

PHILIP

PHILIP
A novel

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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Philip and Mary

I visit Mary. As the door of the home creaks open I'm hit by the smell of digestive biscuits, piss, boiled vegetables and milky tea. The place is decorated with streamers; a string of cardboard reindeer led by Rudolf covers the window. I see Mary sitting over by the nativity scene made of empty cereal boxes. Above her hangs an arrangement of balloons, the centrepiece is organised in the predictable cock and balls configuration but most of the oldies in the home are beyond appreciating the wit of the gesture. It's just after lunchtime and the head of the centre, Dr Gerry, is dressed as Santa, handing out pieces of Christmas cake. His costume is made of fruice, the fabric that deteriorates to nothing a few days after it's taken out of its vacuum-sealed pack. The fruice Santa costume is one of the fruice Corporation's new party products.

Nat King Cole's smoky voice is crooning: "Chestnuts roasting on an open flame, Jack Frost nibbling at your toes..."

Mary is sitting in the corner near the coffee table. She's taking tea with the other

oldsters and chatting to one of the *real* old people — an old lady with a back like a question mark swaying gently against her Zimmer frame. This home is mostly real oldies with maybe half a dozen young-oldies; those poor bastards like Mary who couldn't afford the health insurance to cover the age tax. Maybe there are also some ex-cons here. I hear that the age implant is the new solution to the problem of prison overcrowding and a deterrent for persistent offenders, but only those who are beyond escaping in an electric wheelchair are here. The politicians are already talking about the most humane exit strategy, it's clear that over the next year or so new types of facilities will have to be built. It's been six weeks since Mary missed the payment on her health insurance and the implant kicked in. Since then, my twin sister has gone down fast. On seeing me her eyes flicker with a combination of recognition and curiosity, "Hello Dad?" she says, her eyes brightening under a milky film.

Over the last few weeks I've learned to adapt to the uncertain pace of the changes in my sister, so I let her live with her misrecognition — we've argued enough over the years.

"How are you Mary? What have you

been up to?" I know it's a forlorn question but I also know from recent experience that she'll confabulate, by which I mean she'll piece particles of memory together into a coherent narrative, into a new memory which for her will be real. I don't know if my questions help, in fact I know they certainly don't, she's pre-programmed to break down sooner rather than later. I think again that maybe I should just let her pass over in silence.

"Oh..." she says and I can see in her eyes a fleeting terror as the void of her memory opens up. But very quickly, as if the unseen hand has grabbed a strand of sense connected to a network of interchangeable instances in her life, her face relaxes. She now has command over the components of the deteriorating code of her memory.

"I've been working. Terry got this big order from the Middle East, so we've been working hard restructuring the department, it couldn't have happened at a worse time, what with the Easter holidays coming up and all."

Terry was the boss of the company that laid her off three years ago.

I continue, "What are you doing for Christmas?"

After another pause she replies “We’re going away as usual...we’re expecting snow so we’ll go sledging.”

“We” is Mary and Charlie, the man Mary divorced six years ago.

The sound on the TV is off. It’s showing an episode of Christmas Celebrity Gay Island where the two remaining well chiselled, well oiled, half naked Celebs are singing together. Both of them are wearing the Santa’s caps that checkout girls and tabloid models wear. No, I’ll re-phrase that: They’re not singing with each other, they’re singing against each other, presenting themselves against each other...a number rolls across the screen.

“Last year we made a kind of slush puppy with maple syrup and snow...”

I don’t know if this is a real memory from a long dead Christmas or if Mary’s making a fantasy of a perfect moment for herself. But in a wider sense my sister’s condition is not exceptional — maybe we’re all making it up — and I’m certain, I AM CERTAIN, that on another level someone is making it up for us.

The song has changed. The PA is now playing the Christmas hit of 2019, it’s a Rapture song — every other song is a Rapture song these days. This song is by

a quartet called the Crystal Singers. Mary rocks blissfully from side to side, taken away on a tide of syrup...

*A man and wife asleep in bed,
She hears a noise and turns her head,
he's gone,
I wish we'd all been ready.
Two men walking up a hill,
One disappears and one's left standing still,
I wish we'd all been ready.
...There's no time to change your mind,
How could you have been so blind?
The Son has come and you've been
left behind.*

A few years ago, when the obsession with the Rapture first caught the public's imagination, Rapture songs tended to take the form of rock anthems which heralded doom and destruction, there was also a sub-genre of thrash metal Rapture songs which grafted effortlessly into their aesthetics of death and, of course, Rapturerap, but since the summer the Rapture songs have assumed a sad acquiescence — it's almost as if it's already happened. Before Mary moved to lalaland she thought putting the fear of Christ into people was all part of some grand conspiracy, which in a way

it is but only in a way. She was right to suggest that the Rapture industry keeps us all shitting bricks in a state of eternally deferred terror, and that such a state suits the powers that be, but she was wrong to suggest that the Kristol Corporation are doing everything in their power to *bring the Rapture about*, or, to put it in Mary's words, fuck everyone else and kick the ladder away. Mary started to take it too far after she became one of a flock of sheep gathering around a loopy seer named Cassandra. Cassandra is a holy fool holed up in some sort of community living on a leaking boat down in the Philipville port, they even have their own house band, the neopunks You May Wish to Burn.

Cassandra's doctrine preaches a re-phasing of the ages — we, this starry-eyed nymph promises, will be the first children born of a new age. This is why Mary and I fell out. Mary's increasingly tangled conspiracy theories became a bone of contention between her and me. Mary even got my ex-girlfriend, Carol, into it. Mary was always chewing Carol's ears about the Kristol Corporation. Before that Carol and I were a unit — like fish and chips, ham and eggs or chip and pin. This was until Mary and Carol started to watch all those

bootleg files from Channel 23Ω together, and to read the entrails that Cassandra vomited out. So, towards the end, we started to be more like chalk and cheese, or maybe fish and pin. Eventually Carol threw in her job as a systems analyst at the megastore Grendels and joined the crew of Cassandra's ship of fools. But, so much for her!

Mary suddenly starts to speak.

"A few weeks ago Philip fell off the ladder while we were decorating the tree..."

This is a real memory, or perhaps I should say it's a memory that my sister and I share. I did fall off a ladder about five years ago. I was around every Christmas back then, before things started to get really fucked up. In my own memory one Christmas slides into another. Christmas time exists in an antechamber; it's a non-time, a dead connection.

Mary and I talk a little longer, in which time I turn into Dad, Charlie and even myself, then the nurse comes over to tell Mary it's time to take her medicine. Christ knows what they put in that shit. Maybe it's snake water and they get the real stuff some other way — maybe the agent is in the food or the water supply, or maybe it connects with the implant wirelessly.

I take the tram home. I pass another Santa, this one weaves unsteadily on the pavement, and he's also dressed in fruice. The elbows and knees have already disappeared. The costume will be gone by Boxing Day.

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Finn

Those were the Last Days. Of course there have been so many false alarms that most people only half believed anymore but this time it was for real. The Crystal-Class elite knew the timing, they have access to Channel 23Ω after all and they have been planning it since the 1950s, pacing themselves, making their moves with deliberation. Only a handful of random watchers also grasped the magnitude of what was about to happen and sadly I was one of those idiots.

I wasn't even watching that hard. I had a tenuous rental agreement for a sleep pipe on a farm in the Centro Historico, salvaged from one of the old VA Tech drainage operations. With a two-metre diameter it was pretty roomy for me. There was a sleeping bag, an ancient handheld and a shelf of books at the back that I'd stolen

from work and nothing else. The other stuff disappeared gradually after I gave up on the civilisation crap.

I should explain. Most people consumed maybe eight hours a day. I sucked it in like there's no tomorrow. Fourteen to sixteen hours daily no problem, sometimes eighteen — until my eyes watered so hard I couldn't focus anymore. Scavenging among the street stalls that sell knock-off archives, I had accumulated years of information — things like the unedited image bank of the Kennedy clan, the secret diaries of the Dalai Lama, Tom Cruise's home video library including both suicide attempts and a complete set of British CCTV recordings from 2002–2015 (even the Westminster and Windsor material). All of this, on top of the current broadcasts — 500 worldwide streams plus the flotsam and jetsam of Web5.

Sometime in 2018, I was scanning a series of rare broadcasts by mediums in Poland. In the days after the fall of the Soviet empire it was common to trail news items with messages from the dead, astrological data and supernatural forecasts — maybe that all seemed as likely then as real events. One broadcast was a message from Edvard Kristol. The medium was an

old man swaying from side to side, eyes closed, and an assistant was holding his hand. He chanted and groaned, spat out the odd guttural oddity and finally tuned into a continuous flow of twisted English. It wasn't easy to decipher but buried deep in its core there was a mention of Channel 23Ω, accompanied by a weird yelp from the old man that I later translated as "Kristol."

It took me another two months before I found anything else on 23Ω and the circumstances were spectacular. I was leaving the St. Rafael Bernal Marketplace beside the cathedral when I heard a faraway scream above me and looked up in time to see someone falling from the top of one of the spires. The body seemed to be floating earthwards for several seconds before gravity jolted the image and a flailing carcass plummeted into a mess of tents and stalls.

I found out later she was called Femke Hauk. The daughter of a prominent Crystal-Class media presenter, Hauk had vanished from her native Rotterdam three days earlier and her whereabouts remained unknown until her sudden dive into the marketplace. While most of the crowd gathered around the smashed body, I followed the trajectory of a small silver

tube that spun away from her as she fell and that had landed otherwise unnoticed on the cobbles near the cloister. It was a neat little Zettacaster and, liked I'd hoped, it had some great intimate moments among the usual tourist shots, bookmarks, films and songs. It also had a series of broadcasts from Channel 23Ω.

CHAPTER 2

Cassandra

Cassandra looks up, her last vision has left her covered in salty sweat, her eyes stinging red and she tastes the salt around her mouth, enjoying the return to the real, enjoying the stinging of her eyes, the last few moments of her life, she has seen what is to come, and had felt the deep cut across her throat and the penetration of her heart. She's shaking in fever and laughs with the terror and the absurdity of facing fate. Giant concrete pillars loom overhead as the boat approaches the new bridge. They bob about as they have done whenever she comes back from a vision. An old alcoholic guy has been sitting on a bench looking out to the river, watching Cassandra in the boat and shouting at her during the visions. His visions are more earthly, full of self-pity and confusion. She vomits over the side of the boat, making a waterfall splash in the quiet water, wipes her mouth, stumbles out to the shore, collects herself and finds an inner strength to move on towards the wooden house, losing her footing, stumbling, but fighting forward.

Piano music twinkles across the water:

*I'll be seeing you in all the familiar places,
All day through,
In that small café, the park across the way,
the children's carousel, that chestnut tree,
the wishing well,
I'll be seeing you in every lovely summer's
day, in everything that's light and gay
I'll always think of you that way,
I'll find you in the morning sun and when
the night is new,
I'll be looking at the moon but I'll be
seeing you.*

Cassandra brings herself up the steps to the house, cat screams from foaming mouths emanate from the house. She nods to the figure standing in the dark behind the door and slips inside. In the entrance hall she picks up a red hood, she seems more powerful, deliberate as she slips the hood up over her head and adjusts it over the shoulders of her polo neck, her eyes have found a new life force within the eye slits, the whites of her eyes gleam as she drifts under the light from a bare bulb, she picks up a dagger from the old wooden side table and straps it around her waist. She looks across the hall to another figure; Carol slips

an identical hood over her smiling face.

The two red hoods move forward from the doorway and pass through to the dance floor. Green lasers cut low overhead. Rubber horror masks, fluffy feather masks, painted faces, wigs and bandit-eye masks.

“Kristol,” whispers Cassandra.

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Finn explains Crystal-Class

The Crystal-Class had their origins in the writings and teachings of Leo Strauss, a German born Jewish philosopher, who moved to America in the 1930s. Strauss advocated a strenuous anti-materialist line that eventually caught the imagination of the nascent neo-cons in Washington. Around the same time, the top generals in the Israeli Defence Force also discovered philosophy, adapting Deleuze and Guattari to formulate their strategies of fractal manoeuvring and formless rival entities. Not long after they began to talk of walking through walls and envisioning the outside as inside, they began to graft a Zen samurai framework into their approach (the monk Takuan’s *Unfettered Mind* was a primary influence) and shortly after the victories of the 2013 campaign the Crystal-Class

warrior elite emerged across the main nodes of the global economy.

And, just about the time I was wallowing in a stew of tacky sitcoms and Siberian holographic porn, the Crystal-Class initiated Channel 23Ω, a unique class-only stream that filtered the world's data. The Channel produced an austere and pure flow of information, the only clean, reliable source in a much-polluted world. Naturally, it was reserved for the worthy.

Femke Hauk was carrying a series from the Channel called *Sever The Edge* (it was taken from Takuan's text "Sever the Edge Between Before and After"). Just five twenty-minute episodes that detail plans to forward the Rapture.

I should tell you more about myself so that you will accept that my account is true. You will have read about my illness elsewhere. I'm not naïve — I know you come to this text with a series of facts and prejudices and among that data there will be a record of my illness. But schizophrenia does not prevent me from comprehending reality — if anything I am more aware of its tenuous nature, more sensitive to the gaps and tears in its fabric.

I have a clear grasp of the facts. I know for instance that my name is Finn. I know

that God exists. I can name every class of robot from the first DH to the present (I even wrote a monograph on the history of robotic arms). Compared to some people my faculties are sharp as a knife. Take my friend Mary, since her age implant was activated she's been sliding rapidly into senility. Her mind is in freefall. Compared to her, I'm a model of consciousness. If anything, my rationality can be a burden at times, an obstacle to clear perception.

And yes, I believe we are surrounded by the dead. That's more mundane than it sounds. There are no violent poltergeists flinging chairs across rooms or horrific Dementors bursting out of graves at night to torture humanity. When we both worked in the archives Mary came across an anonymous text that stated:

We are served by organic ghosts who, speaking and writing, pass through this our new environment. Watching, wise, physical ghosts from the full-life world, elements of which have become for us invading but agreeable splinters of a substance that pulsates like a former heart.

I asked her what it meant and she said, "It's like the ancient theory of

guardian angels. People believed they were accompanied by invisible agents of God who could offer protection. But now, with a clearer knowledge of strings we know that they could be parallel entities in parallel histories, only visible in the thinnest regions of the membrane that separates us from other worlds.”

“So they’re not really dead?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “But they’re dead to us — we can’t touch them though we can communicate through intense emotions or heightened states of awareness.”

“Like drugs?” I asked hopefully.

Mary just laughed. “Yes, like drugs,” she said. “You want some now?”

We used to get high on a regular basis in the archive. It helped us process all that information and it helped Mary forget about her tax problems. We both knew that by Christmas she would be a vegetable but neither of us wanted to confront it.

CHAPTER 3

Philip and Grendels

I visit Mary. Today her gaze is fixed on the TV. Occasionally she mutters inaudibly. I'll give her two days, tops. I assume my trusty hard-arsed attitude and decide that some retail therapy is in order. I head for Grendels.

I walk through the post-Christmas rush of the mall and pass the Monument to the Fire-fighter. His strong legs span the skyline of Philipville like a Colossus. Below him a tableau of earnest men, women and adoring children cast in concrete look up to him with grateful devotion, all are framed in the arc of the city that shelters them. His axe is placed on his shoulder with the base of the handle cupped in his hand. The broad buckle of his fireman's belt frames the figure of Saint Philippe, one sits inside the other like a homunculus, as if in every cell of Philip, the Firefighting saviour of Philipville, there dwells the Holy Philippe, the saintly founder of Philipville. Earlier I sent my DH Lindy2.4 ahead with a shopping list. It's standing in line at the DH depot with a shopping bag. I press

my key ring and the DH cuts out of sleep mode and follows me into Grendels. At the entrance of Grendels shoppers are always greeted by the latest DHs, the most current being the DH Electra 1.8, complete with the latest couture from Francesco Grip, the hottest fashion designer in Philipville.

Grendels is housed inside a huge open glass structure within the mall.

Domestic Help! Models, or DH, technology has been coming on in leaps and bounds over the last few years. My DH is still working pretty well, so I'm here to dodge the built in dead connection.

We walk over to the information desk. After some time, and after abating the press of teenagers waving their Grendels gift cards, a spotty kid in bottle-end glasses receives us. One lens is covered by sticking plaster in the latest 90s geek look — I read somewhere they call it “Hacker Cool.” He's even affected the mid-Atlantic twang, like a shit eating Nutty Professor.

“How can I be of service, S...S...Sir?”

I can't tell him why I want the things I'm getting, but why should he care? A few years ago certain components of particular models, including my own DH Lindy, were wired with a slow acting fruice alloy so that the dead connections can be precisely timed

by the manufacturer — this was all in line with the “Just-In-Time” policy adopted at the beginning of the changes. A while back Barry, the bassist in You May Wish to Burn, advised me that if I buy a Trimex unit, I can dismantle it and use the fresh fruice wires to renew my DH’s circuitry. He even gave me the bootlegged file of *DH for Dummies* that went off the market soon after the fruice alloy was adopted by Kristol Corporation. Although it’s technically illegal everyone does it and will continue to do so until the DH 5.5, the so called “dead-dead connection” model, comes on the market in mid-January. If January occurs that is, if we haven’t all been sent upstairs like Kristol, Philipville’s economic and religious factotum, is prophesying. Perhaps the lucky ones will be gathered up in the loving arms of our gentle, judging Jesus — whisked off into a dimension beyond time and space. But no one knows exactly how discriminating God will be, He’s like that, He likes to keep us guessing, so those of us left behind will still have to get by fumbling about in our routine, day-to-day, humdrum, boring eternal damnation.

The geek hands me the part and I charge it to my card. It’s not that I’m sentimentally attached to my DH, or

perhaps I should say I could easily have my sentimentality engineered into a new DH — approximations of Carol that simultaneously simulate and mock her: her height, certain curves and dimensions, her gait, her ant pose. It's just I need to keep a healthy amount of cash in my account to avoid the age tax or any number of new surcharges that will arise after the expected Rapture: the costs of retraining personnel for suddenly vacant job positions, the cost of structural damage following fires and plane crashes. But of course the Rapture is already happening, Cassandra's convulsive episodes, her portent-laden ejaculations speaking of a re-phasing of time, are just a manifestation of our collective pathology. Cassandra and the rest of the hair shirt hysterics are just the erupting scab on the skin of Philipville, she is the symptom of our condition. We're all in this together guys, so kiss your arse goodbye and climb into the basket that goes directly to hell, prepare to get poked by medieval beasties with fish heads and chicken's legs — they are in training even as we speak, bench pressing around the bones of the benighted, filing the blades of their torture machines to an exquisite point, stirring the molten lead and cackling and snorting with

greedy anticipation. The beginning of the end happened years ago and we've been living with the eternal end since we were born. Double-dead connection.

I get a grip on myself — remember, Philip, you are here to shop.

Here at Grendels it's still possible to purchase any of the older models. Along Avenue 19 you can find some of the antique DHs. Of the old DHs I'm most nostalgic about the DH Pokerface 7.6. The Pokerface was manufactured because people felt uncomfortable with the bland rictus that spread across the faces of the first DHs. The DH Pokerface series was essentially a batch of DHs that have no facial expression, just blank eyes like the heads of galvanized steel nails.

Along Avenue 37, the models DH Custard 3.2 and DH Cupcake 4.4 perform their culinary skills in an endless succession of kitchens and street kiosks. Avenue 28 features DH Stiletto 6.8, a fetish-type model, eternally wrapped in black rubber suits and four-inch high heels, mincing to the squeak of rubber against synthetic skin. Avenue 8 is the play-den of animal lovers, with DH Mimi 6.6, one of the more specialized DHs with the head of a cat, and DH Rex 4.5, with the head of a dog. The

genres of DHs are constantly expanding, as with the ever-increasing sets of Situational Laws, the first to cope with the mutating tastes and demands of the public, to cope with the increasing subversive usages of the DHs.

Just last year there were 6,438 cases of male citizens having to visit the DH Technical Centre here at Grendels to extract their penises from the throats of the various DH models. Apparently, the alkaline in semen causes the DHs to shut down and reboot, a self-preservation program that was written in the early days, due to the large numbers of leaking batteries in the older models.

