

Tweed

By Tom Jenney

Illustrations by Leonardo

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This story will be part of the second edition of the *American Futures* story collection. The three volumes of the first edition of *American Futures* are available in Kindle and paperback at Amazon.

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To integrate “Tweed” into the rest of the collection in the first edition, you can add it mentally to the Paleo-Conservative section in Volume 2 and use the following probabilities for the story outcomes: “Middle-Earth” (01-30), “A City upon a Hill” (31-70), “Tweed” (71-98), and “The Wah” (99-00).

THE PERMANENT THINGS.

The transcendent things.

Those are the only things that matter.

How else could it be? How did the true moderns do it? How could anyone truly love a world that was constantly changing? Could anyone embrace or celebrate the widening gyre of linguistic and cultural detritus? According to one statistic, in one recent year the world had produced 200 zettabytes of data. A zettabyte was a trillion gigabytes. In a single day, the internet and generative AI and eight billion babbling humans were churning out more information – and far less truth – than civilization had produced in 10,000 years. One would have to be a genius to comprehend even a tiny fraction of it. One would have to be a madman to embrace or celebrate it.

At least the Nietzscheans who peered into their abyss had a simplistic reduction: all was Will to Power. And their abyss – as they imagined it – contained nothing. Better an empty abyss than the swirling vortex of cacophonies of the modern world. Of course, the Nietzscheans deceived themselves. Their abyss was not really empty. Like everything in this sublunary realm, it was filled with the screamed and whispered lies of the devil, their father. (“When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.”)

In your life, you have endeavored to find and hold onto that fixed central axis of Truth, Beauty, and Virtue, around which everything else revolves.

You will hear the Falconer and fly to Him. The Centre *will* hold, because it is the only thing that is real. You will do your best to stand athwart history, even though you know it is almost pointless to yell Stop!

As it turns out, you got a chance – thanks to the extraterrestrial aliens who abducted you – to press a kind of Stop button. It was more of a Slow Down button. When the opportunity presented itself, you did press the button.



We're going to backtrack now and go into the past tense. We'll tell about your life before the alien abduction, and what your life was like during the first decade after you chose to press the Stop button. Or the Slow Down button. Or whatever it was.

YOUR PARENTS WERE from old New England stock and had grown up among the horse farms and boarding schools of rural Connecticut, but graduate school and a microchip company had brought them to the modernity and sprawl of Phoenix. Within Phoenix, though, they had found something of a sheltered enclave in which to raise you and your little sister Eliza. When the Route 51 freeway had been built, the locals had cursed it as a modern monstrosity that would wreck everything. But ironically, the freeway had closed off your neighborhood on three sides, with limited access from the Camelback Corridor to the south. Between the freeway, the canal, and 24th Street to the east, your neighborhood was limited to residential traffic. It was full of old-fashioned ranch-style houses where families had tire swings hanging from trees in their front yards and where kids could roam freely within the limits of the enclave.

Because of the isolation of the enclave and the proximity of a police station, Granada Park and the nearby section of the canal were safe to explore. When you got older, you could cross Lincoln Drive and wander the desert in the Phoenix Mountain Park. The old folks called the black pinnacle Squaw Peak, and the progressives had renamed it Piestewa Peak. But your parents raised you on Tolkien, so your family called it The Lonely Mountain.

Your parents were traditionalists and Anglophiles who had met during a college year abroad in Oxford. They had been Episcopalians before you were born, and when you were very small. But they left when the Episcopal Church became too progressive – specifically, when it began ordaining and marrying homosexuals. Providentially, there was a small Anglican church tucked away in your neighborhood, and its numbers swelled with Episcopal refugees. (Occasionally, your family attended services at a Greek Orthodox church in the neighborhood, where you could see the parading of the icons and other ancient rites.)

Inspired by their Anglophilia, your parents named you George Lewis. (Your surname was Burgess.) They named you George after the patron saint of England. They named you Lewis after C.S. Lewis. Most of your friends and family knew you as “G.L.” You were homeschooled through the 8th grade, and then enrolled in a crypto-Catholic Great Books charter school in the Arcadia neighborhood. When you visited the school, your parents were charmed by a fuddy-duddy headmistress who emphasized the school’s classical liberal arts education and its efforts to cleanse the student body of modern influences. (She told your parents that the school didn’t do “EN-may.” Your parents didn’t know what “EN-may” was, but you knew she was referring to Anime. The school was so traditionalist that its staff didn’t even bother to learn how to pronounce the names of modern cultural phenomena.)

You and your high school friends were rebels, but in a very traditionalist way. On weekends, a half dozen of you would hike into a corner of the

Mountain Park (“The Wasteland”) with bottles of wine and pipe tobacco hidden in your backpacks. As the sun set, you would recite *Prufrock* and the St. Crispin’s Day speech and other classic texts from memory. As the night progressed, you and your friends would shout the lines louder and louder into the dark emptiness under the sparse stars.

Your parents sanctioned these rebellions. If you came home before midnight and were not too intoxicated, your dad would serve you a half measure of peaty single malt. He disapproved of smoking, in general, but would ask what blend of “pipe-weed” you and your friends had smoked. His concern was that you knew what you were smoking, and that it was a quality product.

As you sipped on Scotch, your dad would usually take a dig at Gen Z. He would ask if your male friends were still male, or if any had transitioned. Or he would ask for your opinions on the latest “electronic crap” that called itself music. He hated most music made after about 1950 but would admit with chagrin that he had a soft spot for yacht rock. You would send him into fits of laughter by finding classical allusions in the lines of modern songs. For example, in your analysis of Cherub’s “Doses and Mimosas,” you would argue with a straight face that the “high class ass that’s too hard to pass” referred to the sirens who attempted to lure Odysseus and his crew onto the rocks and that the “punk ass fucks that just want to talk shit” were Penelope’s suitors in Ithaca. Cherub had clearly improved upon Homer by putting the pithy phrase, “Oh yeah I hate you too” into the mouths of Odysseus and Telemachus when they murdered the suitors.

In class, you were well-behaved, and kept your rebellions subtle. One of the teachers of your Socratic lit courses was hard of hearing. In response to a student's statement, you would sometimes start off, "And should I then presume...?" In response, three or four other boys in the room would respond, inaudible to the teacher, "And how should I begin?" If you made a lame comment about a text, you could hear one of your friends say, "Is it perfume from a dress..." and another would answer, "That makes me so digress?"

Although you and your friends rarely dated in high school, each had to identify a Beatrice (pronounced the Italian way, Bay-ah-TREE-chay) or a Penelope – or at the very least, a Dulcinea – to love, "pure and chaste from afar." You wrote poems to honor your Beatrices. Before one of you shared a poem he had written, everyone made solemn vows to never reveal the poem or its contents to the Beatrice until the author had "shuffled off this mortal coil." The poems were policed for strict chastity. Nothing could exceed the boundaries set by Eliot: "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)"

Your Beatrice, who transferred to the school in your sophomore year, was Colleen McDaniel. She was your "black-Irish Beatrice." You imagined she was the Edith to your Tolkien – a woman you would adore and serve faithfully until death did you part. She was truly beautiful, in fact, but your poems focused on what your friends considered to be her flaws. For example, you composed sonnets to her freckles.

Every great lover had to have his nemesis, and your buddy Philip took on that role. He would adopt the posture of an English chauvinist and refer to Colleen as your “bogtrotter Beatrice” (her name pronounced in standard English, rather than Italian). In response, you would defend the honor of the “ancient and storied Irish” against his English bigotry. In the lunchroom one Friday in junior year, he dared to suggest that she perhaps had too many freckles.

“This is intolerable, Philip. You have gone over the top, Old Sport.”

“Have I gone... *beyond the Pale*? I dare say *you* have, Old Sport.”

“You know what this means, Old Sport.”

“Pistols at dawn, I suppose?”

“Indeed. Pistols at dawn.”

You chose seconds and made plans for the following morning. Percy’s uncle had fake dueling pistols, so it was agreed that Percy would be the referee. (His name was really Jaden, but by consensus, the group had decided that Percy was more masculine, less tainted by Gen Z androgyny.)

Eight of you met in the Mountain Park at dawn. Everyone wore poet shirts (or pirate shirts) and most of you had long button-coats. Percy opened a suitably ornate box with two pistols wedged into red velvet. You and the witnesses had a long argument about who should be the first to choose a

pistol, citing various points of the *Code Duello*, with digressions about whether the copy of the 1777 *Irish Code Duello* you had brought should be admissible.

At last, Percy commanded Philip to “get on with it” and choose a pistol. You took the other pistol and marched twenty paces. When Percy called for the turn, you made a show of pointing your pistol at a low cactus to your side. You shouted “Bang!” Philip pointed his pistol at you and said “Bang!” You fell to the ground and began going through theatrical death throes, calling out Colleen’s name and reciting the best lines from your poems to her.

Philip rushed to your side. At first, he mourned the loss of his “bosom friend” and “boon companion” to the “vagaries of cruel fate.” Then he accused you of *deloping* (discharging your pistol into the ground). Even under the *Irish Code*, the act was not allowed. It was an offense against his honor.

“If only you were not already dying, dearest Georgie, I would challenge you to a new duel.”

“I would not deny you an opportunity for satisfaction, Old Sport.”

“Perhaps you could fire the pistol from your position on the ground? That would make things much more sporting for me. I am by far the better shot, of course.”

After some deliberation, Percy declared that there would be a second duel. You remained on the ground, and Philip paced away. When you said “Bang,” Philip clutched his breast, staggered over to where you were, and collapsed to the ground. In your combined death throes, you and Philip declared your eternal brotherly love to each other, like “David and Jonathan,” but then argued who was David and who was Jonathan. Percy and the others warned you not to go “full Billy Budd” or – God forbid – “Jack and Ennis.”



At some point, Percy declared that you were both dead and that the dispute had been resolved completely: Colleen was a beauty who could inspire the greatest poets, but as a matter of objective fact, she had too many freckles. Another friend, Alonzo, declared that Colleen was the Platonic form of an otherwise beautiful girl who had too many freckles. In response, you and Philip raised your pistols, pretended that they were full auto, and went “bap-bap-bap-bap-bap,” mowing down Percy and Alonzo and the others, who died in contortions worthy of Peckinpah. When everyone was dead, you packed up the pistols and hiked down to the Biltmore Fashion Park to have breakfast.

Although you made relentless fun of the fuddy-duddy professors at the school, you were steadily becoming a traditionalist. You worked hard at Latin and Greek, and immersed yourself in Dante, Milton, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky. You were actively delving for what was deepest and best in human culture. You had less and less in common with the kids in the outside world – and not just the kids at “Camelcrack” High, who dressed and acted like gangsters. Even the kids in the neighborhood, the kids you used to roam with in the enclave.

Most importantly, you were becoming a Christian. You had gone to your Anglican parish almost every Sunday of your life, and had been confirmed, but you needed a journey “there and back again.” In Eliot’s formulation, you needed explorations that would allow you to arrive where you started and “know the place for the first time.”

The decisive text was Augustine's *Confessions*, which you read your senior year. Through Augustine, you were able to explore vicariously some youthful adventures in pleasure-seeking. But you wanted some of the real thing. During your senior year, you took what you thought of as "field trips."

As decadent as American culture was, there were no actual gladiatorial contests to watch. No bloody fights to the death of the kind that the young Augustine enjoyed and later swore off. Instead, you and Alonzo went with his dad to a mixed martial arts fight at an arena on the far west side. Most of the people in the stands were good-natured meatheads in t-shirts who ate overpriced hot dogs and debated the strategies and tactics of the fighters in the cage. They especially appreciated the techniques of ground grappling.

