

The following is an extract. The narrative immediately jumps into chapter six. This is done to comply with the word limit of the John Byrne Award whilst incorporating all the essential thoughts of the text. The remaining forty-seven percent of the novella, which is used to set the scene, introduce the characters, and is a good bit of fun, can be accessed using this link:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yOYnrH0pRnLnL4ajTYxh7iplpTS9HO/view?usp=sharing>

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GREAT EVENTS
FROM LATER ON
and other unheard stories of humanity

J. A. Blakemore

**Introduction
For the John Byrne Award**

Written with the intent of advertising two theoretical products, this novella is an exploration of the impact our decisions have on the world that comes afterwards. Whether these impacts are lasting or in any way significant is debatable. Inspired by the thought of world-changing creations but in no way capable of literally making them, I decided that a literary narrative would have to do instead. Although the forethought of this piece was pragmatic and economic, the story in which the idea was embedded needed to be human and compelling so that the mere concept wouldn't be defeated by very rational fears of jargon and misplaced ambition; if it could be envisioned in some more appealing way, with heartfelt outreach, then it may stand a chance. The future is imaginary, and it probably isn't all that exciting if we're going to exist in it, but it can be a useful tool. Absurd and unrealistic predictions about the world might make you chuckle, helplessly human characters might frustrate you, and you may not buy into this business proposal but at the very least you might start believing that there is something to learn from the ever-distant Later On.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THOSE THAT COME AFTER US?

By J. A. Blakemore

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THE FIRST BIT

“So, you’ve run away?” said Remy, scratching his stubble.

“Not quite – from my problems, yes – but, not from anything physical. It was just debt, but even then, Stephen was quite understanding, y’know? So, really you could say I’m running towards something, although, I’m not exactly sure what it is.” chirped William, offering his new companion a piece of pocket-warmed gum.

Remy politely shook his head but remained silent.

“I guess I’m just hoping for a bit more of a comfortable life – one where I can just switch off for a bit; it’s been a bit of a difficult few months, to be honest.” William glanced at Remy, expecting a reply.

Remy gave him a little smirk then said “Sounds like you’ve got some thinking to do. How about I put the radio on, then you can clear your head before spilling the beans.” (In Linear Time B, they have a slightly different take on the phrase ‘spill the nuts’, but it works to the same effect). Remy tuned the radio to a classical station. Orchestral sounds simmered through the vehicle, dampening the rattling of the old engine. William let his mind wander inwards as he gazed at the world whizzing by. He thought about all the things he wished he’d done differently – the way things could have been. His mind meandered through the avenues of would be’s and could be’s, juggling stories of fame as a literature professor and un-ended relationships as well as dreams of going to space and talking to animals. As a child, William had always wanted to ask his dog, Rudolph, what exactly it was about the world that kept him so excited. Rudolph, like most dogs, had a joviality about him, but he was assuredly unlike most other dogs. Perhaps it was for the best that young William never got to know why Rudolph was always so cheery; the rather innocent looking chocolate Labrador had a serial reputation amongst the various stuffed toys he had collected over the years. Better still that William never came to understand what it took for his teddy bears to get out of bed in the morning. There are some things a child should never know, and some punishments not even a teddy bear should suffer. William missed Rudolph; he had always been a very loving companion. He wondered

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where Rudolph might be now – perhaps running through heavenly fields surrounded by seventy-two brand new teddy bears.

William managed to catch up with his train of thought and turned to Remy to ask him where they were going.

“Calais, my friend.” Remy paused and glanced at his passenger. William just nodded understandingly. “So, why don’t you tell me what it is that’s on your mind?”

“I suppose I’m a bit lost for where to go next in life, y’know? It’s like I’m in a sort of transitory phase and I’m just waiting for something to come hit me around the head.” moaned William. He hadn’t meant to sound like he was moaning, but he couldn’t help it. “And, on top of all that, I’ve somehow ended with some secret document that could change the world or something.”

Remy blinked, somewhat stunned by the concept of a secret document that could change the world; he said only one word.

“Aliens?”

“What? No.” William stumbled over the words, “well, I don’t think so. More like future-humans. It’s not from the present, you see – or the past, for that matter.”

Remy chuckled, “Ah, we must have really messed up then if they had to send a warning message back.”

“Probably, although it would have been more useful if it was sent back even further. I think Adam and Eve could have benefitted hugely from a post-it-note saying, ‘Keep your hands to yourselves!’ – but I suppose they wouldn’t have been able to read it, would they?”

“No...” hummed Remy, “I think that whatever it is you’ve been given has ended up just where it needs to be. They – the future-people, I mean – would know right away if they got the timing wrong, right?”

Remy had a pretty good understanding of how time-alteration activities worked. William did not. William lolled his head back and covered his face with his hands, sighing deeply. It became apparent to him that neither himself nor his new companion could answer each other’s questions.

“So, what is it telling you to do?” Remy asked.

William’s inner dialogue let out a deafening scream, curdling his insides, and (had it been audible) deafening all the roadside animals. “No. I haven’t even gotten that far yet.”

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Remy laughed charmingly; he could see William's inner self kicking his outer self. "There's no rush." he said, "These things will come as they should. Why don't you have a stab at the next bit while I drive? We still have a few hours to go."

William took a deep breath and managed to calm himself down. He gave Remy a solemn nod, the same one you might give your spouse before you go to clean up the dirty dishes; he plunged his hand into his backpack. Counting through the pages, William picked out more than just one page, committing himself to his studies. The classical music returned and - as T. S. Molenkov proved undoubtedly after the turn of the 29th century with the help of a violinist and a rather intelligent mouse - William's brain waves resonated in a fashion that made it possible for him to get the gist of things with a little less effort.

