

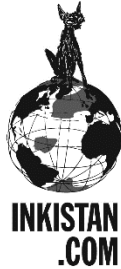
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ISBN: 9781911289548



TRANS-END

Will Lorimer

BEFORE

In the small hours, still at my office desk, too caffeinated from the ten half empty cups ranged before me to call a cab home, with only the night porter rattling his keys, in a distant corner of the deserted building, I chanced upon the YouTube video amongst the usual fare of fake facts disseminated on the site. However, unlike the claims of alien abductions, monster holes in the Antarctic and multifarious Rothschild plots, I trawled that night, something about it nagged, and never quite let go.

That's the trouble with watching too many conspiracy videos, while most blur into the background hiss, some lodge like sticky burrs, and even later, burst into bloom, just as predicted.

Bloom ... bloom

But that was then and this is now. I am a journalist, or *was*, a much-derided profession before the final demise of print media. The Internet, which had seemed so unfettered and boundless, is no more. We had the crafty North Koreans to blame for that. So much for the threat of their missiles reaching Japan and even the West Coast of America – all the time they had been aimed at the sky. The

Van Allen Belt, to be precise. The magnetosphere of charged particles which meet at the Poles, radiate outwards to between 500 and 60,000 kilometres, and protect us from solar flares.

What satellites weren't knocked out of orbit in the nuclear strike had their circuits scrambled in the massive solar storm which followed - bolts of supercharged plasma, tails ten million miles long, heading direct for Earth, with only the magnetosphere to protect us from the radiation. Of course the North Koreans aimed their missiles at the Van Allen Belt. Why wouldn't they when it was an open goal? Seven days to prepare the strike, from when the flares were first observed erupting the rim of our star. Surely enough time for a drongo like Kim Jon Il of the Bloody Red Sun.

Of course, that all could be a story – more alt facts to conjure with from before the Consensus stopped all that. Perhaps the Internet was deliberately crashed and the North Koreans' missiles never blasted off because all along they were cardboard cut-outs with no nuclear warheads, which only ever existed in the penile dreams of Kim Jon Il of the bloody Red Sun at Noon.

But in the aftermath of the Great Crash that was not a question uppermost in peoples' minds. Systems were down, power grids off-line, transformers blown. Micro-circuitry was fried in smart fridges, talking toys, redactive DVD, micro-wangerz, smart clits, remote dildos, auto-pussies, rectalware, secure vaults, data

storage facilities, climate controls, sewage outlets, pressure valves, stock control, road signage, water purification plants, power stations – the lot! Nothing electronic made after the Millennium worked as intended.

That first night after the strike, before the fires when so many city blocks burned, the skies were streaked unearthly colours, deranged traffic lights texted drivers locked in their cars, unable to escape, the controls down. Streetlights flared and faded as current surged and dipped. Whole city districts were plunged into darkness as electricity sub-stations blew.

For the time being at least, hospitals remained lit-up, shining like beacons in the gathering darkness. On thoroughfares, the inner-city bypass, the outer ringway, with its float-overs for electric cars and drive-unders for the rest, *North, East, West, and South*, skeletal floodlights strobed in superstring sequences that whiplashed diamonds far out into the dark urban hinterlands, where they scattered under a clearer night sky than had been seen by suburbanites for many a year. The stars above, even arrayed as they were in startling brilliance, and tinted every conceivable colour by the storm in heaven, could not compete with the drama of the superstrings below.

The bounty of a kingdom, the light which guided travellers home and made us safe, these shining strings of lovely pearls

which broke, faded, lost their sheen, and went rolling like bowling balls, bouncing in and out of the narrow streets of a blacked-out crystal matrix – this city within a city, where on any other day, most of the world's supply fountained. Its square mile of crystalware was set out for the bankers' last banquet – all that glass, reflecting dragons, cavorting over a field of dreams.

Out in the estuary, where the broad tidal river that flowed through the City met the sea, the great gates of the surge barrier, which allowed the passage of ocean-going ships, gaped wide open – failsafe back-up circuits fried like the rest. The City was defenceless. In one week's time, at the neap tide when the moon was full, the Square Mile, the subway, and the Docklands and adjoining low-lying areas would flood.

A nightmare already, down by the river in unlit plazas built to house new money spilled by that gusher – the promised new money which finally had arrived. Crowds jostled around cash points disgorging sheaves of useless banknotes, perhaps later used to light the fires that raged before the Great Inferno was put out by ... you guessed it, the Greater Flood. An ironic twist of the tassels to end the tale of a City of Money made legend by the manner of its fall.