At some point, you noticed a new spectator standing in a nearby section that was mostly empty. He looked like a Phoenix Everyman, standing with a plastic beer bottle. He was wiry and deeply tanned, like a construction worker. Everybody in the place was loud, but he was incredibly loud. And angry. He had no patience for the grappling. He yelled at the fighters to GET OFF THE FUCKING GROUND. When the fighters were separated by the ref and went back to sparring on their feet, he commanded one of the fighters (you couldn't tell which one) to KICK HIM IN THE HEAD and SMASH HIS SKULL. When the fighters went to the ground and one looked like he was getting a choke hold on the other, the yelling guy told the dominant fighter to FUCK HIS SOUL.

It was by far the most demonic thing you had ever seen. It was purely distilled hatred, directed at human beings. You and Alonzo watched the end

of the bout in nervous silence. Before the next bout began, Alonzo's dad suggested that you might want to go home to "work on those big papers you have coming up." The yelling guy had gone elsewhere, but you and Alonzo agreed that it was time to leave. Alonzo and his dad were Catholic. On the way home, they discussed whether the yelling guy was possessed or whether he/it might have been an actual demon, given that he/it had appeared and disappeared mysteriously. You wondered if there were similar characters in the stands of the Roman arenas, or if Roman decorum ruled out such displays. Maybe the demons had been satisfied with the fact that human beings were killing each other, and that other humans had numbed their consciences to the point where they could watch the killing as a spectator sport. When you got home, you went to your room, opened the Book of Common Prayer, and recited prayers until you fell asleep.

Your field trips for the sexual side of Augustinian pleasure-seeking were much more extensive. You were too young to get into a strip club, and the women pictured on the signs for those places seemed too obviously tawdry, in a way that insulted the intellect. But modern movies were saturated with sex – especially once you strayed from the realms of Harry Potter, Middle Earth, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In your senior year, you had some income from a part-time tutoring gig, and your parents let you borrow one of their cars to go out with your friends. You often went to matinee movies and then discussed them over coffee. Sometimes, you deliberately set out to see arty movies, and there were some good ones that year, such as "Loving Vincent." And there were action movies that rose to the level of arty, such as "Dunkirk" and "Blade Runner 2049." But most movies – even the serious ones – were drenched in sex.

The topic of masturbation never came up in your family or your church. Among your friends, it was a subject of jokes – but the subtler and more intellectual the joke, the better. (For example, Percy would always get laughs by suggesting of someone, “He strikes me as a Samuel Pepys.”) You found nocturnal emissions and deliberate wanks to be messy and disgusting. When the urge became unbearable, you got it over with as quickly as you could. You tried to think of Colleen in your brief fantasies, on the theory that if she was your imaginary wife, it was less like adultery under the high standard set in Matthew 5:28. But the images of women from movies had a way of invading your thoughts. To avoid the heaviest sexual content, you began reading the content reviews at CommonSenseMedia.org. Although the reviews skewed left politically, they were good guides. And sometimes, you deliberately arrived at the theater late enough to miss most of the salacious previews.

Through Augustine’s neo-Platonists and Manicheans – and through other reading in school and at home – you were able to sample alternative philosophies and theologies. The chaotic striving of the Greek gods. The endless multiplication of the Hindu gods. The nothingness of Buddhism. The hopeless courage and discipline of the Stoics. The mad Dionysian courage of Nietzsche. The random and meaningless universe of the Darwinian materialists.

In the end, you kept coming back to Augustine’s famous prayer: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless, until it rests in you.*

You wanted to stay close to your family for college, so you went to ASU, where you enrolled in the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (which had a different name at the time). The curriculum was heavy on classical thinkers, the *Federalist Papers*, Irving Babbitt, and Russell Kirk. The school was funded partly by special appropriations by Governor Ducey and the conservatives in the state Legislature, but the school was careful to genuflect to the altars of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (for example, including Islamic and Chinese works in the syllabi for some of the courses on Western thought). You also minored in Latin and Greek, which you had begun studying in high school.

Covid meant that your last two years of college were mostly online. You hated it, even though your seminar profs worked hard to salvage some of the spontaneity in their Socratic seminars. Before Covid, you had begun wearing oxfords and tweed sport coats as your uniform. Even though many students “attended” the online classes in their pajamas or t-shirts, you made a point of showering every morning and wearing your tweed for the classes. The feeling that you had been cheated out of two years of a real college experience was a big motivation for going on to graduate school.

With everyone cooped up at home, you and your dad fixed up the old horse shed in the northeast corner of your family’s acre lot and turned it into a bungalow with a bedroom and study for you. You also installed a kitchenette in the bungalow, so you wouldn’t have to interrupt your studies to go into the main house for breakfast or lunch. Your dad’s eventual plan was to rent it out on AirBnB (though the zoning rules required rentals to have a separate driveway).

Eliza was still in high school (the same school you went to) and was envious that you had your own separate bungalow. She liked to do her homework in the study with you. She was naturally very chatty, but you insisted on having total silence when you worked. You and Eliza did talk a lot when you took breaks. You would sit outside on the little porch and smoke your pipe. Sometimes you read your poems to her. She said she liked the poems, but she wanted you to write stories, like Tolkien and Lewis. She was always asking you about Philip, who was getting an MBA and had started going to your church occasionally. Her plan was to get married to Philip. They would be rich and would support your writing until you were successful. After every conversation, Eliza would make you swear not to tell Philip.

FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL, you commuted twice a week to the University of Arizona to work on a Master's degree in Library and Information Science and also worked on a graduate certificate in Medieval Studies at ASU. In Tucson (which ASU students called the "Dirty T"), you began running into Colleen, who was getting a graduate degree in microbiology.

The first time was a hot September day, and you were loitering at the café in the bookstore before trekking across campus to your afternoon class.

Colleen got into the queue to get a drink. She had cut her long black hair into a modish bob. She still had freckles, but no pimples. She was still beautiful, but beautiful in a curvy, womanish way, not girlish. She noticed you, smiled, waved, and stepped out of the line. You were a little nervous, but you had dramatic irony on your side: she had no idea that you had

thought about her every day of high school and had written dozens of poems to her. She didn't know that you had died in a sunrise duel in the desert, fighting for her honor. The inside joke gave you a confident edge. (You also thought a quick prayer, asking the Lord for courage and the right words.)

After some chit-chat about what you were studying, you defaulted to First Things. What else was there? You had to find out if she was a serious person and if you should continue to invest any vague hopes in her.

You knew her family was Catholic, so you asked if she went to Mass in Tucson. She said that her family had “fallen out” with the Church. There were lots of reasons, but the final straw had been a much-publicized scandal in which the local bishop had invalidated thousands of baptisms conducted by her parish priest – including her own. The issue was that the priest had said, “*We* baptize you in the name of the Father...” instead of “*I* baptize you in the name of the Father...” Her parents were cradle Catholics. They had often gone through the motions and tolerated the Church's legalism, but the invalidation of Colleen's baptism struck them as absurd and extreme. They still had their brand loyalty, so they didn't go to any other churches. Instead, they stopped going to church altogether.

That was your opening. You told her that your family went to an Anglican church, which was “Catholic Lite” and not as legalistic. You suggested that sometime when she was at home, her family should attend a service with you. You suggested that she would like Father Robert, who had been pastor the whole time you were growing up.

You had asked Colleen on a date, but it was a perfectly disguised ask. It was your duty to ask! How could you *not* ask? (The Lord really does provide a person with the right words!)

You traded contacts and talked for a while about some of the personalities from your high school. After that, you would see her once or twice a week on the campus and you would wave to each other. Then, on the second Sunday of Advent, when you and Eliza were serving as ushers at your church, Colleen and her parents showed up. She was wearing a pretty but modest white dress. A very churchy dress. You had never told Eliza anything about Colleen, but she gave you knowing looks from across the narthex. Girls knew these things.

Colleen's parents were nice, and her dad had a good sense of humor. While you were chatting, your parents walked up and you introduced everybody. Colleen's dad asked your dad if they would have to pray to Henry the Eighth. Your dad said that the Anglican Church had discontinued that practice a few years earlier, but that divorce was a key sacrament of the church. If they wanted to join, they would have to get divorced. Then they could remarry each other. They could do it the same day, to minimize the inconvenience. Colleen's family liked Father Robert and the church and began attending frequently.

The weekend after New Year's, Colleen was back in town again, and you went on your first real date, to see *The Banshees of Inisherin*. (Looking back, you saw that it was part of a pattern of Irish things creeping into your

existence.) Afterwards, you got beers at an upscale lounge in the Esplanade and talked about the madness of Colm Doherty. Colleen was sympathetic to his efforts to achieve greatness and was surprised by how dark the story turned. For you, it was a predictable (but enjoyable) tragedy. Artists who deliberately sought greatness were doomed. People who lost sight of the Eternal – or tried to create substitutes for it – would fall prey to the terrors of vanity.

You said that you had written a lot of poetry, but with no expectation of becoming famous. If you ever did become famous, you wanted to be famous in old age – when the fame would have a smaller chance of ruining your character. Colleen asked if you could recite any of your poems. You did not have any memorized, but you did have a copy of one stored on your phone, a poem you had written your senior year. It was called, “Some places I’ve never been.” It had allusions to scenes from classical antiquity and hinted at Heaven. You thought it was free of references to Colleen, but in one description of a Grecian sky you had the phrase “blue eyes,” and in a description of an Italian wheat field in winter, you wrote “like pale and freckled cheeks.” You hoped the phrases would get past her without notice.

They did not. As you were walking to the parking garage in a dimly lit walkway, she grabbed your hand and stopped you, pressing her small body against yours in the cool darkness. You kissed for a long time. You had never kissed a girl. You didn’t know how long it was supposed to last, but you didn’t want it to end. Then she pulled her mouth away and grabbed the lapels of your coat.

“How long?” she asked.

“How long what?”

“How long have you been in love with me?”

You thought about hedging, but the moment demanded honesty.

“From the first moment I saw you. Sophomore year. It was August 11, 2015, I think.”

She looked up and explored your eyes, verifying your words.

“For me, it’s been a few weeks. Sometime in November, I think. Before Thanksgiving. It was that day it was really cold outside. We waved to each other across the mall, like we always do, and I thought you looked perfectly warm in your tweed. Before that, I thought you were very silly, dressing like that in Arizona. Kinda cute, but silly. Your mustache looks good now. When you were a teenager, it was too patchy and uneven. But anyway, right then, I was cold, and I thought, I want to snuggle with George. And I thought, I’m going to visit his church.”

Colleen wanted to go somewhere warm, so you went to your house. Your parents were out on a date, and Eliza wasn’t in the house. As you went out to the bungalow, you were wondering how far things might go. Colleen noticed your pipe on the porch table.

“Of course... you smoke a pipe. I should’ve guessed!”

For better or worse, Eliza was in the bungalow, reading on the couch across from your bed.

“Hello, Georgie. Hello, Colleen. Welcome to The Bungalow. I can leave. Or maybe I should I stay? Perhaps you will be in need of a chaperone?”

Colleen laughed and told her she was welcome to stay. You handed Colleen a comforter and the two of you sat down on the edge of the bed. Colleen wrapped the comforter around the two of you.

“By now,” Eliza announced, “you will have figured out that Georgie – I’m sorry, G.L. – is in love with you. He has never told me, but I know. His poems all have references to a girl with blue eyes and dark hair and freckles. Not all of his poems refer to girls, but when they do, you’re always the girl. Did you know that he fought a duel over you? He died, you know.”

“I see that you’ve been talking to Philip.”

“It could’ve been your ‘Duel in the Desert’ poem.”

“It was too vague. You couldn’t have figured that out from the poem.”

“Yes, but in context, it would be obvious.”

Like most people, Colleen was charmed by Eliza. Colleen asked you what Philip was up to. You said he was getting an MBA, and started to say more, but Eliza broke in with one of her monologues.