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Shortly after Molenkov submitted the results of his research to the assortment of governments ruling the planet at the time, the Peoples of Earth Union established a policy wherein every political debate must be accompanied by a live orchestra. This really helped move things along - lots of housing estates, tax-free zones, airports, and office buildings shot up all over the planet. Just as before, people could gamble on the property market and burn holes in the ozone. Of course, this wasn't all too good for the environment but all the officials that greenlit the projects made some great friendships and really managed to get things off their chest. For the next twenty-one years in which the orchestral-accompaniment policy was implemented, there were lots of tears and heartfelt embraces during political discourses. Molenkov forgot to publish that classical music helped speed up brain activity, not change the kinds of thoughts that appeared. Not many people took notice of the more pressing matters, like the threat of dangerous levels of solar radiation penetrating the atmosphere, but at least they weren't squabbling.

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William and Remy arrived in Calais in the early afternoon of either a Sunday or Monday, neither of them were too sure. Remy had spent the entire journey driving in complete meditation, really milking that portrayal of himself as a mentor figure. William had read. He had read a great number of things worth thinking about, and every single one of them was currently rattling around the inside of his skull. Over the last three hours and forty-six minutes, William Heard had managed to plod through the remaining sixty-six pages of The Document. It wasn't at all what he had expected, but rather it was exactly as the first page had described it – it was a business plan, a programming guide, a list of algorithms, and a handful of political, socio-economic, and philosophical theories to be put into play by some keen entrepreneur, whomever should come across the text and follow through with the ideas. All these things together, outlined only two simple concepts: William understood these to be something like a video game about men in suits and something not too unlike an online newspaper. He must have missed the part about radical revolutionaries and political manifestos to end all political manifestos, he thought to himself. How on Earth could a game (which hadn't even been called a game, strictly speaking) make any difference to the world? And why on Earth could this timeline possibly need more fake news? William scratched his head. The Document wasn't a political manifesto, it was a product manifesto – a description of a couple of wily inventions that would 'change' the world. Had the future-humans just sent him a sales pitch to end all sales pitches? Was there no limit to the seemingly endless wave of new-age start-ups? With all these questions tumbling about his head, he did manage to admire the prospect of sending totally bankrupt and useless products into the past so that money could be made in the future without threatening the continuity of that timeline; to whomever came up with that one, bravo, he thought.

Still, William's confusion about The Document persisted. Had William's computer-like brain been attached to a screen with which it could display a diagnostic report, it would quite clearly read 'rationality.exe has failed to draw a logical conclusion and has stopped working. Would you like to manually reboot?' He felt overjoyed when Remy pulled into an apartment block car park and asked him if he'd like to come upstairs for a cup of tea and some biscuits. Although the journey from Paris to Calais had not been disastrous or overtly challenging in any

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way, the pair still felt weary. For some reason, even though Calais was still a few hundred miles short of his desired destination, William felt that stopping over for a while might serve him well – lately, his gut had been leading him on a lot of decisions. Perhaps there was something meaningful about his intuitions – on the other hand, he worried it was another bout of the stomach flu he had had two weeks prior. He gladly accepted the cup of hot tea and creamy biscuits. The inside of Remy’s apartment was decorated as much as one might expect a visit-once-a-month-type home to look like. He explained to William that he was a district manager for a shipping company at several ports along the north coast of France and Belgium and that the apartment was a company let for when he had to make longer visits for dealing with longer problems. Currently, there was a reasonable amount of upset in the trade community thanks to what was commonly referred to, with the utmost discretion, as Great Britain’s Great Contraceptive Afterthought – or, the act of pulling out at a totally inconvenient time without much thought.

For quite some time, William and Remy discussed the instructions from The Document and, the more they began to wrap their heads around what exactly the proposed product was, the more they became excited by the prospect of a good business deal.

“So, it’s like a simulation – the first bit of the text – right?” asked Remy.

“I think so.” William paused, and scrunched up his face in thought. “I think it’s trying to say there’s a way we could make a programme, using this code, to accurately depict how a society reacts to the actions of a political leader and the laws he makes.”

“And the player is the politician?”

William nodded. “Exactly. But I’m not all clear on the angle it’s getting at, y’know? Like, it doesn’t seem all too exciting, if I’m honest.”

Remy scoffed and gasped, slightly fumbling for his words, “I’m not sure they’re wanting it to be a child’s game! I think it’s meant to be a tool to measure who, of the everyday citizens, would be a genuinely good world leader! This is huge. Game-changing. El grande honcho, or whatever!”

William’s stare shot straight through Remy.

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“But how are we supposed to make money from it? I mean it is a sales pitch, right? And there’s no chance any red-faced politician would let this slide if they gave it a go and got KO’d in round one!”

This halted Remy for a second. “We could disguise it, in a way.” Again thinking, “what do they do nowadays? I keep catching my nephew spending hundreds of euros on fancy looking clothes to cover a little figure that’s only 12 pixels tall; we could just make it pretty; but pay-to-be-pretty, eh?” The cheekiest smirk swam across Remy’s face as he winked at William. “And who cares if some people buy the useless addons if the important bit is underneath the glitz and glam?”

William’s face lit up, “This could be worth a fortune.”

“Umm, we could change the world!”

“I wouldn’t even have to bother with the whole dead-end-job bit of life! Cut straight to the good bits!”

“Yes, but...”

“Oh man, you’ve got me excited Remy. None of that nine-to-five nonsense, eh? Whadda-ya say?” Fireworks were practically shooting out of William’s ears as he grinned menacingly.

“I think...” Remy thought for a moment, “you’re right, William. Let’s do it for the money. Why not?” He slapped William on the back and the two shared a deeply fraternal moment, partners in crime, buddies in business, millionaires en masse. Remy didn’t seem to mind restraining himself; there didn’t seem to be too much need in explaining what a moral compass was to his new friend. The game would be made, the world would be changed – so what if they got rich doing it?