When the moon was full, the tide high, the gates wide open, and a North Easterly blowing down a gale from where hell freezes

over, the square mile of crystal – silverware, golden cutlery, the diamond tiara on the head of dear old HRH – all of it, gone! Scrubbed clean by the Deluge. Swept away to Romney Marshes, and the sandbanks off the Lee of Kent, where I imagine the girders of those crystal towers still to be. A crown missing its Pineapple, perhaps? Over there the statue of Justice from the Old Bailey, sunk in mud. The cupola of St. Paul's, surprisingly big. Close too, the Shard, or a shard of it tiny in the distance over sands that shifted as you looked. Yes, ghosts of the giants of times long gone.

However, well before any of that could come to pass, that first night of the Emergency, across the great City, supermarkets were emptied of goods. There were bread riots even when there was no bread. Violent assaults were commonplace. Driverless cars and convoys of robot trucks blocked intersections. Everywhere, alarms screeched, men roared, women shrieked and children wailed. It wasn't fair. Indeed, it was shocking. Traffic was gridlocked, there was no end to it. Drivers were trapped, the doors of their vehicles stayed locked, circuits blown. Mobiles went madder than their owners. Every street had car crashes and burning wrecks. Gleeful looters scrambled in and out of smashed shop windows, passing out electronic goods which would never work.

Without connectivity, electricity, mobile phones, apps, or even functioning computers, people were lost. The young had no sat-nav to navigate by, while the old stayed barricaded in their homes for fear of mobs roaming the streets. Martial law was declared but with radio communication down the order went largely unheard. The Police were hardly evident, except behind the cordons which protected important buildings and the homes of the rich. The Army, sequestered in their barracks, stayed in lockdown until the civil strife had burned itself out. There was a lot of burning. Whole districts in the city where I lived were razed to the ground, and murder became commonplace, as a means of getting by.

I have a confession to make. By the second decade of the 21st century, I had come to loath the Internet. In 25 years I'd turned from ardent early user, a habitué of chat rooms and regular blogger, to unhappy middle-aged addict. It was clear, face to face to face communication was fast becoming a thing of the past. Even in my workplace, the newsroom of a loss-making and soon to be defunct newspaper, younger colleagues at adjacent desks preferred communicating by text and email over simple talk – as chat went out, so their eyes dulled, it seemed. Only their faces shining in the dead light of banks of monitors relaying the news as it happened,

bomb blasts in distant cities, underlined by market numbers, sports results, celebrity gossip, flashing around the room.

Already in my workplace, on social media, everywhere, predictive text was burrowing below the carpet, through the walls, ceiling, floor, inbox, keyhole and under the door. Type in H, and *Holocaust-Denier* might appear in the search box, followed by links to stories of how the Death Camps were faked. From there it was a goose-step to the recruiting propaganda of right wing organizations, death cults and snuff videos. The paths from the Ascension of the Prophet on his white horse to Jihad, martyrdom and 72 virgins were similarly directed. Words, phrases were cross-linked according to search history and social media gossip, as were facts and their doppelgängers.

In this great era of digital progress, memes of new ‘-isms’ and medical conditions conspired. Victims were created, elevated, served up as role models for mass edification and ultimately cheated, while perpetrators went unmolested and the big beasts still ruled in neo-Liberty Hall. Partying was something you did until you got old and despised. Genders were fractioned and diced in a new Sex War in which sex played less and less a part, and love was nowhere to be seen. Likewise, humble truth, when it came to the fables and facts of Religion and Science, and their interchangeable proxies, Belief and Unbelief.

Though the Papers railed and the Social Media Giants pleaded, both claiming to be the guardians of free speech, all the time arguing apples and pears, the question was never asked: why these bifurcating paths, and where exactly were we being led? Yes, even then, Google, Facebook, Amazon, ALI, Wondro, Micro Wangerz and the rest knew more about us than we knew ourselves, could predict our every next move. No need to shop, it was already on the doorstep, dispatched by drone before you clicked. The *present* no longer its own reward, now that surveillance encompassed past *and* future.