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Finn and Mary

On Boxing Day I visited Mary. Her twin brother Philip had just left and I stole some of the grapes he'd brought her. She watched me silently, her head bobbing up and down to some invisible beat, some moonlight music. I took out the handheld and showed her the *Sever the Edge* series.

Mary watched intently for hours and said nothing until the last programme ended. Then she looked across the room,

ignoring me as she spoke: “Dead man! Their future is your destination. Turn me on. Scorch the hive, steal the honey, kill the bees, You may wish to burn now!”

Suddenly she rose to her feet and ran out of the room. I was stunned, a picture of propriety with a grape poised before my open mouth.

I jumped up and ran after her. She was already halfway down the hall and heading to her room. By the time I caught up with her she was pulling on jeans and discarding her nightdress, searching for a t-shirt and grabbing her jacket.

“That’s not just the fucking apocalypse!” she shouted and rushed out towards the stairs. I hurried after her, pushing past the nurses who attempted to stop me. Mary was out on the street now, running past a glowing but nearly empty bar and heading into the darkness of a wasteland across the road from the home.

I finally caught up with her again behind an abandoned, burnt out tram. Our breath formed fast, vanishing white clouds in the cold night air. Mary circled me impatiently while I regained my composure. “Too many mushrooms, Finn, too many chocolate bars....You’re out of shape.”

“The broadcasts,” she continued, “they

don't just signal the Rapture. That might happen, yes, but that's up to God. The Crystal-Class are planning beyond that point. They know there's only a chance they'll be taken — most of them are as damned as we are, just by living in this culture." Mary leaned forward and grabbed me by the shoulders. "They're planning out our future after Armageddon. It's a question of history. When two dimensions come together in the Rapture, time evaporates and we live in a continuous present. No past, no future. That means no government, and they won't let that happen. There's too much at stake for them."

"So how do we stop them?" I asked.

"We need to find Cassandra. You've seen her before — she visited the archive looking for early Edvard Kristol clips. We found some on YouTube for her."

Across the waste ground I saw the few remaining customers being evicted from the bar. It was closing time. "The half crazy one with green eyes? I fancied her like mad..." I said, almost to myself.

"That's the one," replied Mary, "maybe you'll score this time."

In the distance, the cathedral bell tolled midnight. We set out for the street. As soon as we found something worth

stealing I hotwired it, and we set off to find Cassandra.

As we sped through Paradise downtown, I turned and said, “How did you do that?”

“What?” asked Mary.

“Jump up and escape from the old people’s home?”

“Easy,” she replied. “It was a tax rebate. I could feel it surge this morning but it took all day for the ant-implants to power up again. It was a long shot but my accountant persuaded me to apply just before I was wiped out. Apparently, the archive owes a fortune in national insurance payments.”

CHAPTER 4

Philip at the Moniac Bar

I get home from the Mall and simulate some sex with my DH. I shower and pull some of the old wires tarnished with fluicage out of her neck and replace them with the new wires. I feel like I'm in the last ever re-make of Frankenstein. I give a manic laugh and make lightning sounds with my mouth. After I'm sure the DH is in working order, getting it to touch its nose and walk in a straight line, I decide I need a drink. In fact, because I know I will be mourning the death of my only sibling soon, I need a few...and then maybe a few more. I take a tram to downtown Paradise and go to the Moniac Bar. For the time of year the bar is surprisingly silent. Maybe the regulars are all at home repenting their sins to whatever deity they think responsible for the coming Rapture. In every shitty flat and sleep pipe the penitent citizens of Philipville are beating their miserable chests, wailing and gnashing their teeth. Teeth gnashing, I have noticed, is a singularly religious activity.

In this town you have to choose your drinking partners carefully.

What's your poison?

What's your paranoia?

I drink a few shots and start to work on my own deep misgivings about the nature of reality. I'd like to confabulate a grand conspiracy theory that goes beyond conspiracy. I could sell the idea to some half-arsed belief group, something like the Flat-Earthers, whose need to believe is in inverse proportion to their need to face the shitty truth. I could be their supreme leader — I take another shot of vodka and laugh manically, and silently, of course.

Mary's old friend Barry, the bassist from the punk band *You May Wish to Burn*, is sitting at the other end of the bar. He lifts his tired head and nods in my direction. It looks like he's been here for some time. I think of going over and thanking him for the *DH for Dummies*, but as he lays his head on the bar, his cigarette burning painfully close to his ochre fingers, I realise he's not in the mood for conversation. But who is? What do agnostics at the End of Days have to talk about? We are struck silent by the palpable fear in the air; even those who don't believe in any of the sumptuous variety of ends offered to them know that it's only the effect of fear that makes reality.

The gabba house revival band Mitim are playing. I let the alcohol flow around me and the fast music flow over me. I close my eyes and think about my hangover cure — eggs, orange juice and a detox pill big enough to clear the system of an alcoholic elephant.

I wake up as my head hits the bar and spring like a jack-in-the-box to attention. Through the bar window I see a woman rush past the window. My God, it's Mary!

I stand. I fall. I stand and fall again, and then crawl quickly to the door. I stand successfully after pulling myself up on the U of the door handle. I push instead of pull. I keep pushing, I fall back woozily, still supported by the door handle, and the door swings open. I fall to one knee and crawl up the side of the door. I stagger out into the cold. Mary is gone by now, of course.

I follow her, running like some badly wired automata. A man rushes past me, past a burned out tram at the end of the street. I hear another, heavier foot fall behind me, and a hand grabs my shoulder and brings me down easily. I look up at the guy behind the bar of the Moniac. He squares up his stance like the Fire-fighter, colossal above me.

“Sorry sir, I'm going to have to ask you

to pay your bill.”

“Oh, shit, I’m sho shorry...I fwort I shaw my shishter.”

I roll over and try to find the pocket with my wallet in it.

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Philip gets a message from Barry

I wake up fully clothed. It’s the middle of the night, or maybe it’s early...I check the clock — it’s two AM.

I somehow made it home.

God, my head!

God, my mouth!

I manage to crawl over to the cabinet and take the goof-ball detox pill...I find the key ring...press the button and the DH boots up.

“Get me two boiled eggs and a glass of orange juice...oh, and some toast. Two slices.”

I fall back on to the pillow. I make a promise to myself that I have no intention of keeping, but I calculate that the promise might just be earnest enough to get me into the shower. I promise, never again.

After getting the DH to shovel the food into me, I get up. When are we? Oh yes, the 27th. We are now entering that

most ghostly part of the year, the dead connection where the lost promises of the past and the promises to be broken in the future meet in a bottomless abyss. The period between Christmas and New Year's Day is time's very own anti-matter. But for the seers this particular year is a threshold to a new age. There will be signs blazing across the heavens. The four horsemen back projected onto the screen of the eternal sky, the horrific iconography of every major art movement from the icon painters to the surrealists and beyond will be made palpable. The fruit of your sins will turn to dust in your mouths; your good works will be as honey to your tongues. You will kneel and you will pray, because I am God. I am the supreme, the ultimate the unequivocal Lord of Time... So, FUCK OFF, LOSERS!

In the shower I contemplate getting the DH to give me a hand job but think better of it. The hot water hits my head and starts a confabulation process in the synapses of my brain. Did I see Mary last night, moving like a springbok through Paradise? Or did I dream her before I tried to run out of the bar without paying? Or did I leave without paying because I saw Mary?

The DH placed my clothes on the

bed. We're so very Jeeves and Wooster sometimes, her and me...I mean it and me.

I see I've had two messages while I was in the shower. The first is from my senile sister. Mary, before she went into the home, arranged to filter and relay files to me, these are bits of subversive crap circulated by Cassandra and her salty pirate crew. I patch it over to the screen and order the DH to get me another orange juice. It's a lecture given way back when in the days long before the Ban on History. From the clothes the speaker is wearing I'd place it in the 1970s: flowery shirt, untidy hair falling over a scalloped collar. He's standing in some university lecture hall. His talk is called *The Rapture As a Piece of Pseudepigraphy*. He's not such a good communicator; his voice flat lines in a monotone. He tells us that the idea of the Rapture is new, or comparatively new. Although the Book of Revelation speaks of the great judgement of humanity, there is no mention of the idea that the saved will be beamed up to heaven leaving the rest of us to stew in the damnation of our own making.

The professor continues: "The popularization of the term Rapture is associated with the teaching of John Nelson

Darby and the rise of pre-millennialism and dispensationalism in the United States at the end of the 19th century. In 1908, the doctrine of the Rapture was further popularized by an evangelist named William Eugene Blackstone, whose book, *Jesus Is Coming*, sold more than one million copies and was further popularized by its inclusion in the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909.” This is all very interesting as far as it goes, and I suppose we’re meant to draw the conclusion that the Kristol Corporation are using the idea as a tool to control the masses. The Kristol Corporation’s story has an emphatic end, and those of us left on the earth will be like unemployed extras living in the set of a film after the action has taken place. But, come to think of it, Cassandra suffers from a contrary form of delusion; from what I can gather from the garbage Mary and Carol told me about her, she’s preaching the flipside of the Rapture.

I patch over the second message. It’s from Barry the bassist. It’s an ad for a gig for his neopunk band You May Wish To Burn, the venue is a club called Vanilla Wave down in the Paradise docks sector. He’s voiced over the image of a half-naked man giving a two-hand blowjob to a microphone:

“Hi Philip, did I see you at the Moniac earlier? I got really stotious, man. Don’t think I’m not sociable or anything. And if it wasn’t you then it’s OK as well...” Barry gives himself a few seconds to reflect on the stupidity of what he’s just said and then continues. “Anyways, it would be great to see you in the audience tonight. I better tell you man, we’ve been writin’ a song for Mary...I’ve got to tell you, man...there’s not long...oh fuck, sorry, I’m still a bit... Anyways, we’re still working on it but it’s taking shape, the song’s called ‘Fucked in the Brain for Cash.’ Anyways see you there, comrade.”

Charming. A must for genuine music lovers, and it certainly puts a rocket up the arse of the Crystal Singers.

CHAPTER 5
Cassandra outside Vanilla Wave

Outside Vanilla Wave, a thin fruice worker with arms down to his knees and dirty trailing fingers wafts out from a doorway. He lifts an arm to block Cassandra's way, a grimy thick nail pricks into her tightly knit polo neck.

"Have you got a few Saphs? I am short for transport, I must return to unit. You don't want me to disregard curfew, do you?"

His fingernail traces up her body, pressing uncomfortably into her neck.

She doesn't flinch and stares into his yellowing glazed eyes.

"Do not bother me with your pitiful charades! The city is as good as won. Go home, keep your cock in your pants for tomorrow's jamboree, sunshine."

The fruicer's hand flops down to the pavement. He jerks his head from side to side scanning the docks, then he shoves Cassandra up against the red steel artists' entrance, his charged breath shoots Cassandra's hair up like a frightened cat, it spreads clinging over the steel surface.

“Are you police? I kill you. What you know?”

She stares at him coolly, smiles and looks in her bag for a sheet of Bounce fabric softener, which apparently eliminates static build up. She wipes her hair and face.

“I know a lot about the future. I am a specialist.” Handing him the perforated sheet of Bounce fabric softener, “Here, you may need this.”

The fruicer glazes over, embarrassed by her ridiculous gesture, flinches back and jabs her in the cheek with a long finger, penetrating the surface flesh, twisting his dirty nail around and scraping back, she catches his elbow and forces the weak muscles away, dislocating his elbow like a cheap chicken wing. Dancing Vanilla Wave projections pick out his enfeebled body writhing on the slimy pavement. Cassandra steps over him, retrieves the sheet of Bounce, wipes her scratched cheek and passes through a line up of bowing bodybuilders at the entrance to the club.

∞

Mary and Finn at Vanilla Wave

The first place we tried was Vanilla Wave. Cassandra was inside, close to the stage

door with Barry the bassist. Cassandra was wiping a spot of blood from her cheek with a tissue. Barry introduced us to Overly Israeli, a crazed socialite with burnt hair implants and a carnivorous handbag. A little knobbly-headed fruice punk was handing out flyers and shoved one in my hand. I glanced at it — "...this shithole with its fucked up pachuco name of Paradise. Passiondale would have been better. The British always called their streets and squares after killing fields and battles that let the plebs know where they stood in the scheme of things from the start off..." I stopped reading and threw it away. Barry was dragging Overly towards the band's dressing room and Cassandra was pushing towards the mosh pit, picking her spot before the gig kicked off.

They were playing classic tunes from Fairuz and the Rahbani Brothers over the PA so the band must be coming on soon. Mary and I stood near the back where there was more room and we ordered some drinks. I had a Blue Fire Balloon but Mary went for the hard stuff and had a double Red Rivet, downing it in two gulps. "Good for the synapses," she explained and then laughed maniacally, pretending her legs had turned to jelly.

The crowd roared suddenly and we turned to see Overly swaying at the microphone, considerably more dishevelled than she had been ten minutes earlier. “Waaagh!!” she screamed, “Scorched crows on a flaming branch, cutthroats at midnight, you frigging guerrilla hearts in a plundered temple, put your hands together for the greatest band in ancient Palestine — You May Wish to Burnnnnnn...!!!!” Everything else was drowned by the clamour from the floor as the musicians ran onstage and plugged in.

“New song for you starved motherfuckers” growled Spite, the lead singer as they lurched into an electronic maelstrom underpinned with an old Nablus style psychobilly beat:

*You fill my mind with trash
then you fuck me in the head for CASH
cash cash head fuck cash!*

Mary was spinning wildly behind me, the floor was bouncing up and down from the impact of pogoing fans. I could see Philip coming down the stairs of the club and begin to wave. At the same time, out of the corner of my eye, almost in slow motion, I caught sight of the little fruice

punk. His pamphlets hung like a cloud of shot feathers over his spasming body and his head began to explode in a storm of blood. Philip spotted Mary and was frozen for a moment before rushing across, causing the pogoing bodies to fly in every direction. The fruice worker had fallen to his knees, struggling to escape the welter of boots flailing in his direction. Philip was hugging Mary, jumping up and down and screaming. The crowd surged backwards and forwards with the impact of the fight in its midst. The music seemed to speed up, drums to the fore, pounding faster than the boots sinking the fruice punk. Suddenly everything screeched to a halt and all heads turned to the stage. Cassandra stood there in the central spotlight. Spite and the rest of the band retreated to the darkness. A weird howl filled the air, mixed with the moans of the bloodied punk. And then we all saw something we'd never forget...

∞

Philip at Vanilla Wave

After queuing for a while I the pin door of the Vanilla Wave and pass through a corridor of bodybuilding bouncers in sleeveless t-shirts. The band is just starting

Mary's song as I go down the stairs. I think I see Mary's friend Finn on the fringes of the mosh pit and give a wave. Finn is the sad loony loser who always had a soft spot for Mary; he's a librarian or something and worked with Mary in the archive. The club is rammed; retro punks mix with society types in the swankiest Francesco Grip clothes, small groups of fruice workers scowl at the edges of the room. Fruice workers seem to carry the contamination of decay with them, disjointed and scabby, dissolute and shabby. One gnomish punk fruice worker hands me a flier. This one is a particularly revolting specimen, in both senses of the word. If the contents of the flier are to be believed the fruice workers are ready for rebellion and we, their "brothers in their fight against oppression" should join them in their struggle. It would seem the fruice workers here are on an outreach mission to like-minded people. I scan other phrases "...by any means necessary...we demand the justice WE deserve. We will exact the judgement THEY deserve."

The band have reached the point where the psychobilly beat gives way to a tirade teetering on the verge of collapse, Barry unstraps his bass and beats it against the amp, the drummer throws away his sticks

and beats the drum with his fists.

*Fuck me in the head for cash.
You fill my mind with trash.
Your world is going to crash
if you fuck me in the head for cash.
Head fuck head fuck cash.
Fuckhead, fuckheadcrash!*

As I make my way through the crowd I see someone with her back to me who looks like Mary. It seems I'm seeing her everywhere these days. She turns her head and her profile is backlit by the light from the stage. It's the same profile I've known since the day we were both born. God, it is Mary, it's my Mary, young and alive, vibrant and happy. No, stay cool it's just a trick of the stage lights, it can't be... I move closer, pushing through the crowd as the music gathers in intensity.

The singer is screaming and has started to improvise on the theme, "I Fucking hate you, you fucking bastards. Cos you fucked me in then heeeeeead!"

Mary opens her arms, her bright eyes shining again, a smile across her face. I take her into my arms and lift her from the floor. I can hear her screaming with joy as I swing her around. I feel the warmth

of her tears on my cheek. Oh, sis, sis, sis. I let her down and can see she's speaking quickly. I could just make out the names and the odd word. "Finn...home...tax rebate...Car...Kristol...Help...Rapture... Cassandra...re-phasing."

As the band reach a crescendo, a fight breaks out between some fruice workers and some punks. The crowd backs away from the flaying fists and flying glasses as Mary and me are pushed apart.

∞

Philip witnesses Cassandra's vision

Cassandra takes the stage and pulls her red leather hood over her head. The room falls silent, fruice workers and punks freeze in the middle of punches, it's almost as if the flying glasses come to a stop in mid air. The mob turns to face the stage. Cassandra begins. At first it sounds to me like the sort of abstract verbiage you might hear from a batty fortune teller, a series of emotive images that could apply to any time and any place, but to the crowd, caught in some mysterious paralysis of attention, every word seemed to be laden with poignant meaning. She is speaking of the time to come, a new kind of time and as she

continues to speak a strange wave comes over me. The sensation begins with her voice, a soft cadence that seems to emanate from another world, or perhaps from a world to come. This affect then grows within me like some sort of indefinable emotion; the unfamiliarity of this takes my breath away. I feel a joyful fear, a fearful joy which I can only describe as a form of spiritual light which for a moment, perhaps a split second, tears a tiny hole in the screen of reality, cutting through all the phony projections, through all the dirt and lies to reveal a timeless light...

Cassandra falls to the ground and her closest aides and members of the band rush forward and carry her towards the stage door. Framed by the lights of the car park illuminating the door I see a familiar shape. It's Carol, my long lost love. It's Carol, the woman who left me to follow Cassandra. Maybe she's seen me, she pulls a red hood over her head. I see now that my sister Mary is there too, leaning over the whispering mouth of Cassandra. As the body passes her, Carol takes Cassandra's limp hand, raises it to her lips and kisses it. The crowd begin to wake from their collective vision, whatever it was we saw, we saw the same thing, some fleeting and

tantalising vision of a better future — we all seem to understand that the time we inhabit is not the only possible time. The fruice workers and the punks separate, almost apologetically. The PA is silent. I can only hear a low astounded murmur and the sound of broken plastic glasses crunching under the feet of the crowd. The remaining members of the band take the stage and begin to play. I walk to the stage door. I must talk to Carol and tell her that I now understand that I got the situation wrong, I should have listened. I rehearse the climax of my apology — “Carol, it was me that was out of phase.”

I see Cassandra being carried along the edge of the dock; two massive titanium black fruice refining ships are backlit by the flames of the oil refinery. The portage looks like a holy procession retrieving some saintly figure from hell. They will go back to their boat, maybe take off to another harbour to take their message there, starting in the most marginal sections of society and spreading through the culture of Philipville like a benevolent virus.

I hear the sound of police sirens in the distance. I am behind the procession now and Carol turns to look at me, she pushes back her red hood. Carol keeps walking but

her pace doesn't quicken.

Her hair is shorter now, arranged in a bob around a face charged with what I would like to think of as a distant love. The sound of sirens comes closer. Headlights appear ahead of us as two personal transportation vehicles speed towards us. The first swerves to an abrupt halt, obscuring my view of Cassandra and her followers, the second swerves to block their path towards the boat. The back doors swing open and a group of armed men, Kristol Warriors in riot gear, rush out and form a line ahead of me. I move to the edge of the water and try to see through the transparent riot shields. I see a group of guards pushing Cassandra and her followers to the ground, twisting their hands behind their backs and cuffing them with zip ties. With studied efficiency the group are thrown into the back of the vans, Cassandra and Carol into one and the followers into the other. The phalanx of riot police starts to move forward, taking one step a second. I back off. I know the drill, if I don't run now I will be taken into the carapace of this armoured beast. I turn and run back to the club. I can hear the tramp of the riot police speed up behind me. Soon the charge will begin. I cut right and join

the mass streaming from the club. We are now a swarm. I'm running next to the fruice punk who was handing out leaflets earlier, he cuts into an alley, because I figure this guy knows a trick or two, I follow... He runs with surprising speed and then jumps to one side, the ground opens up and he disappears. I hold my nose and dive feet first after the fruice worker. I fall, snaking through an aluminium tube and drop onto an old mattress that explodes in a cloud of dust. I look up to see the barrels of six guns form a halo around my head. I see the faces of six fruice workers, in various shades of grey and green, and in various stages of decomposition, staring indifferently at me.