After the excitement subsided, the two newly united business partners turned it up a gear. Kettle boiling. Tea bags prepped. Knees slapped. Heads down. A large white sheet of poster paper laid out. A colourful assortment of marker pens. A big circle surrounding the words 'The Game' and an ambitious number of spider legs stretching across the mind-map. They set to filling it in. Using all the eloquently described formats, functions, and features from The Document, William and Remy managed to condense the information into a diagram that was considerably less eloquent and vastly more aesthetically complicated. They had talked their way through all the finesses of developing the game, marketing it, and selling it – they had even thought of how they would keep it up to date with any new political philosophies that emerged, which was very forward thinking for two white men between the ages of thirty-three and forty six. At this point, they turned their thoughts to more pragmatic matters – how would they make it? Neither of them knew the first thing about making a video game; where to begin, what coding was, could they outsource it, did it need training wheels, and did it come with a brochure of other similar products?

Ironically, the two men that were sat in the Calais apartment were unknowingly alive in one of the most convenient times in human history with which to answer these questions. The early decades of the 21st Century are largely considered to be the birth and death of the genre, 'self-help' books. In the winter of 2035, one particular kerfuffle between the American head of state and a group of wrongfully disempowered authors led to a slow eradication of books that made otherwise glaringly obvious statements. The decision came after large waves of deforestation inflated the paperback book market, which then caused the government to begin critically considering which authors deserved to get published on paper. The term 'obvi-ism' came into play to label the texts that made entirely far too much sense to be worth printing in the first place. Thereafter came a tide of Obvi-ism Lobbyists disputing the attack on their (debatably) hard work. Lots of double-edged, double-barrelled, and double-fisted insults

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came to fruition, none of them particularly creative. The crackdown on useless literature lasted nearly forty years. In furious retaliation to the market crash, people began etching into stone books about how to write a formal complaint – but each etcher struggled to get past opening remarks highlighting just how important it was to date the letter and set the tone due to the size of stone available. It was just three weeks after the end of this heated forty-year engagement that William Heard passed away, although it was not at all peaceful and could hardly be blamed on the luxurious life he had lived after making millions from the coveted game – he had simply stood up too fast.

After that fateful day in Calais, Remy and William had decided to each take time off from their respective professions, Remy took a couple months away from the ports and William never made it back to wherever it was he was going. The two of them sparked. At long last, it seemed they had each found a deeper meaning to their lives. They worked tirelessly to complete and fine-tune the game; and when it was completed, it was marvellous. Titled, *Re-Run: The Game of Leaders*, it was a hit, sort of. Most of the player-base really took a shining to the character customisation and how they could buy new clothes for only ninety-nine pence apiece. William had dollar signs in his eyes. Remy, in his modesty, saw the bigger picture. The video game charted in the top 20 for seven months after its release before dropping down to a respectable 53rd by the end of its tenth year. Those first ten years changed a lot of things for Remy and William – mainly for Remy, as he suffered a stroke after the seventh year but managed to retire to Brittany with his new girlfriend, who did a fantastic job of looking after him. William enjoyed his newfound luxury and bought lots of expensive keepsakes and went on lots of cruise tours – of which he rarely made it off the boat thanks to what he called ‘sobriety-sickness’, being in a constant state of drunkenness and at sea made it difficult for him to readjust to life on solid ground. Twenty years after the game’s release, and well after it faded into obscurity, Remy used his savings to set up a charity that aided those with repetitive strain injury as he felt it appropriate to help the people in the community that he had condemned by creating an incredibly click-intensive game. William bought his old landlord, Stephen, a yacht. Stephen lived too far inland to make good use of it. Shortly after the twenty-third anniversary of *Re-Run: The Game of Leaders*, Remy passed away, having dedicated his life to creating

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something meaningful for himself and having helped others that needed it. William attended the funeral wearing a velvet suit.

At the wake for his business partner's funeral, William felt, for the first time in a long time, lost. An overwhelming sense of grief came over him, not entirely unexpected, but still not all that pleasant. Hearing his friend's obituary really tugged at his heartstrings. He was immensely proud to have known Remy and to have grown old learning from him and watching him make the world a better place. Even though, after all his troubles earlier on in life, William had made a considerable effort to live happily and without seriousness, seeing someone go like that reminded him of the beauty of his struggles. For all that he had done, he saw now that there was beauty in dying as much as there was in living. He swirled his scotch on the bar top and recalled a great many treasured memories that he had amassed. As he wandered back through the halls of time, looking at the portraits on the wall, moments of absolute happiness, of grief, of confusion, he saw his childhood home and the various women he had loved over the years. He came to a portrait, in this imaginary hall, that had a flickering lamp lighting it. Somewhat startled by the vividness of the metaphor, he went over to study the lit picture. And there it was, hung before him, his forgotten destiny – The Document. William had forgotten that there was a second part to the mysterious treatise he had discovered; so, had Remy. How foolish for them to have been carried away with their lives that they overlooked something so seemingly important. William knew in that moment, at this funeral, sat at the bar, that he must find the last pages of the manuscript – wherever he had left them last – and finish what he had started. He stood up, perhaps a tad too quickly, and everything went white.

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A journalist – now not so young – had been saying her final goodbyes to a dear friend she had worked closely with throughout her career when suddenly she heard a man yelp, clutch at his chest in agony, and fall to the ground over by the bar. Yet again, she had fallen witness to the miraculous act of spontaneously ceasing to exist. She pondered the cause of his sudden death and, having remembered seeing him sat at the bar deep in thought,

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toyed with the idea that he had an epiphany in far too dramatic a manner. It had been a good guess – all her research on out-of-hospital-cardiac-arrests had not been for nothing, it seemed. Still, it was a shame to have a death at a funeral, but at least he was already dressed appropriately and ready to go.

