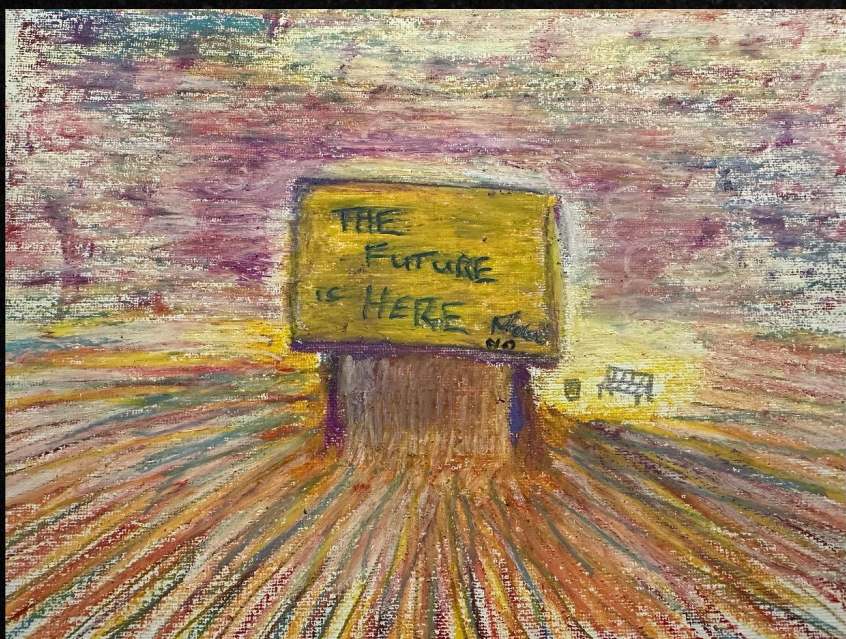


The Future is Now



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The Future is Now



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1

The Future is Now



‘A lot of days seems like somebody already pulled the trigger and we all just waiting for impact. Already heard

THE FUTURE IS NOW

***the shot. You know what I mean? Seems like you'd know
the feeling.'***

2

Chapter I

July 19th 1970.

The sign says “The Future is Here” and is already peeling off the hoarding. A strange sign to have by a roadside with nothing but a wooden bench and a wire bin. Not even a bus stop, or a lay-by to take a car from the tarmac and park in any safety. This future will have to be walked. The surroundings offer no brighter clue, a sullen clump of trees huddle in a field of sad grass and the blue sky and warm sun seem wasted on this empty scene. Except for a figure, walking across the grass and off the footpath, coming from what appears to be the coarse grasslands that lie behind the bench. They are heading toward the bench.

They stop by the sign, the huge hoarding with the weathered paper of the crazy promise and just as we might think they’ll read the sign, come round the front, take a seat on the bench, ponder the future and what it might mean, the figure stops. It disappears for a few seconds, then it seems to be digging in amongst the weeds around the wooden frame that holds up the

hoarding. It has something, a box, small, shining a metallic glint, it might be metal. The figure is purposeful, that's for sure, the movements indicate something is taken from inside the coat we might think is too big for this blue sky day and then pushed inside the metal (it must be metal, what else glints in sunlight just that way?) box. In the same fluidity of movement, like an animal returning to the burrow, the box is back in the hidden spaces within the weeds. Furtive glances, a casual stance adopted – too casual, I think that's a false whistle face without any sound – then the figure retreats, behind the sign, off back across the emptiness. Bench not sat on. Future not walked to.

Within the box (we are able to know without knowing how we come to know other than by trusting the fact you are reading this and I am telling you what this is in that box) is an envelope. White, sort of off-white, ivory white let's say. Sealed and without an address, but a name. Really an initial, not a name. It has the letter F, capital, no flourish, straight lines in blue ink.

* * *

Dear F,

I am not sure if you'll get this. Or even if you are there at all, but I had to write. I cannot really explain why, but there's an urge, one I had for a while and it keeps growing. A feeling that I am being watched. Then all of a sudden one day walking back from work, the bench is in shadow, there's a huge construction appeared, it says 'The Future is here'. I thought, it must be a sign. A big one at that.

The thing is, I have had this feeling we are at a point in time where everything is in jeopardy, the edges are frayed and all that was going to be perfect suddenly started to die off, fall away. I was at the pictures the other night, Easy Rider, had loads of good reviews and I thought this would be a boost, all that's going wrong can be relieved by a good old road trip, Kerouac for the new generation. Then they both got shot. Blown off their bikes by a pair of goons in a pickup truck! Both of them, Fonda and Hopper, Captain America, shot dead! Vietnam, strikes, death, shootings, darkness at every turn. Then the films start killing off the heroes. It took two years to even get up here, we never get the good movies, not at the time anyway, and then they show us that! I am twenty-three years old and I need escape!

This is a warning to you, and maybe a waste of time and maybe it should be a warning to the past, but time doesn't work like that and the past is just gone. Finished. I think though, now that I have had time to think and the sign appeared, that I am sent to feel this collapse and send the balloon up. Do you still have balloons? No point wondering that, I do not even know if you exist. And really, if the future is here, if the sign is right, then maybe I am there anyway and the warning can go with me. Just that right now, it feels hopeless, like there is no future. Now feels the end. Not for me, not only for me, but for all of us. All of us that feel anything anyway. What is happening is not quite clear, so you will have to be conscious of every little thing. And you are probably thinking, 'what the hell is Easy Rider?' and I hope not but expect so, it is a great movie and the ending although too harsh is probably true enough. Thing is, we almost got there, we thought so anyway. Got to the point after war and death, got to a freshness of ideas. Cuba turned golden and got rid of the gangsters and gave the people their own world to build.