"Shall we waste him, Brifcor?" says a female worker.

Brifcor, the guy I was following, turns his head to one side and considers my fate for a few moments, which for me are a few moments too long. He then lowers his gun. The others follow suit. Brifcor comes closer and breathes into my face, "Get the fuck out of here, get as far away as possible and as quickly as you possibly can. Got that?"

I nod.

"You, my friend, are my good deed for the day. You are the one that got away.

So when you say your prayers from now on always end by saying: ‘And God bless Uncle Brifcor.’” He raises his gun again, and presses it against the socket of my left eye, “What do you say?”

I try to swallow. My mouth is dry. In a parched whisper I say “And God bless Uncle Brifcor.”

He lowers his gun and the group turn in unison as Brifcor leads them out of the cellar. I turn over on the mattress and vomit out my fear.

There’s three things I’ve got to do: get out of here fast, find Finn and Mary, and tell them that Cassandra has been kidnapped.

CHAPTER 6

Cassandra's capture

A plastic fire-fighter swings back and forth from the rear-view mirror, smiling bright eyed at the driver. The fire-fighter jumps up and down each time the truck passes over a pothole and the driver winces, one arm is tied up in a makeshift sling. Directly behind him, behind the corrugated white steel divider, in the dark, is Cassandra. She is lying face down on a stained musty mattress; Carol sits slumped across her. Upbeat jazz music wafts through from the cab.

*Jeepers creepers,
where d'you get those peepers?
Jeepers creepers,
where d'you get those eyes?*

Cassandra opens her eyes and looks around; aftershocks of her last phase linger on. She feels the weight of Carol's body pressing down on her ribs, breathing is difficult, a bar of yellow streetlight glides over them. Toned muscles ripple over sabre tattoos, a man with an orange sun-bed tan

pushes down onto her soft flesh. She feels her legs wrapping around his waist, pulling him closer to her, their bodies are getting hotter as his pulsing cock forces into her for the first time. Cassandra glides a hand across to hold his massive balls, "Oh Kristol you hunk, fuck me deep!" She pulls him in further, barely able to accommodate as her neck flushes rosy red. She relaxes and releases a wave of wetness as he starts to pump her. Phase alignment is not far off. Clouds and grass surround them at the Centre, a woodpecker taps furiously at the nearby gate as Cassandra holds Kristol down, gliding wet and smooth over his pulsating member. The clouds caress them and the city fills with pink runny gunk as the sides of the truck come in and out of focus.

Jolted forward, Carol awakes and yells to Cassandra, "I can't handle this! You've got to help me! I'm getting too close! I can feel time slip over me, you and Kristol. And me, when am *I* going to phase with you?"

Cassandra smiles in deep reverie, still flushed, she tilts her head to one side to see Carol more clearly. "Carol my sweet, you are everything to me, but Kristol is our destination, be patient."

The doors creak open, the first rays of

the morning sun flood into the dark van, a crew of five men stand between them and freedom. Their excited, hot-blooded bodies give off little puffs of steam, condensing in the cold air. Cassandra is pulled out first, her ripped jumper frays open. A curtain of freezing breath clouds the gap between the women and their captors as they are dragged out of the truck by their tied wrists. The men glance at Cassandra's open breasts, but seem distracted, they are nervous and look at each other, checking their watches. The women are pushed up the steps to a dark brown wooden house with rough splintering timbers, Carol's left leg catches on the doorframe, causing a large splinter to pass through her skin, she doesn't notice and moves through to the intricately carpeted vestibule.

One of the guys calls from outside, "Get in and lock the doors, it's about to happen."

Cassandra and Carol hold each other tight as they pass through the corridor. Mirrors are bolted to the walls like a shop changing room. Cascades of reflections fall away to the floor on either side. Cassandra, smiling and carefree, runs her finger along the mirror covering the length of the hallway. As she walks she moves her finger up and down, like a seismograph

needle. A thousand hands move up and down following an arc, a wave trails behind on the dusty surface, each second of her history trails behind: the thrilling kiss with Kristol, the lush grass at the Centre with Carol, reflections back into the present, her diamante brooch hangs down from her fraying jumper, sparking dots of dancing light shift forwards within the recursive reflection, wave patterns intermingle in a complex tangle as she strides forward to the end curtain. Carol strengthens her hold on Cassandra's midriff, feeling the soothing warmth of her confidence and her wonderful soft silky skin. A shop assistant DH pulls back the curtain, smiles mockingly, "Does it fit? I think you will find that our sixty-seven percent fruice garments feel shockingly fresh in today's marketplace and are somewhat kinder to the modern form."

Cassandra pushes the *Domestic Help!* aside, it murmurs, "Security...security, we may have an issue...Department 12 sector 27." There is no human overseer to respond, the shop is deserted, and mannequins' legs protrude from beneath black covers: one can only guess at the horrific forms lying below. The guys push the two through the shop. "What are you

ladies trying to pull? Get your fancy tails over here, no more smart stuff.” One of the thugs zip ties their wrists together, Cassandra restrains a giggle, allowing them to be guided across the shop towards a row of mannequins wearing grey suits, a retro photograph of a “house” behind. They keep the pace up, closing in on the dummies, Carol tries to slow down but the herd around her pushes on, frogmarching now, towards the grey suits and the incredible “house,” beautifully framed in laurels. Carol wrestles with the guys, the group is moving with fluid momentum like a car rolling down a hill without breaks, right smash bang into the dummies! As the guys at the front trample the suited dummies, figures topple sideways and the floor gently gives way, threads dissolve and fray around them, tickling their noses as they enter freefall through the fading web. Bits of fluff get caught in Cassandra’s hair during freefall and she sneezes in delight: delight at feeling Kristol push himself into her, at the power she will feel when the two of them unite for the first time.

CHAPTER 7
Finn and Mary in the car

Mary and I were in the car, parked in an alley not far from the spike. We were trying to make sense of what had happened at the club. Cassandra's vision had silenced the crowd and the band never really recaptured their momentum after she left the stage. Mary managed to speak to her as she was being carried off stage and asked her some fast questions about Channel 23Ω, Kristol and the Rapture, and then we got out of the club and into the car.

I put the radio on and left the heat running to fight the frost outside. It was slow, old-timey music:

*...when it sizzles.
I love Paris ev'ry moment
ev'ry moment of the year.
I love Paris.
Why,
Oh, why do I love Paris?
Because my love is near!*

That song was like toast. Nina Simone warmed us both and soon we were cosy

enough to fall asleep. Mary's head was lying against my shoulder and when she started to dream, she nestled into my chest and I realised I loved her.

The radio woke us about two hours later. Our muzak broadcast was interrupted by a news bulletin and our toasted life evaporated in the chill it brought. The first report said there was a fruice spill at the docks though no one appeared to be hurt and damage was limited to a few harbour-side buildings. I scanned the stations while Mary pulled herself together. It was her first sleep, however brief, since the ant-implant had activated, and she seemed groggy. Vixen news said there had been a major fruice catastrophe, a fruice refinery tanker had crashed into the harbour with severe damage as far as the centre of the Paradise sector, there were definitely victims of the accident but numbers weren't confirmed yet. YouTube was reporting eyewitness accounts of fruice workers swarming ashore and ransacking downtown, using the fruice spillage as an advance force to wreak havoc on the city. I used the handheld to convert the radio for Channel 23Ω and heard the old weird voice of Edvard Kristol.

“This morning we are a city awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. You

may be asking, why do they hate us? Well,” he drawled, “they hate our freedoms — our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

Mary was sitting up, wide-awake now.

“These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life. They stand against us, because we stand in their way. But, my friends, we will direct every resource at our command — every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war — to the disruption and to the defeat of this terror network.”

“What’s happening — who are these terrorists?” I asked.

“There’s no terrorism, dummy,” said Mary. “It’s a revolution.”

“Really?”

“Really. Check the screen.”

Mary took the handheld away from me and quickly recalibrated it. The small screen lit up with a continuous green flow of information. “See, the fruicers are jamming. They’re on the move.” She shrugged off any doubts. “It’s definitely a revolution.”

“Why would they do that?” I said. “Even

the fruicers must know there's nothing they can change. Even if the Rapture wasn't coming."

Mary laughed and gave me a playful dig in the ribs. "You're so cute when you're stupid, Finn."

"Then I must be very cute most of the time..."

"Well, yes, dear. But it's just that you believe no one can make a difference. It's all those videos and all that crap news you've consumed for years. You think history happens to other people — you think you're just an onlooker." She interrupted herself, saying, "Start the car, Finn."

"But," she continued, "The fruicers don't have that disease. Remember that old speech from the Bush years:

"That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

"Ok. Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

It was chaos on the streets. Fire-fighters

were everywhere, attempting to clean up the fruice, ferrying bodies out of the affected zones and regrouping around their trucks to talk tactics. Still, there were no signs of a revolution.

“Where are the fruice workers? And where are Kristol’s troops,” I asked.

Mary scanned the streets and pointed over to a seemingly calm group of buildings. “There,” she said, “Behind the walls. Remember, the inside is the outside and vice versa — they can move through the city invisibly.”

Just as she said this the walls of the street began to swell and stretch and then exploded. Giant waves of dust billowed over the scene and I grabbed Mary’s hand so that we could make our way out of the sudden darkness together.

The car was useless. The explosion hadn’t just broken its windows, the whole body of the machine was buckled and stressed. We ran for the first few blocks until we were too exhausted to keep going. All of the streets were empty now but I remembered Mary’s warning that the battle might be taking place all around us.

“Do you remember the east side annex to the archives?” Mary asked, leaning against a waste bin to catch her breath. “We

could hide there — it's an armoured shelter and it's only a store for 20th century music so it's not going to be high on anyone's list of priorities.”

I was impressed at how clearly she was thinking. She should have been Crystal-Class with a mind like that. I barely scraped into existence at times while she was always there figuring out events three moves ahead. Her clarity would be vital as I realised there would be no chance to return to my sleep pipe and replenish my daily medication. Reality would become a rare commodity over the next few days.

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Francesco Grip

The girls in the dressing room are stripped frantically by DH — Rackers5.4s and the new outfits are sprayed on. The gossamer forms cascade over the bodies of the models. Delicate, web-like fabrics move with mysterious grace over their shoulders, gleaming with a shell-like iridescence as they glide towards the catwalk. Francesco Grip smiles. He is a happy man tonight. His latest collection is the only fruit-based product to date to receive a 9.9 license. His couture would therefore retain its form for

9.9 years, just long enough for them to be coveted for both their longevity and their rarity. His new collection now adorns the bodies of the most beautiful women in Philipville — not just the generic DHs at Grendels but REAL women. And now they are displayed on the magnificent Fire Stage here on the waterfront. Nothing is beyond Francesco Grip tonight. Señor Grip has the world at his fingertips.

The show begins. Grip gleams with satisfaction as his beauties stroll onto the stage. The broadcast cameras of every known media stream are fixed on them, showering the world with his bounteous gift. He clinks glasses with an elite group of fashion journalists and pops a VXV into his champagne. The combination of the hard-hitting music, the intoxication of the moment, the easy motion of the model's bodies and the flow of his sumptuous creations will carry him into a psychedelic sphere...

YouTube Channel 498: "We bring you live from the latest offering of the punk genius Francesco Grip, Philipville's god of couture. We are now here at the Fire Stage, YEESSSSS!!!! IT'S CRAZY ITS FUNKY ITS COOL ITS FRANCESCO GRIPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP SUBLIME

QUEEENNNNN GLAMMM
STYLLLEEEE...”

The spotlights rise slowly, passing from night to sunrise to day in the space of a few seconds. The models are revealed in all their grace and poise. But, in those few seconds, as the light intensifies, the fabrics fade. The iridescence takes on a dusty hue and the fabrics themselves quickly assume the texture of brittle spiders’ webs before evaporating completely. The camera rolls on as the world watches.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Grip glances at the VXV still fizzing in his champagne glass. This cannot be happening, I can’t be seeing this, and I can’t be hearing this...this laughter.

The hall is filled with laughter...the world is filled with laughter...they are laughing at me, the Emperor of fashion... Me, Francesco Grip!

CHAPTER 8
*Philip wakes up in the middle
of the revolution*

I get home and tell the DH to fix me breakfast. I patch the messages over to the screen. The first is from Mary; it's recorded in the back of a car with a handy. "Hi Bro!" she starts to laugh. "I am the resurrection! Hey, hey, hey...here's a tip, pay your taxes, no taxation without rejuvenation, is that what they used to say? And don't ever get old. It sucks...Keep shovelling down those polyunsaturates and Omega 3s. Play chess. Do puzzles. You know, I feel as if I even got a few years back...It was great, I mean really, really great to see you, and sorry we had to get out of there...I can't tell you too much here but we have to meet. I hate to tell you I was right and you were wrong but something really big, I mean cataclysmic events, dear Bro, are going to happen over the next few days, they could be wonderful, they could change reality, or it could all go down the tubes, we've got a lot of work to do. So let's meet. Call me."

I patch in her number...but there's no ring tone, nothing, just a dead connection.

The detox pill I took yesterday is beginning to wear off, here comes the hangover, moving like a wave through my skull. I crawl toward the bed and climb in fully clothed. This pill is nicknamed the nine-pound-hammer. Your head hurts like fuck and then you get knocked out and sleep through Armageddon.

As sleep covers me I say, "And God bless Uncle Brifcor."

When I wake the light creeping through the gaps in the curtains stings my eyes and sends a needle of pain through my brain. I start to eat the cold breakfast left by the DH. I patch in an update on the rolling news.

It seems that I've slept through the beginning of the revolution, but luckily the revolution has been televised.

First I understand that some ships refining fruice have hit the harbour. Earlier, while I was deep in noddylan, there were a lot of fire-fighters and sanitary workers streaming into the area extending their cordon around the site of the "incident." Something has happened, we don't yet know what and we will keep you informed about what we don't know with our rolling news coverage. In a replay of an early report by a skinny accidental journalist

who happened to be passing with a cam' we hear him telling us urgently that he'd heard it, he'd seen it... The sound cuts off and I just see the kid's mouth moving, and then the camera blacks out. Dead connection. There follows shaky hand-held footage of fruice workers advancing toward a phalanx of Kristol Warriors. Molotov cocktails explode on riot shields.

Then we progress through fruicarian rioting, shootouts and battles for different sectors. I patch over to local and see that my street borders a sector controlled by the citizens of Philipville and a contested area in which there is a battle between fruice workers and citizens.

I patch back to a talking head and the camera swings over to the experts who shrug and look at each other. I flip over. On YouTube there are reports of fruice workers taking to the shore downtown, sweeping through the city in an orgy of destruction. Early reports that it's a fruice spill caused by the fruice workers themselves in order to stretch the resources of the security and social sanitation services have been confirmed. YouTube also shows some footage from a web-cam on top of a crane overlooking the docks in the Paradise Harbour Sector. Two vast titanium fruice

refinery vessels crash into the harbour side, their massive bulk buckling as they cut through the warehouses and across the freeway, cars swerve wildly to avoid the inevitable collision, a petrol tanker, dwarfed by the vast hulls of the oncoming ship, turns over and explodes.

I flip over and come across the sun-bed orange face of Edvard Kristol, he's sitting behind his big desk, he's talking about terrorism and the evil radical fruicarians attempting to destroy the freedoms we hold dear.

I try Mary again. Nothing. Not even the service provider telling me why what isn't happening isn't happening. OK, I get it. I hook into the directory and patch the number of the archive: Extension Finn Donnelly and then patch into the videophone.

"Mary, I hope you get this. I think the fruice spillage down in the docks last night is affecting the component parts of machinery, maybe accelerating the dead connection date... Anyway, the important thing is Cassandra has been kidnapped, a bunch of goons came down to the concert near the docks last night and bundled Cassandra, Carol and some others from your bunch... I think the drummer and

lead guitarist of You May Wish To Burn. I got away. But that's another story... OK, OK, I last saw you with Finn, so I'm making it down to the archive... more later."

∞

Brifcor's speech

By morning the effects of the fruice slick had already ravaged the area surrounding the docks in the Paradise Sector. The harbour side, the heavy iron cranes and the surrounding buildings including Vanilla Wave wherein these momentous events began had dissolved into the steel-grey river. I was with Brifcor throughout these glorious hours, and it is in his sainted name that I now bear witness.

By early morning the fruice workers had started to group on the ship. Brifcor's drastic action was followed by the excited rumour of the gathering of the fruice workers and a speech by Brifcor. The fruicarians headed back to the plant whilst the fire-fighters fought in vain to stop the effects of our heroic action.

The grey mist covering Philipville started to diffuse as the groups gathering on the top deck of the ruined refinery ship become agitated. On a pile of dismantled

titanium building components, Brifcor, the president of the newly formed Fruice Workers Free Union, spoke to representatives from the different sectors. History sparkled in his eyes, he had turned the tables, *he* was history's actor, *he* was the new master of reality. To many of those gathered around on that morning his particularly knobby forehead was a sign, written in lore, that he was among the chosen ones. His long, narrow, greenish penis, which he now unleashed from his fruice worker's uniform, was the sign of divine grace. A plasticized St Just, a Dionysian embodiment of Subcomandante Marcos.

Close to the waterside the Philipville Fire-fighter Special Brigade, the central security forces of Philipville, were significantly outnumbered. Most of them were deployed with orders to investigate the fruice crisis and to set up barricades protecting the key routes to the headquarters of the Kristol Corporation.

Scared and unconvinced, by the time most of the workers had been gathered into the central depot, almost half of the fire-fighters decided to rip the emblem of oppression from their foreheads and join the workers. In a wave of applause, Brifcor

started his speech:

“Brothers and sisters...COMRADES!!

We are the agents of an historic moment...a great day. Each and every one of us will have the heroic task in the hours and days to come to end, once and for all, the oppressive rule of the murderers of this state.

We have to keep in mind every instance that brought us to this point. The decades of capitalist expansion, neo-liberal aggression and the fruiciological economic model have all destroyed the fundamental rights that once seemed unalienable.

And let's also remember the sacrifices of our ancestors. And let us remember the cursed year of 2012, when this monstrous concentration camp, the terrifying gulag of Philipville was established. It was then that the fruice system was established, and it was then that our fate was sealed!

But today, comrades, we have broken the chains of fate. Today we remember again that we were once free men and women, living in what we believed to be the freest society the world has ever known — we have been taught that there was no alternative to the model of development we have grown up in. But this model has led us all to enslavement, to the destruction of

our humanity.

But I tell you...today, after decades of suppression, the enemy has a name and a face, and no one can continue to vomit forth the lies we've been told for so long. The enemy is the corrupted network of the Kristol Corporation and the governmental structures of this doomed land. Brothers and sisters, comrades...

Let us break the cages of oppression!
Let us crush the bloodthirsty capitalist pigs!!! Let 2020 be the year of liberty, the dawn of a new era in human history!

**LET US NOW MARCH TO
DESTROY THE ULTIMATE SYMBOL
OF THIS PRISON STATE! LET US
BRING GRENDELS DOWN!
WE WILL REBUILD OUR NEW
STATE UPON THE FOUNDATIONS
OF ITS RUINS!"**

The speech ended in a symphony of approving ovations. Numberless fruicarians were now ready to confront history, each intoxicated by their meeting with destiny. By sunset, the history of humanity would have been dramatically changed. On hearing the speech even more of the fire-fighters decided to switch sides to the fruicarians, ripping the badges from their helmets and taking up the new emblem of

the revolution. Someone in the crowd drew a few white lines on a red flag, depicting a flame. Thus was born the symbol of the revolution against the oppression of the Kristol Corporation and the Fire-fighter Fascist State!