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And so, having left behind a legacy, a lifetime of memories, and a little something unfinished for the next generations to find, William Heard exited Linear Time B in dramatic fashion – perhaps not very kosher, thought several of the funeral attendants, but they forgave him anyway.

Death was a tricky puzzle to solve, right up until the end of the seventy-second century. Lots of people had died, and not everyone was happy about it, but thanks to Professor M. A. Sicile, of The Edinburgh Polytechnic University for Science and the People, Indiana, there came a time in which death was cured. Well, more realistically delayed, rather than cured, but this was the nature of the universe, that everything had an end – at least now it would be a bit further away. And, in fairness to humanity's evolution, only delayed by a slightly more significant amount than had naturally been occurring anyway. Over the centuries, mankind had slowly squeezed out more and more years from life with the help of medicine and technology. By the year 7119, the oldest person alive had reached a staggering 203 years of age. The average life expectancy around the time was closer to 169 years in the civilised districts (where humans became bio-engineered and electronically enhanced), and in the regions referred to as the 'natural zones' (where non-enhanced people still wore hemp hoodies and preferred not showering for weeks at a time, believing it made them live longer) were expected to live for around 58 years – the life expectancy of organic lifeforms had dropped moderately over the last thousand years thanks to high levels of radiation emitted in a freak solar storm. However, in AD 7198, Professor Sicile from Indiana welcomed in a new age of Age when he finally managed to solve the Puzzle of Efficient Living. He won numerous awards for providing empirical evidence for the most effective way of living your day-to-day life; right sock on first, brush your teeth in circles, laugh for thirty seconds at least once an hour, and never, NEVER, wear leather trousers, to name a few. Trialled with hundreds of thousands of candidates over several lifetimes (Sicile had initiated the experiments of course, but had passed on the methodology to his successors), the experiment managed to show that these micro-adjustments, when done in conjunction with one another, added exponentially more years to one's life expectancy. Most couldn't be bothered to change their routines, but those that did achieved twice as much in half the time. Eventually, one of Sicile's proteges managed to formulate an equation with which any conscious

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lifeform could calculate whether a proposed activity would add or subtract years from the life expectancy. Amusingly, an innocent user discovered that using Sicile's equation in any way knocked five days of a life expectancy, despite only taking thirty seconds to plug in the numbers – such was life. Such was life that one could stand up too fast and unexpectedly drop dead from it. Such was life that you could leave the world of the living with unfinished business. Such was life that little Tommy McLouth came across an old program, hidden under layers and layers of files on his father's old desktop, called 'R-R: TGL (prod. 2019)'. He opened it and before him materialised a whole new world.

Now, what Tommy was doing looking through secret files on his father's computer was completely his own intrusive decision and, had he found something totally unsuitable for a child, he would have been in a lot of trouble. But when he probed his dad, asking about the game he had found on his computer, his father's eyes lit up – he had forgotten about the ancient simulation he had once played as a child, back in the early '30s. Together, the father and son returned to old stomping grounds and new fields alike, bursting with treasures to find. They took turns playing as different characters and leading new virtual civilisations to glory or failure. Tommy set the time period to Late Medieval and, by some cunning use of a new-decreed belief system and a well-timed equal opportunities policy, convinced the pixelated people in his society to become eager taxpayers and forgiving serfs. He watched as his kingdom grew treble its size and managed to establish trade routes right out into the sticks of the far east before they had even discovered electricity. Tommy's father had a go and managed to simulate a worldwide government at the end of the Information Age that was devoutly communist. He clapped excitedly. All the little simules (as the game adoringly referred to each civilian in the simulation) maintained fair levels of happiness and welfare. Everybody lived equally lavish lives; moderated, but better than nothing, thought their simulated consciousnesses. The only effect of this rather successful simulation of a deeply conformist world was that the population of the planet plummeted down to roughly 231,900 people – who could speak only one language with few sub-dialects and, not at all surprisingly, had no aspirations whatsoever. When Tommy's father posed a question to his simules about why the society had ceased growing, his virtual followers replied unabatedly: "Life is good, you know. We each own 3 quarters of

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the last century's megapolis cities and we still haven't been able to get through all those videos on the internet. So, we figured we might as well hold off on doing anything too creative or innovative for the time being, and just take it easy." The simulation roared with the collective slurping of nearly two-hundred-thousand chai lattes. Although William and Remy hadn't designed the game to be winnable or losable, Tommy's father seemed to face a big fat 'GAME OVER' sign every time he played. Tommy chuckled at his father's attempts to govern the planet. His father sighed and deleted the save, paused for a moment, then started up a new simulation. They went at this for hours a day, weeks on end. There was something radically interesting about setting things in motion, with the most bizarre rules in place, and seeing where things went. Even though they couldn't purchase an entire wardrobe for their virtual characters at the generously low cost of £39.99, father and son still very much enjoyed willing away the time together on Re-Run.

And so, this lovable charade went on until Tommy McLouth grew into his teenage years and began focusing his mind on other much less applaudable matters. He discovered alcohol and cigarettes "a bit before his time", as his mother put it, and spent a lot less time trying to run governments and evolve the human race into space-faring beings. Even though he missed the special times he had spent with his son, Tommy's father couldn't hold a grudge against him for venturing off into the wider world in search of more than he could handle - that has been the purpose of any young man for the last eight-thousand years. Mankind remained a mystery; the teenager, however, did not.