“Philip goes to our church now. He’s not really serious about religion. I mean, he’s serious. But not like Georgie. He doesn’t carry Chesterton in his coat pocket. I think – I know – he comes to church to see me. His family has their own church. Two weeks ago, I asked him if he thought I was ‘horribly plain.’ He said I was ‘incomparably beautiful’ and promised to write a poem to me. He tried to make it sound like he was joking, but I know he really does like me. It sounds vain, but I really do have great hair. And I think my face is mostly pretty.”

“You are very pretty,” said Colleen.

“Thank you. I told Philip we should go on a date. He said we should wait until I’m 18, ‘to avoid the appearance of impropriety.’ I said we could tell people that I’m his ‘niece,’ like the rich old men do in bad novels. I told him I would ask you for your permission. I told him it was essential to uphold the patriarchy.”

She paused here, awaiting your response.

“Permission granted. Philip is a good guy. Deadly with a dueling pistol, though.”

“He’s terribly awkward, you know. I doubt that he has been on many dates.”

“I know he’s been on a few. None were very successful, from what I’ve heard.”

“He’s a diamond in the rough. Most women are too silly to see that. I think he’s going to become a railroad tycoon. Or a shipping magnate or something. We’re going to be very rich. And in the interviews, he will always say that Eliza Burgess was the secret of his success, driving him to greatness. So you don’t need to worry, Colleen. We will support you and Georgie until Georgie becomes successful. Or you become successful. Or both of you. I will be the rich and eccentric auntie. We can’t have your six children running around like little ragamuffins, shoeless and undernourished.”

Colleen laughed.

“*Six* children?”

“You can have more. Doesn’t the Pope give you a medal if you have ten children?”

“I’m not much of a Catholic anymore, but I’ve never heard of that...”

“But you must never fight about money. You’ll never fight about anything. Of course, Philip and I will fight about everything. We’ll be one of those

couples who always fight. Like Scott and Zelda. Except we'll never fight in public. And we'll only fight for an hour. Then I'll break something expensive and burst into tears. Philip will start yelling, but then he'll say that he's sorry, that he's been behaving 'wretchedly.' I'll say, 'No, it's me. I'm the wretched one. I've been horrible, darling.' And then we'll cry and swear eternal love and fly off somewhere exotic for our umpteenth honeymoon."

"Sounds like a great plan," Colleen said.

"And speaking of planning... we must start planning your wedding. Philip will be Georgie's best man. And Percy and Alonzo will stand there in cheap tuxedos. They will look silly, but Philip has to be serious, for once. And his whole speech must be in verse. How many sisters do you have? And who's your best friend?"

"I have two sisters," said Colleen. "No brothers. I don't really have a best friend right now. But I have a few good friends."

"This is perfect. You don't want to choose among your friends, or your sisters, so I could be the maid of honor. With your permission, of course. I can't stand with the men. Women do that these days, but it's so inappropriate. We must make a statement—"

"Uphold the patriarchy."

“Exactly. And there will be this great dramatic tension between me and Philip. People will be whispering about us. There will be *rumours* – spelled with a U – that the best man and the maid of honor are in love and are going to elope after the wedding, because she’s so young and the parents would not give their consent. It will be a major scandal. The first of many. My entire life with Philip will be a series of delicious scandals.”

“That sounds perfect,” Colleen said.

“You really think so? I’ve put a lot of thought into it. Someone has to. You and Georgie need to focus on your studies. You can’t be obsessing about the details. Georgie, especially. He’s not good with details. He’s always looking at the Big Picture.”

She paused, and then stood up.

“I’m going to go back to the house now and watch something naughty on Netflix before the rents come home.”

She went out the front door of the bungalow. On the way out, she flipped the main switch and left you and Colleen in darkness.

“So...” you said, “that was Eliza.”

“She’s delightful. My younger sister M.K. is like that. But not quite as much. Not nearly as much.”

“I should’ve prepared you.”

“I was prepared. When we came to your church, the first thing she said to me was that my white dress reminded her of a wedding dress. She said I would look ‘stunning’ in a wedding dress. She also said that your church would be a great church for a small wedding.”

“Subtlety is not Eliza’s strong suit.”

“Apparently not.”

“For someone who likes drama and intrigue so much, Eliza is very bad at keeping secrets.”

“I like her. I really do.”

“Do you want to flee? I can drive you home now if you like.”

“No. I’d like to stay for a while.” You found her face in the dark and you kissed.

YOU GOT MARRIED in June, and the wedding went very much according to Eliza’s plans. Eliza’s maid of honor speech quoted liberally from 19th-century novels of manners. At one point, she quoted Jane Austen: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Then she added, “Obviously, Georgie,

that quote is not about you. That's for Philip." Philip was seated next to her as she spoke, and she leaned down and kissed him on the mouth. Aside from you and Colleen, nobody in the room knew that they had been dating (their first date was on her 18th birthday), so the kiss had the desired effect of shocking everyone. Eliza explained that she did that to take some of the pressure off you and Colleen, because you were "painfully introverted."

Philip's best man speech recounted the fact that you had been in love with Colleen since the first day you saw her. He retold the story of the duel and said that while most men merely *promise* their wives that they will love them "until death do us part," you had already kept that promise. He concluded his speech by imparting a piece of "ancient wisdom."

"Women get married hoping their husbands will change; but they never do. A woman often goes into a marriage thinking she's going to fix whatever flaws the man has. But that's a fool's errand. What you see, Colleen, is what you're going to get. The good news, at least from my point of view, is that Georgie's flaws are manageable."

"On the other hand, Georgie, men get married hoping their wives will never change: but they always do. Colleen has already changed. She is not the girl you fell in love with six years ago. And that's a very good thing, because the 16-year-old Colleen would've run away screaming if she had known that Georgie the Pimpled Dork was writing poems about her. We might not be sitting here in the church community hall, celebrating your wedding. Colleen is going to keep changing, Georgie. But, if history is any guide, she's going to change for the better."

He raised his glass.

“Until death do you part. And beyond!”

YOU AND COLLEEN rented an apartment to stay in while you were in Tucson, and lived in the Bungalow when you were in Phoenix. When you got married, you did not have enough money for a real honeymoon, so you often took weekend trips. You liked to stay in vintage hotels: the Copper Queen in Bisbee, the Monte Vista in Flagstaff, the St. Michael in Prescott, the old sanitarium on the hillside in Jerome. In Tucson, you sometimes did staycations at the Hotel Congress, especially when the local Hot Club was playing gypsy jazz for Sunday brunch.

As you were finishing up your degrees, you got a job as a librarian. At an Irish library. In a three-story castle. In downtown Phoenix.

The place had been around for a decade, but you had never been there until you saw a job posting for an assistant librarian. The library was the end-of-life project of a local dairy magnate whose parents had come to Arizona from Ireland in the 1920s. The day you visited was a rare rainy day in Phoenix. The place seemed magical: a modern library inside a replica of a 12th-century Norman-Irish castle. You sat in the rare books room with a cup of Irish tea, under a portrait of Yeats, looking out over the trees of Hance Park as raindrops pelted the windows. (There was also a portrait of Beckett, but Yeats was more your style.)

You asked a librarian for a copy of Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, which had been on your (long) list of things to read for a few years. You were captivated by the story of Irish monks in remote monasteries on an island at the edge of the world, doing painstaking labor to copy the great works of Greek and Roman and Judeo-Christian antiquity and preserve them during the dark centuries in which the European continent was wracked by war and cultural destruction. You then spent some time in the library's *Book of Kells* exhibit, which re-told the story of the Irish monks and included a facsimile copy of the original manuscript.

Despite having very little Irish in your family tree, and having never been to Ireland, you got the job. You loved library work. It was slow and steady. And except for Saint Patrick's Day, when the Irish center was overrun by revelers in leprechaun hats, the place was very quiet.

The best thing about the library was the heavy atmosphere of nostalgia that hung over the place. From what you could glean from Irish news media, most of modern Ireland was committed to becoming a typical European social democracy with a progressive culture. But the Irish Americans who read at the library and danced at the Friday night *céilís* and spent months tracing their genealogies were deeply nostalgic. They wanted to recreate the Old Times in the Old Country – even to the point of celebrating mythologies that had little basis in historical fact.

Patrons would often deliver mini-lectures to you and the other librarians on The Way Things Were, speaking with great authority. When the patrons

left, the head librarian – who had a PhD in Irish Studies – would usually correct the record for you. For example, there was a commonly held mythology about how medieval Irish women enjoyed equal rights with men, in the sense of the individual rights of a modern liberal society. The reality was very different – and far more interesting. Medieval Ireland was a clan-based pastoral society in which all property rights were essentially communal. An Irish wife in that period might appear to have had strong property rights against claims made by her husband. There was no dowry, as in other medieval European societies. But the reason she had a strong position *vis-à-vis* her husband was that “her” property – whether she inherited it or won it through commerce – still belonged in large part to the clan networks of her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

You also found that Irish and Irish-American nostalgists loved *losing*. The 800 years of conquest and colonization by the English had been overwhelmingly bad for the Irish, by almost every objective measure. But the English had given nostalgic Irish and Irish Americans a wonderful gift: an eternal grudge to be lamented in poems and songs that could be recited or sung in pubs over pints of beer and glasses of whisky. Most of the modern Irish were eager to jettison the baggage of the past, including the not-so-distant past of The Troubles in Northern Ireland. But the nostalgists loved to wallow in the tragic past, drink themselves into depressive spells, and sing the sad songs, such as Mickey MacConnell’s beautiful 1965 dirge, “Only Our Rivers Run Free.”

You were not very Irish, and you were not a drunk or a natural depressive. But as a traditionalist, you were a nostalgist. You enjoyed the company of fellow nostalgists, even if you didn't share their particular nostalgias.

THROUGH ONE OF your former professors at ASU, you fell in with a group of "ROFTers" (readers of the conservative *First Things* magazine), who met once a month for supper at a club in downtown Phoenix. Most of the attendees were middle-aged and male. The group was heavy on lawyers and prosecutors and judges. A majority were Catholic.

The consensus in the room was that the modern world – and the postmodern world – had gone disastrously wrong. As a general rule, if something was new, it was bad. They were thoughtful people, so if you pressed them to name a Golden Age in the past, they would readily concede that there had never been a Golden Age. Ever since Eden, things had been bad. Christ had given humanity a new start, but humanity regularly failed to follow His Way or live up to His standards.

Often, there were discussions about how modern Christianity had failed to rise to cultural and political challenges. The usual answer from half the room was that Protestants – beginning with your own church, the Anglican one – had fallen away from the One True Church and had begun the ever-dividing schisms that were reflected in the absurdities of postmodern culture, which declared that there were dozens of genders. (By your reading, a true postmodernist should argue that there were eight billion genders; for a pomo, the leftist political project of trying to organize several genders into

oppressed pressure groups should be just as absurd as conservative declarations that there were only two.)

One of the recurring themes in the supper discussions was the tension between revelation and reason. Ultimately, everyone in the room was somewhere in the middle. The Reformed Protestants who clung to *Sola Scriptura* admitted that they needed some amount of reason and tradition to make sense of apparent conflicts in the Bible between various commandments. (For example, between God's commandment to not murder and His apparent command to the Israelites to "not leave even one person alive" among the cities of the Canaanites.) The Catholics, of course, liked to think that there was ultimately no conflict between revelation and reason. But when they were pressed, they tended to favor the reason embodied in the Magisterium. For example, modern Catholics had made the sanctity of human life central to their doctrine, despite the fact that such a consistent doctrine is hard to find in a surface reading of Scripture. However they had arrived at the doctrine, it seemed to you to be a vast improvement over the view of human life that had apparently informed the Spanish Inquisition (or the Protestants' witch-hunts, for that matter).