John Lennon went to India and brought back zen that was English enough to be understood in the factory, civil rights worked things into the consciousness of America and all of us, and while I was a teenager and filled with hope, and saw the death as well, I thought that was the bad dying away. We all did. And it was not dying away, it was just changing shape. It will hide and claim things and kill you from the soul outwards. Be warned!

In 1968 there were riots here, riots all over the place I think. In Paris, in London, and we thought, yes! No to death, no to war, and all the older ones that had been in the war were saying the same things. Those here anyway, they said it was horrible and wasteful and the need now was for connection. Everywhere, everyone said connection and beauty and working class people, women and anyone of any background was going to help build the new tomorrow. All of us, even us in the immigrant areas, us too. This was a bright world it was being said, everywhere, all you need is love. Sing it, love is all you need. Then people got shot, others disappeared. I was a poet for a while, I could write, there was talk of colleges for writers. I got older, that disappeared, it was the factory. The people at the college said it was not appropriate for me to go to writing colleges, to write anything at all really they seemed to say. What about Shelagh Delaney? I said.

Just up the road from where I grew up, Taste of Honey, that was a play, and a film. That was about here, our lives. Turns out, it is not for us all, tomorrow. But it nearly was, at least we thought it was. They are stealing it back, the ones that had it before. They are splitting us up, telling each of us that we do not belong, or that we do belong but some others don't. Go finish them off, they say. At the football, in the pubs, go round and finish them off. And we

nearly got there. Now they are making it like it was before, except worse, because now they know we are here and we are different and we have to be controlled. I do not know what they will do next. This is a warning. They are making things wrong on purpose. Also pretty certain they are watching me, keeping me under scrutiny, monitoring me. I need you to know in case they have won already. I need you to know, we nearly got there.

Jakub

* * *

Chapter II

I couldn't really see where I was going because my eyes were blurred by the type of tears that can only be dealt by somebody who's supposed to protect your heart, not drowned it. You know, the familial variety, and not store-bought, that's thick with betrayal and a hurt so heavy you feel it wringing your throat and squeezing its way into your chest, until even breathing seems like an unreasonable act of desperate survival. It's the flavour of salted frustration spilling down seething cheeks and steaming off upon chapped lips, bitten from words held back. I wanted to scream, but felt it die within constricted lungs.

My nose was running like a faucet, and as I raised my arm to wipe it on my sleeve, I tripped over something buried beneath the tangle of underbrush I was blindly walking through and landed face first onto a metal sign that had long fallen and been overgrown.

I did scream, then, because why the hell not. There was nobody

around, anyway. There was an old “off the beaten path” bench here that I often came to sit on, but it was dark and I’d gone a little too far behind in my teary-eyed trek. My hands searched through the thick grass and dirt to find what I’d tripped over and felt the edge of something beneath my fingers.

The sign I’d tripped over looked just as old – perhaps older. I could only see it now because I’d pulled back layers of grass that had held it trapped for who knew how long. “_HE F_ TU_ E I_ NO_”

I stared, trying to focus my swollen eyes and finally grabbed my cellphone to use the flashlight. The F – something. Eventually I sorted the long faded letters into some semblance of words.

The Future is Now.

I set my phone down next to me, still dutifully shining sideways, and I decided I preferred: ‘The Future is No’ And then a slow rage that had been coiled in the pit of my stomach came screaming to the surface and for some reason I grabbed the sign and tore it free from the remainder of the grass, thinking to hurl it angrily into the darkness, Future and all. To throw my anger and all my pain as far as I could. And maybe it wouldn’t find me again. But just as I ripped it free, the light of my phone caught something underneath, glinting at me.

* * *

Dear Jakub!

I found your letter. No idea why I'm writing back – it's 2025, so I know it's been a ton of years. I guess at least it's distracting me from the hundred and one million things giving me grief lately. Maybe not quite a hundred million, but sometimes it feels that way. If anyone ever ends up finding this, I hope you can read my writing. Or maybe I don't – I'm not really sure. I had to search a few drawers to find a pen, so. Nothing is handwritten anymore. Maybe grocery lists.

I've never heard of Easy Rider, but the first thing I did was Google it. I 'spose you've never heard of Google, so that makes us even! I used to wish I had a motorcycle, but I am a bit of a daredevil, so might not be a good idea. I wonder if you're a biker. Maybe you have a leather jacket and a cool helmet. Did they have cool helmets in your day? Did they wear helmets at all...

Easy Rider sounds like a movie with no heroes, and I wonder what you'd think of the modern-day Captain America from the comics and the movies. No heroes still feels like it's something true, especially recently. Maybe movies haven't changed that much at all.

I know you wrote about riots. I've never been to a riot, but we have "Planned Protests" in the States now. I'm not sure what good they do. I know in France they set things on fire pretty often. Maybe we'd be better off if we burned it all down. Your letter made it sound like the end of the world... it still feels that way right now. Impending doom. The end seems closer now than it ever has.

I do wish you peace, even though I know you'll never read this. Maybe some of my thoughts will travel across time and reach you in the past, somehow.

CHAPTER II

I wish you could know your words were eventually read by someone. Even if they never reached F. I'm putting my reply back into the box I found. Here's hoping!