Privacy, there was none. No corner for the hermit. No place to breathe without suspicious white trails spreading in the stratosphere above. Was it aerial cocaine? Neurotoxin? The theories abounded on YouTube. Whatever, it was mind-numbing, for hardly anyone looked up, or if they did, care to notice. No street without fallout, brain-rot heavy in the air, no road without a cell-tower. CCTV? Don't make me laugh, it was in your wallet. Even the spyware on the indestructible plastic banknotes were pixel-points of an all-seeing radiant Eye which was both omnipresent and nowhere to be seen.

The Digital Age had turned into a slow poison – the dig-it-all ethos of the early days, into a digitalis embrace. A quickening measured by coffee on the go, sleep deprivation, plastic cakes and

faker subs, expanding waistlines, and the erratic beating of one's heart. Caffeine, narcissism and self-gratification, never a stable mix.

Be careful what you wish for – Yes, I *wanted* the Internet to crash, had even come to see that as inevitable. It was too creaky, the architecture just not structurally coherent. I saw it as a global shantytown of teeming shacks, stacked and jacked to impossible heights, built without regard to regulation or planning, everyone communicating, no one understanding. Like the Tower of Babel, it was doomed to fall. But please not today, I would think. Like everyone I knew I was a digital addict, driven to distraction, less and less existing in the here-and-now, the present ever-receding into the digital interface. And with all that, if I was honest, I saw that compassion, truthfulness, kindness, were going out of the world, as people became more and more dependent on machines. Yes, bring it all down, I would think, because the sooner the inevitable happens, the less dire the consequences.

But then I would remember that video, and the prospects. However, I couldn't think that far ahead. The inevitable crash was bad enough, never mind the mayhem sure to follow. Of course the Consensus had always been on the cards, anyone could have anticipated that. Predictive algorithms and thought control were in there from the start. But what sleepwalker pays attention? Awake or sleeping, humans of the 21st century were lemmings swept along in

a mass movement of history, heading for a digital rift, on the other side of which, the video warned, was the wide embrace of the Universal Pantecnicon, from which there would be no escape. But forewarned was forearmed.

Even though this prospective new world-in waiting didn't sound that much different from the one I was in, I mentally shrugged, thought what the hell, and did as I was told. Yes, I admit it, by a fucking video. Sometimes I thought I was stupid. But persevered none the less. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be typing this on my clanky pre-digital, pre-electric, manual typewriter on purloined paper removed ream by ream from a basement store of the newspaper where I was once employed.

They say opportunity knocks. I actually heard it when the directive from the top landed on my desk. That was my golden chance, my one shot to get the golden boot. I stood on my rights, refused to have a smart micro-bead implanted in my wrist. Oh yea, my line manager explained it was a cost-saving measure which gave extra security in the workplace, meant improved disabled access, and kept everyone safe. But not for me waving my fist to open doors like my colleagues, who all were chipped with scarcely a bleat of protest. The sheep. Some older rams who had been journalists as long as I had even claimed to like it. After digging in my heels, acting a storm, citing stress and arguing constructive

dismissal, I accepted an enhanced redundancy package with, if not grace exactly, at least a po face. Yea, well I was into method acting, had been since understudying the lead in an amateur production of *Peer Gynt*.

Next day, nothing better to do but browse in a fishing tackle shop, scanning the small ads in the *Anglers Mart*, an obscure journal with a reputation for an eclectic mix of stuff for sale. This time it wasn't a knock I heard, but a 'ching'. Like at the Big Hitter in a showground, when the man with the large mallet strikes down, and a vivid red line shoots up the glass tube of the tall brass measuring column and pings a large round bell at the top. Yes, my head ringing, that red-lined column my spine, tingling in recognition. Seeing what I must do. A cold intent taking over, that instant.

Three days later, in No.1 The Square, East Rockhaven, I laid all of £8000 in cash before the Trustees. The two lawyers, the same Tribble and McDoubtable on the polished brass plate by the doors, though surprised at the bundles of different denomination *paper* banknotes conjured from my fishing satchel – note: *old paper*, still legal tender then, not the new cursed plastic that antediluvian types particularly loathed – accepted my offer with alacrity, only too glad to dispose of the croft on remote Goat Island, and wind up the wearisome estate of the deceased fisherman.

Goat Island turned out to be not remote at all. Nor were there any goats. A long-eroded causeway between the narrows to the mainland was partly exposed at low tide. Easy enough to get there, but not to get back till the next low tide, as I discovered when I saw the waves neatly folding over the causeway behind me – reminding me of the video that warned a precursor to the main event would be when the tide got out of sync along unspecified coastlines around the globe. So there it was, another confirmation. Not that I needed one, having crossed my personal rubicon on arrival on my island, though the sight did dispel some final doubts as to whether I had made the right decision.