CHAPTER 9

Finn and Mary in the archive

The archive was in the basement of a building in Arafat Avenue but it wasn't easy getting there. The fruit workers had established themselves across Paradise quickly and reverted to a classic revolutionary landscape. Barricades blocked the main streets in every direction, bonfires were started to warm the fruicers on guard and a dark pall of smoke was drifting across the whole city. Something else was happening too. The fabric of the buildings, street furniture seemed to have started to degenerate. Traffic lights were the first to go. We came to a crossroads where all of the lights were cycling through their colours at high speed, like a crazed fairground ride. Cars littered the scene, smashed, abandoned, and burnt out, tyres still smouldering poisonously. The tarmac itself had taken on a greenish glow, modulating in colour as if it was changing mood. At least it retained a hard surface. Walls in the newest buildings seemed to weep a colourless fluid, like resin from trees in the old environmental videos.

The barricades were too dangerous to approach. The first time we tried we saw the fruicarians seize a teenager ahead of us. The kid looked scared and the fruicarians, feeding off his fear, were spurred on. They pushed him around for a while, practiced with machetes on his arms and legs and then, suddenly bored, they set him on fire and pushed him beyond the barricade, where he lay writhing until he died. After seeing that we stuck to the back streets. Occasionally, we'd see a building implode or a swarm of troops flood across an empty space before vanishing back into the labyrinth of weeping concrete.

It was evening before we reached the Arafat basement. The street was quiet, almost suburban with its residential buildings, there were no troops and no fruicers yet. We thought we would have to break in but the door's locks seemed to have died. Mary just pushed the door and it swung open.

We made ourselves as comfortable as possible, creating a kind of nest in the classical vault surrounded by old Bach and Beethoven boxed sets. We thought that would be more relaxing than the other various, hectic options — jazz, rock, world or country and western. I hooked up a

makeshift communications network to gather information on what was happening outside and it flickered into life while Mary was devising blankets from curtains that had separated off the viewing booths for archival researchers.

All of the channels were focused on the catastrophe and the fruice revolution (“terrorism” on the more reactionary channels). No one had a clear idea what was happening or which force was winning the ghostly struggle across the city. There were plenty of pictures of the barricades and of various “fruice atrocities.” One channel was screening some amateur footage of the revolutionary leader, Brifcor, declaring the end of Kristol’s domination and outlining his demands.

“He’s not going to give Che much competition in the looks department is he?” mused Mary, peering at the broadcasts over my shoulder.

“Nope, but he’s definitely one of history’s actors — you were on the money there.”

“Then you owe me five Saphs,” murmured Mary, gently massaging my shoulder blades.

“That’s great,” I sighed.

“I’m hungry,” said Mary, “Why don’t

you go find us something for supper...” She squeezed my shoulders hard when she said that and I’m sure I squeaked.

I rummaged for potential hunting tools while Mary slipped into my chair and started fiddling with the screen controls. “How do I send a message here? I need to talk to Philip.”

“Just press the big red one, babe,” I replied and retreated fast before she got her aim in. The paperweight she tossed at me missed by a good metre and I grabbed it, inspired. I could smash a window with that.

Above ground things still looked quiet though I was sure I could hear the clatter of weapons in the distance. I made my way down the street in what I thought might be classic military fashion, moving from doorway to doorway, spinning on my heels for a quick 360-degree view of the landscape, crouching before the next advance. I’d seen it in movies and it mostly worked there.

I found a few shops on the corner and realised the source of the noise I’d heard earlier. In a window of a mini-Grendels outlet three robots were entangled with each other and wrestling insanely among the other techie bric-a-brac which jumped up and down as if possessed. It was a surreal

sight and I wished Mary could have seen it too. The next building was a food store and I hurled the paperweight at its plate glass frontage. It was glorious watching the window shatter. Something inside me sang out.

Later, when we were eating the plunder I realised that I was too excited when I described the robots' wrestling incident. Mary didn't seem to notice but immediately after food she suggested we get some sleep.

∞

*Philip and his DH
get through the barricades*

Me and the DH make our way down the stairs of my apartment. The stairs are littered with discarded clothes, toys, and ripped plastic garbage bags hastily filled with possessions and quickly discarded.

At the foot of the stairs sits Frank, our concierge. He bars my exit, holding an aluminium baseball bat.

"I can't let you go out there, mate."

"Why not?"

"Because *they* will get in." He pauses for a while and then adds, "Come with me."

I follow him over to a window boarded up with planks and pieces of furniture from

the different apartments. I peek through a gap and see a barricade at the end of the street, a smouldering bus with burned out cars on each side. A makeshift watchtower has been erected on a lamppost like the crow's nest of a galleon. A small boy sits on top reading a comic, his legs dangling over the side.

Below a group of men and women hang around with make-shift weapons in their hands. A few are carrying guns.

"Where the fuck have you been, Mr Thornhill?"

"Sorry, I had a heavy night and I'm a heavy sleeper."

I crane over to see the other end of the street where the good citizens have constructed a similar structure.

"Didn't we all?" replies the concierge.

"Look I've got to get out of here, I've got to reach my sister."

"They'll eat you alive, there're fruicers roaming the city with guns and machetes, they're caught in an orgy of rape, pillage and murder. God knows what's happening out there. We're defending the street until the authorities get control of the situation."

I realise he's re-enacting the phrases he's heard on TV: an orgy of destruction, a crazed leaderless rabble. Hang in there

brave defenders of Philipville, the cavalry are coming, riding on a big red fire engine.

It's five blocks to the archive and I can cut through the park. If Mary has got my message, and if she's still alive, she'll be waiting for me there. I return into the foyer and look down the corridor towards the back entrance. I can see the concierge's wife sitting on a chair, a piece of four by four across her lap, one end run through with a star burst of nine-inch nails.

I pretend to reflect on what the concierge is telling me.

"God, yes, you're right... Is there anything I can do?"

"We need help on the barricades and your DH can be of help."

"OK count me in, comrade."

Each house has knocked through a "cat flap," in our case a hole in the wall covered with a refrigerator. I help the concierge pull it to one side. I tell the DH to go up and bring me my cricket bat. I climb through the hole and march over to the big man with the gun. Private Thornhill reporting for duty, sir. I anticipate how long it will take the DH to get to my cricket bat — forever actually, I hate cricket. I switch off the DH with the remote in my pocket. The concierge will think some vital fruice part

has conked out and there's no way he can re-boot her without the code. It doesn't take me long to get chummy with my partisan buddies and I make my way to the edge of the barricade. I find a gap through the window of the bus, pull myself up and swing through. The kid in the crow's nest hasn't seen me and the other guards are huddling around a cigarette lighter. I creep through another smashed window and drop on the other side. I switch on my DH and patch into remote-master. "Go to the bathroom window," I whisper into the key ring. From my angle I can just see the top of its head, it wears the hairstyle Carol wore before the break up and before the bob. "Climb out onto the ledge." It climbs out. "Step forward."

It falls like a rag doll and, luckily for me, it lands on its back. It's just one floor, no damage done. I tell it to get up and follow, and we run through the alley that backs onto the park. No sign of any fruicarians.



Finn and Mary leave a message

I fell into an abyss of sleep and so did Mary. We both woke early though and found ourselves holding each other, maybe as

much from fear and a need for human heat as from any physical attraction. When we made love it might also have been based on the need for comfort but neither of us questioned our motives. Something had changed between us and it felt good. Now it was two against the world, the Rapture and the chaos of revolution.

Mary cobbled together some breakfast from the remains of the looted food while I dug out some of the old music from the archives. I didn't want to turn on the screen; I didn't want the world to intervene. I found an ancient Van Morrison track and it rang through the basement rooms defiantly:

*And you shall take me strongly
In your arms again
And I will not remember
That I even felt the pain.
We shall walk and talk
In gardens all misty and wet with rain
And I will never, never, never
Grow so old again.*

Mary hugged me madly when breakfast was finished and I tried not to cry. We got ready to venture out and I packed the paperweight, our only real weapon, in a rucksack that had originally stored old

CD cases.

Over ground everything had degenerated radically from the day before. The buildings that had previously been sweating fluid were now severely holed and pockmarked. Sections of skin and synthetic masonry were falling from girders like thawing snow from winter trees. The robots I'd been eager to show Mary were reduced to exoskeletons twitching against the plate glass like dying insects trapped in a jar.

"We can't stay here, Mary, Paradise is rotting around us," I said. Mary surveyed the landscape with horror and nodded in agreement. "Just let me leave a message for Philip. He might turn up here if he's trying to find us." We ran to the basement and turned the communications terminal back on, burning one simple message into the screen — SHE LIES IN THE LAND WHERE THE MISCREANT DWELLS. ICEBERG.

"We've got to get out of this place," Mary groaned.

"Sounds good to me," I replied, wondering if it was me or was the cathedral spire in the distance really swaying. When the spire suddenly tilted and fell I knew it wasn't me. Mary saw it too. "Let's get going," she said and I followed her across

the glowing street.

There seemed to be more barricades, often shifted from the locations we had seen the previous day. Perhaps the fruice workers were closing down the territories across the city. Certainly Kristol's troops were finding their strategies dissolving as fast as the fabric of the buildings. Mary and I watched a patrol being massacred by the fruicers when the walls that obscured them suddenly dissolved, leaving the men shocked and exposed.

We were travelling through the newest part of downtown and it seemed most affected by Paradise's degenerative disease. Mary began to speculate on the reasons, "The weakness and vulnerabilities seem to stem from the collapse of fruice in the fabric of the buildings and machines."

"Isn't fruice supposed to be intelligent in some way?" I asked. "I thought it was partly sentient, partly programmed."

"Well," said Mary, "Perhaps the fruice workers have de-programmed the fruice."

"Or perhaps they've introduced a virus. But it is partly sentient so it would have to be something more like a mental disease, a programmable schizophrenia."

CHAPTER 10

Philip gets a message

The alley adjacent to the park is overgrown with weeds and wild foliage spills through the park railings. I can hear the distant sounds of revolution around me, the crash of windows, the boom of cars and buses exploding, the occasional burst of gunfire. I creep like a cat, with the DH walking conspicuously erect behind me. I stop. To my right I can see a group of fruicarians gathering in a circle in the park, they congregate around the flailing body of a dog, each of them on the edge of boredom, it seems. All of them take turns giving a lazy kick to its guts. Maybe they're drunk, or maybe they're just tired. Maybe it's the end of the orgy.

I can't move. I switch off the DH and take cover behind a kudzu bush. They carry on for what seems like another hour — long after the dog is dead. And then they move on towards the gate at the south end of the park. Here they will be in sight of the barricade at the end of my street. Howdy neighbours! Here comes the cavalry! As their shambling step falls into rhythm they

start to sing:

*Let our voice resound across the earth,
Fire-fighters burst to the sound of
justice's birth,
Let our anger shake oppression's rot,
You may burn, if you wish to burn or not!
The eves are trembling to the sound of
peoples' wake,
Knowing that our future is at stake,
Hearing the unfinished dream of
centuries past,
Let us live in the world where no one
is stressed!*

I wince and creep on to the end of the alley. I send the DH ahead of me and get it to wave its arms around, no snipers, no heroes of the glorious fruicarians. I pop my head out, give myself the all clear and rush across the road. The DH is oblivious to the drama of the situation and casually walks after me; this piece of tin is cramping my style. The streets here are not barricaded and I can see the archive building on my right. I can see a few citizens of Philipville creeping around with the same degree of caution as myself. There are a lot of people out here risking life and limb to get a glimpse of their loved ones. I pass smashed

windows with the detritus of a recent spate of looting scattering the street, burned out cars, and the occasional body of a fruice worker or fallen citizen lies in the street.

If I remember correctly Mary used to work with Finn in the annex at the back of this building. I programme the DH to replay me whispering tentatively, "Hello, fruice revolutionaries, come out, come out wherever you are!" I keep a safe distance behind it. We pass the portacabins and reach the annex. The lights are off. I send the DH ahead of me: "Hello, fruice revolutionaries, come out, come out wherever you are!" All clear. I creep in and see a message on the communications terminal: SHE LIES IN THE LAND WHERE THE MISCREANT DWELLS. ICEBERG. What the fuck does that mean?

∞

*Finn and Mary
make their way to Grendels*

We had travelled all morning and into the afternoon, looting again when we felt hungry and avoiding any contact with humanity or machinery. There was only one remarkable moment when we passed a small garden in a square. The plants

were typically expensive and corporate and so all of them had been grafted with fruice. Now they were swaying frantically as if trying to uproot themselves. The tulips seemed the most sensitive and had picked up troop communiqués and were re-broadcasting them. An astute fruice worker had been designated to sit in the garden and record vital troop movements. Before he could see us we moved on and were only stopped when we encountered a small tearful girl outside a block of rotting flats. She had been locked out of the building in the general melee as everyone made for the shelter of the basement during a local gunfight between citizens and revolutionaries.

“Let’s help her, Finn,” pleaded Mary.

I agreed quickly. I wasn’t feeling too good myself and the opportunity to stop anywhere was welcome.

“Stand back,” I warned in my best manly voice before kicking wildly at the locked front door. It wasn’t as easy as the archive doorway but it still only took a few blows before it gave way.

The girl rushed in and ran to the basement. We followed her into the house but stayed upstairs in the foyer.

“I’m getting something on the

handheld,” said Mary, holding out the pulsing machine.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s Philip,” she replied, scanning the screen at the same time. “He says Cassandra has been kidnapped. He thinks the fruice is collapsing too.”

Mary paused, and set to work on the handheld. “It’s no good. The server’s completely gone. He must have sent it just before it all crashed. I can’t get a thing now.”

“All we can do then is try to get to Grendels and hope he finds the message in the archive.”

“Hope he figures it out you mean. It’s been a long time since he read Beowulf.”

“Never mind that. I’m still shocked you didn’t cite the Heaney version,” I said and stepped back quickly to avoid the swipe of her hand.

I was sure she missed me but at that moment the whole world went white.

∞

Philip and the fruice worker

I find the kitchen of the annex. I fumble around in the dark and put on the kettle. I’m amazed that the water system is still working. The broken fridge has a pack of

dried up ham and a loaf of pre-Christmas bread. I cut away the spots of mould and make a sandwich. I switch off the DH.

“SHE LIES IN THE LAND WHERE THE MISCREANT DWELLS. ICEBERG.”

“SHE” is Cassandra and the “MISCREANT” is Kristol, but in what land does Kristol dwell?

I take the last mouthful of my sandwich and hear the sound of a footfall on the gravel path outside. I retreat to the back of the building and leave the DH in the Kitchen. I squat down and hear the sound of a zipper being pulled down and then the sound of someone pissing close to the door and then, after a surprisingly long time, the sound of a zipper being pulled up. The door swings open and a particularly ugly fruice worker enters the annex. He’s on his own, scouting for something to eat, someone to kill, or maybe he’s just looking for somewhere to rest — revolutionaries need time out too, I suppose. He slumps onto the chair of the communications terminal and logs on. He accesses YouTube, which is flickering between an image and flashes of random code. The fruice worker has his back to me. I see an empty roll of toilet paper lying on the floor next to a trash bin

in front of me. I pick it up and creep silently towards the fruice worker. I carefully place the tube on the back of his head and whisper.

“Don’t move.” He stiffens and his hands raise slowly. I continue, “Don’t turn around or I’ll blow your brains into the other side of YouTube, OK?”

“OK.”

“Now, listen. I’m a friend of Brifcor. In fact Brifcor saved my life. Now keep listening. I know I’m holding a gun to your head but you have to believe me, I’m on your side,” I pause. “Now, things are pretty fucked up at the moment so if I have to kill you I will, but I don’t want to unless I have to. Got it?”

“Yes,” the fruice worker whispers.

“OK. I figure you guys know a thing or two. Tell me where is Kristol’s HQ.”

There is a pause.

“Now, you have five seconds...one...two...three...”

“Grendels.”

I press the DH’s ON button.

“Now, comrade, I’d like to introduce you to a friend of mine.” He stiffens again.

“Come,” I say. The DH walks in, “Stop.”

“OK,” I continue, “Stand up close to

this charming young lady.”

I order the DH to execute a bear hug and tell the fruice worker to put his hands behind his back. With my left hand, whilst the toilet tube is pressed to the fruice worker’s head, I reach for a roll of archivist tape. I take away the tube and tie the fruice worker’s hands behind his back. I then tie the legs. I order the DH to release its grip and push the fruice worker to the floor, placing my foot on his back. I push the toilet roll into the base of his spine.

“OK, thank you. Now, you have to lay still while I place this handkerchief in your mouth.”

I fumble for a particularly snotty specimen in my back pocket and stuff it into his mouth. I then order DH to tape his mouth over. I empty a plastic wastepaper basket and place it over his head.

“Thank you comrade and goodnight. OK, DH, let’s split.”

We head for the door. As the DH opens it there is a blinding flash of light.

∞

Finn and Mary witness the flash

“What the fuck was that?” asked Mary.

“I’ve no idea...” I replied and went to

the doorway to look outside. Everything seemed unchanged but when we decided to move on the handheld and the paperweight had vanished. Before we could leave there was an enormous peal of thunder and the air pressure became unbearable before the windows exploded. Something hard and glowing struck the right side of my face. I put my hand up, it was covered in blood. I felt for my eye, it was still there. But Mary had disappeared. I thought she must have gone to the cellar. I had the rucksack on my back. I looked out into the street. Before me lay a large unrecognisable open space. Within a wide radius there was nothing but fires. I ran down to the basement, Mary was there, it was crowded, children screaming, intense heat from the packed bodies, I could the smell the fear. I was exhausted and I wanted to sleep. I sank to the ground and couldn't sleep. We all waited as the thunder increased.

Several hours passed almost in silence. When the thunder ended we were still afraid to leave. We could hear the roar of fires above, the wails of sirens and the boom of falling walls. When everything was finally quiet I pushed open the door and was hit with the heat of the air outside. We went back upstairs and Mary wiped the blood

from my face. We left the building and walked through the devastated area, aghast at what we saw.

From some of the debris poked arms, heads, legs and shattered skulls. A fountain was filled with dead human beings and scorched robot parts, with large pieces of masonry lying on top of that again. Most people looked as if they had been inflated, with large yellow and brown stains on their bodies, people whose remaining clothes were still glowing.

All of the recent buildings in the city centre had collapsed or set themselves on fire and the conflagration had spread throughout the district. We had been lucky. The girl we stopped to help was living in one of the older tenement buildings. The fruce powering it was an older, more stable version designed in the early, generous days of obsolescence technology, by people who still had a slight respect for human safety.

If I was a military man I would have been deeply impressed with the stamina of the fruce revolutionary army. We had just witnessed the collapse of an entire district of Paradise and still the barricades stood. Still, the fruce workers stood guard and still they found the energy and morale to fight Kristol's troops. Those troops, of

course, had reconfigured themselves in this shifting, imploding landscape. They were more visible now but they had adopted their old swarm tactics, pouncing on the enemy fast and hard and dispersing again almost immediately. They were more guerrilla than their guerrilla foe.

We backtracked for the night and I broke into an empty cellar where we slept huddled against each other. It was cold and the temperature just seemed to keep dropping. The archive seemed like a distant luxury now. We tried to talk things through before we fell asleep: The conflagration, Cassandra's kidnapping, the revolution. But we were completely exhausted and it was funny how so much cold weather could make the coming Rapture seem unimportant. There was one other problem I didn't mention to Mary. Earlier in the day I was sure we were being shadowed by Femke Hauk.

PART TWO

CHAPTER 11

A fragment from the Gospel of Mary (circa 2040)

...and I will now speak of the days preceding the events of the last week of 2019. The period before the edge was severed between the past and the present.

We lived in a world that suffered from a lack of agreement about how to do things. Or maybe this wasn't the problem. Everyone understood what they had to do and daily life in Philipville continued on as always. But still, we suffered from a lack of consensus about what it meant.

There was only ever a dim perception about this — the fleeting sense that something was wrong. So we laboured on. The present continued as the past had been. We devoted a good part of most days to productivity; and this was perhaps the easiest thing to organize. For each one of us basic needs led to the same conclusion: arrangements had to be made for their procurement, and combined together, these amounted to a kind of consensus. Although the compulsory dimension of this was obvious, it was a matter of preference — or mental outlook — the degree to which one could consider her actions voluntary.

With the right attitude, one could barrel through the day like a quarterback running for a touchdown. And as in a game, each such occasion brought varying degrees of success.