Best, Trey

* * *

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Chapter III

Silhouetted by the falling sun, the Future is Here sign looks stronger than last time, the last visit. The paper tighter to the frame, the structure bolder, harder against the empty sky. The figure walking across the scrubland is making toward it quickly, marching almost. They must have seen the lamp, the flickering flame enveloping the wick and lighting a single spot with yellow orange.

The light was small, but the figure approaching has felt it was there before they had seen it at all, felt it in their world several miles away. They had not seen, nor felt, that there was another figure by the lamp, hidden in the crossover of dusk and flame. As the rushing figure closed in they did see, and they stopped in silent cinema shock. It was shocking to see anyone in the barren space, but to see this figure was perhaps more so.

A small man, bearded, clothes of several layers so it was impossible to focus on any one of them, of the colours or the fabrics.

They were dark and light, rough and smooth, the sense of refined tailoring and thrown on rags came through the ensemble. All at once. He was partly lit by the tiny lamp flame and made a black outline by the disappearing celestial orb behind him. A strange there and not thereness about him, and the figure in the scrub resumed the journey and made his way toward the lamp and the beard.

It was Jakub approaching, he offered a gentle 'hello' after contemplating whether to be soft or hard, show kindness or strength, knowing either was only a mask for confusion and fear. The bearded figure was now in front of him only a few feet, he was maybe a foot tall, up to Jakub's knee. The little presence dug into a bag, a shiny material, in the shape of a cat's head, a cartoon cat, huge eyes, it looked an insane cat. The tiny figure took out the tin Jakub had seen last time, opened it, took a letter from it and handed it over. Jakub was written on it and no sooner had he settled from the shock of that than he realised he was stood alone, no minuscule man, no lamp. The letter remained. Jakub turned and headed back to where he had come from, letter gripped tightly between fingers, unopened.

At dawn, the figure of Jakub returns. The sign looks as it did the first time. He reaches into the grass and stuffed another letter in the box. Stooped down by it a while after, maybe contemplating what he was doing here at all. This one in the same type of envelope as before, but this one had the letter T in bold print.

* * *

Dear Trey

I am going to have to just write to you and not dwell on what it means to have a letter back in the box and who the tiny man was and how you made the lamp be a feeling before it was a light. You did, and I will never know, I suppose. Your sign now says 'Now' or 'No' and maybe we have linked because the two points in time, yours and mine are closing into a circle or something? I could not sleep after getting your letter, I read it twenty times, then started my own reply at least ten!

What do you use if not a pen? I was thinking this, but thinking how can you not have riots, and if that means all is good there? Riots no longer needed so peace achieved? Or has the idea of a riot been so squashed that is no longer a possibility? I hope it is the peaceful future you live in, not the squashed one. You are there though! We did not die in a nuclear wasteland or in a burning civil war or invasion or civil collapse. Actually, I do not know any of that beyond you did not die, you are there, you still have a pen in a drawer. What is there without a pen? Without paper? You have paper, yours feels kind of familiar, looks the same, yours is a little bigger, not foolscap. I like it, feels silky smooth. The world here is burning all its heroes and I thought we would go with it. You still have the comic Captain America?! That is so amazing, he was around when I was a kid! That is why it so dark when Easy Rider ended with a false Captain America and he got shot. Captain America was there in the war, the WWII war, the war to end all wars. Except it did not, they have wars everywhere now, just smaller ones, like Vietnam, they have wars in the middle east too, and everywhere. What it means is that we are all scared, we cannot come together like we hoped. They said we would come together and make a safe world and then we did not

do that. We are not doing that. Are you safe, Trey? It seems there is threat with you too.

Captain America was a good guy, a strong one that would always help those needing help. He likes to fight villains. It was hard sometimes too, he liked to fight people with accents, like my family. We kind of ended up always being the baddies in the Captain America games, when I was younger. All the better kids, the nice goofy ones with soft hair and bikes, they looked like who he wanted to save really. So we are just the ones that had to do better if we wanted to be saved too. Be more like the clean kids, the nice kids.

It is so cool you researched him. Google sounds a great guy, or a library, or something, is it a university? When I kept on reading you, I was fixated on you seeing there as the end too, the impending doom, too. I wondered, My grandparents said this all the time, they left the old world because of the destruction, they said it was the end of times. They are dead now, so they were kind of right. Is it the end of times always? Forever? Maybe we can change things and think of us as being here always, or at least a little longer. Wherever you are, you made it there, I am still feeling that. I feel we made it out of here, out of this. Some of us, even if pens almost did not.

Do we have a purpose to have this link between us? The tiny man said nothing. I hope that you do not live in the end of times, I felt it but you show me I do not.

Jakub

* * *

Chapter IV

* * *

Jakub!

I am shook!

I even chewed an expensive nail off one of my fingers. Didn't even notice till it was gone. I bit my nails when I was a kid and my mama used to swat me.

'Son, no woman wants a man with fingers like a cheese grater!'
she'd say.

But that was when we were still talking. Right now I know she'd have different things to say about my fingernails. About her son in general.

But I have to ask – are you some kind of juju magician? My auntie used to tell me stories. And I can't explain what I saw, just that it came straight from the darkness with big ole eyes just starin' at me.

Didn't even blink! Maybe a foot tall. But brother, let me tell you, it threw me.

If not for that, I would assume somebody was playing me.

