use of past tense—but grappling for a response. Hoping for inspiration, I drained the rest of my port. An idea immediately arrived, convincing me in a moment. "I know! There's always extra money from exports."

"Hardly always. Certainly not if more is spent importing than is gained by exporting. But even if there's a net gain from exports, it just passes the problem to another country. Imports and exports only redistribute money between nations, they don't increase the net amount available to all."

Again, I struggled to find a retort, and when at last it presented itself, I was again sure it was the right one. "Growth!" I blurted out, smiling widely. "Of course, that's why it's necessary. Economic growth provides the money to afford everything."

"No it does not. Economic growth simply means more money is being *spent*. It may come from increased profits, credit, export income, and/or government spending—but none of these on their own or in combination can afford *every* profit, so neither can growth. The problem stems not from how much is spent, but *how* it is spent. At best, growth can only provide short-term success for some, without actually addressing the fundamental problem. As I said, not everyone can win a competition. Some win, others lose. And the over-riding consequence of that fact is that a profit-based system is inherently unstable."

I was still not convinced. I stared at his diagram, repeatedly adding up the figures without ever getting different results, and desperately trying to figure a way out. My mind started to broil. If this was all a dream, how could I have become aware of what Wilbur had just told me? We had a sceptical economics tutor one year at Uni—had he mentioned it? It certainly wouldn't have been part of the curriculum. Or had I perhaps somehow recognised it myself but not consciously? Was this dream—this ridiculous complicated dream—the only way it could be brought to my proper attention? Why after so many years? Surely my subconscious had not been brewing over it all this time? Surely it had not taken this long to figure it out?

"By the time this was widely accepted," continued Wilbur, "capitalism had become an arbitrary choice, but its use, habitual. So it hung on, persisting against its own failure."

"What option was there?" I responded hotly. I felt obliged to defend what I knew. "Socialism had failed. There was only capitalism." I surprised myself at my use of the past tense, but was distracted by inner doubts as well as caught up in the discussion.

"Let me put it this way," said Wilbur. "If I only know how to make two types of cake, I might suggest the chocolate cake, not the orange cake, is the most effective way of keeping hunger at bay—but only if I close my options now. Otherwise, one day I might learn to bake, say, a poppy seed cake." He did his best to stifle a yawn, but it was obvious nonetheless. "It's getting late," he said, glancing at a watch.

Another surprise. I glanced outside to verify it was still twilight, then at the kitchen clock. "You're joking. It's barely six thirty. Don't tell me everyone goes to bed at dusk in this so-called future."

"No, they don't. However, for the most part, I do."

"You some sort of anti-vampire?"

"Right. Need a blood donation?" He smiled in a way which, for some reason I could not fathom, gave me a sense of discomfort. "My sleeping habits are unusual, I admit, but we all have our idiosyncrasies." He drained his glass. "I have to return home, Ernest."

"Steven!" I said between gritted teeth.

"Sorry," he said as he began to stand. "You should try and get some sleep yourself."

"I'm already asleep, remember?"

He gave me a considered look, but did not respond for some time. "If you need anything, my number is on your babel."

"No, wait, please stay." I did not want to be left alone. "Just a few more minutes. I'm not sleepy at all." Even if I had been, I would have resisted falling asleep *within* this dream. I certainly didn't like the idea that I was supposed to have already slept a day away.

"Probably from having woken so late," said Wilbur. "But I really must get home."

"What about transferring my needay? You said in the restaurant you'd show me how."

"Right," said Wilbur, blinking rapidly. "I did. Well, fortunately, it won't take long." He paused in thought momentarily. "We'll use your computer, I think—a bit easier than a babel."

I followed him into the study. I hadn't realised a computer was there when I'd been in the room earlier. Its screen was as thin as soft cardboard, and despite its flatness about as flexible; its top edge was adhered (I'm not sure how) to the edge of one of the shelves above the desk, the rest hung below without any visible connection to anything else. What material it was made of I could not guess. There was no box with actual hardware as far as I could tell (I later spent some time looking for it without luck, so I had to assume it was either wirelessly networked from a different room or somehow contained *within* the display screen). When Wilbur turned it on by tapping the screen with a finger, there was no loading phase—the desktop was instantly available. There was also no mouse—Wilbur tapped one of the desktop icons, and almost immediately an Internet site appeared (the browser looked different but I still recognised it as the same freeware I used at home).

The Internet page announced itself as the official city of Chord site, and included a roster of all work scheduled to be performed by the city's entire workforce. I don't mean the city council either. I mean every person who lived within the city's borders. Wilbur made a quick flurry of finger taps and slides, interspersed twice with text he typed using a very thin keyboard on the desk, with no apparent physical connection to the screen. In no time, Wilbur found my name—or rather that of Ernest. Listed with it was his work schedule for the year. I was stunned, yet again. It was surprising enough to see only seven hours of work listed for each week, but I found it even harder to accept that there would be four different locations and types of work to perform over the same year. Every three months, the job changed to something totally different. According to what was displayed, Ernest had already spent time that year delivering groceries, and assembling children's toys, and was scheduled for cleaning in the year's final quarter.

"Ernest must be a very poor historian to be doing work like this," I said. "What was his award *really* for? Most outstanding research error?"

"You are—he is well respected in the field."

"Then why does he spend so much time in menial jobs? For that matter, how does he earn enough from them to live this comfortably?" I swept my arm to indicate the house.

"To answer that properly would take too long. Some other time perhaps. Suffice it to say that you, like everyone else, are rewarded suitably for the labour you perform. But more fundamentally, a standard of living similar to this is your birth right. Now, please observe as I transfer your needay."

There was little to observe: a few finger movements selected the date in question—which I was a little surprised to find was almost two weeks *earlier* than the day I fell asleep—and a 'transfer' option, at which point Wilbur typed Alice's full name in the resultant dialogue box. The computer responded with the name (and address) of the closest match in its records, and asked that it be verified as correct, which Wilbur did.

"That's it?!" I said.

"That's it," replied Wilbur, okaying the screen. "Though Alice will need to verify it at some stage."

"But where's the security? There's no logon code, no personal ID number, nothing."

"You are identified by the computer, nevertheless."

"O? It knows what I look like?"

"Yes," said Wilbur, deadpan. "Though a hair cut can sometimes fool it."

I gave him what I hoped was a suitably withering gaze.

He stifled another yawn. "Like your babel, input from this computer address identifies you to the network as Ernest—"

"Steven."

"Whoever. The point is, like most, you've elected not to use the logon option."

"But then someone else could use this computer, and transfer my work to them."

"Yeeesss," said Wilbur, "but it would be picked up the next time you turned up for work."

"What if it was done just before I went on a long vacation?"

Wilbur stared at me with a blank expression. "Why won't you let me sleep? What possible benefit would what you suggest have for the person supposedly doing it?"

"My wage, of course!"

"Your...?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Wilbur sighed, then spoke so slowly I expected him to start swinging a chain watch in front of my eyes: "Your income would be the same, whether you worked or not."

I loudly snorted a sceptical chortle. "A guaranteed income?" I scorned, smiling in disbelief.

He looked me in the eyes, blinking widely. Slowly, almost melodramatically, he raised a hand and repeatedly tapped his index finger on a spot midway between his eyes. "More or less," he said. His eyebrows furrowed briefly, as if remembering something, then he suddenly moved his fingertip to tap the end of his nose.

I stared at him, incredulous.

## 6

# Choices

"Have you forgotten even the nature of modern money?" he gently asked, lowering his hand.

"No," I grated, angry again. "I never remembered it in the first place. I am *not* Ernest." I sighed loudly. "Remind me next time I dream of you to make you less stubborn."

"Perhaps," said Wilbur, as if I'd said nothing, "you should study the matter on your own." He moved to the bookcase, and scrutinised its contents carefully. "The Net has an abundance of information of course, and there are a number of vids in your collection that provide concise explanations of most topics you'd be interested in. But perhaps the best starting point would be to read this." He pulled a book from the shelves, and handed it to me. "It might even jog your memory back."

I was ready to again deny that my memory needed jogging, but thought better of it. It would have been a waste of breath. Instead, I decided to take up Wilbur's suggestion of self-education. What else was there to do? Apparently I couldn't wake myself up, so I might as well spend my dream time as usefully as I could. I'd certainly need to learn more if I was ever going to trip Wilbur up in his explanations.

I took the book from his hand. Its title: *A Free Lunch*. "This must be a dream," I said, turning the book so its cover faced Wilbur. "There's no such thing as this."

"Why don't you read it anyway?" he said with a gracious but tired smile, and started walking out of the room. "I really must be going."

"Just one more thing," I said, following him. "You said something about 'vids'? Do you mean videos?"

"Of course," he replied with a gentle sigh, stopping in the lounge. "You have an extensive collection on your computer."

"Can I watch them on the TV?"

Sighing more deeply, he moved toward the TV. "Of course," he said, grabbing what was obviously a remote control device sitting near its base. "All your audiovisual devices are networked." He handed the remote to me. "Just use the menu—it should be fairly obvious."

I quickly studied the controls and found many familiar icons. "Some things never change. Although I'm surprised you still have computer files. No innovation to replace them in forty years?"

"Cars are still in use, nearly two centuries after they were invented," said Wilbur moving to the front door. I followed him. "And toilet paper," he added.

"And a keyboard for the computer!" I replied. "I would have expected voice control instead."

"It's available, but, like me, you grew up using a keyboard," he replied wearily. "I remember you telling me you never could get the hang of voice commands." He turned to me as he opened the door. "I'll be over first thing tomorrow morning. But call me if you need me, ok?"



"Sure," I said, suddenly grateful. His obstinacy in believing me to be Ernest no longer seemed important let alone infuriating. "And..." As usual, I could not properly voice my feelings. I settled for a cliché. "Thanks."

He smiled and started to walk off. "See you tomorrow."

I closed the door, returned to the sofa, poured another glass of port, and opened the book. Now, I thought, *I'll find the flaw in the design. The overlooked detail.* I fully expected to quickly and easily find a glaring inconsistency in the book, one—or several—that would reveal Wilbur as a liar, and his alleged future as a pretence. "Bankers don't exist!" I chuckled to myself, scanning the book's table of contents.

But the book was not what I expected. For a start, its publication date was 2026—not the supposedly up-to-date tome I was expecting at all. And although it was mostly a fairly dry read—unavoidably so given the subject matter—it was relieved somewhat by the author's sardonic if occasionally juvenile wit (evident in his or her choice of pseudonym: I.C.Futcher).

A version of the diagram Wilbur had drawn was in the first chapter, with an explanation more rigorous and, at times, more eloquent than his, but no different in content. Additional detail about the nature of credit took my attention: I studied it keenly, hoping desperately, though ultimately in vain, to fault it. It distinguished credit provided to producers from that borrowed by consumers. For producers, prices must be set high enough to cover their costs, make a profit, *and* repay their debt and its interest. But whether funded by credit or not, still businesses who profit—whether by producing goods and services or by lending money—deprive others of doing so.

On the other hand, consumer credit actually *increases* purchasing power, enough to cover profit margins—for a while at least. In fact, enough consumer credit could cover *every* producer's profit, although actual consumer expenditure would never be spread so evenly as to achieve this. Even if it did, it would work only initially, because repaying consumer debt requires eventually foregoing some other purchase, which again means that eventually not every producer profits, or else the consumer defaults on the debt and the lender fails to profit. Credit ultimately fails to ensure the affording of profits because lenders themselves seek to profit: if they succeed, someone else must lose. Looking at the processes over time, and at producers and lenders together, profit and loss still must balance.

I pushed on (though I returned every now and again to the section with Wilbur's diagram, in the unfulfilled hope that a fresh examination of it would reveal its flaw). Subsequent chapters provided details to support the first's contention that what were widely thought of as the world's most intractable problems were mere symptoms of the underlying disease—capitalism. Market competition for profits, it was claimed, not only ensures instability, makes costs and prices fundamentally inaccurate, and creates unnecessary work, it also inevitably fosters poverty and inequality, and generally causes rampant ecological degradation. Addressing the symptoms without curing the disease was futile.

Absorbed despite my misgivings, I continued reading until well after midnight, when I must have fallen asleep.

I was awakened by a soft dawn, still in the sofa, the book open on my lap, the upsetting diagram staring at me.

Surprise—not at the book, nor the surroundings, but that I'd fallen asleep. No surprise at waking somewhere other than in my own bed—until I realised I *hadn't* been surprised by it!

I leapt to my feet like a hiccupping marionette.

It was too cosy, too familiar—yet I knew it wasn't home, and that I wasn't Ernest.

I *had* to be dreaming—dreaming that I had just been asleep for a few hours, and was now fully refreshed from it (and from a long 'slumber' the preceding day). At least I couldn't remember 'dreaming' during my just finished 'sleep'. But then I remembered the dream within the dream, at Wilbur's, of Yvette as a demon. And realised walking the bush road naked must also have been another dream within a dream. It was *all* a dream, at one level or another, I was sure—even more sure now that I'd 'woken'.

"Wake up properly," I said to myself. To no avail.

I wanted it to end. I wanted to go home. Even dreaming, I missed Yvette. And the kids. I had to wake up properly soon. Surely?

But I didn't.

"Why is this happening?" I asked myself aloud. Why was my subconscious putting me through it? Why pretend I'd been transported forty years into the future?!

Forty years. My age, next birthday—less than two weeks away.

I hadn't felt especially bothered about turning forty. Other recent birthdays had also had little impact. Ageing held only one real concern for me: my hair continuing its gradual migration from the top of my head to my ears, upper cheeks and other egregious locations. A nasty image oft came unbidden: of retirement years' baldness inadequately camouflaged by the ultimate comb-over, eyebrows brushed up and over my scalp (perhaps parted in the middle).

But maybe my lack of concern about turning forty was just a front, something I'd convinced myself to believe but really didn't. Perhaps some deep discomfort resided in my subconscious, suppressed to such an extent that this elaborate dream was the only way it could reach the surface? Perhaps I was in fact deeply worried about getting older but unwilling to admit it even to myself? Perhaps I was even having a mid-life crisis?

Suddenly desperate, and lonely, in need of action to distract unwelcome thoughts, I attempted again to contact Yvette. I called information, jotted down the two numbers I'd previously located. When I called the Wunsa Pond number, an elderly male voice answered.

"Can I speak to Yvette Stone, please?" I said.

"She's unavailable at the moment. Can I take a message?"

Was there something oddly familiar about the voice? I could not quite grasp what. "Who am I speaking to, please?" I said.

"This is her husband."

"O, I'm sorry. I think I must have the wrong number. Sorry to have bothered you."

The other number was just as much a waste of time. Though I spoke directly to an Yvette Stone, she was a middle-aged spinster who was utterly confused by the call.

I tried to reassure myself that it didn't matter, that as far as this dream was concerned, I was on my own. All I could do was look forward to seeing Yvette again when I awoke. *Really* awoke. Whenever that might be.

For further distraction, I decided to take a shower. Something ordinary to counteract the overarching strangeness of recent events.

But even after all the shocks I'd experienced, the shower came as yet another surprise—unlike the water-scarce toilet, it was perfectly *normal*. A control for setting the water's temperature, sliding glass doors, a fine miserly spray, unspectacular tap handles—it was everything I was used to. Half expecting a gust of hot air to burst forth and dry me the moment I turned off the water, I instead was forced by its absence to resort to the conventional method of using a towel. As I dried myself, I belatedly realised the lump behind my ear, ever less bothersome, was now without pain, and no longer swollen.

Since I could not find anything resembling a shaver, I had no option but to keep my stubble. Its length was consistent with Wilbur's story about me being unconscious for almost a day. "It's a dream," I reminded myself.

I searched through Ernest's wardrobe, for clothes to wear. It contained not one item in plain colours, not even simple denims. Most of the other people I'd seen in the streets and restaurant dressed far less flamboyantly, more or less as normal—only Ernest seemed to have the dress sense of a colour blind costume designer for an experimental dance company, beset by a permanent hangover.

Some time and considerable deliberation later, I resorted to the least ornate pair of trousers, dark olive mostly except for white hems and linings; a relatively simple shirt full of grey, black, and white fractals; and a light V-neck top, white at the neck but darkening gradually to a sort of faded burnt orange at the cuffs and hem. Far too brash for my tastes, but better than what I had been wearing, and much better than other options, such as a widely flared pair of woollen slacks in four alternating primary colours, legs split to the knee like a skirt; a bright green, floral, short-sleeved, velvet shirt with silver pockets as reflective as mirrors; and a cyan pseudo-vinyl jacket—full of convoluted frills, frays, belts, loops and multiply coloured pockets—the thought of which still makes me shudder.

Best not even to mention the underwear.

Oddly, I felt no sense of being an invader, not even soon after, when I tidied Ernest's room. I began to wonder: shouldn't I have felt out of place, at least a little guilty or uncomfortable at using someone else's house and clothes? Was my lack of discomfort evidence that I really was Ernest?

No, of course not. Ernest didn't exist. It was a dream.

Hungry, I prepared a light breakfast. The stove was familiar enough—despite its odd icons—to allow me to boil a couple of eggs. And the toaster worked as any toaster, though like the kettle it didn't require a socket. As far as futures went, this one seemed an odd mix of the familiar and the outlandish. *Some* technology, like most of the kitchen facilities, was barely different from what I knew, but some of the rest, like the restaurant menu-tabletop, was novel, if not exactly unprecedented. It made sense, I decided: how could my subconscious be expected to invent something startlingly new for absolutely everything? Even if I dreamt of a future millions of years distant, rather than just forty, it would surely contain familiar elements. Like forks and flowers, underpants and doors. As well as extrapolations of the familiar. And, undoubtedly, as I belatedly realised, devices from long-forgotten sci-fi novels.

Eating, I felt oddly grateful for the normalcy of the day so far. Then—not for the first time—I realised how utterly normal my life had become. A growing concern, prompted perhaps by the looming birthday, but also by how the years were racing past me ever more quickly. Best not to dwell on such unpleasant unavoidable facts, but hard not to at times. Especially since the chest pains started. Nothing like the prospect of a possibly premature death to focus attention on one's life.

A loud knock at the front door interrupted my breakfast reverie.

"Good morning," said Wilbur, on the doorstep. Next to him: a man about my age, a little short, with a thick ginger moustache, sparkling blue eyes, pasty complexion. His short-cropped hair failed to hide his advancing baldness, and he wore an eye-bruising floral shirt.

Before I could reply to Wilbur's salutation, his companion rushed forward, shrieked "Ernie, Ernie, Ernie," encircled me in a strong embrace, and buried his head against my shoulder. "Are you feeling all right?" he cried. "Is there anything I can do for you?" He lifted his head, looked me straight in the eye, his arms still around me.

Immobilised by surprise, not knowing how to respond, I looked from him to Wilbur and back again—several times.

"O, it's true," said the man, with anguish. "You don't remember me. You don't remember poor old Mattie! O Ernie!" A tear began to form in one eye, and he threw his head against my shoulder again. "Ernie, Ernie, Ernie," he wailed.

I looked to Wilbur, with no doubt a confused expression, hoping he'd explain.

Suddenly Mattie turned an imploring gaze on me. He inhaled deeply. "O Ernie," he sighed.

"Do I know you?" I said, almost in a whisper.

Tears erupted, streaming down Mattie cheek's. "Even in the biblical sense," he said. "Perhaps this will help you remember." Then, to my unmitigated horror, he kissed me passionately on the lips.

I struggled from his grip and pushed him away, feverishly wiping my mouth. "What the hell are you doing?!" His anguish and tears stopped, instantly turning to quivering disappointment. We both turned to Wilbur. "Who is this?" I said loudly.

Wilbur finally spoke. "This is Mattie Lindquist."

"O Ernie," wailed Mattie. "You must remember me. We were married for almost ten years."

"Married?!" I exclaimed. I could almost feel a tail feather sprouting.

## 7

# Home and Away

For several moments, I could not find any other words. Apparently, neither could Wilbur, nor Mattie who looked very glum, his tears now sobs.

Belatedly realising we were all still standing on or near the doorstep, I silently waved them inside and gestured toward the living area. Mattie wiped his tears with a colourful handkerchief.

When we reached the living room, Wilbur broke the silence. "I was hoping Mattie would revive your memories, Ernest."

"Steven!" I erupted, far too loudly. "Whatever you damned well think, my name is Steven. Will you please call me Steven!?"

Mattie blubbered a little more loudly, but said nothing. Wilbur retained his poker-face, and watched me intently. Apparently, none of us were relaxed enough to sit down.

"Surely now," I said, "you must realise I'm not Ernest. For god's sake, I'm not gay. I have two children." Hardly any proof of being heterosexual, not in a world of IVF, surrogate mothers and adoptions. But I pushed on. "If I *had* been married to you—I'd remember!"

"O Ernie," wailed Mattie, fresh tears springing forth.

I sighed loudly. "This is ridiculous," I said, turning to Wilbur. "I suppose the next thing you'll tell me is you and I are lovers."

Wilbur smiled. "No, we're just friends. Although we have become close, I would say, having spent so much time on your project."

"What project?"

"Your latest historical project." He turned to Mattie, and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Mattie—I really thought you would bring back Ernest's memories."

Calming down a little, and in deference to Mattie's distress, I restrained from correcting Wilbur about my name.

"I'll be all right," said Mattie, sniffing.

"Perhaps you'd like a tea?" Wilbur asked him.

"No," said Mattie. "Thanks, but I really should be going. My needay starts shortly." He finished wiping his tears.

"I'll drive you there," said Wilbur.

Mattie pocketed his handkerchief and started making his way to the front door, followed by Wilbur.

"Perhaps you should wait a few minutes," I said, starting to feel compassion, but remaining in the living room. "Until you feel more at ease."

"No, thank you Ernie." He stopped, and looked contrite. "I'm sorry, I can't call you Steven. To me, you'll always be my sweet Ernie." He looked like he was on the verge of rushing to embrace me again, but then suddenly opened the door and left without another word or even glance.

Wilbur lingered on the doorstep, facing me. "I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"I divorced *him*," I said, quietly. "Right? Not the other way round."

"Yes," said Wilbur. Then, hopefully, "You remember?"

"No, I do *not* remember. It just figures."

Wilbur left.

Almost at once, the room darkened. Through a window, I could see a large dark puffy cloud pass over the sun, many more close behind, towering up to stratospheric heights. *How appropriate*, I thought. *For my state of mind*. Lightning and thunder when I arrived in this dream, and now soon to return. So soon. How long had it been? Quick recalls of a bush-walk, supposed sleep the rest of that day and most of the next, the rest of that with Wilbur—that was yesterday... so, I'd been in Jibilee just two days. Or more likely one day, if the bush walk was, as I suspected, a dream within a dream.

Jibilee! I abruptly realised that for all I'd learned since 'waking' at Wilbur's, I still didn't know exactly where Jibilee was—where the hell *I* was. That suddenly seemed important as I watched storm clouds gather.

So I moved to Ernest's study, started the computer and the web browser, and quickly found some maps. I barely recognised Australia. Its outline was unchanged (mercifully!), but there was no sign of any states, consistent with what Wilbur had said. Capital cities were gone, too, though hordes of much smaller cities with unfamiliar names occupied their locations. Most of the rural areas—apart from the expansive deserts and mountain ranges of course—were similarly dotted with mostly new names, clustered into small interconnected groups. I magnified the view, to reveal a decentralised fractal network, each level mimicking the next. It disoriented me. "Where the hell am I?" I bemoaned, unaware of having clichéd. Eventually I found Chord in what should have been marked as Victoria, on the outskirts of where Melbourne should have been.

I was indeed home. Or very near it at least: Chord was a few kilometres further from the old city centre than the house I lived in with Yvette and our children. I magnified the view further to hone in on Jibilee, which turned out to be near the outskirts of Chord—in what I always knew of as a rural area. In a similarly contradictory fashion, I saw no marks of habitation where my house and its neighbours should have been, hardly even any roads. My home might have been only a long walk away, but there was no obvious route to it.

Call it homesickness, but I felt a burning desire to see it. I felt no certainty that I would—as the map implied, this dream might well decide to have something entirely different there in its place—but I felt an overpowering urge to try.

When Wilbur returned, I wasted no time explaining my desire, showed him the location on the computer, and pointed out there was no point me trekking blindly about in unfamiliar territory when someone who presumably knew his way could help me. He immediately agreed. Perhaps he thought the exercise would prove to me that I was wrong.

But when we exited the front door, storm clouds building above us, and lightning flashing, I froze. There under the carport was a two-seater car like those I'd seen since waking in Wilbur's room—but with the exact deep violet colour as the one driven by the demon! Just as I saw it, a thunderclap erupted. Clichéd even for a dream, though I was too stunned to realise it at the time.

"Are you all right?" said Wilbur, snapping me out of my shock.

"Uh... yeah, sure," I lied, still staring at the car. *Dreams within dreams*, I silently reminded myself. But my mounting sense of discomfort did not ease.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," said Wilbur.

With an effort, I turned my attention to him, and tried to hide my anxiety. "Not quite. Just surprised by the thunder."

Wilbur did not look entirely convinced, but must have decided to put his doubts aside. "Well, if we're going, can I suggest we get in before the rain starts?"

I hesitated before nodding agreement, and moved to the car. *There must be plenty of cars the same colour*, I tried to convince myself—I just hadn't seen any until now. Surreptitiously, or so I hoped, I checked inside for demons ready to pounce. Finding none, I cautiously took a seat.

As Wilbur entered the car, his prominent wrist bracelet clinked against the door.

"Is that a family heirloom?" I asked.

Wilbur suddenly smiled, almost slyly. "No."

Only then did I notice that the car had no steering wheel or floor pedals. I turned to Wilbur, ready to voice my surprise, only to see him hover his hand over what looked like a small button on the blank dashboard—which suddenly lit up with mostly familiar but entirely digital signs: speedometer, odometer, econometer, others. Wilbur gripped what looked like a joystick—at steering wheel height, and in front of him but to one side, atop an arm rest on the door—and in apparent response to his gentle pressure, the car backed out of the driveway. A similar joystick and armrest was also present, dangling down from the dashboard, in the middle of the front seats, apparently ready to be pivoted up for the passenger to control or to suit a left-handed driver. The engine was inaudible. Only when I lowered my window and listened for it, could I hear its faint hum. But I had to close the window almost immediately, as rain began to fall—lightly at first, then torrentially.

I said nothing, but watched Wilbur carefully, eventually realising that pulling back on the stick caused the car to break, tilting it to the left or right steered the car, and a button near the top of the stick switched from reverse to forward (and back again presumably). As well as seeing no gears, I felt none being changed.

As Wilbur drove, I kept expecting him to speed up. After what seemed a small eternity but was probably no more than two minutes, full of rolling thunder and dazzling lightning, I could stand the slow-motion no longer. "Even this rain doesn't warrant such sloth," I exclaimed. "Can't this thing go any faster?"

"Considerably, but not without breaking the law."

"You're only doing thirty kilometres an hour!"

"Yes, the limit."

"Thirty?! Fifty, surely?"

"Thirty is the maximum speed allowed on any residential road—except for emergency vehicles of course."

"But it's so slow. How can you hold yourself to such a speed?"

"Like most things, it's a matter of practice. Or would be if it weren't for the automatic speed limiter. Those who are in a hurry, like yourself apparently, must simply content themselves with knowing that the speed limit makes it very difficult to cause a fatality. The traffains, of course, are considerably faster."

"Traffains?" I said, half expecting another tail feather to sprout.

"The main traffic arteries."

Almost as soon as he said this, we turned onto something resembling a freeway, but augmented by well separated and protected bicycle lanes, a rail line down the

middle, and with a traffic volume barely as much as a typical main street after midnight. Wilbur quickly accelerated to one hundred kph, matching the handful of Concorde-cars within sight.

Lining both sides of the road were dense screening hedges and trees, not a house or construction in sight. I thought we must have left Chord, but when I quizzed Wilbur, he said we were still on its outskirts, houses not far on either side of us. I looked in vain for them—only giving up when Wilbur announced we *were* leaving Chord. Try as I might, I could not see any transition in the landscape whatsoever.

To my further inquiries, Wilbur explained that intra-city traffains had different 'levels', depending on their location: slower, less spacious ones were linked to faster versions. Ours was the fastest in Chord, connecting it to neighbouring cities.

A winding exit put us on a straight bitumen road just wide enough for two cars, but devoid of traffic. Wilbur slowed slightly.

The storm was easing by then, as I tried to see into the thick open bushland flanking the sides of the road. There was nothing about it in particular that I recognised, yet it held an eerie sense of familiarity...

Constant rain... constant wipers... dripping kangaroos... dim rain-drenched forested hills... one like a truncated pyramid... bridge over a creek... steep banks...

"Stop!" I shouted, moments after crossing the bridge. Wilbur obliged without the half-expected screech of tyres, braking gently and unhurriedly. "Can you back up to the bridge?" I said. He did so, and as I looked through the car window at the creek, its surface covered with the rain's tumult, I knew this was where I had rested shortly before seeing the demon. I was on the same road I had walked two days before.

"This road stops being straight about now," I said, "doesn't it? It starts winding and curving, right?"

Wilbur studied me carefully it seemed, with just a hint of surprise on his poker-face. "Yes, I think so. Is your memory starting to come back, Ernest?"

"Not of Ernest's life—but of what happened to me, soon after this dream started. You can drive on now."

He did, and yes, for the next two or more kilometres, the road curved and was exactly as I remembered it.

My bush walk couldn't have been a dream, after all, I realised.

Or at least not a separate one.

But then that meant the demon was part of this dream too.

Unless only my bush walk was part of this dream, and I fell asleep within it without realising, and dreamt of the demon?

Aaagh! It should have been academic which level of the dream the demon appeared in, yet it wasn't. I wanted him as far away as possible.

The last drops of rain ended, and storm clouds began to lift, as Wilbur slowed and stopped the car on the edge of the road. "This is it," he said. "Where you wanted me to take you. Or as far as we can go by car at least. The spot you're interested in is about a hundred metres through there." He pointed into the bush on the left. It looked like the surrounding landscape—there was nothing to distinguish it as a residential area, or as ever having been one.

We left the car and tramped up a gentle slope.

"What is it you hope to see here?" Wilbur asked.

"I don't really know. Something! A sign, perhaps. I don't know." This journey was a mirror image of my walk when the dream began, but I had to admit there was every chance it would prove to be utterly futile.



"All you're likely to see is more bush," said Wilbur. "There've been no houses here for two or three decades, not since the local land use structure was finalised."

"You mean there *were* houses here," I said, surprise and hope mingling just beyond the grip of rationality.

"Yes. A few. Mostly old and fairly scattered. But they were recycled, and the immediate area devoted to natural bush, though there's some farmland a few kilometres to the north. You can see how recent the changes were—apart from a few older specimens, the trees here are all less than thirty years old."

We walked in silence for a few minutes, my mind running over Wilbur's words. I could not put my finger on it—or perhaps deep down I did not want to—but there was something very unsettling about what he'd said.

Lost in unresolved thoughts, it did not seem long before Wilbur halted. "Well," he said, "as near as I can make it, we're here." He looked at me. "This is where you wanted me to take you."

I looked about us. It was just more of the same non-descript bush I'd seen before, full of tall native grasses, dense shrubs and towering trees. This *couldn't* have been where my home was meant to be. "Are you sure?" I asked, plaintively.

"As sure as I can be. Nice spot." He suddenly raised his eyes skyward, bent forward at the waist to almost a forty-five degree angle, and, pressing thumb and forefinger of one hand lightly together near his mouth, fluttered the remaining fingers. "A hamburger joint'd really clean up here," he said in a lazy American accent.

I was too surprised by his actions, and disappointed by what we'd found, to realise for some seconds that Wilbur had just done the worst Groucho Marx impersonation I'd ever seen. Another reason to groan.

Mockingly, storm clouds suddenly parted for the sun to cascade off raindrops suspended in the surrounding greenery. A taller tree, perhaps thirty metres away behind many others, stood out, its striking white bark almost blinding in the sudden sun.

I rushed towards it.

Wilbur followed hurriedly. "What is it?" he asked, impersonating no one.

When I reached it, I was in no doubt: it was the same tree I had seen after 'awakening', the taller thicker version of the one outside my bedroom window. And there too, the other, with the scar from a fallen branch, exactly where I remembered it relative to the first. The same as at home.

"This is it," I brayed. "Where I first woke up in this dream." I immediately realised the contradiction, but couldn't be bothered correcting it. "And this tree, and that one over there," I added, pointing, "they're in my garden at home. Except, here they're taller. I'm sure of it, we're standing where my bedroom should be."

A sudden and I must admit belated realisation struck me. "Where my bedroom *was*! This is where my home *was*!" The trees *were* those outside my home, but older. Even the creek was the one Yvette was involved with, but after decades of devoted care, it had recuperated and thrived.

"I *have* travelled in time," I whispered in shock.



# Part Three

## Who

"...we need to know not just what to rebel *against* but what to rebel *for*."

Peter Cadogan, *Direct Democracy*



## 8

# Self-Evident

Wilbur ended the ensuing pregnant silence with solemn deadpan: "There's no evidence for that assertion."

"I'm the evidence," I retorted.

"Inconclusive at best, since everyone thinks you're Ernest."

"I'm telling you I must have travelled in time. It all fits."

"No one is likely to believe that without conclusive evidence."

"Like what?! A convenient, uniquely identifiable artefact from the period? Sorry, I forgot to pack luggage. Remember? No pockets."

I looked long and hard at Wilbur, but could discern no reaction. His irritating alternation between emotionless passivity and lame humour seemed inhuman. Unreal...

"What am I talking about!?" I suddenly realised. "I'm simply *dreaming* I've travelled in time. Of course. It's all perfectly consistent, which this dream has been from the start. If somewhat incomprehensible. I dreamt I woke up in my bedroom forty years in the future, but my bedroom was no longer there, nor my house, just some old trees still standing." I turned a rapid circle, suddenly feeling manic. "I have to hand it to my subconscious. It knows what's supposed to have happened in the last forty years even if I don't."

"Any chance," said Wilbur, "you know what your subconscious intended by *this*?" He was staring at the ground near my feet. He bent down and ran his fingers along a line of burnt grass, its shape outlining a person, outstretched, reclining. Me. When I first 'awoke'.

"I forgot about this," I said, bending closer. Within and around the outline, the grass had grown detectably (it was Spring after all)—but along the outline's centimetre width, there was only black stubble, burnt almost to the ground. "It was there when I woke up. I have no idea why."

Wilbur shot me an uncomfortable glance. "It looks a good match for your shape."

"It is! Perfect as far as I can tell."

"Would you mind verifying that?"

I *did* mind, thinking again of murder victims' chalk outlines. But it was irrational. As much to prove that to myself as to help Wilbur, I lay down on the wet grass.

"Fits like a glove," muttered Wilbur, oddly quiet. Almost concerned?

I stood hurriedly, brushed my damp clothes. "Do you know what it is?"

Wilbur shook his head, still staring at the outline. "It could be natural, but I doubt it." He opened his mouth to speak then stopped before looking me in the eye. "Only a proper analysis could answer your question. It may be nothing but I'll see if I can arrange something. So you woke up here then?"

"Yes. As I said."

"Lying down?"

"Yes, on my back. The same position as when I was last in my bedroom."

Again, Wilbur seemed to start to say something, then stopped and returned his attention to the outline.

"You suspect something," I said, "don't you? Tell me."

"Not until I have some evidence. After proper analysis."

"How long will that take?"

"Not long. Leave it to me... Is there anything else that happened after you woke here that perhaps you also forgot to tell me?"

His voice and face betrayed no suspicion, nevertheless I felt it. Still, something held me back from telling him about the demon. A long hesitant pause. Finally: "Yes." I thought his eyes widened in anticipation. "I stood on some kangaroo droppings. There, now you know as much as I do."

Wilbur neither blinked nor even breathed it seemed. I doubted the bacteria on his skin were moving. A moment later, intonation-free: "That explains the smell."

We barely spoke on the trip back, during which Wilbur seemed deep in thought. Not until we were very near Ernest's home did conversation resume.

"Doesn't it strike you," said Wilbur, without any preamble, "that everything is too detailed and realistic to be a dream?"

"It can't be real," I said, certain, after a troubled pause. "So it must be a dream."

"Why can't it be real?"

"Because it's forty years in my future! You know, I'm pretty sure I didn't step out of the house saying, 'Honey, I'm just taking the new time machine out for a spin round the century—be back before you know it.'"

Another granite wall impersonation later, Wilbur said, "There are other explanations."

"Like yours? That I'm really Ernest? That I walked in my sleep, got a bump on the head, and woke up thinking I'm someone else from a different time!? It's not possible."

"What makes you so sure?" Wilbur pulled into Ernest's driveway.

"Because I remember *nothing*! Not a single thing about Ernest's life or this city is familiar. Not his house or his work or his friends. And yet I remember my own life—my *real* life—with all the detail you'd expect. I can't believe any case of amnesia with or without false memories would be so thorough, that there wouldn't be some chink in it that lets through a real memory, however minor."

I moved to open the car door and exit, just as Wilbur replied, "It may just need more time."

Ready and eager to reply, but irritated, I forcefully pushed open the door and began to move out—only for the car door to rebound and jam my left foot between it and the car frame. The door rebounded again to stop slightly ajar, just as I erupted with a shriek of pain.

"Are you ok?" said Wilbur.

"Just dandy," I exclaimed between gritted teeth, grabbing at my foot. The pain was immense, and the pressure of my hands did nothing to relieve it. I re-channelled pain into anger and directed it at Wilbur. "This is just a custom we had back in 2025—of self-inflicting pain whenever we get lost in the future."

Wilbur watched studiously, uselessly, as I gingerly slipped off the shoe and sock beneath—my two smallest toes were already darkening and swelling. When I touched the smallest, it hurt so sharply, I feared the worst. "I think this one's broken."

"Let's get it looked at properly," said Wilbur. He restarted the engine. I shut my door—with excessive caution—and he pulled out of the driveway.

Soon after, he drove *past* his house.

"Where are you taking me?" I said, grimacing, as the pain increased. "To a hospital?"

"No," he replied, his eyes firmly on the road. "To Toby's. He's just a few streets along."

"Who the hell is Toby?"

"Toby. Doctor Toby Morrow."

Pain *and* confusion. "Can't *you* look at it?" I moaned, feeling in no state to deal with anyone new.

Another rare moment when Wilbur looked genuinely uncertain. "I'd rather Toby handle it. It's his specialty."

"He specialises in broken bones?!" I replied, unconvinced.

"Not exactly. But he's very good with sporting injuries and the like. And he *is* your doctor."

"My doctor?! I mean, Ernest's doctor?! I thought *you* were."

"No," came the quiet yet final reply.

"Then how come I woke up in *your* house?"

"I was looking after you. Toby made the diagnosis."

New doubts surfaced. Were these two doctors in cahoots? Conducting some sort of psychological research, monitoring the behaviour of someone ripped from the familiar into the bizarre? Or was I perhaps the victim of a medical experiment gone wrong?

I kept these doubts to myself, but viewed Wilbur with renewed distrust.

Minutes later, we arrived at the other doctor's—again, a house similar to Wilbur's, not a multi-practice clinic—and I hobbled inside, one arm round Wilbur's broad shoulders. By this stage, the part of my foot closest to the blackened toes was also swollen and bruised, and the entire area was throbbing, each pulse beat prominent and aggravating the pain. There were no other patients waiting for attention, so Toby (he insisted I call him this, claiming I'd done so for years) saw to me immediately.

Toby was about fifty, surprisingly tall and athletic, with a thick shock of curly white hair. He had a benevolent but occasionally hesitant bedside manner which only revived my doubts as to his *actual* purpose—especially when he kept calling me 'Ernest'. When I first objected, he took it in his stride (Wilbur, who had insisted on waiting in another room, must have told him about my 'amnesia'). "O, yes," he said, "forgot, sorry, force of habit." But then, almost immediately, he reverted to calling me 'Ernest'. After two or three more increasingly strident objections, each with no better result, I gave up.

His treatment of my injury was minimal. Holding what looked like a small camera over my foot, he turned its digital display towards me: an X-ray showing no broken bones. An injection followed: to reduce the swelling, he said, and to speed recovery and kill the pain. Then with what I first thought was a toothbrush, he drilled a small hole into the nail of my smallest toe—to allow the blood beneath to ooze out and release the pressure. The throbbing eased almost at once, though the sight of blood momentarily elevated my discomfort by, as usual, evoking a dreaded memory from my first year of secondary school: of a new and larger classmate who, upon hearing my surname, recited the saying "you can't get blood from a stone,"

then set out to disprove it by bashing the crap out of me. But the painkiller soon swung into action, so the memory did not persist. Indeed I soon felt almost nothing—at least from the foot. I felt much of another sort though: confusion, irritation, distrust.

After the blood-letting, Toby offhandedly asked, “How’s the other medication working?”

“What other medication?” I replied, truly ignorant.

“The heart medication, Ernest.”

Alarm bells started clamouring in my head, sending me straight into denial. “Look, I don’t know what you think you gave Ernest, but you didn’t give it to me.”

“O,” said Toby, discomfort apparent. “Well, um, perhaps I should have put it another way then: have you had any chest pains lately?”

His question almost gave me a chest pain on the spot. How could he have known? Especially if he thought I was Ernest? Too dumbfounded to think straight, I soon found myself dutifully answering his question. “Not since before I woke up in Wilbur’s room.”

“Good,” said Toby, proudly. “Very good. It would appear the medication *is* working.”

“What medication?”

“The one I gave you last week. I mean, the one—you know—for your heart defect.”

My entire body shuddered involuntarily.

Toby frowned with obvious concern. “It’s nothing to worry about,” he said. “As I’ve explained. Really. I mean, the medication appears to be working. And as long as you see me annually for a booster shot, you’ll be perfectly all right. We have your condition under control, Ernest, so please please don’t trouble yourself about it further.”

“Did you say heart defect?” I said worriedly.

“Yes. I thought... Have you forgotten the tests you undertook?”

“I never took them. How often do I have to repeat it: I’m not Ernest, my name is Steven.”

He opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. Instead, he smiled broadly, and, with an obvious attempt at casual good humour, said, “Yours really is a most stubborn amnesia.”

“It is *not* amnesia. I know who I am.”

Toby’s smile vanished. Meekly, he turned his attention to my toe.

“What sort of heart defect?” I asked. I needn’t have bothered. Toby’s explanation was far too detailed and full of medical terms for me to follow. All I could gather was that there was some sort of problem with the aorta that had first made itself apparent about a month before in the form of sudden crippling chest pains which sounded all too familiar. Medication was supposed to have compensated for the aorta’s defect, and prevented the pain from returning.

I hadn’t given much thought to my chest pains over the last two days—they’d been totally absent since I’d woken in Wilbur’s room, and there’d been so much else to occupy me. On the few occasions I had thought of them, I felt increasingly hopeful they were not caused by heart trouble but by lack of physical activity. I’d done quite a bit of gentle walking since ‘waking’—by my standards at least—and perhaps this had kept them at bay. Or perhaps my subconscious had simply chosen to exclude them from this dream.



Now, I was less confident. I even began to consider whether the true explanation for the recent absence of pain was just as Toby indicated. Could I really be an amnesiac Ernest? Feeling more uncomfortable and displaced than ever, I found myself explaining to Toby my recent history of chest pains and the tests I'd taken.

"I'm very impressed, Ernest," said Toby when I concluded. "Your historical research is outstanding. At least one of those tests hasn't been conducted for twenty years or more."

"Well, they were conducted on me only a week ago," I asserted, anger suddenly rising.

"If my memory is correct," said Toby, before suddenly replacing his professional smile with a worried look suggestive of having put his foot in his mouth. "I mean, well, that is to say, a week ago, according to my records, your tests were finished and you were given your first shot."

"Was I indeed?" The anger had not yet peaked. "Can you prove it? Is there any evidence?"

"I—well..." Toby fumbled out a few more disconnected words before settling into stunned silence. "It *is* on your file," he finally suggested, without much conviction.

"Files can be doctored." I grimaced at my poor choice of words but was too fuming to apologise. "Any *incontrovertible* evidence?"

Toby's eyes darted jaggedly from side to side for several moments. "Yes," he finally said. "Yes, I would think so. What about evidence obtained from yourself? From a simple blood test. The medication will be present in your blood."

My anger turned to a stomach-churning mixture of hope and doubt. Here was a chance to prove I was who I said I was—and also a chance to *disprove* it. All the events of recent days crowded in on me, filling me with uncertainty. I hesitated...

But not for long. Whoever said 'no news is good news' was being selective. As often as not, uncertainty granted by an absence of information is far more crippling even than bad news.

"Do it," I said finally. "And get Wilbur in here, too. I want him to see this."

Toby obliged. After quickly explaining the purpose of the blood sample to Wilbur, he took a few millilitres from my arm, and placed it in a small electronic device. A spectrometer, he explained, keying in the name of the drug he was looking for via a small keypad on its side. "It will take just a few seconds."

As I waited nervously for the instrument to do its work, I realised the test might in the end prove *nothing*. While lying unconscious in Wilbur's room, before I first woke in this dream, Toby or Wilbur or anyone else could have injected me with the drug they were now testing for. It might have been planned all along.

The spectrometer beeped. Toby checked the display. With baited breath, I watched his face register surprise.

"This—I..." he faltered. Seconds later: "It's not there"

## 9

# In the Puddle

My doubt and suspicion vanished at once. I felt vindicated. And relieved beyond measure. If there was any conspiracy, it was less than exhaustive. "I knew it. This proves I'm not Ernest."

Wilbur, poker face undisturbed, said, "Are you sure, Toby?"

"Well, I... Yes. I mean, as sure as I can be. The test is not foolproof, though." He smiled thinly, as if finding an obviously weak source of renewed hope. "Perhaps I should take another sample to confirm it."

I agreed to this, now feeling no doubt the result would be identical. We went through the motions again in complete silence. Toby was apparently too surprised to talk, Wilbur perhaps likewise, and I so relieved and vindicated that I felt anything I said would sound unbearably smug.

"Same result," said Toby, finally, staring at the spectrometer's display, his face awash with confusion. "There's no trace of it in your blood." He looked at me. "I don't understand this at all. I mean, I know you were injected with it last week—I did it myself. It should *be* there." He took a stethoscope and put it to my chest, his expression almost immediately more doubtful. "Are you on any other medication?"

"No. Is there something wrong?"

"Yes, and no. I mean, your heart beat is a little stronger and slower than usual—healthier. More than can be explained by the medication. If you had it, that is." His expression firmed, as if making a last ditch effort to reassert what he thought he knew. "Which you must."

"Is your spectrometer reliable?" Wilbur asked Toby.

"Yes," he replied. "Well, I mean, it always has been. But perhaps that's it. Perhaps we should conduct the same test with another spectrometer. A full-scale version. The one at the hospital." He extracted a babel from a pocket, and made a call.

"I hope I still have some blood left when you finally convince yourself."

He didn't seem to hear me, nor Wilbur who looked lost in thought. Clearly, the boot was on the other foot. Now it was they who had to grapple with uncertain possibilities about my identity.

"One o'clock, Saturday," announced Toby at the end of his call. "The day after tomorrow," he added, after my expression must have conveyed to him I had no idea what day of the week it was.

"Whereabouts?" I asked.

"At the hospital," he replied. "Where you had the other tests, Ernest."

"Where *Ernest* had them," I said. "But where is that exactly?"

Dourly, he opened a desk drawer and handed me a hospital's business card.

The tide was turning. The dream at last was giving me a chance to prove my identity. In the strongest possible terms, by empirical scientific tests. How convoluted it all was, to need future science to prove I was me! What was the point of this outrageous dream? A remedy for an unrecognised identity crisis? Or perhaps

one for something more physical? Here I was, I realised, in a doctor's office of forty years in the future, and what had been troubling me more than anything else in the days before this dream started?

"As long as I'm here, Toby," I said, "would you mind giving me your opinion about *my* condition? The chest pains I've been having?"

As if distracted by unvoiced thoughts, Toby did not respond at first. "The diagnosis you claim you were given seems sound enough. It may be heart trouble." An abrupt mocking laugh and shake of the head. "Maybe even what I thought I'd treated you for, though I doubt it. More likely entirely different, maybe muscular pains and cramps brought on by sudden activity, or some psychosomatic trigger."

"Is there any way of deciding which?" I asked.

"Yes. I've already given you the test."