It sometimes occurred to you that perhaps you and your fellow traditionalists were just genetically prudish people. That's certainly what modern liberals would think. Informed by evolutionary biology, the Jonathan Haidts of the world would conclude that traditionalists had inherited an extra dose of an ancient obsession with bodily purity. They would say that such Abrahamic scruples as an aversion to homosexuality had been advantageous for survival

and procreation in certain ancestral environments but had no bearing on the modern life of humanity.

You disagreed. You had no personal animus against homosexuals. You found the effete male artistic types amusing. You found that both male and female homosexuals evoked a kind a *pathos* in you. Their situations were tragic, whether their same-sex attraction was biologically hardwired or chosen or the result of a history of abuse. But sodomy was obviously wrong. It was a key disease vector and a disgusting mess. (Thanks to marriage, you had found the one exact field in the world in which your seed was meant to be planted. You enjoyed sex, but one of the feelings you had when it was concluded was a sense of relief that you had managed to dispose of something dangerous in the right place. That feeling of relief became more joyful when Colleen became pregnant with George Junior, about a year after you got married.)

The members of the supper club were overwhelmingly technophobic. For the group, some of the most obvious – and negative – impacts of modern technology were sexual. Sexual technology allowed modern people to have dangerous sex with multiple partners and think that they could avoid filling the world with disease, aborted babies, orphaned children, and single mothers. Technology helped the boys of your generation to believe they could become girls, and vice-versa.

On the deepest level, technology had assisted in creating a modern culture that was distracted and alienated from the Permanent and the Transcendent. Moderns and pomos were under the illusion that the most fundamental fact

of life – physical death – was not inevitable. People believed that with enough technological advances, they might be able to live forever in this world – and live well – without having to face any ultimate reckoning at the Throne of Judgment.

When Congress voted to ban Chinese investments in TikTok, everyone at the supper club (aside from the two token libertarians) agreed that a full ban of the app would be a good thing. The flashing screens of TikTok were the epitome of the modern culture of distraction and immediate gratification. Ephemeral video segments were the antithesis of the Great Books mentality. You were not a conspiracy theorist, but you would not have been surprised to learn that TikTok was a ChiCom plot designed to (further) distract American children from the quiet contemplation required for them to become thoughtful citizens of a republic.

In your day-to-day life, you found technology to be a constant source of frustration and bewilderment. The world was drowning in government and corporate bureaucracy. Every agency and every vendor made you download its app and log into its portal. Some agencies and vendors had two portals: one if you were a manager/payer, and one if you were a worker/user. You could store dozens of passwords in a keychain, but that seemed to be putting all your eggs in one basket. *One password to bring them all, and in the darkness hack them.* Instead, you wrote them all on sheets of paper, copied them, and hid them in books on shelves in the Bungalow. One set was wedged in the third volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

When you and Colleen got your first jobs – she worked as a lab tech for a genetic engineering consortium – you put yourselves on a strict Dave Ramsey budget. You didn't use the little envelopes, but you did try to pay for everything with cash. Thus you were often annoyed by vendors that had decided to go cashless. You had a credit card, but it was for emergencies only, and was taped inside the back cover of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

To pay your monthly bills, you had to spend a half hour at your local bank branch, making simultaneous withdrawals and payments to vendors. Like every other vendor, the bank was trying to reduce human interactions and cut labor costs, so it charged you an extra service fee for doing so many transactions at the branch. The company that held your student loan debt charged you an extra dollar a month for doing the debit transaction and three more dollars for paying more than the monthly invoice. (That was your only debt, and you and Colleen were paying it back as fast as you could.)

You were not a conspiracy theorist, but you were something of a Jeffersonian. The modern credit-card economy seemed as if it were designed deliberately to encourage impulsive spending and keep people permanently indebted to creditors. And thanks to the internet, people didn't have to go anywhere or expend any effort to buy things. Just a few clicks, and stuff appeared on your doorstep. Compulsive consumer-debtors also tended to vote for politicians who promised to have the government bail them out. (You were aware of the irony that Jefferson himself was a compulsive debtor: his heavy debts were his main excuse for not freeing his slaves.)

You were some kind of conservative, but you didn't have a moral objection to a minimal Welfare State. (Even your favorite libertarian, F.A. Hayek, had allowed for tax-funded government assistance to the poor and the sick.) For a few months after you graduated from college, you and Colleen had briefly qualified for AHCCCS, Arizona's Medicaid program. When you got jobs, you qualified for big Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare) subsidies for "private" insurance plans.

What you found most objectionable about the programs was their complexity. How were poor people with low IQs and bad educations – people who often worked long hours standing at cash registers – supposed to deal with the paperwork? AHCCCS was supposed to be for the destitute. Why did poor people have to re-enroll in the program? Why didn't the government just provide "free" public clinics and emergency rooms for the poor? If you were going to have a socialist program, why not go all the way?

The ACA also seemed absurd to you. To keep people from getting insurance only when they were sick, the ACA had a strict open enrollment window in the fall. People who were struggling – but who made a little too much money for AHCCCS – were supposed to plan their lives and delay their health needs until the open enrollment window opened. To its credit, Arizona allowed people to get cheap and simple temporary plans to get them to the open enrollment window. But national rules prevented the plans from extending longer than 364 days, so people had to reapply every year. As with many policies, you thought Singapore had a better model. To the

extent you understood it, Singapore seemed to have a two-tier system: “free” health care for the poor and real private insurance for everyone else.

You had also met dozens of people who were scamming the national SSI disability system. To get disability benefits, people could only show income of less than \$2,000 per month. Your dad was something of a nativist and didn’t want to hire a lawn company staffed by illegal aliens, so your lawn was tended by an old white guy who insisted on being paid half in cash and half by check because he was scamming SSI.

Policy writers sometimes described the American regulatory regime as “Byzantine.” That was a slander against the ancient civilization. Without the surplus wealth created by industrialization – and without modern computers and the internet – there was no way that Byzantium could’ve run such a complicated bureaucratic system.

WHEN THE ALIENS abducted you, it was initially very frightening. After all, you were suddenly transported to a spacecraft. Your biggest concern was that Colleen and your family would be worried by your sudden absence. But soon after you arrived on the spacecraft, you gained a strong sense that your unseen captors had taken care of that problem.

The aliens had done much to make you comfortable, beyond simulating terrestrial gravity. They had prepared your living quarters so that they looked like a study in a posh English country house. The bookshelves had plenty of classics for you to read, including several translations of the Bible

and many great works by Christian writers. The aliens could apparently read your thoughts, so when you thought of a book they didn't have, it would appear after you woke the next "morning." (For 12 hours at a time, the aliens filled your quarters with some kind of diffused ultraviolet light to give you "days.") With plenty of free time on your hands, you began working on several reading projects that you probably would never have completed on earth, including reading a heavily annotated version of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The aliens had set you up with a computer terminal with which you could surf the internet. In that way, you learned that an ersatz version of "you" was in fact still on Earth. "You" had not disappeared. You checked the church bulletin every week and were comforted to see that "you" and Colleen were still assigned as ushers once a month, and that "you" were teaching a course on Augustin to the adult Sunday school. Photos and video of "you" appeared often on the library's social media posts. In one of the videos, "you" and Colleen were taking baby Georgie on a tour of the library. In another, your fellow librarians discovered a plastic skeleton "you" had placed in a remote corner of the library. The skeleton had a copy of *Ulysses* in his hands. The joke was that a patron had sworn off food until he could finish the book – and then reaped the consequences of such an unwise decision. (Your own progress through *Ulysses* was painfully slow, especially given your compulsion to understand each passage and trace the origins of every allusion in the book.)

Knowing that your earthly life had continued, your main concern was an intellectual one. You were a traditionalist, fond of quoting Solomon: "There is nothing new under the sun." But as far as you knew, this *was* something

new. If you were the first person ever to be abducted by an alien civilization, that was by far the newest thing that had happened to humanity.

As the days went by, you developed a traditionalist take on the situation. From the large portal on one of the walls of your quarters, you could look out at the stars, pondering how long their light took to reach you. You sensed that your captors had come from an ancient place. The aliens were plainly benevolent, perhaps angelic. You comforted yourself by imagining that they were from somewhere like Perelandra in the C.S. Lewis space trilogy. Your sojourn on the spacecraft was not a challenge to your faith: in fact, freed from your job and family life, you were able to deepen your daily devotions. In a word, your life on the spacecraft was *monastic*.



WHEN THE ALIENS returned you to Earth, you spent a few days in a state of wonder, getting used to the many things that had changed during your year on the spacecraft. First and foremost was the fact that Georgie Junior was now walking and talking. You were concerned that people would notice you had not kept track of social details and current events, but most of the people in your life were accustomed to your bookish nature: they were not surprised that “Alonso Quixano” had trouble remembering things.

On the eighth day of your return, when the aliens spoke into your mind and gave you a choice of 14 different political ideologies, you were initially put off by the proposition. You didn’t mind the idea of the aliens doing a political experiment on America, but you had been influenced by many traditionalist writers, such as Russell Kirk, who had claimed that conservatism was not an ideology. Conservatism was not about imagining an ideal set of policies or outcomes, or even structures of government. Properly understood, it was a philosophy, or a temperament. It was a prudential attitude that took cases as they arose and usually came down in favor of the tried and true and against the untried and the speculative.

Although the aliens could read your thoughts, they did not change their menu of options. They were giving you one chance to choose a broad package of policies and structures. You would not get to be an Oakeshottian statesman, carefully exercising prudence at multiple decision points as time went on. It was all or nothing.

[To read the menu of ideological options, go to the Menu on page 19 in the Kindle version of *American Futures*, or near the beginning of any of the three printed volumes.]

Given your choices, you were mostly attracted to paleo-conservatism. Your logic was that the decentralization of the paleo option would come closest to taking America back to what the Founders had originally set in motion with the drafting and ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In your reading, the Founders had not engaged in an ideological project. Instead, they had considered the histories and wisdom of the ancient world, with the strongest lessons taken from Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. They had also studied the city-states of Renaissance Italy and the early European republics. In the end, the Founders' main achievement was to conserve the best institutions that had evolved over centuries under the unwritten British constitution. For example, the three branches of the US federal government were not something the Founders invented. Their legislative branch was modeled on the British Houses of Lords and Commons. Their judiciary was based on the English Common Law. Their executive branch was a constitutionally constrained version of the monarchy. Those institutions had already been mirrored in the governments of the 13 States that had won their independence from Britain.

You spent a full day – it was a Monday, so you were off work – pondering your choice. You thought about consulting Colleen, but that might involve telling her about your abduction, which you were not prepared to do. Also, she was working remotely that day and had been up much of the night with Georgie Junior, who had a bad cough and had been through several diapers.

(You had been up much of the night, too, and had helped with several of the changings, but for some reason, you were not exhausted.) Further, Colleen was generally very apolitical. After high school, she had focused on science and left the humanities behind. You might've consulted your dad, but he and your mom were on a vacation. You thought about consulting some of your colleagues from the supper club, but you didn't want to bother them on a workday with an elaborate hypothetical. Besides, they would probably tell you to go to the greatest minds of the millennium, who were readily available on your bookshelf in the Bungalow.

While Colleen worked and Junior slept, you re-read a couple dozen of the essays in the *Federalist Papers*, a big chunk of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and your favorite chapters from Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*. You were aware that the paleo option was something of a hedge. By allowing the 50 States to go in different policy directions, you would allow them to learn from each other's mistakes and successes. Not all of them would be governed by Oakeshottian statesmen, but some would. And, you were choosing paleo-conservatism – not paleo-libertarianism – so you were tilting the playing field of political cultures in the States toward prudential outlooks, rather than utopian ones.