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It is not uncommon for fate to be mistaken as coincidence. It is also not uncommon for coincidence to seem like magic. Many people, since its discovery, have said that time travel is not unlike magic. Therefore, it wouldn't be unreasonable to conclude that, in some cases, fate necessarily involves some form of time travel. Fate, hence, is not at all up to who it affects, simply put. At least this was the judgement decreed by the author of The Document. He had sent it back in time to manipulate the circumstances - or rather, encourage the outcome - of humanity

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developing a set of tools with which they would run society in the early centuries of the second millennium. All this because, without those two inventions, things turned out drastically different in the next generations of humans. The author felt it best to introduce these concepts into Linear Time B so that the 'distances between similarities' weren't too large. An important note to make is that, in AD 8610, only three years before The Document was first transported back through time, the World Government began taxing the 'temporal distance' covered when someone time travels - i.e. if you went somewhere that was not at all like where you came from, it would cost you a lot of money; not too dissimilar from the ancient concept of the taxi fare. This didn't suit the author's plans too well as he had begun frequenting the furthest realms of possible realities and made a good bunch of friends out there, so he quickly devised a loophole and changed six thousand years of history. All for the sake of a saving a few pennies when he went to see his buddies. There was no uproar amongst the people of Earth when he did this. No governments backlashed with policies and formal statements. Nobody tried to jump back in time before he did this to stop it from happening. Because, at that point, humanity had essentially discovered infinity, and there wasn't much point mucking about in the finite bits of it. After all, what is a God without his sandbox?

Yet, in his own carved out spacetime continuum, the author hadn't quite managed to resolve the issue he had set out to. William Heard had got too comfortable in his new life, he had become complacent. In the forty or so years after he had created the world-altering video game with Remy, he had often thought to himself: 'Isn't this nice? The peace, quiet, the freedom to relax, to become stressed and impassioned as I please. I suppose this is what the ideal life is - to have forgotten Destiny and made my own.' Destiny of course was his beloved first yacht. Hopefully Floats, was his second. Nevertheless, these thoughts kept him distanced from what the author had hoped he might accomplish with The Document. His purpose was lost, and the important papers forgotten. Another attempt was made.

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LATER ON

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9

Tommy stood staring at a large painting hanging on his new office wall, puzzled. His assistant walked in, quietly closing the glass door behind her. She opened her mouth to speak but a quick gesture from Tommy cut her off before she could get a sound out.

“Rachel, dear.”

She gulped. “Yes, mister McLo...”

“What is this?” His eyes jumped from the painting to Rachel and back to the painting again.

“Well, it appears to be a painting, sir - maybe a gift?”

“Maybe?” Tommy asked. “You don’t know where it came from?”

Another pause. She had left her mouth open, still in thought. “No...” Now, Rachel began to switch into gear and took the time to consider how, in a more literal sense, the painting might have gotten there; the whole building had been closed for New Year’s Day and she had been the last to leave the office at 1:32am on New Year’s Eve. She hadn’t had time to celebrate the first day of 2099, too busy getting things sorted with the new office space; but she was adamant that nobody had been in or out of this office under her nose.

“... in fact, I’m not entirely sure how it would have gotten here in the first place. I’m sure I...”

“Check it for bugs.” snapped Tommy, not an ounce of hangover traceable in his voice, although he was severely caffeinated - mildly vibrating.

“Bugs, sir?”

“You know, the spy stuff - microphones and cameras and...”

“Of course, Mister Mclouth.” said Rachel with an affirming nod, cutting her boss off before he could digress into a fantastical imagining of all the enemies he had made and how they wanted to swipe the rug from under his feet. He had made a staggering number of rivals in his twenty-odd years in the bio-packaging industry and he was insistent that all his employees knew of his reputation. “I’ll call Manuel to remove the painting and put it in the building’s basement for now.” she continued.

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Tommy raised his hand again, "No. On second thought, let it stay for now."

"But, sir, what about your..." Rachel cleared her throat and whispered, "enemies?"

In this moment, Tommy was unable to put into words just how he was feeling. Waves of serenity washed over him every second longer that he spent gazing at the painting, calming him, elating him. For all that Tommy had become since moving on from the days of playing video games with his father, being sentimental – or, in fact, at all interested in the arts – was not in his character. Rather unexpectedly, he felt disarmed by the colourful canvas hung before him; even compelled to study it.

"Forget my enemies." he said, "for I have art."

Rachel stood stunned. This was not the man she had worked under for seven years. Without a word she bowed her head and swivelled on her heel to leave the room. On her way out, she carefully plucked the full cup of coffee from the scene so that her boss might avoid any cardiovascular difficulties in the near future. Tommy did not wave her out or mutter anything under his breath as she left. He stood still, appreciating (for the first time in his life) Art.

The scene that had just played out in Room 308 of the Abdol Maktoum Tower far above the Arabian Gulf coastline was not the first of its kind. Throughout history many megalomaniacal leaders have been stunned by artwork, causing them to become docile, defeated, or simply dumbstruck. Perhaps the most significant of these kinds of events took place during the Great Baltic Sea War of AD 3130. Tjeder "Tjeddy" Bjornson, general of the Finnish Navy was totally intoxicated with overwhelming feelings of love and passivity after the Slovakian forces smuggled a Manet painting into his war room. In a moment that was studied by art historians and commanders for centuries after, a decade-long naval war ended with a typically human gesture: a gift of undeniable beauty. Although that particular artwork by Manet had never been considered his masterpiece, it still managed to remind Tjeddy of all the perfections of the world, and left him staggering for balance, grasping at the control panels to steady himself. The general's secretary accurately captured the moment in which his commander's heart sank, once he realised that the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles could not be

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deactivated mid-flight. He had fallen on the innocuously large red button that launched hellfire. To accompany the visually stunning scene in which a wartime general weeps whilst staring at a picture of a dog called Bob, were the harmonic rings of alarm bells and sirens. At last the war was over. A hardened veteran wept for his childhood puppy. A secretary heard dollar signs cashing up as he noted down a scene that would be published in at least one-hundred-and-fifty history books. The dog in the painting stared blankly. One thousand years earlier, Tommy had safely avoided any wars so far, but was still equally overwhelmed by the painting that stood before him – his mind regressed back to his boyhood. The CEO of WonderPax thought of his father. He thought of the time they spent together playing video games and ruling their own virtual worlds.