"You may have already given it to Ernest, but not to me."

Doubts visibly renewed, he stood. "Would you mind taking off your shirt, please?" He extracted an object from a high shelf: it was a rectangle a few centimetres wide, flat, black, made of a flexible plastic, with no visible features. He removed from it two protective covers of adhesive strips and fixed it to my chest above the heart, its shape adjusting to my contours. "You should keep this on at all times until you next have a chest pain, then see me immediately. It's waterproof, so keep it on even when you shower." He stopped momentarily in his tracks. "I'll call the hospital later to schedule some additional tests, for your heart. How are your toes?"

I'd completely forgotten about them in the recent excitement—now they barely bothered me, though their black and swollen appearance prompted me to walk with caution, and shoeless.

As I hobbled out of the room, I began to wonder when Toby was going to give me the bill. "I haven't any money, you know," I said, "what with me just arriving from the past and all."

Perplexed looks later, Toby explained there was nothing to pay. "All health care is free."

On the point of asking how this could be, I decided not to cloud my little victory with another economics treatise. Not yet at least.

Wilbur drove me to Ernest's home, and insisted on making sure I was comfortable. Appreciative of his concern, in the best mood I'd been in since the dream began, I offered him a drink. Wilbur agreed, taciturn as ever.

"Cheer up," I said, as he cautiously sipped his tea. "We're all wrong sometimes."

"I'm not at all sure I am wrong."

"You still insist I'm Ernest? Despite Toby's test?" A scornful expression. "Steven Stone," I said with heavy punctuation. "Get used to the name. The day after tomorrow, you'll have the proof—beyond doubt."

"Yes, one way or the other." He sipped further. "The proof, as they say, is in the puddle."

"You mean the pudding."

"Pudding? In a puddle?!"

"No, you've remembered only half of it—it's in the eating."

"A pudding is in the eating?! Or a puddle is in—"

"The proof of the pudding is—o, never mind." I sighed, slowly, loudly. "Tell me Wilbur, if the next tests *also* show Ernest's medication isn't in my blood, will you believe me then? Or will you require further proof? Like fingerprints?"

Wilbur almost choked on his drink, a reaction that made me jolt with sudden understanding. "Of course," I said, "Ernest's fingerprints couldn't be the same as mine, could they? That would be a simple proof."

Without a word or gesture, Wilbur put his drink down, stood, moved to the study, and made a quick flurry of motions at Ernest's computer that resulted in a website with a prominent heading: Citizens' Database.

"This is what we're after," said Wilbur. He explained how the website accessed a database about residents, including identity records taken soon after birth: retinal scans, DNA samples, and fingerprints. Before I could yell 'big brother', he added that each person determined how much of the information they made available online. The rest remained confidential.

"You type in a name and birth date here," said Wilbur, standing to let me take over the keyboard, "and it comes back with whatever information that person allows."

Without hesitation, I sat and quickly typed in my name and birthday.

"For your own record," continued Wilbur, "accessed from your own computer, that should be everything. Wait on! You'll need to type in *Ernest's* details if this is to work."

Of course! But it was too late. I had already hit the 'Enter' key. Before I could hit 'Stop', the screen was replaced with a list of personal details, most of which matched my own to the letter. "That's me, all right," I said, scrolling down and glancing over them.

"But this is for someone who's almost eighty years old!" said Wilbur, now undeniably confused. "And lives on the other side of the region." He pointed at an address. "At Wunsa Pond."

The name prompted an alarm bell to erupt in my head. When I made my futile attempt just that morning to contact Yvette, one of the two phone numbers for her name was in Wunsa Pond. And an elderly, vaguely familiar voice had answered. Who had I spoken to?

With sudden resolve, Wilbur leant forward and tapped one of the screen icons. "That should bring up personal photographs. *If* this Stone has agreed to make any available."

The screen abruptly filled with photographs of myself at many ages. I scrolled, from one of my earliest baby shots to one Yvette took on our last vacation.

"But..." began Wilbur, staring at the screen, pointing at one of the more recent snaps. "But that's Ernest!" His poker face was lost now, surprise writ large.

"No, it's me all right. This life I remember."

"Your appearances are identical," said Wilbur, shock subduing.

I scrolled down to more photos: me, or someone who looked just like me, into and beyond my forties, to old age. An eerie experience seeing my future selves. It was some time before I remembered to remind myself that it was all just a dream.

Then, with a jolt, I realised. The call I made to the Wunsa Pond Stones! I might have been able to have spoken to Yvette after all, or at least to an older version of her. And that vaguely familiar voice of her husband—it must have been my own! I had spoken to myself—an older version.

In a dream, I reminded myself, anything is possible.

"It can't be you," said Wilbur.

"It is. Maybe I look just like Ernest—that's not beyond the realms of possibility—but this is me all right. I remember every photo—the first forty years at least. The rest, obviously not."

"But it can't be you," said Wilbur.

"It is," I said. Inspired, I keyed a return to the previous screen which showed my personal details. Turning my back to the computer, I said, "Test me. I'll tell you everything on the screen."

Wilbur seemed hesitant, but soon said, "What's your second child's full name and birth date?"

"Sylvia Lauren. May 17, 2022."

I could not see Wilbur, but his silence spoke for itself. He repeated the question for Yvette, then my son Godfred. I gave the correct answers—as I did for subsequent questions about parents, marriage date, schooling, employment, career, shoe size, birthmarks, favourite shower arias...

"Convinced yet?" I asked after answering what must have been about the twentieth question.

"No," he replied, with an atypical edge of desperation to his voice. "You may still be Ernest. Perhaps, at some stage, you accidentally stumbled across these records during research. You'd have been sure to notice how physically alike you and this Stone are, and that might have prompted you to examine him in detail. Maybe you remembered his details, perhaps subconsciously, so that when you were bumped on the head, memories of Stone's life surfaced as a false identity."

"And did the bump on my head remove all of Ernest's medication from my system too?"

After a perplexed hesitation, Wilbur replied, "Toby's tests weren't completely conclusive."

"Not about the medication perhaps, though you and he seem to be clutching at straws on that one, but Toby seemed quite sure about the state of my heart. If I'm really Ernest, how could my heartbeat be stronger and slower than it should be?"

"I don't know. But if you're not Ernest..." He pointed at the computer screen. "...how can you be Stone? You're half his age, and he's somewhere else."

"And I'm *somewhen* else. I told you, I belong in 2025." I pointed at the screen. "This is clearly me forty years in my future. As far as this dream goes, I *have* travelled in time."

"And if it isn't a dream?"

I returned his steady gaze, snorted a derisive laugh. "It must be."

He smiled grimly. "I might not be able to prove it to you—yet—but I know this is not a dream. And I would much rather believe you're Ernest with some unexplained improvement to your health, than a time travelling younger version of Steven Stone, somehow turning up just when Ernest has disappeared."

"I can prove I'm Steven Stone," I said, turning my attention to the computer. "How do I call up my fingerprints?"

Wilbur tapped a menu: it listed the information viewable, not a fingerprint in sight. "You can't," said Wilbur. "Not from this computer. Not unless you know your older self's logon code."

After a moment's frustration, I settled for a lesser proof. "Well, I can prove I'm not Ernest at least." I was familiar enough with the browser to quickly return to the main screen, on which I started entering Ernest's details. "What's his middle name, do you know?"

"Albert."

"And his birth date?"

"September 28, 2025."

I typed it in, and pressed 'Enter', just as I realised: "That was the day I fell asleep and this dream started. So, he's forty years old, is he?"

Hesitant pause. "In less than two weeks."

I laughed abruptly. "Me too. This dream thinks of everything."

Wilbur's expression suffered a sudden queer flicker, just as the computer screen flashed up a list of Ernest's personal details.

"Where's his fingerprints?" I asked, growing impatient when they were not immediately visible.

Wilbur leaned forward and tapped an unfamiliar icon on the screen. A new page came up almost instantly: larger than life, it showed the thumbprint of the man everyone thought I was. I held my own thumb up and compared it.

It was silent in the room for some moments.

"I told you."

"This cannot be."

"It must. They're clearly different. Now will you believe I'm not Ernest?"

Wilbur put a hand to his face and rubbed one side up and down repeatedly, staring at the screen. "It must be a mistake. The database must have switched your records and Stone's." Then he froze for a few moments, before leaning over me to tap a few keys. My screen—the one for Steven Stone—returned. Wilbur immediately took his babel from his pocket, and with one eye on the screen, the other on the babel, he tapped a number—the one displayed for my older self. "Why not get it from the horse's mouth?" said Wilbur. "Dream or not, if you *have* time travelled, you must have returned to 2025 in order for you to be still around now as an eighty-year-old. In which case, the eighty-year-old would be able to verify it."

"Unless the eighty-year-old has dementia," I said. "Or Alzheimer's. Or just a bad memory." My memory. "Maybe *he* has amnesia. Though it would have to be pretty bad to forget a time trip."

"Hello, my name is Wilbur Edmonds. Could I speak with Steven Stone, please..." Wilbur's eyes briefly widened, rapidly blinked, then regained their more typical composure. "Oh... Oh... Yes... No... Yes... All right, thank you." He ended the call, and looked steadfastly at me.

"You didn't ask him?!" I said.

"That was his house sitter. Stone and his wife left this morning for a holiday in the Congo. They'll be out of contact until they return, in a month."

"You're joking." I felt suddenly deflated. "Hasn't hi tech communication reached the Congo yet? I can't believe there isn't some way to contact him. To contact me."

"It could be done in an emergency. The Congo is not lacking in communication, but the holiday the Stones have taken is deliberately far removed from civilisation. There are still many spots like it left in the world, and some people really crave them."

"Yvette's choice, probably," I muttered. Wilbur's expression demonstrated a lack of understanding. "My wife. She loves nature, the more unspoilt the better. Damn! And I only spoke with him this morning and didn't even realise it."

"Huh?"

I explained my earlier phone call. Wilbur nodded, though his mind seemed to be elsewhere. "It may be for the best that Stone is away," he finally said. "I have to

concede I'm no longer sure you really are Ernest. But if you're telling the truth, *if* you are really from the past, then who knows what would eventuate were you to come into close proximity with your older self."

"We'd annihilate each other in a great pyrotechnic display. According to a lot of sci-fi at least."

"Perhaps."

"Wait on. There's another standard sci-fi theme. When I return to my own time, I'll know about the future. And the actions I take with that knowledge could alter the future—*your* past. I could corrupt the timeline. Right?"

"Pure speculation," said Wilbur, forcefully. His expression, however, suggested he hadn't convinced even himself; his meeker addendum confirmed it. "But possibly."

## 10

# Delivering the Goods

A weight of responsibility.

Incipient fear, peaking rapidly then brushed aside. “If this wasn’t all a dream, of course.”

Wilbur ignored me, looking thoughtful. “The future could be yours to make or break, but it seems a little late to worry, given how much you’ve learnt already. I’d say the ball’s pretty much in your stadium.”

“Court,” I corrected.

Wilbur’s expression turned confused. “What have you caught?”

I trusted my expression to be sufficient reply.

As if understanding, Wilbur backtracked. “The other possibility, though, also well represented in the literature, is that events can follow only one path—that however you use your knowledge it will only ensure that the past forty years proceed as they have, as they necessarily must. That’s *if* you can return to your own time.” He shook his head suddenly and vigorously, as if trying to snap himself out of a reverie. “Assuming you *are* from the past... Perhaps I’ll ask Toby to add a DNA test for Saturday. Better than fingerprints. In the meantime, at least, I prefer the view that you’re Ernest suffering from amnesia.”

“And a change of fingerprints.”

“Please keep that to yourself.”

“What?!”

“No point confusing people without definite proof.”

“Toby knows. That I’m not Ernest at least.”

“He knows that’s what you think. But he’s not convinced.”

“Despite his tests. And you want me to keep the one bit of corroborating evidence to myself! Why?”

“Ern—Steven. *If* you are correct, it raises more questions than it answers. How did you travel forty years from the past? How do you return? Where’s Ernest?”

“What’s the capital of Gibraltar?” I muttered angrily, annoyed at his request for secrecy.

“It would be best,” he continued, “to have definitive proof before others are hit with these puzzles. No point going off half-cocked and getting it wrong.”

“I’m not wrong. I know.”

“Just wait for the tests. Trust me.”

I was not at all sure I did trust Wilbur, but a knock from the front door effectively ended our debate.

I expected Wilbur to take charge, but after a few moments of stony silence, he curtly gestured with his head in the direction of the door.

I sighed, trudged to the door, and opened it to find a stunningly attractive young woman, in her late teens, on the verge of knocking again. Almost a caricature of feminine beauty, her high cheekbones, long straight dark hair, large piercing blue



eyes, moderate straight nose and generous lips were undermined by her chewing of gum and her shapeless clothes: frayed paint-strewn coveralls over a matching T-shirt. Beside her: a small quasi-supermarket trolley housing a cardboard box full of groceries.

"Hi Ernie," she said merrily. "Delivery time!" She raised the front wheels of the trolley over the doorstep and pushed it inside. On the verge of being run over, I hastily stepped out of her way. Apparently, she was familiar with my house, because she made straight for the kitchen, pausing momentarily to ask, "What happened?"

I followed her gaze to my still bare foot and its dark bruise. "Had an argument with a car door," I suggested, not interested in explaining.

"Hope you won. Hi Wilbur," she said on seeing him. "How's the project going?"

Wilbur smiled. "Stalled for the moment. I'm surprised to see you Laura. I thought you started holidays this week." Was Wilbur trying to catch this woman's attention? Not only did he seem to stand straighter than usual, but his face was more expressive—especially his eyes. He moved towards her, stretching out his arms as if to help, then awkwardly halting the motion as she lifted the box of groceries effortlessly onto the kitchen bench.

"Next week," she said.

"Where are you off to again?" said Wilbur, casually yet self-consciously moving closer towards her.

"Up north. Rail most of the way, then we'll probably hire a dirigible—always wanted to see the tropics from the air."

"Sounds good," said Wilbur, with one of the most clichéd expressions of fascinated attention I've ever seen.

"It'll tide me over until my world trip," she said.

"Have you decided when you'll take it?"

"Probably soon as I finish studying—I think. Can't wait. Six months, every continent, I'll never want to come back."

"You will, I'm sure," said Wilbur.

"Ernie didn't," she said, turning to me. "That's what you told me when you got back."

I must have looked nonplussed again—before I could reply, Wilbur made apologies for me. "You'll have to forgive Ernest, Laura. He's developed a fairly thorough case of amnesia."

Sudden compassion, mixed with confused mischief. Glancing at my bruised foot, she said, "Sounds like the car won the argument. Hit you in the head too did it?"

"No," I said gruffly.

"Then how did you lose your memory?"

"Can't remember," I grumbled.

"We're not sure yet," said Wilbur.

"Remember me?" she said.

I shook my head. "Actually I'm not really Ernest, my name is Steven. And we've never met." Perhaps Wilbur wanted me to keep the hard evidence to myself for the time being, but he'd said nothing about keeping my supposedly false memories secret as well.

He gave me a sharp look, but held his tongue.

Laura, on the other hand, took my revelation in her stride. "Uh-huh. You sure look like Ernie. And sound like him. Though I've never seen you in need of a shave."

Too quickly for me to reply, she changed the subject. "Any meatboxes?" she said, opening a cupboard. "Or other returnables?"

"Any what?" I said.

She extracted an empty cardboard box from a cupboard and placed it in her trolley. Wilbur moved to the freezer, opened it and looked inside. "None this week, Laura," he said, shutting the freezer door, smiling widely.

"Ok," she said, pushing the trolley toward the front door. "Then I better shove off. Don't forget to confirm the order, Ernie. Think I got it right."

Wilbur and I followed her to the door, watched her push the trolley behind a van parked in the driveway, pick it up and place it inside, close the door, and move to the driver's seat. She talked in bursts the whole time. "Better finish my rounds. Before the ice blocks melt. Still got another fifty deliveries. Be lucky to finish on time. Hope you get your memory back soon. See you next week. Nope—forgot—your amnesia must be catching—see you when I get back from holidays."

The van, not as smoothly contoured nor as low to the ground as other cars I'd seen, moved off all but silently.

"Ice blocks!?" I said to Wilbur as we headed back to the kitchen.

"To keep meat and other perishables fresh." His usual taciturn response. Now that Laura was gone, so was his smile (and his drooling).

"But ice blocks? Why not a refrigerated van?"

"Why not an atom-splitter to slice bread? Or a Lear jet to go shopping? Because it's way over the top. Unnecessary. Wasteful of energy. The ice blocks may seem low-tech, but they're efficient and inexpensive."

I idly thumbed through the items Laura had left. "Like the van I suppose? It's different to other cars."

"It's designed for its purpose," said Wilbur. "Intra-city haulage. A bit less aerodynamic. And slower—eighty k, its limit."

I shifted my attention from the groceries to Wilbur. Seated near the kitchen bench, watching me like a hawk, his expression was unreadable. "What about long trips?" I said. "A van like that would take forever to deliver interstate."

"Long trips are not that common. Most consumption, logically enough, occurs close to sites of production. But of course you can't grow pineapples in this climate, only in the tropical north, so some long hauls can't be avoided. For those, there's rail, shipping, and bigger, faster, trucks."

"What powers them all? Has Peak Oil hit yet?"

"Long ago. Most transport is powered by electricity in one form or another, either directly like urban rail or indirectly via batteries such as for most cars, though a few, especially the larger or longer-haul vehicles, use hydrogen fuel cells where practical, otherwise petrol."

"So all the petrol hasn't gone?"

"Diminished but not gone. And used rarely for transport. Mostly it's used for making products harder to find large-scale substitutes for, like plastics, fertilizers, by-products like kerosene."

"Well, it still sounds like there's a prodigious use of energy," I insisted.

"Not nearly as much as the profligate levels of a few decades ago, but, yes, still a lot. You can't build and maintain cars, planes, and railways without a lot of energy. Or manufacture all the other goods in use."

"Or make use of them I suppose. So where does all the energy come from? I suppose not fossil fuels—that would be out of keeping in this future. And yet I haven't seen a single solar panel or wind turbine since I've been here."

"You wouldn't. But there is plenty of solar and wind energy in use—in appropriate locations. Wind turbines are too noisy to have much place in urban design, so they, like solar thermal plants and panels, have been set up in strategic rural locations. But there's still plenty of solar technology all over the city—you just wouldn't notice it."

"Why not? How could it be hidden?"

"It isn't hidden, it's in plain view." He eyed me carefully, as if still disbelieving me. "Solar paint."

I barely avoided another parrot impersonation—instead, I returned his questioning gaze in kind. I had heard of attempts to incorporate some sort of solar energy cell into paint that could cover any surface, and it had even been suggested it would not need direct sunlight to function, merely any form of light. But it was in the early experimental stages. "Ok," I finally said, "solar paint covers all the buildings does it?"

"And cars and other transport—that's what usually keeps car batteries charged without further fuss."

I must have looked even more bewildered than normal, because Wilbur's suspicious gaze vanished. He went on at some length, including an explanation of why cars always had dark colours—to enhance absorption of light and increase their solar paint's efficiency. Whereas houses, with larger surface areas, had no similar requirement for dark colours, and managed to produce more energy than they used. That was possible even in my time without solar paint, but apparently it had now become the norm, aided by improved house design, and greater energy efficiency. Yet geothermal energy not solar paint was now Australia's primary power source, with lesser contributions from solar, wind, tidal and wave energy (with batteries, salt, compressed air, and various other backup storage systems ensuring a constant supply of baseload energy even from spasmodic sources like solar and wind). Apparently, much of the country looked as if it had been deliberately built to generate geothermal energy, with vast areas of hot rocks, most of them with their own groundwater ready to be evaporated by the heat into closed-cycle, high pressure steam that ultimately turned the turbines that produced the electricity. We were more blessed than many other countries, but others were pursuing different mixes of the same, and occasionally other, approaches. Combined with fewer but more long-lived and cleaner cars, widespread use of bicycles, less time spent working and hence commuting, reduced transporting of goods due to more local production and distribution, and greater use of teleconferencing and other travel alternatives, the result was, aside from greater self-sufficiency, reduction in energy requirements—allegedly—to less than a tenth of their peak of three decades before.

"So no doubt all this fixed global warming as well?" I inquired sarcastically, when Wilbur's explanation ended.

"Oh no. The climate is still warming—if barely. And that's despite a negative global carbon footprint."

I struggled with this. "You mean carbon *isn't* to blame?"

"It certainly contributes, and its absence will eventually have a benefit, once the system's lag-time of a few decades passes. But the predictions of your time were based on overestimates of climate sensitivity and feedbacks, and underestimates of

natural cycles. Fortunately, the worst fears have not come to pass and the world, for the most part, has found ways to adapt."

I still couldn't accept it. "You mean, the consensus was *wrong*!?"

"A consensus is no guarantee of truth or understanding. Scientists are human—they sometimes get things wrong. Continental drift, for example, was treated as nonsense for decades before it was accepted. As was the idea of stomach ulcers being caused by bacteria. Science progresses with many an occasional step backwards or sideways as it gradually moves forward. Its history is littered with ideas that were once popular but later proved untenable: phlogiston, N-rays, curative lobotomies, a steady-state universe, multiple universes."

"You're telling me all that fuss and bother, all the debate and politicking about carbon taxes and emissions trading schemes, it all turned out to be so much hot air?!"

"Aptly, yes."

I should perhaps have been less surprised. Wasting time and energy on the wrong causes almost seems to be politicians' specialty. *They always have huffed and puffed enough to power their own fleet of hot air balloons*, I thought—which prompted me to remember something else.

"Did I hear Laura right earlier? Did she say she was going to hire a *dirigible*?"

"Yes. Sky-snails are very popular."

"You mean like the Hindenburg? Elongated balloons full of hydrogen, ready to explode as soon as someone fails to notice the no smoking sign?"

"More or less, except they use helium rather than hydrogen, since helium is inert. Non-flammable, and safe as hoses."

"Houses," I corrected.

Wilbur momentarily furrowed his brows, clearly baffled. "More like hotels than houses."

I shook my head but ignored his misunderstanding. "Surely people prefer planes."

"If they're in a hurry. Otherwise, zeppelins can be used more or less like planes, except without such extreme energy use. Much less costly to produce and maintain too. Of course, planes are still used, though only more or less when necessary."

"That sounds draconian."

"It isn't really. The world trip Laura was talking about will be largely on planes. She's entitled to it, as part of her birth right—as is anyone in most developed nations. But she can take it only once, at least without it costing her an upper and lower limb. More practically and fairly, if she wants to travel again after her world trip, she can do so by sea or rail or other less costly modes. The point is, it's much harder for anyone to hop on a plane on a sudden whim, or to jet set regularly—instead they have to treat air travel for what it truly is, a costly resource-intensive privilege that needs to be used sparingly and responsibly."

"It still sounds draconian."

"You ignore the advantages of such an arrangement. Most holiday spots are not nearly as congested. Airports no longer have to continually expand and multiply, indeed most have shrunk. And friendships don't have to endure as many holiday vids."

I smiled, thinking of the ones I'd suffered. My smile seemed to please Wilbur out of all proportion, his face lighting up as if just told he'd won a lottery. "Even so," I

said, unconvinced, "if planes are a luxury, surely so are plenty of other things. What about delivery trucks—like the one Laura used?"

"On the contrary, they save much energy and expense compared to everyone doing their own shopping."

"Some people do their own shopping. I saw them yesterday."

"Yes, most still prefer to shop themselves, some of the time. But many prefer their regular requirements to be delivered periodically. Saves a repetitive chore. I take that option, as do you."

"You mean," I said without expression, "as does Ernest."

He nodded slowly, but his previous sudden pleasure had now faded into something more ambiguous.

"It all sounds like green heaven," I muttered, returning my attention to the groceries. "So how come it feels like hell to me?"

"You're a stranger in a strange land," said Wilbur, distractedly, staring through me. With a blink, he snapped back into focus, and spoke with more surety. "Once your memories return, I'm sure you'll appreciate it as much as you ever did."

I restrained myself from pointing out the obvious flaw in his argument, settling instead for giving him a dirty look. Then, attending to the dull but necessary domestic task of unpacking the groceries, I took the box's topmost item, a carton of eggs, and put it in the refrigerator.

"I suggest you check the order before you put it away," said Wilbur. "However considerable her charms, Laura is not always the most reliable packer."

I rummaged through the box looking for an invoice, without success. "Check it against what? Where's the paperwork?"

Wilbur smiled, though it struck me as forced, as did the words that followed. "These false memories of yours are thorough all right." He moved to the study and returned with the computer's cardboard-thin screen in hand. "The 'paperwork' is on here of course. And on your babel—but this is easier to use." He pressed the top corners of the screen to the wall nearest the groceries, and it remained there, safely fixed in place. Then he took me step by step through a very simple process which found the order Ernest had placed the previous week, and which allowed me to mark (by tapping screen checkboxes) what I'd received, or hadn't. I was surprised to discover the order was from several different 'providers': butcher, grocer, greengrocer, and stationery store.

"Which one does Laura work for?" I asked, checking off the items as I unpacked.

"All of them. They're more or less adjacent." To my surprise, Wilbur didn't lend a hand unpacking; he just sat and watched me closely.

"Where we ate yesterday?" I asked.

"No. A larger sales centre near the hub of Chord, about a ten-minute car-drive away. The main food outlets for the city, and other shops. For those not close enough to buy directly from producers."

"Of course," I said, distracted. A sturdy, compartmentalised, plastic container had taken my attention: inside, several cuts of red and white meat. With a faint hope that the conspiracy was about to be unmasked, and, I suspect, wearing a leery grin, I held the container aloft. "I thought Ernest was a vegetarian."

"He is," said Wilbur, eyes fixed on me, "but he likes to entertain, and some of his friends don't much care for his vegetarian dishes."

I nodded without conviction, unsurprised that Wilbur had such a ready answer. It would have been too easy if he hadn't. I placed the meat container in the freezer,

where it fitted neatly on top of another, almost empty one. Pointing at it, I said, "The meatbox Laura mentioned, right?"

"Exactly."

"Recyclable?"

"Of course—but more to the point, reusable."

I continued to unpack, noticing that many items came without packaging, while the rest were minimally wrapped, often in paper, only occasionally in sturdy plastic similar to the meatboxes. I was hardly surprised, given everything else I'd seen.

"Little to recycle here," I said.

"Which is in everyone's interest."

"Not producers, surely? Wouldn't it raise their costs? Wouldn't it often be cheaper to use materials that couldn't be recycled?"

"Sometimes, from the narrow perspective of a single producer. But not from a more inclusive viewpoint. As far as a city or region or nation is concerned, the less time involved in producing and disposing of packaging—and in avoiding, or else recovering from, the often toxic side-effects of both processes—the lower the price, and the shorter the working week."

I nodded as if sagely, then my eye was caught by a cylindrical plastic shampoo bottle. I took it from the box and studied it. To my surprise, the top was able to be screwed off. "What on earth is the point of this? Surely you pour the contents from here." I pointed at the usual dispenser tab in the centre of the top.

"Yes, of course," said Wilbur. "But the top is detachable to make it easier to refill the bottle."

"To refill?!"

"Of course. Like meatboxes. Or toothpaste containers. Or a horde of other things."

As it happened, there was a tube of toothpaste in the order, so I picked it up and immediately noticed that its head could also be unscrewed. I was confident this was also the case in the real world (who takes enough notice of such minor details to be really sure?), but I'd never heard of them being re-filled. Certainly, Yvette would have ensured it was done if available. It suddenly occurred to me that *she* should have been having this dream, not me. She'd have been overawed.

"Is this plastic recyclable?" I said, holding both the toothpaste and shampoo for Wilbur to see. "I don't see a code anywhere."

"All plastic is recyclable."

I wasn't sure how that made codes redundant, but I wasn't going to inquire. Wilbur's cool reactions to my questions were increasingly making me feel slow and uncivilised.

I returned to checking the order. Most items looked familiar in substance but not always in appearance. Notably there was rarely anything that could be called a brand name. The items with packaging had manufacturer names listed in small print, accompanied by content specifications for food and most other items, but that was all.

"Is this pirate toilet paper?" I asked, holding up a brown-paper-wrapped set of four rolls.

Looking at me with a sceptical expression, Wilbur seemed lost for a reply. Temporarily, at least. "It's from the regional manufacturer. Pirates could use it if they wanted. If there were any pirates."

"No, no," I said, unsure if he was making another of his would-be jokes. "Pirate, as in bootleg. Illegal. There's no brand name so..."

"Of course there's no brand name. There's no brand. All toilet paper in Chord and the region is manufactured by Hillbeach's one provider of it. Their name and address is on the wrapping."

"In small print!"

"What need is there for anything more obvious? Should the senses be assaulted, as they were decades ago, with glaring announcements of the fact?"

"One toilet paper manufacturer? To serve how many people?"

"About two million."

"In my day, there must have been twenty or more toilet paper brands on the shelves."

"All pretty much as effective for their specific purpose as any other, no doubt."

"Maybe so, but—"

"So you only really needed one brand."

"Some people prefer softer paper than others."

"Which is why the local manufacturer makes three different types. But there's no need for twenty different manufacturers."

"What if your single manufacturer makes shoddy toilet paper? You're stuck then. In more ways than one."

"That old chestnut! Of course, quality could vary—one city could have great toilet paper but lousy shirts, and the next city, the opposite. But information about manufacturing techniques is freely shared, so poor quality production never persists. At worst, people reorganise so that, where possible, the best producers churn out more to cover areas served poorly by others, who find different duties to perform, usually more successfully."

I did not have a comeback but even if I did, I wouldn't have bothered. While Wilbur was speaking, I noticed something on the computer screen which I could not believe had eluded me for so long. "What's going on here? Nearly all these items have no prices! The food at least—all of them are zero! Except the mangos, which are rather expensive."

"Yes, well mangos are something of a luxury round here. Can't be grown this far south, and involve a lot of resources to have transported here."

"Yes, ok," I said, edgily. "But you've missed the point. The rest of the food is free!"

# 11

## A Free Lunch

"How can that be?" I demanded.

"Well, you've not ordered beyond your allowance," said Wilbur. "If you had, you'd pay for the excess."

"Let me get this straight. Are you saying I'm entitled to a certain amount of free food every week?"

"It's a yearly quota to be precise, but that's the gist of it. Enough for your nutritional requirements."

"Judging by what I've just unpacked, more than enough." I shook my head. "And I suppose I'm not untypical in any way."

"You're untypical in many ways, Ernest, but not when it comes to your right to a free staple diet. Didn't you read about it in *A Free Lunch*?"

"No. I didn't get that far. I didn't even finish the first part of the book—the critique of capitalism."

"Hmm," said Wilbur. "Finish checking your order, then perhaps I should fill you in on what you absolutely need to know."

I did as he suggested, finding the order to be all present and accounted for, except for one packet of herbs—which made me wonder if Wilbur's sense of humour was infesting the rest of the dream. "Not enough thyme!" I grumbled.

When I finished marking the order, Wilbur said, "Now press ok to pay, and the shortfall will be put on your list for next week."

"With what authorisation? Anyone could use this computer to buy something for themselves and have it paid for from *my* account. Ernest's account, I mean."

"Only if they could be here when it was delivered and do a fairly convincing impersonation of you. But no one's likely to want to do that, even if it wasn't illegal, and frowned upon. There's been a handful of cases in the last ten years—always youngsters—and all they achieved was to temporarily reduce the account of someone other than themselves. That's fairly trivial."

"Trivial!" I said, tail feathers growing. I'd be laying eggs soon if this kept up. "It's theft."

"Easily amended, and survivable without fuss. Why don't you take a seat, it's time for your lesson in free lunch accounting."

"I'm probably going to wish there was a seat belt," I said, as we settled ourselves in the sofas. Nevertheless, I felt a buzz of anticipation, seeing this as a new chance to find the flaw in the design, the inconsistency that would prove it all some demented dream.

"You remember the diagram I drew," began Wilbur, "the one showing how no more can be spent on the product of work than is paid to do the work—why business profits are zero in total?"

I nodded briefly, trying to dredge up all my powers of concentration.



"Well," continued Wilbur, "that diagram is the key to modern economics—not just the key to why you can have a free quota of food, but also why economic growth is not necessary. It is the basis of economic rules which ensure no-one is penalised whenever less work is needed, so that abundance *and* the work that creates it is shared."

"Sounds like you're getting back to the seven-hour working week stuff you already talked about. But how is it actually arranged? How *can* it be arranged?"

"An example is probably the best way to explain it. Consider a period of say a year. For the sake of argument and for simplicity, assume—initially at least—that over the next year there'll be no changes to consumption or production habits. Basic needs and wants won't change, nor will anyone's employment. So everyone keeps their jobs, and production targets are unchanged for the year. Now, go one step further: guarantee everyone's earnings—freeze them in place for the year, even if production targets turn out to be met with less work than anticipated. That way, the total cost of wages over the year can be determined in advance, and the prices of all goods set so their sum equals the sum of wages. Also—"

"Hold on. *How* do you set the prices of all goods? You're talking about the domain of producers. The market. *It* sets prices."

"Not if it's been agreed to do otherwise. Remember, we're dealing here with a decision to move *beyond* a competitive growth-compelled economic system. It's hardly possible to do that if you don't abandon capitalist conventions." He adopted a mischievous smirk, and I knew a joke was about to be attempted. I braced myself for the worst. "A bit like trying to learn to drive a car while refusing to step down from a bicycle."

I smiled, more from relief than amusement. It was anything but funny, but at least it wasn't excruciating. And it was a lot better than his appalling Groucho Marx impersonation earlier that morning. I then realised this was the first time I'd heard him *try* to be funny since his impersonation. Understandable, given the surprising turns of events and confusing discoveries he'd been dealing with in the interim. But clearly, now things had quietened down, he felt comfortable enough to try again. I steeled myself against the prospect of more (and worse) to come.

"In any case," continued Wilbur, clearly pleased by my apparently positive reaction, "this is the way it happened. The system started out with wage rates and prices extant under capitalism, except that prices were expunged of profits and adjusted so their grand total equalled the sum of everyone's wages. So, no more profits—instead balance between production and earnings. And guaranteed income."

"And was this supposed to achieve anything? Is it advantageous at all?"

"More advantageous than a glue stick in a leper colony."

Caught between surprise at the political incorrectness of the joke, and genuine if embarrassed amusement, I rolled my eyes skyward and grimaced to keep a smile at bay. Schoolboy humour, perhaps—offensive in its own way, certainly—but at least, by Wilbur's standards, a little inventive. Or more probably, given the speed of his response, an old joke from sometime in the last forty years. Or even more likely, I had to remind myself, something from my own adolescence, long forgotten to all but my subconscious.

Wilbur continued. "It means greater security for all. Farmers, for example, with an extra good year's crop don't have to fear lower prices and reduced income. Excess crops are simply stockpiled or sent to places suffering from crop failures. It also

means greater efficiency—the end of make-work. If people only have to work as much as they need to, to actually finish their work rather than protect their jobs, they are more likely to save work. The first year this was attempted, all production targets were met with only about ninety percent of the work expected. So, the following year, the same production targets were attempted with the number of hours to be worked reduced by ten percent.”

“But then people would have ten percent less income from ten percent fewer working hours. They’d lose. Or did their wages go up by ten percent?”

“No, no, wages stayed the same, as they do almost every year, the rare exceptions being when widespread agreement is reached that circumstances have changed enough to make existing wages misrepresentative of the value to the community of the work being paid for. No, the first year, wages stayed the same but with ten percent less work and income, prices were reduced across-the-board by ten percent. So no one lost any purchasing power.”

“Just like that?!” I said, snapping my fingers. “It’s that simple?!”

“More or less. There are many other factors that affect price adjustments, and these have been brought increasingly into consideration over the years.” He rattled off a long list, including trends for resource usage and availability, scarcer fossil fuels, cheaper renewable energy, the effects of flood and drought on food production, varying productivity changes between economic sectors, stockpiles and unsold inventories, costs of work not directly leading to goods and services such as research and development.

“These have to be taken into account,” he continued, “to plan what work is really needed, not just for the short-term but for future generations. Nevertheless, they don’t alter the basic principle: prices change in accordance with the amount of work actually required. If people save work, their hours and the prices of all goods reduce by the same proportion. If, on the other hand, people *make* work, naturally enough they work longer, but prices also increase. So, there’s no real inflation because prices only change in line with income. Effectively, the business cycle is absorbed into changes to working hours. And the supposed need for constant economic growth disappears.”

It sounded like nothing I knew, yet still oddly familiar. “Isn’t it all just a variation on socialist planning?” I asked. “An economy driven from above with Five-Year Plans, or one-year versions of them at least. Needs determined in advance. Surely, you’d need a totalitarian regime to make it work.”

Wilbur made a sudden loud noise which, judging by his expression, was a surprised snort of amusement, but sounded more like a bovine burp. “You never need a totalitarian regime to make anything work,” he said, smiling grimly. “Not even what they do best, oppression and misery, which can be arranged by any number of alternative approaches. What is used, what allows the pricing system and much else to work, is the opposite of totalitarianism: an advanced form of democracy.”

I snorted *without* amusement, and spoke likewise (probably with surliness). “You mean governments?! Central planning has long been repudiated as inferior to globalised free markets. Your alleged system wouldn’t work.”

“Ah, but it does. Because it’s *decentralised*. There’s no central planning. There’s management and coordination, at all levels including the top, but it flows from below. And it’s unavoidable in any case, assuming you want to avoid anarchy. Even globalisation’s most avowed proponents advocated *management* of the world

economy, rules for regulating supposedly unregulated markets. Which brings us back to the economics. You asked how your food items could be free, and the answer is because of CAPE, Cost And Price Equalisation. If prices can be adjusted across-the-board to balance the costs of work done, then they can also be adjusted individually—increased here, decreased there—as long as their *total* for all goods produced balances the total cost of all work planned for. So, food for example can be made free simply by increasing the prices of all other goods.”

I shook my head—it was not sinking in—but Wilbur recognised my confusion before I needed to voice it. Grabbing a pen and paper, he tried again. “Let me show you a simple example. Divide the economy into two groups of producers: those who grow or make food, and everyone else. For a particular year, say the total cost of all food is ten percent of the total cost of all goods. Now, with CAPE, the total cost of all goods has to balance their total prices. But you can have the same *total* prices if you make food free *and* increase prices of all other goods, by what works out in this case to be a fraction over eleven percent. Earnings haven’t changed, and total prices still balance total costs, so everything produced can still be afforded.”

“But you could do that for *anything*,” I said, studying the diagram and starting to feel like I understood it. “Not just food.”

“Exactly. And it *is* done, for many things. Health care, for example, as you experienced today with Toby. Laura’s one-off round-the-world holiday. Education. CAPE-adjusted prices of goods now rarely equal their specific costs of production. Only the grand totals are in balance, which allows all worthwhile work, whether it directly contributes to purchasable goods or not, to be afforded. People no longer even think in terms of what can be afforded. Their concern instead is for what work is actually needed, or sufficiently wanted. Environmental regeneration for example. Or construction of a community hall or public road. Even international development and aid. All of it can be budgeted for by planning for it, and ‘absorbing’ its cost into the prices of all consumables in the same way as I showed you for food. It’s how, after years of gradual reduction, government taxation was abolished—taxes are effectively obtained by setting higher prices for consumables.”

“Hold on. That’s still taxation—it’s just levied in a more hidden fashion—in effect, it’s just a goods and services tax.”

“Yes, you could say that, except the decisions on what to tax, and for what reasons, are now made by the people not the government.”

“No, don’t go down that path yet. Stick to the economics.” I shook my head. “It sounds like a big ask. Even if it’s de-centrally planned, it must be a huge juggling act.”

“Less huge than capitalism’s, which you once described in a speech as the most god-awful juggling act ever attempted.”

“I can see how all this *might* work,” I replied, barely believing myself, “looking at it from the viewpoint of a *total* economy, but what about at the individual level? Food for instance. If food is free, how are food producers paid? And if free food requires the raising of prices of other goods above their costs, then producers of those goods will make a profit, while food producers make a loss. You said it was a profit-free system.”

“It is. A cooperative economy can simply redistribute ‘profits’ to cover ‘losses’, so all producers break even.”

“How?! I can’t imagine how the logistics could be tackled in even a small economy.”

"Quite easily actually. As easily as falling off a journal."

"Log," I corrected.

For several moments, Wilbur gazed at me quizzically, silently. "That too," he finally said, clearly still none the wiser. "Anyway, as I said, it's quite easy. Every provider has a financial account, which is credited at the start of each year by an amount that fully covers their expected expenditures over the year. Every worker also has an account, but their income is usually credited each week or fortnight. When a good or service is purchased, the account of the purchaser is debited by the *price*, but the account of the provider that produced the good or service is credited with the *cost* of producing what was bought."

I had to ask him to go over it again before it sank in. When I did get it, it seemed a simple enough approach, yet I retained my scepticism. "And at the end of the year? Don't tell me everyone is in balance again."

"No, not at the individual level or even overall. By the end of the year, providers are in balance only if all the goods they've produced that year are sold; the more common result is they'll have some unsold goods and so their account will be negative. CAPE-planning tends to overestimate needs, just to be on the safe side, so production usually exceeds consumption. Though sometimes it's vice versa because of backlogs. The differences make for improved planning of course—if they're not trivial enough to ignore. Persistent negative balances prompt more work, or more efficient production, or reduced targets, or sometimes they're a sign the work is no longer needed. Whereas positive balances usually lead to shorter hours."

"Yes, yes," I grated, "but if nearly everyone's out of balance at the end of a year, wouldn't it lead to confusion?"

"Undoubtedly. So, at the start of each year, records of the account balances are made, and provider accounts are all reset to zero—before being credited with the new year's expected expenditures."

"You reset the accounts to zero!"

"Yes. Resetting them to anything else would make no sense."

"But you *reset* them?! After all that fuss! What sort of accounts are they?! Surely they're meant to record what's happening? You can't just wipe out the results year after year!"

"Why not? The accounts are to facilitate the system, not the system to serve the accounts. Early on, some people claimed the total economy's imbalance between costs and prices of actual sales demanded second-order adjustments the following year, up or down accordingly. However, a less anal-retentive approach was taken. Since the entire economy co-operates for the mutual benefit of its players, it's possible to agree to simply take it year by year, to make the best educated guess possible about what each year will entail, what it will require, and to work accordingly. Rather than try to carry over inaccuracies from one year's estimate to the next, it's far easier and more practical to be aware of the inaccuracies, to learn from them, and to hopefully make a more accurate estimate for the next year. Of course, this is all true for providers, but consumers are handled differently."

"Of course," I grated, overwhelmed by the detail. "They'd just have to be, wouldn't they? Otherwise it would all be so simple and straightforward, a genius might be able to understand it."

"Anyone can follow this if they put aside their preconceptions. It's actually much simpler than the financial maze capitalism generated."

I shook my head in frustration, unconvinced. "Whatever you say. Just how exactly are consumers handled?"

"Their accounts are not reset to zero each year, rather each person's account is cumulative."

"You don't try to balance them?"

"No need. Production and consumption are never identical, however thorough the planning. While annual resetting of provider accounts makes sense, cumulative consumption records reflect each individual's contribution to their community. And they're accessible to all, at all times. So it's obvious who's a worko, whether by longer hours or frugality—their accounts are consistently in the black. Whereas big spenders and lazy burdos stay in the red. Of course, the majority—'balos'—keep their accounts in approximate balance from one year to the next."

"But what's the point? Is it to identify burdos, so their credit can be cut off?"

"No. No one's credit is cut off. Persistent burdos just stay in debt."

"What? Indefinitely?!"

"As long as they're alive."

"You have got to be joking! You're talking about unlimited credit for everyone!"

## 12

# Impostor

"It's ridiculous," I added. "There's no onus to work! Nothing to stop *everyone* from being burdos. From spending more than they have year after year. In fact, there's nothing to stop a person from simply refusing to work at all, yet still spending like a millionaire!"

"Almost nothing, beyond the approval of others."

"Is that all?" I scathed.

"It's enough. Especially with final account balances displayed on gravestones and memorial plaques. People decide their own epitaph. And most are motivated to avoid anything unflattering. But your concerns are well-founded. There *are* a few burdos, the most troublesome difficult enough for any system. But there are more workos. Indeed, as soon as the working week was reduced, many volunteered unpaid hours. Some like to keep busy. And some actually find work enjoyable and satisfying."

"Then why not avoid saving work in the first place? Keep longer hours!"

Wilbur tried to reply, but each attempt was thwarted by hiccups of imperfectly suppressed amusement. Finally, he managed: "Perfectly ludicrous." Then he saw my expression. "That wasn't a joke?!"

"Of course not. The fear of unemployment couldn't have been that easy to shed!"

"There is no unemployment when people *share* work. Even when a job becomes redundant or unnecessary, its occupant is paid for the start of the next period as if they're doing that work, while actually spending the time retraining for other necessary work. Of course, those costs are taken into account before the annual resetting of prices. As are payments to the disabled, the retired, anyone genuinely unable to work—they each receive credits of half the average income."

I shook my head in disbelief. It was all too much to assimilate, let alone frame an intelligent response. "Generous," I muttered.

"Fair and reasonable. Only those who deliberately and consistently choose not to contribute, but who are able to do so, receive no payments. And their account reflects their choice. In some regions, too, their voting privileges will eventually be suspended."

"This...", I began, feeling overwhelmed. "This all works?!"

"It certainly *has* worked. With the ability to remove unnecessary work, and to share what needs to be done, productivity has skyrocketed. Within a decade, most of the truly necessary work was done by half the previous number of people in half the time."

"But the numbers are so rubbery. So manipulated. They just don't seem real to me."

"They *are* rubbery and manipulated, but they're also as real as people want them to be. The figures on stock markets were also rubbery—little more than figments of hyperactive imaginations—yet people once chose to treat them as real. Numbers

now in use may seem every bit as arbitrary, but they're not just plucked from thin air. A lot of effort has gone into setting prices of goods, *and* the wages paid to produce them, so they better reflect community values and take into account all social and environmental costs. The extremes of your time—poverty-line wages and multi-million dollar executive salaries for example—simply no longer exist. Rubbery perhaps, but current wages and prices are more meaningful and fairer than any determined by profit-obsessed markets."

"It must be so much work to process all the information. I can't imagine how it could be attempted."

"Quite easily. In essence it's little different in scope from the old Gross Domestic Product estimates, but facilitated by a streamlined participatory form of democracy that makes considerable use of the Net."

"How exactly?"

"I think you may have enough to digest for the moment. Besides, I have other things I need to go on with. I'll return tomorrow morning."

After Wilbur left, I found myself at a loose end. His lecture had overwhelmed me to the point that I just wanted to leave the subject alone, for a while at least.

I distractedly paced about the house, until I noticed the computer screen still adhered to the kitchen wall. Reminded of the Citizens' Database, a sudden curiosity burned. I re-started the browser and found the website with little fuss. What would it have to say about events since 2025? What sort of life had my kids made for themselves? I entered Godfred's details, but with my finger hovering over the 'Enter' key, I hesitated.

I'd been treating it all as something of a game, but what if I was wrong? What if this was *not* a dream? What if I found a way to return to my own time after learning about my children's futures? If Godfred or Sylvia were going to win fame and fortune, for example, would my pleasure seeing them attain it be reduced by knowing it all along? Was it the trip and not the destination that mattered after all? Or what if I knew of some dreadful event—would I spend all the years beforehand trapped in fear and anticipation? Or would I try to take steps to avoid the woes, but perhaps ultimately only cause them? The sci-fi I was familiar with was full of these sorts of paradoxes, and while there was no clear consensus as to what was possible or likely, that in itself might be the most convincing reason to avoid the dilemma.

"But it *is* just a dream," I tried to convince myself. "It's not like I'd be learning anything real."

I did not convince myself. Indeed, I belatedly realised that for all I'd learnt during this dream, the vast majority of it was general—the way society conducted itself, its approaches and systems—not anything specific about people, at least not any I knew in my own time, nor about historical events. Call me a coward, but I decided it would be prudent to maintain that habit. I hit the 'Escape' key, and exited the browser.

By that stage it was late afternoon. With a sound like the final tortured moments of a draining bath, my stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I helped myself to the contents of Ernest's refrigerator and prepared myself a simple meal. I deliberately took it slowly, yet still my mind was elsewhere, going over my situation, its various interpretations and implications.