You considered neo-conservatism only briefly. First, you had a gut-level aversion to anything *neo*. You had also been influenced by several of your supper club colleagues, who were in the Voegelin/Ryn camp and loathed neo-cons, who were often Straussians. Finally, you had grown up against the backdrop of the prolonged and disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and you distrusted the neo-cons' utopian global projects.

You rejected Trumpian nationalist conservatism, as well. Like its leader, the inchoate movement was unprincipled, opportunistic, and childishly impulsive. It seemed like the whole thing had been cobbled together during an all-nighter in a freshman dorm lounge, in response to a whimsical prompt by a professor: “By tomorrow, I want you to create a popular middle-class ideology and use federal power to own the libs.”

Although you were mainly a Jeffersonian, you had some sympathy for the Hamiltonian project of protecting American manufacturing – up to a point. You liked the paleo model of using low, broad-based tariffs to fund a small national government in the absence of income and payroll taxes. But you didn’t like the idea of government using targeted tariffs to pick winners and losers in the economy. The nat-con version of protectionism seemed like just another Washington swamp game, in which powerful special interests leveraged working-class protectionist sentiment to lobby for tariff regimes that benefitted those interests, while most American consumers and manufacturers ended up paying higher prices.

That night you said a long prayer, asking God to forgive you for the hubris of choosing a system for 350 million other people. You were confident that you were right about what America’s political system should ideally look like, at least in rough outline. And you were informed by the thoughts of the soundest thinkers of the past two millennia. America needed a Stop button. Or a Slow Way Down button. But what gave you the right to press that button?

Perhaps in answer to your prayers, you suddenly gained a deep sense of peace about the matter. You chose paleo-conservatism and went soundly to sleep.

[The major policy changes that occurred during the first decade of the alien experiment are outlined in the first-decade section for paleo-conservatism in Volume 2 of *American Futures*. That section begins on page 1498 of the Kindle version, or on page 535 of the print version of Volume 2.]

IN THE DAYS and weeks following your decision, it became apparent very quickly that you had made a truly radical choice. The speed with which things happened was bewildering – *to you*. Almost everybody else seemed to take the changes in stride.

The paleo-conservative super-majority in Congress decided that the “prudent” thing to do was to dismantle the post-New Deal national power structure as rapidly as it could. Three weeks after you made your choice, Congress voted to “phase out” all national health programs – almost two trillion dollars of spending – by the end of the next fiscal year.

The next morning, you were at the library when two Arizona legislators stopped by on their way to the Capitol. The man was the Republican House majority whip. The woman was the Democrat House minority leader. You served them tea in the periodicals room. (The Republican liked Lyons. The Democrat chose Barry’s.) They had carpooled together and were having a

friendly argument about how to deal with the imminent demise of the national health programs. The Republican was arguing that Arizona should create a stripped-down version of the ACA – which he called a “Swiss” system of subsidized insurance. The Democrat was arguing that navigating a subsidized insurance system would be too complicated for her “people.” She just wanted a guarantee that the Legislature would fund an adequate number of “community clinics” – basically, free urgent cares – where poor folks could walk in and get triaged and obtain discount drugs. She also wanted direct subsidies to hospitals that provided free care to the poor. As you were pouring cream for the Democrat and adding a sugar packet for the Republican, they asked you if you would be willing to describe your income status and your party affiliation.

“Lower middle class,” you told them. “My family is currently on the ACA. And I’m a registered Republican.”

They outlined the alternatives they were debating and asked what kind of health system you preferred.

“It has to be simple,” you said, to nods of approval from the Democrat. “No paperwork. You guys are getting rid of the Arizona income tax, right?”

The Republican said it would be done by the end of the year. After that, the only people who would have to file any paperwork – other than businesses paying sales taxes – would be people who wanted to prove they were US and Arizona citizens and poor enough to get services from the state government.

“So,” you asked, “why create a bureaucracy to track health insurance subsidies? Just give poor people cash if they’re willing to do the paperwork to prove they’re poor. Then they can go to the free clinics or pay cash at urgent care or hospitals. I’ve heard that most hospitals provide a lot of free stuff anyway, even the way things are now.”

The Democrat laughed.

“See, Trevor? This guy’s a Republican. And he wants to do it my way. Let’s keep it simple, and then all we gotta argue about every year is exactly how much cash to give to poor people and how much to give to the clinics and hospitals.”

The Republican legislator seemed to be coming around. But he wasn’t entirely sold.

“I see your point, young man. George, you said? And your point, Yasmine. But if we do subsidies, we can exclude people who don’t deserve to get them. Or give them less. Like drug addicts and drunks and violent criminals. We only want to help the deserving poor. We want to encourage people to get onto the right path. Can you see where I’m coming from?”

The question was for you. You thought about it. You were not a policy expert. You went back to first things.

“All those problems come from the devil,” you said. “Just give people cash and pray they find their way to Christ. Or AA. Or whatever. You would need an army of bureaucrats to try to figure out who deserves the subsidies and who doesn’t. And I doubt they could figure it out.”

The Democrat laughed again.

“See? I keep telling you. Keep it simple. We got enough to deal with figuring out the K-12 mess and the CAP water thing. And the federal lands.”

“Okay, Yasmine. I’m coming around. And thank you, George. You might’ve tipped the balance for me on this one. It’s good to get away from the campus and listen to the average Joe. But we gotta figure this out fast. Let’s get back to work, Madam Minority Leader.”

Even apolitical types like Colleen had jumped on board the paleo wagon. That night, you asked her if she was concerned that Congress might be moving too quickly to dismantle a century’s worth of accumulated national power.

“It looks like it’s going to be pretty messy,” she said. “But we have to get back to the Constitution. Go big or go home. If we try to cut it back little by little, and stick bandages on it, it’ll grow back faster than we can cut it.”

In many ways, it was a relief to find that the aliens had tinkered with everyone else’s minds. Thanks to the aliens, people were mostly happy with

the sudden changes you had foisted upon the country. The country was not about to erupt in a civil war. But it was also disturbing, at the individual level. Were you really talking to *Colleen*?

You thought of the *Arabian Nights*. The alien *djinn* of the lamp you had found seemed to be benevolent. But *djinn* were unimaginably powerful, and as Acton warned, power tended to corrupt. The good news – for your soul – was that nothing else seemed to have changed. You did not have sudden riches, or the command of armies, or the temptations of adoring women. You had merely – merely! – changed the entire American political system. That night, as on many nights, you took comfort in the lines from Goldsmith’s *Traveller*:

*How small of all that human hearts endure,
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.*

YOUR GOAL IN choosing paleo-conservatism for America had been to achieve ordered liberty. And order was indeed emerging. Most people called it the “Great Adjustment.” But much of the first decade seemed extremely chaotic to you.

The economy went through some amazing swings. With the national government cutting spending massively, and with uncertainty about the transition to the gold standard, the nation’s money supply – mainly, the digital dollars that only existed on bank ledgers – contracted by 40 percent. There were many bank runs, as people panicked and withdrew cash. In the

first year of the alien experiment, green paper was king. Many people didn't trust banks, and the value of Federal Reserve Notes – the old green pieces of paper, which were no longer being printed – increased greatly in value. (The nation's money supply eventually stabilized around the official gold price of \$1,517 set by Congress.)

In the absence of national labor regulations (companies had begun to ignore them even before they were officially repealed) wages were allowed to fall, so most people were able to keep their jobs. At the library, the executive director was a business guy named Tom who knew little about libraries but did seem to understand economics. The week after the alien experiment began, he sat the staff down and explained that the foundations and wealthy donors who gave to the library had just seen the values of their stocks and bonds fall by half. To keep the place open and keep everyone on staff, every employee (including him) would have to take a wage cut of 35 percent.

The good news, as he explained, was that prices were also falling. On average, the prices for things your family needed to buy fell by about 30 percent. So, you weren't even-Steven, but the wage cuts weren't as bad as you had imagined.

Within a year, however, the economy began to recover strongly. Americans were saving at East Asian levels, and Dave Ramsey became a household name. Initially, interest rates were high. Many banks offered over ten percent on deposits, which was enough to get many people to take green paper out from under their mattresses – especially when banks offered to pay depositors in new gold-backed dollars. (The gold-backed dollars – officially

known as “gold certificates” – were printed by the “Big Five” private banking consortiums.)

Once it stabilized, the gold standard itself was good for the poor. The new dollars not only held their value, but slowly gained in purchasing power. People didn’t have to deal with stockjobbers and take big risks in the markets to build up savings for the future.

Under the new state banking laws, there were two kinds of banking accounts: demand deposits and time deposits. Demand deposit accounts had priority if banks went bankrupt and had to liquidate. Within 72 hours of a depositor’s demand, banks had to return the amount of physical gold and gold certificates that had been deposited. (Most banks honored the old Federal Reserve notes at par, unless they were worn out to the point of being illegible.) In that way, demand deposit accounts were more like safe deposit boxes – except that people could write checks and do electronic debits against them. For several years, you and Colleen kept most of your money in demand deposits. Most demand deposit accounts did not offer interest – and some even charged small storage fees.

Time deposit accounts were more like traditional bank CDs (certificates of deposit). Banks offered more attractive interest rates the longer a depositor was willing to go without making withdrawals. Before you and Colleen became confident enough to open a brokerage account and invest in the stock market, you earned interest from time deposits.

One old problem that got better was the problem of identity theft. First, the meager benefits offered by state and local governments were less of a target for identity thieves. Second, the demise of the IRS, the Social Security Number, and national relief programs forced private financial syndicates to compete to provide replacements for identity verification. The Big Five interstate financial syndicates had their own systems, and three independent firms emerged. The ID verification (IDV) firms had local offices (some were run out of defunct Post Office branches) and did home visits to verify the validity of identities. For the homeless, they checked against the police registries and visited shelters. All of them used biometric ID systems, and many used high-resolution video. For online commerce, they used blockchains to develop competing systems of secure virtual identities (SVIs). The poorest Americans used a single IDV at their local branch banks. Wealthier Americans who did a lot of online and international commerce had their identities verified and cross-checked with multiple top-tier IDVs. The people with the most secure IDs were called “Sevens,” because they could cross-check their IDs against seven or more systems. (You and Colleen and your kids were “Threes.”)

PERHAPS THE MOST significant fact of life during the Great Adjustment was the ubiquity of charitable relief. Prior to the alien experiments, 100 million Americans had been dependent upon benefits from the national government to get along. (Over half the country had gotten some kind of subsidy, but it was the bottom third that was truly dependent.) Within a year and a half, they lost their Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, as well as a dozen other national benefits. They had to rely on state relief and

private charity. Arizona's benefits were about average for the country – which meant that people got less than half of what they had gotten before from government.

You and Colleen had jobs, and you and your kids – George, Caitríona, Maeve, and William – were blessed with energy and good health. You spent much of your free time at the church, taking care of people who had been displaced. Most of America's elderly, disabled and sick were able to rely on their families and neighbors to survive. But as you and the ROFTers had often lamented, the American Family and the American Neighborhood were not what they once were.

Churches were on the front lines of relief for people who couldn't get help from family and friends. Wealthier people made big donations to churches such as yours, but the main expenditure was time and labor. Your church let displaced individuals and families sleep on cots in the fellowship hall and had the more rugged (and crazy) people pitch tents on the small recreational field in the back of the lot and use porta-potties. Your dad installed a shower in the fellowship hall bathroom and built a shower tent for the people living on the field. (During the hot months, he turned the shower into a cooling station by removing the walls of the tent, turning the shower into a mister, and keeping the roof of the tent for shade.)

In true conservative fashion, the Phoenix City Council urged the police to enforce vagrancy laws strictly. Vagrants who had no verified church or charity home were carted off to jail. If they were caught on the streets more than five times, the "five strikers" could be carted off to work camps in rural

parts of Arizona to build roads. The police visited your church once a week to compare the residents of your rec field with photos of known vagrants. A group of young weightlifters in your church (the “Beef Bros”) was tasked with enforcing order and trying to enforce sobriety.