At the end of the causeway stood an imposing fence, about ten feet high, its mesh fluttering with tufts of wool and strands of sea wrack in the wind. Nailed to a weathered fence post was a large faded yellow and black warning sign: *Danger Keep Out – Poisoned Ground*. Crawling through a gaping rent in the rusting fence, I decided to leave the sign where it was, knowing that nothing I could dream up could so succinctly express my concerns about the world I was desperate to leave behind – or be so effective at keeping out the curious.

A narrow path through thick marram grass led up a steep bank to a small croft house, the rough stones of which showed evidence of whitewash. Surprisingly, given the weight of moss and

lichen on the low thatched roof, inside, the croft was viable. The floor was beaten earth, dry below roof beams blackened by generations burning peat in the open fireplace, and chinky wee windows let in some light. It was cosy. In a corner, a rack for drying fish. Walls lined with austere plain wooden boards that had seen no paint, varnish, nor chemical. Just the salt of the air, animals in for the winter – for warmth if not for company. A simple life, just what I wanted. Needed.

The property was without electricity, which was a plus in the new scheme of things. From the wee byre at the back of the croft, a path led down between low gnarled trees to a little cove, with a slipway and a boatshed of slatted planks, weathered but still holding up. Inside, a rowing boat which was sound as a pound, with good lines and long oars, worn at the grip. No one else on the small island, the only signs of occupation some concrete abutments at the north point, overlooking the Sound – all of it mine, until I swapped my Swiss wrist watch for a tousled sheep dog named Browser from a farmer on the Mainland, whereupon it became his to share.

After the farmer and I had done the deal we retired to the snug of a nearby pub, my watch on his wrist, his dog at my side. Browser's head rested on my knee for the crisps I was slipping him under the table. I was buying and we were onto our second pint

and whisky chaser, when the farmer took another puff on his woodbine cigarette, leaned in, and motioned me closer over the table, waving away the smoke with a big callused hand.

‘You’ll be wondering,’ he breathed, when our heads were near touching, in the manner of countrymen of that coast imparting confidences. ‘Why when it is named after them there are nae goats on yer wee island, eh?’

I nodded. ‘The question had crossed my mind.’

‘That’s because in the nineteen fifties they were a’ exterminated.’ He grinned, glad to be the bearer of bad news, I thought. ‘Poisoned, every last one of them.’

‘And why was that?’ I asked, suspecting I already knew the answer.

‘The military were testin’ a deadly nerve gas to drop on the North o’ the Korean peninsular where they get short summers and long winters, like we hae here. First they done the goats. Then they put sheep on the island and done them too. My faither said, birds would’nae touch the corpses, which never rotted, and lay about the island for months before men wi’ masks and breathing equipment took them away in covered lorries. Twa times the men came, first for the sheep and then the goats. Never a wurd o’ explanation from the big man in charge whit the poison was.’ He smiled, knowingly, ‘The island ye ken was supposed tae hae been decontaminated

years ago, but some in the town claim they can still see the yellow gas creepin' ower it on days like this when there's nae wind. Whitever the truth o' that, nae one frae aroond here will gang near it.'

He dipped his head, 'Except of course for Daft Archie. Ye ken, the auld fisherman, who bided there afore you. Imagine it, all thae years alane in that wee croft just because he couldnae abide the sharp tongue of his wee wifey ashore.' He shook his head sadly at Daft Archie's evident lack of mettle.

'Sounds like he made the smart choice.'

'Writer are ye?'

'How did you guess?'

'Ye hae that look about ye.'

'I had hoped you'd take me for daft fisherman too.'

'Nae chance of that.' The farmer laughed, stubbing out his untipped cigarette in the ashtray between us.

'Pity,' I said, looking up from the ashtray and the smoking stub I suddenly craved, having recently given up the habit.

'So who dae ye write for?' he said, coming up with the question I invariably get asked in pubs, when the conversationalist opposite works out I'm a journalist.

'These days,' I said, with a shrug, wishing he'd step off the subject, 'no one in particular.'

‘What?’ The farmer chuckled, ‘A sharp-eyed fellae like ye, gettin’ a hale island, on this stretch o’ the coast for the price o’ tumble-doon croft in the hills? Allow me to say,’ he said, smiling darkly, ‘I rather doot that, my friend.’