The office intercom beeped and jogged Tommy back into reality.

“There’s a reporter on line one.” said Rachel, “she’s wanting a comment on the effects of the election for the packaging industry – have you got a minute?”

Tommy let out a short breath. “Put her through.”

"Hello, Mister McLouth. My name is Anna Turnbull, I'm a reporter from Al-Hazeeb Newspaper. Do you have a minute to discuss the impact of the recent election results?"

"Of course," said Tommy with a hint of bitterness. "I assume you're wanting to know how the new government's trade policies will effect WonderPax?"

"Yes. What do you make of the move towards establishing zero-sum economies?"

"Well it certainly isn't historically typical for a Middle Eastern government to try and stop any more money coming in; but it is very ethically-minded."

"Of course." Anna seemed jarred by the comment. "The President was clear about his intentions to prevent any further pollution by international trade – do you think this will be a thorn in the side of the eco-friendly packaging giant?"

"It won't help, but I suppose it is with the best intentions and, in a way, aligns quite nicely with our moral agenda."

"So, you're not upset about the potentially industry-killing decision?"

"Businesses can't feel emotions. I am the head of my company and thus, I willingly abdicate any emotional input. I must remain rational – WonderPax will remain stable."

On the other end of the line, Anna glanced at her scripted questions; she hadn't expected Mister McLouth to be so poetic. Before she could say another word, Tommy continued.

"If the government's decision has environmental welfare in mind, I trust the President is making a good choice with his new policies. Perhaps you should be more worried about his distrust of the media, Miss Turnbull. He doesn't seem to appreciate any negative press these days, and it sounds an awful lot like you're digging for criticisms. I think he's a wonderful chap."

She hung up.

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Tommy smiled to himself as he looked out the large office windows. Content with his victory, he returned his attention to the painting hanging on his wall. It wasn't imposingly large, about the same size as a 32" flat-screen TV - that is to say, it was large enough to contain the full detail of any feature-length motion picture from the last hundred years. Moving around his desk to get a closer look, Tommy was slightly taken aback by the brazen frame in which the painting was encased. It was a tad distasteful, he thought. As he took in the scene painted before him, he saw swathes of deep blue, royal and cascading, tones of umber and earthen dirt laden on top of solar reds and delicately highlighted by thin strips of golden light. Above the ground, the skies rumbled with greys and purples, arcs of lightning and heavy thunder. Tommy had imagined the sounds of thunder erupting from the mottled canvas. The scene was chaotic and calm at the same time, it told of weathering storms and the silence that comes afterwards. Each colour within it had been chosen with the utmost care, truest to the instantaneous moment in which the behemoth clouds and setting sun had been captured. It raged with absolute truth and every imaginable understanding of the moment, all the lights and shapes belonging to it, seen in every way at that exact time. Tommy looked for a signature but there was none. He lifted the painting away from the wall and settled it on his desk so that he could examine the backside. Nothing. It was as if the object had only one thing to tell him, and it was precisely what was painted on the front. What on Earth did it mean? And why, for heaven's sake, did Tommy feel so compelled to find out? It was his job to wrap fast-moving consumer goods in bio-degradable plastics and he wore ties made of fine wicker. He was not a connoisseur of fine art and was surprised at himself for suddenly thinking he was one.

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When it comes to temporal manipulation - or moving things through time in a direction they wouldn't normally go - it is best understood by letting go of all previous conceptions of time to begin with. Usually, humans perceive reality as moving in one direction: forwards. That is how William experienced it, and that is how Tommy experienced it. But that only happened because they were thinking about it. If they stopped overworking their human brains for a minute, they might have found that, like

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a shiny pebble or bent paperclip, they could exist at any point in time that they willed to exist in. This understanding was what helped the author of The Document and the painter of The Painting (who were very much the same person) send them through time in whatever direction he saw fit, to any point which helped him get what he wanted: cheap travel across possible realities. Knowing this, it wasn't all too difficult plugging a few numbers into an advanced artificial intelligence to help calculate the most appropriate time to send an object back to so that it could change the world. The Document had to be found under Renault's seat (this seat belonging to both the car and man of the same name) and then left in the coffee shop for William to find, otherwise it would never have been used to design Re-Run: The Game of Leaders. If William Heard had found the pieces of paper tucked away in his backpack at any other time, he simply would have mistaken the OATs-manipulated script for an English play. And, because the English are simply no good at writing plays, the production would have led, by some obscure means, the demise of around 119,000 African Hippos, almost leading the species to extinction. Thankfully, the Author avoided this. It was the same for the painting, not the resultant death of hippos, but the means by which The Painting would have its desired effect. It appeared in Tommy's office so that, immediately after he first laid his eyes upon it, he would receive a call from a prodding reporter. It wasn't so much what the reporter said to him, but merely the act of being a reporter that was significant. Combined with the fact that, to Tommy, the painting instilled in him a sense of unrelenting truth and a multitude of perspectives, the outcome was inevitable. Moments after discovering that The Painting had no signature and no other information hidden on it, he would have an idea. He, by no coincidence at all, would stumble across the very same proposition that had been written in the second part of The Document; the bit that William didn't quite get to. Although Tommy would never get to read it, the introduction to the second half of the mysterious transcript read this:

Well done on getting through the first bit, you've been super helpful – I know how hard it is to avoid distractions so it's great that you haven't wandered off with all the winnings of the first half of this document! This next bit is not merely complimentary to the societal-shifting game that you've developed in the first section, but it is essential in establishing a reality that is more truthful than

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not. I apologise ahead of time as this pitch isn't quite as much fun for the family as the last one, but it is just as important if you wish to stay on the right path.