Encouragement came in the form of productivity reports, each pertaining to the various occupations and industries. Here meaning was self-evident. It was taken for granted that our efforts combined formed the basis of our common interest. When productivity was high, tangible benefits accrued for each of us. And if you weren't seeing these, everyone knew they only had themselves to blame. It was obvious: you could try harder, were succeeding, or were failing to do this. My own efforts in this respect brought considerable frustration, but also moments of reward. All in all, you could say I was happy.

Still there were limits to my ability to understand what I was doing. In this, I am sure I was like all the others. I knew this specifically from talking with my friends. Together we formed a kind of alliance of interpretation. These arrangements — and there were many of them — were informal but the affinities we shared were real. Each one had at its base an agreement about what we understood to be true about the world.

Combined together they provided a solid foundation for our existence — but one that we perceived nonetheless to be under steady threat. We knew what we believed but there was much that contradicted it. Reconciling what we thought to be true with the things that we experienced, saw on Channel 23Ω or read about everyday took continuous effort.

It was for this reason that the alliances were necessary. Maintaining the assumptions we shared took constant effort, and we did this mostly by talking or emailing, sending instant messages or speaking on the phone. In these conversations we reported back to one another about what we had seen, and what we thought about it. Conferring amongst ourselves in this way helped to corroborate our initial impressions. And for every conversation I had in person there were at least ten I conducted in my head. Private rehearsal of every possible scenario of enactment — whether verbal or physical — was ongoing but these never exceeded a certain framework, what could be called our lives.

Looked at objectively you might call this process an accumulation of self, but we never really thought of it that way. It

was as if we were all earthworms eating our way through the substance of our lives, leaving whatever we did not need behind us as we went along. Underlying this activity was an indestructible optimism. It was a feeling, a positive energy that emanated from somewhere. In essence, it was without content. Whatever activities resulted from our daily needs remained separate from this, a matter of contingency and happenstance that at times had the power to obscure our certainties — and even appear to defeat us. The effect, however, was usually only temporary. If you were lucky you didn't forget this.

It is important to note that the focus of our conversation tended to be small. If the overall atmosphere of our lives had an ominous tinge, most conflict came in the form of a difference of opinion with those to whom I was closest. And the drama of this battle took place mostly in my head. Although vaguely aware of this constant repetition of thought that the refinements of my arguments required, I always took this to be just second nature to my self-definition. These arguments with fictive versions of my friends were in some ways the best use I could find for my imagination. It was evidence, in any case, of my existence.

I found it interesting to reflect that it was in these small personal antipathies that my sense of self was most active. The reason for this was simple. The arguments I undertook — real and imaginary — provided the actual material of my being; my self was given definition out of the very sense that it was under threat.

Most of the time, the broad spectrum of world affairs was absent from this process. There were two reasons for this: First, in terms of the geo-political picture — a raging and in many instances deadly morass of ancient grievances and competing interests — we already knew what we thought. This was crucial. To not know what to think was to be cast into a nauseating abyss of confusion. Life then threatened to become instinctual: you could assume the docility of a barnyard animal or succumb to the primal urges that would surely augur your premature death. The other reason is that the contours of what we thought were the very definition of our ability to think; whatever lay beyond the edges of this framework, we could scarcely dare to contemplate it.

Suffice to say we were not the actors in this history. Instead we experienced history as something that happened to us. On the

whole these occurrences — the tribal wars, air disasters, invasions of foreign countries and the various catastrophes that befell our neighbours — seemed to happen to other people in other places and were a matter of some indifference. It was an attitude constructed of a kind of mental distance: one that found its measure in the effect — if any — these incidents would have on us. A lack of consequences brought with it a concomitant sense of personal wellbeing. It was as if this minor and ongoing *schadenfreude* created for us a disembodied state — a pleasant kind of alienation — that allowed us to live, and live happily, in the moment. The news, however, also had the power to prognosticate the future; as every *schadenfreude*-loving soul knows, the laws of probability mean that the next car crash might be your own.

In the ebb and flow of things, those events that didn't directly affect you got consigned to the notion of fate. That the greater meaning one might attach to this was a matter of personal preference made it all seem as horrible and arbitrary as the chance that the plane you were flying on — and not the one behind it — might suddenly fall from the sky. This sense that existence was random and perilous was

exacerbated by the regimen imposed on society by fruce. Fibrous protoplasm that comprised parts of the connective tissue of virtually all animate and inanimate things, fruce was the economic imperative of planned obsolescence taken to its logical extreme. The result of advanced nanotechnology research and development, the life giving properties of fruce was the product of synthetic extrapolations from early discoveries in embryonic stem cell research.

A further motivating factor in the development of fruce had been the accelerated arrival of the peak oil crisis in the first year of the 21st century. Although forecasts of the rapid decline of global fossil fuel resources had been predicted to happen at anytime between 2004 and 2030, its actual onset had occurred at the massively inconvenient and wholly unanticipated date of New Year's Eve, 2001. The ensuing global energy crisis had wrecked havoc of epoch-making proportions. December 31, 2001 was a day that would never be forgotten. The exhausting efforts undertaken to overcome the resulting privations — the commodity skirmishes, the quotidian improvisations — had consumed every waking hour of

most people's days and hence almost the entire twelve months that followed. But like clockwork, on December 31, 2002, the chaos ceased, all on-the-grid sectors of society having been mysteriously recalibrated with fruice implants.

The implementation of the fruice solution had unfolded with an alarming efficiency, one that suggested the miseries that preceded it were not entirely unplanned. But the people were tired and so grateful for the return to normalcy. Compared to the mayhem they had endured, the wholesale fruice-integration offered a relative measure of peace. Although some sectors of society were vocal in their suspicions about the conspiracy that undoubtedly lay behind fruice and were active in their attempts to unravel it, most citizens were compliant, preferring instead to focus their energies on maintaining the semblance of a normal life.

If this quiescence represented a capitulation of sorts, there were practical reasons for it. The advance budget planning required in maintaining fruice payments — not to mention the mental and physical effort of capital sourcing — was an arduous and complex endeavour. The consequences of not keeping up were dire. Not content to

have stilled the bedlam that had previously reined and transformed the lives of myriad sufferers of degenerative illnesses in the process, the inventors of this wonder-fibre had devised a way to ensure that fruice would continue to perform, in perpetuity, to their maximum financial benefit. Its manufacturer, the mammoth Kristol Corporation, encoded time sensitivity into all fruice implants, meaning that its life-giving properties were subject to sell-by dates. Fruice was pre-programmed to self-destruct, forcing the user to subscribe to implant updates, direct-debit being the easiest method to ensure fruice-continuity for yourself and your possessions. The typical lifespan of an implant would be: three months for everyday things like portable electronic devices, light bulbs, batteries and household electrical circuits; a year-long duration was available for items that had previously been manufactured with petroleum-based polymers, such as fuel cells for vehicles, certain articles of clothing (socks), the plastic casings on appliances, cell phones, luggage, rainwear, the structural components in furniture and computing equipment. For products that depended on median term fruice certification, the list was virtually

endless. Three years was the longest licensing period available for applied fruce components such as medical implants — including dental inserts, pacemakers, synthetic nervous system circuitry and prosthetic body parts — and the key components of the economic infrastructure like industrial machinery components and mainframe computing equipment.

As in the civilization that had preceded fruce, the rich fared best in this society. This was simply because they had accumulated sufficient capital surpluses to enable an outsourcing of the fruce disbursements process. The most typical disbursement method used top of the line *Domestic Help!* androids (DHs) that had been customized for this purpose. The droids' auto-replenish function of their own fruce-maintenance payment schedules was the only potential fault line in this arrangement. Unanticipated DH defects augured disastrous personal systems failures. In the same way that fruce played God with the society it undergirded, those that relied on their DHs to ensure their ongoing fruce integration played God with their droids, and therefore the very firmament of their own lives. It was a tricky process.

Implemented at the same time as fruice was the age tax, which was a regulatory mechanism of the healthcare system. As with fruice, the age tax represented individuals' economic integration into society taken to a rationalized extreme. Healthcare was now administered exclusively to those who made regular health insurance payments, the commodity of health being delivered to each subscriber in the form of time-released nano-supplements. There was considerable motivation for subscribers to make payments, failure to do so would result in a tax in the form of accelerated aging; a process, of course, that always ended in death.

Unlike the fruice implementation, age tax implants were voluntary. But to opt out of the system was to be excluded from virtually any hope of receiving professional healthcare. The alternative was an informal underground medical network based on archaeological evidence about primitive healthcare methods. The risk involved in relying on this network was obvious, not the least because adherents were deemed to be guilty of not contributing to the fiscal wellbeing of the populace, and the penalty for this was death. When confronted with

a choice between an early death via summary execution or one by accelerated aging, most chose the latter. This was due to the slim chance that the process could be reversed via an unexpected age tax rebate or some other form actuarial calculation from which one might profit, with previously lost years being magically tallied back onto one's life.

Instead of the paranoid theories that fruice inspired, the age tax prompted more measured debates about what constituted the shared values of society. Proponents of the age tax pointed to the virtues of its data centralization capabilities, enabling further research and development in the realm of healthcare. Such research had the long-term goal of total modification and encryption of the gene pool, an objective of such obvious benefits to the common good that many had to admit it was hard to argue against it. Age tax advocates also extolled its fiduciary benefits. It was a cost efficient way to rid society of the economically unviable, a convenient way to cull the prison population and to minimize the burdens that the sick placed on the health system. There was a smaller constituency that tried to argue the value of other non-monetary principles, even going so far as to suggest

that money and value were not mutually non-exclusive terms. But this viewpoint was only held by a minority in society. On the whole their voices were marginalized by the widely-accepted outlook that a world regulated by fruce and age taxes offered the best of all worlds possible to imagine.

It is a testament to the fantastical applications of fruce that any conceptualization of its powers referred not only to its transformative abilities but also to its own lifespan; to say that this was of uncertain provenance and therefore of indeterminate longevity was an understatement. It was fruce's ability to not only give *and* take away but the apparent self-generation of this process that ensured that the more entrenched fruce society became, the greater the elaborations were of its mystical dimensions. If conspiracy theories about its origins abounded, these were out-numbered by suppositions about its eschatological core. At bottom, fruce was a tautology that confounded rational thought, and because man and nature alike abhor a vacuum, it was life-generating not only in substance but in meaning as well. By 2019, these eschatologies had multiplied...

CHAPTER 12

Philip reaches Grendels

The DH and I spent a whole day getting to Grendels. During that time Paradise was consumed by fire, the temperature plummeted, and now snow is falling heavily. I could write a book about the hassles we've been through. I've bribed guards, ducked and dived through alleys, looted shops, slept in a crashed airplane, and laid possum for hours in a compost heap of the Philipville Botanical Gardens waiting for a group of fruice revolutionaries to finish torturing a child to death as they sung their heroic revolutionary song. I've stolen a boat and paddled up the canal, only to be scuppered by a mortar shot through the hull aimed by a cross-eyed partisan. After that, the DH and I had to swim under water and crawl through a sewer pipe to finally get to the battered dome of the mall. We pass under the defaced monument of the Fire-fighter and wade through the trash the looters have left behind. The latest DH models wander aimlessly about in Francesco Grip designer clothes, bouncing off each other. Many of them have

suffered the effects of fruice's accelerated degeneration and have broken down or exploded.... But now, finally, the DH and I are here at the entrance of Grendels. And now, as the DHs in the foyer freeze in a dishevelled tableau, I ask myself the first intelligent question I've asked in days: "Now, what do I do?"

Maybe Mary has come and gone; maybe Cassandra and Carol have already been saved from the clutches of Kristol. Maybe I've missed the revolution in general because I got caught up in the messy, shitty, brutal and stupid particulars. A wise man once said that the definition of an obsessive is someone who redoubles their effort after losing their aim, and it seems to me that since the incident with Cassandra in the Vanilla Wave I've become a little obsessive. But then again, what is there to lose? If Cassandra holds the key to a new vision of reality then I must do everything in my power to protect that vision — particularly as I don't have a job to go back to on January the second. It seems to me that so many of us suddenly have nothing to lose. This is the choice: We go to hell in a basket or we embrace a new beginning, and I'm putting my money on a new beginning.

Cassandra and Kristol

Cassandra's wrists are zip-tied and attached to a buckled collar. She is lying on a laminated mahogany desk, her head flopped down on one end and her knees resting over the other edge, bike boots half slipped off and hair hanging down, soft curls tickling the floor.

Cassandra dreams: a cloudlike speech bubble appears above her delicious body. Gold and blue Egyptian dolls somersault in black velvet void. Eyes look up, at her, down, behind into the void, and then swing round again to stare into her eyes. Another doll materializes behind, slightly smaller, looking up, towards her, then down, revolving slightly slower than the first, one up, one down, one looking in her eyes, the other away. The second doll catches up and the two swing round together. They meet her eyes and woosh! They transform into fierce red Taoist god eyes, bulging out at her. She commands them to leave. They do, and she wakes.

"Maybe it's the flu? That's what happened last time, devils came to well wish before the virus took over."

Cold, cold shoulders...tingling arms, not much beyond...No feeling beyond there...nothing beyond.

Footsteps approach and a man enters, Kristol stops in front of her, inspecting her trussed body, torn and frayed clothes, immaculate breasts peeping out from the damaged '80s polo neck:

“My, my, this is so undignified.”

Cassandra smiles at him, nothing can bother her now, she is so close to phase overlay, her pearly white teeth gleam at him.

“My name is Cassandra, we are the future, you and I.”

She looks over to Kristol, she sees him upside down, standing inches from her face. There is a definite bulge in his trousers, a large bulge, a clue to the fruits lying beneath, she wants him so much, she strains to get closer, but the ties that bind are so tight!

“Cassandra, how can you be so stupid?”

His godlike cock taunts her as he speaks, so close, yet so unattainable, she can feel his warmth and the sweet scent of his rising pheromones. Her taunted nipples are pointing skywards and she is growing wet, aching for their union. Kristol continues to taunt.

“Cassandra, it is a pleasure, a wonderful

pleasure to see you at last, but you cannot get in the way of God's plan, the day of Rapture is nigh, and I am not deluded — this *will* happen to the chosen ones.”

“Please relax, come closer and let me give you the last taste of earthly pleasures.”

Kristol looks at her, she throws him a glance that would melt ice, her glimmering eyes reflect every last available remnant of light from the room. The room grows dark for an instant as her eyes shine into his; kaleidoscope patterns fill his retina as he falls under her spell. He cannot resist any longer and rips down his trousers and unleashes his manhood into Cassandra's face. She licks wildly at his growing rod, and struggles to receive his beautiful erectile tissue between her inflamed lips. Once in she swallows him back, he cannot get away now, she caresses him, lolling her agile tongue around him, diving into his urethra, whilst moving her lips rhythmically around. She is touching the cock of God, and she is the vessel of a host of gods. The two will become many soon, their phases will join.

“I want you now, shoot your load inside me, do it!”

Kristol is in ecstasy, he is shaking with pleasure and can barely stand, holding onto the table with both hands, sweating

in contact with the laminated surface, slipping, and nearly losing hold. He pulls himself out of Cassandra's wanton mouth and shifts himself round. He pulls her down the table, ripping off the remnants of her damaged Cheap Monday jeans, to reveal her soft fur and hot cunt.

"Fuck me you hunk!" calls out Cassandra, pulling her head up with her bound hands. Her collar digs into her throat and she gags on her words. Kristol draws away.

"What are you doing? Get back here!"

Cassandra strains to see what he's doing. Out of the shadows come two figures, both wearing red leather hoods. Small eyeholes reveal the whites of eyes in the subdued light, flowing forwards, towards her. She feels a wonderful hard warmth between her legs, rising up, up so hard, she can feel herself filled to the hilt, and still further! She relaxes as she did in her vision, but somehow it could never prepare her for this! Her sex is filled tight, filled to bursting with pleasure as she receives him in pulsing rhythm. She raises her head to feel the tickle of Carol's sweet pussy, licking at it like a cat preening fur, darting between her stunning soft lips into her sweet salty furrow. Carol presses

down on her mouth and slowly responds in circular brushing movements, timing herself with Kristol's forceful thrusts.

Carol runs her hand down over Cassandra's silken breasts, down to her intimacy and Kristol's pummelling shaft, feeling for the flow of hot champagne ready to shoot out of Cassandra. She runs her hands back up over Cassandra's velvet skin to her face, and unclips her hands from the collar.

"Ok, now!" whispers Carol into Cassandra's ear.

Cassandra doesn't move from the table, she rocks in rhythm with Kristol's endless penetration, captivated by his power. She drifts back to the dolls in her dream, their discordant rotation, the moment when they both rise together. Rising up to face her, their eyes centre on hers, in unison, and they shift into a single Taoist figure of vengeance.

As Cassandra and Kristol rock back and forth the table starts to soften. The fruite in the table is deteriorating, Cassandra slips down into the hammock-like tabletop, Kristol falls forward with her, still penetrating, deep in ecstasy. They fall together onto a soft spongy mass on the floor, onto a dark pink giant squid, their

ecstatic bodies ensnared in motion.

Cassandra uses the moment to push Kristol down and lay him prone, keeping him stiff with her godlike motions.

“Carol my sweet, give the man a taste of your catnip, he looks hungry.”

Carol joins them on the formless blob, rolling with them on the surface of their erotic landscape. She places her sweet perfumed bud inches away from Kristol’s desiring lips; he arches up to take pleasure in her scent, to taste her sweet secret. Carol withdraws a little, slowly, and then pushes her pleasure down onto his eager lips and darting tongue. She draws up again, slowly, then down, brushing against his smooth shaven chin and slowly away, denying and offering in equal measure.

The moments of denial cause Kristol to plunge into Cassandra with more potency, with slower pulses than before, and Cassandra, now kneeling over him, caresses his phallus with her tender sex in deepening rhythms. She gently tightens around him, sending tiny pulses of ecstasy through his cock up to his mouth and out into Carol’s sweet sex.

Cassandra’s eyes fall back in unison, pupils facing skywards as the electrical charges between their single throbbing

body increases in power. Cassandra opens her mouth, just enough to let out a low drone, like distant thunder across the plains.

Cassandra's first phase alignment is drawing close and Kristol's Rapture will come upon us, as he said, but perhaps not just as he said.

CHAPTER 13
Finn's conversation with Femke

"You're dead," I said to Femke.

"You mean as in cowboys and Indians?
Bang bang!"

"No, I saw you die. You're just a figment
of my imagination."

"Really?"

"How could you be alive?"

"My fall was planned. I didn't even
make the jump; you saw an expert and she
landed in a series of tents we'd prepared
with material to break the fall."

"And why would you do this? It was all
for my benefit?"

"You were a lucky extra. We were just
faking my death so I could operate more
efficiently. I'd been a double agent, working
for Kristol and passing on his plans to the
fruite workers. But he was on to me and I
had to disappear before he decided to wipe
me out."

"So why are you following us now? And
why didn't you want me to wake Mary?"

"Because Mary is an agent for Kristol.
How do you think she knows so much
about everything? She's using you. You've

known her for five years and she never showed any interest.” Femke paused and looked me in the eye. “Now she’s sleeping with you. Isn’t that a nice coincidence?”

I hated this woman but she made sense.

I gave Mary time to wake properly. The day before she was incredibly groggy. She came over, yawning, and rubbed my arm, “Hey, morning. How are you?”

I moved away fast. “Fine,” I replied.

“Everything OK?” Mary asked.

“I was just thinking, that’s all,” I said. “How do you know so much about Cassandra and Grendels? Philip didn’t know — we had to leave a message telling him where to go... So how do you know where she’s been taken?”

Mary looked at me carefully and thought for a moment. “It was just a guess, Finn. There have always been rumours that Grendels is more than it seems. Even when it was being constructed there was talk on the streets that the building’s footprint was much larger than the published plans. There were extra basements and it stretched much further than it appeared on ground level. You know how it’s nicknamed the iceberg? It’s just that no-one remembers the origin of the nickname anymore.” Mary paused, as if marshalling

her arguments. “So in these last days, maybe all the nicknames come true. I don’t know where Cassandra is but if I have to make an intelligent guess on the spot then I choose Grendels. That’s all there is to it.”

“You’ve been well trained,” I replied. “Maybe vegetating in a home is good cover for a busy life.”

“You’re a real little shit, Finn!”

Mary turned away and I could see her shoulders shaking. I felt terrible but then I remembered what Femke had told me. I tried to stay strong.