Although they were mostly conservative, Arizona’s voters and politicians had a libertarian streak. The compromise reached by the Legislature and the cities was to not enforce laws against possession of drugs – among other things, drug enforcement was a strain on already-stressed budgets – but to strictly enforce laws against public drunkenness or drug use. The Beef Bros worked to enforce the same rules on the church campus, so several of your residents went elsewhere to get drunk or high, and often returned to the campus in police custody, having spent a week detoxing in jail cells.

Some church members spent most of their free time shuttling the sick and elderly to the new community clinics and to traditional medical services. On Sundays, the church took a collection to fund the top ten needs identified by Father Robert and his advisory council (which included your dad and 11 other men from the parish). For his part, the priest spent most of his week counseling the displaced and referring them to subject-matter experts in the parish and the neighborhood. One of the great things about the Great Adjustment was that many neighbors who were not churchgoers spent a lot of time at the church, helping the displaced. At the very least, neighbors stopped by to put cash in the Poor Box.

Father Robert tasked you with tutoring kids with their homework. As a secondary role, you were tasked with offering instruction in basic theology.

The church made a sign with your photo on it that said, “Who is Jesus? Ask this guy.” You tried to convey compassion for people’s problems, but you were an intellectual, not an empath. You usually referred the emotionally distressed to Father Robert or one of the deacons.



You didn’t get a lot of takers for basic theology. The people who showed up at your church looking for relief were not – initially, at least – seeking spiritual salvation. They were looking for water, food, shelter, safety, emotional support, and medical care. However, you did end up counseling people in basic finance, using a modified version of the Dave Ramsey program. (One of the jobs of the Beef Bros was to guard a set of keys and a

row of lockers in Father Robert's office where people could keep cash safe until they were ready to open bank accounts.)

One of the best things about the Paleo Revolution was that the entire country had become allergic to bureaucracy. In the Great Adjustment, things had to be done quickly. A couple of carpenters who went to the church built a row of small wooden shelters at one end of the rec yard. (Some of the more paranoid residents liked the security of the shelters; others slept outside without a tent at the edges of the field, wanting to be able to see if anyone approached them.) Alerted by the neighbors, a City of Phoenix inspector came to look at the shelters, which were nowhere close to code. He just laughed, wrote out a provisional permit, and told the carpenters to "Keep it to one story, and make sure the plywood on the roof is secured with brackets."

THE QUESTION OF the poor initiated your first real disagreement with Colleen. Even with Maeve and William in diapers, she spent a lot of time at the church, helping the poor families who came in. Late one Saturday morning, she came back from helping a pair of single moms who had just arrived. One woman, named Katie, had been beaten by her boyfriend, with whom she and her kids had been living. She had drug issues. Colleen had spent much of the morning convincing her to file a police report and helping her stay calm as she detoxed.

Colleen was visibly exhausted, and you told her she ought to back off on doing so much.

“We need to focus on the *deserving* poor,” you told her. “These people just wander in and out. They almost never end up going to services.”

“We are different kinds of Christians,” Colleen said.

That was news to you. From all your previous conversations, you had gathered that you and Colleen were in close agreement on the First Things. The Permanent Things. You asked her what she meant.

“You’re one of those people who is always right, Georgie. You’re like a Catholic. You’re legalistic and judgmental. I don’t mean that in a bad way. But with you, people are In or Out. There’s not a lot of room for Grace.”

“We’re saved by Grace. I believe that.”

“Right. At some level, you believe that. But I don’t think you *feel* that. You said you admire Yahweh. A bunch of times. ‘The vengeful Yahweh of the Old Testament.’ For you, some people are just bad, and they deserve to get their comeuppance good and hard. You told me once that you were not sure about the ‘turn-the-other-cheek stuff’ that Jesus and His followers did. Your main concern is that bad people might escape punishment.”

“God is order, Colleen. He will not be mocked. The economy of salvation requires that every sin must be paid for. And Christ did pay for them. But only people who repent and accept the Grace of His Atonement—”

“—will be forgiven. Yes, I know. But I don’t think there’s a big difference between *my* level of repentance and acceptance and Katie’s. She grew up Christian, you know.”

“But you’re clearly in a very different stage of your walk.”

“I’ve found that people with a very judgmental worldview often believe that they are right. Or at least, *right enough* to qualify for some category of Good People, or People Who Do Right. I’ve always had trouble connecting with people who are convinced that they are always right. That was my problem with Catholicism. That’s why I’m a good fit for Reformed, Grace-based Protestantism.”

“I agree, Colleen. I do. As it is written, ‘There is none righteous, no, not one... For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.’”

“I don’t think you really agree, Georgie. Not at a gut level. There’s a big divide between the Always-Right people and the Humility people. I think it’s the biggest divide between human beings. One of the biggest. I love you. But you’re on the other side of that divide.”

Colleen was clearly exhausted and frustrated. You decided that then was not the time to argue. You would let her have the last word and think about what she said. You were, in fact, thinking. Maybe this “divide” she sensed was at the root of some of your recent disagreements. For example, you had always assumed that you would homeschool the kids. But she had scoped

out a nearby Lutheran school for preschool and had started going occasionally to their early-morning praise-and-worship services. You didn't hate the services, but you were not inspired by the guitars and drums and simplistic songs. Colleen seemed love them. She had tears in her eyes when they sang songs like "In Christ Alone." That one, at least, had some good theology in it. You remember her saying that the people at the service "really know they're sinners and really know they've been forgiven." At the time, you didn't understand why she thought that was any different from the liturgy at your church, which included a corporate confession. She had also told you that she loved "the energy" in the AA/NA meetings that met in your church's fellowship hall.

Colleen seemed to have shed any residual Catholicism. Among other things, she had started using contraception – worried that having any more kids might make it impossible for her keep her job. Now, she was telling you that you weren't Reformed enough as a Protestant. On a theological level, you understood the danger of presuming that you were doing just fine in the eyes of God. No human being was close to perfect, by God's standards. You were overly peevish sometimes. You lacked patience when it came to ministering to the poor. But that's what corporate confession and private prayer were for. "Forgive us our trespasses."

You began to wonder about a lot of things. What had Colleen done to feel like she needed forgiveness so badly? In her new Reformed zeal, she was supposed to have "no guilt in life, no fear in death." But she must have some deep guilt about something. Had she engaged in premarital sex? You had always assumed not. If she had, that shouldn't matter. Right? She was

forgiven, and you were married now. From everything you could see, she was a good wife and mother. Maybe she was tempted by a man at work. Or *men*, plural. Or maybe women? Once a person opened the door to one perversion, could the door really be bolted shut against others?

You tried to dismiss those suspicions. The devil was playing the part of Iago, trying to poison you against your faithful Desdemona. But the suspicions kept recurring in your mind. Now you really did have something to confess. Something for which to do penance – and not just the symbolic annual Anglican penance. At the age of 30, you went to Father Robert with your first real confession. After reciting a perfunctory absolution, Father was silent for a very long moment. He then took a grave tone.

“This is a serious sin, George. In your heart, you are bearing false witness about an innocent person. Colleen is entirely innocent. She is the best wife a man could have – other than mine, of course. I can’t tell you how I know, but you know that I hear a lot of confessions from a lot of people in this church. I also understand people. I would bet my life on it. You must overcome this sin. It will destroy your body and soul, if you give in to it. In my opinion, it’s as bad as actual adultery. I might even feel better about your situation if you were going to prostitutes – but had no suspicions about your wife. You remember the story about the Prodigal Son?”

“Of course.”

“So, you remember that Jesus was talking to the Pharisees. The story is actually about the *two* sons, not just the famous prodigal one. Read the story

again. The younger brother – the prodigal son – gets saved. But the story doesn't say what happens to the elder brother. The last thing we hear from the elder brother is anger. How he followed all the rules and 'slaved away' for his father. And how angry he is with his father. How angry he is that his father welcomed the younger brother back. We don't see any repentance from the elder brother. The parable was a warning to the Pharisees."



"Are you saying that I'm a Pharisee?"

"No. But you're definitely an elder brother, George. Your biggest temptation is to think that because you follow the rules – and I believe you

do, as well as anyone does – you are thereby earning God’s Grace. Which is God’s free gift. Given to anyone. And you’re tempted to look down on the prodigals. Am I right? Or am I right?”

He was right. You nodded. Then you added, “You’re right. I’m the elder brother.”

For penance, Father gave you a permanent assignment. Any time a suspicion came to your mind, after asking God for forgiveness, you had to do something for Colleen. You took her on more dates and bought her flowers – often in violation of your Ramsey budget. You did chores for her. You took the kids off her hands. You did things her way sometimes when she had a different opinion about something. (The biggest was to enroll your kids at the Lutheran school, and to go to the praise-and-worship services once a month.) You gave her compliments. You tried to apologize for any unkind words you had uttered recently. You worked to remedy your tendency to be inattentive. (Father said, “You’re a bookworm, George. And you work long hours. You have to pay more attention to your wife.”)

The penance worked, most of the time, in a virtual circle. For the first time in your life since your adolescent masturbations, you felt guilt. The guilt made you seek penance, and the penance assuaged your guilt. (Unlike more extreme theologians in the Reformed tradition, you believed that guilt could in fact be a productive feeling.)

Ironically perhaps, your lingering suspicions made you crave sex in a way you had not before. You also worked harder to make sure Colleen had

orgasms. Maybe it was an urge to assert your ownership over her sexuality. The socio-biologists would say you were trying to ensure that any of her offspring were actually yours. Whatever it was, it worked. You had sex more often. And judging from Colleen's physical reactions, it seemed to be better sex.

AS YOU ENTER the second decade of the alien experiment, things are good in America. In fact, given your natural pessimism and tendency toward nostalgia, things are much better than you had expected.

The National Bureau of Economic Research no longer gets any government funding, but its old functions have been sustained by a consortium of university economics departments and think tanks. According to its consensus statistics, the American economy has been growing at about four percent per year, measured in terms of per-capita real income. The Great Adjustment took four years to get America back to pre-experiment income levels, but now, the average American's income is on track to double in two decades.

Your own family income has increased rapidly, with Colleen's promotion to manager of a team of 20 lab techs. When your elderly neighbor across the street dies, you borrow cash from Philip and Eliza and buy his house. (Philip and Eliza are now wealthy – at least temporarily – from the capital that has flowed into Philip's AI startup. They have bought a ridiculous Italianate mansion in the Biltmore Estates.) Your new house will need some

fixing up, but now your kids have their own rooms and indulgent grandparent-babysitters across the street.

With more disposable income in the donor class, the Irish library has been able to fund new exhibits – such as one on Irish weaponry – that attract large crowds. The old cottage on the campus has been converted into a reservation-only rustic pub that attracts hipsters. An unused room facing Central Avenue has been converted into a permanent Virtual Ireland “experience” that allows visitors to feel like they are visiting various Irish monuments and bucolic settings. (It’s especially popular in the summer, when visitors can escape the Phoenix heat and feel the cold damp of the Irish climate.)

Although America seems to be doing great, it’s unclear whether things will remain that way. Now that the aliens have stopped tinkering with people’s minds, old attitudes are reasserting themselves. It seems that people are naturally hardwired to be attracted to a wide range of ideologies and policies. In recent polls, only 30 percent of Americans describe themselves as paleo-conservatives. Despite the stunning economic growth of the past half decade – which has greatly boosted the income of the average working American – many people are unsatisfied and envious of those who are significantly wealthier. As a result, the old varieties of leftism have begun to reemerge.