My mantra persisted, but more desperately, less convincingly. It *had* to be a dream.

"What I need now," I eventually decided, after eating and cleaning up, "is a good distraction." I needed to settle down, as I usually did, by losing myself in a good book. Or better, a good film. I picked up the TV remote and stumbled around with the controls until, a few frustrated attempts later, I managed to get the screen on and to list Ernest's video collection. I scanned the titles, hoping for something suitably escapist. Most titles looked unfamiliar—just what my dream should be arranging, if there was supposed to be forty years of films I hadn't seen. But I soon saw one title that I did recognise: 'First Contact'. The 'Star Trek' film, apparently still popular well over half a century after it was released.

*Why not, I thought. Something tried and proven. Haven't seen it in years... or perhaps it was decades!*

I used the remote to select the title, and a menu appeared, typical for a DVD film, but with a backdrop that bore no resemblance to any 'Star Trek' film I'd seen: there were several images, the main one causing me such sudden shock that I dropped the remote to the floor and began to quiver.

"What the...", I mumbled, hurriedly turning my attention away from the screen to the wall, the floor, outside the window, anywhere but the screen. My breathing sped up, and I had to make a conscious effort to calm down.

Nervously, hesitantly, I picked up the remote, and dared to look at the TV screen again. The backdrop images were of an unfamiliar ringed planet, the earth from space, and a strange spacecraft from which exited several humanoids depicted on too small a scale for me to discern any detail. But there was no doubt about the foreground figure: the head of a humanoid yet non-human creature, identical to the one who had found me along the bush road.

A demon.

I again dropped the remote—it landed on its corner on the instep of my injured bare foot, mere centimetres from the bruise. I repressed a cry of pain and reflexively lifted my leg to inspect the thin red scratch forming where the remote had landed. "At this rate," I muttered, "I'll be an amputee before I get home." But the new pain faded quickly and there was no obvious damage other than the scratch. Still, I hung onto my foot, delaying my next step (sic).

Finally, I summoned the resolve to face the screen again. A closer look at the demon's face revealed subtle differences from the traditional image. Yes, it was scaly and had two horns on its forehead, but they were small, little more than bumps. He—or perhaps she—also had normal rounded, not spiked, ears, and the colour of the skin was not green or red or black but only slightly darker than a typical Caucasian's. It was the nose that differed most: narrower than normal, it extended from the usual spot above the mouth to finish protruding *above* the eyes, and was almost as wide there as at the lower extreme. The eyes themselves were dark red, almost black, and like a cat's, without any white around the irises. There was also no evil-looking goatee beard, indeed no facial hair at all, including on the scalp. Though I hadn't consciously noticed these subtleties when the lightning flash gave me my brief glimpse of the demon by the road, I had no doubt it was the same creature.

When I was able to tear my attention away from the face, I noticed words under the screen title: 'The true story of humanity's first visitors from the stars'.

"An alien!?" I gasped. "I really have read too much sci-fi."

But my curiosity quickly took hold—I selected 'play movie', and started watching it.



Over a panorama of stars and galaxies, a voice full of gravity quietly intoned: "February 2, 2037. A pivotal date for humanity. Before, we had wondered. After, we were certain. We are *not* alone. Other life, other intelligences *do* inhabit other planets. And one had decided to pay us a visit."

A close still shot of a demon-face. "At first," continued the narrator, "our visitors invoked fear. Distrust. Panic... Yet that did not last."

Cut to a long shot of people walking in great numbers along the street of a busy shopping area. "Now, their presence among us is taken for granted. We have become accustomed to them." This confused me, for try as I might, I could not see any demon faces among the throng. The narrator continued. "Indeed, most of us would not even notice them were it not for their identifying bracelets."

The TV screen cut to a close shot of a human arm adorned at the wrist with a prominent, unusual and very ornate gold-coloured bracelet.

The same bracelet worn by Wilbur.

I jumped in my seat. "What the—?!" I could feel my heartbeat racing, matched by my mind as it tried to grapple with this new information, to fit it into recent events, to try to work out why Wilbur wore a bracelet reputedly meant to identify an alien. Wilbur was clearly no demon, even if his sense of humour was hellish. What the devil was going on?

"How is it," continued the narrator, "that the long-anticipated first contact with aliens from other worlds so quickly gave way to blithe disregard?" Cut to a similar shot of the spacecraft from the backdrop, with disembarking aliens. "This is the story of that first contact, how it was greeted, and the changes it wrought for humanity."

At this point, my inner confusion prompted me to rewind and pause, to have a closer look at the wrist bracelet—which made me even more certain it was the same as Wilbur's. What, indeed, was going on?

I was too distracted and fretful to continue watching the documentary, so I turned it off. But I desperately needed an outlet for my nervous energy, so I paced back and forth, as fast as my bruised toes would allow, trying to assimilate the new information, trying to think what it all might mean.

I gave up quickly, too impatient for an answer. I rummaged in the bedroom through the shoe collection until I found a pair of open-toed sandals (garishly green), put them on gingerly without buckling the one on my damaged foot (the pointy-toed shoes I wore earlier that day were not an option), and hobbled out the front door.

The sun had all but set when I reached Wilbur's house. The morning storms long gone, I scanned the now perfectly clear sky for the moon—but without success. This only heightened my discomfort when I remembered the moon when I last saw it, on arriving home from work the night this convoluted dream began: a thick crescent high in the sky soon after sunset. Two days in Jibilee and a crescent moon had disappeared. I *had* to be dreaming. Unless the moon was on a needay.

Wilbur took some time to answer my knock, during which I noticed his carport was empty but his car was parked in front of the house. Odd I thought, before he opened his front door and the thought fled. I decided to go for broke, and spoke before he could even say hello. "You never told me there are aliens on the planet!"

For a moment, I thought his poker face quailed, but if so, he recovered too quickly for me to be sure. "The subject never came up," he said, gesturing me inside.

I entered the house, fuming at his answer. "You could have told me anyway! It's a fairly major event."

"We had so many other matters to deal with, I just never gave it priority." He led me to the lounge. "You just found out, I take it."

"Yes, from one of Ernest's videos." He sat on a couch but I remained standing. And fuming. "But I don't understand why you wear the same wrist bracelet as the aliens."

He was clearly surprised. "You don't?"

"No! *You're* not an alien!"

"Well, yes, I am. Surely you—"

"Come off it Wilbur. If you're an alien, what the hell happened to your face? Plastic surgery?"

Wilbur sighed and shrugged. Then, before my incredulous eyes, his face seemed to melt, then re-coalesce into that of a demon-alien.

I backed away, breathless and alarmed, my eyes fixed on his face. "What the—?"

"I told you," he said, quietly, his voice deeper than normal, but with the same unusual accent.

"You didn't tell me you could... could do that," I said, waving vaguely at his face.

"Surely the vid mentioned my species is metamorphic?"

"Metamorphic?!" I parroted. "I only watched the first minute or so. When they mentioned your bracelet, I rushed over here for an explanation."

"Well, I guess now you have it."

For a while, I was lost for words—too many questions battled for priority. Wilbur must have misinterpreted, because his features melted again, back into his usual familiar face. "I'm sorry if my true appearance makes you uncomfortable," he said, his voice regaining its usual pitch. "Most humans are affected the same way. That's why my species now adopt native forms when we visit your planet."

"Native forms!?" I grunted, before wondering if I should start enquiring about bird cage hire rates. Desperate to fill in the looming silence, I soon added, "Anyone I know?"

"Sort of. Wilbur Edmonds."

My surprise mounted.

"The doctor who usually lives here," continued Wilbur—the alien Wilbur anyway. "He's now about halfway through his world trip."

"You've been masquerading as him?"

"Hardly a masquerade, but yes, that's the arrangement." He held up his hand, displaying the bracelet. "There's no deception as long as I wear this. It announces to everyone that I'm not the person I look like."

"But why look like someone who's known?" I was starting to calm down, enough to decide to sit—as far from Wilbur as the positions of the couches allowed.

"Convenience. Since Doctor Edmonds was not going to be here for a year, his house was made available to me over that time. As long as I was to live here, I might as well look like him as anyone else. The local community certainly never objected to the idea. Indeed, the people of Jibilee have been very accepting. They've made me feel very much at home. I shall miss many of them when I return to Orlanos."

"Your planet?"

He nodded.

"So you aren't even a doctor?"

"No."

"What do I call you? Wilbur isn't your real name, right?"

"No, it isn't, but you can still call me by it. Everyone else here does."

I was too curious to let it rest. "But what *is* your real name?"

"You'd be unable to pronounce it."

"Try me."

Wilbur made a few sibilant whistling noises punctuated by odd rolling consonants, with something in the middle resembling an anaemic raspberry, all of which amounted to a few syllables—but they were truly impossible for me to repeat.

Then I realised I had been deceived for several days. "Why didn't you tell me any of this before?" I cried.

"To avoid you becoming even more disoriented than you already were."

*Reasonable*, I thought. And reassuring. "So I really did see a demon? It was you."

"Exactly. And you fainted at once. Very flattering in retrospect." He smiled grimly.

"But why were you in your natural shape then? Why not like you are now?"

"A lapse on my part. I adopt my natural shape on Earth usually only when alone, as I was in the car when I found you. I simply forgot to revert to this appearance."

"What really happened after I fainted?"

"You hit your head on a rock. So I took the precaution of asking Toby to examine you. Though you stayed unconscious the whole time, he thought the bump fairly minor, and advised just to keep an eye on you until you woke."

"But why did you pretend to be a doctor?"

"Actually, I didn't. I neither confirmed nor denied it when you falsely deduced it. Since you were so disoriented, so amnesiac, I thought it best not to nit-pick. There were more important memories to try to ignite, without overwhelming you with minor details."

"But if you wanted to re-ignite lost memories, why did you hide your identity? Wouldn't revealing it have helped me remember? *If* I was Ernest, that is."

"It should have. And it was my intention. But when you recounted your memories, you didn't mention seeing me as a 'demon', as you put it, when I found you by the roadside. I thought that a curious omission to say the least. No doubt my understanding of human psychology is less than perfect, but you seemed particularly uncomfortable and unsure about me, at least in my true form, so much so that either you felt obliged to lie about it or perhaps to force it from your memory. Either way, best not to bring it to your attention, I thought—it could have tipped your fragile state of mind further out of balance. Better instead to keep secret my true identity, at least until you were better able to handle such a revelation. That's why I improvised the story about finding you on the doorstep. I rather regret the deception now. It would have been simpler to say you were found by the side of the road—but the thought came to me suddenly and I rather unwisely went with it. Perhaps I have read too many Earth fairy stories."

"I believed you at the time," I said, smiling grimly. "I thought the demon must have dumped me on your doorstep. Assuming I hadn't dreamed him."

"A dream within a dream?"

I nodded. "Hell! I didn't have a clue what was going on at first. I'm not sure I do now." After all, here I was in a perfectly ordinary room, having a quiet conversation with an alien!

Suddenly Wilbur yawned. "I'm sorry, Steven. Any other questions will have to wait. I really have to get some sleep. Maintaining a form other than my natural one takes a toll on me. Especially with your planet's stronger gravity."

"Er, sure," I said, feeling suddenly intrusive. "Sorry."

I returned to Ernest's home and immediately watched 'First Contact' in full. It was informative and well put together, if occasionally pompous in tone.

Naturally it dwelt at some length on the shape-changing abilities of the 'Orlanis'. They were not the typical sci-fi metamorph made of a fluid substance that could mould itself into the shape of anything from a flea to a skyscraper. Rather they were more like normal earthly creatures, with internal organs and a specific structure, but possessing very unearthly levels of bodily control (to the molecular level) not just over their exterior appearance but also their muscles, internal organs, even their unusually flexible skeletons. Exercising that control allowed them to reshape themselves markedly, to stretch and shrink and distort, even to warp the skin of their scalp into the semblance of hair. What squids do with colours, Orlanis could do with substance. But there were limits, from beyond which their true bodily parts could not recover. And they could not shed or gain mass in the process. So they could not turn into a full-sized elephant, only a scaled down version, and, given the extent of such a deformation, not for long.

Another surprising revelation was that while Orlanis were highly intelligent and adaptive creatures, with particular skill at quickly picking up alien languages, they found the human concept of humour baffling. Apparently, there was no such thing on their home planet. Not surprising then that they could rarely tell, let alone invent, a joke that humans found funny. Their failure, however, only fanned their desire to succeed—one trait at least which they shared with us.

Wilbur's 'jokes' now took on new meaning. It was more fundamental than him simply having a poor sense of humour, as I had thought. Additionally, he was also a victim of trying too hard. It would probably never come to him as long as he tried to force it to happen; instead, he would just continue to seem awkward.

The documentary also claimed that Orlanis had similar problems with proverbs, despite their language skills. Usually, they found them obscure and alien (*sic*), which tended to lead not only to them being misunderstood but also mis-remembered. Again, I saw Wilbur in a new light.

The ultimate cause of all these differences, it was said, was the Orlanis' different brain structure—the cause also of their more developed visual sense, which allowed them, among other things, to discern subtle mood shifts via slight changes to skin colour and complexion. This ability more than anything else enabled them to know (usually) when to react to human jokes, even though the joke almost inevitably soared over the tops of their metamorphic heads.

They had several other comparative advantages over humans, especially as regards mathematics and, to my surprise, singing (they could alter their larynx, at will, to generate almost any sound imaginable—a veritable orchestra in a voice-box).

There were reportedly several thousand Orlanis on Earth, studying human behaviour first-hand while teaching us about themselves and some of their more advanced technology and knowledge. In something like a cultural exchange program, a smaller number of humans had been transported to Orlanos for similar purposes.

Oddly enough, I was most taken aback by the claim that Orlanis used a similar economic and political system as that in force on Earth in 2065, but after operating it for more than a century, they had done away with money entirely. This followed, it was said, because the Orlanis had reduced their working week to so small a duration—barely an hour—that the book-keeping required to balance costs and

prices became counter-productive, more work than it was worth. It was simpler and, in the words of the film, “more enlightened” to simply do an hour’s work each week for no monetary reward. No longer needing to pay for anything they wanted, the Orlanis were apparently both wealthy and cohesive enough to curb any inclination to indulge to excess.

I was surprised at first by their willingness to accept self-imposed limits, but then realised how it was simply an extension to the habits adopted and encouraged by a system long in place—it would have been more surprising for them to have abandoned those habits and reverted to practices not seen for more than a century.

While watching this part of the film, I wondered if first contact with Orlanis might have sparked the change on earth, that we might have adopted *their* systems. But the film soon informed me this was not the case: our systems were in place shortly before first contact was made. We had no saviours from above, only from within. Even so, I could not help but think that the proven fact of another intelligent life form in the universe must have humbled and ultimately united humanity, and so helped ease the changeover to a new system.

When the film finished, I felt restless again, which prompted my usual response, to surf the web. It hadn’t changed much: it was still full of diversions and crackpot ideas, playful home and personal sites, and a plethora of business addresses. But it was notably free of advertising, and had even more freebies than the considerable amount I was accustomed to finding.

It also lacked many of the sites I knew. Consequently, while sampling some of Ernest’s favourites, I discovered a site that claimed to have “almost any music ever recorded, any film ever made, any book ever written”—all available for free and completely legal downloading.

I felt compelled to research that claim, and soon found an explanation. Allegedly, there were still platinum albums, hit films, and million-seller novels, which still made their creators famous, but they did not make them rich. Fame followed in large proportion to the extent to which an artist’s work was downloaded, but also how much the download was appreciated. When a downloaded book was read, or a film watched, or a song or album played (for the third time), the downloader received an electronic request on their babel and/or computer to rate the product out of ten. People could ignore the request, in which case after a month, it automatically deleted itself. All ratings—able to be amended later if desired—contributed to a record of the number of people who had sampled the product and what they thought of it, which distinguished ‘successful’ artists from the rest. Those achieving a certain level of success were then funded by CAPE to continue full-time in their chosen fields, less successful others received part-time funding, the rest were left to pursue their muse in their spare time. The dividing line as to what constituted a ‘sufficient’ level of success was determined mostly by what could be absorbed by CAPE without detrimental effect on working hours or prices.

Success by those terms often proved fleeting, with one-hit wonders reportedly quite common. Although this did not convince me that popular artists should be prevented from amassing at least small fortunes for their efforts, I had to admit, after I got over my initial shock, that there were some positive aspects to the arrangement. It certainly gave everyone a chance to pursue their muse. Who knows, the garage band I toyed with in my mid-teens might have succeeded if such an approach had been in place at the time. And my life might have turned out quite differently.

The reliance on downloading computer files also meant that hard-copy books had become rare, except in libraries. Apart from a few devoted bookworms and academics, almost no one was willing to repeatedly pay for the more costly option of keeping their collections as actual books. Ernest's spilling bookshelves clearly made him one of the exceptions.

I had to admit all of this must have avoided a lot of waste. Probably three quarters or more of my own collections had been read or viewed once, or played only a few times, then ignored or forgotten, and were now useful only as dust-collectors or coasters; I'd even once used a book (an ancient and unappreciated gift) as emergency fire-fodder.

Undoubtedly there was much more information available on the Net that I would have found interesting, and I could have easily spent many more hours surfing.

But I was prevented from doing so...

# Part Four

## Which

"...the economic problem... the problem of want and poverty and the economic struggle between classes and nations is nothing but a frightful muddle, a transitory and an *unnecessary* muddle. For the western world already has the resources and the technique, if we could create the organisation to use them, capable of reducing the economic problem, which now absorbs our moral and material energies, to a position of secondary importance..."

John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*





## Asparagus & Honeycomb

Like the previous night, I managed to fall asleep without warning. I woke well after daybreak, sprawled across the floor beside the chair I'd been sitting in while surfing, incongruously comfortable apart from chilly bare feet.

Narcolepsy? In a dream?

Narcoleptic dreams?!

Dreams aren't necessarily sequential. Or logical. They miss whole slices of events.

Maybe just a way of progressing.

Whatever was happening, I had little option but to accept it, grudgingly. Morning rituals of toiletries and breakfast followed, events distinguished only by the difficulty of choosing a new shirt from Ernest's collection, and the surprise I felt when disrobing at finding Toby's black device still adhered to my chest—light and subtle enough not to be noticed since its attachment. My injury too surprised me: my toes were blacker than ever, yet without pain and no longer swollen; I could flex them and move about comfortably, barefoot or wearing shoes, with essentially no impairment. It was as if a week of gradual recovery had occurred overnight. Toby's injection was a wonder.

As I finished breakfast, true to his word, Wilbur returned.

"Hard to believe you're really an alien," I said. "Or did I dream that part?"

"You're dreaming all of it, aren't you?"

"Right. Silly question. Here's another? How come I'm getting the guided tour of 2065 from you, an alien, rather than from a local?"

"Shouldn't you ask your subconscious that?"

"You *are* evasive today!" I said, standing to wash my bowl. "I've already asked it, and it didn't know. It was also as curious as me to know how you know so much about an alien world." A sudden realisation. "Alien to you *and* to me."

"Yes, I can see how you might think it a bit like the vision-impaired leading the vision-impaired."

"Blind," I corrected, patiently. "Leading the blind."

"The vision-impaired leading the blind," rehearsed Wilbur, with a mildly uncertain expression.

I bit down my frustration, and returned to my question. "So? Why you? And how come you know so much? Or have you just made it all up?"

"It's my area of interest. My hobby, you could say. I've been studying Earth customs for many years—and its history. That's how we met. And I must say your historical insights have been invaluable."

"Ernest the historian's maybe. But you and I met by the side of a road if I remember correctly."

"If you remember correctly—a moot point."

I ignored him. "I still don't understand why? Did you stumble across me by accident? It didn't look like it. You had some device you ended up pointing at me, as if you'd used it to find me."

"That's exactly what I'd done. It was a tracking device."

"But how did you know to find me?"

"Because you'd gone missing."

This made things no clearer to me, and Wilbur must have recognised it in my expression, or perhaps he was employing his Orlanian skills at picking up mood shifts. Whatever it was, he continued. "In your terms, *Ernest* had gone missing, and I went looking for him. I thought I'd found him too, as did the tracking device. Neither it nor I could tell you two apart."

I studied him, looking for some sign of deception, but found none. I decided to let the matter rest and move on. "So what're your intentions for today?" I said. "Memory-jogging or question-answering?"

"I thought we might exterminate a plurality of avians with a solitary large pebble. How would you like to meet an old friend?"

"I'd like that a lot, if only I had any old friends here."

"An old friend of Ernest's then?"

"Will he tongue-kiss me?"

"I doubt *she* will—she's happily married."

"O."

"Her name's Dianne Knight, Jibilee's plurocrat."

"Plutocrat?"

"*Plurocrat*."

"What's that? A plutocrat with a split personality?"

"A plurocrat is the colloquial name for an elected plurocratic representative."

"Plurocratic?"

"Plurocracy is the participatory form of democracy I mentioned. I called Dianne yesterday and filled her in on your... situation. She's agreed to spend some time with you today. You'll find her more than able to answer any questions you might have about plurocracy, or pretty much anything else for that matter. And with any luck, she may even do something to revive your memory."

"Never give up hope do you?"

He did not answer but gave me a timid smile.

We left soon after, but not until I'd shaved—Wilbur, at my request, identified the shaver as a battery-driven cylinder barely larger than a forefinger; I'd mistaken it as possibly a marital aid.

While walking to Dianne's house, I asked, "How come you've never taken me to Ernest's parents? Judging by the prominent photo in his lounge, they're important to him—potential memory triggers."

"Possibly. Though not as likely as Mattie. But they moved north some years ago, and it'd be impractical for you to meet them in person. A teleconference might work, but I'd rather not trouble them over your condition. The likelihood is, you'll have your memories back in the near future without them needing to know. Your mother, in particular, is something of a worrier. Or so you've said."

On the road, an elderly man on a bicycle whizzed past us at great speed. Surprisingly fit, I thought, until I noticed he wasn't pedalling. There was a small box near the gears, a battery-driven motor according to Wilbur.

As we walked, I couldn't resist raising the subject of Wilbur's behaviour towards Laura the day before. "You seemed keen. Are human-Orlani relations possible?" I jolted to a momentary halt as some of the possibilities of sex with a shapeshifter came to mind.

"Extremely possible," said Wilbur, without expression.

Name your fantasy. All sizes available. Try our Yum Cha.

"But reproduction cannot occur. In any case, with Laura, I was merely trying to behave as a typical human male would around a female widely regarded as attractive and desirable. It helps me understand your species if I try to get inside your skin, so to speak."

"I thought you were trying to get inside Laura's skin."

Soon after, we encountered a pre-schooler sitting on the ground in a house's front yard, his back against a tree trunk, sobbing uncontrollably. Wilbur did not hesitate to kneel next to the boy and try to placate him. Asked the source of his distress, the boy could not force out words between sobs, but instead pointed upwards at a kite lodged high in the tree's branches.

"Don't worry," said Wilbur, soothingly, "I'll get it." He held up his arm so that his wrist bracelet was directly in front of the boy's eyes, which widened almost at once, just as his sobbing suddenly stopped.

Wilbur stood, lifted his arm to point at the kite, and with little apparent effort, gradually elongated it. I was reminded of a fire truck's ladder as Wilbur's arm stretched many metres, thinning as it went, until his fingers grabbed the kite. Then, just as casually, he retracted the arm to its normal length and handed the kite to the boy, whose tearful demeanour was now replaced by a mixture of awe and relief.

Instant giraffe, I thought to myself. Like a Marvel comic had come to life.

"Handy ability, this shape-changing of yours," I said soon after, having left a now much happier child behind us. "Must be particularly useful in crowded trains."

"Not to mention police line-ups," said Wilbur, smiling enigmatically.

"You'd never need to diet, would you? Just make yourself taller."

We walked in silence for a few minutes, before turning into a street I hadn't seen before. It made all the others seem ordinary. There were the same types of houses (though the opposite side of the street was undeveloped bush), but footpaths were all painted with idiosyncratic designs, and nature strip bushes were crafted into three-dimensional flower sculptures augmented by wooden and metal figurines, and smaller objects: garden gnomes, elves, fairies, hobbits, dragons, other mythical beasts. Paper lanterns and mobiles of many materials hung from tree branches overhanging footpaths. In the nature strips of some houses were brightly painted seats and benches, one next to a large tree occupied by a young child talking quietly to another dangling from a sturdy low branch. And there were other more subtle features I could not quite sort out in my head. Part landscaping, part construction, part art, it was both striking and charming.

"Hello, Jeff," said Wilbur, looking across the road. There, near one wooden sculpture like a Native American totem pole but with faces of different ethnicities, was an odd thin fellow with chisel and hammer in hand, wearing paint-strewn coveralls. His hair and beard: wild and thin. His eyes: gleaming with disarming intensity, but his expression unmistakably one of deep absorption. At Wilbur's words, he looked up briefly, waved perfunctorily, then returned to his work.

"He did this?" I asked Wilbur quietly.

"Yes. Something of a success story. Jeff is a loner and a difficult personality. He's tried many jobs but he simply can't work with others. Too difficult, obstinate, opinionated. For a few years, he gave up, didn't even look for work. But I think it must have bored him to distraction, because one day he started painting the driveway of his home—doodling. When his surprised neighbours and others complimented him, he extended the painting to the footpath, and eventually to this." He beckoned to the streetscapes. "He still socialises minimally, but at least he waves to people now. And he looks happier, especially when working."

A small gnome-like sculpture reminded me of a scene from a movie I saw not long before with my kids: an animated version of 'The Wizard of Oz', complete with yellow-brick road and computer-generated munchkins that looked more real than those of the Judy Garland version. It resurrected an earlier theory I'd briefly entertained, or a variation of it. Could I be trapped in a virtual reality? Was this a hoax after all? If so, it was too elaborate to be real, but could it all have been programmed? Was I on something like the holodeck of the USS Enterprise? I wasn't aware that virtual reality technology was this sophisticated and life-like, but maybe that was ignorance on my part. I found I could not dismiss the possibility.

I dwelled on the idea for the rest of the walk to Dianne's, scanning hopefully but vainly for signs of a flaw in the design, an extremity with missing pixels. But Dianne's was only a few doors down and my search too short for me to think it conclusive.

When she greeted us at her front door, I was not surprised she did not seem familiar. Probably in her thirties, she was short, unprepossessing, with a round face, close-cropped brown hair, a slight cleft above her wide chin, a straight nose and freckled skin. Her eyes, however, were striking: wide and of an intense green I could not remember seeing before—made even more striking by their frequent bouts of rapid blinking. She wore a plain pale tan shirt and ordinary blue denim jeans, the very opposite of Ernest's garish tastes.

Wilbur showed no reaction when I failed to recognise Dianne. Instead, while still on the doorstep, he explained that he was going to leave me with her, so he could attend to some pressing concerns of his own. He headed off before I could inquire further, adding that he would drop by my (Ernest's) house at eleven o'clock the next day to accompany me to the hospital for the scheduled tests.

"Come in," said Dianne, as Wilbur left. "Make yourself comfortable. I have Gino with me at the moment, fixing the washing machine. You'll have my full attention as soon as he's finished."

"Ah-hah!" came a muffled voice from another room. "Stone."

I started. Someone's recognised me at last, I thought.

I followed Dianne into a laundry, where a short white-haired middle-aged fellow in coveralls, lying on a large towel on the floor, was studying the base of a washing machine tipped on its side. He had a small component in one hand, and was prodding it with a screwdriver. A large box of tools was on the floor nearby.

"See?" he said, standing quickly and pointing at a tiny stone lodged within the component. "Won't drain with this. Stuck between rotor blades and casing." He passed the component to Dianne who studied it. Then he noticed me for the first time. "Hello, Ernest," he said, a Mediterranean accent apparent. "How you going?"

My sudden hopes evaporated. "Hi," I said, without enthusiasm.

"So it was a pump failure like I thought," said Dianne.

Gino shook his head. "Pump is fine, I think, just jammed because of pebble." He directed a wry smile at Dianne. "Not covered by warranty."

Dianne shrugged, and handed the component back to Gino, saying, "So much trouble from so small a thing."

"What my wife often says about me," said Gino, removing the stone.

I stood idly by, stewing about the loss of my false hope, as Gino put the washing machine back together. Dianne watched intently the whole time, never still for a moment—in keeping with her rapid blinking, her fingers tapped, rubbed, flexed, almost constantly shifted in seemingly random movements. And she periodically stepped to one side or the other, nervous energy abounding.

When Gino put the machine upright again, and tested it, water gushed into the sink. "There," he said to Dianne, "pump is fine. You followed enough to handle it next time?"

"Think so," said Dianne, still fidgeting. "Can you trust me?"

"Can you trust yourself? You could have got schematics off the Net and tackled it. You have before."

"Yes, well," said Dianne, looking uncomfortable, and suddenly rigid—even her fingers were still. "After my last effort on the fridge, I didn't dare. A horrendously botched attempt, you called it."

Gino gave an abrupt laugh. "No. I said the aftermath looked like something by Hieronymous Bosch. A joke. But you learned a lot, right? You're good at DIY repairs. Keep at them—save me trouble." He closed his toolbox and started to move out of the laundry. "Your computer?" he said to Dianne.

"Of course," she replied, following him, her fidgeting movements returning.

I followed them both like a lost dog. The thought crossed my mind that although Dianne's house, like Ernest's and Wilbur's, did not display obvious conspicuous consumption, neither did it suffer a lack of appliances and consumables. All houses I had been in had washing machines for instance, which one might have thought a future like this would have shared, one for every few houses perhaps. But then I remembered what Wilbur had explained about energy production and how goods were built to be efficient and durable. A washing machine in every household then seemed less odd (although I assumed anywhere that had denser living arrangements might well involve some shared goods).

In the living room, Gino started recording on Dianne's computer what I could see was a description of the work he'd just performed. He went into considerable detail. He asked Dianne to verify that all was in order, then she pressed an icon marked 'Pay'.

"See you," he said, as we followed him outside. After the usual thanks and responses, he left, toolbox in hand. He put his toolbox on a bicycle's carry-rack and cycled away. Presumably, he lived close by.

"Was all that recording of his work necessary?" I asked Dianne, as I followed her back into the house.

She seemed stunned by the question, and stopped in her tracks. Then she must have remembered my supposed amnesia. "Absolutely," she finally said. "It's needed for next year's CAPE-planning. After all, the time required to make all necessary repairs is a fairly hard thing to anticipate, especially with goods becoming more durable and reliable. Planning tends to err on the side of caution, though, so repair work is often over-budgeted. This makes the working week and prices higher than

really needed, but the difference usually isn't much, provided we keep good records of the repairs actually done."

"Does that mean Gino works *less* than seven hours a week?"

"Most weeks, I suspect. Especially when people like me try to do the work for him." Her fingers and eyelids, I noticed, now fidgeted to the rhythm of her words.

"I don't understand why that doesn't worry him. He actually seemed keen for you to do his work. How safe can that make his job?"

"His job *is* safe, as long as he does it—however long it takes. More to the point, his income isn't affected by how much others know. Teaching others to increase their self-sufficiency doesn't deprive him of a living, it just reduces his workload, which contributes to a shorter working week for all." She began walking again. "I hope you don't mind, but I just remembered I have to do something urgent in the garden. You can join me if you like, or else you're welcome to wait here until I'm finished."

"No, I'll go with you."

We passed through the house, into the back yard. It was similar to Ernest's, with screening bushes on all sides, but there was no vegetable garden.

A small detached building stood near one hedge. Through its windows, I could see a short, wiry, balding man hovering over a workbench and tinkering with something resembling a small motor. He saw us approach and waved. Growing accustomed to greetings from complete strangers, I waved back.

"Am I supposed to know him?" I asked Dianne, as we continued to walk toward the back of the yard.

"Yes," she said, smiling widely. "You went to school with him. David, my husband. Working, as usual, on the phase transformation engine."

"An engineer?"

"He'd like to think so, but it's really just a hobby. He says he's making progress."

Approaching a corner of the yard, I realised the screening bushes ended here just as I thought they did at Ernest's: there was a gap we could walk through before another row of bushes started a metre or so behind the first. The second row only barely overlapped the first, but extended in the other direction to fully screen the neighbour's back yard.

Behind both rows was a new shock: a vast vegetable garden, with fruit and nut trees, a large pond full of water lilies and ducks, and a sizeable chicken coop, all tended by several people. One old gent had a fishing line drooping in the pond.

It was like a small farm, but surrounded by rows of screening bushes, and interspersed at strategic points with tall native trees—an odd hybrid of natural bush and intensive small-scale agriculture.

Yvette probably would have been in seventh heaven, but I found it daunting. It was like I'd been thrown back into a distant time. It reminded me of nothing so much as an elaborate form of the Second World War's victory gardens I had read about long ago at school. "Whose is this?" I asked, as we made our way to what looked like a large tool shed near the centre of the garden.

"Ours," said Dianne. My face must have betrayed my lack of comprehension. "The thirty houses that border the garden," she added. "The neighbourhood."

Something in the way she said those words made it clear to me: "It's part of the city design, isn't it?"

"Yes. Most areas of Chord have a neighbourhood garden in every block."

As we neared the tool shed, one of the people tending the garden—an elderly man in a cane hat turning soil over with a large garden fork—noticed us, stopped his work, and began to approach.

"Uh-oh," said Dianne quietly. Her fidgeting ceased. "I know what this is going to be about." She waved to the man approaching us, and said more loudly, "Morning Shane."

He stopped a generous distance from us, and leant lightly on his fork handle. He ignored me and fixed his gaze on Dianne. "The asparagus will not last forever."

"True," replied Dianne, "but with a lifetime of twenty-five years, it's as close as most vegetables get to immortality." With that, Shane's humourless expression grew more stern. Dianne relented. "I'm just about to pick it now," she said. "That's why I'm here."

Shane stared at her. "You said that yesterday," came his eventual reply. "If you are not interested, I will do it."

"No," Dianne responded politely, "I'll do it. I want to—really."

He continued to stare at her for several icy seconds. Then: "If they are still there tomorrow morning, I *will* pick them," Shane warned, moving off. "I will not see them wasted."

Dianne shook her head, then moved towards the tool shed.

"Property dispute?" I said, following her inside.

She gave me an amused smirk, then, resuming her presumably unconscious accompaniment of blinking and finger-fluttering, said, "Of course not. You know the harvest is shared. O, right, you don't remember. Let me remind you. Last year, I was so busy with representative duties, I forgot to pick the asparagus. Just before they were too far gone, but still past their prime, Shane did it for me. He's very fond of asparagus, and he's never trusted me since. I suppose it's fair enough. I mean, they are about the most trouble-free vegetable in the whole garden—they need almost no attention for two thirds of the year, and only a few minutes of harvesting every few days for the rest. It isn't like it's anything onerous to interfere with my work. One reason the neighbourhood decided I could look after it. It's just I forget to do it sometimes." She took a basket and a small knife from the well-stocked tool shed shelves (which must have held five to ten of nearly every tool imaginable) and moved outside.

"So you *have* to take on some work in this garden?" I asked her as we headed toward the asparagus plot.

"O no," she said with a wide grin, "there's no onus on anyone to take part. But few households don't have at least one member who wants to. I mean, there's the oddbod like Wilbur who insists on having his own vegetable garden and not working in the neighbourhood one, but most families are keen to take part." She moved her forearm in a narrow arc, indicating the garden. "A few even have their own backyard garden as well. Fresh food is hard to resist once you get a taste for it."

My heart skipped a beat. Dianne's last sentence was one of Yvette's favourite sayings, word-for-word. What was my subconscious doing to me? Was it trying to tell me I should take more notice of my wife?

I looked about us, astounded by the abundance of food. I was also surprised by how close the pond was to the vegetable plots, and wondered what would happen in a heavy rain. "How do you stop the pond overflowing into the vegetables?"

"It's linked to the underground water reserve. Like the street drainage system, any excess feeds into larger city and regional water reserves. Of course water tanks make most houses more or less independent anyway."

"I didn't notice any tanks in your yard."

"You wouldn't—they're underground."

I looked about at the vegetable plots. They were dense and productive, dauntingly so. "Are there any *real* farms left, or is this enough to survive on?"

"We *can* be self-sufficient, at times, at least for *some* fruit and vegetables, but mostly the garden just supplements farm produce. Farms are indispensable, not just for crops like wheat, but for vegetables like these too—especially for areas that can't grow specific crops. You won't find many bananas or mangos around here, for instance—most come from farms up north. And then there's the meat-vat manufactories."

I barely halted in time as a chicken crossed my path, racing past and clucking loudly as it tried to evade a rooster not far behind it. I sighed deeply, then waved vaguely at the vegetable garden. "And is this—this arrangement—typical? In other cities?"

"In the newer ones, yes, and increasingly in older ones as they are re-designed. But of course there are limits. You can refurbish the more crumbling eco-insensitive houses and add neighbourhood gardens, or turn central business district skyscrapers into residences full of hydroponic gardens. But there are some old manufacturing and industrial buildings beyond help. Just not cost-effective to do anything with them except tear them down and start again."

"I—you mean..." I wasn't sure I understood, but I was struck by a faint glimmering of the possible ramifications of what she was saying, and of what I'd heard already about old boundaries no longer existing and new names being adopted for new areas. "Are you saying population centres like Melbourne are being completely re-made?"

"More or less." She stopped at the extensive asparagus plot, knelt down, began cutting spears and placing them in the basket. "Instead of urban sprawl blanketing the landscape, the old metropolises are being turned into something like a honeycomb structure—like Jibilee and Chord—at least as far as possible: buildings mixed in with natural spaces. Land outlying the boundaries of the metropolises and well beyond into rural areas is progressively being refashioned into networks of smaller, semi-independent and largely self-sustaining new cities. These provide homes for people from the least habitable areas of the metropolises, as their buildings are cannibalised and materials recycled—the vacant land that results is either redeveloped for sustainable living or turned into farms, parklands, natural bush, or other soothing spaces. The same thing is happening worldwide: metropolises and megalopolises in developing and developed nations alike are slowly and creatively disintegrating. And just in time, too. They were clearly breaking down, too unwieldy and monstrously over-sized to function properly. Now we have more modest sized cities. *Optimally* sized cities. And we no longer impose ourselves on the environment, but blend in with it, cohabitate."

"It must be a massive task," I said, not believing a word of it. "To renovate entire cities."

"Yes, it is. We might have a *one*-hour working week otherwise. But in previous centuries, entire metropolises have been built in just a few decades—and at the same



time as a lot of other genuinely useless work was done—if that's possible, thorough renovation is hardly beyond us."

That kept me quiet for a while. I just watched her gather asparagus, and looked about me. Was that a koala in one of the trees?

How much longer was this impossible dream going to continue? Although Dianne looked nothing like Yvette, she reminded me of her. It was more than her use of one of Yvette's favourite sayings—perhaps her ecological consciousness or understated optimism. Whatever it was, it was beginning to make me more conscious of Yvette's absence. And the kids. And my real life.

To distract myself from burgeoning homesickness, I attempted more conversation. Remembering why Wilbur had left me with Dianne, I asked, "So which party are you?"

She looked at me in obvious confusion, before suddenly brightening. "O, you mean political party!" She grinned widely and resumed her asparagus cutting. "I'm not a member of any."

"You're an independent?"

"You could say that. All representatives are independent. There are no political parties."

## 14

# Plurocracy

"You're kidding?!" I was stunned. "Why not?"

"They aren't needed. In fact, their rigid dogmatic thinking and formalised platforms would just obstruct plurocracy."

I sighed, resigning myself to yet another unfathomable explanation. "Perhaps you'd better explain to me what plurocracy is."

"Well," she began, exhaling deeply, but continuing to cut asparagus. "The essential feature, I suppose, is its decentralised bottom-up structure. At its basis are small self-governing electorates called *localities*."

"How small?"

"Most have around two hundred and fifty people—usually about three-quarters old enough to vote. Of course, numbers vary according to population densities, geography, and other factors. Our locality, Jibilee, spans all the houses bordering this garden, and those bordering the next two to the north—including the part of Balderstone Road where you live. Currently, a total of 188 voters."

"And you're their representative?"

"For the moment. But there's another 187 people who could do the job if they wanted."

It took me a moment to realise what that implied. "What about people outside the locality? Can they represent it?"

She snorted an abrupt but quiet laugh. "Of course not. How *could* anyone properly represent something they aren't part of, familiar with? One of the main aims of plurocracy is to avoid distant and faceless representation. I know the majority of people in Jibilee by name and sight. And vice versa."

"Jibilee?! What *does* that mean?"

"Nothing at all. Just the name chosen from those suggested by locality members when it formed."

"But a meaningless name? I would have expected a famous Australian sportsperson's. Bradman—Freeman—Cazaly."

"They're in use elsewhere, as are many others. But Aboriginal and old English names are more popular. Voters in Jibilee, though, and many other electorates, wanted to start afresh, with names lacking associations. Names we just liked the sound of."

"But Jibilee?!"

"Better than 'Orgasmia'. We should be grateful that was out-voted."

Eyebrows raised, I nodded in agreement. "Anyway, about plurocracy...?"

"Yes, well, the localities—the base level electorates—are all arranged into larger associations. The *town* level usually consists of about twenty localities, that's about five thousand people. You probably won't like our town name either—Enote."

I didn't, but at least it was consistent—it sounded every bit as meaningless as Jibilee.

She stood, having cut all mature asparagus spears in sight—there must have been a couple hundred or more in her basket—and began walking back to the tool shed. I accompanied her. All the while, she continued her explanation. “Each town is represented by one of the representatives of its constituent localities. In some cases, like ours, the town rep is elected by town voters. In other towns, the locality representatives choose the town rep. And sometimes as compensation for their extra duties, an assistant or even replacement locality rep is elected. But these issues are entirely matters for each locality or town to decide.”

“Is that it? Localities and towns?”

“No. Towns form bigger electorates again, and those likewise, progressively upwards. The *city* level usually has about ten towns, say two hundred localities, fifty thousand people. In turn, cities combine to form *regions*. Chord, which is Enote’s city, and another forty-nine cities make up the region of Hillbeach.”

I belatedly realised that Enote wasn’t a meaningless name after all. Was Chord dissonant or consonant, I wondered.

“Hillbeach in turn combines with another nine regions to form the *nation* of Australia. Which in turn is linked with fifteen nearby nations to form the *meta-nation* of Oceania South, and there are nine other meta-nations across the world.”

“You mean every nation in the world has this system?”

“No, unfortunately there are still a few that maintain older forms of government. But a majority at least now use plurocracy. Australia was actually the very first to adopt it.”

That proved this was a dream. Australia leading the way? After generations of parroting Britain then the US? Usually we were a decade or two behind, not ahead!

Yet as surprised as I was to hear it, I must admit it appealed to my sense of national pride. My subconscious certainly knew which buttons to press.

“Ok,” I said, as we moved inside the tool shed, “so you have the various levels—apart from there being more of them, how is it different to what I’m used to with local, state and federal government?”

“It’s vastly different—because of the way the levels interact.” As she continued, Dianne placed the asparagus one or two at a time onto a long low bench, sorting it eventually into a score or more of equally sized piles. “Firstly, just so I don’t confuse you, an electorate at any level is often called a plurocracy. Now whatever the level, for a plurocracy to pass a proposal, approval is required not only from a majority of its voters but also from a majority of its constituent plurocracies. Enote, for example, can only pass a proposal if more than half of its localities and more than half of all its voters agree. Likewise at the city level and above.”

I suddenly recognised what she was describing: a system mentioned in an episode of the classic TV satire, ‘Yes, Minister’. Extended and expanded, but basically the same. I hadn’t seen the series for years, yet here it was being re-presented to me as part of a grander scheme. Not for the first time, I was stunned by my dream’s level of detail. I’d never had one nearly so involved.

“Mind you,” continued Dianne, “in some plurocracies—Jibilee for one—a majority is defined not as a half but two-thirds. Though in some situations, not even that suffices: many localities, again Jibilee included, sometimes require full consensus for proposals to be adopted—we continuously modify them until they satisfy everyone. For other decisions, especially about issues of land use, many plurocracies weight votes, so people most affected have the greatest say. Some votes have a zero to ten scale and must reach a pre-agreed total for decisions to be passed.

But I digress. Whatever the details, the point is, every plurocratic electorate at every level functions semi-autonomously. So, while each locality, for example, has to heed the plurocratic decisions of its town, these apply only to issues that affect two or more localities—for purely internal affairs, each locality makes its own rulings. So, for example, a decision to build a new shop within Jibilee would be made by Jibilee's voters; but the shop's location would be restricted by Enote's planning scheme, and the height it could reach would be limited by another agreement settled on by the whole of Chord. This way, people most directly affected by proposals have the major say and decisions are made from the bottom up."

Whereas the approach of most governments I knew could more aptly be described as up-(your-)bottom. "But then what is the point of having representatives? In your system, they'd surely be superfluous. You might as well not bother even having elections."

"We don't," replied Dianne, to what must have been my obvious astonishment. "Each person's vote is stored on the Net, and anyone can change their vote at any time. This saves the waste and tedium of semi-periodic elections, as well as motivating more diligent representation." She shrugged. "Personally I think the title should be coordinator, not representative, because mostly what we do is provide options and proposals to our electorates, and try to ensure they have all available and necessary information to make properly considered decisions themselves. All of which is facilitated by the Net. It's usually an efficient way to make proposals, to seek and obtain 'expert' advice, and to bring any issue to the attention of those it affects. Like an electronic communal noticeboard."

Having now emptied the basket of asparagus, Dianne put it and the knife back on the shelves, then opened one door of a tall, wide, two-door refrigerator at the end of the bench. Inside were vegetable crispers, one atop another on shelves, all marked with a different surname each. One, I noticed, was 'Knight'.

"But if you can change your vote at any time," I asked, "doesn't it lead to instability?"

"Not at all," she replied, taking one pile of asparagus and putting it in the top crisper. As she continued her reply, she repeated the process for the remainder of the asparagus and crispers (though she skipped her own family's). "Without political parties, a change of representation corresponds merely to the people changing their mind, not a potentially destabilising power shift. With plurocracy, power always remains with the people. Even if our voting habits did prove destabilising, we could vote to change them. The choices available are limited only by our imaginations."

Choices. What would people choose with such an arrangement, I wondered. How would they manage to find agreement? "What if a locality or town disagrees with a majority of others?" I asked. "Are they supposed to just cop it on the chin? Grin and bear it?"

"Not necessarily. Each plurocracy has the right to secede. If Jibilee ever finds itself consistently voting against decisions plurocratically passed by Enote, we could choose to secede from it and become independent. Or join other more-like-minded localities—not necessarily with common borders."

*A useful feature, I thought, but hardly a panacea.* "Even with the right to secede, how would plurocracy prevent discrimination against minorities? How does it avoid persecution? I can see how it would just lead to rule by majority ignorance. Legislated racism with all the different ethnic groups huddling together in their own electorates, making up their own rules."

"You're right. That's what it's capable of. And the only way to avoid it is to be vigilant. People must understand the responsibilities associated with self-determination. Which requires education. It's an ongoing task. Though there's a simple guideline designed to foster the best from people, one that is accepted as a condition—as a guiding rule—by each and every plurocracy: any practice of one's own choice is a *right*, as long as it fulfils the *duty* not to harm others in the process."

"That's vague enough to be misinterpreted. Hardly foolproof."

"True," she said, closing the refrigerator door, and picking up the last pile of asparagus from the bench. She continued to talk as we made our way out of the tool shed and back to her house, her fingers fluttering more than ever now that they were not involved in more deliberate actions. "Care must always be taken to distinguish the truly harmful from the merely disagreeable—to avoid misinterpreting due to shocked sensibilities or outraged morality. Or laziness. Even a majority definition of 'harm' could open the door to just the sort of rule by weight of numbers that persecution depends on. Which is why many localities pursue consensus rather than majority approval—for certain proposals at least."

"Which proposals?"

"Whichever ones are deemed appropriate to deal with that way"

"But how do you determine which ones are appropriate?"

"We vote on it."

"So you vote to determine if you need to find consensus instead of voting?"

"I know, it sounds contradictory. In the early years, there were several attempts to set up simple criteria for determining when to seek majority approval and when to seek consensus, but they failed badly. Most other plurocracies had similar experiences. You can't always use simple generalised criteria—such as a party platform—to tackle complex issues. Usually the first thing we do, any time a proposal is made that requires a decision, is discuss the reasons for and against methods of making the decision, then we vote as to which method to use."