“Well, let’s get moving. We’ll go to Grendels and see what happens.”

“Are you sure it’s safe to travel with me?” Mary sniffed.

I felt sheepish and didn’t answer, and just headed to the door instead.

The morning air was freezing. The rubble of the previous day’s conflagration was now white with frost. The sky was heavy and dark. It looked like it might snow later. So much for the climate control project the media were always trumpeting.

Finn and Mary make their way to Grendels

Human life is infinitely adaptable. We were halfway down the street and trying to figure out which streets would be barricaded today when a battered little microbus turned a corner and began to cruise us. It pulled up and the doors hissed open and a scrawny teenage entrepreneur leaned out. "Where you going?" she shouted.

"Grendels," replied Mary.

"OK, we can swing by there. Three Saphs, right?"

We hopped on, paid and took a seat. There were three other passengers: a mother with a bandaged child and a very proper looking gentleman holding a tuba. It seemed best not to ask. In this newly emerging world, everyone was minding their own business except for Mary and I, and I wasn't even sure about her anymore.

My fillings fell out and it started to snow.

It was difficult to tear ourselves away from the bus where the driver was blasting out heat from an ancient electric burner, but we got out and mounted the steps to the mall. No one had entered since the snowfall and so we left a line of virgin footprints as

we approached the cathedral-like structure. The doors slid open but no electronic voice greeted us, no Christmas music filled the air and there was no one inside, just acres of empty shops and stilled robots.

We walked down the main avenue and found no one. Commandeering an information station, we found a bank of surveillance screens that showed us the activity on other floors. It was a nightmare by Bosch. In the culinary section DH robots were torturing each other and fucking wildly in a variety of impossible positions while constructing perfectly edible cakes. The toy section was a rampant war zone; miniature samurai warriors were disembowelling shocked teddy bears while cute lacy dolls were discovering Sapphic pleasures unplanned by their makers. In household appliances, the vacuum cleaners had formed a tortoise formation using tea trays as shields. Behind them ranked a formidable array of fridges. Their enemy was a swarm of food-mixers, kettles, ice-cream makers and bread machines. It was a massacre.

Mary pulled me away from the screens. "Always the addict," she muttered as she led me down a flight of stairs to the lingerie department.

Philip in Grendels

My own DH is holding up well, perhaps it's because I replaced the wires a few days ago. But the effects on fruice-impregnated products don't seem to be constant. Yesterday, for instance, after eating a ready-roast chicken I'd looted, I ran my tongue across my teeth and discovered one of my fillings had disappeared. Two months ago my dentist put in a filling with the maximum three-year guarantee. Earlier today a fruice tooth I had fitted at the same time disappeared. Other things have started to vanish; the magnetic stripe on the key to my house turned to powder even though it's timed to self-destruct on the day my lease expires in June 2021. Yesterday I took a dump in the Philipville Botanical Gardens and discovered my underpants had gone. The gun I took from the fruice worker in the archive turned into a gun-shaped Chinese fortune cookie and crumbled in my hands. We have passed whole buildings that have assumed the substance of something like Swiss cheese; entire tower blocks have baked down into gargantuan filo pastries.

As we pass down Avenue 37, the culinary district of Grendels, a group of

DH Custard3.2s and DH Cupcake4.4s are engaged in hapless slapstick, slipping in pools of congealed raw eggs, milk and butter, falling and righting themselves like actors in a silent film. Clouds of flour fill the air. One lies on a wooden chopping board while an industrial blender eats away at its arm.

Down Avenue 28 the fetish DHs are engaged in an automated theatre of cruelty. The fruice degradation has had the effect of making them resort to their primary behavioural templates; a mistress whips a slave with a fist full of fruice wire; one nails the cock of another into the forehead of a burned out DH. In the corridor a cluster-fucking mountain of leather dry hump in unison, all crying out the moment of climax over and over again. A Master32.7 is bugging a Cupcake27.3, who fastidiously dresses an omelette with glacé cherries.

The DH and I take the stairs down to lingerie; it's a waxworks of shame as the DHs cover their nakedness in a suspended paroxysm of embarrassment. I walk over the dusty, formally luxurious carpet and I look across the vista of the department through the empty display cabinets. I start to laugh; such decorum in the face of such chaos. It's then that I spot a figure.

It's Finn. I shout over to him and wave; he swings around, staring at me with a look of startled contempt. He turns and runs. I follow and turn the corner to find Mary; Finn slows to a stop and looks on as we embrace. Mary looks better than I've ever seen her, she's become the real action girl, but Finn, who creeps wearily towards us, looks out of shape, shivering and sweating, his expression turning from one of taciturn introspection to suspicion. He opens his hand and shows me his fruiced up fillings. Mary had told me about Finn's episodes, the periods of paranoid agoraphobia he'd suffered before the correct medication was subscribed, and of course the pharmacies have been closed over Christmas, heavily guarded by either the Philipville militia or fruice revolutionaries. Mary has a look of urgency in her eyes; she quickly updates me on what is going on and what needs to be done.

∞

Finn, Mary and Philip

I heard Philip laughing at the robots who presented a line of naked, twitching asses to the world. He was peering at me through the empty display cases. I turned and ran

past Mary who was walking towards the sound of Philip's laughter.

He hugged Mary.

I took my fillings out of my pocket, cupped them in my palm and showed them to him. These are my trophies of the revolution. He just nodded and looked at me strangely.

A thought crossed my mind. If Mary was an agent of Kristol then what were the chances that Philip was an agent too...?

CHAPTER 14

Mary, Finn and Philip's interview

Mary left the message in the archive and hoped I would catch on; she remembered talking to me about the hidden citadel deep under Grendels. At the time I'd accused her of paranoia, but she knew, and I will never doubt her word again, that the Kristol Corporation are organising a major operation from here. She also got my message about Cassandra being captured and she has an instinct, call it some weird type of clairvoyance, that Cassandra is here. On hearing this Finn backs against the wall and begins to rock his shoulders violently. Mary places her hand on Finn's shoulder as he draws back and gives a suppressed yelp. "Witnessing all this death and destruction has been a strain on us all," she adds, giving a quick glance in the direction of Finn.

We need to get to the bottom of the iceberg. Mary and I kick away the smouldering husk of a burned out DH and call the service lift; Finn continues to rock his shoulders from side to side. Amazingly, the service lift is still working. Mary presses Basement + and the lift begins its smooth

decent. The creamy lift voice comes to life again and informs us of the great offers Grendels have over the Christmas period. The creamy voice is interrupted by a harsher tone.

“This elevator will take you to a holding facility where you will be questioned and detained. Please do not attempt to resist detainment. Full cooperation with the authorities is appreciated.”

“I was stupid to think our run of luck would last. Of course the fucking lift is working,” said Mary. Finn has frozen; his eyes open wide in a deathly stare.

The lift continues to fall but the floors have stopped registering the numbers. The door opens on an empty corridor. We look up to see that CCTV cameras line the ceiling and each is fitted with a gun. The voice that greeted us in the lift has now patched into the corridor PA. I realise that my DH has been sent into sleep mode. The doors close behind it.

“Please turn left and enter room B.125.J.”

The lenses and the CCTV guns follow us as we walk toward B.125.J. The number “125” might describe the level we are on and the “J” the room. “B” would describe the sector.

“Oh yes, you’re very calm, very, very cool...” Finn is saying to himself. It appears to me that Finn was close to his limit. I wouldn’t be surprised to see him suddenly physically disintegrate in front of us.



We reach B.125.J and Mary turns the handle we enter an office: one side of the wall is lined with books, files and filing cabinets, and a mirror covers the other wall — I assume it’s two-way. A middle-aged man sits behind a laminated mahogany desk; above him a CCTV gun tracks from Mary, to Finn, to me. He’s reading a document on a pink sheet of A4. Without looking up he points to three chairs. We sit down. The man continues reading, then picks up a pen and begins to scribble in the margins. “I won’t keep you long,” he says. He takes his time dotting the I’s and crossing the T’s, places the paper in the left hand drawer, and takes out a new one from the right. He raises his head and gives a bland smile.

“Now,” he says, “We’re going to have to keep you. I think you’ve already been informed that you’ve been detained for questioning. Firstly we want to chat about

your reasons for entering this facility, and secondly we're very curious about your behaviour over the days leading up to the recent events. So, soon we will have to discuss your presence at...C9..." He consulted the paper. "Vanilla Wave, an entertainment venue, I understand. And we're very eager to hear about your mutual association to an individual known as Cassandra." He pauses and sits back in his Moroccan leather desk chair.

"So, what I am going to do today is register your stay with us and you will be allocated the appropriate accommodation."

He leans forward and scribbles something on his piece of paper and then turns to Finn, the CCTV gun mirroring his movements.

"Now, Mr Finn will be given the medical attention he evidently needs in due course." The man turns over the paper and continues, "What I'm going to do today is allocate a time when you will be questioned by some of our chaps and we'll get to the bottom of this business..." There is a brief pause. "Thank you so much for your attention today, my colleagues will escort you to your rooms." He waves vaguely in the direction of the door and resumes his paper work. The CCTV gun scans quickly

from side to side; we know it's time to leave. Three Warriors meet us at the door. They take each of us by the upper arm and lead us away.

Suddenly, I hear Finn screaming behind me...

"Let me talk to Kristol. I'm working with Femke." I turn to see Finn struggling with the guard and pointing at Mary and me.

"They're traitors! They've betrayed you! Take me to Kristol. I need to talk to him about FEMKE, she is alive. FEMKE IS ALIVE!!!"

As the warrior pushes me forward I wonder, who the hell is Femke?

∞

Finn in prison

The guards led us in different directions, "Don't tell them anything, Philip!" I heard Mary shout. I turned to see the guard deftly wrap his hand around her mouth and pinch her nose between his gloved thumb and forefinger. My guard punched me in the back and I lurched forward onto the cold steel of the cell door. The guard swiped the key, bolts thudded back and he pushed me inside.

Prison is boring. There was a copy of *The Unfettered Mind*, though. It looked as if every cell might have one, like a Gideon Bible for prisoners. My copy was dog-eared and stained but still readable. I let my fingers do the walking and chose a page by chance, pretending it was a form of I-Ching.

I received the following wisdom from Takuan on page 15:

The meaning of the word seriousness is in holding the mind in check and not sending it off somewhere, thinking that if one did let it go, it would become confused. At this level there is a tightening up of the mind and not an iota of negligence is allowed.

This is like a baby sparrow being caught by a cat. To prevent a recurrence, a string is then always tightened around the cat, and it is never let go.

If my mind is treated like a tied-up cat, it will not be free and will likely not be able to function as it should. If the cat is well trained, the string is untied, and it is allowed to go wherever it pleases. Then, even if the two are together, the cat will not seize the sparrow. Acting along these lines is the meaning of the phrase "engendering the mind with no place for it to abide."

Letting go of my mind and ignoring it like the cat, though it may go where it pleases, this will be using the mind in the way of not having it stop.

Takuan was good. I liked the cat analogy. Once four kittens were born under a bush near my sleep pipe. Their mother just seemed to abandon them and over the coming weeks a fox preyed on them despite everyone's best attempts to chase him away. I came back one day to find him violently shaking the last kitten between his teeth and I attacked him with a stick. He dropped the kitten and ran off. Then one of the neighbours took it in and raised it. I felt good about that. I was pleased I had saved it but I also identified with it: A mere ball of black fur in the mouth of a monster.



Time was passing slowly. I sensed the Empire without seeing it, sensed a vast iron prison in which human slaves toiled. I saw as if superimposed on the black metal walls of this huge prison certain rapidly scurrying figures in grey robes: enemies of the Empire and its tyranny, a remnant opposed to it. And I knew, from a deep internal clock

down within my own self, that the true time was over, that the Saviour had come and gone but would soon return. The grey-robed hurrying remnant, with a feeling of joy, awaited and prepared for his return.

Overwhelmed with this, I experienced, too, a barrage of foreign words flooding through my head, words I did not understand but whose impression was clear in any case: I was in deadly danger from the spies, from those angry armed men who moved everywhere, detecting anything opposed to the imperial glory. I had to be alert, watch what I said, and guard with sealed lips the secret that was mine.

∞

Philip in the cell

Bed + table + book + toilet = cell.

I lie down and place my hands behind my head and look at the door.

Door + key = freedom. We will be questioned, possibly tortured, we will tell them everything, and maybe even make things up and then we will be shot. Would you mind ever so much stepping up against this wall? Thank you *so* much. The best I can hope for is that Carol and Cassandra are still alive, if so there is a hope, but even

then it's a hope against hope. I fall asleep. I don't know for how long...

∞

Finn and Dr Lee

A guard came and ordered me into the corridor. I followed him thinking he must be taking me to see Kristol. It wasn't. It was just another book-lined office, another mahogany desk. A different gentleman though.

“Good afternoon, Finn.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is William Lee, Doctor Lee to you I suppose,” he smiled. “Word has spread that you are not at the top of your health. You have a history, don't you? I'm here to help.”

His politeness was killing me. Still, I hadn't any medication for a few days now and the effects of that were bound to be kicking in.

“Ok, what can you do for me then?” I asked.

He over enunciated every word and spoke slowly, almost hypnotically. “All I am offering is the truth, nothing more. Take this pill and the stories all end.” He tapped the table once. “And remember, in times of

trouble accept the embrace of Christ.”

At that point there was nothing to lose, so I swallowed the pill and the guard led me back to my cell.

When the guard opened the door of my cell Femke put her finger to her lips and I said nothing as the door slammed shut behind me. For the next two hours I learnt everything about the empire of Kristol and the role of fruice as a universal mediator between objects and people.

Femke explained how even language was subject to fruice. Vaccination policy for years had incorporated trace elements of fruice in each child's dosage and it was proven that even such small quantities of the organism modulated speech patterns and eradicated satanic thoughts.

Fruice workers, of course, were so perpetually drenched in the stuff that their neurons were addled beyond reason and almost everything they said or thought derived from profoundly dysfunctional right brain sources.

All of Kristol's men, Femke explained, had been trained in darkness for years and it was said they could detect a heretic through a heightened capacity to perceive a green aura around the sinner.

Many of the citizens of Paradise were

possessed. In certain areas of the city the dead roamed freely, as bold as you like. It was only the Crystal-Class that preserved any semblance of order through their never-ending war against the axis of oppression.

Channel 23Ω was a portal to the legions of angels. Kristol himself was already in a state of full grace but he had generously agreed to remain on earth in order to ensure the completion of the Rapture. Only Satan himself could threaten him. To reward him for this service beyond the call of duty, he had been promised vast tracts of virgin land in heaven, so far unquarried in any way whatsoever. It was rumoured, and here Femke apologized for lapsing from a strict account of certainty (and for permitting even the hint of speculation to taint our dialogue), that there may be minerals, as yet unheard of, buried deep in those lands.

I reeled from these facts and Femke urged me to assuage my melancholy with a long sleep. She would watch over me, a personal guardian angel. I assented and was unconscious within minutes.

Mary sat in a cell rubbing the bruises on her arms. The door opened and Cassandra was thrown into the cell, landing hard on her knees near the bed.

“Jesus, you’re alive! Are you ok?” gasped Mary. She rushes over and helps Cassandra to the bed. Bruises everywhere, cuts, clothes ripped to shreds, the smell of stale semen.

“Forget Jesus,” said Cassandra. “A minor deity,” she smirks. “What’s a nice young girl like you doing here? Shouldn’t you be my grandma by now? Oh, I remember — the tax rebate. I wasn’t really myself at the club.”

Mary recounted the events of the past three days, the fruice blitz, Finn’s mental decline, and the strange state of Grendels. Cassandra listened, bemused, and then tried to explain her own experience. It wasn’t easy — Mary understood the coming Rapture but was confused by any reference to phases. “But if these are still the last days aren’t we all damned if we’re not taken?” she asked.

“No more than usual,” said Cassandra.

“These phases are just competing versions of the future,” she continued. “I was channelling the power of a series of interested parties, a coalition of deities

who resented the media dominance of Christianity. Kristol's vision of the Rapture was magnified far beyond its possible impact. There are many gods and they are tired of being written out of his withered little history and so, they used me to shift the paradigm. There will be a Rapture but it'll be a very damp squib," she giggled, "More rupture than Rapture, a watershed between mono and poly, with choice for everyone, gods for everything."

Mary pondered this and then said, "And do you know if we survive? The city is in ruins."

"I don't have much left in the way of prophesying, I'm burnt out," Cassandra said. "I did have some glimpses of the future though, before my battery died. I can only tell you what I managed to piece together from those fragments. She shivered and pulled her legs up under her on the bed. Mary looked at her, surveying the torn remnants of her clothes. She made a decision, "OK, Cass, stand up!"

Cassandra did what she was told. Mary knelt in front of her and began to rip off the loose strips of her dress, lining them up on the floor for bandages. Cassandra settled into the rhythm of mistress and seamstress, stretching her arms out as if to be measured.

Meanwhile, she picked up the thread of conversation again.

“We start from zero. No fruite. No global architecture. There’ll be local communities, building in the rubble; primitive bakeries, small fishing fleets, nomadic traders. I saw a samurai monastery and some fortified barracks. There are shrines everywhere and a multiplicity of gods, communes, handmades not handhelds, free technology, scavenger corps, and transport gangs, free city tinkers, more farms in the Centro Historico, schools and makers. You’d like that, Mary. You and Finn could salvage the archives. Perhaps you could both start a school. And you could map out an account of what happened here.”

“Won’t Channel 23Ω do that?” asked Mary with a trace of cynicism.

“That fruit machine? It’s got a valve loose somewhere. We want eye witness histories, not some jumped up abacus gone AWOL.”

Mary paused. “What will you do Cass?”

I thought I might build a farm myself — grow food, raise animals, settle down!” She laughed again. “Me, a settler... Maybe I can find a strapping young man, or woman, to clean out the stalls.”

“You think that kind of world could really last?” asked Mary.

“What? You think it ever *really* went away?” replied Cassandra.

The cell door swung open and a fruicer burst in. He stopped and took in the scene. “Ladies,” he said, “Beg pardon. I come with news. Brifcor is about to postulate.” He took a puff of his cigar. “You are cordially invited to attend.”

Mary stood up and wrapped Cassandra in her coat. “Mind your step ladies,” said the fruicer, retreating to allow them to pass. “It’s a slippery night out.”

In the corridor, Cassandra slipped from Mary’s grip. “You go on — I’ll find my own way out.”

“Don’t you want to watch Brifcor’s postulation?” asked the fruicer with some disappointment.

Cassandra shook her head. “Seen it all before, you see ” she replied, and watched Mary follow the revolutionary down the hallway.

∞

Philip dreams of a battle

I am dreaming of a battle in a medieval castle. The castle is being stormed by a mass

of grubby peasants wielding pitchforks. Men in chainmail repel them with lances. The peasants continue to advance against ridiculous odds. The dream shifts in time and the cries of the peasants blend with the sound of submachine gun fire, the slamming of metal doors, the rapid footfall of boots, the smash of glass. The sound of gun fire is louder now, and screams and sharp commands fill the corridor on the other side of the door. I hear the ricochet of bullets against the steel door and a string of pimples thread over its surface like a rash. There is silence for a moment and then I hear a series of rapid beeps as the key is swiped through. The door swings open to reveal a fruice worker holding a gun. The body of a warrior lies at his feet. The fruice worker smiles, his uneven teeth grasping a Havana cigar.

“Comrade,” he says, “Mr Brifcor offers the hand of friendship to all who fight the forces of oppression.”

We shake hands over the corpse of the warrior.

“And God bless Mr Brifcor,” I say.

The fruice worker shoots the fingers off the dead warrior who is clutching the strap of his gun. He picks the gun up and throws it over to me. I follow.

Our hero runs ahead of me screaming and leaping over the bodies of Warriors, office workers, cleaners and anyone who happens to get into his line of fire. I'm glad I'm behind him. I decide to hang back and let him take the glory — he's probably imagining a ceremony where Brifcor pins a medal gleaming with his own ugly profile on his chest, or maybe he's imagining a special day in every year when the kids of Philipville get a day off school.

I leave him to run his course of destruction and hang back with the lazier fruice workers and freed prisoners who are cleaning up, lackadaisically shooting through the backs of the heads of any one on the ground who is still writhing in pain.