Writing letters pretending to be from a different time. But I kid you not, it winked one of its giant eyes and threw a paper airplane right at me while I was sitting on the bench. Hit me clean in the chest! My name was written on a wing and by the time I looked up, the creature was gone.

Never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself.

I'm still not sure how to reply. Still trying to wrap my head around getting a letter back. But I'll give it my best shot.

Most things here are electronic. I'm wracking my brain for an equivalent.

I guess think of the movie screen you saw Easy Rider, but much smaller. Maybe the size of your hand. Plastic rectangle. And instead of an entire spinning film strip, everything is condensed into a single square of film, and held inside the rectangle. The information within the single slide is multiplied a thousandfold, and held within the rectangle screen. Like say you got a dictionary, history books, artwork, more films...whatever you want, brother! You can move the pictures on the screen and ask questions.

Google is like an electronic librarian that looks through all these entries very quickly and shoots you an answer faster than you can read it in a book. A speedy librarian. No glasses, though.

I asked Google about Easy Rider, and it sent me some details.

This probably sounds total madness to you! Usually we write letters electronically.

Oh, the rectangle is also a phone! Telephone. Do your phones still come with 2 pieces – ear and mouth – and operators plugging wires? I do remember seeing that in movies. Not so many wires here these days.

The situation here is political. I'm sure there will be riots soon. Too many people divided. And there?

You wrote about the end of the world, so it sounds like not much has changed. Government lookin out for itself, not its people.

I wonder what our boy Captain America would say.

You asked if I am safe.

Friend, I am a gay black man in the United States. People hate me for my skin, and they hate me for my fancy nails. Makes me a little scared to ask how things are there. "Then." You talked about villains and accents, and not being saved. Are you from Germany? I remember Steve fought in WWII. You must be several years after it ended. All the bombs and death, and concentration camps.

Never I thought I'd be able to write those words about 2025, but here we are.

But maybe there's some kind of magic left in the world, still. God knows it sure don't feel like it some days.

CHAPTER IV

Tell me about the world, in your time. How do you live?

I'm putting my letter back into the box. Maybe there's still some juju to deliver it to you. Time will sure tell!

Trey

PS - I forgot to ask, who is F?

* * *

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Chapter V

* * *

Dear Trey,

I had no inclination of your reply this time. I went to the sign, it was cold and dark and the box was empty. Sadness came, and sickness, I thought I was ill and created you so I ran back home to read your letter. When I got there, to the squat, the room was shining, and we have only a single bulb in there and nothing that would create such a golden glow. Under my mattress, where I keep letters and my journal, I reached under and there was another letter from you! I do not know what it is that links us, that does this magic, this juju! Your technology makes me think maybe you are not on this planet, maybe? Maybe it's not the future we are crossing but a universe?

We have phones here, you know the wars too, I think? Maybe we are on the same planet. WWII ended before I was born, but I am a product of it. My dad was Italian, he was a Prisoner of war

in England. He should have gone home afterwards but he met my mum, she was Lithuanian and came to England as a refugee. They made a life, dad working in the mines and then he started an ice-cream stall. The people are OK, sort of. We belong and don't, mum and dad are still up in the North, but I came to London, to be a writer. I am not a writer, or I write but for nobody, just for you.

I live in a squat by King's Cross station, it is a wild world here. So many people from everywhere, dreamers, lost souls, artists. I want to tell you everything but then I remember my first letter to F. F is the future, or was. I wanted to write to there because here is so sad and angry. You are F, not really as an initial but as a place. Now I have to rethink everything, who I am and where this place is and what is real. We have televisions, is your Google a television made small, maybe? The telephones you describe made me laugh, they are on films, they are not like this now. We do not have a phone but there is a phonebox at the end of the street. They are little rectangles, red metal and glass, the phone is a lifeline and its always busy. People hang about it waiting for calls, others run businesses there. Telephones are all wires but I think it is machines that connect now, not operators. I do not know how they work, nobody does that I know, they are magic! Technology, it kind of links us but cannot be trusted. Google at least sounds good. We have a show, they play it in the coffee shop in Soho, Star Trek! It is the best show. It is in colour and they adventure in the universe, an equal society of the future. Sounds like you have some of that, maybe?

Even there in technicolour space futures, no gay men or women, it is worse here Trey. You know it was only made legal to be gay a couple of years ago? Here in England. They have lots of rules around it, we go to a pub here that is kind of safe to be gay but they raid it, the

police. So many places are not safe. Racism is also everywhere. It is violent out there, angry small minded people who want to destroy difference. We are trying to imagine new worlds but most people that think of safe spaces live in places like here, powerless and in squats and nobody listens. Until there's a riot. Then they send police to kick heads in. And the future, that everyone thought would come after the war, is worse. I cannot go home very often, they think I am weird, I think my parents are ashamed and if I get to university that would be something. It is hard to go to university, they are for another class of people.

I am working in factories sometimes, when the work is available, I study at night school when I can. There are changes, we read them and I try to access in the libraries and we have some really great 'zines, people outside the normal who write and share new ideas. You would love the 'zines, they are brilliant and exciting and somewhere we can see each other as we want to be. Sometimes, I read those, or listen to singers up in Camden, and feel like change is coming. Then they crush it. Shoot the speakers, silence the movements, raid the pubs and shut down the writing. Still, there are people, strange and wonderful people, and they keep the fires burning for a better world.