Well, I rather doubted he was my friend, but wasn’t troubled. He’d have his suspicions, but of what exactly? As far as he was concerned, he’d got the better of me in a deal. He supposed I was writing a book. That was his only angle.

Not that I had any particularly, hidden away on my wee island. What did I care if it was contaminated or not, the important question was how long anyone had, with the way things were going in the world. But then, I was past worrying about that. For the first time for years with nothing to case, no girlfriend, no calls, no mail, I forgot to be unhappy. With my only distraction a dog, skills I never knew I had came to the fore.

I remembered tradesman I had watched and admired for their craft and imagined I was them. It worked. I was a multitude, method acting in my isolation. *We* made a workshop of the byre, assembled tools and bought a pedal-powered short-wave radio to follow developments in the world beyond and keep fit. *We* even found the time to clear the thicket of brambles behind the concrete abutments, on the north point of *our* island, overlooking the Sound. Once the brambles finally were piled to the side, *we* contemplated a

metal ring in the middle of a paved area. We then gripped the ring, heaved the slab aside, opened the pressurised hatch below that. Followed steps down into a small, perfectly dry chamber, which was cone-shaped and tiered with glass shelves.

There was a stainless-steel table under a safety notice, which in itself was a story, warning of the hazards of mixing dangerous chemicals. A white laboratory coat hung from a hook under the stairs. The chamber was entirely dry, no dust, no marks anywhere except for a chalk scrawl on one wall: *DF sterilised and sealed, by Order.*

Dropping the multitude for the moment, I decided the chamber was the perfect place to stash a time capsule of books, journals and periodicals, which might include a personal contribution, if I wrote anything worthy of appending to the collection. In the meantime, however, my horizons were strictly short-term. And anyway, I rather doubted whether there would be anyone around in the distant future, far less anyone capable of reading what they found. Save the day, I thought. When it rains, and I had nothing else to do. Maybe then.

All summer long, I uncrated supplies brought from the city, filled the larder with tins and dried food. I was careful not to attract attention whenever I arrived with my boxes of books and sundries

at the railway station of the nearby coastal town, which I will call Rockhaven, though that is not its name, where my little boat was sandwiched between the bigger boats in the small harbour.

I had returned to the City for one last load when the Crash came.

There was a predictable interregnum of carnage, but I had a second-best-laid contingency plan – a bicycle in a hedge and a stashed set of master keys to an out-of-the-way museum dedicated to the Age of Steam. It was a long shot, but I couldn't think of a better place to hide while I waited to see if my plan would pan-out.

There was no watchman, I was undisturbed for three days, until awoken by an army convoy which rolled in bringing engineers and a lorry load of coal to get the Flying Northman going again. The locomotive was lubricated in its many parts, a cow-catcher was welded at the front, and coal shovelled into the wagon behind the engine.

I made myself scarce, but not before filching one of the name badges stacked on the platform with goods to be loaded onto the train. There was just one set of rails leading out of museum, but half a mile ahead, by the signalman's box, the rails branched. One line turned south, towards the coast, the other north.

Already I suspected the destination, and when the civil servants arrived in another convoy, I mingled, in my crumpled suit

worn since I stole out of the City, as they crowded into the hanger. Most were dishevelled some half-dressed, still wearing their pyjama bottoms, jackets buttoned wrong, others with spectacles missing a lens, one portly gentleman, seemed to be squinting through his cracked monocle, at an unusual suspect next to him – me, shirt flapping, one suit leg tucked into a sock.

I needn't have worried. In the chaos of departure, my name badge was improperly scanned as I was hurried through the ID check and settled into the one empty seat by the guard's van at the back of the train. Last on, after a commotion on the platform, the civil servant who had lost his name badge was hastily ushered on board.

Ahead, beyond the platform, the engine shed's huge wooden doors swung open, the whistle sounded, and with a belch of black smoke, the last surviving *Behemoth* of the Steam Age shunted forwards, after more than half a century dead on rails. Beyond my window now, a ramshackle picket fence, listing telegraph poles from another era, one riveted with a 1/40 gradient sign registering the long incline to the junction up ahead. At the signal box, a white wooden arm was raised, a rusting, enamelled metal flag extended. Green to go.