The idea now is that you ought to develop a media platform that helps you see what you're not seeing – there was a large demand for this in our timeline as everybody's eyesight got worse and worse thanks to all the fancy screens our "scientists" kept developing. Yes, a 72-inch-high 360-degree quantum television is important if you really want to enjoy the new series of Gronk and the Warlords, but it is not so good for your eyes. Hence, I have attached to this document a selection of codes that, in your time, will program a handy little AI that will help people see better. I mean that in a less literal sense than you might imagine, you'll see in the next paragraphs.

*

That afternoon, rather than kicking off the start of 2099 with a flurry of conferences and business proposals, Tommy sat in his office and imagined, for reasons foreign to him, some sort of media platform that would help people get a better picture of the world they lived in.

What Tommy had seen in *The Painting*, moments after getting off the phone with Anna Turnbull, had (almost) miraculously led to a connection of neurons forming in his brain. This collection of impulses formed the idea, perfectly planned by an artificial intelligence six-thousand years in the future, of an online newspaper that, rather stubbornly, suggested articles that you were least likely to read, instead of one's that you would very much like to read. Whether or not this idea was in any way sensible eluded Tommy for he was utterly compelled to run with it. It wasn't that it was an obvious program to develop to better inform society, nor was it really an idea totally owned by Tommy. It was the perfect timing of being mildly accosted by a member of the media industry and a being audience to a painting that evoked a sense of all-seeing that ushered the thought into Tommy's mind. Thus, the ebbing and flowing river that was Tommy's life drifted ever so slightly into the neighbouring realm of possibility that ran next to his own reality. Although he was unaware of the variance, his spiritual subconscious tingled with excitement; the part of Tommy's mind that wasn't bound by time was incredibly excited at its change in destiny. Had the CEO of WonderPax been able to meditate for long enough and connect with his higher self he would have been able to hear his inner being squeal with excitement, a high-pitched, "weeeee!" – the very same sound a child might make when going down a waterslide. Despite not truly recognising the journey in its entirety, the first set of traffic lights were green, and Tommy had his foot cemented to the peddle.

*

Throughout history, it has not been uncommon for men in their early sixties to experience sudden shifts in mood. For the most part, these emotional shifts would stem from a deep yearning for purpose; once their role as father, mentor, business executive, and/or fun uncle has come to an end. Anthropologist, Jaime Hanson wrote a thesis on this natural occurrence in AD 2777. Her research had been inspired by the endings of

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a villainous tyrant's rule in South America some forty years earlier. Bolivia had been subject to Col. Suarez's horrific laws and policies for twenty-nine years. Some Bolivian children had never been to school, others had never tasted the bitter tastes of the fabled Cochabamba Chocolate Milk. All of them had been raised unjustly. It was on the Colonel's sixty-first birthday that all this changed, when he realised that his time as adjudicator, torturer, businessman executioner, and (on occasion) unsettling uncle had come to an end. Hanson would study this radical change in a governing body's rule as ultimately related to the 'male sexagenarian psyche fault.' The dictator that had been ruling Bolivia woke up one day, saw that he was too old to continue doing what he was doing and turned the country on its head. Col. Suarez outlawed that any man aged over sixty be an executive in any way, turned himself in to the authorities and spent the next twelve years in prison writing poetry and short novels for children. The new Bolivia soared in global standings as one of the most fruitful and morally attuned countries, ranking within the top ten for the next 75 years.

This very same, yet unstudied, shift in psyche of the sexagenarian male's mind was now underway in Tommy as he composed several emails reaching out to former colleagues and acquaintances asking for help with a new 'project of truth and fairness.' Luckily for him, he lived in an age where reaching out to those he needed could be done with a few taps on the device around his wrist. Unluckily for those around him, he had not mastered the etiquette of taming the device's alarm sounds and so, at totally inconvenient times throughout the day, his wrist would unapologetically coo with all the charm of a flustered pigeon as new messages pinged in from faraway places. For the first week after his new idea manifested, Tommy received several positive confirmations from people eager to develop a new-world tool. In the second week, he and his new teammates excitedly shared their thoughts on how they might go about bringing the immaterial idea into the material world. In the end, the idea would never make it to the material world, but it would come into existence in the virtual world, and that was enough for its purpose. As Tommy spent more and more time focusing his energies on this new passion project, his employees at WonderPax took on more and more duties in order to sustain the company. Eventually, it came to a point where Rachel, knowing her boss' intuitions all too well, began conducting commerce without the need for any executive orders. For all the various

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mechanisms involved in the process, WonderPax remained a well-oiled machine with each part thriving in the face of new challenges. After the fifth week, Tommy opened up a floor of the office's building to a new team of developers for this project. Another five weeks from then, the team rested, having finished what they set out to do. Although the now not-so-little Tommy McLouth had always imagined that he would be remembered as the chief of bio-packaging, he now saw his name blazing through future history accompanied by the title: Leader of Software Nerds and The Team That Brought You The Antagonist. This is the name that all 23 members of the crew assembled in the early months of 2099 had decided on; The Antagonist.

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12

On the 4th of March 2099, a Wednesday, Rachel tenderly knocked on the glass door of her ever scarcer boss' office.

"Come in." beckoned Tommy.

Rachel hadn't seen Tommy in nearly three weeks and had been surprised at his summons. "It's good seeing you again, sir. How've you be..." she began.

"Ah, Rachel, my dear - come and have a look at this." He twiddled his newly fashioned wiry moustache. Tommy motioned her over to the computer screen on his desk and twirled it around for her to see. Her eyebrows furrowed and danced in puzzlement as she processed what she was looking at.

"A game? Is that what you've been doing this whole time?"