And now this, a future with you, us linked by magic. Who is the little mystery man? Sounds like you have no idea either! He is not here now, so I will go to the sign, put this in the box. Hope our channel is still open.

I find hope in you Trey.

Jakub

* * *

Chapter VI

* * *

Dear Jakub,

I am on earth! What there is left of her, I guess. But some days you'd be pressed to find some real dirt to touch with your feet. There's so much pavement and tall buildings, powerlines and even things in the sky – if you can believe it. I can't remember when y'all landed on the moon, but it didn't stop there. One small step for man, and all that. It didn't turn out like Star Trek, that's for damn sure.

My mama used to say, they can put a man on the moon but that don't put no gas in my car! Some days she hated 'progress' It don't help me none, she'd say. Fix the damn road! I don't live there anymore, but I don't think she's wrong.

It sounds like you're not close with your parents. I'm sorry for that, my brother. I'm not either. My daddy passed away when I was 7,

so I don't have much of him. And all the 'daddys' that came after weren't the sorta men you'd wanna shake hands with. I do have a half sister. She's only 12 and I love that muffin to death. Some days if I saved enough cash, we go for ice cream, if my mama's not around.

The way you talk about people lookin at you, sounds like here. Now, today. Sometimes the looks aren't OK, though, and you learn real quick when you best be on your way.

What do you write about? It sounds a little like the movie *Moulin Rouge*. I know you wouldn't have seen it (how could you!), but bohemian in spirit and all about following a dream. 'It's about love!' Man, I love that movie.

I think it's also a real place. France. One day I'd like to go – be all fancy-like.

I work part time in a night club here taking coats, and they let me perform some nights. My daddy loved music, and he taught me to play piano before he died, so I like to think we still share that. I wonder if he'd be proud of me.

They still sending police to kick heads in. It's getting scary, especially if you not white. I know one girl from work – vanished. Like smoke. She was from Mexico.

They send masked men out to find people who ain't from here, according to them, and send em away to these messed up prisons. They raid businesses. Catch you on the streets. It feels like just the beginning. Like how I think Nazi Germany musta been, back in the day. Or maybe even with your daddy. People disappear and you never hear from them again. I don't know if they will come for me. I'm American, but it don't seem to matter sometimes. They see your skin or your name and you just gone.

It sounds like a war story. One day I know they'll make movies about this too. All this hate. One day I hope their children's children ask, why didn't you stop it.

I don't know why I keep getting your letters, but maybe that's why we're the same. Almost foreigners in our own damn country. Connected.

I'm glad you still wrote back after I said I was gay. I figure a lot of people wouldn't. Maybe there is still some good in the world.

Trey

* * *

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Chapter VII

* * *

Dear Trey

You cannot begin to believe what happened to me today! I turned invisible! Totally gone, all that was there of me was the eyes that could see. It was so weird, has it ever happened to you? I was somewhere else, without a body and I could not make out where, it felt everywhere and nowhere all at once. I had your letter, it was in my pocket and felt like it had been there the whole time. I put my hand in, there it was, no sign, no little guy, no magic, just your letter. I was thinking about that, just the ordinariness of this now, and then I disappeared. Or I was already gone, absent, transparent.

I was in many places all at one time. I thought of your daddy but saw my old man, he was in Italy I think, lots of marching and statues and Egyptian obelisks. I recognised the language, not the words, he would not let us speak Italian. He said we had to fit in here, and here

they do not like foreign, they don't trust foreign. They like the ice cream, that seems OK. But here, I was in the place they all spoke, or shouted, in Italian. So weird, I thought how he told me when I was in school to get a proper job, not to write. He said they kill the writers, find em and kill em, every time. I am not sure what he meant, it was before times, before he came here. The killing was in the vision, but not quite, but then it was ancient times, sandals and sand and soldiers like Romans and still those obelisks and columns outside the houses but strange clothes and still marching.

It was like I was there, hiding, but no need to hide because I was not there, I could see, but I was invisible. There were people in cages, they were being shouted at and they looked terrified. This was another time, but I knew the people in the cages, I felt I was with them. Like you said, connected. All of us, through history, connected. I felt it. I wanted to see you, but I did not, there was another place, not then but a place I could not really see. The people were not in cages and there was no violence but it was a sad place, shiny floors and people drifted about and there was a kind of music. But not real, like it was in the air, like it was music as air, in the ducts above like the air conditioning. And the people, they just drifted, and all the windows had stuff in, it was indoors and there was just stuff, looked really beautiful, all lit up and kind of special.

But the people, they moved slow and sad. I was there too, but they could not see me, they seemed not to see each other. Drift and sad and slow and the piped sounds just an echo. Then I heard piano and I knew, or thought I knew, it might be you. But it was now, or near now, not your time. Then song and chains and more houses, different but still with columns and people in chains. Americans, they sounded like that, in the movies and there was English too, like

the ones here. And they have the columns here too, on some houses, but on the museums and the galleries. Columns and angry faces and stay away in the design and I saw, when I was invisible, that this was everywhere, across all these places. And in every place, every single one, just out of the sight of things, I heard a voice. It was so soft, gentle and kind, a beautiful voice that was fragile, feathery and just there somehow, in amongst it all. There between the shouts at the cages, there in the marching ones, amongst the songs and the chains and the brutality of the American fields. It was there and it said the same thing every time. It said, 'stay safe'. So soft, I could sometimes not really hear it, just felt it. Stay safe. I think of you, wonder about the friends here in the movement – there is a movement after Stonewall, in America, they write and they hold meetings. I think there's more happening, liberation is coming. We kind of felt that for everything in the early years, but you know, Captain America, the shooting by the thugs in the van. Liberation was coming, but you have to fight for it, write for it. And I think again, those words, stay safe. We have to write and be and create and be the alternative, but we have to stay safe, look after each other.