"So presumably you end up with a majority approval in favour of reaching consensus."

"Yes, a two-thirds majority—that's what we decided. We can change it, but the possibility hasn't been raised for more than two decades."

I shook my head. "I find it hard to believe people are so politically involved. I'm used to most being apathetic even about voting once every few years. And you're telling me now they vote all the time on all sorts of issues! However well you might 'coordinate' your electorate, I hate to think what poor decisions they make."

"Ah yes," said Dianne, smiling grimly, "the old fear that if people are actually given power, they will be irresponsible with it. Preserved, no doubt, because it justified the restriction of power to a few leaders who usually acted so irresponsibly as to make the fear seem warranted. But people aren't sheep to be led, even if tradition long treated us so. And, just like children, we can't become responsible if we aren't given responsibilities."

"Voting at elections is a heavy responsibility."

"Choosing every few years which party hack should take control? That just transfers responsibility—abandons it. It has to be taken over personally, through involvement, not abdication. Fortunately, as might have been predicted if fear, prejudice and lazy thinking hadn't ruled, once people *were* given responsibilities by plurocracy, most rose to the occasion."

She hadn't convinced me—perhaps the fear she spoke of was too entrenched in me—yet I couldn't think how to reply. Instead, as we entered her back yard, I suddenly became aware of the potential ponderousness of the system she'd been describing. "All this careful involved decision-making must take a lot of time. Doesn't it slow the wheel of progress? Or grind it to a halt?"

"Progress at times is less rapid under plurocracy, but it's a type and rate of progress that people truly want. With only one needay a week, we have enough time to deliberate over decisions, to seek information, and to use our plurocratic abilities for change responsibly. Perhaps we don't make so fast a wheel, but for most it's a better wheel. In any case, your concern is just the common old argument that true democracy isn't practical because it would take too long to get anything done, that what's really needed is a benevolent dictator to make decisions on everyone's behalf. Of course, dictators rarely stay benevolent for long, nor are any as omniscient as they need to be to make all those decisions. But it was always a ridiculous argument as long as true democracy was never actually attempted. A bit like a virgin claiming sex is unpleasant."

A lengthy silence followed, as we entered the house and moved into her kitchen. I wanted to raise objections, to point out flaws, but at the time none came to me. After she transferred the asparagus to the refrigerator, she gestured to me to sit down, then moved behind the kitchen bench.

"Well...", I said, finally. "It's... it's unprecedented."

"Actually it isn't," she replied, stopping in her tracks, blinking rapidly. "It has much in common with Switzerland's old system of government, although it's more elaborate, systematic and consistent. And naturally enough, modern information technology streamlines it—enough to decentralise most government departments into towns and cities."

I had a fleeting vision of a local 'Dad's Army' defence force, but she continued before I could voice my thoughts.

"It makes sense. Towns are pretty much the perfect size to most efficiently satisfy most social needs and many cultural ones, as well as to maintain eco-energy systems and other services like much health-care. But some things work better with *more* than five thousand people, and are most efficiently managed at the city level: police, for example, libraries, information, fire protection. As well as education, housing, sanitation, street maintenance, entertainment, recreation. And of course there are some concerns for which cities don't suffice. A few can produce high standard orchestras and sports teams, universities and specialist research groups, and other ensembles of note, but more often—for the best standard possible—the talents and skills of a region or even a nation need to be pooled. The advantages of being part of a larger group manifest most during hard times: when industrial shortfalls, for example, or crop failures occur in one city, they can usually be compensated for by other cities in the region—and regional failures, by the nation." She moved to a cupboard and opened it. "Care for a tea?"

"A coffee please," I replied, to her surprise. Another silence followed as she prepared the drinks. I found myself lost in my own thoughts, trying to digest—as well as recall—all she had said, and to figure out how this system might actually work. Not surprisingly, given her ability to talk at length, Dianne broke the silence. It was as if she was aware what I was thinking.

"As it happens, the monthly locality meeting is scheduled for tonight. Not only would it be a good chance for you to see plurocracy in practice, but since we have to

reach consensus on one issue, your attendance is more or less essential." She smiled. "Not that you usually miss the meetings."

Running footsteps interrupted us, and I turned to see a young girl, perhaps eight years old, rush into the room, speaking simultaneously. "Can I have something to eat please Mum?"

"It's a bit early for lunch, Victoria," said Dianne.

"Awww," she whined, "but I'm really hungry."

"How about an apple?"

"Ok." She turned to me and said "Hi Ernest," then immediately moved to a fruit bowl on one of the benches and hovered over it, lost in the decision of which apple to select. You could see at a glance she was her mother's daughter.

"Hello," I said to her. I turned to Dianne. "No school today? Do children have a one-day week too, like adults?"

"Most have three school days a week," Dianne answered, the start of a broad explanation of the nature of modern education. Schools still existed at least, and they served much the same function as ever, but they were augmented by on-line education at home and various other audiovisual aids used almost from birth. Children also had frequent 'community days', time spent accompanying and assisting adults as they performed their work—a sort of work-experience meant to provide opportunities to meet many people in many walks of life, and to understand the type of labour the community performed and how it functioned. This, Dianne claimed, helped develop social skills and supplied a wide choice of role-models. It also helped children decide—sooner or later—what they themselves did best and what they might most want to do when they grew up.

"And do you like community days?" I asked Victoria as she chomped on her apple.

"O yes," she replied, her mouth full. "I told you once before. Community work is the best part of school."

"Really?"

"Yes, I like seeing how we grow food and produce energy, and how factories run."

"You sure it isn't just slave labour?" I asked Dianne, after Victoria returned to her room.

"Hardly," she said. "It isn't *hard* work, not at Victoria's age. In fact, half the time, the kids don't do *any* work, they just observe and keep the adults company. When they actually do some work, as often as not it just slows the adults down. So there's very little motivation for using them as slaves."

I had many more questions, as we sat outside with our drinks, and Dianne was very informative with her answers. Children were still taught the three r's, but an at least equal focus was given to the art of living with other people. As soon as they were able to understand the concepts, children were taught the rights due to and from each other, how to trust, co-operate, tolerate differences, how to resolve conflicts, control anger, and manage stress.

Dianne claimed at one point that learning was no longer a chore or a contest, but an engagement. "We aren't trained exclusively for employment but rather for life. So, too, our identities aren't defined by careers, but by how we spend all our time—work *and* leisure."

"It sounds to me," I replied, "a bit like brain-washing. However well intentioned, isn't it just organised propaganda? Indoctrination? A sort of supposedly enlightened version of the Hitler Youth?"

Dianne looked shocked—enough for her fidgeting to cease, but only for a few moments. "That's a very inappropriate comparison. I can understand how it might seem like indoctrination, but the fact is that every culture indoctrinates, if not wilfully then unintentionally. Each generation passes onto the next their unstated assumptions and expectations about life and society. We do the same, no doubt, but at least we are aware of it. That is why behavioural studies are a significant part of education, why we are taught to understand where and who we are, the nature of our thinking, our culture, and the assumptions and philosophy of our institutions and systems. And we are also taught to think critically, to question accepted wisdom, to be vigilant and creative. I may be wrong, but I don't think the Hitler Youth were taught that."

"Point taken. So what's the result? Does everyone have an IQ of 200?"

My scepticism sounded unduly harsh even to my ears, but Dianne brushed it aside without comment. "The result is, generally speaking, a more open-minded and understanding society. It isn't perfect. It can't be, of course, not ever—people are too fallible, but most are happy and fulfilled. And when they are not, when life throws some spanner in the works and happiness and fulfilment fly out the window, the cohesiveness and caring of the community help people move on."

She was clearly convinced of the truth of what she was saying, and on the surface I had to admit she had made some persuasive arguments, but I still had nagging doubts about it all. There was a certain cerebral quality to this society, a dispassionate detachment that I found unnerving and not entirely human. I could not see happiness and fulfilment flowing from it for me. "It all sounds very fine and civilised," I said, "but I can't help feeling it must also be a bit boring."

"O, anything but," she replied. "For me there is never enough time in the day to become bored."

"Even with a one-day working week? Surely with all that time on your hands..."

She smiled knowingly and gently shook her head. "When enufism was first introduced," she said, "some feared that the economic problem would just be replaced by a problem of boredom. Critics claimed a shorter working week was likely to generate an uncontrollable level of hedonism and self-indulgence. And there certainly was plenty of that at first, although it was hardly out of control. But you can't do anything for long before it begins to bore, even hedonism. Then you either seek newer activities, or rot. And one of the best activities to revive the terminally bored is education. When you have something interesting to learn, you are rarely bored. Of course, what interests each person differs, but that just means education has to involve efforts *to determine* what interests each person. Which is what we do. Not just for children. Education doesn't stop at the end of secondary school, or tertiary. It continues voluntarily through to old age—whenever people want it, on whatever subject interests them, from the driest academic esoterica to advanced knitting or skateboarding, anything that can be taught."

"Including gun-running?" I said with cynical aplomb. "Terrorism 101?"

"Naturally."

I stared at her expressionless face in disbelief.

She stared back, oddly motionless for seconds. Then a sudden wide smile. "You actually believed me, didn't you?"



I was too startled—and relieved—to respond.

"Of course those things aren't taught," she continued. "I meant anything that fulfils the duty not to harm others. That concept has become so second nature to most of us now, I forgot you would need to be reminded. Sorry."

Rather obviously, Dianne changed the topic to me. Ernest, that is. Presumably she was hoping she'd mention something that would jog my memory back into full bloom. At first, I was glad for the reprieve from further new disarming ideas. But however sure Dianne was about me being Ernest, I knew she was wrong. So after hearing a few things about 'myself', I politely declined to hear any more. She then told me a little about Mattie and—whenever my censoring skills weren't quick enough—'our' marriage, as well as some neighbourhood gossip. Most of it went in one ear and out the other. What I did pay attention to only made me aware of how much I did *not* know the people of whom she spoke.

Eventually, Dianne's husband, David—my supposed old school friend—left his workshop long enough to share lunch with us. And Victoria's older brother, James, appeared briefly before heading off to a friend's place. David—an oddly hesitant type who, somewhat like his wife, apparently could not say a word without an accompanying hand or facial gesture—was shocked by my purported amnesia, but James, on the cusp of adolescence, was too much in a world of his own to give any indication that he even noticed (though he could not be said to lack manners).

After lunch, David returned to his workshop, but Dianne spent the rest of the day with me, showing no overt signs of annoyance or impatience, or even of getting on with her own life. I was surprised by this, given the nervous energy so apparent in her; I wondered if she had things to do but was being prevented from doing—by me. Even when she was seated, she shifted every few seconds, as if unable to become comfortable. Her fingers only ceased their fidgeting movements when they were otherwise occupied, or for a few moments when she was taken by surprise or discomfort. Likewise her less frequent blinking. At first I thought it was me making her nervous, but at one stage, after lunch, when I was seated outside, I observed her through the kitchen window when she was briefly alone inside with David, and she was as much assailed by her fidgeting then as before. A bundle of nervous energy, it seemed.

"Perhaps I should head home now," I said soon after lunch, before realising that I was not able to go home—at best, I could only return to *Ernest's* home. "You must have things to do."

"Nothing urgent," she said. "I'm up to date with my work, and prepared for tonight's meeting. But what about you? How are you feeling? Is anything coming back yet?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nor will it. I know you and Wilbur and everyone else here are sure I'm someone else, but I'm telling you I am Steven Stone."

She said nothing, beyond the eloquence of her expression of compassionate concern.

Soon after, she suggested a game of tennis, which initially struck me as a good idea, but then I remembered my injury. Despite their bruised appearance, however, my toes seemed to be completely recovered thanks to Toby's injection, so I decided they probably wouldn't trouble me. My chest pains were another concern. I was not keen on doing anything to make them return. Then I began to reconsider—if this was a dream, why should I fear chest pains? Perhaps they were not going to be part of the dream. They hadn't been since I first met Wilbur in the storm. Perhaps their

absence was my subconscious's way of telling me I did not have heart trouble after all. Wishful thinking, maybe, but I was feeling restless and trapped. Apart from the walking, this dream had been fairly inactive, physically if not intellectually.

"I haven't played in years," I said to Dianne.

"What about last week's game?" she replied.

I smiled and just shook my head. She shrugged and said, "Well, are you interested or not? I promise I'll take it easy on you."

She probably did, but still she thrashed me. I made a half-hearted attempt at blaming it on my foot injury, but the truth was it did not impair me at all, as Dianne pointed out in reply.

I enjoyed the game thoroughly. Though tired and muscle-sore by the end of it, still no chest pain eventuated. More evidence for a dream. I had almost hoped a pain *would* strike—a small one—so Toby's device would do its stuff. It was still stuck to my chest, yet it didn't impede my movements even while playing tennis.

On the walk back, the tennis courts being barely further away than Ernest's house, Dianne informed me that I'd performed up to my usual standard. Which made Ernest, if he existed, a fairly inept tennis player.

After our return, over a late afternoon tea on her verandah, the information overload I was trying to keep at the back of my mind hit breaking point. David was with us again, and I'd just belatedly made the usual, casual, polite remarks to the effect of 'what a nice place you have', before asking how long they'd been living there.

"Fifteen years," said David. "Or is it sixteen? Umm. No, fifteen."

"Paid off your mortgage?" I asked innocently.

"Mortgage?" they said in unison, looking at me, then each other, in surprise. At least I was not the only one at risk of turning into a parrot.

I misinterpreted. "You *have* paid it off then?" When their puzzled looks mounted, I tried again. "Or were you cashed up enough to avoid a mortgage altogether?"

"Um...", began David, his body rigid, his expression concerned. "You really *have* forgotten everything."

"There was nothing to pay," said Dianne, blinking more rapidly than normal.

"You mean you rent?" I said, grappling.

"No," said Dianne, "no one rents any more. No one buys houses either. Housing is free."

# 15

## Decisions

In shock, I let my half empty cup of coffee slip from my hands. I caught it in time, though not before a few drops of very warm liquid spilled onto my trousers. "Free housing, free food, free health care, seven-hour working weeks, government by the people. This can't be real. How the hell can you afford free housing?"

"The same way we afford free staple food," said Dianne, showing no offence at my outburst. "The costs are absorbed into the prices of other goods and services, using CAPE."

"Surely not! Houses are too expensive. If they were made free, other goods would have outrageous prices. No one could afford them."

"No, er, that's not so," said David, now mimicking his wife by fidgeting in his seat. He continued, in sentences full of ums and ers, his arms waving, his hands gesticulating wildly. The movements mostly had no relationship to the words but they were of such a magnitude, I found myself thinking of a puppet show. "In the early days, that is when we were all children, the building of houses comprised only about eight or nine percent—I think, wasn't it, Di?—certainly less than ten percent of most nations' costs, I'm pretty sure. So, that being the case, the prices of other goods—non-housing goods that is—were naturally only about ten percent higher than they would have been if there had been no free housing."

Again, my coffee cup almost fell to the ground. Yvette and I spend a lot more than ten percent of our income on our mortgage. So do most people.

"The percentage is somewhat higher now," continued David, "with so many other costs removed because of the shorter working week. But then the population is also stable enough for there not to be nearly as much need for new houses. Even if we had to spend, say, *half* of all our costs on housing, making it free would still be affordable—I think that would be a fair thing to say, wouldn't you, Di? That's the way CAPE operates, after all: if the total costs of an economy are balanced by its total prices, then the prices are by definition affordable."

His final gesture of a pointed finger being abruptly lowered almost made me feel like I was back at school. "What else is free in this place?" I demanded irritably. "Do you pay for anything? Apart from restaurant meals and toilet paper?" That was about all I'd seen involve a payment. "And tropical fruit?"

"Of course," said Dianne. "You saw me pay for Gino's work this morning. It's only basic needs that are free—for the most part. Housing, food, education, health care."

I grappled momentarily with this news before returning my thoughts to the concept of free housing. An objection immediately reared its ugly head. "But what happens if you decide you want to move?" I said. "Surely there'll be more than one person or family interested in the same house. If you don't offer a higher price for a house, how do you manage to get to own it ahead of someone else?"

"We don't own our house," said Dianne.

"But you said you had no mortgage or rent." Suddenly I realised. "Ohhhh. The state owns it. Your locality or town. Or city."

"No one owns it," said Dianne.

"But we *steward* it," said David. "Ownership has been transcended—by stewardship."

I remembered Wilbur using the same word in relation to Alice and her restaurant, but the memory did not aid my understanding. "What?! No one owns anything?! Not even clothes?"

"Sorry," said David. "I expressed myself poorly. Too general and brief. Most things are owned, but not houses. Nor land and fixed capital. They're stewarded."

"And who is Stuart?"

My mind already broiling, I listened with a mixture of horror and fascination as they explained how the costs of developing land for use, and building factories and industrial plants and other fixed capital, were all absorbed via CAPE into the prices of other consumable goods and services, so that, like houses, land and fixed capital were free. They pointed out that even under capitalism, the costs of creating and maintaining capital goods are covered by the prices of the goods they help produce—effectively absorbed into prices just as with CAPE. But making fixed capital free had (allegedly) caused stocks, bonds and other speculative money-raising devices to become obsolete. Was my subconscious trying to tell me it was a good thing I never became a stockbroker, a career I'd once briefly entertained?

Stewardship of land and fixed capital was not as alien as I expected. Essentially it was a plurocratic form of collective ownership. The people living in the smallest plurocracy with borders that fully enclosed any unused land were its stewards, which is to say they had responsibility for looking after the land until they could agree on how, if at all, it would be used or developed. Whereas fixed capital was stewarded mostly by the people operating it—all of the workers of a factory or restaurant, for example—but also, and ultimately, by those most directly affected by the capital's operations: again, those living in the smallest plurocracy with borders that fully enclosed it. All of which, it was said, tended to encourage environmental and social care.

Home stewards, on the other hand, had the usual rights bestowed by ownership, except they could not sell or buy their houses. What they did instead struck me at first as a little complicated. Even though houses were free, they still had 'prices' associated with them. Whenever a house had new or vacating occupants, valuers would inspect the condition of the house and estimate what it would cost to rebuild it from scratch. Adding standardised values for location, proximity to services, the state of soil and land, and other advantages or disadvantages, produced a quasi-price. If people left a house in worse condition than when they moved in—if its 'price', adjusted to take CAPE-fluctuations into account, fell during their stewardship—they could only move to places with an equal or lower 'price'. But if house stewards maintained or improved the value of their homes, they were eligible to move to higher-'priced' residences—in Chord, higher by the percentage increase in the price of their existing home plus ten percent of the average house price. This allowance for 'upward mobility' differed between plurocracies, as did the maximum 'price' for anyone's first home.

I was pleased to hear that burdos were treated somewhat differently. Anyone below retirement age who had refused to work for more than a year, regardless of the state of their house, could move only to houses with lesser 'prices'. If this

obstacle prompted any burdos to return to work, they still could not move to a higher-‘priced’ house until they worked for as long as they had previously avoided working—in other words, it had to be a committed change of mind, not just a brief effort to exploit a possible loophole. Likewise, anyone with an account in the red beyond a specified value could move only to houses with lesser ‘prices’. Of course, burdos could still spend to their heart’s content, and rack up more colossal negative balances, but at least there was some pressure on them to contribute—a motivation more concrete than the distant prospect of an accusative epitaph.

“But you still haven’t answered my question,” I said at the end of the explanation. “There is bound to be more than one family interested in buying a house when it’s vacated. How do you decide who gets it?”

“Waiting lists,” said Dianne. “Accessible online and alterable at will. We nominated eleven specific houses we were interested in as soon as we were engaged. When the occupants of any of those houses decided they wanted to move, whoever was at the top of their waiting list was notified automatically and given first choice to move in. As it turned out, when this house’s previous stewards moved elsewhere, we were second on the list, but the couple ahead of us decided against it, so we moved in.”

“We were a bit lucky,” said David, “I have to admit. It could have taken much longer, and for others it often does. But then the other ten houses on our list would have suited us just as much as this one, or maybe even more”—he turned to Dianne—“wouldn’t you say so dear?”

“But there must have been plenty of other people waiting on those houses,” I said, not at all convinced by their explanation. Visions of poor crowded public housing in Soviet Russia came to mind. “And how often would they come on the market? You might have been waiting for years. And what do you do in the meantime?”

“Well,” began David, “for a start, there are more houses than occupants in Hillbeach, quite a few more in fact, so there are always—or very nearly always—some vacant houses to use while anyone is waiting. They don’t stay vacant for long, as they tend to be rotated. We were living in one in the adjacent city for about two years before we moved here. But of course we weren’t so silly as to put all our eggs in the same basket of just eleven houses. We also put ourselves on waiting lists for this locality, and for two other nearby localities as well. And for several others in other towns and cities. That way, whenever *any* house in those localities was vacated and we were on top of the list, or others ahead of us rejected the houses, we were offered them.”

“We knocked back at least ten,” added Dianne.

“It sounds a bit like pot luck,” I said.

“No more than it ever was,” replied David. He blinked rapidly (either a habit picked up from his wife or passed to her), before meekly regretting the certainty of his reply. “At least that’s what it seems to me. Indeed, I would think there was probably more luck involved in the old days, what with everyone bidding against everyone else and trying to guess what they could afford and what the manic-compulsive market double-thought a home was worth. Wasn’t that how it was under capitalism? A breeding ground for homelessness?”

With his last sentence, the faltering gentle quality of his voice vanished, replaced by a certainty and gravity that bordered on anger. His face also settled into an expression that could not be misconstrued: he did not approve.

Dianne's response was similar in mood, though her face maintained its standard composure. "What sort of excuse can be made for condemning even one person to living under railway bridges or inside tunnels, kept merely alive by handouts from charities, isolated, unwanted, half-frozen at night, and semi-catatonic during the day. Is that supposed to be a mark of civilisation?"

"Civilisation?!" said David, with more passion than I thought him capable, free of hesitation and nervous movement. "It often seems to me that twentieth century civilisation is an oxymoron." He turned to me. "I never cease to be amazed you can study it so dispassionately. Some of its travesties are more than I can bare to think about."

I did not reply, since there seemed no point in reminding him I was not who he thought I was. Dianne diplomatically changed the subject, asking about David's progress with his work. His response, again replete with puzzling gesticulations, informed me—in about twice the time really required—that his nitinol phase transformation engine was prototyped about a century before, but largely abandoned for most of that time. He and other researchers across the world, mostly hobbyists, had resurrected it and solved several of its more pressing hurdles. It was clearly a work in progress, but he was optimistic about the final results. Soon after, he returned to his workshop, and soon after that, Dianne took the dishes inside.

The next moment, she was gently jostling me awake—I had dozed off in her absence and she'd let me sleep for over an hour. My sleeping hours in this dream, always irregular, still hadn't settled down.

Dianne informed me that she, David and Victoria were about to head off to the locality meeting and asked if I wanted to join them. Why not, I thought—and said. It wasn't like I had anywhere else to go.

David, apparently as usual, curtailed his day's research only at the last possible moment, so we were on the verge of running late. But the hall was only a few hundred metres away.

Victoria walked there with us, surprisingly enthusiastic. She claimed she liked the meetings and all their activity, even though she could not vote. Her brother, however, preferred playing football with friends, but was going to join us afterwards.

Soon after starting our walk, my eye was caught by a flash of movement on the opposite side of the road. I looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of a small dark shape as it scrambled into the bushland that fronted the entirety of that side of the street.

"Did you see that?" said Dianne to no one in particular, pointing in its direction.

"Only briefly," said David. "Too briefly to be sure what it was, I'm afraid. Was it a possum, perhaps?"

"No, Dad," said Victoria with relish. "It was a lyrebird."

"That's what I thought," said Dianne.

"Could have been," I muttered. "Didn't really see it properly."

"I suspect it was," said Dianne. "That would be the third sighting this year."

"What's it doing in an urban area like this?" I asked. "I thought they're very timid creatures."

"They are. But that's part of a nature corridor," explained Dianne, pointing at the bushland, "one that winds through Chord and connects up ultimately with open habitat. The original town planners hoped it would have this sort of effect, but I

doubt they expected lyrebirds. They haven't been seen in this area for nearly a century. Not until this year."

Two cyclists rode past, waving. The Knights waved back.

We walked the rest of the way without incident. The hall was a spacious mud-brick construction on the near side of the tennis courts, set on a large block devoted to sporting and community facilities, located according to Dianne near the centre of the several localities which shared it. Inside, there must have been hundreds of people, mostly adults but also many children. I looked for Wilbur, but could not see him. I did see Mattie and Gino, and returned their waves, along with many other salutations I received from complete strangers. Mattie's spirits seemed to have risen, but his expression indicated a certain cautious restraint—an admirable change, I thought.

It was a kaleidoscopic crowd. Women in everything from jeans and t-shirts to formal gowns, billowing frilly dresses, skin-tight mini-skirts, glaring rainbow colours, drab greys, muted monotonous, floral ornamentation, modernist and abstract patterns, modest high neck- and hem-lines, plunging décolletage and brazen midriffs and thighs—a plethora of coordination and dishevelment. Men were less varied: none in dresses at least, but still from shorts and singlets to formal jackets and pants. One red-headed old fellow even had a kilt. Makeup from subtle to savage to none, but little jewellery, facial or body, and no tattoos. And hair colours decidedly natural. (Something I could admire: I never have understood why people who object to the slightest chemical additives in their food or who worry about pollution can choose to periodically plunge their heads into sinks full of abrasive solvents just to change the colour of their hair. Even Yvette used to do it.) But if hair colours were plain, their styles were not—for men *and* women. Long hair, short hair, curly, straight, wavy, frizzed, loose, tight, buns, plaids, pony-tails, shaved scalps, men with sideboards, moustaches, beards from full-face to thin lines, even a pair of cheeks covered in facial hair *without* moustache, sideboards, or van dyke.

When I could tear my attention away from the people, I noticed, along one wall of the hall, a series of tables almost spilling over with large lidded containers of food, copious bottles and jugs of drinks, stacks of plates and glasses, several microwaves and kettles. My appetite awoke. Another free dinner by the looks.

On the same side, near the hall's entrance, was a large electronic noticeboard with several lists each of about two hundred names. Each list had large headings, but the only one I recognised was 'Jibilee'. As soon as we walked into the hall, David moved to the Jibilee list and waited in line behind several people. Eventually, he put a tick against the names of himself, Dianne, and Ernest. I was on the verge of objecting to his last tick, and making my usual denial, but decided it was futile. I noticed that all but five of Jibilee's names had ticks against them.

While David waited in line, Dianne reminded me that consensus was needed for one of the issues to be discussed. "All of Jibilee's voters really should be present tonight," she added.

"What happens if some don't turn up?" I asked, looking at the faces in the hall.

"We mark them as absent and carry on without them. It would only be a problem if they were inclined to vote against the issue, but very few objectors tend to miss these meetings."

"What if they have a good reason for missing them? Illness, for instance."

"They can always appoint someone to vote on their behalf, or send it through online. But if, for whatever reason, they were prevented from conveying their views

to the meeting in time, they could still discuss it with me afterwards. I'm not altogether an unreasonable person."

"I imagine not," I replied. Having finished scanning the hall's occupants, I asked, "Where's Wilbur?"

"His house is in Aurora, an adjacent locality. They met last week."

Dianne moved to the front of the hall, onto a low stage, while the rest of us found seats. She inserted a finger-sized device into a slot at the side of a large whiteboard, and pressed some buttons near the slot. The board lit up with a typed agenda. The steady stream of conversation ebbed. Dianne took what looked like a remote control device from the side of the board, checked her watch and stood to one side, waiting silently until the missing five stragglers arrived not long after.

"Thank you all for attending," she said as soon as they found seats. Her clear voice quieted the last dregs of chat. "As you can see, we have only four items to discuss this evening, so we should have a fair chance of finishing on time. The first is Jeff Myer. I doubt any of you wouldn't have seen his work in Galadriel Street, but just in case, here's a less than exhaustive sample of it."

She pointed the remote control at the board and the agenda was replaced with a photo of Dianne's street, and its idiosyncratic decorations. Further photos followed before Dianne began to speak again. To my surprise, she was no longer blinking and her fingers were still. Had her fidgeting merely been symptoms of performance anxiety? Nervousness about the meeting? She certainly seemed to be in her element now, comfortable and relaxed.

"At the last meeting," said Dianne, "the proposal was made to record Jeff's efforts officially by treating it as his needay work. In the month since, I'm pleased to report that the necessary two-thirds majority has been recorded in favour of the proposal, so the cost of paying him will now be included in Enote's CAPE budget, starting from the beginning of next month."

"How can that suddenly be afforded?" I whispered to David. "I thought CAPE was planned out for the whole year."

"It is," he whispered back, nodding slightly. He continued, accompanied by more facial and hand gestures, but like his voice, they were muted, less sweeping and more circumspect than usual. "However, each town and higher level plurocracy includes in their annual costs a nominal amount for unanticipated expenditures. These are used as needs and desires arise, although I should add there is certainly no compunction to spend everything."

"Needless to say," continued Dianne, "Jeff works far longer than seven hours a week, so the town is definitely getting a bargain employing him."

"How long will he last?" demanded a surly voice from the back of the hall. I turned to see its source: a young man, slouching in his seat. "Your street's about as decorated as it's ever going to get. Then what will he do to earn his keep?"

I turned to David with a quizzical expression.

"Len Dartmouth," whispered David. "He's always been inclined to play the devil's advocate, but even more so since he broke up with his last girlfriend."

Meanwhile, Dianne answered Len's question. "Jeff will be available to decorate any street whose occupants desire it, Len. The occupants of one block in Briony Street have already asked him to sketch some plans for their approval. I daresay others will follow." She turned her gaze directly at Len when she continued. "And I must remind participants that for the sake of orderly discussion it's the custom to raise one's hand and wait for me to acknowledge you before speaking." (A snort



from Len's direction.) Dianne paused before asking if anyone else had questions on the matter. After a suitable silence, she continued with the second agenda item.

This was not a report about decisions already plurocratically made, but the issue that required consensus: the location of a new fire lookout tower. According to Dianne, this had been proposed by a city planning group, to overcome blind spots of existing lookouts in Chord and surrounding cities. They had selected five sites as most suitable, one of which, a small area of one block's central garden near the corner of Jibilee, almost opposite where we were meeting, was near the border of three other localities. The tower had an obvious drawback: it intruded visually—even given the plan's attempts to give it some aesthetic appeal and to position it to maximise screening via houses' back yard hedges. As a result, the proposal required approval by the bordering localities as well as by Jibilee. Dianne used her remote to display on the board a computer graphic of what the tower would look like on the site in question, depending on the viewing location.

Two of the other localities had already voted in favour of the site, and one narrowly against, but Enote's rules had been plurocratically agreed that, in such a situation, the proposal would be carried by the 'home' locality's approval. At the previous meeting, Jibilee had voted to require consensus approval; but as this was not immediately forthcoming, people had been given the month since to consider the issue.

Even though the initial show of hands indicated only fourteen people were prepared to vote against the proposal, the debate that followed took over half an hour. All objectors agreed that the locality, town, city, and region would be better served by having the tower than not—the risk of bushfire had apparently not lessened since my day—but all were concerned about its visual intrusion. None of the objectors lived close to the proposed site, where the bordering hedges would provide full screening, but further away, in line of sight of the tower, as the computer graphic demonstrated. However, the objectors' resistance was gradually whittled away as additional strategically placed screening in their own yards—not very tall due to the distance and angles involved—was suggested and considered, and the final result was indeed a consensus in favour of the new tower.

When I failed to raise my hand in the initial vote, David whispered that I "really should" have my say, not only because the proposed site was not far from the rear of 'my' house, but also because 'my' vote was necessary for consensus to be reached. I objected, saying I was not a member of the locality, but he insisted that if I did not vote, the proposal could not be decided. As it turned out, my vote was not needed, because after the initial raising of hands, Dianne was sensible enough not to attempt to repeatedly count the nearly two hundred in favour, but instead opted merely to count those against. When this number finally shrank to zero, the issue was decided.

"Congratulations," said Dianne. "I can remember few issues where we have reached consensus as quickly as we have today. I will record our decision formally on Chord's website, but of course this is only the first step. As soon as the stewards of all other nominated sites finish voting, the city planners will make the final choice. As usual, this will be based not only on the differing suitability of each site, but also on the level of consensus and extent of additional requirements made by each site's voters. From what I have been informed about progress with the other sites, I would expect the planners' decision and their reasons for it to be on the Net within the month." Something from the back of the hall took her attention, and she nodded towards it, saying, "You wish to address the hall, Len?"

I turned to see Len lower his raised hand, stand, and begin speaking. "This is so damned slow," he said.

"Here we go," whispered someone behind me. David shifted his eyes skyward. At my quizzical look, he said, "Len makes more or less the same complaint, I would say, at every single meeting."

Len expanded at length on his initial statement, while whispers mounted. Several people headed towards the public conveniences.

When Len finally finished, without offering any way of speeding the discussion along, an old fellow near the front of the hall raised his hand.

"Seiji," said Dianne, "you wish to speak?"

He stood and spoke in a quiet dignified voice, far clearer and louder than I would have expected from someone his age. "I trust Len has now let off enough steam for the meeting to resume. I wish only to point out that if he had been around in the old days, before these meetings, when decisions were made usually too *quickly* by someone who lived and worked miles away and had no familiarity or understanding of who and what we have here in Jibilee, Len wouldn't now be complaining of sloth."

A short round of applause erupted from most of the hall, including David.

"It's still too slow," grumbled Len, unrepentant.

Dianne waited briefly for further comments, then pointed out the third agenda item. It may have been my imagination, but I thought the meeting proceeded then at a slightly quicker pace.

The third item took me somewhat by surprise, though everyone else seemed to treat it as old news. Dianne explained how in the previous week, a number of refugees had landed by boat on Australia's north coast, seeking asylum from a repressive regime whose name was unknown to me but apparently well recognised by everyone else. She made a brief reference to national and meta-national policy dictating that the refugees were to be accepted into Australia as long as sufficient housing was available. And she added that diplomatic negotiations and something I thought she called 'pair giving' were continuing in the hope of persuading the regime to abandon its authoritarian system in favour of plurocracy and a free lunch.

The issue for Jibilee was whether or not to offer some of its vacant houses to some of the refugees, although there was no guarantee an offer would either be needed or accepted by national and regional authorities who, according to Dianne, might well be facing a glut of similar offers. To assist Jibilee in the making up of its mind, Dianne had electronically circulated a summary of the cases for and against the proposal. She put a shorter point-form summary on the board for all to see. It seemed thorough and even-handed. When I whispered the question to David, he replied that this was typical of how Dianne handled issues.

It was all in stark contrast to the policies, procedures, and opinions dominant in recent years—*my* recent years, that is. For a long time, even as foreign millionaires, leaders of industry and anyone considered a skilled worker migrated without fuss to the land down under, when it came to refugees we had all but suffocated under a deluge of well-worn phrases like 'opening the floodgates', 'invading hordes', and 'queue jumpers'. Xenophobia ruled to the extent that it was questioned not only whether those seeking asylum were genuine refugees but even whether some were terrorist plants. Consequently, both major political parties tried endlessly to duck-shove the refugees onto more willing nations.

I was one of the alleged minority at the time who found the national reaction appalling. Allowing every refugee into the country ran a risk of encouraging more to do the same and stretching our resources beyond their limits, but I did not accept that this demanded a blanket rejection of all so-called 'boat people'. In my opinion, what it did require was a more humane response to those in need and better diplomatic relations and understanding between Australia and the countries of origin. Financial assistance and technological aid to improve living standards and so deter refugees from leaving their homes would also not have been misplaced. But, as Yvette pointed out, it was truly an international problem, with the same scenario enacted in many other countries. "It will never be fully avoided," she warned me one night, "as long as nations are pitted against each other in economic war. It will require a cooperative solution to bring everyone's living standards and political institutions up to something resembling a civilised level." Her words sounded right at the time, but I gave them barely any further thought. Obviously, my subconscious had contemplated them considerably more than my conscious mind, since the dream it had thrown me into was indeed looking at the problem from Yvette's angle.

"To begin the discussion," said Dianne, "I'd like to offer my own view. Let me remind you of plurocracy's single guiding rule: any practice of one's own choice is a *right*, as long as one fulfils the *duty* not to harm others in the process. Some might claim we have a right to keep Jibilee to ourselves, a right to privacy or self-rule, a right to do as we have been doing without being burdened by people who at least at first will require considerable care and attention, who will probably not even speak our language. My own view is that Jibilee cannot exercise such rights or any right that might allow us to reject taking in some of the refugees without neglecting its duty not to harm those people. Who would like to respond?"

Several people raised their hands, and Dianne selected the closest, an elderly man sitting on his own. As with all of the others who had spoken during the meeting, she addressed him by name—quite a memory. "Poppycrack!" he said in a loud but croaky voice. "There are enough spare houses all over the country to accommodate a thousand times the number of refugees we're talking about here. Why should Jibilee take them on when others could do so just as easily? More easily in fact since our spare housing stock is not as high as many other places. I say we leave it to others."

He was rebutted by a nearby elderly woman who spoke about Jibilee setting a good example, and the discussion passed back and forth between those willing and those less willing. I was struck by how there was no talk about rejecting the refugees overall, the only question was where in the country to relocate them. And through it all, Dianne kept making gentle references to rights and duties. She did not denigrate any person's opinion, and allowed all to speak, but nevertheless made her own views clear. Her actions during the meeting, and her preliminary dissemination of both sides of the case, persuaded me she was a very committed representative keen to raise the standard of thought of her electorate.

"Are all locality representatives like your wife?" I whispered to David in the midst of the discussion.

He smiled and shook his head. "If only. Most plurocrats are fairly conscientious, I would think, however a few leave much to be desired. Di's predecessor, for instance, it would be fair to say, took it very easy. I doubt he ever distributed any background information, or even tried to set out both sides of an argument. He did not stay our plurocrat for long."

My attention returned to the discussion. The floor was held by a middle-aged mother flanked by two pre-adolescent boys, all of obvious Asian ancestry. "In this country," she said, "we are all refugees, and have been ever since Britain first sent convicts to Botany Bay. How can we refuse them?"

The discussion continued for another ten minutes or more, before it quietened to the point where Dianne brought it to a vote. I would have liked to have voted in favour of this one myself, but I still felt an overriding sense of being an impostor, so I kept my hand down. It made no difference. The vote was a clear two-thirds majority in favour of offering some houses to refugees, without an exact number of houses being stipulated. When that question had its turn to be voted on, Dianne began by asking for a show of hands in favour of offering all eleven spare houses in Jibilee. No one agreed, and so the number was reduced incrementally by one until the necessary majority was reached. Dianne's only comment during this process followed the narrow rejection of three houses. She pointed out that offering only one house would probably cause more problems than offering two, since it would help any refugees to have someone else nearby with whom they were familiar and could speak the same language. Jibilee then voted—almost unanimously—to make two houses available to the refugees.

The fourth and final agenda item took barely a minute. It concerned a number of new products that were on the verge of being released across the region, including a battery-free smoke alarm developed by a Jibilee resident present in the hall. In what she called a "reminder", Dianne explained that if enough voters nominated their preferred price for the new products, as a percentage of cost, the average value voted would then be used by CAPE. But if too few voters made the effort, the price would be set at cost. She pointed out that with less than a week still left to nominate prices, no one in Jibilee, apart from the inventor, herself and David, had bothered, and that it might be courteous, as well as ultimately in their own best interests, to cast their votes. Some uncomfortable shifting in seats, particularly those closest to where the inventor was sitting, suggested Dianne had struck guilt.

"Now is there any other business?" she asked, after a brief pause.

A tall youth, I thought just barely old enough to vote, raised his hand. Dianne said his name, and he stood and spoke. "Last year, you might remember, before consensus was reached about building the new tennis courts, a few of us pointed out we preferred an upgrade to the basketball court. We ended up giving in when it was pointed out that more people here play tennis than basketball, but it was conditional on the basketball situation being reconsidered a year later. That time has come."

"According to my records, Nguyhen," said Dianne, "the meeting you refer to was a year ago *next* month. I have included it in next month's agenda."

"I thought it was..." said Nguyhen, blushing. "Sorry." He sat down abruptly.

"It won't hurt," said Dianne, "to have reminded people now. It will require a town vote, of course, since the facility is used by people from many localities besides Jibilee, and any upgrade will naturally need to comply with city regulations. But I suggest those in favour of the upgrade prepare their case as fully as possible, including its affordability, and promote it in person and online before next month's meeting. I doubt Jibilee or any other of Enote's localities will require consensus for it."

Another call for further business was answered by Len, who complained (apparently not for the first time) of Jibilee having different representatives for different town and higher-level issues. Dianne, it turned out, was Jibilee's general

representative. More specialised tasks were represented by others with usually greater knowledge of the issues. The ensuing discussion also mentioned that some localities did not even vote for their representatives but rostered the positions among volunteers.

It was clear to me that Len wanted to be Jibilee's sole representative on everything. Yet he had no option than to let the matter drop when Dianne reminded him that his had been the only dissenting vote against the standing arrangement for over five years.

When a thorough silence greeted her final call for further business, Dianne declared the meeting over. "Ok," she said, quietly beaming, "let's eat."

The entire gathering stood, moved to the tables, and helped themselves to the waiting smorgasbord. Eat we did. And drink. I made a pig of myself. And drank more wine than probably was wise. That's my excuse anyway.

## 16

### After Hours

I was near Shane, who was spooning an egg dish into his mouth, eyeing the last remnants of a dazzling sunset through one of the hall's tall windows.

"Have you tried Juan's tacos?" Dianne, next to me, inquired.

Shane turned to Dianne. One of the tacos was firmly in her hand, partly consumed. "Not as yet," Shane replied. "Do you recommend them?"

Her nodding response was eloquently muffled by the bite she took as the question was asked, so Shane took the chance to recommend a Thai omelette.

A friendly debate ensued, occasionally turning to quiet exaggeration, about the relative merits of dishes we had sampled at the post-meeting feast, and others besides.

I had sampled freely, but had stayed close to David and Dianne. In particular, I had kept my distance from Mattie.

Shane moved away. Dianne whispered, "Our fondness for spicy foods is perhaps the only common interest he and I have. But here, at least, it suffices."

"This is glorious food," I said, grabbing another samosa. Most of the dishes were simple but very flavoursome. "Who does the catering?"

Dianne, still free of her fidgeting, explained that each month, except January and December, the task of preparing post-meeting feasts was rotated between groups of seven or eight households. Combinations changed each year, except for firm favourites, though three households who never attended the feasts excluded themselves from the task. In January, the most laid-back month, still the most popular for holidays, no feast was held—but then, often many people were still recovering from the previous month's grand gorge, to which all ten of the monthly cooking groups contributed. It all cost nothing, other than time and energy—unless exotic ingredients were included. When the cooks ordered the food to be prepared, they simply 'billed' it as a locality 'expense'—CAPE then treated the food as part of the yearly quotas for the locality's members (non-attendees excepted).

Later, queuing for an additional helping of salad and a third or fourth top-up of wine, I belatedly noticed that the woman in front of me looked *exactly* like Yvette—from the rear at least. I found myself hoping. Why not? She'd already appeared in this dream once, if in a somewhat unwelcome way, so why not again, more conveniently? The woman selected her food and turned to head off, but then noticed me.

With a generous enchanting smile, she said, "Hello Ernest." The smile was also Yvette's, as was the straight nose, full red lips, and soft blue eyes. But she was not Yvette. Her voice was deeper and huskier for one, and she looked a few years younger for another. Still, I could not take my eyes off her. She wore a loose, highly coloured, floral top which left her arms bare, but gave no more than a hint of cleavage, and an even more colourful pair of striped but tight slacks. Yet it was not

her clothes that caught my eye—it was her tantalising resemblance to Yvette, and, I must admit, her equally tantalising differences.

When I failed to respond to her greeting, she tilted her head and said, “Is something wrong? Do I have crumbs on my lips?”

She tried to wipe away the imaginary crumbs before I could reply. “No, there’s nothing there,” I said. “Sorry, I just...”

A friendly voice jostled me from behind. “Hey, Ernest, are you going to top up your plate or not?”

The woman moved off, and I hurriedly scooped a generous helping of salad onto my plate. When I turned, I could not see her. I moved about, trying to look nonchalant but searching for her. When I finally found her, she was chatting with another woman about her age, close to the food table but further towards the back of the hall. I wandered near, trying to look as if she was not the sole object of my attention, but then stopped, stunned to hear the other woman say, “O you didn’t, Yvette?!”

I almost dropped my plate. The efforts I made to prevent it happening must have caught Yvette’s eye, for when I looked up, she was watching me. “Are you ok, Ernest?” she said. “You’re behaving oddly.” The other woman also watched me, but her attention was diverted by a man who walked up to her and started talking about the weather. Yvette walked closer to me, apparently demanding a response.

“I’m not Ernest,” I finally said.

She smiled. “O? Who are you then? Napoleon?”

“My name is Steven Stone, and I’m dreaming this. All of it.” Her eyebrows lowered in uncertainty, but she kept smiling. “I’m not joking. I know—everyone else thinks I’m Ernest, too, and I look just like him. But I’m not. You look a lot like my wife, but you’re not either.”

“Your *wife*?!” she said with obvious scepticism, her smile disappearing, and her head tilting. “Has your experience with Mattie scared you straight?”

“I’ve always been straight.”

“That will come as something of a surprise to many men. And to me! How many times did I try to convert you at school?” The smile returned, a knowing version, which left me guessing—and curious.

I did not reply, unsure what to say, my mind’s track derailed by her words, but still gazing intently at her.

Her smile faded with concern. “Are you all right, Ernest?”

“Steven,” I said calmly.

“Ok—Steven, then. Should I come up with a new name for myself too? What about Cleo?”

“No,” I said, earnestly (or, rather, stevenly). “Yvette sounds just right.” Realising that if I did not soon prove to be more engaging company, she would likely seek it elsewhere, I made a hurried attempt to be conversational. The derailment of my thoughts forced the choice of topic. “This ‘converting’ you attempted—I take it, it failed.”

The smile returned, complete with the briefest most delicate guffaw I’ve ever heard. “Yes, it failed. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t. I can’t. It wasn’t me.”

“Come on, Ernest, a joke’s a joke.”

“It’s no joke. My name is Steven.”

“Right! And you’re in the middle of a dream?”

"Right."

"And you're straight as a board!?"

"Right."

She tilted her head again and studied me long and hard. She hadn't removed her eyes from mine since our conversation began, and in marked contrast to Dianne, she almost never blinked. I almost felt like I was starting to wilt under her steady gaze. "Don't believe you," she said suddenly, matter-of-factly. She straightened her head, and drained her almost empty glass. "You'll have to prove it to me," she added in the same tone, before surprising me with a slow wink. "Your place or mine?" she added, smiling.

The cognitive derailment suddenly detoured and sped up, racing in the direction of a possible tunnel. What sort of dream was this? I could not think what to say.

"So," she said, "when it comes to the crunch..."

"No," I said, "it's not that. It's... well, there's my wife."

"O right. Your wife. Is she part of this dream too?"

"No, no," I said, shaking my head.

"Then why not? If this isn't real, why not go for it? Is your sense of fidelity so overpowering you have to reject a wet dream?"

"Of course not."

"Well, *are* you dreaming, or aren't you?"

I could not reply. Sinking in indecision, I drained my glass, put my plate down, and bought time by offering her a refill, which she accepted. But the time it took me to return with two full glasses did not bring me any closer to a decision. It had to be a dream, and yet I could not shake the feeling that were I to indulge in it fully, I would be betraying Yvette—the *real* Yvette. *My* Yvette.

When I handed the other Yvette her drink, she looked me in the eye and grinned. At first, I thought her grin was wanton, but the next moment it struck me as cynical, sceptical. "Well?" she said, "is it to be a sweet dream or not?"

A sudden loud noise from the front of the hall saved us from another awkward silence. A young man with outlandishly coloured patchwork clothes and a shock of bright red hair had apparently fallen over on the stage, and was noisily clambering upright. Only after he stood, did I realise he had fallen off a unicycle and was attempting to re-mount it.

"Ahhh," drawled a woman behind Yvette. "The entertainment." She and the rest of the hall's occupants gave a brief round of applause.