Now, just as long as that young soldier in the box doesn't muddle his lefts and rights, I thought, watching him working the

levers, switching the tracks. *Trust in the Lord*, I breathed, a believer in Providence again, as the clanking train swung slowly right and joined the Great Northern Line that ran the length of the country.

Yes, I had no doubt, the civil servants and their precious files were headed three quarters of the way up the eight hundred long line to the Emergency National Command Centre. Its existence had been denied for years, but an open secret among journalists. A honeycomb of subterranean bunkers to house the Spymasters of GCHQ, the top brass, military, and of course these civil servants, who I forgot to mention, were all male.

Excavated by giant tunnelling machines, and under a famous mountain, the secret command centre was close to a remote railway station equally famous among climbers – the same mountain railway station capitalised in important red letters on the name badges hung on lanyards around the necks of all but the last civil servants on board, who was badgeless and nameless, because I was wearing his.

The mountain was called Geárr Eanchainn, which means hare-brained in the old tongue. Make of that what you will, it seemed apt, given the dishevelled state of the top civil servants, the cream of the service, Permanent Prunes to the Treasury, Mandarins peeled from the Foreign Office, sour faced Lemons squeezed from the Home Office, half-cut Pineapples from the Ministry of Defence –

the civil servants in question all fruits of one description or another, all blathering, all clutching what they'd managed to gather up in the pandemonium of roused departure.

They were crammed into the old Pullman carriage once reserved for royalty with lower types that before they wouldn't have given the time of day – far less rub shoulders with - truffle hounds from the cranks bureau at GCHQ, scuttlebutts from the bottom drawers of the Cabinet Office, and from a crypt of the new Ministry of Cryptography, spooks - undercover, even here, but fooling no one all the same. And they knew it, tucked away in their corners. Like me, *not* checking them *not* checking me out. All miserable specimens of their trade. I noted sourly, matching the look on one dark face watching from behind a tall wooden box, which he never took his hands off – much the same expression as worn by the other watchers. Match mood to mood, pair posture, ape positive, mirror negatives, know that like and alike is the best shield. A martial arts master told me that once, and I put it to practice then. Method acting, it's a great resource.

In character, tucked away in my corner, a crypto-spook, so deep as to be unfathomable. I *was* one of them. Glancing around, I saw little reason to hope order would anytime soon be restored in the country given the chaos in the packed carriage, and the portentous atmosphere of national breakdown emanating from all

and sundry. Yes, I was safe enough for the time being, at least until that last bend before Rockhaven Station.

Through the carriage window, a dusk sky streaked every lurid colour, flaring with the solar storm in the magnetosphere beyond. Out in deep space (which now seemed apparent, as if in the last few days the atmosphere had dramatically thinned), faint fireworks burst and faded. Closer too, streaking lights, zigzagging and looping, dipping near to the horizon of hills.

Lowering my gaze below the silhouetted hills, I solemnly regarded the downed pylons and burning farmhouses of the Yorkshire Dales. There would be mobs out here, just like in the City. Perhaps, behind that approaching line of trees, yokels in tractors wielding pitchforks. There was a lot of agricultural equipment in the country. I imagined the damage a deranged combine harvester lurking by the tracks could do, grateful for that cow-catcher out front. Thinking ahead, surely the Flying Northman would have to slow down on the long bend that skirts the sea cliff before Rockhaven Station, otherwise it might join the ill-fated 11.45 mail train from Euston, derailed, tumbled into the raging waves with all on board the night of the great storm of 1922.

A snuffle, relative to the ongoing catastrophe, I reflected, glancing back up at the lurid sky and the plasma flares. This thundering Iron Horse from another era, probably the only train still

working on the whole railway network, wasn't going to stop until it got the civil servants to their mountain destination. Slow or not, at the bend I would have to jump. On one side of the tracks was the cliff, on the other a narrow bank above a precipitous drop to the rocky seashore. If the tide was in, I might get lucky, hit a pool and not the rocks, of which there were plenty in Rockhaven and along that stretch of the coast.

But, anticipating just such a scenario, I'd paced the railway line by the cliff, and there was a stretch about twenty feet or so where the banking was probably wide enough before it dropped to the sea. I didn't like that word '*probably*'. It had come up a lot in the video. *Probably* this, *probably* that. But probably is not *sure*. Only hope can supply that when it has wings. Believe in hope and destiny, that's what I kept telling myself, and anyway someone's going to have to set the record straight after all this, not like the victors – if there are any.