My first letter, just to F, that was meant as a warning, I thought it was just to purge my own soul. But you, you and me now, we are connected, you are so right. We need the connection, we need to help each other stay safe. It was not a warning, it was a reminder, we are always here Trey, you and me, all of us. You know here, you will not believe it, we have a new war, a cold war they call it. Everything we do, we do knowing we might all die. Not some of us, all of us, entire cities and all of us in them. Gone. Like they did in Japan. Knowing you are there, it means that went away, that annihilation.

When I stopped being invisible, when it all ended, I threw up. It

was physical, it felt so real. I threw up, slept and then woke to write this to you. Stay safe, that was still there, that voice. It sounds like hell there now Trey, in your world.

Disappearing people, masked men. We set that in motion maybe? Maybe it is always there, forever?

I wonder if your friend Google can tell us the answer? What do we do to stay safe, Trey?

Jakub

* * *

Chapter VIII

* * *

Dear Jakub,

Your letter was waiting for me under the wiper of my car when I woke up this morning. The place I live had a pipe bust, so they kicked us all out the building while they brought in some guys to repair it. I had nowhere to go so I slept in my car. She's a small hatchback, so not a lot of room. Plus parking on a slant means the seats aren't the best beds. San Fran has so many dang hills – you'd think somebody'd build a roller coaster instead of a trolley by now.

Did you time travel? Are you a time traveler? Brother, maybe it's been you all along! Remember when you asked if I was on earth. Maybe you're not on earth!

I had to read your letters five or six times.

I don't understand about the marching, but your father sounds a lot like my mama, talkin about blending in.

Most of what I understood was America in chains. The world in chains. Slaves.

We're still slaves here, just different than before. And I don't think there's an underground railway to save us, this time.

Sorry if my writing is messy – it's early as hell right now and my fingers still warming up.

I gotta be honest, I'm not really sure what to make of your letter. Nothing like that's ever happened to me before. I hope you're alright.

But I gotta know, how do you stay safe? You can't ask Google.

It will just regurgitate information for something that's irrelevant.

Like, here's how not to burn your house down when making eggs; never store your gun with one in the chamber. Ironical, in America.

I guess that's how the world feels now. Maybe it always did. The earth is a rotating revolver with one in the chamber and we all playin roulette.

I hope you at least are safe,

Trey

PS – did you ever figure out the song?

* * *

Chapter IX

* * *

Dear Trey,

Ha, yes, one in the chamber! That is a thing, a perpetual state of something coming, something hard and fast and not good. I never did work out the song, I did not know it. I hope your home is safe for you, dry at least. Today your letter arrived through the letterbox, a regular delivery. Like this is totally normal! We do not get mail here often, this being a squat it is kind of off-grid but the postmen at least do come, with bailiff letters and official things and now...your letter!

You are right, the images are that, slaves and chains and being stood on, all the time. I knew it would be a tough letter to read because it was tough to write. It happens to me a lot, the collapse, but not always being invisible, that was new.

My folks said I was ill, but we do not go to the doctors with that illness, it ends in asylums or on some kind of knock out pills or prison. I tried to tell them how I felt but the thing is, they lost a lot. Everyone did. When my dad was my age he had me, after the war, by that time he'd lost his brothers and his parents in the war. Mum had too, she was just twenty when she gave birth to me, her mum and dad were gassed they think, they disappeared. Lots of people disappeared and those left behind were scattered everywhere, like Manchester. New countries and languages and not being welcome, not really. It feels like we are all in the aftershock. If I try telling them I feel shot to pieces they just tell me to shut up and get on with stuff, I break sometimes. I just go off, fall apart. It is common here, loads of it.

And down here there is a whole city of us it seems, young and lost and terrified. Maybe the riots and the fights and the anti-war are fear mostly, anger too, just a state of us wanting to be ourselves but all the children of the war generation, with hardened parents.

Sorry my last letter was out there. I reached for something, to make sense of it. I know that dad's stories of the fascists in Italy are inside me, that's the marching. I was not there but I hear the stories and it's like some of the movies about the war – so many movies are about the war here, they seem to be trying to make sense of it. You have your own after shock, I know, I wonder what happens between me and you? Last year, the Americans landed on the moon. We watched at the coffee shop, it was incredible, just amazing.

Humans on the moon, and yet here we are still just getting by, hungry a lot, and the wars seem to kill only kids. Still, we have people walking on the moon, it kind of made better futures seem possible, like Star Trek might come true. I want to write and create but I know

why dad says no, he sees what happened there. The artists were like the soft belly the fascists could not stand, so they killed them. I guess that's what it is. All of history seems to have been like that but we – you and me – have been given something special. This link. I want to take the bullet out of the gun for you.

Jakub

* * *

Chapter X

* * *

Jakub!!

You're ok! Glad to hear, brother. I was a little worried from your last letter. It's funny how I bein' expecting a reply now, like you said. Like it's normal. I know for sure if somebody'd asked me a few weeks ago if I thought I'd have a friend in the past, you bet I'd be lookin' at 'em sideways.

Now that's a fact! But here we are.