Yvette, still grinning, turned from me to watch the man on stage. Although I was glad for his inadvertent interruption of my conversation with Yvette, his obviously clownish antics gave me no joy. Nevertheless, occasional gentle laughter erupted from many in the hall, especially children.

After one tired routine twisting balloons into shapes that were only supposed to be animals, I could not restrain myself. "I hope this guy is cheap," I whispered into Yvette's ear.

She turned to me and her smile was gone, replaced with a bemused expression. "What're you talking about?" she whispered. "You must recognise Luke. As if we'd pay him! Or him accept payment."

A soft groan escaped me. "Another free service?!" I said, in a loud whisper not directed especially at Yvette. "You are a selfless bunch of do-gooders, aren't you?" I took another long swig of wine.



One or two closest by turned their heads to me in mild and clearly surprised disapproval, but it was Yvette's reaction that took most of my attention. She tilted her head again—something I soon realised she did whenever surprised or curious—and her bemusement turned darker. "What *are* you talking about, Ernest?" she said, just loudly enough for me to hear. "Are you going to watch the entertainment or not?"

"Not," I whispered, suddenly impulsive. "How about your place?" The question apparently caught Yvette by nearly as much surprise as it did me. And yet almost immediately I said it, I was glad. Maybe it was just the wine going to my head, or maybe the 'entertainment' was driving me to seek a more enjoyable alternative, but I suddenly felt I'd wracked myself with enough indecision. Why look a gift horse in the mouth? *Of course* this was all a dream. Surely that was made obvious by the fact that the one woman in it for whom I felt an attraction resembled my wife and even shared her name. Why my subconscious was doing this to me, what the point of it all was, I still did not know. But I'd laboured under the same uncertainty ever since the dream had begun (as was typical of most of my dreams). Maybe I really was having a fortieth birthday crisis—there was a certain unwelcome plausibility to the idea.

Yvette studied me closely, apparently unsure how to take me.

"You said I'd have to prove it to you," I whispered, hoping to end her indecision. "So let me prove it."

Her expression and scrutiny did not waver, until with sudden resolution, she sipped her drink, placed it on the table, looked me in the eye, and said, "Ok. Let's see you prove it." She moved toward the hall entrance, only to stop and turn to me when she realised I wasn't following. She tilted her head again, this time clearly as a question, to which my answer was to swallow hard, drain my glass, put it on the table—so roughly it fell sideways and had to be righted—and then follow her.

"I don't know what's gotten into you Ernest," she said as we left the hall, "but this little game of yours is intriguing."

"Steven," I said. "And it's no game. I'm deadly serious."

"Are you?" she said. Her eyes locked on mine. "So who're you meant to be really, Steven? Someone who doesn't recognise Luke or know he's an amateur, apparently. How come you're so ignorant?"

"This is not my time," I said, quietly, my eyes scanning from side to side as we crossed the road in the late twilight. "I'm dreaming I'm forty years in the future. And it's a future with no one I know. With very little of *anything* I know."

Even the sky. Like the day before, there was no moon when it should have been more than half full. And Mars was now high in the sky and bright rather than the dim object I last saw setting just a couple of hours after sunset. Not far from where I'd have expected Mars to be, though, was Jupiter, which wasn't even in the evening sky when I was home. At least the constellations were the same: Scorpio, for instance, was in the right spot, high in the sky.

Earthbound, though, a Concorde-car cruised quietly and slowly into view as Yvette and I reached the footpath. "Even cars are nearly unrecognisable," I continued.

"You recognised me."

"No, I didn't. You just look a fair bit like my wife."

"O," she said. I glanced at her—she was watching me as intently as walking allowed. Smiling, she said, "And do you like this future?"

"The jury's still out on that one. Truth is, I don't altogether understand it. It's certainly not what I expected." I laughed abruptly. "I didn't expect locality meetings and a clown. Are we missing any other riveting stuff?"

"Some music," she said, "including a solo ukulele recital by Wanda Jones." She shuddered. "Some attempted stand-up routines. And, I think, a short play. Thankfully, after last month, no poetry."

"So what I saw was *typically* ordinary?"

"Come on, Ernest, you've been to plenty of meetings—you know what goes on afterward."

"Steven! And I told you, I don't." When she just looked at me, without replying, I pushed on. "You don't have to believe me—god knows, Wilbur doesn't; he thinks I have amnesia and false memories—but you could at least humour me. Was it typical?"

She sighed and relented. "If that's what keeps you in the mood... Yes, it was pretty typical. Except for the rare occasions we hire a professional performer. You can't expect too much from locals. They may have copious spare-time to pursue their art, but very few have much real talent. I think Hans is about the only one who's gone on to greater things."

"Hans?"

"You must remember him. You were one of his strongest advocates. In fact, I think you were the one who first suggested we use Chord funds to pay him to perform after a meeting. He needed encouragement you said."

"Encouragement at what?"

"His comedy." She stopped in her tracks, and stared at me. "How do you make a camel hump?"

"What?!"

"It's his most famous line. How do you make a camel hump?"

I shrugged my lack of knowledge of the answer.

"Use an Arab," she said.

After a brief and laughter-free silence, I said, "Isn't that a bit lacking in political correctness?"

"There's an expression I haven't heard for a while. What do you expect from a pseudo-surrealist comic?"

She resumed walking—to my surprise, not further along the footpath, but into the front yard of a house. I belatedly realised it was next door to Ernest's. "You and I are neighbours?!" I said.

"O right! You forgot that too!"

"I didn't forget. I never knew. I never laid eyes on you until tonight."

"Whatever you say, Steven," she said, with a weary tone. She opened the front door of the house and moved inside, leaving me for a moment alone on the doorstep. "Feel like another wine?" she said.

"Think I *need* another one," I replied, moving inside and shutting the door. I followed the direction of her voice and found her in the kitchen. We were silent a few moments until, perhaps stalling, I picked up the discussion where we had left off. "So this Hans—he actually manages to make a living from jokes like the one you just told?"

"Yes," she said, taking two glasses and moving to the refrigerator. "He's officially paid by Hillbeach at the standard comic's rate. He was something of a hit at his first post-meeting performance. They're as good a way as any for amateur performers to

get noticed. Though it takes raw talent, as well as persistence, to convince any plurocracy to pay a performer's wage. Or an artist's." She poured generous glasses of a dry white wine.

"Are you saying performers and artists survive entirely by state assistance, like in Soviet Russia?"

"Goodness, Steven," she said, again emphasising my name in obvious mockery. "This game of yours is starting to wear a little thin. Artists and performers survive quite comfortably, like the rest of us. But only some achieve enough recognition or popularity for plurocracies to pay them a wage, especially full-time. Of course, even a part-time wage frees them from less glamorous but more necessary work. But most artists pursue their muse entirely in their spare time." She handed me my glass and gestured towards another room.

"But the professional artists—they'd all have to be budgeted for by CAPE, wouldn't they?"

"Of course. As well as can be anticipated."

"So who gets to own the art? Or is it never owned, merely stewarded?" We sat down next to each other in a large three-seater couch. I began to drink my wine in big gulps, whereas she took smaller sips.

"Good guess," she said, with the last word emphasised in such a way it was clear she thought I was not guessing at all. "Artists can work for individuals or plurocracies—who then steward the works they commission. But there's also plenty of non-commissioned art produced, which artists can give away to the first interested party they approve of, or keep for themselves if they're amateurs."

"Give away!" I blurted out. "Surely you're not claiming all art is free!"

"Not everywhere," she replied, with a tinge of irritation. "It's a matter of choice for each plurocratic region and above. But Hillbeach has voted for free art—at least for the art itself, not performances or displays which often cost something to see."

"What about old art, like Van Gogh's paintings which used to sell for millions? Surely they can't be free. They're priceless!"

"In every sense of the word. That's why the most famous art is plurocratically stewarded—it can't be bought or sold but moves from one place of public display to another, usually within a plurocracy, but sometimes on loan to others."

"So no one can have a Picasso hanging on their wall, they can only visit them in galleries?"

"Of course. Although the main reason is preservation—too much risk of damage or deterioration hanging an old masters on a living room wall. Of course, most people are content with copies."

"I can't believe artists are happy with this arrangement. How do their egos cope with their work *not* being fought over with hard cash? It must cripple their creativity!"

"It flourishes. They have the time and financial freedom to explore their interests, without worrying about making sales and commissions."

"But it's so uniform. All artists on the same wage."

"Who said anything about a single wage? Artists' wages vary. It depends on the nature and costs involved in their art, as well as on public perception and popularity. Much like successful musicians and authors."

"So the unpopular artist can't flourish? Van Gogh would still die in poverty if he was alive today."

"Hardly. Chances are, with the Net available to record and publicise his work, and have it rated, he'd have gained some sort of following. Capturing the attention of a fanatical few's just as often as successful as gaining the mild interest of many. That's more or less how Hans won his wage. But even if Van Gogh had no fans today, he'd only have to put in one day of work a week to avoid poverty. He could still pursue his art the rest of the week. Or he could choose not to work at all, for a time at least—he'd survive, more than comfortably, on half the average income."

I shook my head vigorously. "Now *that* is something I cannot get my head around. How can you afford such generosity? How is it anyone decides to work?"

"We have a duty to work."

"A duty you can ignore! Don't you have the right to choose *not* to work?"

"Yes, but also a duty not to harm others by exercising that right. If any of us chooses not to work, the work still has to be done, so others' working hours increase."

"But then you *are* obliged to work. And all your talk about it being a choice is self-deception."

"Anything but. There are no compelling laws and orders—no one's forced to work, just encouraged in different ways to do the responsible thing. A few don't, but rarely for long—they only ostracise themselves. The rest, liberated by stable economic conditions, and the abolition of any need to compete, make the responsible choice *because* it can be done without coercion."

"If it's harmful to not work," I said, all but ignoring her words, "why not just *make* everyone work? You could plurocratically decide what's harmful and legislate against it, couldn't you? You could even ban racism."

"We could ban it but that wouldn't stop it. Order can't be imposed, only built from within. There will always be people with different views, habits, and cultures—and there will always be an onus *not* to let it matter. Toleration of differences is at the root of cooperation."

"But how do you ensure that people *do* cooperate?"

"You can't ensure it. There are no absolute solutions, no hard and fast realities. Each moment involves choice and chance. Control is not possible, only trust. And care. And forgiveness and understanding when mistakes are made."

"So, despite endless involved decision-making, you just *trust* people to make the right choices, to agree to work?"

"In a manner of speaking, but the guiding rule encourages the right choices."

"It doesn't guarantee them."

"As I said, nothing can. In any case, all other approaches have failed, as history attests."

"Failed!? At what? In my time, we had more people wanting to work than could."

"Is that supposed to be an achievement?" she said, calmly. "Or having more work than was needed? More pollution than could be dealt with? More stress, alienation, violence, war? I wonder sometimes how we ever got through it. Tell me, *Steven*, was *your* time really such a great time to live? As Ernest, you've never thought so."

"It had its problems, but it also had plenty going for it. For one thing, it was progressive. And bold and innovative. I can't believe it led to this. The future I expected was one of genetically engineered people, nanotechnology, bio-implants, asteroid-deterrent systems, space exploration—at least some dazzling skyscrapers. Where is it? All I've seen is more like the *nineteen-sixties*. Like a large-scale

retirement home for the terminally uninspired. Low tech provincialism with an environmental twist. Green suburbia."

She took a deep breath, before responding, to my surprise, without any noticeable animosity. "Chord is suburban, but hardly backward. We have everything you mentioned, it simply doesn't dominate our lives."

"Really? You're genetically engineered are you? Let me guess, you have wings folded behind your back."

"O for god's sake. Genetic engineering is mostly used to remove some of the more obvious recessive genes, to avoid hardship and suffering. It's a medical aid, like the limited nanotechnology that's been developed, and the odd bio-implant, not some mandatory brave new world procedure. Occasionally, it's applied to crop and animal breeding, but with more care, more safeguards than the pursuit of profit ever allowed—and *without* corporate gene ownership. Just because we don't parade our technology in front of your eyes every moment, doesn't mean we don't have it, or use it in an appropriate and plurocratically agreed way. This is not some turn of the century Hollywood sci-fi epic."

"You can say that again. It's more like a post-war Jimmy Stewart film."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter. I just—I don't belong here. Everything was simpler and easier in my own time. You could make a decision to do something without so much fuss, without the self-deception and dilemmas of choice you're faced with here over the simplest bloody issue."

Yvette snorted derisively. "If that's true, then why didn't you *address* the problems of your time? If it was so much simpler and easier to make decisions, why didn't you make them? Instead of speeches? That seems to be what you did most—endless lip-service to the difficult issues of the day. The bigger the problem, the longer the speech—and the more the problem tended to fester untreated. Spin instead of action. Were you all unaware of what was going on around you?"

Anger building, I drained my glass. "We knew what was going on, of course we did."

"Then why didn't you do something?"

I rubbed my forehead, flushed and irritated. "We did plenty."

"Plenty of nothing. O, some had genuine concerns and intentions, they at least tried to do something, but most missed the point. Even avowed environmentalists left their energy-efficient lights needlessly burning in vacant rooms. Or drove petrol-guzzler cars, ate TV dinners and plastic-wrapped food, lived in air-conditioned luxury with walls and furniture made of unsustainably harvested wood. And spent their holidays every year overseas. Consumption. Consumerism. Excess. Demand ensuring supply until the planet was exhausted. What you needed to do, above all else, was set an example—stop consuming to excess—live simply, modestly—not replace things grown unfashionable or boring every few years—settle for enough instead of for ever more and never enough. But instead you just soldiered on with business as usual. Even though you must have known that very busy-ness was behind most of the problems you faced. You *did* know, didn't you?"

"Yes, we knew." It felt like my head was spinning. Yvette's accusing questions were aggravating my already degraded state. Loathe though I would have been to admit it, least of all to myself, I was labouring not only under the mental duress of my sudden unexpected displacement into this foreign world and the information overload I'd endured since arriving, but also under the mounting physical

discomfort of my recent excessive consumption of alcohol. I might have been dreaming it all but it was becoming a subtle nightmare. "We knew," I repeated. "We just put it to the back of our minds, and hoped it'd go away or someone else'd fix it. We had a right of our own—a right to try to enjoy what we could of what we had, despite the mess. A right to our own lives. But we knew what was going on. Many of us anyway. We just did nothing."

I stood, intending to refill my glass, but instead the parlous state of my head was suddenly mimicked by my stomach. I did not take a further step, though I remained on my feet, wavering from side to side. I glanced at Yvette, and saw concern. I rejected it with a broad sweep of my hand. "And you're telling me *this* is our future?!" I railed. "This citadel of co-operation and responsibility." My movements did not help the state of my stomach. "What did we do to deserve this future?!!"

"We *chose* to make it happen," said Yvette calmly. "And then we *did* make it happen."

I had no reply—but my stomach demanded its own form of utterance. "Where's your toilet?" I grunted, staggering forward, doing my best to keep my stomach's 'language' to itself.

"Through here," said Yvette, standing quickly and leading me to the right place, just in the nick of time. I heaved uncontrollably for several minutes. It's never pleasant, not even when the result resembles Monet.

After I'd finished, I found Yvette in the kitchen, stirring a glass of clear liquid. Shamefaced and repentant of anger and excess, I nonetheless found it difficult to apologise. I avoided doing so by raising an irrelevant topic. "This future sure has weird toilets. I've never seen such a dry flush."

"It's perfectly normal," she replied, scrutinising me carefully while stirring. "Here in *your* future we treat even human waste as a resource." With a small sigh, she correctly interpreted my expression, and continued in a tired voice. "All the toilets on this block are linked to an underground storage system near the central pond, where it degrades with minimal treatment into high quality fertiliser and gas, used for heating and cooking."

"No shit!" With that unbidden comment, and another of Yvette's head-tilts, I belatedly realised I was truly drunk. "Sorry. Think I better sit down." I moved to the lounge again and sat on the nearest couch, a single-seater. I did not feel good.

Yvette joined me at once, and offered the glass of clear liquid to me. "This should calm your stomach, and avoid a hangover." When I looked at her dubiously, she said, "Unless you'd rather another wine?"

I took the glass immediately, but drank cautiously. She sat opposite, at the closest end of the long couch.

"What's going on, Ernest?" she said. "We've had many a drink over the years, but you've never had more than you could handle. And all this talk about being Steven... Are you having some sort of crisis with your research?" When I said nothing, lost for a reply, she continued. "It's not Mattie is it? I thought you were well over him."

I shook my head (which only made it feel worse). "No, it's none of that. It's what I told you. I really am Steven from forty years ago."

"And you think you're dreaming?"

"I *know* I'm dreaming," I said, calmly for once. "I *have* to be dreaming."

It was her turn to shake her head, gently. "This is no dream."

I drained the glass, and suddenly felt amused. "It's certainly no *wet* dream," I said. "Are you turned on yet?" I started to laugh. "Have my seductive charms and winning ways convinced you to submit?"

She laughed as well, but briefly. "Long ago, Ernest, long ago."

I stopped laughing, suddenly giddy in perhaps more ways than one. "Is there no one else in your life?" I said.

"Not at the moment." She took her glass of wine from the table between us, and sipped from it. "Still haven't found Mr Right." With another abrupt laugh, she put the glass down. "Like you don't know! How many times have you let me cry on your shoulder?"

"What are neighbours for?" I said, lightly.

"Even before we were neighbours," said Yvette. "Still can't believe how lucky I was this house became available."

"Took your fancy did it?"

"Less than others. But having you so close decided it for me." She smiled warmly.

It was Yvette's smile. *My Yvette's*. This *had* to be a dream. I certainly wanted it to be.

I stood and, taking great efforts not to fall over, staggered across to sit on one arm of her couch—the closest one, as it turned out, though my original intention had been to move to the other side of her and sit on the couch itself. I put an arm round her shoulders. She nestled her head against my side. But the situation was not stable, not with my wavering sense of balance—very soon, I slipped off the arm of the couch with a sudden lurch, my full weight landing against Yvette, who collapsed sideways, sprawling. Suddenly, I was on top of her, our faces close, one of my hands partly under her neck, the other resting on one of her breasts. Intense looks, her wide smile. My hand began caressing as if of its own accord. Her smile morphed to uncertainty. I moved my face closer to hers—but halted when she spoke.

"Are you sure about this, Ernest?"

I nodded blissfully, lost on autopilot.

"Are you sure you're up to it?"

My groin answered for me, a gentle press acting as translator.

Her eyes widened—surprise—a smile. "Feels like you are."

I kissed her and she returned it with passion. My giddiness increased.

## 17

# The Bigger Picture

I woke in the same couch, a blanket spread across me, Yvette nowhere in sight.

The intervening time was a black hole—an absence of memory. Events leading to the kiss, clear as day.

I sat up... stunned to discover a clear head, no hint of giddiness, and no hangover. Not even bad breath! Yvette was right about her drink.

I still wore the clothes of the night before. Baffled, I was compelled to think no further about it because of a bursting bladder. I had drunk a lot.

I returned from the toilet to find a note on the table: "Dear 'Steven', You really know how to show a girl a good time. Don't know much about fairy tales though. One kiss and Prince Anti-Charming *falls* into an impenetrable sleep—and at barely eight o'clock! God knows I tried to wake you. I've got lectures throughout the day. Hope we can resume where *you* left off—that is, unless Ernest suddenly returns. I'll call when I get back. Love, Yvette."

It suddenly occurred to me that since waking in Wilbur's room, I had not spent one of the three ensuing nights in a bed. What would Freud have said about that, I wondered.

The clock in the kitchen indicated I'd slept for over twelve hours. An intrusive nuisance, this habit of suddenly falling asleep. But at least it would not last—not once I woke up! Whenever that might be. The dream was taking forever. And was hardly satisfying. As to its purpose or meaning—why I was dreaming this particular dream, and in so much detail—I still could not begin to guess. What was my subconscious trying to tell me? That at almost forty I had become truly old? Too conservative perhaps? The ideologies and approaches of my time were not appropriate for the future? Was that why it was so foreign? Why then was it so hard to understand? Or accept? Despite my considerable but not always successful efforts to figure out *how* it worked, for the most part I still could not believe that it *could* work. But I was intrigued by it. Increasingly so.

Alone in Yvette's house, free of the hangover I should have had, I eventually realised it was the day of the hospital tests. Today, I would finally prove to everyone who I was. But eleven o'clock, when Wilbur was due to pick me up, was almost three hours away, and I was at a loose end. I half expected some new and undoubtedly puzzling event to overtake me, or an unrelentingly ordinary happening that would reveal peculiar or outrageous new habits or systems of organisation and procedure, but instead... nothing happened. I sat and thought for minutes, utterly undisturbed—except for a growing sense of restlessness.

Eventually, I could stand it no longer. If my dream was not going to bring me something of interest, I would have to look for it. First to practicalities: I needed a shower, a change of clothes, and breakfast, so I returned to Ernest's and went through the motions.



During breakfast, partly in response to the traumatic effects of having to select a new shirt (finally opting for a very pale green one littered with white and pale yellow geometric shapes), I decided I needed distraction—something light and undemanding, but able to capture my attention. Deciding to see what Ernest had available in his collection, I used the TV remote to (eventually) list his files on screen—music and video. I felt more in the mood for music, but scanned both categories, in case a suitable concert video was present. However, apart from classical composers, there was not a familiar musician's name among them. Admittedly, I wasn't exactly up-to-date with modern music—my tastes clung vigorously to those I acquired during my teens—but I wouldn't mind betting no band had ever called itself 'Juan Nytstan and the Itchy Foreskins'. Likewise, album titles were rarely as long as 'Now I've seen you naked, I could never eat turkey'. Or 'It's not Holst but it sounds like something from Uranus'. O my aching subconscious!

An untypically short title caught my attention: 'Surviving Capitalism'. More surprising was that its listed 'artist' was none other than Ernest himself. Probably not a concert, I decided. Unless it was industrial music. Or a modern opera—maybe with a chorus of 'Money, money, toil and trouble'.

Curiosity got the better of me, even when the video's menu showed it to consist of a collection of speeches made by Ernest. Hardly what I was looking for, but I was intrigued. Would it show me delivering a speech I never gave? I could not resist.

When the first images hit the screen, sure enough, there I was—Ernest at least—standing on a podium, delivering a speech. No hint of nervousness. Barely referring to a thick wad of notes. Clothes like a feverish drug-soaked dream of a renegade hippie: frills, beads, blurred and bleeding colours, and a collar resembling nothing I'd seen outside old rock concerts or the Vatican.

Had to be a dream. Or a computer forgery.

"Well into the twenty-first century," Ernest began, "humanity's mindset remained straight out of the middle ages. Except that instead of lives constrained by religious dogma, they were suffocated by economic and political orthodoxies that worshipped god the profit, the job, and the holy growth—overseen not by popes and bishops, kings and dukes, but less conspicuous rulers with different titles, wearing not priestly nor regal robes but business suits. A world dominated by mutually masturbating coalitions of political and economic forces that constantly shifted and realigned as they overtly and covertly tussled for control, hiding behind the mask of so-called democracy and its inadequate options of misrepresented party devotees capable of running their society only into the ground."

This was certainly not me, even if it looked like me. I would never have even thought such things, let alone said them. Nor was I ever as flamboyant as Ernest was with hand gestures, which accompanied his speech almost without pause.

"In my opinion," he continued, holding a stern pedagogic finger in the air, "the key to their rule was a deep-seated fear that people with time on their hands are dangerous—that if all are not kept busy, existential angst and/or boredom runs riot, tearing down society. So, everyone *had* to work. Or search for it. Even though technology and knowledge had increased to the point decades before that there was no longer any necessity to work as hard as most did to arrange everyone's needs and desires. The work performed was not necessarily of any real benefit either. Rather, the sacred outdated economic dogma dictated that it merely had to allow someone somewhere the chance to make a financial profit. And so, the glut of manic activity subjugated societal and ecological goals, mistaking the map for the territory, and the

ends for the means. Money itself became the goal, yet it was the Tinkerbell of the economic world, a figment of the collective imagination ready to disappear as soon as belief wavered. And belief was sorely tested as financial wizardry ruled. Banks gained their princely tithe of compound interest using pens as magic wands, waving them over formal documents during incantations that created credit out of thin air. With official sleight-of-hand, Reserve Banks magically created money merely by purchasing pieces of paper inscribed by governments. The loaves-and-fishes banking system lent money many times greater in amount than the savings left with it by depositors. Issuers of bonds, stocks, derivatives, and various other too-clever-by-half exercises in self-deception—glorified IOUs and bets upon gambles—conjured up cash flows with almost as much ease as they lost them.”

“Which part of my subconscious is this coming from?” I said aloud. There were days when I felt down and bored with my job, but they were uncommon, and I’d have thought never so extreme as to have these sorts of feelings behind them, however deeply buried.

But Ernest wasn’t finished: “And so, deafened by the hallucinatory sound of money talking, people pursued profits and cash flows—not the satisfaction of needs. Work that most needed doing was often not done: Mercedes were built for the Mercedes-less rather than homes for the homeless. Children languished because of parents’ double-income stress. Lives wasted away from workaholism or alternate addictive states sought for escape from nine-to-five humdrum.”

*Monday-nity ‘til Friday*, I thought. A phrase one of the junior tellers at my branch frequently used—especially on Monday mornings.

“Corporate power games,” continued Ernest, “and promotional struggles sold out friendship, self-respect, and individuality. Relentless economic competition transformed ‘I was just doing my job’ into a universal excuse for collective idiocy—even bestowing clear consciences to exporters of hi-tech weaponry and torture equipment banned in the exporting countries. Despite material success, or perhaps because of it, the real and imagined pressures of the sacred rat race provided not a human community so much as a busy buzzing beehive where individual concerns were mostly treated as less important than the continued functioning of the hive, a monolith whose purpose remained obscure to most of its members. And what did the leaders of the time do, the political and business powerbrokers? They defended their privileges while making outdated-ideology-driven decisions that were usually inappropriate, often made matters worse, and always shut the barn door long after the horse had not just bolted but caught the next flight to South America. Armed to the teeth with senile fantasies of orthodox explanations provided by myopic economic experts rigidly facing yesterday, they confounded common-sense with their wishful thinking and reality-tunnel-vision. However bad it looked, their advice was the same: to continue with habits of the past, to go boldly—unthinkingly—where everyone had gone before. The bottom line: continue to compete and grow. Without competitive growth, the market couldn’t have enough money to afford investing in environmental protection and restoration or social improvement. So, first things second, if not last. Can’t afford to save the world but can afford to destroy it.”

I started when I heard this—it was something Yvette had said more than once. Then I realised: of course my subconscious would cobble it all together from many sources, including my wife. Just as it had for her expression about food that Dianne

had used. I'd probably heard everything I was hearing before at some stage, I just could not remember when.

"But," continued Ernest, "because growth was—*is*—impossible to maintain indefinitely, the hapless citizens of the day were periodically confronted by televised warnings from dour-faced exponents of the status quo. Gorged on orthodoxy, muttering so much economic jargonspeak as to suggest the native tongue had been forgotten, masquerading authority with a title like Treasurer, Chancellor of the Exchequer, or Minister of Finance—and desperate to invoke confidence in that authority—the 'democratically' elected political representative, convinced that the signs had been read correctly, would convey to the public (with great gravity) the sad sobering 'truth'."

Ernest's next words had a harsher, higher-pitched, more nasal twang and a pronounced Australian accent. He slipped in and out of this voice to suit the speech.

"'The economy's stuffed', screamed the economic minister from the press-room pulpit. 'It's over-heated, unbalanced, impaled on a J-curve, crushed under debt, infected by foreign problems, congested, brittle, strangled, suffocated, castrated and crippled; but above all, *it's no longer competitive*. We aren't winning anymore. Time to pull the finger out, tighten our belts, make the extra effort...', and perform all those other clichés that might more accurately be rendered: 'The gods of the economy have been angered and we must offer them a sacrifice'. With a seal of approval from the most fashionable economists, credit might be tightened or relaxed, interest rates hiked or dropped, taxes raised or cut, government services reduced, or some other bitter policy pill popped... 'for the national interest... to regain our competitive edge... so living standards can rise.' Yet living standards usually dropped as the policies bit. And so, everyone raced faster just to stay still, while breathlessly awaited economic indicators degenerated, cancelling promises of imminent prosperity, and eroding faith in the holy prophecies of economic priests. Even the market could only bear so much bull."

I started fast-forwarding the speech—more memorable than many stiff epics I'd endured at conferences, but not what I was after... nor were the later excerpts I glimpsed. Before long, I gave up on it altogether.

Its castigation of the present though had resurrected my interest in understanding this dream future. What I'd seen so far was clearly intended to avoid the pitfalls alleged by Ernest, but still I felt like I was missing the bigger picture. I certainly hadn't found the flaw I presumed must be buried somewhere, the chink in the armour that would reveal the true deception. I suddenly realised I hadn't finished reading *A Free Lunch*. Nor had I looked at any of the other sources of information Wilbur suggested three evenings before. Now, with nothing more pressing, and no obvious alternatives, it seemed the time to do so.

For two hours, I skimmed *A Free Lunch* and several other books, looking for salient parts. It took me much less time than I expected to gain the overview I sought. It all meshed together in a way I had not previously understood.

At its basis, enufism (or freelunchism, as it was sometimes called) depended on the determination of requirements—public and private. This was not done by faceless bureaucrats or party apparatchiks. And certainly not by profit-obsessed CEOs and marketing managers. There was no real corporate or central planning. Rather, plurocracy provided a quasi-market surrogate. Each locality established for itself what it wanted. Most localities usually overestimated, but this allowed for strife and changes of mind—even disaster. Insurance, for example, was no longer in

the form I knew; instead, each year, prices were set via CAPE to absorb an amount estimated to cover the costs of all repairs expected to be required because of natural disasters and misfortune, a figure based on recent trends, and usually more than what was actually needed.

Realising that not everything in life can be planned, each person also individually nominated an additional percentage of their total anticipated expenditures to be devoted to discretionary 'impulsive' purchases—items they did not expect to buy but might if the mood took them (additional sweets, a trinket, an extra children's toy). This increased both production and the working week, across-the-board, but, with the effect obvious to all, there was a clear motivation to keep the percentages fairly small.

What each locality wanted, of course, varied considerably, and reflected priorities appropriate to circumstance and culture. Hence, earthquake-prone areas put a lot of effort into reinforcing buildings. Older countries placed equal emphasis on preserving and restoring historical structures and art-treasures. Many places still required a lot of work to repair and rejuvenate degraded environments. Whereas Australia usually chose to spend more time and energy per citizen on sport and recreational facilities than anywhere else.

Whatever the requirements, as they were determined—with specialist co-ordination and advice as needed, especially regarding the latest innovations and newly invented products—they were fed plurocratically into the Net, by consumer and producer alike, then tallied and tabulated at successively higher levels, from locality to nation. Near the end of the year, they were set in place for the following year. With costs so determined, prices were reset using CAPE. Then it was 'simply' a matter of doing all the work thus plurocratically deemed to be worth doing.

The way this was done was very alien to me. In a nutshell, people shared the work, co-operated together to get it done. Like the Net, each local node merged itself into a bigger network, distributing work across more people, each with something to offer. Needs, talents, and dispositions played the dominant roles in determining *how* the sharing took place.

But even this co-operative economy could not avoid people being required to take on an equal albeit small share of work that none or too few *wanted* to do. Once established which work lacked workers, a call for volunteers was made, allowing people to choose what they saw as the least odious of the unwanted work. But of course there was still some work for which none or too few volunteered. This had to be assigned—by computer, randomised within the constraints of not forcing people to work further from home than was reasonable or practical, or to perform labour for which they were patently unsuited (like abattoir work for vegetarians). Even so, the end result was not fixed in concrete: the work to be done by each city was recorded on the Net in such a way that the person to do the work could indicate it as something they were willing—or eager—to swap or give up to others more interested.

Apparently, quite a few assigned jobs swapped. One motivation for doing so was to save personal expenses by building one's own goods out of working hours, paying just for parts not labour. This could be planned for with CAPE, or taken into account retrospectively. Thus, a frugal audiophile, for example, was often more inclined than others to suffer the tedium of a few seven-hour working weeks manually assembling relatively expensive hi fi speakers because this gave them the requisite skills to DIY their own discounted set.

Not everyone worked a seven-hour week as it turned out. Some worked longer hours—those required to be on call or whose work could not easily be performed in a single day per week or which needed skills that too few people had. An economy might have so few doctors for example that each needed to work say five days a week, until more could be trained to ease their burden and allow them to return to standard hours—but then their extra initial contributions would be compensated for by subsequent reduced hours and/or earlier retirements (which otherwise occurred at fifty-five, when they started receiving a ‘citizen’s wage’ of half the average income). Similarly, anyone who wanted to take time off could work longer hours (preferably) beforehand, if they could find the work. This, I realised, must have been what Alice referred to when I was in her restaurant: apparently, she had worked almost enough ‘overtime’ to take an entire year off.

All of this complicated CAPE, of course, but did not undermine it. Computer resources and plurocratic organisation constantly monitored arrangements, redistributing resources towards appropriate training as necessary to ease the burden on people working longer than standard hours in jobs lacking sufficiently skilled people—the aim was always for a standard working week for all as soon as possible.

In the process of obtaining this overview, I also learned just what Wilbur meant when he informed me that banks and banking (essentially) no longer existed. A few of their functions were carried on via CAPE and the Net, but most had disappeared entirely. There was no lending, no mortgages, no compound interest, barely even any cash to be stored in vaults. The whole payment system was computerised, except for a few plurocracies who insisted on retaining the use of cash either because of their relative isolation or their 666-inspired distrust of a cash-free system (or both). Even what I would have called a person’s ‘bank account’ was just called their ‘account’. It was simply another facet of CAPE, stored on computer somewhere in the labyrinth of the Net, updated by each babel-deducted expenditure and each periodic crediting of income.

As for wages, as Wilbur had mentioned earlier, they could be altered but only when there was plurocratic agreement that they didn’t accurately reflect the value to the community of the work being paid for. After apparently considerable adjustments in earlier years, they soon became more or less static. And with essentially fixed wage rates, it became possible to adopt a fixed-value currency (and, not surprisingly, to abandon currency markets)—a ‘labour standard’. One Australian dollar was defined as the total payment for one minute of carpentry, forty seconds of medical care, one minute and twenty seconds of farming, and varying amounts of time at many other jobs. Definitions differed from one nation to the next, but an average of all national standards—a global ‘composite-job’—determined international exchange rates. With Australia paying four of its dollars for ten minutes of the composite-job, and the USA three of its dollars for the same amount of work, the Australian dollar was worth three-quarters of a USA dollar. And had been for almost twenty years.

This would have made an international currency easy to arrange, except there was no need for one. There was still plenty of international trade, despite increased local production, but rather than a choice between polar opposites—free trade *or* protectionism, globalisation *or* local self-sufficiency—balance was the goal. Although all nations tried to be as self-reliant as possible, there were still certain goods and services that some nations found much easier to produce than others (still no mangos

from Alaska for instance). So there were still exports and imports. But they were handled via simple balance sheets, not by exchanging hard currencies.

Each nation had either a debt or credit with any other. The aim, to suit CAPE, was for total costs of export production for any nation to balance its total costs of imports. But there were inevitable imbalances, which prompted altered working hours—longer to increase exports, shorter to decrease them. Increases to the working week, however, were often small enough to be compensated for by adjustments prompted by local productivity improvements. Only if a national surplus or deficit was large, and remained so for long enough, would there be a potential problem. Allegedly, this never happened, because of discounted exporting from richer to poorer countries of technology and other methods for producing goods.

Dianne had referred to this when I thought she said 'pair giving'. In fact what she meant was 'PARE giving'—Poor And Rich Exchange. When it was first introduced, some measure of relative wealth had been determined so that, for example, Australia rated nine out of ten, Turkey five, and Zambia one. Australian goods were sold to Zambia for one-ninth their cost, and to Turkey for five-ninths, while Zambia bought Turkish goods at one-fifth their cost. How they actually did this was another shock to my system: to buy a ninety-dollar Australian product, for example, Zambia debited its CAPE-trade account by ten dollars in favour of Australia, which credited itself with the remaining discounted eighty dollars.

"And Ernest accused bankers in my time of money magic," I exclaimed when I read this. Creative accountancy indeed. Its justification, went the claim, was the pressing need to end poverty and international tensions. Allegedly, it worked: there were no refugees from Enufist countries, it was said.

Yet it was such an obvious piece of deliberate self-deception, how could anyone have accepted it, let alone entire nations with diverse cultures?

The more I studied, however, the more I realised that what could have allowed this and other free lunch innovations to work was the same thing that had allowed money to function over the millennia. My university degree included a unit on the history of money, and one of its major lessons was that money can only be traded for goods if there exists a common acceptance of what is ultimately an utterly artificial definition of the money's 'value'. Whatever its standard, money acts as a social convention or agreement, dependent on *stability of belief*. Presumably the same could have been true for PARE and the rest of enufism: *if* people had grown convinced firstly of its usefulness, then of its necessity, it could have become part of the social fabric, woven tightly enough not to be at risk of immediate unravelling. But for the life of me, I could not envisage what might have prompted such conviction and agreement.

However, I did not muse on this for long, as I was distracted by a paragraph in a book published the year after *A Free Lunch*: "Latest population projections suggest there will be about nine billion people alive when ecological and economic crises may well hit their peak. These people will face a return to barbarism if we continue to compete economically. We simply must change our economic system before then. If we do, it will be a case of a switch in time saving nine billion. The obvious objection to PARE stems from a desire not to think beyond our current tunnel-reality. It is a poor objection, a lazy one. And given how work-obsessed this business civilisation is, lazy objections seem especially inappropriate. The task before us is to re-channel the energies we now put into jobs and careers instead into making a

better world, and better people. A quote from Aldous Huxley seems germane: 'They intoxicate themselves with work so they won't see how they really are'."

I had to read that a second time. It sounded eerily familiar. Where had I heard it before? And then I remembered: it was the quote on my desk calendar, the last time I was at work. I remembered thinking at the time that Huxley was probably intoxicated himself when he wrote it—with mescaline!

But perhaps I was the one who was intoxicated.

There was no mistake, I was sure. It was the same quote, this time cited in a book allegedly published two years later. Coincidence? My subconscious incorporating a real event into an endless dream? It had to be. Or...

Was it possible that I really was Ernest? Stricken with amnesia? Incorporating a presumably well known quote into a fantasy of an imaginary character called Steven? Was my wife also an invention, based on the Yvette I was with the previous night? Was everything I thought I remembered a fabrication, figments of an over-active imagination?

Was everything I knew wrong?!

## 18

### Heart of the Matter

"Of course I'm Steven," I muttered to myself, trying to be convincing. But despite my best efforts, I could no longer suppress doubts about my true identity. I stood and paced about the room. "Me, myself, I. I know who I am, where I live, what I do. I. Am. Me!"

I felt suffocated, and rushed outside for air and distraction. But it didn't help. The view from the back porch only emphasised I was not where I should be. It was like having a carpet pulled from under my identity.

"I am me," I repeated, returning inside, aimless, agitated.

I checked the clock. Almost eleven o'clock. Almost time. Memories of Toby's tests, and online fingerprints, came back to me with a jolt. "Of course I'm Steven," I repeated, this time more convincingly. The looming hospital test would surely prove once and for all that I was Steven not Ernest.

Yet I could not fully dispel my doubts. Or the nagging feeling that every theory I came up with would sooner or later be overturned, that every time I felt sure I was beginning to understand what was happening, something new would raise doubts or prove me wrong.

I couldn't stay inside though. It evoked the same sense of dislocation as outside but was more suffocating. So I went outdoors again, at a loss what to do. I dithered the remaining minutes away, silently repeating my mantra. "I am me."

I walked round the back yard, into the adjoining communal garden, seeking distraction. Flowering plants and vegetables in various stages of growth did not provide it. From a distance, I saw several people including two teenagers quietly tilling and harvesting. One waved when he noticed me watching. "Ernest certainly is well known," I muttered. With a deep sigh, I waved back.

"I am me. I am me. I M E."

If the tests were to prove it, I realised, it would just open up a different can of worms—of the time-travelling variety. My mantra expanded: "I am me, and I am dreaming. I M E N I M dreaming."

When I thought I'd killed enough time, but not nearly enough self-doubt, I returned to the house, and sat motionless in a couch. Waiting for Wilbur to arrive. Fretting. Undeniably anxious, and no wonder. The Huxley citation had made me wonder what the tests would prove. I could not wait for them to be over. I had to know.

M I E?

Well after eleven o'clock, Wilbur arrived. His presence shook me out of my no man's land, yet he seemed oddly quiet and distracted. Though he soon shrugged it off, signs reappeared throughout the day.

After leaving the house, I stopped in my tracks again when I saw his car. It looked the same except for the colour, no longer violet but blue. "Am I going colour blind? Or is this car a different colour to what it was last time I saw it?"



As usual, Wilbur took a while to reply. "That was a different car," he finally offered as he opened its door.

I shook my head, but decided not to pursue it any further. So he has two cars—or hires them from day to day—what difference does it make? I have enough to deal with.

We were quickly on the road, and again I strained against the slow speed limit. When Wilbur reminded me the speed limit made it hard to cause a fatality, my anxiety prompted a far more savage response than he deserved.

"O, right, more of your usual good-natured self-sacrificing routine. I might be late for my meeting but at least I won't kill anyone." I snorted, not quite in disgust but certainly with irritation. "A society of saints and more saints."

"You exaggerate. People are as flawed as they've ever been. Visit a dance floor and see for yourself."

His expression was deadpan, so I suspect he had no idea he'd made, by his standards at least, a half-reasonable joke. I was too irritated to give it any attention. "But everyone is so selfless and cooperative. My god, you even manage to share the work no one wants to do. Flawed people wouldn't do that. Not without kicking up a fuss. Yet as far as I can tell, no one objects. Not even to the most menial chores."

"You should know," said Wilbur, without rancour. "For three months last year, you performed maintenance work on biogas pipes and valves across Enote. You certainly didn't find it enjoyable but, as you said, it doesn't take long and it *has* to be done. Like house chores."

"But people must resent it."

"Why should they?"

"Because it's beneath their abilities."

"Perhaps, but not beneath their needs."

"They must object to being *assigned* work."

"Occasionally. But they know it's worth it. And it applies to all. Plus, it's only for short durations."

"How inefficient is that? People can't spend long enough doing assigned work to build up their skills to a level worth passing on. Training would consist of the blind leading the blind."

"It might, except that procedures for unpopular work are generally recorded on training vids."

"That can't be as efficient as learning from people who know the work."

"There are various forms of efficiency. Vids can't teach as well as people who know their stuff, but sharing unwanted work gives people broader experience, greater knowledge and skills. That means more DIY, which means the community can function with fewer monetary costs—which because of CAPE means lower prices, for everything. A considerable efficiency. There's a lot of invaluable unpaid DIY work. Household cooking, cleaning, mending, child minding, caring for the aged and infirmed, plenty of priceless personal counselling, listening, advising, dressmaking, hair-cutting, even entertaining. Ultimately, who knows, one day everything might be done without charge."

"Everything free! Don't be ridiculous."

"It's happened on Orlanos."

I did not respond—as much as I wanted to, I lacked a suitably caustic rejoinder. More or less immediately, we turned into a railway car park. Wilbur explained that the hospital was in a nearby city and that a train was the most efficient means of

reaching it. He added that it would take barely longer than if we drove, but that we had plenty of time in either case.

As we left the car, my mood prompted me to grumble. "This wasn't that far from Ernest's. Shouldn't we have walked here?"

"Yes," replied Wilbur, with no sign of annoyance. "You usually do. But this planet's higher gravity makes it difficult for me to do much walking, and I've already done a fair bit today."

We reached the railway platform, but did not buy tickets. All public transport was free according to Wilbur, as per plurocratic agreement. This was partly practical, to encourage its use, and partly a matter of principle, that something intended for public use should not cost anything. We did not wait long for the train, which was silver, very sleek, and about half full.

"This must be a very new train," I said, after we found seats.

"Why do you say that?"

"It's clean. It's shiny. And it has no graffiti."

"Actually, it's about ten years old. You can tell by the colour. The newest ones have a slight green hue."

"Ten years without graffiti!?" I queried. "Or is there some new wonder treatment for removing it without trace?"

"Graffiti's about as rare these days as hen's teeth. Or..." A mischievous smirk spread across his face. Another would-be joke coming. I steeled myself. "...whale feathers."

His humour, if it could be called that, sailed past me almost un-noticed, and his hopeful smirk once again faded. I looked at him in disbelief. Surely teenagers would still be teenagers, even here, whatever their education, however participatory and socially responsible the populace? "Are all your youth such saints?" I asked.

"No, that's certainly not a title I've heard any parents use about them. But they don't face the same difficulties as previous generations, so their behaviour tends to be different. More saintly, I guess you could say."

"What do you mean they don't face the same difficulties? Teenagers always struggle to find their own identities, always have to deal with the sudden acquisition of new hormones and all the thrills, confusion and doubts they bring."

"Yes, more or less. But it doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's long been established that teenagers with stable family backgrounds and focuses for their youthful exuberance tend to have the fewest problems. Without economic uncertainty or hardship, with better education for dealing with other people, most families now have the means and time to provide a stable background and a caring environment, to steer teenagers past the worst excesses. Schools, too. Teachers are trained to recognise and identify the most troubled individuals, and there are tried and proven programs in place to assist them in getting beyond their difficulties, to give them constructive alternatives for self-expression. Sport and other physical activities play a big part—to help them get their potentially destructive energies out of their system. Indeed, the process is not reserved for teenagers—adults are encouraged to do the same."

"We had sport in my time, but it didn't seem to do much good."

"You also had a dog-eat-dog materialist society with double-income stress and little concept of co-operation. Your sports were mostly a continuation of the same, competitions to weed out the weakest rather than opportunities for enjoyment and fulfilment. Now it is truly how you play the game and not whether you win or lose."

"You mean, no one tries to win?! Dianne certainly seemed happy to beat me at tennis yesterday."

"Of course people try to win, but their self-esteem is no longer crippled if they lose. One of the most popular sayings of the last few decades is, everyone excels at something."

I had no reply. As it turned out, at the next stop, a number of teenagers stepped aboard and sat near us. It was almost as if Wilbur had arranged it. The teenagers behaved impeccably for the next five stops until they departed. While their conversations were centred as might be expected on young love, sport, the latest clothes, music, games, and movies, they spoke quietly, and with hardly an expletive. They still had the usual air of self-obsession which distinguishes young people, but they did not treat the rest of the world as simply not there. Their world was a microcosm still, but within something larger.

Other bizarre behaviour shocked me just as much. I noticed that when people entered the train to find the only spare seats available were beside other passengers, rather than instantly erecting an imaginary barrier that shunned even eye contact, as is the standard custom (or habit), they instead usually acknowledged or greeted the person or persons they sat beside. One or two even started a brief conversation. I had seen that sort of thing happen in the real world, but very rarely, and usually it was initiated by individuals who were clearly not altogether mentally balanced, with the result discomfiting to those they addressed. But on this train, norms had reversed. Yet another reason to believe I was dreaming.

Our trip lasted about half an hour. The first few stops were at suburban locations, but the remaining few, much further apart, were surrounded not by houses but by shops and offices—the rail line by then running through the middle of a traffain, as I'd noticed on my first trip with Wilbur. Between stations, initially, I caught only a few fleeting glimpses of houses behind screening hedges and trees. But on the traffain, the houses and shops disappeared entirely, replaced by dense vistas of bushland, and something resembling the communal gardens behind Ernest's and Dianne's houses but on generally larger scales. When I queried Wilbur, he reminded me of the honeycomb structure to city and regional planning, and explained that each city in Hillbeach was directly connected by train to each of its immediate neighbours, and so indirectly to all others, with intra-city loop rail lines merging with inter-city traffain lines. Some trains kept looping round cities, others went solely between them, some combined both approaches. Wilbur had chosen one that would not need us to change trains to reach our destination, adding that places with specialised services, such as large sporting venues, or major hospitals—like the city we were heading to—had more frequent trains.

When we finally reached our stop, the hospital was all but immediately in front of us. But we still had nearly an hour to kill before my tests started. We spent most of it at a restaurant, having a leisurely meal and further conversation, Wilbur again treating me to a free lunch.

Perhaps the train ride had somehow calmed my fears but I felt surprisingly comfortable and relaxed. I was now sure I was on the verge of having my identity proved beyond all doubt. I talked freely with Wilbur.