In recent polls, 40 percent of respondents described themselves as liberals, progressives or socialists. Asked how satisfied they were with the option of being able to “vote with their feet” and move to more left-leaning States,

well over half described themselves as “unsatisfied” and said it was a mistake to dismantle the national Welfare State. They complain that the more paleo States are not doing enough to alleviate poverty, reduce concentrations of income and wealth, protect the environment, or combat racism and sexism. They complain about gun violence – though violent crime in paleo States has declined to levels not seen since the 1950s. They complain about restrictions on abortion, increased surveillance, police harassment, and erosion of the separation of church and state.

From your point of view, the good news is that in total, only a minority of Americans – about one third – is strongly interested in reestablishing the old national power structure. The emerging neo-conservatives, who are about ten percent of the population, complain that America has abandoned its allies and made the world less stable. (To you, the world seems to be at least as stable as it was before.) But as far as you know, none of the new neo-con pundits has expressed any eagerness to recreate the old national Welfare State as a *quid pro quo* for increased national military spending.

The libertarians – another ten percent of the population – are entirely opposed to bringing back the old system, even if they’re concerned that civil liberties are not adequately protected in hard paleo States and that economic liberties are not adequately protected in the prog States. The final ten percent of the population – some are centrists, others are uninformed or apathetic about politics – are mostly satisfied with the economy and the option of voting with their feet.

Nationalist conservatism seems to have disappeared completely. Some observers argue that the nat-con “movement” was a cult of personality that fell apart when the Trumpies (suddenly) became paleo-cons. Others argue that the rapid implosion of the federal government channeled nat-con energies into state and local policy debates about how to implement conservative values.

And, people really have been voting with their feet. The pre-experiment phenomenon known as the Big Sort – in which many Americans had moved to States that fit their cultural and political preferences – has become the Great Sort. Over the past decade, 15 million of America’s poorest and sickest people have moved from paleo to prog States to gain access to more generous welfare benefits. Another ten million people – mostly conservatives, libertarians, and nonideological persons looking for lower taxes and lighter regulations – have moved from prog to paleo States. People also sort within States. In Arizona, the more liberal and libertarian sorts continue to move to Tucson, Flagstaff, Bisbee and other locales where drug use and hippie lifestyles are tolerated or encouraged.

Not all the local sorting is voluntary. Arizona, like two dozen other paleo States, has set up a system of rural work camps to move the homeless out of cities. In Arizona, the camps are usually at higher elevations, to keep the residents out of extreme heat in the summers. The tiny plywood shacks at the camps generally do not have air conditioning, and they have only rudimentary heating. The campers are forced to get up early every morning and build roads. The roads usually go to nowhere, paving the century-old jeep tracks and mining roads that crisscross the countryside. Some of the

projects are entirely whimsical, such as the “ziggurats” – roads that circle up to the top of the mesas and cinder-cone volcanos that dot the landscape in the boonies. The projects are deliberately labor-intensive, with workers using hand-cranked concrete and asphalt mixers.

Most of the camp superintendents make some effort to keep drugs and alcohol out of the camps and work sites, though some camps with lax supervision develop reputations as “party camps.” More controversially, some superintendents routinely dose mentally ill residents with anti-psychotic drugs and other pharmaceuticals. The practice is known as “darting,” because the drugs are often administered from a dart gun. Under Arizona law, the darting of “five strikers” is protected by Good Samaritan statutes.

In Arizona, investigative journalists and documentary filmmakers are encouraged to monitor conditions at the work camps – in part because the Legislature does not want to spend much money on homeless advocates. There are many success stories about people who get sane and sober and develop work ethics in the camps. But there are also plenty of failures. Camps routinely ship out the most addicted, violent, and insane campers to prog States. California is the default destination, but when California begins tightening its border checkpoints (originally set up to keep guns out), Arizona camps and prisons begin shipping people to destinations in the Pacific Northwest and even as far as Illinois and the East Coast.

As for its own borders, Arizona is simultaneously tight and open. On the one hand, people entering Arizona must provide proof of clean criminal

records, as well as proof of residence, hotel deposits, or employment (though apparently “decent” people are routinely waived through checkpoints). On the other hand, Arizona allows up to a quarter million Mexican and Central American nationals per year to enter as non-voting guest workers, if they can provide proof of clean criminal records, employment, and residence with family members or in employer-provided housing.

One result of the tight-and-open policy is that Arizona has become a remarkably safe place to live, with the lowest levels of per-capita violent crime in its recorded history. A recent factoid suggests that Arizona is now as safe as Sweden or Denmark.

Another result is that having plenty of low-skilled labor makes the cost of living in Arizona lower than it is in paleo States with stricter immigration policies. Middle-class Arizona families have Mexican or Central American guest workers doing yard work or helping with home remodels. In upper-middle families, *domésticas* help with babysitting and housework. (You and Colleen are not quite able to afford one, and in any case, it’s a source of disagreement: Colleen wants to get a helper, while you believe that the family should be more self-sufficient.)

By contrast, restrictionist States like Nebraska (“Nebritzerland”) have huge labor shortages. According to one recent factoid, Nebraska now has three times as many self-operating harvest combines as human beings. Cross-country drivers who pass through Nebraska on the toll roads that have replaced the old I-80 complain about the lack of mom-and-pop diners and

even chain restaurants. Rest-stop vending machines have some great options for hot food, but the human element is gone.

DESPITE AMPLE EVIDENCE that Arizonans are safer and more sober and industrious than they were in any of the “good old days,” the paleo nostalgists in the supper club still find much to complain about. Although church attendance is significantly higher after the Great Adjustment, the clubbers share your complaint that many people go to church primarily to maintain their connection to a social safety net. The Catholics in the club complain that Mexican and Latin American Catholics are the “wrong kind” of Catholics: they hold onto many superstitions that have been condemned by the Catechism and pray to “saints” who have not been canonized. The Reformed Christians in the club complain that their churches are becoming too “works-based,” rather than Grace-based. And everyone complains that The Kids These Days continue to grow up without learning how to read a text carefully and extract its meaning.

Technological developments continue to trouble you and the other supper clubbers. On the one hand, it’s hard to complain about the new drugs and therapies for dementia and cancer.

American pharmaceutical companies – including the one that funds Colleen’s lab – have developed several new drugs that have pushed back the onset of cognitive decline in dementia patients by at least a decade. With cheap and accurate early diagnostic scans, the drugs have given tens of millions of Americans (and soon, billions around the world) a strong chance

of preserving their rationality in old age. Your mom, who has several genetic markers for Alzheimer's, now goes in every six months for scans. Previously, she had lived in dread of getting old, and had even retired early on the assumption that she would soon enter the "twilight." Now, she has gone back to work at the chip plant – though she does take more vacations than she used to.

Hundreds of drugs and therapies have been developed to target individual cancers. Most promisingly, several good broad-spectrum therapies have been developed. The latest ones use AI-guided "seek-and-kill" (SAK) microbots to destroy a wide range of tumors, including tiny ones. In a sense, SAK is invasive – the microbots are deployed intravenously, and they do some microscopic damage to surrounding tissue – but the damage is minimal, and some of the newer bots can be left on "standby" in the body for years, ready to be activated when new tumors are detected.

Given the great results of cheap and accurate diagnostics, every insurance plan in the country now recommends – or requires – an annual panel of diagnostic scans. It's hard to complain about that.

On the other hand, you and the supper clubbers feel that the new Scan Culture seems to be going to perverse extremes. Self-described "scanboys" and "scangirls" (or just "scanners," for those who want to be gender-neutral) hang out at scan centers, which are becoming at least as ubiquitous as fitness centers (to which they are often attached). Millions of people post daily on social media from the coffee lounges and gyms at the centers, showing off their latest reports along with bulging biceps (men) and sculpted shoulders

(women). Others use hashtags like #ScannedTannedAndReady when announcing that they're heading to singles venues or off on vacation.

For you and the supper clubbers, Scan Culture is the latest version of the old problem with modern and postmodern culture: people think they're going to live forever and neglect any devotion to the Permanent Things. When people are not pursuing wealth and sex and other pleasures, their spiritual efforts are limited to forms of "self-actualization." You've always found the "spirituality" of yoga – and gym culture, in general – to be annoying.

(You don't have any objection to "living in the present moment," rightly understood. As C.S. Lewis stated, the present is the only moment that intersects with the Eternal. The devil loves to keep human beings mired in guilt about their pasts or obsessed with their futures. But when a person is truly living in the present, he is aware of the Divine, and of his tiny, ordained place in the great expanse of Providence. He is not supposed to be reveling in how cut his abs are.)

The supper clubbers also complain about the people and governments in other States, especially California ("Gomorrahhifornia"). Untethered to the rest of America, and with the Great Sort reinforcing demographics, the people of California are busy creating a Euro-style progressive Welfare State. The most obvious targets for the supper clubbers are California's social and moral policies, which include government-subsidized abortion, euthanasia, and transsexual surgery.

Aside from euthanasia and surgical abortion – which are illegal in Arizona – the main difference is cultural. The vast bulk of Arizonans are vaguely libertarian. Or perhaps we should say they are “propertarian” – they generally think that people should be free to do what they want on their own property but should not expect the rest of society to affirm their lifestyles. For example, gay and polyamorous marriages are not recognized in Arizona, but gays and polys can use trusts to achieve community property and other features of legal marriage. In California, by contrast, the state calendar is stuffed with official celebrations and paid holidays for various ethnicities and lifestyles. (The latest addition to the calendar has been to make November “Chinese Inclusion Month,” as a correction to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and to curry favor with the People’s Republic, on which California is highly dependent for the solar panels and batteries it needs in its quest to someday abolish fossil fuels.)

The California Assembly has established a universal basic income (UBI) of \$1,000 a month, allowing drug addicts and other loafers to subsist in idleness. The Assembly has also solidified CaliCare, its single-payer health system based on the old Canadian model. The system outlaws private insurance and assigns global budgets to regional health collectives that are based around hospitals. California offers to let other prog States piggyback onto its regulatory, welfare, and health systems, as part of what it calls the Progressive Policies Compact. Washington and Oregon join California’s health networks and agree to contribute tax revenue to support the system. But they choose to go their own way on energy regulations and they choose to set up their own welfare systems, rather than participate in California’s UBI. Washington and Oregon also have more restrictions on immigration

than California does. California has absorbed ten million new immigrants over the past decade, and its population is set to double in 20 years compared to what it was before the experiment. (The clubbers often argue that California is attracting the “wrong kind” of immigrant, compared with Arizona’s more selective policies.)

One recurring topic at the supper club is whether America is still America, rather than a bunch of separate countries. The eternal question: *E pluribus unum*? The more paleo members – including you – are optimistic. The new federalism seems to be working well, and there is no big movement to re-nationalize the country. Others are more pessimistic. The main concern is that huge numbers of immigrants in places such as California will eventually swamp the US House of Representatives. But the Senate is still dominated by the low-population paleo States, and with the repeal of the Seventeenth Amendment, most Senators are chosen by conservative state legislatures. The pessimists are also concerned that the cultural influence of the populous prog States will undermine morality in paleo States. (Most blockbuster movies and arty films are still made in California – with unionized human labor. But AI has begun to level that playing field: conservative filmmakers can easily pirate the best plots and visuals and tweak plots to uphold traditional values.)

The true paleos in the club also warn the handwringers against the problem of telescoping morality. After all, the old liberal-neocon War State was built in part on the notion that the United States needed to fix every human rights violation in every corner of the globe. And, almost all the members

condemn the (very rare) pro-life extremists who travel across state borders to kill abortionists or bomb abortuaries in prog States.

THINGS WITH COLLEEN get more difficult. You sometimes think of Philip's best man speech, in which he warned that women always change. Colleen seems to go through a new fad every year.