Have you had the episodes all your life? Do you have family you are staying with now? I think I remember you saying you're not close with your folks. Aren't they back in England? Anybody looking out for you now?

I can't check your letters because I'm at work, but I'm glad you weren't taken away for some kinda "treatment." We don't

really have that today so much, but instead we all just suffering from depression and trying to find different ways to cope – least that's how it seems to me. I have seen some movies about old school mental asylums, and they look awful. People treated like animals. And you can't leave. A different type of slavery, I guess. Sure am glad you didn't get stuck in one of those places. I think they're all haunted, now.

The pipe is fixed now, thanks. It was only a couple nights, but it's nice to have my bed back. The place is small, and three other roommates, but I'm still glad to have somewhere. Tomorrow is open mic night at my club, and I been practicing a new song, so wish me luck!

I forgot I'd said that, about the bullet, but sure feels that way. Except a lot of days seems like somebody already pulled the trigger and we all just waiting for impact. Already heard the shot. You know what I mean? Seems like you'd know the feeling. Or maybe it hit a long time ago and the rest of the world is just trapped living in the aftershock. Gets me thinking about the past, the present and the future. The ripples. What ripples do you think we leave? I hope maybe you're still writing, even though your dad may have said not to. The world needs those good words and good ripples more than ever. Yours reached me, after all!

Trey

* * *

Chapter XI

* * *

Trey,

I never know how you get your letters! Today, I walked to the coffee shop, I wanted to see other people. I am still shaken from the episode (that is such a great word for it!) and had my head down. A guy banged into me and I felt him push something in my coat – someone leaving something in a pocket is a rare occurrence here, I can tell you!

I was thinking, you would have done the open mic, then I thought, no you wouldn't because you are not even born yet!

This is so freaked and I love it. I hope it goes well, or went well, or whichever works for us. I hope our letters last forever, and then I think they could end anytime. Thank you for wishing me out of the asylum. The thing is, I do not think I am mad

but I do feel I see the world differently. This is enough, enough to get locked up, to be an outsider and not in a good way. We got past that for ages. Then, well, you know, they shot Captain America. Lots of them, real ones, not just ones in films. They shot great liberators, dreamers, thinkers and writers. They locked lots of others up. My folks are in the north of the country, near Manchester. We are not close but I love them, they are just frightened. Traumatized, I think.

I came to London to be free but it's different types of slavery. Two types of people in the world far as I can see, rich and poor. Like my mum says, 'don't be poor'. Like my mum lives, easier said than done. They try to fit in, I try to make a world that fits me. We both lose. I want the greatest for them, happiness. A thing that distances us is the world, he was in the army fighting for a cause he did not believe in. Then the war brought him to England and he got married to a refugee. Everyone had to join the army, even after the war. But they stopped that just before I would have joined, and we all fought something else. We fought false truth. That will have gone now for you, because of Google and the tiny televisions and stuff, but here, we are just finding out. Because we were free to find out, do you know the beatniks? They were in San Francisco, they wrote new worlds up there. What knowledge is – in the army they can tell you, like schools tell us. But we were finding out they were not real, not all the stories they told us. We had to try and reframe. Knowledge is different from knowing. We started to see we could not be all together because knowledge was not simple. There are different ways of knowing, different things to know. Dad was aware, I think he was a writer maybe, or his family had writers. They knew differently and suffered. Maybe he is frightened for me,

just wants me to fit in too. He saw the damage, I know that.

I keep thinking of the shot you think is fired, the impact not yet felt. That made me shudder. Maybe we fired that shot from here? I am not sure, we fire lots of shots. Most of us fear the bomb, we know it landed on folks somewhere else and wiped out cities in a second. I know the feeling you describe, we are all waiting, for that silent fall of the bomb that ends it all. Feels like it will fall forever.

That's what the warning is, the first letter, I think. Do not fear the fear, do not fear other people. We are wasting away waiting for bombs to fall and shots to hit. If they come, it is too late. Until then, we can write and dance and perform at open mics. I wish I could see you there.

Jakub

* * *

Chapter XII

* * *

Hi Jakub,

Truly, I'm glad you're ok, my brother! I for one, don't think you're mad.

These time traveling letters blow my mind, sometimes. How can we both be writing "now" but you're also writing from "then." Very trippy! Very strange. Makes me wonder if I'm thinking straight, or there must be so much more to the universe than we can ever guess. Maybe it's a secret and we only get the answer at the end. Like a knot you can only unravel with two pairs of hands, but we all just born with the one set. Either way, I hope you keep bein OK. I hope you keep writing. I appreciate you telling me about your life, sharing your stories.

Maybe one day things will be better with your parents. I miss

my dad every damn day. And I'm really sorry for all your parents went through – can't have been easy. I know what it's like to be poor. Your fingers keep pinching pennies even when nothing left for em to pinch! I hope things get better for your mama and your daddy. And for you!

Some days I think things have changed so much, and other days it seems like the world stays exactly the same – mostly in the bad ways.

Lemme tell you this, though. That first night when I stumbled over your letter, I just had a huge fight with my mama. She been trying to forget that I told her I'm gay, and a few weeks ago it got real ugly, real fast.

I told her I ain't gonna change, because I can't. She said I best not be coming home less it's with a lady.

And then she told me my daddy would be so ashamed. I lost it, an' I told her we never speaking again. I nearly drove my car off a bridge when I left cuz I was crying so hard. Couldn't see a damn thing.

