



PROLOGUE



‘When do you expire?’ Goran asks Melinda: ‘This anyway is just an exercise.’

The ministers cower down, like bats shaken from their hold, they’re on the floor, broken crosses or immobile in a breast-stroke.

Grenades and crackers.

The fake emergency concludes. Melinda says, ‘We’re here to make them make the future. “To save the world” – how many times a conference on the theme? When this show is over, so’s my contract. What can they expect?’

‘The future ...’ Goran says, and no doubt carries on, professional, authoritative and sceptical. I must make all this up. I’m in a box, buried shallow in a field, my last gasps coming through a straw.

The guys will dig me up if someone pays a ransom. Maybe they’ll dig me up if no one pays, and they’ve no cash to make a getaway. Maybe they won’t dig me up.

ONE



‘And – Hail to the tempest, hail the four horsemen! Compose, propose, dispose! Defend, defend – here comes the end.’

Valhalla trembles – but we’re all still here – one end has come, but others wait, and we’re to be the witnesses.

The set of trumpeters steps up. A blast.

Up turn the faces, hopeful. Nothing. Just – up where the sky should be.

We three are at a conference. On the floor, the big guys, making futures and a florid past. We write the policies – Melinda for a hot, middling, rising place. A land where pineapples bloom disciplined, in line. Goran's from a shady place, working for shady people. My country is quite desperate, recovering from war to make the next one.

Melinda says, 'It's not a fake, a plastic cheeseboard, with its map and flags. Like well-off people used to have, with pictures of each cheese. These guys – the leaders of the world – they're just the middling cheeses, some ripe, that's hung on for years, and cling till death. There is no super kingly Parmesan. There's creamy ones, elected and ephemeral. Newly pressed, first salting. How the people despise, distrust them all – the seasoned despots and the runny ones, the bland and milky ones, the crusty stinky ones.' Goran says,

'Up on the catwalk – here you see everything.'

Down there, what a spread! You see the heads, but not the mouths, the brains. Those must be Jews or cardinals in skullcaps. The rich in white, like sellers of ice-cream. Africans in stuff that could be curtains. The structure, the hall – like the rail station in Istanbul, iron fingers curved above; below, the tracks that ought to go to China.

Up here, there's parakeets and jays – 'We love the birds,' Melinda says, 'because their eyes see just the same as us, but out it comes all different, you can't say it's fantasy or manner – it's just difference.' And we agree.

What a congress! So many countries – there's one fallen! in the crush, picked up and swallowed down – 'That's the pope,' Melinda cries, but no, it's just some nurse's cap she sees, – and here's the suits from way out East, they nod and bob to all the guys that owe them.

'Here come the drinks,' Melinda says. 'That shows who has teetotal gods, and who's for health,' and round it goes – the scotch, the brews of leaves.

'Help me, oh rescue me,' says Goran. 'What shall we do in our

hereafter?’

Melinda smiles, and does not know.

Goran tells her, ‘Bits of you I like, very much.’ He thinks – ‘They’d never take me, as a guard. I haven’t the fibre. Imagine, prisoners, and snow and trees.’

Not necessarily trees. ‘And the people locked in – suppose there was an innocent, and all your time to think what you might be guilty of. Innocence – it’s just perspective, and guilt is just the same. We guards – knowing who to trust, and living in some hole, for warmth, and getting up before the rest to take roll call.’

Melinda has said, ‘I see it wouldn’t be for you.’

Goran has said, ‘I’m just not up to it.’

Melinda says, ‘I’ve suffered too. Not alcoholism, like you, Goran, and thinking of the prison service. It’s enough our lives make sense to us, not in the world. Think of them as beautiful.’

‘You can’t ruin my life,’ Goran says, ‘It’s ruined like the rest. What’s left is – the gaze, of others. You can’t escape. What you want to do with other people? Kill them in the cellar?’

‘Not specially,’ Melinda says, dismiss-ively.

‘So, we just walk on, walk away,’ says Goran, ‘Forget about the sense.’

Yes, there should be a romance here – beyond the countries, the position papers and all that, world’s end, and how to interrupt the process.

Now, they’re joined by Mister Kite, a colleague older, better contract, almost a diplomat. He says,

‘Ah yes – if only there was a clash that you could see, a battle, conflict, struggle. But, my friends, I fear big changes go ahead quite tranquilly. From crawl to walk: from hunt to plant. Of course, some things you notice, you’d be stupid not to. New rich guys – up on the podium. Sects, principles, the dangers imminent – even new animals, strange crops, stuff hidden in the ground. And so, you guys, you’re civilised, you write it up – ‘here comes the transformation!’ – but fight! Do battle? Fight personal? You wouldn’t dream of it, and you’d be right.’