At one point, when I found myself describing my employment history in perhaps inordinate detail, dwelling on a factory job I took during a summer break between university years, I suddenly realised the one thing I had not seen at any stage in this dream, had not even noticed during the train trip, was industry.

"It's there," replied Wilbur. "Just hidden. Industrial areas tend not to be especially attractive, however much care goes into their designs. Nor are all their necessary comings and goings of particular value to residential neighbours. So while modern cities tend to blend residential and industrial areas, the latter are in mostly small pockets, screened off by various means, and with access points carefully placed not only for efficient use by private and public transport but also to minimise effects on neighbouring residences."

"So you still have industrial estates, they're just less conspicuous?"

"And less concentrated. A lot of manufacturing occurs on such a small scale that it can be done more or less as back yard operations. They're spread inconspicuously among residential areas. Those on larger scales tend to be grouped into small pockets within cities. While the most specialised and largest industries are kept entirely separate from, albeit close to, cities."

"To minimise pollution?"

"To minimise their intrusion into city life. Pollution's no longer an issue. Industries now use techniques of production that don't pollute. Plurocracy requires it and responsible stewardship ensures it."

"So some things simply don't get produced? Because it would mean pollution?"

"Not at all. There are always ways of preventing pollution, if people have the time and incentive to find them. In the past, too often, prevention wasn't attempted because flawed capitalist accounting made it seem too costly."

"Flawed?"

"Only obvious and generally avoidable direct costs of preventing pollution were considered, those that ate away at company profits, not the usually much greater costs companies didn't concern themselves with unless forced to: costs of cleaning up pollution, or dealing with its impact on health and well-being."

Later, on the return trip, I occasionally thought to keep a keener eye out for industrial areas, but still they eluded me. Not even a smokestack or a cloud of rising steam. If what Wilbur claimed was true, then industry must indeed have been well screened and pollution free. I really *had* to be dreaming.

Eventually the appointment time drew near. We finished our meal and headed to the hospital. It was not unlike others I had been in, though it looked like a recent construction, and fairly plain in style. Reception directed us to the right spot, and shortly after one o'clock, I was in a room having blood siphoned from my right arm by a tall, young, muscular, blond-haired, humourless fellow in the traditional white coat. He introduced himself as Doctor Tim Wilson, but insisted on being called by his first name. After he gave the blood sample to an assistant who left the room, he put me through a series of tests, some familiar, others very alien indeed.

I recognised some technology, such as needles, and electrodes to monitor various physiological factors. But the electrodes had no wires; and the banks of electronic equipment which presumably showed their readings were utterly unfamiliar to me, even though I went through a battery of medical tests only a week before. Or perhaps it was forty years before. Still, there was little that seemed out of place, little that did not look like what medical technology could become after forty years. Something of a contrast with some of the other low tech I'd seen elsewhere.

"Here we are," I said to Wilbur during one short pause between tests, "surrounded by so much hi tech it puts the bridge of the USS Enterprise to shame, and yet Dianne harvested asparagus with a knife. Until now, I was beginning to think most technology hadn't advanced much over forty years."

Wilbur's response was succinct. "Technology has advanced but in a manner that's appropriate, unobtrusive and ecologically responsible. For once, it's been matched by economic and political progress."

Tim's re-appearance for another test prevented reply. The test involved perhaps the most advanced piece of equipment I saw that day, something reminiscent of a wand. He lowered it slowly onto my bare chest, then moved it gradually up to my neck. When finished, he looked at the quasi-LCD on one side of the wand, then, without a word or change to his single stern expression, moved to the next test. This, to my surprise, and in stark contrast, involved the use of acupuncture needles. Afterwards, Tim rubbed something resembling a small flat spoon across my tongue, sealed it in a plastic bag, and took it away. Then, a small fingernail clipping was taken—for a DNA test, I was told.

The longest test was very familiar: it involved me running on a treadmill with electrodes attached to my chest, partnering the device Toby had adhered there. Tim and Wilbur both watched me studiously as the pace of the treadmill increased and I laboured to keep up. On the verge of giving up, pain erupted in my chest, and I cried aloud. Tim stopped the treadmill immediately, and I collapsed to the ground. But even before Tim and Wilbur reached me to offer help, the pain passed. When he was sure I was all right, Tim removed the electrodes and Toby's monitor from my chest—along with a fair amount of body hair (forty years should surely have solved *that* problem). He then handed the monitor to an assistant to process—it was the last time I saw it.

After, the tests complete, but the results still being processed, Tim led Wilbur and me to his office, where he asked us to wait.

Minutes later, he returned, but only, as it turned out, to find a file. Having surveyed the room in considerable detail in the interim, I was struck by a desk photo of a young boy and girl near a lake that looked familiar but which I could not place.

"Where was the shot of your children taken, Tim?" I asked.

He responded with an unfamiliar name, then added, "They are not my children. I'm a neut. That's my sister and I. When we were younger, obviously." He left again, leaving me more baffled than ever.

"Did he say he was a newt?" I asked Wilbur.

Wilbur nodded.

Confused, I muttered, "He doesn't look amphibious."

"No, more like a gibbon," said Wilbur, looking at me expectantly. When I responded with greater bafflement, rather than the amusement I suspect he was hoping for, he backtracked. "Not newt. N-e-u-t, someone who has elected to have his or her sexual impulses quelled."

"Quelled?" (Polly want a cracker.)

"A small implant under the skin, usually near a shoulder, dispenses a continuous dose of a prolactin-based hormone which negates sexual drive."

"You mean they *willingly* forgo sex?!"

"The desire for it, yes."

"And a drug can do that? I thought it was a biological imperative."

"One that's alterable with the appropriate medication. It's not commonly used in Australia. But in some nations, especially those with the densest populations, it's more popular. Several places encourage it. One or two avowed *democracies* have even made it mandatory, for part of their citizens' lives."

"What's the drug called? Anti-Viagra?" I shook my head in consternation but continued before Wilbur could answer. "Why on earth would Tim want to take it?"

At this point, the door opened and Tim returned, carrying a large file.

"Why don't you ask him?" said Wilbur quietly to me.

"Ask me what?" said Tim, before sitting and opening the file.

I did not feel comfortable about doing so, but the situation and my curiosity got the better of me. "Why you've chosen to be a neut," I said.

"Simple," said Tim, his voice, like his face, devoid of expression. "I will not contest that sex is something to savour and celebrate, but it is also banal and basic, something animals do without heed, a universal urge and habit as ordinary as eating or urinating. And for the average male, especially in his late teens and soon after, hormonal brainwashing results in sexual urges so dominant that, were they not universal, they would be regarded—by the psychiatric profession at least—as an obsessive-compulsive disorder. I choose not to be so afflicted, which gives me greater concentration and energy. Which I need for my work and research. Sex distracts, makes me impulsive, impairs my relations with women."

"Impairs?" I said. "Not enhances?"

"Aspirations to treat women as equals often run aground when confronted with a pretty face, a shapely figure."

"You don't notice a pretty face or a shapely figure!?"

"Notice them," said Tim, "but without sexual craving. I'm aware of a woman's physical charms, but detached. Like I am naturally of an athletic male body. I recognise it as aesthetically pleasing but it does not incite desire."

"So," I said, understanding the argument, even if not wanting to follow his choice, "how long have you been a neut?"

"Seven years. Other than during my annual leave."

"It can be turned on and off?!"

Tim gave me a quick look of impatience, as if my ignorance was unreasonable, then re-adopted his bedside manner. "The implant is easily removed or reinserted. It takes only an hour or so to kick in."

"Holidays must be exhausting for you."

"The first was overwhelming." Incongruous deadpan.

"You're happy with this arrangement?"

"For the moment. And for several years more I expect. But I doubt I'll stay a neut indefinitely, unlike some. I find sex too ecstatic. And fatherhood has its attractions. Enough about my sex life. Or lack of it. I have the results of your tests."

Suddenly anxious, I was given no time to dwell on it. Tim ploughed on immediately, looking down to his file, then back to me.

"They are consistent with the previous results," he said. "You have a heart condition, which the medication in your bloodstream is counteracting."

## 19

# Resonance

"No." I was baffled and crestfallen. "It can't be."

Wilbur, beside me, had no hint of expression.

Tim was about to continue when there was a knock at the door. A young female nurse stepped in, stood awkwardly, and leant back against the door, hands behind her back. Despite my astonished state, I noticed she had a very pretty face that matched her exquisite figure—perhaps I needed some Anti-Viagra.

"I—I...", she stammered, blushing, sheepish. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Doctor, but I... it's just... well..."

Nervous glances at each of us, then a rush forward to the side of Tim. She brought a file from behind her back, held it briefly in front of him, put it on the desk next to the one Tim had open.

"Wrong file," she muttered, before rushing to the door.

"Then what is *this* one?" said Tim, clearly annoyed, indicating with a gesture the original file still open on the desk before him.

The nurse turned mid-step at the doorway with a rapid spin, and blushed even more furiously. "I... well, you see... er... I'm sorry, but..." Her words seized, her gaze diverted to the floor, she kicked the side of one foot against the other, repeatedly. "Well, that's Mr d'Alembert's first set of tests—from last week," she finally managed, before hastily turning and exiting. "I'm really sorry."

Tim's eyes narrowed briefly, before sending Wilbur and I embarrassed contrite glances. Then, quickly regaining his usual composure, he opened and scanned the new file.

"This is baffling," he soon said, his expressionless face contradicting his words. He looked from the file to me. "According to these tests, you do *not* have a heart condition. Nor any trace of the medication you were given."

"My heart is ok?" I said, unsure—as ever—what to believe.

"Uncommonly healthy. Comparable to a thirty-year-old's."

"Then why the chest pains?"

"Muscular cramps," he said distractedly, returning his gaze to the file and turning a page. "Avoidable by more regular exercise and improved fitness."

A moment's sudden relief beyond measure.

Tim continued. "But this is impossible," he said, his gaze locked on the file. "Your DNA doesn't match your birth records." He flung a steady gaze at me. "Is this a practical joke?"

With a quiet almost embarrassed voice, Wilbur said, "Did you compare the DNA against the record I suggested?"

Tim kept staring at me until, as if shaken from a daydream, he turned to Wilbur. "What? O?!" He thumbed through the papers, before stopping at one he apparently couldn't take his eyes from.

"Well?" I said, impatience rising.

Several tense moments passed before Tim looked directly at me and said, "According to this, you have the same DNA as Steven Stone, a seventy-nine-year-old from Wunsa Pond."

At last! I was vindicated. The proof: I was *not* Ernest. I was myself.

And I *had* spoken briefly with an older version of me.

"This makes no sense," said Tim, studying the file.

A smile spreading across my face, I looked to Wilbur. He turned his gaze—almost unwillingly it seemed—from the floor to me. He said nothing, but for once his expression said it all. He was in shock.

The boot was now firmly on the other foot. I had been right all along.

I was me. I M E.

Wilbur recovered soon enough to promise Tim he would explain everything in the near future but for the moment we had to attend to other matters. We stopped by reception on the way out, and a wave of Ernest's babel settled all 'bills' (although health care was free, the resources expended in providing it were carefully monitored, which was the argument Wilbur had used earlier to eventually convince me to bring the babel along).

He said almost nothing on the way home, other than to answer my question as to whether he still believed I was Ernest.

"Apparently not," he said, and left it at that. Other than staring through the window and looking worried, he did nothing until the train ride was nearly over.

I didn't mind. The thrill of being proved right was coursing through me. My celebratory mood prompted plans to open a bottle of wine from Ernest's collection and toast myself! Wilbur's state of mind was not a concern.

But while still immersed in the silent train ride home, post-vindication depression set in. So I had proved I was me. I was still stuck in this dream. Still away from my wife and kids, from my own time. Still lost, waiting for the dream to end, unable to think of anything that would hasten its conclusion. Still forced to deal with each moment as it came.

Before I knew it, I was staring despondently through the train window just like Wilbur.

Near the end of the trip, I stopped staring long enough to glance at him. Still gazing out the window, his face had changed. He wore not the features I knew, nor even his natural Orlanian shape, but rather resembled a short-haired version of Einstein. Before I could even express my surprise, Einstein abruptly turned into an Orlani with a face narrower, darker and more careworn than Wilbur's own. I watched fascinated as his appearance changed further, sometimes gradually, sometimes more abruptly, into various Orlani and human faces. Apart from Einstein, the only one I recognised was the ancient actor Rod Taylor.

"What are you doing?" I finally said. "Rehearsing your impersonations for the Christmas review?" He can look exactly like anyone he chooses, I thought, yet two days ago he did the worst Groucho Marx impersonation I've ever seen.

Wilbur, with a bald human female face, turned to me, but his expression lacked understanding. I pointed at my face, then at his. He reacted as if startled, looked at his reflection in the window, then immediately re-formed his usual human face.

"Sorry," he said. "My mind was on other things."

"Then how come you could devote enough mental energy to shape shift?"



Wilbur looked even more uncomfortable—embarrassed, I thought. “It’s sort of like an Orlanian form of fidgeting. If we turn inwards enough, our thoughts sometimes unconsciously manifest in our shapes.”

“You mean you were thinking about Einstein?”

“Among others. Relativity actually—time dilation.”

*This is really bothering him*, I thought. “And Rod Taylor?”

He spent a moment thinking before answering. “An old film I saw.” He held my gaze for a few moments, then returned his attention to the window view.

We said nothing else for the rest of the trip.

It was not until we were walking to his car after exiting the train that Wilbur finally broke our silence. “I think it’d be instructive if you came to my house,” he said, poker-faced. “There’s something I want to show you.”

As soon as we arrived, after again parking his car in front of his house not under the carport, he led me to a closed door of a room I hadn’t been in before. He unlocked the door, and ushered me in. Inside, on a desk, was a strange device about the size of a large old-fashioned TV set. It had a prominent display screen, was made of a mixture of what looked and felt like dark metal and glass, and had a very irregular shape full of geometric protuberances, deep insets, and wide grooves. The front panel below the screen was flat, its top half full of meters, soft-touch buttons, and displays full of icons, none of which I recognised. Its lower half was even more unrecognisable; it included what I took to be an alien alphabet on what appeared to be the equivalent of a keyboard, albeit a vertical one!

“One of the reasons I’m in Jibilee,” said Wilbur, as I studied the machine, “apart from observing humanity, is to assist a local historian—one Ernest d’Alembert. He’s been researching the transition from capitalism to enufism, and I’ve been assisting him using this.” He pointed at the device.

“Which is?”

“A time viewer.”

I stared at him without expression, not at all sure what he was getting at.

“That’s the simplest way to describe it,” he added. “It can view the past, but it can’t interact with it. At least that’s what we always thought, what we’ve always experienced during its decades of use on Orlanos. Yet when Ernest and I last activated it to study the year 2025, not only did the viewer suddenly stop functioning, Ernest literally disappeared before my eyes. I thought I’d found him again when I met you by the roadside. Even after you claimed otherwise, I still thought you were Ernest. You were simply disoriented. Or perhaps affected by the viewer’s malfunction, or the bump on your head. Or all of the above.”

“But if you thought I was Ernest,” I said, “why didn’t you show me this room? To remind me how I disappeared.”

“The same reason I didn’t mention I was from Orlanos. The same reason I made up the story about you being dumped on my doorstep. To spare you further disorientation.” He sat on one of the two chairs in the room. “The point is, Steven, it would appear Ernest wasn’t merely transported across some physical distance, as I first thought. Somehow the time viewer has caused the two of you to move across time, to swap over. Even though that should be impossible.”

I took Wilbur’s lead and sat in the other chair. But not because of shock. Perhaps surprisingly, I took his words in my stride. They had a certain plausibility given the circumstances of this rambling dream. And having read so much sci-fi, it was just the sort of explanation my subconscious would dredge up. No, I was not shocked—I

was offended. "You mean," I said, gesturing at the viewer, "even though you'd been mucking around with this thing, you still never believed me? Even though you'd been watching *my* time, you still thought I was Ernest?!"

"Until the evidence began to accrue, yes. As I said, use of a viewer has never before resulted in time travel—all it's ever been able to do is provide a window into the past, one we could look through but not move through. So, just as you couldn't believe you'd travelled in time, neither could I. I did have a slight and rather worrying doubt that you might be telling the truth, but it was too extreme a possibility, or so I thought, to attach much credence to it. Amnesia and false memories seemed more credible."

"You could have mentioned your doubts."

"I thought it best to keep them to myself. You had enough to deal with. Whether you were Ernest or Steven, there was little to gain from adding to your confusion by informing you of uncertain possibilities. I certainly didn't want to colour your views—that would have just made it more difficult for me to find out what had truly happened."

"And when did you start believing I was telling the truth?"

"Not until Toby's tests. And later, when you demonstrated your intimate knowledge of the Stone family, and proved not to have Ernest's fingerprints. The DNA test today removed my last lingering doubts. Or perhaps it was a test of my own, which I completed this morning. That's why I was a little late arriving at your house—at Ernest's house. I took a sample of the singed grass outline, where you said you arrived. It has residual traces of a synthetic fibre that hasn't been manufactured for over twenty years but which was commonly used to make bed sheets in your time."

"You mean I was transported here complete with bed fluff?!"

Wilbur nodded grimly.

"So now, finally, you believe I'm not Ernest."

"Yes. You really have travelled into your future."

"You mean I'm *dreaming* I really have travelled into the future."

Wilbur laughed briefly—or at least it sounded vaguely like laughter, of a sort that might be expected from someone without a sense of humour, similar to what I heard from a Prime Minister at a press conference responding to a lame joke by a visiting foreign dignitary—shrill, staccato, overly enunciated and emphatic as if almost rehearsed. "You're even more difficult to convince than I am," said Wilbur, his amusement gone. "This is real, Steven. You really have travelled in time."

"How? You said the time viewer shouldn't be able to do that."

"It shouldn't, and never has previously, but there's a first time for everything, it seems. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but probably the similarity between you and Ernest is at the base of it all. Along with some striking coincidences. I didn't realise it at the time, but when Ernest and I last used the viewer, when it stopped working and he disappeared, we were watching an area which included a point exactly midway between your house and here. I was indulging his curiosity, viewing the house Ernest was born in, at the time he was born: shortly after ten p.m. the day you disappeared."

"That's about the time I last remember being at home," I said, trying to recall events.

"The moment we saw Ernest take his first breath, the older version, in this room, touched the viewer's screen—I think he was about to point something out to me—

and there was a flash of blinding light. Perhaps the same blinding light you described seeing just before you arrived. When I could see again, the viewer was inoperative—and Ernest was gone.”

I said nothing, still trying to figure out what it all meant.

“Since then,” continued Wilbur, “I’ve checked the records, and found that your age at the moment we were viewing was exactly the same as Ernest’s when he disappeared—to the minute. It’s unlikely that’s just a coincidence.”

“But why would it be important? How could it have made any difference?”

“I speculate there was, for want of a better term, a temporal resonance between you and Ernest. The viewer acted as a link between the two of you across time. At one end of the viewer, the viewing end, was Ernest, the same physical distance from what we were watching as you were at the time of those events. But also, you and he were the same age, not to mention physically all but identical. So, the two of you, at equidistant and opposite ends of the time viewer’s effective temporal expanse, must have somehow resonated. When Ernest touched the viewer’s screen, he unwittingly initiated your mutual transfer across time. It was too much for the viewer—the energy involved blew its fuses—which in retrospect is no surprise at all. It must have been enormous, far more energy than the viewer uses. Presumably it’s what singed the grass where you arrived. I have no idea where it came from. The continuum itself, perhaps—zero-point vacuum energy.”

Wilbur finally ran out of words, but it was some time before I could respond. I was not sure how much I understood. “Are you saying that because of some coincidences mostly, some similarities between Ernest and me, we were *both* transported across time? That I came here to his time, and he to mine?”

“Yes, that’s more or less what I think happened. For the first time in the viewer’s history, extremely unlikely parameters created a resonance sufficient to sponsor a transfer across time.” At this point, he seemed to forget I was there, and looked elsewhere. “Perhaps it can be utilised. Perhaps some form of time travel will eventually become commonplace.”

“Well,” I said, with some bite, “it’s been a one-way trip so far. Enough, I think, to put off most would-be time travellers.”

Wilbur snapped back to the real world, stared at me.

My mind, however, was on a fine point he hadn’t considered. “I’m not comfortable with this.”

“For which you can hardly be blamed. Being ripped from your own time—”

“Not that,” I interrupted. I stood and paced back and forth across the room. “I mean Ernest being transported back to my time. To my bed. With my *wife*.” Memories of the feverish moments before transportation flooded back to me. The possibility that I’d been replaced in an instant with Ernest was unsettling to say the least. Would he suddenly appear as I was at the time, naked, on my back? Inside Yvette?! Or would he retain the clothes and posture he had at the moment of transfer? How would Yvette react to that!? Would she know he was not me? Or would she make the same delusive attempts that Wilbur had made to pacify and convince me that I was someone else?

I stopped in my tracks and stared at Wilbur, hoping he would infer details I preferred not to spell out. “It was not exactly an opportune moment,” I added, when he seemed not to pick up any inference.

“Ernest would not have been transported to your bed,” he said, finally. “Just as you awoke not here where Wilbur was, but where your house was decades ago,

Ernest presumably arrived in your time at this spot, here, whatever may have occupied it then."

Though relieved, I could not help thinking of Yvette. "Then my wife just suddenly sees me not there?"

"Probably. I don't know for sure. This has never happened before."

I sat down and looked him in the eye. "How do we fix this? How do I get home?"

"I'm not sure. It may not even be possible. This is virgin territory, Steven. But I would hope we can arrange another resonant swap." His expression became grave. "We *must* attempt it. History may be in the process of being changed—Ernest's presence in the past may be altering subsequent events that have already transpired."

My concerns were more immediate and selfish. Not with history or the future but with me. "So what's stopping you?"

Wilbur blinked. "Well, I've only been convinced of all this for an hour or so, even if my mind has been focussed on its possibility since yesterday. And, of course, I needed to explain it all to you before roping you in on an experiment of this type."

"Which you've done. You have my permission. Press the buttons, pull the switches, batten down the hatches, do whatever it is you need to do. Please! Let's get started."

He studied me carefully, and said, "You seem to have a strong sense of urgency for someone convinced this is all a dream."

I shook my head. "I know it's a dream. But maybe the best way to end it is for me to dream of returning to my own time."

"You once told me you were sure this is a dream because you can't remember anything of Ernest's life, but everything of your own. Well, now that we know why, you can no longer use it as a reason for arguing you're dreaming."

"It's not the only reason," I said, then hesitated. He was watching me carefully, his expression clearly telling me to continue. "There's no way this could be the future," I said finally. "The way things were going in my day, they couldn't possibly have led to this."

"Forty years can be a long time. Plenty enough for change."

"Change, yes, but total transformation? Everything I'm familiar with has been turned upside down."

"It took much less time for Lenin's revolution. And Gorbachev's. And—"

"And didn't they have happy outcomes?!" I snarled, immediately regretting it. I sighed before continuing in a less aggravated fashion. "Change for the worse I might have believed. But such radical change for the better? How could it be anything *but* a dream? It's too optimistic, too much of an improvement. My god, the worst thing going for it, as far as I can tell, is its suburban provincial feel—its capacity to be dull."

"You have only been exposed to one small part of the world, Steven. Enufism thrives on diversity and there are many other cities I'm sure you'd find more exciting."

"Maybe so, but is provincialism the worst you can do? What about Soylent Green cannibalism? Logan's Run euthanasia? Even a conspiracy to turn everyone into Mormons? Although you might be halfway there with that one. If I could just glimpse some horrible countervailing truth lurking at the back of this world, then I might believe it, then it would seem more real, more normal."

"You've seen too many dystopian films," said Wilbur, frowning. "They've coloured your perception of what is possible."

"Well, I know one thing that's possible." I paused for effect, then slowly enunciated my words. "That I am dreaming."

"From what I understand," said Wilbur, almost without pause, "humans dream much as Orlanis do. I've never had a dream in which even one day moved in a normal fashion, with each detail complete and sequential. My dreams are usually haphazard, disjointed, often with no apparent logic. Rather like some twentieth century election speeches I've sampled. My dreams also tend to be full of strange beings, impossible events and bizarre situations."

"You mean like time travel and shape-shifting aliens?"

He did not stay on the back foot long. "I take your point, but tell me Steven, since you arrived in this time, have events ever shifted from one location to another without intervening movements? Have you walked so fast you found yourself flying? Has your face sprouted grass? Or your arms dropped off? Have you met unicorns or long dead persons? Have you in fact experienced anything at all resembling what you normally dream about?"

"No," I admitted reluctantly, but with anger. Then, more subdued, "None of the above. This is the most realistic dream I've ever had. And far longer and more detailed than any I can remember. But that doesn't prove anything. I don't remember many dreams, so for all I know, the ones I've forgotten are just like this. When I do wake up, I'll probably forget this one too."

"And if you don't forget, perhaps then you'll be convinced this isn't a dream."

"It's beside the point," I said, after an uncertain pregnant silence. "Dream or not, I want to go home."

Wilbur sighed. "Pragmatic and reasonable." He turned to the time viewer, pressed a button. Its screen lit up, dark blue. "Fortunately, I've given the matter some thought. I think I know how to set up another temporal transfer."

"How?"

Wilbur pressed something on the front panel, and the 'vertical' keyboard tilted downwards to the horizontal. "Remember," he said, as he rapidly tapped keys, "we know when and where Ernest arrived. Or where he should have, at least. Once I set up the viewer to show his arrival, I'll simply follow his movements for as long as it's been since you arrived. Then, you'll both be the same age again. If his location is suitably static I'll shift the view to a spot midway between here and where Ernest is located—which should then re-create the conditions of the original resonant swap. Hopefully, all you'll need to do then is touch the screen."

"And away I'll go?" I only pretended I'd followed him.

The time viewer's screen filled with odd characters as Wilbur continued typing. Silence settled over the room. I tried to use the quiet time to clarify his explanation in my own mind, to understand what he was trying to do. It didn't come to me. "Sorry, I forgot what you explained. What are you looking for?"

He continued typing as he replied. "For now, the moment of Ernest's arrival—ultimately, so as to arrange another temporal transfer, the point as far past Ernest's arrival as you are from yours."

"O."

He stopped typing, and the viewer's screen faded to a mixture of grey and black hues that I could not decipher into anything recognisable. They vanished with a flash, replaced by a sudden view of an open paddock, at night, with rain falling, and

a bull standing under a large solitary tree, munching grass. Almost at once, the grey and black hues returned. Another flash erupted, this time its cause visible as a convoluted lightning bolt. I did not recognise the scene specifically, but it was similar to several areas not far from home, the vicinity of which is strewn with paddocks and small farms.

"Ernest should appear any moment," said Wilbur, adjusting the screen's brightness to suit the night-time scene. Whatever he did also managed to compensate for the excessive brightness of the lightning. "*If my theory is correct.*"

Long moments passed, punctuated by lightning bolts but no sign of Ernest. I began to fret.

Another bolt struck, and there in the midst of the paddock, about twenty metres from the bull, out of nowhere, Ernest suddenly appeared. He was standing with his arm stretched forward, pointing at something. I say Ernest, but for all I knew, it could have been me. We were identical, apart from his outlandish clothes—a bright pink pseudo-kaftan and floral pants for god's sake!

Immediately, gingerly, Ernest rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. Then, he blinked and looked about as if trying to focus. Concern changed gradually to confusion. He turned a full circle, panic rising. When another lightning flash revealed the bull, who had stopped chewing and had his gaze fixed on Ernest, he became motionless.

"Uh-oh," unisoned Ernest and I.

He took one step backward but almost slipped on a large, apparently fresh cowpat.

"Well," said Wilbur, without expression, his eyes glued to the screen, "he often said that back then you couldn't avoid bullshit."

I barely heard him, my attention fixed to the screen. Ernest recovered his footing, only to see the bull scraping a hoof, readying to charge. Ernest turned frantically from side to side. Quickly sizing up escape routes, he bolted for the nearest fence, perhaps fifty metres away. The bull charged after him almost at once. Ernest kept running, occasionally slipping panicky glances behind.

The chase seemed in slow motion. It flooded me with concern, not just the obvious type for Ernest, but also for myself—if Ernest was killed back in my time, would a resonant swap be possible between me and his corpse? Would I be stranded in the future all because of a bull!?

By the time Wilbur was halfway to the fence, the bull had covered more than half of the ground between them. It looked hopeless. Closer and closer it came. With the fence still ten metres away, the bull literally breathed down Ernest's back.

I despaired. The bull was going to trample Ernest. I was going to be trapped in the future.

## 20

# Other Life

At the last possible moment, Ernest veered aside. The bull was too slow to react to turn with him—or else its night vision was too poor to see the manoeuvre. The bull kept running in its original direction, until it collided headlong into a fence post, its horns too wide apart to make any contact, its forehead taking the full force of the impact. Moments later, like a classic Bugs Bunny cartoon, the bull's legs slid slowly apart and it collapsed unconscious to the ground.

Meanwhile, Ernest had managed to fling himself over the fence a few metres away, and, with surprising athleticism, land with a roll on the other side. He lay still on the grass, panting, apparently oblivious of the rain falling on him, or the lightning flashing. He remained there for some time, before standing with obvious effort.

"Tired," I said, "like I felt when I was transported."

As if on cue, Ernest yawned.

"Probably a side effect of time travel," said Wilbur. "Like an extreme case of jet lag. Think how many time zones he's moved through."

Maybe that also explained my falling asleep so suddenly day or night for no apparent reason.

"So now," said Wilbur, "I track him for as long as you've been here. Then we can attempt to get you home."

I nodded blankly, as I watched Ernest look about him, unsure where to head.

A mental double-take.

"Hang on," I said. "That won't work. All the time you spend tracking him, I'll still be here. It's like chasing your tail. I've been here four days, so if you have to track Ernest for four days, by then I'll be here another four days. You'll never catch up."

Wilbur's face melted to despondency—then erupted in a smile. "Have you never heard of a fast forward?"

He tapped a touch-key on the upper half of the front panel, and the viewer's screen image raced forward: Ernest, having chosen a direction, was walking several times faster than anyone could run. The occasional words he uttered were equally quick, and indecipherable.

"No pianola soundtrack?" I quipped, light-headed from viewing the past like a DVD.

Wilbur's puzzlement did not prevent him manoeuvring a swivel-stick to keep the view on Ernest. "Of course, it will take some time. I can't afford to go too fast, I might lose track of him. But with any luck I'll be finished some time tomorrow."

I watched with him for a while but Ernest wandered almost as aimlessly as I had when I first arrived, and I soon decided to leave Wilbur alone with the task. When I let him know, he responded by warning me not to tell anyone else of my predicament.

"Why not?" I said, surprised. "I thought a co-operative society would be without secrets."

"It is. But this is not just a social issue. I'll report what's happened to the Orlanian embassy—they may have some scientific advice, though I expect they'll be every bit in the dark as I am. But until we more fully understand what's happened, and ideally have dealt with it, I think it safer to keep it to ourselves. Not many would believe you anyway. And remember, with luck, tomorrow you and Ernest will be back in your rightful times and places, and the need for secrecy will be gone."

"I've already told some people part of it—that I'm not Ernest, that I'm dreaming being in the future—Yvette, for instance."

"That's not so important, as long as you don't mention we've *proved* who you really are. Let them continue to think you're Ernest with false memories."

Reluctantly, I agreed to his request, then left.

Walking to Ernest's, late in the afternoon, my mind raced. It had been a good day! Not only had I been proved right about my identity, but it even looked as if I might return home.

In the not too distant future! Literally.

Feeling like celebrating, I took the liberty of opening a bottle of Ernest's wine, as I'd planned on the train. Then, with nothing better to do than wait for Wilbur to finish his part, I decided some entertainment was in order. Some relaxation to compensate for the heavy demands of recent days.

Resorting to old habits, I turned on the TV—only to realise to my surprise that, although I had skimmed through Ernest's video collection, I had not watched any television shows since the dream had started. Obviously, my attention had been captured very thoroughly by more pressing matters—until now.

As was my tendency at home, I flicked through the TV channels looking for whatever took my fancy. It was a mixture of the familiar and the foreign: there were sit-coms, dramas, reality and quiz shows, news and current affairs, sports and weather, children's shows, soap operas, documentaries and films, and much more—but also strange hybrids of various formats, often dealing with considerably more esoteric subjects. For example, a tai chi workout (which prompted my usual verbal responses: "yes, yes, cut to the chase", and "hmm, is it someone moving very slowly along a wind tunnel?"). There was also a drama that used the premise of Beethoven, transported somehow to New York in what looked like the nineteen-nineties, writing jingles for an advertising company (the sound of the fate motif from his fifth symphony being used to sell laxatives compelled me to quickly switch channels). Perhaps the strangest viewing I caught a glimpse of was a game show called 'Beat The Suburban Train' which, for some reason, accepted as contestants only people who had experience in industrial waste bin manufacturing. Or it might have been a soapie called 'Hospital Hermaphrodites'. I didn't stay long on either to decide.

The show I ended up watching most was a short film I flicked over to just as its opening credits were ending. It caught and retained my attention, so I stayed with it. Meant to be a fictional portrayal of life in modern Bangladesh, it was obviously not Hollywood, yet it interested me—perhaps because I was already in a strange foreign land. I was also curious how enufism, which the show made obvious very early on was the system in place in Bangladesh, would function in one of the world's poorer countries. What would my subconscious come up with here, I wondered.



The subtitled film opened with a window-framed view of the red rim of a tropical sun surging over the horizon, briefly silhouetting a distant stork. The view widened to show the foreground side of the window, and the main character, in bed, in the process of waking: eighteen-year-old Khwaja Mannan. His thoughts acted as pseudo-narration: "Monsoon season over—winter—better weather... robin-song—warblers?... cinema with Nurjahan tonight—Urdu comedy about family tragedy... last needay of the week... bladder alarm—time to get up..."

A supposedly typical day in the young man's life followed. It showed much of his locale, the old city of Khulna, home to a million people—except it was now the revamped *region* of Khulna, pragmatically subdivided into renovated component cities of around fifty thousand, covering more area than did the old metropolis, spreading further but thinning as it went in a Bengali version of honeycombing.

Once a Third World country, Bangladesh clearly still had some way to catch up, as evidenced by its *three*-day working week. Yet there was no sign of famine or deprivation. Indeed, my impression was Khwaja had only one source of true suffering: the incessant comments of a father who never tired of pointing out how much harder it had been in his day. "Houses," he mentioned ("as often as he ate rice," according to Khwaja) "nearly all had more occupants than rooms—much smaller rooms too—and they were made of bamboo, not bambrick." Which was apparently a unique local invention of mud-brick reinforced with bamboo.

An improved standard of living was evident from the very beginning of the film. Khwaja's bedroom, shared with a brother, had modern, if rather sparse, furnishings—a typical feature of the Mannans' clean comfortable apartment on the top floor of a two-storey building shared with seven other families. In less crowded areas of Bangladesh, families lived in their own detached houses, but urban Khulna was still one of the world's most congested places. Conditions nevertheless were more than tolerable: the positioning of doors, windows, trees, bushes, stairs, double-glazed windows, double-layer walls, and other sound-proofing and privacy-proofing materials did much to avoid a sense of claustrophobia.

Khwaja showered with hot water, drank fruit juice stored in a refrigerator, ate a breakfast of a peculiar muesli laced with chopped banana he picked from a communal garden not far from his door. He heated water for a cup of tea on a gas stove, one powered, as his narrating thoughts revealed, by his building's biogas/compost system. Thanks to solar paint, their building, like more modern ones in the First World, were said to 'produce' not just most of the energy they required but also, via a clever arrangement of sloping roofs, gutters, drains and tanks, as much water as was needed. Hardly avoidable, being inundated with over six metres of annual rainfall. For backup, and to cope with inevitable fluctuations in production and demand, their water arrangements—along with the rest of their eco-energy system—were interconnected with those of seven other similar nearby residential buildings, and through them to a national system.

Still calling itself Bangladesh, the nation now included what in my time was the Indian province of West Bengal. Over the years (my subconscious claimed) Bengalis gradually decided their common tongue was more important than their different religions—at least they did once they got used to living in autonomous cities and regions which left most religious matters largely to towns and localities. Apparently, *many* old national boundaries had grown irrelevant or had disappeared, groups merging because of dominant linguistic or religious or cultural ties, nations splitting because of irreconcilable differences or practicalities of co-ordination and

administration. At one point, perhaps tellingly, Khwaja mused on how there was no guarantee Bangladesh itself wouldn't eventually mother several new nations.

For the time being, though, it was stable, and flourishing. Its material standard of living had soared, and simultaneously, as had usually been the case elsewhere, its birth rate had plummeted. Indeed, its population was barely increasing.

It still faced occasional hardships, though. Enufism could not end the periodic flooding of Bangladesh, even though much national effort had gone into controlling and diverting the floods, with generous *PARE*-sponsored assistance from the Dutch. But even with the worst floods, although some people still drowned (in far smaller numbers than was previously the norm), national grain reserves built up in good years to supplement regional stockpiles ensured that at least none starved afterwards.

Bangladesh's plurocratic structure was revealed to be similar to Australia's, though the considerably greater population density resulted in an intermediate *district* level (between city and region). Khwaja's locality consisted of the people in the building he lived in, and those from the neighbouring seven interconnected buildings. Along with the communal garden-park-recreational area between them (with dozens of fruit and nut trees, chickens, ducks, geese, goats, and a large fishpond) they occupied an area less than a sports oval.

Khwaja cycled to his work, on well-maintained paved tracks, along generally verdant shady avenues. Cycling was the main means of transport—even in the wet season when rigid transparent light-weight plastic shells were used. Many elderly and infirmed riders could be seen on modified battery-driven three-wheel cycles. Even specialised bicycle trailers hauled freight, though boats, rail and trucks dealt with the longest and/or heaviest hauls.

The thoroughfares were not as crowded as I expected—and not just because of under- or over-passes at the most congested intersections. A shorter working week, composed of different days of the week for different people and work-places, along with a growing preponderance of work performed at home, was said to keep traffic flows manageable.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the film for me, surprisingly, was at Khwaja's work. He was the youngest member of a factory with eleven stewards (though on any one day, only six or seven were present). In keeping with the spirit of stewardship, there was no fixed chain of command, the position of manager being rotated among all staff. Likewise, everyone's duties alternated every month or so, "to discourage boredom and to give everyone the broadest possible overview and understanding of the whole factory's operations."

On arriving at work, Khwaja noticed Mujib, "manager of the week", glowering as his obligations compelled him to listen to a perennial complainer named Nawab register doubts about a metal press. According to Khwaja, Nawab's fussiness over equipment safety was almost legendary, but he worked as hard as anyone else, and most people liked him (though a few who bore the brunt of his fussiness when they were manager could hardly wait for his turn to come up).

There were no time clocks to punch, no book-entries to sign. "If people start a few minutes early or late," mused Khwaja, "it makes little difference to the task of getting so much work done in so much time. If we finish early, we leave early. If it takes longer than expected, steps are taken to find out why and prevent it from recurring."

The factory manufactured the city's light bulbs, torches, fans, and several other small electrical goods—but not normally simultaneously. For periods of one to four months each year, the factory would gear itself to making one type of product in amounts that slightly exceeded the city's anticipated requirements for the next year; then it would spend anywhere from a day to a week revamping and refurbishing its operations, adjusting its presses and moulds, to begin making a year's requirements of the next item in its repertoire. Most small factories, it was said, could do this quite efficiently.

At the time of the film, the factory was devoted to producing LED light bulbs. One team busily pressed out the LED components, while the other, which included Khwaja, dealt with their assembly and packing.

Soon after arriving, the relatively inexperienced Khwaja explained to the manager his thoughts on how to save two work-days per year by changing the factory's order of production. Since adjustments to presses to suit fan manufacture had to be partly reversed when it came time to make torches, Khwaja argued for a swap. Mujib pointed out this would adversely affect other adjustments, but calculated, using a computer model of factory operations, that an overall saving of one day would still result. When the other stewards were informed of the proposal, they seemed to understand it at once, and voted unanimously to accept it.

But that was as much of the film as I saw—because of a knock at the front door.

"Care to resume where you left off, Steven?"

I stared at Yvette for some time, not knowing what to say.

"You *are* Steven, still?" she said, her smile fading a little.

I nodded blankly, but otherwise remained motionless on the doorstep, uncomfortable.

"Well," she eventually said, "are you going to ask me in?"

That snapped me out of it a little—I gestured her inside with a muttered "of course".

My mind was in turmoil. *Resume where you left off?* Previously, it had taken some effort of will, and copious amounts of alcohol, for me to view a liaison with this Yvette as a wet dream, a welcome distraction from confusion and alien dilemmas. But now Wilbur had proved I was not of this time... Infidelity? How could I explain this to her, since I could barely explain it to myself. If I *knew* this was all a dream, how could anything I did in it be unfaithful to Yvette—my *wife* Yvette? Was some part of me secretly convinced it was not a dream? Occasional doubts did surface, but it always seemed the best bet. And yet, when put to the test...

We moved without words to the lounge. She sat on the three-seater, I followed suit on a single-seater. She watched me studiously, but said nothing, her smile fading further until lost.

I was soon desperate to break the silence, preferably with something tangential to the situation. "How were your lectures?" I said, finally, relieved to have remembered her note.

"About as usual," she replied. Then, without pause, "You've changed your mind, haven't you?"

I groped without success for the right words.

She soon saved me the bother. "What happened?" she glowered. "Had your fancy taken by a nice male arse, and forgot all about me? That'd explain you not babbling. I expected a call at least."

"I'm sorry," I said, suddenly guilty. "A few things have happened and I just didn't..." I was on the verge of saying "didn't think of it," but was alert enough to stop in time. "I just didn't find the time," I said finally.

Perhaps the distinction was true—I had been busy—perhaps not. But I didn't want to hurt her feelings any more than I already had. "How can I make it up to you?" I said, in genuine earnest. (But not genuinely Ernest.)

She smiled, though bluntly. "I think you know how. Just doubt you will. Or can."

I almost blurted out, "O, I can, I just shouldn't," when I recalled Wilbur's request to keep the truth hidden. Better not to reinforce any doubts in Yvette's mind that I was really capable beyond Ernest's inclinations to give her what she wanted. When all this was settled, Ernest might have enough other bridges to repair—if this wasn't a dream—which of course it was.

"I can't, Yvette. I'm sorry, I truly am. I'm just not the unfaithful type. I need to remain true to my wife."

"O, her again, *Steven*. I thought you decided this was a dream and infidelity not an issue."

"Well, yes, it is a dream. It has to be a dream. But what if it isn't? As tempting as you are, I don't want to take that chance. I'm not sure how I could live with that on my conscience."

"But you just said it *is* a dream!"

"Yes, but then, well, maybe it's a test for me—to resist temptation even in a dream might be a way of strengthening my marriage."

"Does it need strengthening? Is it so fragile?"

"No. It's a good strong marriage. A little weakened by its length perhaps, but no more than any other, probably less."

"Maybe it would get more benefit from a resoundingly earth-shattering affair. Maybe that would rejuvenate it, bring its advantages into sharper relief. And without guilt too if the affair's only a dream."

She wasn't giving up without a fight.

I felt myself wavering.

"No," I said, after a lengthy pause, more to convince myself than her. "No, I just can't. It wouldn't be right."

"And was it more right last night? When the only reason it didn't happen was sudden narcolepsy?"

I sighed. "I am so glad that happened."

"Thank you!" she said, affronted and angry.

"I don't mean it that way, Yvette. I mean I'm glad I was *faithful*, to Yvette—my wife. Not that I wouldn't have liked to... or wouldn't like to now... Perhaps I should just shutup, before I make it any harder."

"Perhaps you should." She shook her head bitterly. "Always words, Ernest. Words but no action. I should have known." The bitterness rapidly faded, and her face resumed more characteristic qualities, though sterner. "Your narcolepsy was probably inevitable. Whatever inner motivation pushed you to the point of *almost* sleeping with me, clearly it wasn't powerful enough to hold sway over other, apparently more fundamental, desires. I don't know what sort of inner conflict it is you're dealing with, but I'd rather not be involved any more. Not directly, at least. I'll have to just give up on you completely, I think. Again. I managed it there for a while, until your behaviour last night resurrected my fool's hope. Now I'm starting to realise, even if I were to somehow get you into bed, you'd only fall asleep at the

last moment. Only a few minutes earlier than some men admittedly, but considerably more frustrating."

I could not think what to say for some time, but I had to end the daunting silence. "We can still be friends, though. Right?"

Briefly she resisted, until her stern expression gave way to a sudden sigh. "Of course. That much at least I can rely on."

"So how about two friends going out for the evening?" The thought just popped into my head. "Are you free?"

She tilted her head, but didn't answer for several seconds. "I *did* have other plans," she finally said, without expression. Another silence, almost as long again. "But since you've spoilt them, I guess an evening out's the next best option. Where'd you have in mind?"

"Nowhere," I said after a confused pause. "I don't even know what's available. One thing I haven't seen anything of in this future is its night-life. Does it have any or do you all go to bed at sunset?"

"Put away the act Ernest. If you won't sleep with me, at least be yourself."

"It's no act, Yvette." A belated memory of Wilbur's cautions. A suitably ambiguous qualification. "As far as my memory is concerned, as far as I know, I really am Steven Stone. Ask Wilbur."

"I have. I called him from Uni this morning. He may be convinced, but I'm not." She scrutinised me long and hard before continuing. "O what does it matter? Might even be a good conversation piece. Come on," she said, standing. "You can drive—after your performance last night, you'd better watch your drinking."

"Ok," I said, standing. "Do you have a car? Ernest doesn't—or at least his carport's been empty ever since I arrived."

"You're really into the part, aren't you?"

Her meaning was lost on me.

"I suppose I'll have to explain how this future of ours handles cars," she said, in a resigned voice.

Her explanation revealed that cars were not owned by individuals. Instead, to more efficiently use resources (and reduce costs for individuals), plurocracies pooled cars—about one for every four or five houses, allegedly more than enough to suit the modern lifestyle. (A small backup supply was available at a babel call should the need arise.)

Anyone needing a car simply found the nearest one not in use (identified by a small phosphorescent flag on the bonnet that retracted inside the car body when in use), and passed their babel over a sensor in the dashboard to start the engine (and simultaneously record the car's use against their account). A dashboard button turned off the engine. Without a driving license, babels could not start a car—but with one, once in use, no other babel would be able to start the car. When finished with the car, another pass of the babel over a different dashboard sensor recorded the use as ended, and protruded the "not in use" flag. The car was simply parked in the borrower's carport or more often on the street for the next person who wanted to use it. Now I understood why Wilbur's car changed colour and why he sometimes parked it on the street—as he said, I thought cryptically at the time, he used more than one car.

"I can't use Ernest's babel," I explained to Yvette after her explanation concluded. "It would be like stealing."

"Now you're getting *too* far into the role," she said, eying me sceptically. "The only other option is for me to pay for everything? How does that sit with your high morals?"

I grappled for words, recognising the truth of what she was saying.

"It doesn't matter," she said, before I could reply. "I owe you for the last time we went out. But please take your babel—all right, Ernest's babel—just in case you need it for some reason other than paying for our outing. Making an emergency call for instance."

Reluctantly I agreed. She led me out of the house and along the street, and we found an available two-seater car only a few doors down. Knowing now that the car was, in effect, communally owned—like the neighbourhood garden, and its shed's tools—I half expected it to be dirty and uncared for (despite that not being the case for the cars I'd been in already). Instead, it was immaculately clean. I persuaded her to drive, somewhat put off by the joystick controls, but curiosity forced me to ask her all sorts of questions about how she used them.

"I'm a bit surprised we're going by car," I said, at one point. "Wouldn't it be more environmentally responsible to use the train? Or are we heading to the train station?"

"We could if you prefer. But there's little difference for this length of trip, for two people. Modern cars are very clean, and very efficient, especially the two-seaters." And very light, I soon realised. A little more instruction from Yvette revealed they were predominantly made of moulded carbon-fibre and had been completely redesigned compared to what I knew (though she alleged the basic design was prototyped in the 90s). Their average lifetime expectancy was believed to be at least thirty years, possibly fifty—none had yet achieved the milestone of actually outliving their usefulness.