Tommy chuckled, "No, no. Heavens no. Do you think a man of my import would spend his time playing video games?"

"No, of course not. But this new moustache of yours had me questioning your status as a man of import - after that, I suppose anything would be possible. What am I looking at?"

"A game."

Their eyes met. Tommy grinned. Rachel glared.

"But it's not the game that is important." he continued, "it is what the game is telling us that is important. You see, this is a childhood favourite of both myself and my father. It's a videogame that simulates society. Terribly nifty; lots of fun. I once established an entirely alt-right colony on the moon and governed the Earth from a distance of 384,000 kilometres. The simules loved it. But now, I've..."

"Simules?"

"Yes, exactly. And now, I've gone and uploaded a rough schematic for today's society - nothing special, but I had to change the politicians' names for legal reasons - and used this to test the thing we've been making since this wonderful mystery walked into my life." Tommy gestured to the conspicuous painting hanging behind him, the one that had most certainly not walked haphazardly into his life. "Among all the great

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bits of code that give people in this world-simulation a sense of consciousness and attitude is a line of ones and zeroes that makes them react to things. React, say, to a new product that might be introduced into their world."

Rachel gasped, "Is this how you've been product-testing all these years?! On a videogame!"

"Yes, darling; it's a trade secret, so hush hush."

"And what exactly have you made this time?"

"Something very different, not at all capable of protecting fresh apples from the elements or degrading into nutrients for plants in just ten days. No, this is something quite unique, I must say."

"Get on with it." The anticipation wasn't quite killing her, merely maiming her.

"In a nutshell, it's like an online newspaper that, instead of using your data to recommend news sources that you're *more* likely to read, it does the opposite. For all the tabloids and biased buggeries out there, this will throw the best of the rest at you. If you, its dearest reader, were to always read articles about our beloved governments written by left-wing reporters, it would give you a piece of journalism thrown out of right-field, so to speak. And if, for example, you always read news about whatever war that is trending at the moment, it'll hit you with the old one-two and give you a sneak peek of a war that isn't in mainstream media - or, hell, it'll chance you with a piece written by whomever it is getting slaughtered in the fields: last name, Victor, first name, Not The."

In a stunned silence, Rachel processed all of this. "And what" she asked, "is all this for?"

Beaming brighter than a 500-watt floodlight, Tommy swivelled in his chair and threw his hands out towards The Painting, gesturing in a way that truly embodied the unforgettable quality of an actor in an English play. "Look here at this masterpiece. What do you see in it?"

"A storm."

"Yes, exactly - good." He paused. "No, not exactly - bad. It is a storm; but look closely. Think of the colours, the layers. It isn't just one storm, is it? Observe, Rachel, how each cloud has more than just one edge. The shoreline disappears and reappears. The light is bright, but infinitely so - as if from every direction. What you are seeing is a storm from every

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which way it might be seen. There's a beauty to it, sure. But the real treasure of it, is that it paints a truer picture than any I've ever seen. This *thing* that I have created, in imitation of art, hopefully will do the same. It will paint a truer picture for every member of the audience to see. And, it has. The simules..."

"The who?"

"Exactly. They love it. It works in their world; which is to say, it'll work in our world." Tommy's elation grew and Rachel steadied herself so that his sprightly excitement wouldn't throw her off balance. "Would you like to know what we've called it?"

"What" she sighed, "have you called it?"

"The Antagonist. Great, right? We thought we'd give the cheeky algorithm a cheeky name, you know. It does everything that you would rather it didn't - naughty little thing, isn't it? The Antagonist. Who knows, maybe it'll be the dawn of learned man." Tommy paused and gazed out the window of his sixtieth-floor office. He saw beneath him golden sands at the far ends of the horizon. Before that were silver rooftops, glistening in the wavy heat. Although the city beneath Tommy was filled with people, busy and never stopping, he saw none of them. He saw only the vehicles they drove, the flashing lights they obeyed, heard the faint hums of their machines. It was as if he did not live in a world with anyone else in it, except for him and Rachel, together in his office. Some time passed in which Tommy gazed thoughtfully and Rachel pondered what might be said next. In a moment of hesitation and sobriety, Tommy turned to Rachel and asked, "Do you think it'll work? Will it make a difference? I'm not sure what came over me, but I had a rather impulsive urge to change the world; and, now that I've come to it, I'm not sure if what has happened was at all meant to happen in the way it did. What, really, is there to change? And for whom are we changing it?"

Rachel, for all the witticisms and snappy retorts she could think of, did not speak.

Tommy did not speak.

Neither the boss nor the assistant, the master nor the grasshopper, the teacher nor the student, could think of what would come next. The answer, and as it would happen, the future, escaped them.

Epilogue

Moments after the silence between Rachel and Tommy was interrupted – by a sound not too dissimilar from the troubled cooing of a pigeon – a baby was born. Whom this baby was, and whom he was to become, remained unknown to the two office workers. The mother of the child knew, for she had picked an endearing name from a long list of the top 100 baby names for the year 2099. She held the babe in her arms and stared wondrously at his galactic eyes. Within them, comfortably nestled, was the future; his future, the world’s future. It rolled about and bobbed playfully. She saw a world governed by those that were able, proven in theory and in simulation. She saw people unafraid of looking at this world in every way they could. She saw rises and falls of leaders, wars and harmonies, creation and destruction. Tightly wound around the iris of her baby’s eye, the mother saw generation after generation, a world glowing and pulsating with new life. She saw answers to all the questions she had ever asked, predictions, prophecies, and problems not yet solved. She saw, at the very end of her vision, something she knew, deeply in her inner soul, to be ultimately meaningful. But all that she could make out was a rather bland and undesirable English play, the kind of play that would hold a reputation of absolute worthlessness for eternity – or at least the next six thousand years. The new-born blinked and the future faded away.