‘What’s new,’ Melinda says, ‘Comes like a gift. You play it right, and you are bonded in. You must become a vassal of the new, the new rich guy. Protection – you need it, that way you’re not extinguished.’

‘It’s not so,’ Goran says. ‘It’s the thought that counts, puts asphalt on the roads, swings in the playground, sets the guys marching up the hill and through the desert. Thought first – then perhaps the gift.’

‘Well, why does it not go on and on, renewal? Why does it falter, why do some guys deride, while others wave their arms and run to battle?’ asks Mister Kite.

‘Maybe there is no choice,’ says Goran, and Kite says that’s no answer. They close him out.

‘It’s liberal rhetoric, all of it,’ says Goran, ‘Or something partisan.’

‘Yet it’s natural that you believe it’s getting worse, or better,’ Melinda says.

‘Should we go in to dinner together? Is it time?’ asks Goran.

‘No, it’s coming up to lunch – we might renounce lunch, a solidarity, sacrifice. Dinner was yesterday. You go in separately, or they think it is a plot,’ says Melinda.

‘It’s good being up high,’ says Goran.

‘You see into unsavoury rooms,’ says Melinda.

‘That’s not what I mean,’ he says.

They digress. ‘It takes a thousand people to turn a graphic novel into

film,' she says.

'The boxes are all ready-drawn,' says Goran, 'The rest is up to you.'

She says, 'The movie has no boxes, it's all to be lived through.' He says,

'There's box-office, though. It's lifeways that we differ in, Melinda,' Goran says: 'Your life is tidal, mine's all finishes and starts. Not picture singular, but stills in albums, all recurring. People mostly disappeared.'

'There's revolution too – that's a movie guys will try to copy,' says Melinda, 'Making sense – that is the action. Movies have lots, graphics don't.'

'It's not turned out at all like that,' says Goran, 'The repetition makes the strangeness, a row of cells, a trap. One day, one box – that is the secret. Analysis, not flux.'

'All those dead, to commemorate,' she says. There is exhortation everywhere – and the dying, hunger, war, all round.

'War, what do you expect?' asks Goran: 'Those bright machines, the tough guys enrolled and scared.'

'Maybe I could give some testimony,' she says.

'You need to rough up somewhat – now, you're too exquisite.'

Melinda is Cuban, so Goran says, 'I've always been a communist. It's our only hope.'

She waits for something more. He says, 'Of course, not everything, the details. The outcome, maybe, or not. Things going wrong.'

Cuba's not her country now, of course. There is a pause, she says, 'It's abstractions. They're a deep pit. You need to scabble to get out of them.'

She shows him photos: there's a line of glum people with red knees. Tourists: 'A pineapple farm.'

‘What’s they come to see?’ Goran asks, without enthusiasm.

‘Pineapples, mostly,’ she says. ‘Then they go away with one. Mostly they throw them in the bushes.’

She asks, ‘What’ll you do in life, Goran? It can’t be only solitude. And let it be far from me, you are – too noisy in the night.’ She thinks, too, who’d fantasise about some ugly person?

Goran says, ‘It’s the drink. It struggles to get out, to reach a top. You see – each box, it has its logic, but one after another, things make a story, make a narrative. It doesn’t take a thousand people to have it make sense, but together with the frames that follow in an order, inexorable and for ever – that is the sense. Slow and sure.’

Melinda objects – ‘But it’s not my sense, not this disjoint. Our conference – another in the chain to save the world – and in the end, someone will know how it worked out. But you and I – we’ll be unemployed. Now the big ones think of splitting up – America, there’s mountains, rivers, sea and deserts – each a little unity. And China – wow! – there’s seven good-sized units there, and each a perfect shape. Then – what will life be for you, Goran?’

‘I’ll mostly work at home,’ he says, to make her angry.

‘Justice,’ Goran says. ‘Now, there’s a precious gift. A thing you may resent, giving it out, when you’d prefer to keep it for yourself. But – there it goes! – a gift you can’t get back. Me – I think revenge is more a human thing.’

Melinda agrees, ‘Not everyone likes what they’re given.’ He says,

‘It’s what we all deserve, they say. You can’t object, you get what you deserve. That’s only fair.’

‘These systems here, it must fit in with them.’ Melinda waves around, the delegates, the bosses.

‘These monsters,’ Goran says, ‘We’ll strip them down, and of the

parts assemble new ones. New sets of monsters, all recycled, new models all.’

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