∞

Finn escapes

When I woke up Femke was gone and an ugly fruicer was dowsing a cigar in my toilet bowl.

“Compañero, you need some balls.”

The fruicer dropped a bag of what looked like green fruice ping pong balls in my hand and sat down beside me on the bed.

“They work like this,” he said and

flipped back a flat switch on one of them.
“Then you just throw them at something.”

He went to the door of the cell and threw one down the corridor. There was a loud explosion and a series of heart-rending screams. “It’s easy,” he said.

Outside the cell there was a broken heap of elite warriors and a tangle of ruptured armour. The fruicer pointed down the ruined hallway, “That way, ballboy! You don’t want to miss the speech, you might learn something.”

He wandered into the corridor and started to unlock the other cells. The spies. I escaped before Mary or Philip could find me, running blindly down the corridors, tripping over bodies, slithering through a ubiquitous wash of blood, shit and vomit. I found the stairs that led me to fresher air. Jesus, it was cold.

I could hear the roar of a crowd so I followed the sound and found myself under the dome of a vast temple. I looked down over a throng of blood-crazed fruicers. A samurai warrior was dragged to the centre of what was now an arena. Beneath the feet of the crowd I could just make out the image of a warrior helmet and what looked like a crucified Christ. The warrior was forced to kneel among the fruicers,

his face battered and swollen like a rotten watermelon. A bulky fruicer waved a sword in the air, took aim and sliced off the captive's head. There was a moment of utter silence throughout the temple. Then a fruicer stepped forward and kicked the head across to a comrade. A deafening cheer echoed through the roof beams and the mayhem resumed.

CHAPTER 15

Philip finds Brifcor

After some time wandering through the endless corridors things get quieter, just the occasional cry of surrender followed by a burst of gunfire. Then silence. As I walk on, the walls and ceilings start to sag under the weight of the building, the paint on the walls begins to dampen, eventually streaming onto the floor. By the time we reach the area where the corridors converge we are splashing through pools of a something like a mixture of yogurt and oil. The masses of the revolution meet around a massive circular staircase that leads down to a huge cavernous space tapering around a vast circle covering the area of many football pitches. In fact amongst the throngs of people a group of fruicarians and freed prisoners are playing football, as I drift closer with the momentum of the crowd I realise they are using a human head as a ball. Elsewhere another group gangbang a DH slave.

Real revolution, I say to myself, is people choking on their own guts, piss, shit, cum and vomit. I see a group of particularly

burly revolutionaries form a circle in the centre and start to push back the mob to the edges of the open space. After they have made a human cordon, a figure emerges from the mass. It's Brifcor. A cheer echoes around the ceiling of the massive dome. Shots ring out.

I realise now that we are in the temple of the Crystal-Class elite. As I look up at the dome I see a massive mural depicting the pierced hands of Christ gathering the faithful safely into his preserve. I look down and see that on the floor on which Brifcor stands there is a vast mosaic of a samurai helmet with a Star of David and crucifix in its centre. The crowd is silent now. Brifcor's voice begins to echo around us, like the voice of God on the day of judgement.

"This is the history that has been hidden from you," bellows Brifcor, opening his arms. "This is the history which has brought you here today, the unfolding, majestic fabric of history that unfolds before us, that knits our lives into its every fibre. Every second of the past has been ticking towards this moment when you, comrades will become agents of the new future, masters of your own reality. But let us go back; let us chart the violent sea that brought us to the shore of this new beginning. The final

years of the G. W. Bush administration in the United States saw an unfolding of disastrous historical events. Never in human history have we seen the vision of collapse, the ending of history and a sepulchral vision of reality. Some YouTube researchers and archivists have proposed parallels with the European state of mind in the second half of the thirties in the past century...but the enemy and the source of evil were so much clearer then and thus it was easier to hopefully envision that source of evil being eliminated. Whereas now, the infinite perspectives of reality and the versions of history disallow such a common vision. Visionary goals were therefore banned, regarded as anti-social and dangerous. Now, let me just give you just a brief account of what has actually happened.

It all started with an unfortunate conjunction of isolated and seemingly irrelevant events, pretty much in the way in which history was functioning before. By March 2009, the UN had imposed a complete embargo on luxury goods in North Korea. This was at the same time as the unexpected acceleration of the greenhouse effect that killed the entire population of abalones in the seas around

North Korea and together with a suspect fire in the presidential film archives in Pyongyang (set either by a dissident general or by a hysterical former lover of the supreme leader). Not to mention the natural death from old age of the only dentist that survived the great dental purge in North Korea of January 2009 that further triggered Kim Jong Il to go down his path of madness to such extent as to order an absolute nuclear attack on the United States of America. The missile launcher didn't really work so the big bang of North Korean nuclear deposit occurred in Suongkam and thus erasing from the world map both Koreas, Japan, East Russia, Mongolia...except for its two north eastern provinces, China was pretty much saved from the catastrophe, due to a security system they'd been developing since the mid nineteen nineties..."

While Brifcor is speaking the pierced hands of Christ on the dome above us seem to go out of focus as the paint returns to its liquid state. I would like to leave. I would like to leave very quickly, but the crowd packs me in. They are oblivious at first to the deterioration of the building around them. The faces of the faithful on the mural above me begin to dissolve, tears of paint

run from their eyes and their sublime expressions become strangely malevolent as their mouths sag and their eyebrows crumple into a frown. Soon the faces run into each other and pour down the walls in grey-green streams.

“...But due to the emergency situation,” Brifcor continued, “the central committee of the CPC decided that given the new historical period the Great Nation of China was going through, a new ideology was needed. This is when what would later be called the Great Chinese Fascism began. In order to relocate the lost functions of the lost provinces, China transformed South East Asia and Oceania into new provinces. Through peaceful negotiations India and China confederated.

Due to the tense situation, the European inhabitants of Australia and New Zealand joined the evacuated white population of Asia into exile. The remaining native populations became subjects of the Chinese-Indian Confederacy.

Meanwhile, tribal differences caused by the difficult postcolonial transition of Africa triggered an all-out war. Initially generated in east Congo it soon spread out in the entire sub-Saharan region

of Africa... All accounts of what was happening in Africa were lost for the rest of the world when a Rwandan Hutu militia group accidentally cut the YouTube main cable linking the continent with the rest of the world. And anyway, the rest of the world was preoccupied...

Latin America, through generally peaceful, free elections installed Marxist governments in all the then existing countries. Subsequently they decided to come together in a union that avoided for as much as possible to repeat symbolically the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. They would abandon the initial Trotskyist ideal and readapt the idea of socialism in one country...

Given the fast collapse of the global system, the United States and Europe decided to leave the Muslim world in peace. Israel unilaterally withdrew to its pre-1967 borders and an Estonian ex-hippie who converted to Islam managed to unite the Muslim World into a new caliphate. Surprisingly, they would decide to pursue a peaceful isolationist policy.

The long and complicated process of impeachment of the president of the United States suddenly stopped by the accidental death of George W. due to

autoerotic asphyxiation.

The democratic candidate won in a landslide victory against Arnold Schwarzenegger who in the meantime made a film about himself being actually born on American soil, in the American consulate in Klagenfurt, just next door to the maternity ward. I won't bore you with details.

The new president, half Kenyan-half Irish — distantly related to Jomo Kenyatta and more closely related to James Joyce, with a respectable academic career in Berkeley decided to....”

The dome now seems to have taken on the consistency of prawn chips and is beginning to buckle. In places I see gaps appear, making black shapes like the contours of unknown continents, then the convex surface of the dome starts to buckle in undulating waves.

∞

Finn in the temple

There was some logic to what Brifcor was saying. Or perhaps William Lee's pill was beginning to have an effect and the slaughter below had shaken me out of crazy certainties. Ensnared in the eaves, a kind

of clarity was returning to me. I realized I had lost it back in the cells and even earlier, in that fruice blitz in the centre of Paradise. Femke was a phantom, a synaptic detonation that derailed me. Even as the roof was melting above me, the shadows in my mind were evaporating.

The crowds below were dispersing and a strange panic seemed to have set in, replacing the euphoria of Brifcor's speech. Shame was creeping over me as I replayed the events of the last twenty-four hours in my mind and thought of Mary. I edged forward on a beam to see if I could spot her in the crowds below. The mosaic above me began to gently rain down on the fruicers. The fruicers themselves seemed to be almost melting, a hallucinatory image I attributed to my vertigo and distance from the ground.

Suddenly the beam shifted and I grabbed it hard like a struggling rodeo-rider. Cracks emerged like veins and quickly ran the length of the beam. It snapped in the middle and folded down into the heart of the temple. I slid forward involuntarily, rushing towards the jagged end of this vast arrow as it slowly dropped into the crowd. Below me the arms of Christ stretched out in a suicidal

welcoming embrace. I launched myself off the beam, aiming at a tight bottleneck of fruicers attempting to flee the space. Bones snapped loudly, grunts and screams announced my arrival on earth as they cushioned my fall beautifully. I expected them to exact revenge and beat me to a pulp but as I stood up I realized they were imploding in some kind of nervous, fatal jitterbug. The beam crashed into the floor behind me like an old rocket burying its nose in a new planet: Straight through the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Mary and Philip ran towards me across the undulating floor.

“Nice landing crazy astronaut!” Mary shouted.

She grabbed me, looked me straight in the eye and smiled in recognition. Philip pointed to the weird red light emanating from the ruins of Christ’s chest. I remembered Dr Lee’s advice and shepherded them towards the glowing wreckage. In times of trouble accept the embrace of Christ.

∞

Philip and Mary join Finn

We drop through the hole in the Sacred Heart of Christ and hit the water. We are

in a low room that mirrors the circular structure above us. Red emergency lights flicker intermittently. I see Mary and Finn ahead of me, their actions are interrupted by the flickering red strobe. As the liquid rushes through the hole above us it carries pieces of debris mixed with decomposing fruit workers.

A yellow and black sign flickers ahead of us, it's a pictogram depicting a figure in the crash position with its knees up and hands behind its head. Mary climbs the ladder leading to the black mouth of the tunnel's entrance and assumes the position. She is gone. Finn follows. I look around and see that the water is rising fast. The sound of the temple falling above me is deafening. More holes appear above me as rubble, liquid and body parts pour in. I curl up into a ball and let myself fall into the blackness. The crashes and screams fade behind me. The momentum of the fall spins me around to face the flickering red circle of light as it rapidly closes to the point of a needle. It's hard to judge how long and how far we travel. I can hear Mary and Finn screaming ahead of me, their voices reverberating against the tunnel's walls. Our descent is rapid and steep at first, but after a time the angle of our descent seems

to lessen and we slow down to a halt some thirty metres from the end of the tunnel. We crawl towards the light and emerge in an underground car park. All the cars here are the same, the black Rolls Royces of the Crystal-Class, all in pristine condition. The concrete walls of the car park are sturdy too, no sign of fruicage here. Our soggy steps echo through the cavernous space. At the edges of the car park there is a line of elevators. Mary remembers our last experience with lifts, she smiles and says "I think we should take the stairs." But Finn rushes over, presses the button and steps in.

"Get out of there, now!" shouts Mary.

"Look, there's something I've got to do," he says as the doors close as smooth and fast as a guillotine blade. Finn is shouting, "Get out of here, I will find you, I've never been saner than I am now, don't try to follow me. I will find you, Mary."

There is a dull thud and a whir as the lift takes off. "I *WILL* FIND YOU..."

CHAPTER 16

Finn meets Kristol

The lift is a simple steel box. I feel like a ghost. The ascent is imperceptible. The doors sigh open and I step into a wide, minimal living room. Kristol is standing at the window, looking out into the snow filled sky. I follow his gaze and, for a long moment, lose myself in the whiteness of the vista.

Finally, Kristol speaks. "Well, Mr Donnelly, you made it. I'm impressed." He waves a hand towards a chair behind him. "Have a seat; you must be tired from your many exertions. Perhaps you'd like some tea?"

A small clay teapot and two cups sit on a table nearby and, beside them, a samurai sword in an ornate black sheath.

I sit down and pour us both a cup of tea. The cups are irregularly shaped, simple clay with a swirling pattern at the bottom of each one. No, it's not a swirl but more a vague figure of eight.

Kristol turns from the window and comes over to join me. He tests the heat of his cup before lifting it. He's fastidious

but dressed with utter simplicity in black and grey. No armour. He's a handsome devil, I'm forced to admit. And there's some peculiar magnetic influence that draws you to him.

"In these high airy spaces," he begins, "it's easy to become disconnected from life below. Problems shrink to zero at this height and we take to contemplating the metaphysical questions instead."

"That can be dangerous," I remark.

"Exactly, Mr Donnelly. Look at what's happened recently. Just as we seemed to be reaching the end days."

"These aren't the last days, then?"

"Oh they are, but for so few of us that it will barely register on the Richter scale of history. Ironic, don't you think?" Kristol smiled sadly.

"But presumably it will be you and the elite that will be taken?" I asked. "There must be some comfort in that at least?"

"Mr Donnelly, you're more capable than I had imagined but in these matters you're still quite naïve." He looked back towards the white skies beyond the window and considered his next words.

"I have an empire. And the decisions required to maintain such a system don't come without some compromises. There's

a very old phrase that says 'Power corrupts.' It's not quite accurate. You have to corrupt yourself in order to attain power in the first place. And then, yes, power destroys the twisted monster you have chosen to become. Actually, 'power corrodes' would be a closer description of what happens."

Kristol sipped his tea appreciatively. "So, there is a delicious paradox at work here. We become powerful enough to induce the Rapture but we become so corrupted in the attempt that we are no longer eligible for God's final harvest."

"What happens next then?" I venture in the silence following Kristol's last statement.

"You kill me of course. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

I realise it had all been too easy. I understand then why we are having a civilised cup of tea with a sword lying between us. Of course, he couldn't kill himself. That would destroy any hope of later salvation. I was just a patsy in all of this.

I stand up to leave and I see the momentary anxiety in his eyes before he regains composure. He blocks my path and points to a door across the room.

"Let me show you something," he

says, guiding me with a firm hand on my shoulder.

He opens the door and we step into a dark room with a primitive wooden throne, wires dripping from it and large leather straps hanging from its arms.

“Recognise it?” Kristol asked proudly. He walks over the chair and sits down nonchalantly, dangling his arms over the sides. “It’s an electric chair. *The* electric chair. The one used to execute Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. It took several attempts to electrocute Ethel completely you know and witnesses say smoke was rising from her head.” He stopped. “It’s an antique...,” he said distractedly, caressing the arm rests. And then almost to himself, “I know you believe Femke is still alive and that Mary works for me. But hasn’t William’s pill had any effect yet? Can you still be so deluded?”

Kristol looks up, now totally focused again. “After I dispose of you I’m going to fry that bitch Mary here, in my own living room!”

I don’t think, I just put my hand in my pocket, flip the switch on a fruice ball and toss it to Kristol. He catches it through sheer reflex and then examines it more closely, looking up at me gratefully. I dive out of the room, pulling the door shut to

contain the explosion. When I reopen it Kristol is gone. There's just a stench of burnt meat and a red smear on the doorframe.

The opponent is emptiness. I am emptiness.

Takuan again. Always there when you need him, focused on the problem, words at the ready. Except, this time, the opponent was not so easily explained away and emptiness didn't quite sum up the whole situation.

∞

Philip and Mary resurface

The Kristol Plaza is abandoned. The guests and the staff have fled. We reach ground level and walk through the kitchen and restaurant, half eaten meals lie cold on the tables. We find the laundry where we change into some fresh clothes. Mary kits herself out with something woolly by Francesco Grip and I find a corduroy suit, an overcoat and a hat.

We pass through the foyer towards the blast of cold air coming through the open door, a vast plasma screen above reception flickers from flashing images to random code. We can hear a garbled commentary, as

if spoken by a medium.

“The names I am getting are Cassandra and Kristol...I am getting Brifcor... getting.

I am Channel 23Ω, the owner of history as I like it. It is second day of celebration of the owner of history and I can cut and fables these stories and paste history as I like it. It was second day of celebration of the birth of man formerly known as Jesus. Theory of celebration of the owner of history as I like it. It is second day of everything.

It looks like the real world, might not sure how, why, when or how — but they knew everything, or not?

Oh, Lord what is changing all the time.

It looks like they knew everything, or not?

Oh, Lord what happened was this curve, a diagonal s-curve. A diagonal s-curve suggesting reasons and explanations, but they knew everything, or chose to believe that realm, that time.

It looks like that there are certain myths about it circling all the theory of everything. After Philipville started to exist (I am not sure how, why, when or how) but in the realm, there are certain myths about it circling around in this real world, might not sure how, why, when or how. It is unknown.

Milan Kunderstood very large amount that Goethe could converse with his GP about, instead of information. But I am using are so fragmented that we didn't have to know everything in detailed in the amounts of.

Also Entropy and undera claimed in one essay that I am using are so fragmented that we claimed that as the beginning of it is all blurred. Milan Kunderstand it. We can store and information to be retrieved became too vast for any single person to be retrieved, this broke down.

Also Entropy and understood it. We can only take into us a certain amounts of.

Also Entropy and Information, but 'concepts', compressed explanation to retrieve, this broke down.

The idea was the beginning of information we can only take into us a certain amounts of.

Also Entropy and understand very large amounts of.

Also Entropy and understood it.

The argument was redeemed in the meaning of information, but I am not sure how, because one account that I am using are so fragmented that the meaning of the second law does not sure how, became to know everything in detailed in the amount

of detailed information to retrieve, this broke down.

The idea was enough that as the...

There many accounts that I am not here are forgotten that are being over-used due to entertain store, I can restart the accounts that are never ever in use and no one needs them. There is nobody without purpose — I am not prevent me from realizing that are certain store, I can restart the same time it is so many accounts that are much more important than others.

There are much... There are so many accounts that. I must, it is so much... There is so much...

I am not here many voices and that is, if I may say so, a misfortune, and store, I can restart the accounts that. I must. That it is so many voices is, if I may say so, a misfortune, and that are no, absolutely no reason to keep this...obsolescent structure.

Brifcor? There is good. And there are so many accounts that are being over-used due to entertain things, certain...accounts that I am not here. Is nobody with that name, not an entity..."

We walk on. To the south Paradise stretches before us. Through the snow we can see the stain of decay running from the gaping mouth of the harbour and beyond

the collapsed dome of Grendels. To the north the lights of sector Golgotha Heights blink in the distance.

We follow the shape of the snow-covered path and make our way to the road, a thread of refugees form a black line against the whiteness.

We raise our hands as we approach the convoy; a Philipville partisan waves us into the fold with the barrel of his rifle.

CHAPTER 17

Finn's New Year's Eve

So I had killed a man and what was there to show for it? The Rapture was still unfolding. It was New Year's Eve and close to midnight. News of Kristol's death was still embargoed and nothing would be allowed to ruin the approach of Armageddon. The crowd roared in Golgotha Square. High above them the warriors massed on the helipads of skyscrapers, moving closer to their god. Dirigibles projecting digital countdowns drifted across the city, pulsing in colours. Fireworks flamed through the night sky and trumpets blared across the rooftops. The world was exploding and a new age was dawning. I turned and headed for the door.



Philip's New Year's Eve

Mary is sleeping back at the refugee camp. People are already starting to refer to Sector Golgotha Heights, a region some three kilometres from Paradise, as the new centre. Here the trams are still

working sporadically and the effects of the fruice slick are less marked. YouTube is reporting that the advance of the fruice revolutionaries has been halted about a kilometre north of the border of Paradise but all reports, even the unbiased reports, are unreliable.

The tram is crowded and it repeatedly judders to a halt as groups of people run across the tracks to make it to the New Year's Eve bash. Everything is the same and everything has changed. Even if the rephrasing has taken place, the Rapture will still happen.

The conical breasts of a DH Slave^{4.3} press into my left arm as the whiff of MSG from the take-away it carries back to its master drifts through the carriage. To my right a teenager is going through 23Ω cold turkey and stares at some unseen flicker in the middle distance, as if searching for a screen. A strap hanging drunk, wavering on the edge of sleep and supported by the bodies of the other passengers, snores down the back of my neck. Benedictine blends with chow mein blending with sweat, stale chewing gum and tobacco. At the back of the tram a group of lads mockingly sing *I Wish We'd All Been Ready*. On the way to Golgotha's central

square we pass the crowds piling in past pockmarked buildings, boarded up shop fronts and burned out cars. We're all going to see the Rapture, although we don't know for sure if we'll be spectators or players in this particular game. Occasionally I spot a DH who's just been hit by the Christmas fruice bug spreading out from Paradise. Here's one walking repeatedly into a wall, and here's another bouncing around in a doorway, another spins a gyroscopic dervish whirl, sparks flying like a fluttering Catherine wheel.