But for some reason I stopped at the field where I've gone before, to sit and write songs. It looked like there was a light there. Caught my eye. Good thing too! I found your letter. And I think maybe it saved my life. I will always be grateful for that.

I don't think we'll ever know who loaded the gun. Who took the shot. But I been thinking a lot about your vision, about staying safe. Thanks for being a safe space, my friend. I hope you find some safety as well. The world needs the writers, and the dreamers. Too many of the opposite trying to take over the world. Maybe we need to start burning like stars, 'stead of just wishin on em.

Be safe!

Trey

PS – I sang Rainbow Connection, and the piano was tuned, so I got to play it, too. I don't think you'll know it yet, but when it's written, you sure will.

And I know my daddy woulda been proud.

* * *

Chapter XIII

Wasteland stretches in every direction, no signs of any city or people. All that a viewer might see is in a blasted clearing where dry dust hosts a large sign. Beneath this hoarding, a steel bin and a bench. On the bench sits an old man, white hair drifting over the collar of his long black jacket. He is writing, pen on paper. On the bench by his side an envelope, off white, empty.

* * *

Dear Trey,

First time in years I have come here, to the place I first saw the sign. I had been coming, a lot, early on. It was just barren, no sign, no bench, nothing. I came in 2002, I thought you'd be born by then, just, and I wondered if that would spark something, revive the juju. It did nothing. I came today, because it has gone 55 years since the

first time. Now it is back! And it different, it as you said it would be, The Future is Now! But not for you, thing with time is we are always a kicked can down the road from each other. You will be there now, 2078. Crazy, what would that be like? And you, will you still be here? You will, of course but I cannot see you, but I have been looking.

At first, I put you down to my hallucinations, my crazy brain as people called it. Then I heard that song, or a song that had the same title, Rainbow Connection. It could be coincidence, course it could, I knew that. But I sort of knew, I felt it, it was the song in the dream, it all flooded me. The empty spaces, me invisible, the piano and the soft voice and it was you, singing that song. Since then, I have thought of the letters, of the link between future and past and now. Mostly, I thought of you. Knowing you were not even here, not even when the song was here, a song you were not here to sing but I had heard from your lips. Somehow. Later other things came to pass. The Google thing was the shock that hit me most. I was not using technology much, not then, but it grew and grew and now it is some kind of monster! Things have changed, slowly and often so dramatically, but I still see the warning I wrote to F. It was useless, of course. But things are better.

We know things now, our selves.

We wanted the whole thing to change back then, mass revolutions and total change and everyone changing with it. We now know it can only start with ourselves. It has to be a change in each of us, I think I know that. I never had a crazy brain, but I was different. And I lived.

You know, in the squat everyone but me was dead before they hit

30? Thing is, the difference killed, now it still kills but not so much, not so often.

Trey, I think the sign being back is something. I saw it and thought, the trashcan, that is there, and I missed the importance. This is where most of the stuff I did went, thrown, forgotten. There is a box though, if we look hard enough, if we are open to seeing that. A box that connects us to others across place, across time. The box we put letters in, dreams and warnings in, thoughts and hopes in. I have lived as a writer all this time, sometimes published, mostly not. But I learned stuff, important stuff, Trey. The letters taught me.

We are always breath, just a single breath that takes a lifetime.

Things change over time we cannot see, over such long times, forever maybe. I ache to know you are safe, brother.

* * *

The old man looks up and drops his pen. Drops the pad. The old man stands up and looks across the wasteland in front of him, eyes open. Eyes filled with water. And with wonder. A slight figure emerges from just beyond his vision, details becoming clearer with each step. The light grows and spreads, in a manner not unlike a sunrise as one watches it spill across the horizon to eventually brush your cheeks with its warm rays through a bedroom window draped with blue and white striped curtains.

A crackling radio broadcast fades in and out in the distance: the

future is...Here!

The future is...Now! A record scratch, skipping. Here! Now! Trey – indeed, because who else could it be! – is wearing a long jacket, faded jeans, knock-off Air Force Ones, tied loosely. The cracked nail polish on his fingers is more apparent with each step. A pianist's fingers. He's holding a stack of folded, yellowed letters in one hand. His face is expectant, as though he knows who he will find on the bench. Or at least, who he knows he hopes. The radio sang him a song he'd only read about, and he knew his next stop. Where else? Finally, a bright smile splits his face with almost relieved recognition when he's finally close enough to take in the figure seated on the bench. Waiting.

“Brother.”

A single word, but a lifelong conversation contained within. A merging of worlds; a gentle meeting of souls.

Trey stretches his hand to greet Jakub, pulling him up into the embrace of long lost family.

They sit next to each other, for a moment lost in silent disbelief and comfort, in kind. Finally, sharing the same place in time. The radio crackles.

“We know that it's probably magic, have you been half asleep, and have you heard voices...?”

At long last, Jakub passes Trey his final letter, with a smile that looks past him at the same time as meeting dark eyes. “I've heard them calling my name.”

There is nothing left to say. Trey hugs him one final time, a chest-tightening farewell; how weighted with the arms

of traded stories, friendships forged, and an unmistakable gratitude for all the time shared. And at long last, sees him off, with peace.

Where before two sets of footprints, now only one. Though Trey is assured, he is never truly alone. Perhaps time is a thing of the past, and if he's learned anything, it's that maybe you need to dream a future that's worth dodging a few bullets.

* * *