I made it back to find Browser wagging his tail and very thin. Millions died as I pedalled on my new fitness regime, spooning food from cans. The storm in the heavens faded, the bloody sun assumed a lighter hue of red, but then the rains started. Even Browser didn't want to go out and was sad. I was more than that,

and desperate for information, *anything* – the state of the world was too far gone for the News.

I had cycled approaching fifty thousand miles when, weary of the clamouring lone voices, I switched off the radio. An interregnum of silence and cycling followed in which *probably* billions died. Then the new satellites went up, or so I supposed. Now there is only acceptable speech, no fake facts, no Jihad, no talk of Big Pharma, no reptilian or paedophile conspiracy, no real dialogue, just the Consensus, its corrected alphabet, redacted dictionaries, and the new norms enforced by the new global security agency, Psicops, and their smart brain scanners, which I gather are installed in every school, street corner and home, in those rebuilding towns and cities that escaped complete devastation.

All is normal in the post-human world out there, where the populations no doubt are chipped and monitored 24/7. And happy, or so it is reported in the broadcasts I get on the short-wave. That is whenever I pedal, which isn't much these days because there's plenty to do, except when it rains for weeks, which it does more often than not. I did write an account of the disaster, though whether it is worth leaving for a post-human to find is questionable at best, for the ramifications of what has happened are still too vast to be comprehended by any individual brain, far less constrained

within the margins of a manuscript of what I estimate to be seven hundred thousand words – give or take. All that precious paper – including the bunched pages I threw across the room, when I wrote in the evening, and collected in the morning to light the fire – eleven reams before I was finished. I wonder what that is worth in the post-human world.

The attempt seems to have been pointless now, even though there are chapters coherently laying out the chains of compromises and unforeseen consequences which led to disaster. Considering the longer passages of incoherent ravings, which still needed to be excised, I wondered if I had been more influenced than I had thought by the preachers on the short-waveband, ranting in the background as I thrashed the keys on the old Remington Standard. The first year after the Crash most voices pronounced about God and retribution, and though other, more reasonable voices did intrude, too soon they grew faint and disappeared into the static.

But now even the hell preachers are long gone. Any voices from before that do remain are drowned out by interference, which seems targeted. I never broadcast, never have, though this short-wave radio is a quality rig. I have always considered it too dangerous. It would only take one signal to be detected. However

there comes a time for everything, so perhaps when *mine* is about to run out, I will get over my reluctance.

Despite surface differences, the new voices have a uniform tinny quality. Robot or post-human? Truth to tell, I can't be bothered, because the message always ends the same. Run rabbit run, there is nowhere to hide. No burrow so convoluted, no fog so thick. No wall so high. No ocean so wide. No chasm so deep. The post-human is coming to get you. The post-human is close. The post-human is here. The post-human is *you*.

But I didn't pay much attention to those voices. Usually shouting 'Boring boring boring' was enough to make them recede into the background. Truth to tell I wanted no more radio silence, because I needed to hear a lone voice somewhere out there in the darkness, bearing witness to terrible events, speaking things I feared to utter on the airwaves. Another cast-away, mirroring my solitary existence – alone again after poor Browser was swept off in a recent storm, how I miss him. Me in my croft, the *other* isolationist sailing the sea in his or her coracle, pedalling the short-wave.

One day, maybe when the spring high tide was running the narrows, and the moon was full, maybe we'd bump into each other down in the cove by where the boat shed was before it drifted away on the rising sea with Browser barking plaintively from the wooden

staging. Before my island home was *completely* washed away, start a revolution, it takes two. One is never enough. Yes, it's never too late, as long as there is hope, and hope has wings.

THE SUCCESSORS

Fast forwards two hundred and twenty years, to a conversation in a secure room in lockdown, deep under a mountain ...

'This is the third time,' No.1 observed, dryly.

'Well, 021 must have got lucky,' No.3 blustered. 'Perhaps it was an inside job? Either way, we'll get him.'

'We better had.' No.1's gimlet eyes glittered in the glow of the lamp casting a pool of light on the desktop between them. 'We can't afford not to when there is so much at stake.'

'No need to remind me.' No.3 looked around the safe room where they had their secret confabs, and at blank walls which seemed to lean in. He saw the phosphorescence was back, ghosting metal surfaces, worming dim corners, and made a mental note to have the room scrubbed by the Urmops at the start of their next shift.