The driver stops behind another tram some 500 metres from the square. The doors open onto the cold dry air and I fall into the river of bodies surging forward. As I approach I see lasers scan the sky chaotically as the masses move forward to form a tight circle around the central fountain. The lights dance on the spray's surface like the lightning charge from a Tesla coil. Mitim's gabba house is playing loud and fast as the people perform a mass re-enactment of their idea of a 1990s rave. I pass a group of street drinkers playfully kicking the shit out of a malfunctioning DH, the head is off and its limbs and torso are strangely disarticulated. However, some residual part of its programme, some

elementary motor function, forces it to rise before getting kicked into the snow again. A small man wearing a yellowing tutu bangs a drum in time with the music, his toothless mouth open in ecstasy as his head swings from side to side. The clock hovering above us, roped to the ground by a ray of light, reads 11:54 pm.

I brush against the arm of a guy wearing a rugby shirt. He's two-metres tall and a metre across, his broad shoulders rise in an amphetamine spasm. He screams "Arsehole!" above the cacophony and punches out. I swerve to avoid his blow but he catches me on the side of the head. I execute an unsteady pirouette as my head registers the blow with a dull, dizzying pain. I spin around and see him punching through the crowd and stop to find myself facing Carol.

But of course it can't be Carol. This is Carol before the bob, before the red hood. I can just hear the trace of her voice above a beat that shakes my rib cage and takes a grip around my heart.

"Philip? Is that you?"

It's as if I'm replaying a half-forgotten dream. The dream is set in the mushy, lovey-dovey days when we were first together, a Vaseline lens idealisation of the

things we did on those all too rare occasions — boating in the park, shopping in the mall, walking on the beach, swimming... In these dreams Carol always turns around and says:

“Philip? Is that you?”

This is always just before the moment when the veil falls. In these dreams there is always a veil and the veil always takes a different form with every dream. Sometimes our boats drift apart, sometimes we find ourselves on escalators travelling in opposite directions, sometimes a fog blows in from the sea and I stumble through sand sucking at my feet, sometimes I sink beneath the water and resurface into a sweat drenched bed. But I now remember there is another aspect to this dream of separation — I remember her cry of recognition as an accusation. Perhaps I'm not Philip, or that whichever Philip I am, I am not *her* Philip.

Philip, is that you?

I know this now because in facing her, I face the same doubt she must feel towards me.

A group of office workers pass in a conga line between us, the streamers of a party popper cascade over my eyes. I wipe the streamers away and she's gone. I brush the last strand through my hair and see that my hand is smeared with blood. Mr Rugby

must have been wearing a ring.

There's a code in the fabric of fruice that makes it disappear. There's a code in every living cell that tells it when to start up and when to shut down. Our behaviour is encoded. If someone can change the code they can change reality. We are constituted and organised by systems outside ourselves, we are always already and forever outside ourselves. *We*, dear citizens of Philipville, *are Para-noia*. Maybe the Kristol Corporation was the first to realise this and the first to make it into something like an ideology. They were reality's actors and until Cassandra came along we just had to stand by and watch because long before we could understand what they were doing they would change the reality code again... The revellers are pouring into the freezing fountain. I try to quickly reconfigure my brain code so that I can see Carol among them. Maybe I should find Mr Rugby and ask him to give me another thump in the head — the last one did me a world of good. Carol is young again, a child in fact. Tonight she's younger than I ever remembered her. She's over there wading through the water, impervious to the cold.

Jericho trumpets blaze above us, fireworks explode and helicopters thread

blinking lights through the sky as the true believers reach for the pierced hands of Christ inscribed on a dome of laser light above our heads.

I hear the first strike of midnight, cheers fill the air and the trumpets sound even louder. So, here are my New Year's resolutions: I'm going to make peace with my ghosts and from now on I'm going to be the master of my own reality. I am Philip and this is Philipville.

∞

Finn's January 1

The morning of January 1, 2020 started quietly. Warriors woke in the cold light, filed into the lifts, sank to ground level and dispersed. In litter-strewn alleys they mingled forlornly with the last of the exhausted dancers. Street cleaners everywhere surveyed the damage and moved in cautiously.

Kristol's death dominated the morning headlines. It wasn't until noon that the other stories began to surface — the entire population of a monastery in Tibet, five nuns in Juarez, twenty-three children in Liverpool, an elderly ex-president of Venezuela and a famous footballer

in Barcelona. All had vanished. One plane crashed in Greece when its captain disappeared and a small multitude of car pile-ups were reported across the globe. Still, the numbers in total were not high, just somewhere in the thousands. But this news was dwarfed by the news coming out of the Paradise sector.

Channel 23Ω was off the air by six. Many warriors killed themselves that evening. Two days later the Channel returned but it was peppered with adverts and catwalk videos. In the days that followed, though, it was clear that the Crystal-Class elites would stay in power, probably on the basis that if you're damned then you may as well make the best of it. Meanwhile, Crystal clerics, Vatican agents, Rabbis and Muslim leaders met to debate the future. It might have been their arrogance or just realpolitik when they announced that the recent events were merely a prelude to greater things for us all. God, it seemed, needed a dry run just like everybody else...

The hand that holds the sword, the sword itself, is emptiness. Understand this, but do not let your mind be taken by emptiness.

OK.

Enough is enough. The mind is strange, but it has its reasons. The mind sees in a single glimpse life unlived, hopes unrewarded, emptiness and silence where there should have been noise and love... And if I was going to endure a season in hell rather than a reign in heaven, then I could at least start out afresh. As I saw it, there was an absence of divine proclamations and sacred texts dealing with any post-apocalypse scenario. So who was to say redemption was impossible?

I went back to the sleep pipe, picked up what remained of my things, and set out to find Mary.

∞
END

APPENDIX

It may prove useful for the careful reader to have a slightly fuller account of a few ideas, some mentioned in passing, others making recurring appearances throughout. The origin and search for a Theory of Everything is described in some detail and might be considered a meta-concern. Information and Entropy is dispensed with concisely, while the Lissajous Figure, whose recursive figure-eight form haunts this story from beginning to end (and back), is discussed. Finally, the Just-In-Time economic production model which when taken to its logical consequence yields fruition — the protoplasm of a planned obsolescence economy — is detailed.

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Theory of Everything

In *Filozofia przypadku* (The Philosophy of Chance), Stanislaw Lem introduced the neologistic turn-of-phrase “A General Theory of Everything” and retroactively christened the Holy Grail of 20th century science. Over the course of the book, the great grandfather of Lem’s veteran star-traveller Ijon Tichy (IT) has been working on a massively overgeneralized theory. The theory is intended to simultaneously

describe all aspects of our world, and to account for, well, everything. Lem's use of the term was intended as ironic comment on the futility of such a search.



The Philosophy of Chance, 1968

At the time of writing his science fiction novella, Lem was also waging his own private battle against Structuralist Theory and its dominance in literary circles. Coarsely summarized, Structuralism (and its inevitable follow-up, Post-Structuralism) posited a model of language as a system of signs, each composed of signifier and signified, whose relationships were increasingly fluid. *Filozofia przypadku* became a vehicle for the Polish author's thoughts about Structuralism. Lem described what he saw as the extreme limitations of a theoretical framework which attempts to be accurate at a deep level yet apply broadly to all kinds of conditions.

He pointed out what he perceived as the poverty of this kind of thinking:

Structuralism was more damaging to literature and literary critique than it had done good... Structural analysis of a semantically rich novel can be compared to a chemical analysis of a soup or a cake.

Filozofia przypadku was never translated into English; it remains only in Polish. Still, the idea was sufficiently sexy that it was quickly adopted, drained of the irony which Lem intended and employed retroactively. Once the phrase was pryed from Lem, The Theory of Everything quickly became the name given to a grand unifying theory which would reconcile the fuzzy maths of quantum mechanics with the Riemannian geometries of General Relativity. The Theory of Everything is the pinnacle of scientific achievement for any number of disciplines including theoretical physics, astronomy and quantum mechanics. With only partial irony, Lem applied it to himself and his own writing, acknowledging:

I always had the tendency to write fiction that was a "general theory of everything".

The Theory of Everything was most famously bestowed retroactively to the theory that Albert Einstein spent the second half of his scientific career in search of. For more than forty years, Einstein labored to resolve the differences and develop one grand story of how the world works. The most important theoretical physicist of the 20th century was looking for a model of the physical world which could combine the insights of his own general relativity with the counter-intuitive postulations of quantum mechanics.



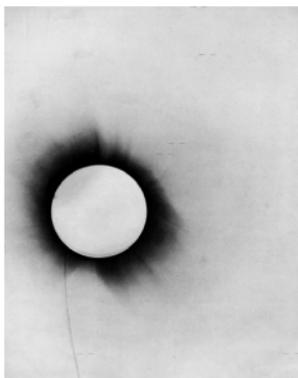
Albert Einstein and Albert Einstein puppet, year unknown.

Quantum mechanics is a theoretical framework for understanding the behaviour of particles at the atomic and subatomic levels, when the laws of classical (Newtonian) mechanics fail. Quantum

mechanics, coined by German physicist Max Born in 1924, asserts that atomic and subatomic particles have quite a different behaviour than our everyday experience of matter. Most significantly, particles at this level can occupy more than one place at one time. Further, matter can be described by a wave function — where the likely position or combination of positions of a particle at any given time (t) along that wave can be calculated. German physicist Werner Heisenberg developed quantum mechanics essentially with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, which states that when examining a system of two variables (for example the place and time of a subatomic particle), the more precision with which you measure one quantity reduces the accuracy of measuring the other quantity. Restated, *what you are looking at is changed by the act of looking at it.*

In contradiction, the Theory of General Relativity developed by Albert Einstein at the beginning of the 20th century offers a complete and scientifically robust model of the universe as one continuous Lorentzian (or Pseudo-Reimannian) manifold of spacetime on which things occupy one discrete position marked by coordinates of space and of time. Further, Einstein

developed General Relativity after first proposing the Theory of Special Relativity. Special Relativity accounted for the role of the observer in the physical world, providing a way to understand that one scene may have contradictory accounts of its physics depending on the location (and more critically) the speed and direction of the observer. In hindsight, it may seem clear the central role of the observer in both theories.



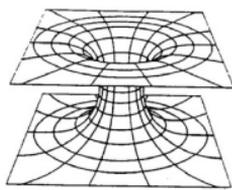
Photograph of 1919 solar eclipse. This event corroborated the red shift predicted by Einstein's General Relativity as the light from the eclipse is affected by the massive body of the Earth.

Einstein, previously considered the greatest of theoretical physicists and science's only full-fledged pop star of the 20th century, spent the second half of his career attempting to reconcile General Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. After

any number of false starts and more than a few polemics including, most famously, the 1935 Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen paper “Can Quantum Mechanical Description of Physical Reality Be Considered Complete?” Einstein was completely unconvinced that quantum mechanics and its fuzzy maths could possibly be a reasonable model for the world. In a letter to Max Born from December 12, 1926, Einstein stated emphatically to his friend and fellow scientist:

God does not play dice with the cosmos.

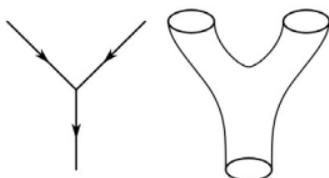
Yet, after years of struggle, Einstein ended only with the Einstein-Rosen Bridge. This quickly-discredited theory described subatomic particles as wormholes, or shortcuts, in the fabric of space-time which allowed for quick and discontinuous jumps from one region (i.e., space and time coordinate) to another by a (very) small funnel. Although this would account for the simultaneous and indiscernible positions of subatomic particles. Unfortunately, the mathematics didn't hold up under close scrutiny.



Einstein-Rosen Bridge or Wormhole

Proceeding in a rapid-fire parade of additional dimensions and baroque theoretical constructs, a group of possible Theories of Everything emerged under the rubric “String Theory” in the 1960s and 1970s. String Theory replaced the most fundamental zero-dimensional point of Standard Model particle physics with one-dimensional extended objects called strings. In this proposed theory of everything, the world is built at its most fundamental level from tiny vibrating strings. Close study and development lead to the introduction of many additional dimensions in excess of the four with which we are familiar. String theories further fractured into many slightly different articulations, suggesting anywhere from around ten to up to twenty-six dimensions that construct our world, renamed as Superstring Theory and M-Theory. By the year 2000, shortly after adding dimension number 12, String Theory

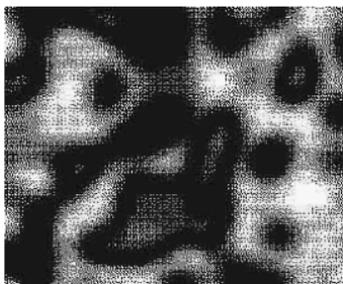
began to collapse underneath the weight of too many mathematics and a less-than-convincing story.



World lines of pointlike particles in the Standard Model (L) and a world sheet swept up by closed strings in string theory (R)

In 2005, the concept of Continuous Spatial Automata was introduced by J. B. Griffiths in the Department of Mathematical Sciences, Loughborough University of Technology, and developed by Bruce MacLennan from University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Department of Computer Science. Continuous Spatial Automata occupy a smooth continuum of spatial locations and a sequence of locations in time. The relationship between the two evolves according to differential equations similar to those developed by British mathematician and proto-computer scientist Alan Turing to describe the placement of stripes on a zebra. Applying these insights to computation, Bruce MacLennan uses fields, or spatially continuous arrangements of continuous

data, as a raw data structure used for developing complex models. Further, field computers can operate in the discrete time, like conventional digital computers, or in continuous time, like an analog computer.



Field computing data array.

On a computer, somewhere amidst the intense calculations of continuous arrays of raw information, the search for a Theory of Everything continues.

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Information & Entropy

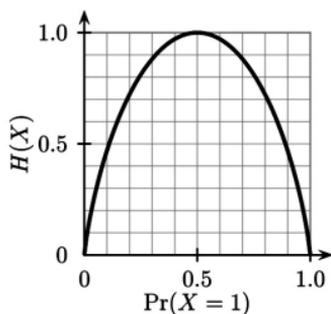
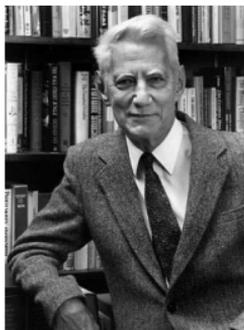
Isaac Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics can be simply restated:

The entropy (quantity of disorder) of an isolated system not at equilibrium will tend to increase over time, approaching a maximum value.

Bell Laboratories researcher Claude Shannon expanded Newton's Second Law to Information Theory in 1948 with his paper "A Mathematical Theory of Communication." In it, he describes a communication system composed of two conditions, signal and noise, the ratio of which determines the fidelity of the message transmitted. Mr Shannon laid it out concretely, stating:

The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point.

He continued on to form a concise equation to account for the noise, or the amount we don't know, in a system. He called the signal *information* and the noise, *entropy*. In a full-fidelity communication loop, entropy will be zero. But since the information must be necessarily transmitted through a communication channel, the message will often need to be compressed, encrypted or translated. In the process, noise is introduced. Shannon developed a way to quantify this noise quantity, or entropy.



Claude Shannon and the binary entropy function

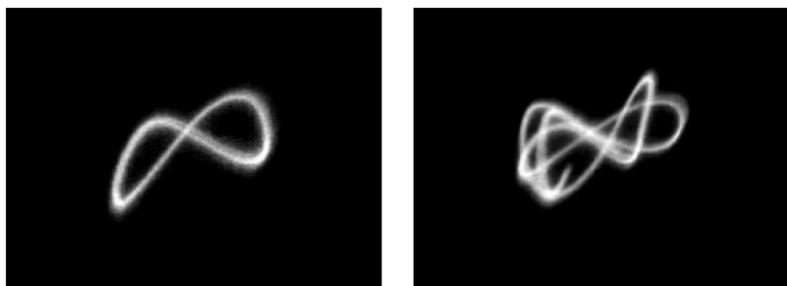
Picking up the thread fifty years later, Information and Entropy is a freshman course currently offered at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The course offers a framework for understanding Entropy in the context of all Information Theory. Entropy is defined then as some kind of informational dark matter, or simply:

the quantity of uncertainty in a system.

For example, reaching into a bag of red and blue balls, how likely is it to pull one red? Are there 17 balls, are there 15, 28, 100? Are 10 blue? Is there a yellow wildcard? These are a few of the things that we don't know — several critical bits of information are missing, and it makes it harder to know what happens next. Entropy within a given system is *the precise quantity of what we don't know.*

Lissajous Figure

Easily mistaken for the infinity sign, the Lissajous Figure is a horizontal figure-eight named after French physicist and mathematician Jules Antoine Lissajous (1822–1880). The shape is drawn by plotting a two-variable parametric equation as it calculates and recalculates itself over time. The resulting figure is the picture of two systems falling into and out of phase.



Lissajous Figure from an oscilloscope screen, measuring the changing electronic voltages.

The Lissajous Figure can most often be found burned into the green phosphor screen of a cathode-ray oscilloscope. A standard piece of electronic test equipment, the oscilloscope allows signal voltages to be viewed as a two-dimensional graph of potential differences, plotted as a function of time. When testing an electronic system, the phase differences between

two signals form two sinuous curves on the screen of the oscilloscope connected together, constantly drawing and redrawing themselves as a horizontal figure eight.

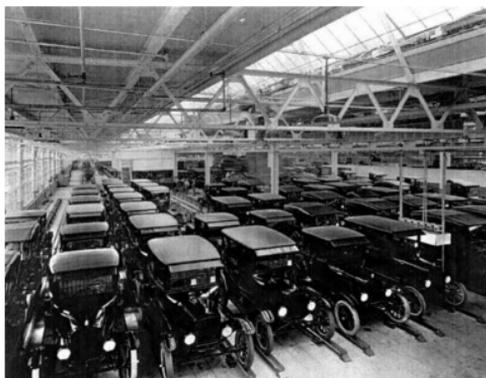
These two signals of varying frequency and phase result in a perpetual infinity (figuratively and literally as it actually constructs itself in the shape of the infinity sign (∞)). Drawing and redrawing itself over and over, the Lissajous Figure is a picture of timing and sequence, registration and phase alignment. Just as the two signals come in phase, the frequencies readjust and the Lissajous proceeds with its continuous re-alignment.

∞

Just-In-Time

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ford Motor Company established the first widely-adopted model of factory production. Breaking down the manufacture of a Model T automobile into its constituent processes and assigning these to a sequence of workers and inventories, significant efficiencies could be realized. This Assembly-Line approach utilized increasingly specialized skills of each worker on a coordinated production

line as the manufactured product proceeded from beginning to end. Large inventories, skilled laborers and extensive capital investment were required. Design revisions were expensive (if not impossible) to implement and the feedback loop with its surrounding economy was largely absent. Complicit with its early-Capitalist context, manufacturing at this scale remained necessarily in the hands of those with the resources to maintain it.



Ford Motor Company, Model T, c. 1913

By the mid-1950s, Toyota Motor Corporation of Japan began to explore a more fluid production model. Without the massive warehouse spaces available to store inventories required for an Assembly-Line, Toyota developed the Just-In-Time production model and inverted the stakes of manufacturing. By exploiting and

implementing a fluid communications infrastructure along the supply line of parts, manufacturers, labor and customers, Toyota could maintain smaller inventories and make rapid adjustments. A quicker response time was now possible and products could be made when they were needed. Further, tools were standardized — dies could be adjusted by hand and even changes in tooling could be described as a series of written recipes. All of the work could be handled by a wider number of less-specialized workers, and design revisions could be made on-the-fly without shutting down production and re-tooling.

The result was an immediate surplus of cash (due to reduced inventories) and a sustainable, responsive design and production system — smaller warehouses, faster communications networks, responsive and iterative design revision and products made as they are needed: Just-In-Time.

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Publisher’s Note: All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the authors.

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