We settled on driving almost the whole way, much of it along the main traffain. It took less than ten minutes to reach the central area of Chord, which Yvette said contained most of the entertainment available in the city in an area two blocks wide.

We parked in an above ground car park on the edge of the city centre: totally obscured by screening vegetation, it was spacious but less than half full. She turned on the 'not in use' sign of the car, certain from long experience that we would have no trouble finding another when it was time to return.

But as we left the car behind, I was struck by how all of them looked alike—only the variation of colours seemed to distinguish them. "If you *did* want to re-use the car, how would you find it among all these clones?"

"The number plate of course."

I looked at the number plate, but was surprised that it was blank. But then I realised so were many of the others. "How..." I began, before noticing only the cars with a 'not in use' flag had blank plates—the rest all had not numbers but names.

"The plates are actually screens like on a babel. They change automatically when a babel registers whoever is using a car. They stay as the babel's owner's name until the car's use is finished, then it goes blank until a new user starts the car."

"What if two people with the same name were to leave their cars here? How would they know which car was theirs?"

"Either by its position or its colour, or both. And if they still managed to pick their namesake's car, it wouldn't start without the correct babel."

I gave it no further thought, as we walked into the city centre, along broad footpaths dotted with periodic bicycle racks, strategic shade trees and greenery, not one car or garish advertising sign in sight.

The rest of the night flew past. It might have been forty years in the future, but people still entertained themselves much as they'd been doing for generations. Restaurants, bars, clubs, dance halls, cinemas, live music, theatre, performance—all pretty much familiar fare.

With subtle differences. Virtual reality game halls were more common, and more sophisticated, but there were no strip joints, lap-dancing bars, or other meat-fests. Even film banners were relatively tame (to my surprise, none included what had become the ubiquitous cliché of a character holding a gun at arm's length in both hands, aiming and ready to begin the inevitable blood bath). My curiosity was piqued.

"What was aptly named the sex-industry barely exists now," said Yvette, to my question, during a four-course dinner at a theatre-restaurant—in between a stand-up comedy act that barely lived up to its title, and an astounding set by a stunningly talented six-piece band who played rhythmically complex, melodically rich music impossible to categorise.

"There's still plenty of nudity and pornography on the Net," she continued. "Though it gets fewer hits than in *your* time. And films still depict sex, as well as violence, though it's rarely prurient or gratuitous. There's also the odd private non-commercial performance at buck's or hen's nights by natural exhibitionists. But that's about all. There's certainly very little prostitution anywhere. In Chord and most of the region, none at all."

"How come?" I immediately frowned at my choice of words. "Has it been banned?"

"No!" she said, with a mixture of shock and amusement. "It's just that there's little capacity for it to be provided. Think about it. CAPE requires planning not just for what's needed but for who'll arrange it. Some people might be inclined to identify so-called 'adult entertainment' as something they require, but there might also be a level of reticence to admit it. Prostitution even more so. In the early days of enufism, there was only a small identified demand for pornography and commercial sex, but the issue then became *who* would provide it. Those who *had* been were no longer compelled by economic hardship and so most didn't want to continue, opting instead to be retrained. Which left too few willing sex workers for the identified demand. In that situation, the next step with CAPE is to call for volunteers. There *were* a few but not nearly enough. Which left a dilemma. Randomly assign the leftover work, like is normally done? You can imagine the uproar that would have caused, forcing people into pornography and prostitution. Instead, people opted to live with less of it. Demand reduced."

"People coped?"

"Eventually. Sexual relationships are generally more successful than a generation ago. We're less pressured, less stressed, more co-operative, more truly liberated, not like when sex was treated as just another commodity, bought and sold in different forms like soap or food. We're educated to enjoy healthy sex, so our earliest experiences inevitably imprint us with a sense of security and naturalness."

I had a brief image of a sex education class with a prac session, but this was dispelled as she continued. She claimed that enufist society encouraged sex as a normal part of life, healthy, meaningful, ecstatic, an expression of people who care

for each other—or, at the very least, like each other, and not simply each other's looks. Not something to pursue covertly or shamefully. Or exploit commercially. Not an adolescent game, or spectator sport, or competition. Consequently, and with few fictitious media ideals to live up to, and no timetables (most teenagers took things at their own pace), healthy responsible sexual functioning was the norm. Dysfunction was rare.

"It can't ensure satisfaction for all, surely?" I responded. "Or even that everyone has a sexual partner. There must still be people who find themselves on their own. How do they function healthily, rather than resort to second-rate substitutes?"

"A fair concern. To an extent. Nothing's perfect, but we do have community. People who miss out are usually comfortable enough to make it known, if it isn't obvious already. With a whole community at one's disposal to act as matchmakers, people rarely miss out for long."

"So what's the result? Not a single partner for life, surely? I gather you've had a few."

"Yes, a few. Some people settle down with their first and only partner, but most practice serial monogamy until they find the right one, if they ever do. Some never settle down, or play the field, though they're a minority. And some are comfortable with multiple partners, especially in early adulthood. There's plenty of diversity, though the family unit's still the most dominant arrangement. And there's little sign that will change. Not with the wider community providing the equivalent of an extended family."

"And is everyone always faithful?"

"Of course not. People still have affairs. Relationships still grow tired and couples become bored. But people are more understanding and forgiving, and they have more time to spend on each other rather than on careers. Even when fidelity is broken, it's not the guaranteed death knell to relationships it used to be. Certainly, divorce is at its lowest level for well over a century."

We talked about much else during the meal. Afterwards, Yvette suggested we go dancing. I resisted but she was insistent that it was our custom. Fortunately, the dancing was the old-fashioned, mostly slower and more casual variety, and the music not glaringly loud. There were no teenagers at the venue, so I assumed younger people still danced as frenetically as they did in my time, but according to Yvette, the dances I witnessed were popular with all ages. This surprised me at first, but then I realised the dances' close physical contact probably explained it.

Yet I did *not* take to it. I'm not much of a dancer, always too self-conscious to relax enough to develop any skill, but with new steps to learn, as well as the ambivalent distraction of close physical contact with Yvette, I was even worse than usual. Much worse, apparently, than Ernest, who had a reputation for sure-footed grace.

"Perhaps you aren't Ernest, after all," she said, tongue-in-cheek, after I stepped on her toes a third time.

Several toe-crushes later, she gave up and took me to a film based on the sacking of the federal government in 1975 by the governor general (played by an ancient if well preserved Chris Hemsworth). Unsure what to expect, it proved to be a subtle and sophisticated parody of democracy, complete with a fair share of slapstick. No gratuitous sex and violence, though it sometimes hinted at and apparently led up to it, only to veer away at the last moment to various other quite different events. More parody no doubt.



By the time the film ended, it was getting late, but Yvette was keen to continue. She took me to a virtual reality parlour. While I was strapped in, marvelling at the increased visual resolution and enhanced tactile and olfactory sensations, I could not help but think of our earlier discussion.

"I'm surprised no one's tried to set up virtual sex," I said to her when my time was over.

"They have. It was even thought it might be a way of making up for the lack of willing prostitutes. But it turned out VR's fine for most senses but limited when it comes to touch. From all reports, virtual sex is a crude imitation, and for most people not especially satisfying."

Next to the VR parlour was a curious establishment with blackened windows called 'Trips Inc'. Its function shocked me: it was for the taking of the many recreational drugs it sold, only a few of which sounded familiar. It did not seem especially popular, though I saw at least one person (middle-aged and utterly unremarkable in appearance) enter its doors while I was nearby. To my further questions, Yvette explained in essence that the war on drugs had been lost: there was now not a single banned substance, though nearly all drugs were restricted in availability and use.

"It was simply hypocritical," said Yvette, "to have alcohol and tobacco commercially available, while other, often clearly less harmful drugs were outlawed. It wasn't like bans ever stopped people from using them, they were just pushed underground into seamier environments where the risks were greater. Nowadays, recreational drugs are treated as something many people are interested in at some stage, at least in their youth. The need then is to ensure they can experiment as safely as possible, with *all* the facts at their fingertips—whether at home or in establishments like 'Trips Inc', which are designed for safe comforting settings. I doubt it's a coincidence that levels of drug use are much lower now than they were half a century ago. And addiction's virtually non-existent. You want to see inside?"

"No thanks," I said, starting to move off. Her words had not eased my shock or sense of discomfort. Even though I'd used marijuana in my university days and for a while afterwards, and at the time recognised the same hypocrisy Yvette spoke about, I thought of myself as one of the lucky ones. I was never tempted by other drugs but I saw many friends abandon their hopes and aspirations as they became increasingly entrenched in the culture. How the measures Yvette had spoken about could prevent the same thing happening, I could not fathom.

"I'd have been surprised if you had gone in," she said, walking with me. "You always said your first experience with cannabis put you off all drugs for life." She smirked. "I've never seen anyone's face take on that particular shade of green."

Soon after, walking casually along the street, 'window-shopping', we almost literally bumped into Nance, an old friend of Yvette's—and Ernest's. She invited us to a party she was heading to, and Yvette clearly showed an interest, reasoning that the entertainment would not be available for much longer.

"Isn't it open 24 hours?" I asked, confused.

Nance gave me a puzzled look, but Yvette smiled, and said to her, "Just a little game Ernest is playing—he's pretending he's new here, a time traveller from forty years ago." Then she turned to me, and said, "Hardly anything's open 24 hours—hospitals and emergency services like police are about all I can think of. And they're usually quiet by this time of night."

"But...", I began. I had simply assumed that even with a reduced working week, some businesses would be open round the clock. "What about factories? Surely the largest have to function 24 hours a day."

Nance muffled a laugh.

"Hardly," said Yvette. "There's no need to produce around the clock unless you *consume* around the clock."

"So you're saying there's no such thing anymore as evening and night shifts. Just day shifts."

"For most people, yes. Except hospital staff and others. But not *long* regular shifts like in your time. It's a seven-hour working week after all."

"Which must mean there are an awful lot of hospital workers for the work to get done."

"Quite a few," said Nance. "I'm one. But there's not as many as in the old days. Much of the hack work has been automated, and there aren't as many sick and injured."

"Life's much healthier and safer," said Yvette, "than it was forty years ago."

I did not respond, reminded again of just how out of place I was.

Yvette recommended we go to the party Nance was heading to, but I was not in the mood. I suggested it was getting too late for me. She was keen, however, and we soon decided she should go with Nance, but without me—after I eventually convinced her I could find my own way back to Ernest's, or at least to the GPS she said was located in each car's dashboard.

"A good thing I convinced you about bringing your babel along, eh?" she whispered as we parted. I was puzzled until she moved out of sight, then remembered I needed a babel to start a car. I still felt qualms about using Ernest's babel, but decided I had little option. I could catch a train—there was one very close to the city centre, I knew—but I had no idea where to get out, or how to get from there to Ernest's. A car, it would have to be.

For a few minutes after Yvette left, I continued to wander the streets, watching people, young and old, their clothes, their expletive-free language, advertising-free shop-fronts, litter-free streets, subtly different architectural styles, and all the rest that made it such an alien environment to me. It was not that I found it threatening or even unattractive, indeed increasingly I found there was much here to admire. It was just it was clearly not where I belonged. It was not home. And home was where I really longed to be.

I soon found a car park with an available car and used Ernest's babel to start it. I even soon had the GPS working, and programmed for Ernest's address (spelt out for me by Yvette just before we parted). Yet my mood was low. I felt tired and alone. And having to get used to the car's joystick controls lowered my mood further. How out of place I felt.

I took the drive slowly and carefully, though I still found it hard to stick to the slow speed limits, at least until I eventually figured out how to set the 'cruise control' speed limiter. But even though the controls were easier to use than I expected, still my spirits refused to rise.

About halfway back to Ernest's, I was dimly aware of having trouble staying awake. It was my last memory of that trip.

# Part Five

## Why

“Why choose this as our goal? ...because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our abilities and skills”.

John F. Kennedy’s speechwriter, 1961



## Escape

An indeterminate time later: dim awareness of warmth, comfort.

Gradually, other senses returned.

I opened my eyes.

I closed them immediately. What I'd seen I did not *want* to see.

Reluctantly, hoping I'd been mistaken, I again opened my eyes. The same sight greeted me: a hospital room, my right leg in plaster suspended from a hoist, a bed beneath me.

I closed my eyes. How had I gotten here? What had happened? For a few moments, I could not remember anything earlier than Yvette knocking at Ernest's front door. Then more recent events flooded back, including a final memory of feeling tired while driving back to Ernest's.

An accident? Asleep at the wheel!

Yet I could feel no pain. Painkillers?

I opened my eyes again. Bandages covered other parts of my body. Tubes and wires ran from me in profusion—I resembled an impotent pincushion.

To my right, bright light streamed through a window—dawn of another day.

From my left, a female voice: "Awake at last."

I turned to see, sitting on a chair, a magazine open on her lap: Yvette. *Not* the Yvette with whom I'd spent the previous evening. My wife, Yvette!

I gasped with shock and relief... Home again. I'd woken up, finally! I must have had an accident that put me in hospital, and I'd dreamt everything while unconscious. Or during surgery, for all I knew.

I had to be certain. "What year is this?" I said, with urgency.

"You haven't been out that long," said Yvette, mock-serious.

"Just tell me," I replied. "Please. What year is it?"

She closed the magazine and shrugged her shoulders. "2065."

"But..." I could not believe my ears. I looked at her welcome face and saw confusion creep across it. My own was quickly replaced by a sudden thought. "O no," I cried. "Has Wilbur snared you too?!"

Yvette smiled, stood, leaned close, kissed me passionately on the mouth. "Who's Wilbur?" she said, straightening. Her smile widened, and her face blurred. Then her whole shape became a vague smudge that shifted to become that of Wilbur.

"Is that supposed to be funny?" I said, angrily.

"How would I know?" said Wilbur, with one eyebrow raised. "It's your dream."

He and the entire hospital room vanished, replaced in an instant by Ernest's bedroom. I was sitting bolt upright in his bed, my leg no longer in plaster, my body free of bandages, tubes and wires.

Some moments of dazed disorientation ended with me hurriedly checking myself for injuries. There were none, other than my still bruised toes. I noticed I was lying

on top of the bed not in it, with a blanket over me, still in the clothes I wore the night before. Closed curtains were aglow from broad daylight behind.

Confusion again. *How did I get here?* Or was I still dreaming? (Dreaming *within* the dream?) Or still in the car, asleep? Or trapped, after an accident?

Or had the time viewer fouled up again?

I did not waste time trying to choose. I rushed from the bed, found Ernest's babel where I had last left it in a shirt pocket, and called Wilbur.

"Awake at last," he said.

"What?! You know something about this? How did I get here? The last thing I remember was driving home, feeling tired."

"Yes, tired enough to fall asleep, and activate the car's failsafe."

"The what?"

Wilbur explained about a mandatory car device, fixed unseen in the roof above the driver's seat. Its purpose: to detect brain wave patterns, and upon recognising those indicative of the driver falling asleep, to slow the car to a stop, switch on the hazard lights, and alert the local police. Wilbur was listed on my babel—or Ernest's at least—as an 'emergency contact', so the police left a message with him explaining they'd been unable to rouse me, then they had driven me home and put me to bed.

Embarrassed and somewhat incredulous, I wondered how this might affect Ernest's reputation. "Will Ernest be charged over this?" I said guiltily.

"No," said Wilbur. "It'll go on his record. And repeated offences will risk a suspended license. But everyone's allowed the odd mistake. The important thing is there were no injuries or damage. That's what the failsafe is for, after all."

There was a quiet pause, as I reflected on how lucky I'd been.

"I was a little surprised," said Wilbur, "to hear you'd driven a car."

"I was with Yvette. We had a night out. I'll tell you about it later if you're interested. But what can you tell me? Have you tracked Ernest to the right time yet?"

"Nearly. With any luck, I'll need little more than an hour."

Having moved to the kitchen, I noticed its clock read shortly after noon. "More than enough time for me to freshen up and join you. See you soon."

I quickly showered and lunched, less quickly rummaged through Ernest's collection for a new shirt to wear (in the end opting out of desperation and shocked sensibilities to re-use one I'd worn a few days before), then walked to Wilbur's as fast as I could. I was keen to return home, in fact could barely wait for it.

Yet, while walking, the memory of my most recent dream prompted a disturbing thought. What if I had it all back to front? What if the seemingly most unlikely reality was the true one, and the most plausible one not real at all? What if the episode in the hospital with a shape-shifting Yvette was not a dream but real? Perhaps the same was true for the earlier alleged dream where I woke up beside Yvette only to find her wearing a demon's face? Was it possible one or both of these were the only real events of the last few days? Was what I thought of as my real life truly nothing more than a false memory? Or a dream within a dream? And if Yvette was a shape-shifter, did that make me one too? Were we both on Orlanos? Engaged in a psychological experiment? Or a test procedure gone wrong to prepare us for a stint on Earth as observers? Or invaders?

All disconcerting possibilities I did not want to even think about—yet I found myself unable to completely reject them, no matter how hard I tried. They stayed in my thoughts all the way to Wilbur's. Once there, however, they could not compete with everything else demanding my attention.

Wilbur took me immediately to the room with the time viewer. On the screen, freeze-framed, was Ernest, asleep under an overhang of rock and dirt, a small stream not far below him, screening greenery on all sides. At his feet: a loaf of sliced bread in a plastic bag, a small wad of cheese, a few apples and bananas. The light was dim but not as dark as the night scene I'd viewed previously. Twilight, I decided.

"After his escape from the bull," explained Wilbur, "Ernest walked for a while before exhaustion overcame him. He just sat down against a tree in an empty paddock, and fell asleep. He awoke at daylight, and headed toward a distant farmhouse, but stopped when close enough to discern it in detail. He immediately veered away from the farm, into thick bush behind it, and eventually found this secluded spot. He's stayed there almost the whole time, except for two forays to the farmhouse to steal food. He was seen once by the wife as she hung out washing, but managed to elude her. He's spent most of his time asleep—which is lucky, since it's relatively easy to fast-track him when he's still."

"Sleepy too, eh?"

"Undoubtedly. But he also knows he's travelled to your time, and I think he's deliberately trying to avoid contact so as not to change the future—*his* past."

Wilbur tapped a touch-key on the viewer's front panel, and motion returned to its screen. Bird song filled the air, accompanied by the stream's calm babble.

"He knows?" I said. "How?"

"He's an historian, after all," said Wilbur, tapping another touch-key. The screen's activities sped up. The trees and bushes fluttered rapidly. The stream blurred and its babble turned to soft white noise. The bird-song accelerated almost to supersonic frequencies. Ernest, though, remained mostly still, apart from an occasional fast-motion twitch or toss and turn in his sleep. "Even without his training," continued Wilbur, "he could never mistake the farm equipment for those of his own time."

On the screen, twilight faded quickly to night, prompting Wilbur to switch to night-vision. "Are you sure he knows?" I asked.

"Yes, the secluded location of this spot, and many of his actions, have suggested it. But he's also said a few words which I think prove it."

"O?"

"Quote. Damn. This *is* 2025. Or some time near it. Unquote. I consider that a likely indication he knows when he is." Wilbur's expression was completely deadpan.

"Are you sure Orlanis have no sense of humour?"

He did not reply, but was clearly surprised—until we were both suddenly distracted when the viewer's screen was momentarily obliterated by a flash of light, quickly followed by an abrupt sound resembling a thump on a drum.

"What happened?" I said.

Wilbur did not answer, but slowed the motion to real-time. Another brighter flash erupted, followed by the unmistakable sound of a sharp crack of thunder, with which Ernest jolted awake.

"Another storm," I said.

Wilbur briefly widened and redirected the shot to verify the approach of a thunderstorm, before zooming in again on Ernest. Then he hit a button that put two sets of Orlanian text characters into a corner of the screen, one beneath the other, each altering rapidly. At first, I had no idea what they were, even when I noticed the characters on the right of each set were changing the most rapidly, while those on the left were fixed.

"Only about half an hour from catching up," said Wilbur, resuming the fast-forward. The speed of change of the top set of Orlanian characters increased proportionately. An Orlanian clock, I realised.

Much less than half an hour later, indeed barely two minutes, Wilbur slowed the motion and announced, "We're almost in synch. Just a few little nudges." He pressed more buttons that sped up Ernest in short bursts, leaving him leaning against the cutting behind, munching on bread. Light rain fell in front of him, but the overhang kept him dry. Lightning still flashed but less rapidly.

"There," said Wilbur, eyes on the screen, "Ernest has now been in your time for very nearly five days—as long as you've been here." Belatedly, I realised the two Orlanian time counters were identical.

Wilbur turned to me. "We can attempt the transfer as and when you wish."

So—the time had come. I was about to go home. The dream was really about to end. Yet to my surprise, I found myself in no hurry. "This won't hurt, will it?" I said, though without real concern.

"It didn't hurt the first time did it?"

"No." I looked long and hard at Wilbur, and sighed. He'd been patient and understanding and helpful from the moment I'd arrived, despite my frequent hostility. "Perhaps I'll let you take part in another of my dreams, after all," I said. I put my hand out to shake, saying, "Thanks. For everything."

Wilbur took my hand and shook it firmly. "You're welcome. Especially since if anyone is to blame for you being here, it's me."

"No one's to blame," I said, certain. "An unanticipated accident you said. And it's all a dream anyway."

He smiled, was ready to comment but stopped himself.

The handshake ended, and I decided there was no point stalling. "So what do I have to do?"

"Touch the screen when you're ready and... away you go. It's been a pleasure knowing you. And deeply instructive."

I was touched. "Likewise," I said, nodding. "Likewise." I swallowed hard. "Well... as the saying goes, there's no time like the present."

I put out a hand towards the screen, and gradually inched it forward.

"Bon voyage," said Wilbur.

My hand touched the screen...

Nothing happened.

I was still in the room with Wilbur, the only change being the mood of disbelief and doubt into which I suddenly plunged.

I removed my hand from the screen then touched it again with more force.

Still, nothing happened.

I repeated the movements, with ever more force, each attempt equally unsuccessful. I touched both hands to the screen. Nothing. I rubbed an arm against it. Still nothing. I bent and rested my forehead against it. Zilch. I was on the verge of heaving a shoulder against the viewer's screen, probably more forcefully than was safe, when Wilbur put a placating hand on my other shoulder and shot me a warning look.

"No, no, no," I said, anger rising with each repetition. "This can't be. What am I supposed to do now? Click my heels and chant 'there's no place like home'?" I faced Wilbur, for all I knew with steam rising out of my ears. "What the hell went wrong?"



Wilbur's poker face briefly betrayed puzzlement. He started double-checking the time viewer's counters and settings. "I don't know. We're definitely synchronised with Ernest's time coordinates." He stopped his motions abruptly. "And with his spatial coordinates." He turned to me, and smiled. "Which is rather impractical, since as I explained yesterday, we're meant to be viewing a spot halfway between his and your locations." His smile grew embarrassed. "My mistake. Sorry."

My anger and doubt faded rapidly. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Apology accepted. Only don't let it happen again. Please."

He typed away at the keyboard, and the view jumped suddenly from Ernest to a non-descript paddock full of seedlings in long rows. "That should do it. Whenever you're ready."

Full of nervous anticipation, I hesitated briefly. A hard swallow. "Well, nothing personal, but here's hoping I never see you again." I stretched out my arm, and this time more quickly touched the screen.

Nothing happened.

"O no," I groaned, this time keeping my hand on the screen, pressing it harder, staring blankly at it. "Are you sure we're looking at the right spot?"

"Yes," said Wilbur, double-checking nevertheless.

The screen suddenly brightened with another lightning flash, just before I was blinded by a more pervasive burst of light that seemed to come from the room itself. I covered my eyes with my hands, but to no avail—I could see nothing but a wash of intense whiteness. My mind grappled in turmoil. Had it finally worked? Would my vision clear, for me to find myself at home? With Yvette? In *our* space, *our* time? Or had some malfunction blinded me for good? Was I still in the room with Wilbur after all?

It seemed to take forever, but my vision gradually returned. I strained to make sense of the dim blurs coalescing in front of me.

Eventually, I could see enough to be sure.

And to be depressed: I was still in the room with Wilbur. He was blinking and widening his eyes as if having trouble focussing. The time viewer's screen was blank, thin wisps of dark smoke rising from its interior.

"What happened?"

That took the words out of my mouth, until I realised it was not Wilbur who'd spoken. Not his voice. *My* voice. And yet I was sure I hadn't said anything!

"Is that you Wilbur?" said my voice again, as if from near the floor and behind me.

I turned and saw him: sitting on the floor, rubbing his head, looking in Wilbur's direction with wide blinking eyes—my doppelganger.

"Well," said Wilbur, sheepishly, "at least we got *you* back to your right time. Welcome home, Ernest."

## 22

# Beside Myself

Ernest, still dazed, turned his attention to me, and blinked more rapidly, obviously doubting his eyes. "You will never believe this," he said, "but I'm hallucinating that I'm standing in front of me—right there." He pointed at me.

"It's not an hallucination," said Wilbur. "Ernest d'Alembert, meet Steven Stone. When you were transported to 2025, he also transported—from then to now."

Ernest grew earnestly incredulous.

My frustration built. "And I was supposed to have transported back when you returned here." I turned to Wilbur. "What went wrong?"

"I don't know." He studied the time viewer, thinner smoke rising. "This is most puzzling. Not only your failure to be transported, but Ernest's appearance here." He turned to Ernest who was making efforts to stand up. Diffidently, I leant him a hand. "In the original transfer, neither of you moved in space, only time, so I expected you to return to now beside the stream where you were."

"Am I supposed to understand this?" asked Ernest.

"Sorry," said Wilbur. "Not yet. A long story. Later. First, how are you feeling?"

"Fine, but a little tired." He took a seat. "Then again, that has been a problem ever since I left here—or *now*, I suppose." His eyes narrowed in puzzlement. "I thought you told me the time viewer could only *view* the past."

"That's what I thought too."

"Have I changed history? I did my best not to interact."

"As far as can be told, you've had no effect. But then if you have changed history, I doubt it could be detected."

"What are you talking about?" I said. Sharing a room with my doppelganger, still grappling with how I alone remained out of my time, I nevertheless tried to dispel the feeling of being a spectator to the discussion. "If history changes, of course we'd notice."

"Would we?" said Wilbur. "The people *within* the history? If Ernest's presence in 2025 somehow caused different events to unfold than would have in his absence, we, some distance down the stream of time, would be aware only of events that finally did unfold. The original events that unfolded in Ernest's absence would simply cease to have *any* existence—they would *never* have existed, at least as far as the present moment is concerned."

Thanks mostly to all the sci-fi I'd consumed, I managed to follow Wilbur. I think. Time travel always seemed to me full of paradox, and I was never quite sure if I understood the logic properly or if I'd simply become familiar enough with it to accept it as incapable of being understood. Or indeed if it made any real sense at all or was instead just inventiveness masquerading as logic. Wilbur's explanation, nevertheless, was unsettling—to say the least. "So you're saying, *if* Ernest has changed the past, no one would know about it anyway."

"Exactly."

"Is there much chance he did?"

Wilbur seemed oddly uncomfortable. "It may be that his actions did not change history, but rather guaranteed it occurred just as it was known to have occurred, before the time transfer took place. But the fact is, we cannot be sure. Even his stealing of food, not to mention his being noticed doing it, could have unanticipated consequences. You are familiar with the butterfly effect, I presume."

I nodded, not altogether sure if I knew what he was talking about, but more concerned with not wanting to seem uneducated. Certainly, in my time, it was commonly accepted that an extra flap of a butterfly's wings could ultimately result in a hurricane that would otherwise never have arisen. That seemed an apt comparison to my state of mind: I felt like I was being buffeted by all manner of doubts and uncertainties, especially the fundamental one to which I soon gave utterance.

"So what now?" I said. "How do I get home?"

Wilbur's poker-face did not shift, not even when he realised Ernest had quietly fallen asleep on his seat. "I don't know. I'll need to give this more thought." With a gentle nudge, he woke Ernest (who started on seeing me, then remembered). "For the moment, I think the best thing is for you both to return to Ernest's house and keep a low profile. Certainly all of this should be kept to ourselves, for the time being at least, until matters are more certain. So, please make efforts not to be seen together. To that end, you should leave separately."

"I'll go first," said Ernest, stifling a yawn, "if it's all right with you, Steven. The sooner I get home to bed, the better."

I put up no resistance, and followed soon after, staying barely longer than was needed for Wilbur to verify that the smoke no longer rising from the time viewer wasn't a sign of fused circuits or anything serious but a normal consequence of its fuses burning.

When I arrived at Ernest's, he was already sound asleep, on top of his bed, not having bothered even to undress. At a loose end, still feeling trapped, but now not even with any sure hope of escape, I paced up and down the house. Earlier thoughts returned: was I in something larger than it seemed? Did I glimpse the true reality only in what seemed to be dreams?

I even made a ludicrous attempt to shift my shape, in the hope it would force the dream to end, to disintegrate into the 'true' reality of life on Orlanos. But I remained firmly on Earth, in Ernest's house, in my usual form. Trapped.

I decided I could not stay there, I had to get out.

I quickly wrote a note, explaining to Ernest that I was borrowing his babel to use a car and go for a drive, I knew not where. And that is what I did.

It didn't help at first, merely killed time. I stayed within Chord, aimlessly turning from one street into another. I didn't see anything much different from what I'd already seen, other than one or two slower traffains, and, in contrast to Jibilee's rectilinear street grid, many other parts of Chord which had very different patterns: curved roads with closed courts, grids based on triangles, even hexagonal designs.

Eventually, I wandered without realising into an industrial area. Very well hidden. Like no other I'd seen. Buildings were clean and colourful, some very ornately designed, each signed just enough to serve the purpose. Shrouded by tall trees, with no sign of rising fumes, outlet towers, even oil stains. An ecologically and aesthetically sensitive form of industry I could barely believe possible.

I hastened out of the area, reminded again of how I did not belong. Without intending, I soon found myself on the main traffain, surrounded by greenery. Chord, judging by the signage, and the location of surrounding hills, soon receded fast behind me. I tried to get my bearings using the sun. Heading roughly south, I thought—then realised it might take me to Melbourne. A Melbourne. Not the one I knew, but a refurbished retrofitted version. A good idea nevertheless, I thought, given the limited options available. So I continued.

When I reached the next city, and turned off the traffain into a residential area, I was not at all sure it was such a good idea. The new city looked much like Chord, though there were enough variations of design, style and topography to avoid the sense that the same city had been cloned. Clearly, modern town planning was not all linear, but tended to follow the natural lie of the land. Still, my vague hope of finding something reassuringly familiar was not fulfilled. Despite considerable wandering, I didn't see anything within the city recognisable as from my own time. Eventually, I found my way back to the main traffain and continued on in my original direction.

The rural expanse that followed was smaller than the last, but the city that followed also suffered, in my eyes at least, from the same varied sameness as its predecessor. Staying on or near the traffain, to make it easy to find my way back, I grew despondent.

At the next city, I stayed on the traffain until it neared the city centre. There I finally had some luck. Between two new yet oddly old-fashioned, utterly unfamiliar buildings, was an old hotel I recognised—a little changed, with a new colour scheme, and looking in somewhat better repair than I remembered, but recognisably the one I knew. Old in my time, it had been preserved under an historical trust classification. Surprised it was still there, I parked the car, and walked inside.

Never a great frequenter of pubs (not being fond of the taste of beer) I was nonetheless familiar with the sight that greeted me when I opened the door. If not for the clothes, it could have been the inside of any pub from any time in the last century or more. Amid a din of conversation and clinking glasses and cutlery, people ate and drank and laughed, played billiards and pool and darts, engaged in fiery debates and friendly persuasion. Eyes sparkled, hands clasped, grins flashed, lips touched. Boasts were made, jokes told, stories exaggerated. Lust was in their hearts, love in the air, and spilt liquid on the tabletops. Even coasters had familiar scenes of sport and scenery.

"What can I get you?" asked a voice from behind me, as I leaned against the counter watching the activity.

I turned to find the source of the voice: a young man with a broad smile, watching me keenly.

"Oh, uh," I said, not having had any intention to drink. Then I remembered I had no means to pay—other than by using Ernest's babel. I still had strong qualms about that. "Let's see." I feigned a fruitless search through my clothes. "Nothing I'm afraid. Looks like I left my babel at home."

The bartender lifted his eyes skyward in mock disgust, then pinned me with them. "In that case, you can have one on the house. But just the one."

"Very kind of you," I said, surprised and touched. "But why?"

"Why not? Hardly fair to have you waste your time coming here is it? Besides, I like the look of you." He winked, arousing homophobic doubts and fears, but I put them aside when he took it no further. "So what'll it be?"

It turned out not to be the only drink I had. After wandering with it for a closer look at a darts game, I was asked by the victor if I also played—before long I found myself losing to him in no uncertain terms. Then, in a similar fashion, I stumbled into a game of pool, followed soon after by another which I actually managed to win. In the process, I was shouted to two other drinks.

I spent most of the afternoon there, talking, playing, drinking (though I was careful not to repeat my performance after Jibilee's monthly meeting, this time pacing myself to ensure I'd be sober enough to drive). I kept my true identity to myself, giving my name as Ernest only when asked. And though I joined in with conversations, I did more listening than talking.

What I heard was reassuring. Human nature hadn't changed. Institutions and systems might have been revamped to help bring out the best in people, but everyone still had much the same hopes and fears, the same desires and goals, the same capacities for enjoyment and conviviality. People still faced the ultimate existential question: what do I do with the time I have? But they differed inasmuch as they seemed to have found more agreeable, sustaining and benign answers to that question. In among all the tales I heard, there were none of war or violence, of stress or hardship. Apart from an oft-cited worry that the Australian cricket team might lose the World Cup the coming summer, the most significant concern that day was from a father who bemoaned his daughter's choice in boyfriends. Traditional indeed.

In retrospect, the feast after Jibilee's meeting revealed much the same, had I been open then to seeing it, instead of grappling with the shock of the new. In the pub, I was still shocked, and grappling with a sense of entrapment, but at least I was in a building I knew, full of people engaged in familiar activities—at last more aware of commonalities than differences.

Late in the day, I drove back to Ernest's without mishap (other than more navigational errors), more at ease, still wanting to return home but at least not feeling so out of place. The notion that I might be an Orlani lost in some dream, even more intestinally convoluted than the one I was in, now seemed especially ludicrous.

When I arrived at Ernest's, a cool change was bringing light showers. In the last stages of preparing a meal, Ernest had been awake long enough to freshen up, call Wilbur, and be filled in on the whys and wherefores of his unwitting time travel. And to cook enough for me to share a sensational vegetarian noodle dish, spiced unlike anything I'd ever tasted ("traditional East African").

Surprisingly, we conversed with ease. I'd expected our identical appearances to be an obstacle, that conversation would be like talking to a mirror. But we were obviously very different people. And rather than the enmity and distrust I'd have expected to feel towards a homosexual doppelganger, I felt surprisingly comfortable—putting aside the sight of his appalling cyan vinyl jacket. (After I mentioned I'd been wearing his clothes but that our tastes differed considerably, he pulled out a small trunk from the back of a closet and offered me my choice of its contents: old clothes he no longer wore, far more conventional and to my liking. Effusing thanks, I immediately changed into the most conservative items.)

He asked much about historical events in my time. But he told me much more that I did not know about his time, often in a ceaseless stream of words the speed of which I could never have matched, and with extravagant gesticulations.

For instance, in addition to many new nations now straddling old boundaries (as the Bangladesh film had indicated), there were many Liechtenstein-sized 'city-

nations' who had decided to go it 'alone'. Whereas several larger nations had split into loosely affiliated meta-national groups. Hence, California, having long behaved as one, was now officially a nation (to their own delight, and perhaps even more to that of their neighbours). Only a few nations still resisted plurocracy and a free lunch, increasingly in the manner that avowedly communist China resisted capitalism in my time—in pronouncement not fact. Globalised liberation, according to Ernest.

Surprisingly, despite—or perhaps because of—the world's increasing number of 'nationalities', xenophobia had decreased. Even Europe's neo-Nazis had dwindled to a mere handful of isolated, aging die-hards.

"As you might expect," said Ernest, "for most people to stay alienated in a system based on co-operation and participation is not easy. You are surrounded by others taking part and reaping the rewards of plurocratic stewardship. You have community. Resistance is futile."

I did not reply, just sipped some wine. But my body language must have been obvious.

"You are not convinced, are you?" said Ernest. "You have doubts about freelunchism?"

I almost snorted wine through my nasal passages. "Quite a few. Probably the biggest is, maybe it's just too good. Too easy. Unlimited credit! Free housing! Free food and health care and education, one-day working weeks. There's no pressure on people, nothing to push them to improve or excel. Aren't hardship and stress necessary for that? Wouldn't a utopian society never facing disaster or threat stagnate? Lose its highest best qualities? Become apathetic? Lazy? Underachievers? Eventually degenerate into something more primitive? It's a bit like what I understand about evolution: environmental change forces species to adapt. Without change, without hardship, even evolution would stop in its tracks, or degenerate. Well, enufism must run the same risk. Its constancy and security should stifle progress. There's nothing in it to egg people on to greater achievements. They just content themselves with enough. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that is essentially correct as regards material satisfaction, but fortunately there is much more to life than simple materialism. Our society today is eager to progress further, materially *if* that can be arranged responsibly and to genuine benefit, but also socially, and spiritually. Our fundamental aim is improvement—of ourselves and of the world of which we are part. What better motivation to excel than such a goal? And how unlikely it would cause us to stagnate? As for the theory of evolution, well that has limited if any applicability to the subject. For one, it neglects people's innate self-motivating abilities. We can and do provide our own push when given the opportunity—especially in regard to areas of interest or concern."

"*Some* might push themselves," I objected, "but surely many don't. They're too lazy or just not inclined."

"Some. But they can always be taught or encouraged. Ultimately, it is a matter of choice. Of course, it is hardly necessary for *everyone* to be motivated—for most of recorded history, the human race has advanced mostly due to efforts of a few, a handful of individuals. It's little different now."

"And you really progress? Without stress or hardship?"

"What may be true in general for evolution is not necessarily true for an individual species. Hardship *may* prompt innovation—though sometimes it can be

regressive—but the thriving of recent years has sponsored leaps of understanding and knowledge, art and design, that I would suggest outdo anything of the past. Medicine, technology, ecology, food production, fundamental physics—many disciplines have overcome hurdles not long ago thought to be insurmountable. No wonder! People have more time to spend on such matters, and resources have been freed up from other distractions.”

I shook my head. “But how? No matter what I learn, I still can’t see how it could have happened. It’s too massive a change for people to have accepted—or for vested interests to have allowed.”

“Not at all. It happened because it was a clear alternative full of obvious advantages that appeal to natural self-interest, such as a one-day working week, free food and housing. That much was obvious even in 2026 when *A Free Lunch* was first noticed on an Australian website.”

“We invented it?!”

“Perhaps. No one has ever worked out who was behind the obvious pseudonym.”

“Not even the publisher of the book?”

“The book is just a hard copy of what was on the website—Net self-published in effect. But its author...” He shrugged. “For years, I’ve been trying to discover who was responsible, lately with Wilbur’s help, but so far without success. It’s not as straightforward as you might think. For one, freelunchism has similarities with the Participatory Economics Project of earlier decades.”

“The what?”

“Yes, most people of your time weren’t aware of it either. Nor of Inclusive Democracy which shared many of freelunchism’s views about polity. However, plurocracy was more obviously suited to the Net, so perhaps not surprisingly it caught on more quickly. The first, de facto plurocracy, enabled by freeware, was small scale, incomplete and scattered, but functional nonetheless. And it did not take long to grow and interconnect. Especially when yet another inevitable economic downturn occurred. In the wake of that, governments, pressured by the increasingly pervasive plurocratic network, and the enufist political party it spawned, gradually adopted free lunch policies—initially those least confrontational, and usually under different names of course. Ideas politicians once called foolhardy and idealistic, they soon referred to as visionary and pragmatic. But they worked—and quickly. So even politicians started to sense the inevitable. Rather than waiting to be swept out of power by the ever more popular enufist parties, many tried to reserve one last place in the history books by initiating referenda to officially adopt freelunchism. In Australia, it was passed overwhelmingly.”

“How could that have happened?” I said. “Why didn’t corporations stop it? They had the motivation—and the power.”

“They perhaps had the power but ultimately not enough motivation. At first they were adamantly opposed. Officially. Some media tirades were positively evangelical in their zealous commitment against enufism—full of quasi-scriptural reminders of failed central planning, the advantages of a free market, free trade, globalisation. As if they were the only options. As if decentralised planning is not possible. Or retaining the market’s motivation to improve and innovate while removing its punishment for failure or bad luck. Or providing the stability necessary for it to perform optimally. As if markets have more importance, more reality, than people.”

He paused briefly to sip his wine, but not long enough for me to think what to interject.

"Even so," he continued, "behind the official objections, there were unofficial doubts, fanned by the growing popularity of a detailed alternative. As the world grew ever more interconnected, it became increasingly obvious that everyone had to sink or swim together. Yet that was increasingly hard to reconcile with how competitive globalised markets produced a steady stream of losers, by their shifting of investment constantly to countries with lower wage rates, taxes and regulation, and by their claiming of *free* trade but enforcing of quotas and tariffs aplenty—subsidies and offsets—selective protectionism tilting the allegedly level playing field towards the rich. But if losers were inevitable, so too were their inconvenient tendencies to protest, resist, even terrorise. No wonder even corporate leaders had their doubts, unofficial though they might have been. Was a free lunch perhaps more likely to share peace and prosperity? Was it more capable of avoiding tensions that prompt protest and terrorism?"

Another sip, again too brief to divert Ernest. "Of course, however deep the doubts, freelunchism was never going to be openly promulgated by corporate media monopolies, nor supported by other corporations—*until* the Net's introduction of plurocracy, ironically perhaps the ultimate form of globalisation. Corporate campaigns to suppress plurocracy met so much popular opposition, even from within the corporations' own ranks, that ultimately, self-doubt and internal contradiction defeated them. They resolved, reorganised, and scaled down; disseminated their knowledge and experience, and their more sensible equipment, to local people; and passed into history."

I shook my head. "I still find it hard to understand how it all could have started."

"So do most of us now. It was very gradual don't forget, not like the dog-eat-dog shock therapy that many communist countries used to turn themselves into free markets. There must have been any number of chance events that hurried it along, as well as any number that slowed it down. But still, it was sure to happen, as soon as there was enough agreement as to what to change to—and as soon as there was Net plurocracy."

He emptied his glass, and refilled it, apparently satisfied that he'd said all that was necessary.

I felt I should make an effort to repudiate his explicit and implicit criticisms of the world and time I knew—but I found I could not bring myself to do so. Not just because I expected to be overwhelmed by another round of counter-arguments. It had more to do with doubting my own case. I'd been in this future for nearly a week, and, perhaps belatedly, it had forced me to reassess the systems and orthodoxies of my own time: not only were they losing some of their appeal, but worse, from my point of view, they were starting to seem a tad arbitrary. That did not stop me from wanting to return home, to be with my wife and family again, but I had to concede, there were aspects of the return I would not welcome. I was beginning to think this future—this *dream* of the future—had a few things at least to recommend it.

In any case, the silence lasted barely a second or two...

A knock at the front door.

I remained in my seat, lost in thought, as Ernest left the room.

"Been practicing a new speech have you?" came a familiar voice from the doorstep.

"No," said Ernest, a little uncomfortably, "just thinking aloud."

"I've got to talk to you Ernest," said the other voice—Yvette's voice.



"Of course," said Ernest, even more uncomfortably.

Suddenly shaken from thought, I realised it might be wise to make myself scarce. I stood, looked hastily for the best place to hide. But Yvette's voice drew rapidly closer.

"This masquerade you've been performing," she said, "pretending to be Steven—I was speaking with a psychologist at the party last night. He thinks—"

Her voice stopped abruptly as she entered the doorway to the lounge, and saw me walking to the bedroom as hurriedly as my attempts to be silent would allow. We both stopped in our tracks. Her jaw dropped, then she spun to stare at Ernest a step behind her—he looked almost as ruffled as I felt. She turned to stare at me again, her mouth still wide open in shock. She closed her eyes, opened them, blinked, turned to face Ernest, then swapped her attention several times back and forth between the two of us—before she eventually backed up against the doorframe and demanded, "Will one of you please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Almost at once, it became the turn of Ernest and myself to drop our jaws. As I moved towards her, not sure what to say, but wanting to lend comfort, I stopped in my tracks. Before my eyes, the long-sleeved floral shirt worn by Yvette blurred and shifted, and in moments was replaced by a decidedly different, short-sleeved, grey, striped T-shirt.

## 23

# The Unravelling

Ernest saw it too, and was as surprised as me. Yvette, however, was unaware, until she realised we were both gazing at the same thing as if spellbound.

"And why are you both staring at my breasts?" she said, before looking down to find the answer herself. She jerked in surprise.

Ernest was the first to gather his wits enough to speak. "Is this some sort of joke?" He looked into Yvette's eyes. "Is that you Wilbur?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Yvette, staring back at him. "For all I know, *you're* Wilbur." She turned her gaze on me. "Or you. One of you must be. Surely!?"

Was I a dreaming Orlani? My discarded theory flashed to mind. With difficulty, I forced myself to ignore it. "Hold on," I said. "None of us is Wilbur. Not unless he's decided not to wear that bracelet he's supposed to have on all the time."

"Then what just happened to my shirt?" demanded Yvette, eyes wide. "And why are there two of you?!"

"You must have heard of clones," I said, suddenly inspired.

She blinked, but Ernest raised his eyes skyward.

"I know enough," said Yvette, her fear verging to anger, "to know there were none born forty years ago."

"Thirty-nine," corrected Ernest, discreetly.

I was at an utter loss. "Right, er... Did I ever tell you I have a twin brother?"

Her incredulity spoke more eloquently than words.

"Forget it Steven," said Ernest. "We cannot avoid telling her the truth."

"Steven!?" she erupted. Her face betrayed a flurry of confused emotions, from hope to despair.

I walked cautiously toward her, slowly took her by the arm. "You had better sit down," I said. "This may take a while to explain."

It did not take as long as I expected...

"So it *wasn't* a masquerade!" said Yvette, distractedly. "You were telling the truth all along." Her face flared suddenly into focus. "Yet none of this explains my shirt... unless... it temporally resonated with this." She tugged at the grey stripes she now wore. "It looks like it comes from another age."

"That does not make sense," said Ernest, shaking his head. "But then I'm not sure what would."

"Maybe Wilbur?" I suggested. "If anyone." I extracted Ernest's babel, still in my pocket and called Wilbur's number. Before he answered, I guiltily realised I had all but taken ownership of the babel from Ernest.

When Wilbur answered my call, I briefly filled him in. Initially, he was sleepy—not surprising given the sun was on the verge of setting—but once he learned what we'd just seen, he snapped to full attention. Rather than offer any thoughts, however, he suggested we move to his house. I returned Ernest's babel to him, and then, compelled by a strong sense of urgency, Yvette drove to Wilbur's with Ernest—

using the car I had unthinkingly left in the driveway without putting on its 'not in use' indicator. To avoid being seen with Ernest, I followed separately on foot as soon as they were out of sight.

When I arrived, another baffling event occurred. The showers of late afternoon had quickly passed, leaving patchy clouds. While waiting on Wilbur's front porch, after knocking, I was distracted by stunning salmon pink cumulus, low in the west, illuminated by backlight from a sun just barely behind the horizon—thin but expansive, full of fine tracteries—then *gone in an instant*. Not swept away by sudden winds—simply gone—vanished from sight without transition, as if they had never been. The sky was suddenly, utterly devoid of clouds, in every direction.

Was the dream disintegrating? Was reality starting to creep back in, perhaps by small degrees? I could not avoid the thought that I might be on the verge of returning home in an unexpected fashion and, more disconcertingly, that home might be Orlanos.

Wilbur opened the door, but I still had my back to him, looking westward in vain for missing clouds.

"Did you see that?" I said, spinning to face him.

"Did I see what?"

"The clouds. They just disappeared. As I was looking at them." I pointed in their direction.

"Clouds?" Wilbur frowned and beckoned me inside. "As far as I recall, there've been no clouds all day. Or yesterday."

"You aren't serious," I said. We moved to the room with the time viewer, where Ernest and Yvette were waiting. The viewer seemed to be on, but its screen was blank. "It rained this afternoon, and there have been clouds ever since."

"You must have been dreaming this time, Steven," said Yvette. "It hasn't rained for days."

I looked at Ernest for support, but his face pre-empted his words. "I don't remember it raining today."

"What's wrong with you all? Of course it did. I distinctly remember it."

"Perhaps," began Ernest, and then tantalisingly lost himself in thought. All eyes were on him, waiting, but he didn't continue. Instead, a thick but well-trimmed moustache suddenly sprouted on his hitherto hairless upper lip. Our eyes must have widened, or our faces registered surprise some other way, because his thoughts seemed to freeze to a halt, and he looked from one to another of us with mounting alarm. "What!? What has happened? What are you looking at?"

"It quite suits you," said Yvette, burying her surprise.

"What suits me?"

"Nothing to worry about," said Wilbur.

"Go have a look in a mirror," I suggested.

Ernest rushed out of the room to follow my advice.

"What is happening, Wilbur?" I said.

From the neighbouring room, we could all hear Ernest's thin gasp.

"I'm not sure," answered Wilbur, standing. He wandered in deep thought to the kitchen, Yvette and I in his wake, before suddenly stopping in his tracks. "But I have an idea. Would you mind making a call please Steven?"

"I'd rather hear your idea."

He extracted his babel and tapped it on. "It could help me settle my idea. Would you mind?" Ernest joined us, evidently perplexed, rubbing and fingering his new facial hair like a budding RSI victim.

"Fine," I said, trying to put aside my immediate concerns.

Wilbur tapped some more then handed me the babel. "Who am I calling? Dial-a-pizza?"

"Close," said Wilbur. "Dianne."

I held the babel in front of me, confused. "What do I say to her? Noticed anything transform lately?!"

"If I'm right, it won't matter what you say."

Irritated by his vagueness, I attempted a scathing gaze, but then noticed the number displayed on the babel vanish, replaced with a crystal clear image of Dianne's face.

"Ernest!" said Dianne, clearly surprised.

"Hello, Dianne," I said, pushing my imagination to its limits, still holding the babel in front of me.

"It isn't like you to use the video facility," she said, peering at me with obvious curiosity. Then her eyes widened. "O?! That's why. You've shaved your moustache."

Standing in front of me, behind the babel, Ernest and Yvette on either side, Wilbur caught my eye. He nodded repeatedly, silently mouthed 'say yes'.

"Um, yes," I said.

"Well," said Dianne, scrutinising me. "If you are after my opinion, then I quite like it. Though it will take some getting used to. How long did you have it? Fifteen years?"

Ernest's level of shock mounted beyond the scale. Wilbur nodded again.

"Uh, yes," I assented, "something like that."

Wilbur repeatedly moved a pointed forefinger rapidly across his neck, a gesture I took to mean either the same thing it did in my time or that he really did not like the moustache.

"Uh, well," I said, "that was about all I called for, Dianne. Thanks for your opinion. Be seeing you."

"Sure," she muttered, expression contradicting word. "Any time."

I hung up, looked at Wilbur. "Well?" I said, returning his babel. "Is that supposed to help?"

"Yes, I believe it does," said Wilbur. "As far as Dianne's concerned, Ernest has had a moustache for years, and yet we in this room believe otherwise."

"I've *never* had one," said Ernest, with an expression as if he had just caught an unpleasant whiff. "And I still do not understand how I could have one now."

"I think..." said Wilbur. He drew a deep breath and finally let us in on his thinking. "I think the timeline may be fluctuating. Possibly unravelling."

"O," I drawled. "That's all... What the hell does that *mean*?" I demanded, too anxious to heed manners.

"The past and present are in flux. Probably a side effect of Ernest's return to the present. Remember: you two *swapped* time coordinates five days ago—but today only one of you returned. You, Steven, should be back in 2025 to balance Ernest here. Because you're not, the timeline is *unbalanced*. And seeking to re-balance itself: trying to compensate, adjust to suit your presence here. How, and to what extent, I can only guess. Subtle adjustments here and there, or—"

A moment of obvious shock flushed Wilbur's features. "Your whole life may have become a temporal anomaly—to be dealt with by removal."

"Removal?" I said, appalled. "The timeline is trying to write me out of history?!"

"Trying to make a certain Mr Stone sink without trace?" said Ernest, with the tiniest hint of a grim smile.

"Perhaps," said Wilbur, worriedly.

"You make it sound as if the timeline's alive," said Yvette. "Conscious."

"Not at all," responded Wilbur. "But it is subject to physical laws and their underlying principles of symmetry. If anything is pushed out of balance, it behaves in ways that ultimately restore it to balance—when possible."

"By a change of shirt!" I cried. "A new moustache?! That's how the timeline restores balance?"

"The changes we have seen," said Wilbur, "may only be trivial consequences of more significant changes. And many events could alter without us necessarily knowing about them. For example, the Net would tell us if Jibilee is still called Jibilee, but we would not know if it changed names without seeking out that information."

"But how come we see things changing?" I asked. "It contradicts what you said when Ernest returned: that if he's altered history, the original history would in effect have never been. We would never know about it. If my presence here is causing the last forty years to alter, how could we know about it? Wouldn't we be like Dianne, blissfully unaware Ernest's moustache is not fifteen years old but brand new."

"You're right," said Wilbur. "However, the fact is that each of us *has* seen the effects of the temporal disturbances, though *only* when you're with us. Which suggests your presence here, the likely cause of the temporal flux, acts something like a protective bubble."

"Protective!?" I said. "We aren't protected from the disturbances. Yvette's shirt and Ernest's upper lip weren't protected."

"Perhaps protective is the wrong word. But you and those in your vicinity are at least able to recognise when events alter. Others are not, as your call to Dianne indicated—to her, the adjusted timeline is the one that's *always* been. Not that your field of influence would appear to extend very far. When you were alone on the doorstep and saw clouds disappear, each of us just a few steps inside the house weren't aware of the change, and remembered the day as being without clouds."

"How significant is this, Wilbur?" asked Yvette. "The changes have been trivial: a moustache and an altered shirt."

"Could the timeline have a fashion sense?" I asked.

"Must be a poor one," muttered Ernest.

"There was also the weather," said Wilbur.

"Can we live with the changes?" asked Yvette.

"For a while perhaps," said Wilbur. "But as long as Steven's not where he's meant to be—*when* he is meant to be—they are likely to continue. And perhaps to mount. Disturbances to the timeline could grow in frequency, and in extent. They could have increasingly greater impacts upon the present. Indeed, Ernest's return here might conceivably be annulled—that could be one way to restore balance. Or I and the time viewer might suddenly be removed, consistent with another timeline in which Orlanis didn't visit Earth, or didn't discover interstellar propulsion."

The room fell into sudden threatening silence, which I soon felt compelled to break—with exaggerated emphasis: "Then it's not serious at all."

Everyone ignored me—especially when the mud-brick walls around us suddenly changed to plaster.

"We all saw that one, right?" I asked.

Everyone nodded sombrely.

"Of course, only some adjustments will have visible effects to us," mused Wilbur. "Many might affect other parts of the world. Or have less tangible, obvious results. I suspect that's why the first one was not noticed until some hours after you returned."

With no warning, Wilbur abruptly disappeared. Before our eyes, he vanished in an instant.

"O shit," I said. I looked to the others who seemed every bit as worried as I was, then ran to the room with the time viewer, expecting it to have vanished as well—but it was just as I'd last seen it. "What the—?" I exclaimed before returning to the others. "The viewer is still there."

"That doesn't make any sense," said Yvette. "Why would the timeline remove Wilbur but not the viewer?"

"The timeline hasn't removed me." The voice was Wilbur's and seemed to come from where he'd been standing when he disappeared, yet he was nowhere in sight. "I'm right here with you." A shimmer appeared in his place, gradually growing more substantial. With a sudden jolt, Wilbur reappeared.

"What the hell was that all about?" I said.

Wilbur looked embarrassed. "There's no human word for it. The only thing I can compare it to is hiccups."

"Hiccups?" parroted Yvette and Ernest in unison.

Wilbur disappeared again. Eerily, his voice remained. "It's something Orlanis occasionally develop when tired or stressed—a mild physical disturbance that alters the body's refractive index. We turn invisible." He popped suddenly back into visibility. "Then alternate rapidly back and forth." He disappeared again.

"Just what we need," I moaned. "Just when things were getting dull."

"I am sorry," said Wilbur, returning more gradually to view. "This hasn't happened for years."

"Isn't there something you can do to stop it?" said Ernest.

"It's harmless," said Wilbur, "but if it's bothering you, there are a few folk remedies that sometimes work." He disappeared again. "I'll try one." A glass in the dish rack on the sink suddenly floated upwards, then across and down, to rest suspended under the tap. The tap handle lifted as if on its own, the glass filled with water. The tap returned to its shut position, the glass floated higher before tilting. Its contents spilled over its edge, but they did not fall to the floor—instead they vanished. Wilbur popped back into view, the glass to his mouth, one hand pinching his nose shut—in his natural Orlanian form. A demon.

I shuddered briefly.

Wilbur drained his glass, put it on the sink, held a hand in front of him at arm's length—watched it studiously.

For long still moments, nothing happened.

Wilbur sighed, then resumed his familiar human features. "It appears to have worked."

"Shouldn't we get back to more pressing concerns than Orlanian hiccups?" I said, peeved at the delay, yet relieved Wilbur was back to normal. "The timeline is unravelling, remember? And there's still something I don't understand. How can the

disturbances reach us one by one? If the timeline between now and 2025 has been altered, why aren't we seeing the net effects in one big hit, instead of this piecemeal account?"

"Because, if my theory is correct, the timeline hasn't yet regained balance. Events are altering gradually or in sudden increments perhaps. I don't know. In any case, everything I've said is essentially just speculation to explain the facts apparent to us. For all I know, the true cause may be entirely different."

"Which leaves us where?" said Ernest. "As spectators, simply watching events unfold."

"No," said Wilbur, forcefully, concern apparent. "We must attempt to rectify the situation. I suspect the only way to properly end the temporal imbalance is to return Steven to his time. If we can achieve that, the changes already made may even be annulled."

My sci-fi novels had come home to roost, but with me the unwitting and reluctant star: *I* had to return to my own time in order to safeguard the timeline—to maintain reality itself. "But you don't know *how* to return me," I said. "You said that."

"I know," said Wilbur. "The last attempt should have worked. I set up everything exactly as it was for the original transfer. It was even roughly the same time of day."

"Would that have mattered?" said Ernest.

"Probably not, but I really can't be sure. I only have a *theory* as to what happened."

"Your theory got *me* back," said Ernest.

Wilbur seemed momentarily lost in thought. "Suggesting perhaps," he finally said, "that everything of relevance was the same for you for both transports, but something was different for Steven."

"What something?" I asked.

"I have no idea," replied Wilbur.

"Could there have been something in Steven's bedroom," said Ernest, "containing some element or compound capable of making a difference."

"Possibly," said Wilbur.

"Kryptonite, perhaps?" I suggested, frustrated by the lack of progress.

Wilbur ignored me, but Ernest and Yvette both gave me scornful glances.

"What were you doing at the time you were transported?" said Yvette, looking straight at me.

"I..." Discomfort. Reluctance to answer.

"Are you blushing?" said Yvette, puzzled, then smiling. "O! *That's* what you were doing?" She turned to Wilbur. "Could having sex be behind it all?"

"Hold on," I said, outraged. "You're not suggesting that to go home, I have to have sex!?"

All eyes turned to Wilbur. He paused long in thought. "It's possible." He shook his head vigorously. "Anything's possible. It might have been sex, or something as mundane as food you'd consumed. Or the fullness of your bladder. The state of the weather."

"Great!" I said. "That narrows it down considerably."

We all fell silent, struggling for useful thoughts.

Ernest opened his mouth to speak, but was stopped by a loud crack of thunder—through the living room window, cloudless deepening twilight snapped to almost night, overcast, full of threat. Thunder rolled on, overtaken by blinding lightning bolts.

"I take it," said Wilbur, "that we all saw that change?"

A louder peal of thunder. Everyone nodded or muttered assent.

"These storms seem to be following me everywhere," I added.

Simultaneous with another blinding lightning burst, Ernest's and Wilbur's eyes snapped wide open—stares of surprised recognition.

Wilbur turned his gaze on me. "There was a storm raging when you were transported here—correct?"

"Yes. But haven't we got more pressing things to do than discuss the weather?"

"And there were storms," said Ernest, deep in thought, "both times when I transported."

"But *not* here when we transported you back," said Wilbur. "Of course! That must have been where the energy came from. Not from the quantum vacuum—from lightning!"

More bolted down.

"But the lightning didn't funnel down some pole into your viewer, did it?" I objected, not at all convinced. "Surely it's not that gothic and clichéd. I didn't arrive here with bolts in my neck."

"It would seem," said Wilbur, "that localisation of the storms' energies isn't necessary. Temporal uncertainty at work perhaps. It merely needs to be in the vicinity of the time viewer and what it's viewing. So we may have a way of returning you to your time."

To my surprise, he suddenly yawned.

"Sorry if all this is boring you Wilbur," I said, increasingly grumpy. It's not every day you find yourself responsible for an unravelling timeline.

"Anything but," he responded. "Only the fascination I hold for recent events is keeping me awake. But I won't be able to put off sleep much longer."

"Then you had better hurry up," said Ernest, his expression betraying fear of more than an unfashionable moustache. "What do we need to do?"

"Not much," said Wilbur, heading to the time viewing room (every home should have one). We followed on his heels. "At least, as long as this storm lasts. We just view the right location and time, and, with any luck, all Steven has to do is touch the screen."

"That didn't work before," I objected.

"There was no storm here then," said Yvette, obviously following things better than me.

Silently, we watched Wilbur tap at the viewer's keyboard, press panel buttons. Thunder and lightning were suddenly joined by heavy rain.

"Does it matter *where* you view?" I asked, uncertainly. "Now that Ernest is back."

"Perhaps not," said Wilbur, "but I think it best to play safe." He stifled another yawn. "I'm setting this up to view the location midway between here and your house, just as when Ernest was returned."

"That's where I'll arrive?!" I asked, not at all pleased by the news.

"No, Steven," said Wilbur, patiently. "These transfers only alter your time coordinates, not your spatial location. You should arrive back where you are now."

"But that's no good!" I cried. "It's kilometres from home. What about Yvette?"

Wilbur and Ernest turned to her, puzzled.

"My wife!" I said. "I don't want her to have to deal with me suddenly disappearing. I want to return home at the spot I disappeared. In my own bed."



"I'm sorry, Steven," said Wilbur. "That's not possible. Here and now, you need to be in the vicinity of the time viewer. Even if we could move it, there's no simple means to power it in a such an isolated location as where you arrived."

"But *would* Steven stay put?" said Ernest. "I returned here, despite being elsewhere in 2025."

"I am not sure of anything," said Wilbur. "However, I think Steven will maintain his position in space. Or maybe not." He turned to me, grim. "But even if you return to your bedroom, I expect you will arrive days *after* you departed. Your wife will have to deal with your sudden disappearance however we proceed."

"What? Surely, this'll all get me back to the same moment I left. Or the moment after?"

"I doubt it," said Wilbur. "More likely, you will return to your time just as Ernest did—more than five days after you left."

"No," I said. "That isn't what I want."

Despondency overcame me. An image ran through my mind of Yvette regaining her vision after the blinding flash of my transport through time, to find herself alone: I did not expect to brush it aside days later with a flippant, "Had to rush—couldn't stay for breakfast."

"It's what is possible," said Wilbur, tapping a final key to bring up a night-vision image of the non-descript paddock viewed for Ernest's return. "It's what would have happened to you, probably, earlier today when Ernest returned, if only there had then been a storm here."

"I didn't realise. I thought I was going back to when I left."

"No, Steven. I don't think the symmetry principles at work in these resonant transfers will allow it. But my theory could be completely wrong. This may not work at all. Storms may have nothing to do with it—or if they do, there may be other unforeseen factors. And dangers."

"Like what?" I said, hopes diminishing.

"I don't know," said Wilbur. "That's why I called them unforeseen. Nothing's really certain—you could be transported *anywhere* in time. Conceivably even to *several* different times. You could temporally split into multiple versions."

A particularly loud crack of thunder erupted.

"How reassuring!" I said. "Yvette doesn't just have to deal with me suddenly going missing for five days, instead it's maybe for months, and then I might return Xeroxed. Or not at all. This had better be a damned dream."

"He couldn't arrive *before* he left, could he?" said Yvette.

"No," said Wilbur, certain—before immediately wavering. "Probably not. Maybe. I'm really not sure."

"You mean I could end up in the nineteenth century? Or the Roman Empire? Surrounded by Neanderthals!?"

"I can't be sure, Steven," said Wilbur. "But for the timeline to balance, I think you'd need to arrive, at the earliest, just after you left. More probably, you'll arrive as long after that moment as you've been here, in 2065. Maybe. Ultimately, your final destination will depend not on what I think, but on the fundamental physical symmetry principles re-balancing the timeline. And we're never going to find out as long as we keep talking."

He was right. I had to get home. So I had to face the risks. "I don't know why this dream is so endlessly troublesome," I said, angrily, "but the sooner it's over the

better." A double take of regret. "Nothing personal. I just want to see my wife and family."

Yvette put a hand on my arm and gently squeezed, forgiving, understanding.

With an effort, I turned my attention to the time viewer's screen. "Let's get on with it then." But I was immediately distracted. On the screen: a bright star-lit sky, Scorpio arching on high. Not a cloud in sight—it confused me no end. "There's no storm there?"

"I don't believe there needs to be a storm *there*," said Wilbur, patient as ever, "only here. In our attempt today, the storm at Ernest's location provided the energy to transport him back, but the absence of a storm here left you stranded. The storm raging here and now should send you back. Are you ready?"

I exchanged a long glance with Wilbur, then with Yvette and Ernest, keen to leave yet not to have seen the last of them. As if to remind me there was no time to lose, Ernest's moustache disappeared.

"Changed its mind again," said Yvette. "Just when I was getting used to telling you two apart."

Ernest was baffled, until Yvette stroked a gentle finger above his upper lip. He immediately brightened.

"Ok," I said, moving closer to the time viewer. "See you all in my next dream, maybe." I lifted my hand towards the screen, retracted it in sudden doubt, paused, then thrust it forward in one quick motion to touch the screen.

An especially bright lightning bolt dazzled my eyes. A split second of seeing nothing. Then, vision clearing.

There, standing next to me was Yvette.

*Not* Yvette my wife. The other Yvette. Next to her, Ernest. Sitting in front of the time viewer, Wilbur, his head turned to me, dismay writ clearly.

The attempt had failed. I was still trapped in the future, the timeline unravelling around me.

## 24

# Face to Face

"Well," I said, keen to break the heavy silence, "I guess I'm going to have to find some less hi-tech way of waking up."

No one responded, all looked worried.

"Perhaps," I said, "one of you would care to throw a glass of water in my face."

"That won't work," came a voice from behind us.

All four of us turned.

An old man stood in the doorway, smiling broadly, staring straight at me. He gave me a nagging sense of vague familiarity, yet I was sure I did not know him.

He turned his gaze to the others. "Good to see you again Wilbur. Ernest. Yvette. It's been a long time."

Wilbur—expression uncharacteristically perplexed—said nothing. Ernest and Yvette also remained silent, clearly unaware of the newcomer's identity.

"You called me," said the old man to Wilbur, "three days ago. Remember?"

Wilbur's perplexity mounted... then was suddenly replaced by understanding and relief. "At last you're here," he said. "I expected you to turn up earlier."

"Couldn't," said the old man. "Had to turn up exactly when I remembered doing so."

Wilbur nodded slowly.

"Care to let us all in on this," I said. "Or do you two take delight in being the only ones to know what the hell you're talking about." I could restrain myself no longer. To the old man: "Who are you anyway?"

He smiled, shook his head. "Tsk, ts. I was headstrong wasn't I? Manners, young boy, manners."

I ignored him, turned to Wilbur. "All right, *you* tell me who he is."

"Steven," said Wilbur, with a hint of a smile, "meet Steven Stone."

A small gasp—from Yvette.

I ignored her, fixed my attention on the old man. Another of Wilbur's inept jokes? What the hell did he mean?

Sudden memory of a photo from the Citizens' Database website: frail body, thin grey hair, wrinkles... finally, realisation why the old man seemed familiar. "You mean...?"

He nodded, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Got it at last, Junior."

His voice suddenly became familiar—the one I heard when I called the Wunsa Pond Stones.

Me! Myself and I!

I backed off a step, into the desk supporting the viewer.

"Don't worry," he said, two steps closer. "We don't annihilate each other." He extended a hand. "Not even when we touch."

I looked to Yvette, her face a mixture of surprise and wonder—then to Ernest, utterly confused. Wilbur yawned, struggled to keep his eyelids from closing—his

face momentarily shifted and blurred, before returning to normal; so tired, I realised, he found it hard not to revert to his true shape.

Meanwhile, the old man continued to smile. It was too much to resist. If I could not trust *him*, a more experienced, hopefully wiser version of myself, who could I trust? Hesitantly, I took his hand.

We did not mutually annihilate.

"That call I made Thursday," said Wilbur, his eyes fixed on me, "the one I said was answered by your house sitter—your future self's house sitter..." He pointed at the old man. "...*his* house sitter—well, I actually reached him—you."

"You mean," flabbergasted Ernest, "this is Steven as well? An older Steven?"

"Exactly," said the old man—me—the older me. "And when Wilbur rang me, I told him I'd been waiting for his call, that the person in the room with him at the time was a younger version of myself, and that he was telling the complete truth." He stopped and looked at me. "That you *are* from the past. I told him the DNA test would verify it. I also told Wilbur to give you the cover story about me being out of the country, and not to worry about you learning about the present time, your future."

"And you said I wasn't to try to contact you again," said Wilbur, looking at the old man, "but that you'd be in touch when the time was right."

"You couldn't have been here sooner?" I whined.

"Not without changing history," said my older self. "The events I experienced forty years ago included this conversation, which makes it clear I had to do exactly what Wilbur just said I have done: remain out of contact until now. How else to experience events exactly as we did?" He sighed. "*Forty years!*" To me, a steadfast glare: "If my memory is any good, I didn't beat about the bush now. I'm here because I need to be. Don't ask me *why*—it was something Wilbur could never explain at the time—but without me here, you won't be able to get home."

Confused, I looked to Wilbur—he shrugged his shoulders as response, lowered his eyelids without realising, started awake with a jolt.

"Trust me," said my older self, "I know it works."

"But how?" I said.

"I knew you'd say that," said the old man. "It's what *I* said, forty years ago. And what I said in response was I told you not to ask. I don't know the answer."

My mind was reeling. It had taken me less time than I might have expected to grow used to sharing a room with Ernest, my mirror image, but now I also shared the room with myself—aged seventy-nine—claiming to know what had already happened to me before I'd experienced it! Maybe Jung thought dream characters are different manifestations of the inner self, but I was beginning to think my subconscious was pathological.

I grabbed my head and muttered, "This is too much."

My older self smiled. "I have the strongest sense of *déjà vu*."

The room lit up with a particularly bright flash of lightning.

"O, and I forgot," said the older me, "I'll be just one moment." He (I) left the room and returned almost at once, with an old woman I'd never met, but who gave me the same fleeting sense of familiarity.

She studied the room's occupants, then turned to my older self. "So you *were* telling the truth," she said.

Different in appearance, but *not* in voice. Closer scrutiny confirmed it. Yvette—my wife. My legs almost slipped from under me.

"It's all right, Steven," she said, with a steady gaze. "You told me everything. Even about my namesake." She turned to face the other Yvette, who was uncharacteristically uncomfortable. "Don't worry—it *has* been forty years. An understandable misunderstanding, given the circumstances. Not that I'm not glad for Steven's narcolepsy. Still, I admire your taste in men."

A brief nervous laugh from the younger Yvette, then more relaxed.

Wilbur yawned again, longer and wider than before. For a few moments, the surface of his face wavered, his hair all but disappeared, and stubby horns sprouted from his forehead.

"Don't you think you should be making a move," said the older Yvette to me. "You have a wife and young family waiting for you." She smiled—that too hadn't changed over forty years.

It was my wake-up call. "You're right," I said, realising I had little choice but to go with the flow. "Let's get it over with. Before another version of myself arrives."

"I knew you'd say that too," said the old man. "And what I said was: for you to be sent back, you can't be here in this room."

"What are you talking about?" I said, resolve floundering, the course of action now uncertain.

"You have to be in the place you arrived," said my older self, "lying on the grass, just as you were when you transported here."

"But then how can he touch the screen?" said Ernest.

"He doesn't," said the older me. "I do."

"Makes sense," said Wilbur, after a moment's contemplation. "I think." He yawned again, and his face fluttered.

I sighed with frustration. "Well, all right, I suppose you know what you're doing."

"I'll drive you there," said Yvette.

"I'll go too," said Ernest.

My older self left the room.

"But I'll need directions," said Yvette.

Wilbur, between yawns, told her which roads to take. "Call me when you get there."

"And take these," suggested me senior, returning with a torch and a large umbrella. "You'll need them."

Ernest nodded, and left the room. With a backward glance and tentative smile at her namesake, the younger Yvette followed.

"You *are* prepared," I said to my older self.

"Yes," the old man replied. "You are. Go on. It's time."

I wanted to say yet another, hopefully final, goodbye to Wilbur, but he was slumped asleep across the desk—wearing not his familiar face, but that of an Orlani demon. Now, however, I felt no fear or revulsion. Too many other things to occupy my mind, no doubt. Too many other shocks to the system to deal with.

"Don't worry," said the older me, "it's all set up, and we can wake him if we need him. I'll give him your goodbyes. Get going."

I was lost for words. I substituted steady gazes. "Be seeing you," I said, finally, leaving the room.

"Yes you will," said the older me.

"Weird bloody dream this one," I muttered as I moved to catch up with Yvette and Ernest.

"He still thinks it's a dream," came the older Yvette's voice behind me.

"Yes, I did," he (I) said, just before I exited the front door.

After almost tripping over a large umbrella draining on the porch—like the car parked in front of the house, it must have belonged to the older me—I found Ernest and Yvette already in the car they had driven to Wilbur's. She drove off the moment I took a seat.

The residential speed limit and teeming rain combined to make the drive almost unbearably slow and frustrating.

"There was a roundabout here," said Ernest. We were only a few blocks from Wilbur's. "Wasn't there?" He was clearly confused, surprised.

"Yes," said Yvette, "you're right. Must be another effect of timeline re-balancing."

"I hope this all works," said Ernest. "That we get things back the way they were."

"Scared of another moustache?" I said.

"I could live with that," said Ernest. "If I had to. But what if changes are more severe? What if we lose our free lunch society? Yvette and I would find that the hardest to deal with. No one else would be even aware it had ever existed."

"We might be unaware too," said Yvette, "once Steven's gone."

"I had not thought of that," said Ernest, more worried than ever.

I tried to reassure them. "It isn't likely is it? From what I said before, the older me, it sounds like all of what's happening is what he remembered. And if he's here now, then I must have gotten home—and everything must have returned to normal."

"Maybe you get home safe," said Yvette, "but the timeline stays as it is when you leave—whatever state it's in."

"Anything is possible," said Ernest. "Wilbur said so, more or less. Although another possibility occurs to me now: it may sound paradoxical, but what if the world Yvette and I know has only existed because Steven *does* manage to return home."

"What are you talking about?" I said, sensing another unwelcome piece of information.

"Maybe," said Ernest, "it has been your visit here—to *your* future—that brought it about. Perhaps, you return and cause freelunchism to be invented."

"O, you have got to be joking," I said, biting back anger.

"No," said Yvette. "There's a logic to it. It might even explain why no one's been able to figure out who first put enufism on the Net."

"Exactly," said Ernest. "If it *was* Steven, you would have wanted to avoid us knowing," said Yvette, "so we wouldn't treat you differently than what you've actually experienced."

"This is all hot air," I said, losing patience. "I have my own life to return to, a quiet unassuming one free of the responsibility of creating *your* future. I do *not* create it."

"If I'm right," said Ernest, "you have already created it."

"Well, you're wrong. My life is not predestined. I have a free will of my own. I can *choose* what I do. What am I saying! This is just a dream, damn it."

"Well, I guess we will see," said Ernest. "The time viewer will disclose what you actually do after you get back."

"Don't you feel like a voyeur?" I said.

"I stay out of bedrooms."

"Make sure you stay away from thunderstorms too. As much as I've enjoyed your company, when I get back, I want to stay there. *If* I get back."

We said no more. To my relief, we finally reached the traffain and our pace increased. Desire and hope mounted that I might shortly, at last, see my wife and family again.

Minutes later, having turned onto the narrower road, we reached the point to stop the car. It was still raining, though not as heavily, but apart from gradually diminishing lightning flashes, it was almost completely dark. The three of us managed to stay fairly dry, huddling together under the umbrella my older self had provided, trekking through the bush, his torch lighting our path.

I panicked when I could not immediately find the right spot. It was more difficult at night, in the rain. Finally, after several minutes of disappointed scanning with the torch, a sudden lightning flash revealed one of the white-barked trees. Sighing relief, I hurried forward out of reach of the umbrella, and located the singed grass outline. The rain, by then, had eased to a few scattered if rather large drops—I grew worried that the storm might move away and take its lightning with it before we could do anything.

"We have arrived," said Yvette, speaking into her babel.

"Good," came a thin voice over the babel. My voice. Me senior. "Right on schedule, if memory serves. You had better get a move on, before the storm passes. Get undressed Steven."

"What?!" I erupted.

"You have to be lying naked on the grass," said my older self, "just like when you arrived."

Irritated by this latest requirement, I hesitated. I looked at Yvette, under the umbrella, her face dim in light reflecting from the torch beam Ernest beside her was pointing at the white-barked tree.

I thought she was doing her best to avoid grinning. "Come on," she said, "this is no time for excessive modesty."

"Would you mind looking away," I said, very uncomfortable.

"Ordinarily not," she said, eyes glinting. "But seeing as how the other night you gave me plenty of tease, I think now you can give me a little strip. It'll help balance the timeline, I'm sure."

My annoyance increased for a moment, then diminished as I decided she had a point. I had no one to blame for her attitude but myself. Besides, there was an urgency to the situation that brooked no delay. It was all just a dream anyway, I reminded myself. "This is why you came along," I said, kicking off shoes and removing my top. "Isn't it? I should have guessed." I handed the top to Ernest—it was his after all, and the ground was wet.

"What are you worrying about?" said Yvette. "It's dark, isn't it?"

"Not dark enough," I replied.

I removed my socks, shirt and trousers without a further word, then my older self spoke over the babel. "Am I undressed yet?"

"Almost," said Yvette.

It was muggy because of the storm, so I was not cold as I stood there in just underpants, hesitating to remove them. Ernest and Yvette kept their eyes on mine.

"Come on, Steven," she said. "At least you don't have to have sex like we thought earlier."

I took a deep breath. There was nothing for it. I slipped out of the pants and dangled them in front of Ernest. "You two had your thrills now?"

A sudden very bright lightning flash erupted—Ernest's and Yvette's eyes turned downwards.

"So," said Ernest, looking me again in the eyes, "we are not quite identical after all." With a wry smile, he put the torch under the proffered underpants and gingerly transferred them to the top of the pile of clothes draped over his other arm.

Yvette, with a very straight face except for one raised eyebrow, said nothing to me, but soon to her babel: "He's undressed."

"Ok," said the older me, "now make sure I am lying precisely in the outline."

I kept my eyes on Yvette and Ernest. The annoyance I had felt at their behaviour of the last few minutes vanished when I realised I was—hopefully—about to see them for the last time. I could not leave them in anger.

Ernest's hands were encumbered with torch, clothes, and umbrella, so rather than offering a hand to shake, I lightly grabbed one of his shoulders, and said, "Ordinarily I'd say, keep in touch. But..."

"How about, be seeing you," he suggested. "Every time you look in a mirror."

I smiled, said, "Thanks for everything." Then, to Yvette: "And thank you."

"My pleasure," she said. "Almost." She moved forward, kissed me on the lips, gently but too long for me not to return it. "Have a happy healthy prosperous life."

"Am I in position?" said my older self.

"Not yet," said Yvette.

I hastily lay down on the grass. Ernest shone the torch along my perimeter so I could wriggle precisely into the outline. Soon, I was ready, my arms stretched behind my head.

"He's all set," said Yvette.

"Ok," said my older self. "Ernest and Yvette, you should probably stand back a bit from me. A few metres at least." They backed off as instructed. "I'm going to touch the time viewer screen now, but nothing should happen until the next lightning bolt arrives. Just don't move until then... Bon voyage, Junior."

So there I was: lying naked on wet grass, occasional large raindrops falling on bare skin, Ernest and Yvette a short distance away under an umbrella, the torch pointing at the tree behind me—waiting, waiting for a bolt from the blue (or the black to be more precise) to take me back through time to my wife and family and the life I'd known.

Five seconds went past without lightning. Then ten.

"O come on," I said, exasperated beyond restraint. "How bloody frustrating can a dream be?"

Another few seconds drifted by. A dim distant bolt of lightning flashed, but nothing happened.

"Sadistic sonofabitch subconscious!"

"A case," said Yvette, grimly, "of all undressed and nowhere to go."

The instant she said the word 'go', the weather altered. I had no idea at the time what had happened, but another timeline balancing act must have resurrected the storm, or created another. It erupted upon us like a blow. My skin was assaulted by a torrential downpour, my ears by thunder as loud as any I'd heard. Dozens of simultaneous lightning flashes blinded me.

For a moment.

Then, dazed and visionless, everything ceased: the noise, the rain, the sensation of grass beneath me. I felt suspended in mid-air, or in a sensory deprivation tank. I heard, smelled, tasted, felt nothing, and could see only white noise.



I waited for the white noise to fade, for my vision and other senses to return.

And I waited some more.

White noise remained. My senses did not return.

I had escaped from the future, only to be trapped in some incorporeal limbo state, not even sure I was alive.

## 25

### No Place

After a small eternity of probably a few seconds, the white noise began to fade. I started to make out vague blurred shapes, but my other senses remained inoperative.

Gradually the blurred shapes grew more defined. Sudden hope. Was that my bedside table there? Or that other blur, the painting on our bedroom's far wall?

... No.

I was not in our bedroom.

I was still outside.

But not outside where I had been, in 2065. Not even close.

One of the decreasingly blurred shapes finally revealed its full glory: the unmistakable form of a tyrannosaurus rex. Red flesh of its latest kill spilled from its jaws, blood caked its teeth and chin.

Recoiling from shock, it took me time to realise the dinosaur was not moving. Like every feature of the surrounding landscape, it was motionless.

Then I realised my own state in this mind-boggling scene was equally impossible. I had vision but nothing else—I could not even see my body, however much I changed my field of view. Consistently, I could not speak (or more pertinently, scream). Nor did any other sense function.

I was a disembodied viewpoint, able to shift seemingly at will, yet trapped in a frozen prehistoric landscape.

Fearful beyond imagining, at my wit's end, I watched in confused dismay as the scene suddenly blurred, and was rapidly replaced by another—*more* baffling and unsettling: landscape rich with vegetation, akin to jungle, but hardly any plants or animals familiar—most far more colourful, especially the many exotic vibrant flowers. More startling: pale shapes, floating here and there, vaguely human, translucent, hairless, with huge craniums, naked but sexless. Again, no movement.

Persisting for less than the dinosaur, the scene blurred away and was replaced.

The blurring made me wonder if I was on Orlanos, surrounded by shapeshifters in their equivalent of a callisthenics class. Or perhaps the psychological experiment I had previously considered as explanation for events was continuing.

The new scene around me: proto-humans, half-man, half-ape, clustered round a deer-like carcass, tearing at raw flesh with bare hands, blood dripping down chins. Yet again, a moment frozen in time, no visible movement. Lasting for an even shorter duration.

More blurring to another bizarre landscape... Night, pockets of lights glimmering in the distance, barely brighter than unrecognisable constellations. Foreground dominated by trees, possibly luminescent. In the midst: an object whose purpose I could not even guess. A construction? If so, then like none I'd ever seen. Some parts open, full of frames and girders, like sculptures or mobiles—the rest closed, like distorted ornate medieval churches. Made of a single substance, perhaps, but not

brick, wood, cement, steel or anything familiar. Inexplicably, I thought it organic. Like surrounding trees, it seemed to radiate its own pale light. But its position among the trees was hard to fathom, rendering its scale uncertain.

The image blurred again, more quickly than the previous. I returned to the past. Another frozen moment in time: thousands of toiling sun-darkened men dragging slabs of rock up steep slopes to the top of an unfinished pyramid.

Before I knew it, the scene abruptly changed to something more familiar yet not: a small city seen from afar and above, separated from others by green belts, not unlike the town planning formats of 2065. But buildings not at all like those of Chord or surrounding cities, or anywhere else: full of odd angles, towers, spires, seemingly functionless protuberances, colours in profusion, few regularities, a seemingly chaotic jumble.

A thought came from nowhere: it was many centuries at least beyond 2065—and the earlier baffling landscapes were further still into the future. I was being flung backwards and forwards, with increasing rapidity, between past and future, each instance drawing closer to the present.

The next scene was consistent with my theory: a religious procession in the main street of what might have been an old European city. Perhaps post-Renaissance, but hardly my specialty. Or was it a re-creation performed yesterday?

Wherever it was, whatever was happening was clearly not restricted to the location I'd started from, in 2065.

Not only *when* but *where* would I finally end up?

If *anywhere*?

The procession vanished, as I was flung to another tantalising glimpse of the future: a streetscape even more closely resembling those of 2065. Then, I was plucked back to the past.

Back and forth between past and future, with increasing rapidity...

I saw familiar episodes from history, baffling glimpses of uncertain future events, mixed with mundane moments from domesticity...

Guillotine execution. Future Christmas pageant. Edwardian gentleman, shaving. Flourishing national park with oddly dressed tourists. Congested city streets and Model T Fords. Futuristic cars and trains. Neon lights. Robot factory unlike any other. Vietnam War demonstrations. Cityscape transformed. Test cricket with Lillee squatting in mid-appeal. Swimmers with dolphins. Modern battleships, cannons blazing. Communal garden. Stock exchange chaos. Frantic restaurant kitchen. Dole queue. Election launch like any other, except for the unrecognisable faces.

Scenes became ever briefer, transitions more clear cut. Still I could neither hear nor smell nor taste anything, but gradually, tactile sensations returned. I felt I was lying on my back, my arms outstretched behind my head.

The scenes changed more quickly—and my body faded into view.

Ever more quickly, soon too fast to follow, came the confusing kaleidoscope of historical moments. Amid the commotion, incongruously, without apparent conscious reason: the stirrings of an unbidden erection. *Not here*, I thought, feeling a slave to mindless hormones.

But there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Constantly shifting images of past and future swapped, blurring together into an indecipherable jumble, mounting like my erection—until both reached their logical conclusion.

The jumble of images became a smear of white light, which brightened in no time to the point of blinding me. Then suddenly everything changed: the bright light vanished, and my sight returned.

Yvette—my wife—was on top of me, riding frantically, midway through an obvious climax.

I was home! In our bedroom. In our bed. The moment I had left.

Lightning lit up the room, the storm raged.

Home, in my own time, as if I had never left, as if no time had passed.

Ecstatic, relieved beyond all possibility of doing adequate justice to my feelings with words, I waited until Yvette began to peter out and lower herself to the horizontal, then I tilted up to meet her halfway. I embraced her, kissed her.

No excessive tiredness from this particular trip through time! So great my joy and passion at again seeing Yvette, so vigorous my affection, by the time she caught her breath we had swapped positions and began what for her at least was a second helping.

Later, in afterglow, still wrapped in each other's arms, she quickly drifted off to sleep, but I stayed alert for some time. In the security of my own bedroom, surrounded by the familiar, locked in my wife's embrace, the events of the preceding days seemed even more unreal than ever. Had I imagined them? Was everything I experienced in the future a figment of my imagination? It couldn't have been a dream, as I'd maintained. Surely? Unless it was one that lasted for only a split second. Was that possible? Was it instead some sort of vision, or epiphany? A result of a blood vessel bursting in my brain? Was there a physiological explanation for it?

Eventually, drained and exhausted, but happy and utterly content, I fell asleep.

In the morning, wakened by the sound of my alarm clock, the future I had glimpsed or imagined seemed even less real. Bright sun through windows. The kids bickering in the next room about what TV show to watch. The sound of the ensuite shower running.

I was really home.

Back to work, I realised.

As always, rising as late as possible—still early, given the commuting ahead of me, but not as early as might be thought—my morning routine was a bit of a rush: out the door usually within half an hour of rising, breakfast in the form of a snack bar on the train.

Probably something I should change. One day.

I moved to the bathroom, smiled as I saw Yvette showering, asked how she'd slept ("very well"), responded in kind to her identical question, and started shaving.

It *had* to have been a dream. Disturbing in certain ways. And unlike typical dreams in *many* ways, including that I could remember its details in full—but then they'd probably fade away soon. Perhaps they were already fading. In the clear light of morning, I decided I'd probably mis-remembered at least the timing of the dream: it must have happened *after* I fell asleep, not during sex.

Perhaps I had dreamed the sex too.

Probably not, I decided, when Yvette stepped from the shower, put a wet arm round my waist and kissed me on a shoulder.

"Hey!" she said, jovially, "All your energy last night must have shed a couple of pounds." She rubbed her hand across my stomach.

I turned, leant back to kiss her. "There's a dieting regime I can handle." I returned my attention to shaving.

"Looks like it made your hair grow too."

In the mirror, I could see her surprised expression as she ran her fingers through my hair. "Huh?"

"Look for yourself."

I checked in the mirror. "Doesn't look any longer."

She shook her head, towelled herself dry. "I'd have sworn it was shorter last night."

I checked again, but still could not see what she saw.

"When did you do that?" she said. Bent over to towel her lower legs, she was motionless, pointing at my left foot. The smaller toes and surrounds were livid with fading bruises. The smallest toe had a needle thin hole in the centre of its nail.

I was struck dumb.

I had no memory of the injury—not in the real world that is, only in the dream. The *supposed* dream. Yet I could not deny that my foot bore the residual damage of having been caught in the door of Wilbur's car.

My knees suddenly weak, I stumbled momentarily, leaning heavily on the bathroom bench.

It must have really happened.

"Are you all right?" said Yvette, full of concern.

"I... I think so." I needed time to think.

"So what happened?" said Yvette.

*Could* it have? Really? Or was there another explanation?

"Just a momentary dizziness," I said. "Nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Still, I think I might stay home from work today. I've plenty of sick leave owing."

She looked at me with confusion and suspicion, but said nothing. She knew I rarely took sick leave, not unless I was all but bedridden.

But I felt a sudden overwhelming need to sort out just what had happened. I *needed* time off work.

Had it really happened? Or was it all in my mind? I soon realised, it didn't matter. Whether it happened or not was ultimately not even relevant. It was of no importance whether the knowledge I'd gained and the ideas I'd been exposed to were really those in use forty years in the future, or whether they were figments of my imagination drifting up for god knows what reason from the deepest layers of my subconscious—what mattered was what I did with them.

The fear I felt when Ernest spoke of me, in effect, as being the architect of the future now seemed absurd. Perhaps my decisions and actions were bound to create the future, or change it—but then that is *always* the issue. For *all* of us.

"So," said Yvette, "are you going to tell me what happened to your foot?"

I turned to her.

"Yes."

## Afterword

Ok, it's an optimistic portrayal of the future. So sue me.

For decades, the majority of fictional futures have been dark and brooding, pessimistic. Futures you'd do your best to avoid if you had half a chance. No apologies are due for not following that trend, for trying to suggest a better alternative to the dystopian norm.

And I won't be apologising either for suggesting that anthropogenic (man-made) global warming (AGW) doesn't threaten the future to the extent suggested by the current 'consensus' view. Despite the simplistic media portrayals and viciousness of some members of both sides of the debate, not only redneck conservatives and conspiracy fanatics have doubts about AGW—even some 'radical' progressives like myself find the evidence less than compelling. I used to accept AGW *until* I bothered to look into the claims and the data. While it seems almost certain that the CO2 greenhouse effect does indeed operate, and that therefore human activities are contributing to a warming of the planet, my understanding of the theory, its computer-based models, and the long-term temperature records—not to mention the groupthink and confirmation bias that pervades all human endeavour—suggests to me (though notable others would disagree) that the 'consensus' models overestimate feedbacks and climate 'sensitivity', and underestimate natural cycles. Consequently, I believe future warming will likely be less than the current 'consensus' forecasts, and also almost certainly less affected by attempts to limit AGW than is predicted. Perhaps my greatest doubt about AGW, however, is that its now widespread acceptance as the pre-eminent threat to humanity has the very deleterious effect of distracting attention from what are actually far more pressing and immediate concerns, such as the fundamental one of transforming to saner and fairer economic and political systems.

Nevertheless, while I do not share the 'consensus' view of AGW, I believe a horde of other perfectly sound reasons exist for developing renewable energy. Consequently, I won't be apologising for depicting a future full of it. Nevertheless, I suspect the technology I've described will likely prove insufficiently imaginative: all of it is based on existing ideas either in development or largely already working, rather than speculative and as yet impractical concepts such as Zero-Point energy or Tesla-style direct radiated power—such esoterica may never prove feasible, or some of it could be dominant in forty years, but it seems to me more sensible for the novel to concentrate its attention on what now seems the most likely solutions. Besides, the primary purpose of the novel is not to depict the technical accomplishments of the future, but rather how a new economic and political system might work—all other issues such as technology and urban design, though necessary parts of that future, are of secondary importance.

A word or several is also warranted regarding my explanation of how profit ensures that some competitors must lose, and therefore that capitalism is inherently unstable. I deduced this myself over three decades ago, but have since found quite a bit to back it up. Readers wishing to explore the subject in greater depth can find more detail about this and other ideas raised in the novel, especially the failings of competitive market economies and the merits and workings of a free lunch future, in

a non-fiction book I have written called *A Free Lunch* (available at <http://home.spin.net.au/freelunch>)—this gives a more formal treatment than does this complementary novel (which was actually “derived” from *A Free Lunch*).

Even if my arguments are somehow wrong, I would maintain that there is still a need to design a better future than the one to which we seem to be heading. The future of this novel is not a prediction, but a suggestion. Maybe not likely but possible (though metamorphic aliens and time viewers may be stretching it a bit). Forty years is a long time for institutions, systems, behaviour, and technology to evolve and change—especially if people take an interest in understanding and arranging what most needs changing.

Unfortunately, today the battle seems directed at symptoms, not the disease. What hope of ending ecological and social crises while persisting with eighteenth century economic, monetary and political systems that give birth to and encourage most of those crises? How can we cooperate to make a better world as long as we must all compete against each other economically? How can decisions be made which reflect the opinions of the whole population when we abdicate decision-making to clownish clone “representatives” ruled by worn-out ideologies, wealthy lobbyists, and archaic party platforms?

Tinkering at the edges without addressing core assumptions is like endlessly trying to repair a Model T Ford in the face of the obvious need to replace it with a new car—at best we will just drive round ever-narrowing circles until we inadvertently dig our own graves.

Fortunately, other forms of economic and political organisation—not simply capitalism *or* socialism—can be conceived and chosen. And other futures besides alienating hi-tech *or* agrarian throwback are possible. *Better* futures.

One possible future with a number of striking similarities to that portrayed in this novel—and equally striking differences—is the *Participatory Economics Project*, detailed at <https://www.participatoryeconomics.info/>. I first became aware of it two years after first drafting this novel, though its origins stretch back at least to 1991, about the same time I conceived the basics of freelunchism. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that suspicious.

Another possible future is that of *Inclusive Democracy*, detailed at <http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org>. Again the similarities to freelunchism are striking, even more so than Participatory Economics, but again I became aware of it, despite it being around since 1997, well after drafting this novel. Of the two, I prefer Inclusive Democracy as it seems better thought through, less anal retentive and has from the start based itself on a thoroughly revised polity. Nevertheless, I perhaps naturally prefer my own proposals. Hopefully, some amalgam of the best from all three proposals—and perhaps others I am not familiar with—will sooner, rather than later, be adopted.

It’s *not* either/or—the choices available for change are limited only by our imaginations. Feel free to improve upon what I’ve imagined.

Ultimately, it’s our choice.

Herman Royce

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