The latest is vegetarianism, which she has adopted after reading a book by a libertarian college professor named Huemer. Most of the time, Colleen doesn't try to enlist you in her fads. But this time, she pesters you to read the book. From your marginalia, she can tell when you've finished it. She sets up a lunch date downtown, which signals that she wants to talk. She likes to have contentious discussions in public places. Sometimes you think it's a way of having the discussion in neutral territory. Part of it is to avoid hashing out family policy in front of the kids. (You're sure she wants to change the family diet.) You meet at a cafe near work and order a breakfast sandwich with Spanish *chorizo* on it. She orders something with tofu.

"What did you think of the Huemer book?"

"I found the arguments persuasive – up to a point. But it's typical libertarian stuff: the product of taking rational principles too far, unmoored to revelation or received wisdom."

"I think he makes a convincing case that we should avoid cruelty to animals."

“Does anyone actually argue *for* cruelty to animals?”

“No, of course not. But the question is whether the benefits we get from eating meat outweigh the harm from the cruelty inflicted on animals.”

“You know that I’m not a utilitarian. It’s an abuse of rationalism. Let’s go scriptural. God clearly set up the world so that we would eat animals. Maybe that’s just a post-Eden thing. But Christ didn’t repeal that. Or Peter. Or Paul. Paul did mention not eating blood. But you know me. I’m grossed out by blood sausage. And medium rare is too rare for me.”

“They didn’t know what modern factory farming would be like. You did read those parts?”

You nod. You’re chewing on a piece of the *chorizo*, which tastes amazing. But you’re also hoping that the Spanish pig lived a good life before making its way to your sandwich.

“In one of the psalms,” Colleen says, “the psalmist says that God saves both people and animals.”

“Then we shouldn’t worry too much about them.”

“Or, we should recognize that they’re special to Him. We have a duty to treat them kindly.”

You ponder that and hope again for good things for the Spanish pig.

“I’m going vegetarian,” Colleen says. “Not full vegan, but I want the butter and the yogurt and cheese to be humanely raised.” In answer to the question forming in your mind she adds, “And I’m not cooking any meat for you. Or the family.”

You finish your sandwich in silence. You’re thinking less about the ethical questions of vegetarianism, and more about Colleen – the strange woman sitting across the table from you. You’re marveling at things that should be obvious. She is not you. She doesn’t think like you. It’s easy to forget those things, living in your mind, in your books, in your discussions with the supper clubbers. You’re somewhat frustrated with her new stance, and with the vehemence of her declaration that she will not cook meat for the family.

You’re supposed to be the head of the family, but you’ve never been a dictator. You need to be an Oakeshottian compromiser. A wise compromise will keep the peace and achieve a new, possibly stable balance in the family dynamic. It may also help with sex, which has been rare in recent weeks. You can go for long periods without it, but after a while, its absence becomes awkward. And right now, sitting across from this strange woman, the desire is building. We should say that you want to “make love” to your wife. But right now, you want to *fuck* this strange woman.

You tell Colleen that you’re not going to stop eating meat, but you’re going to try hard to avoid factory-farmed meat. You’ll do free-range and grass-fed meat and line-caught fish. You can afford it now. Instead of the “Meatless

Mondays” she suggested, you offer to make them “Manly Mondays.” You’ll cook for the family that night. You’ve never cooked much in the past, but you’ll cook meat or fish for the family. She can just eat the salad and the vegetables.

Colleen seems to be very pleased with the compromise. You tell her that the Huemer book did make you think about taking up hunting and fishing as hobbies. She laughs.

“Hunting and fishing?”

It’s a bit absurd. You’re not an outdoorsman. You’re an *indoorsman*. You and Colleen joke about using Philip and Eliza’s money to send you on safari so you can become Hemingway.

“At least you have the mustache.”

You’re wondering if you might actually try hunting.

“New topic,” she says. “I’m thinking about working from home this afternoon...” That’s code. If you can leave the library early, you and Colleen will have the house to yourselves for an hour before she goes to pick the kids up from school. You have a genealogy client coming in at two, but you really want to have sex. You pass the client off to a volunteer and drive home.

AS YOU ENTER middle age, it's the third decade of the alien experiment. America has continued with the paleo model. The federal government now spends roughly two percent of GDP, down from a peak of 25 percent. The federal clock has effectively been turned back to the late 19th century.

The prog and paleo States establish different economic trajectories. The prog States are growing at a rate of one percent per year in terms of real per-capita GDP. Their growth is slowed somewhat by their efforts to maintain relatively generous public health, retirement, poverty, and unemployment benefits (including UBIs) – and by the fact that millions of poorer and sicker Americans have moved to those States. Their growth is also slowed by heavy regulatory burdens.

Immigration seems to cut both ways for the prog States: talented young immigrants feel more welcome there, but the prog States also attract more elderly and sick immigrants. The children of the immigrants are a burden on expensive government school systems, but many of the talented students stick around (close to their families), get good jobs, and pay taxes. In general, the world's creditors seem to believe that the prog States – despite their deficit spending – will keep their fiscal houses in order, and creditors are willing to lend to them at relatively low interest rates.

The paleo States are growing more quickly, at an average rate of over two percent annually. The main reasons are low tax and regulatory burdens, which also attract many businesses, entrepreneurs, and tax refugees from the prog States.

The big differences in regulatory regimes create some friction in interstate trade between paleo and prog States. For example, most of America's car manufacturers – and the foreign manufacturers who use American labor to finish foreign cars – produce two fleets of cars: “red” cars that have relatively high emissions and “blue” cars that conform to California emissions standards. Theoretically, it would be more efficient for the manufacturers to produce a single fleet of cars under a single standard, but they have adjusted to the dual standards. Most car makers operate plants for higher-skilled labor in paleo States, and plants for lower-skilled labor in prog States.

For the most part, America is an interstate free-trade zone, despite the fact that the federal courts are no longer doing much to enforce the Interstate Commerce Clause. Powerful producer interests in many States do use state taxes and regulations to impose “nontariff barriers” on products made by competitors in other States. But it's hard for small countries/regions/States to run protectionist regimes. There is also a lot of smuggling between States, and the smuggling is hard to stop. Legislators in prog States complain constantly about *carbon smuggling*: for example, when people sneak cheap, high-energy refrigerators and appliances into California, New York, and other prog States. Legislators in paleo States complain that it's too easy for kids to install California-legal “porn chips” on their portable devices (similar to the way people used to switch SIM cards in their phones).

Differing immigration policies in the States continue to create some friction. Over the past two decades, 20 million permanent immigrants have arrived in

prog States. Under the rules of the Progressive Immigration Compact (PIC), 15 million of them have gotten vaccinated and paid a \$2,500 fee. The other five million have paid \$500 temporary entrance fees and gotten their vaccinations at border stations and airports, but they're technically illegal – they've stayed much longer than the six months they are officially allowed under the PIC.

From a conservative point of view, mass immigration has been chaotic in the open-border prog States. New immigrants need places to live, but the cities and towns in the prog States also tend to be surrounded by “green belts” in which development is highly restricted, if not prohibited. In theory, the problem is supposed to be solved with “infill,” but progressive local governments also tend to have strict zoning regulations, occupancy restrictions, and building codes. The result is that millions of poor immigrants have crowded illegally into existing housing, and hundreds of thousands squat in the green belts in tent cities and shantytowns amid huge piles of trash and the ever-present stench of raw sewage.

In response, progressive state and local governments have built massive public housing high-rises for the immigrants on condemned land, but the condemnations and the construction have been subject to long delays. Construction of the high-rises has been very expensive, given rigorous building codes and the pay scales put in place by the powerful labor unions in the prog States.

With scenes of prog-State squalor on the television and internet, the paleo States have become even more strict about immigration and have beefed up

their border-security budgets. Even though the labor interests in the paleo States have always tended to lean Democratic, many of them have switched parties to lobby to try to protect their wages from the flood of immigrant labor in the prog States.

In general, commerce runs smoothly between paleo States and between prog States. But at the borders between paleo and prog States, there are long lines of vehicles waiting for inspection. The lines are longer to get into the paleo States, but the prog States have retaliated by stepping up border inspections for noncompliant goods and for firearms.



The Conduits are a fascinating phenomenon. The old interstate freeways – I-10, I-40, I-70, I-80 and I-90 – serve as conduits for goods and immigrants from the prog States on the West Coast to prog States in the Midwest and the Eastern Seaboard. (Freight-only rail lines also carry goods across the country.) The Conduits are operated by private toll companies that pay hefty concession fees to the governments of the paleo States through which they run. Except in medical emergencies, to get off the Conduits, drivers must be citizens of States in the Border Security Compact, with exceptions for persons with tourist visas. Legislators in the paleo States that host the Conduits sometimes complain about lapses of security along the Conduits – but the concession fees from the toll companies are high enough to keep them mostly happy. (Michigan, Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania have set up a Lake Guard on the Great Lakes to deter boatloads of migrants from diverting from their destinations in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois. But it's mostly political theater: immigrants have long since learned to avoid States in which they're not welcome.)

Despite the interstate friction, things have been working out. The American economy booms in different ways in different regions. For the first time in a century, the US population stops aging. Most of the immigrants to prog States are young. The use of public services by the immigrants does cause fiscal problems in prog States, but the immigrants also provide cheap labor for nursing homes and hundreds of other services. Meanwhile, there has been a baby boom in paleo States, and especially in the Bible Belt. In your own family, George and Caitríona have married young and will soon start

having children. (Maeve and William are still in college, but seem to be more career-oriented, like Colleen.)

Despite heavy regulatory burdens, cheap immigrant labor has begun to create strong manufacturing sectors in the prog States. At the same time, the paleo States have bustling tech hubs, especially in the Houston-Dallas corridor and along the Potomac. The paleo States become tax havens for a million wealthier immigrants. Most of the tax refugees come from Europe and East Asia, but there are also tens of thousands from India, Africa, and Latin America. Under the paleo Border Security Compact, the price of fast-track citizenship for foreigners is \$100,000. (Officially, there's no fee for "legacy" US citizens from prog States to move to the States in the BSC. But the extensive documentation can cost upwards of \$10,000.) The foreign tax refugees tend to become entrepreneurs and investors. Many of them invest in manufacturing and service businesses in the prog States, often employing their former countrymen. Many have apartments in the prog States, but – like the domestic rich – they often prefer to reside and vacation at large country houses or mountain cabins in paleo States.

The prog States have also begun decoupling themselves from the national gold standard. It's an old story, one that has taken place many times over the centuries. Governments – especially progressive ones – tend to run deficits. Governments also regulate banks. So, they pressure the banks under their control to lend them money at lower rates of interest than free markets would offer. (The banks aren't exactly innocent, either: human beings have always found ways to build mountains of paper and digital credit on top of any monetary base.) California and other prog States that

are heavy in manufacturing for export also want to be able to reduce the prices of their exports faster than allowed by the natural adjustments made by international currency markets to the gold-backed US dollar.

The compromise achieved in Congress is to allow States to charter their own banks and issue their own currencies. On the West Coast, people tend to use California's new Golden Bear. In the Northeast, people use New York's new Empire. Both are officially "gold-backed," but at floating exchange rates to gold. By law, the "Big Five" federal banking consortiums – through which the federal government does its business – must strictly silo their holdings of Golden Bears and Empires and foreign currencies, as well as any assets denominated in those currencies.

The result is a bifurcation of American money. Risk-averse international and domestic savers and investors tend to favor gold-backed US dollars and dollar-denominated financial instruments as safe havens for their wealth. Risk-seeking investors chase higher yields from bonds denominated in Bears and Empires, or do arbitrage between the currencies.

MIDDLE AGE HAS made a big impact on Colleen. She now has a gym membership and works out for at least an hour every day. She also takes about a dozen nutritional supplements. You are skeptical about these developments, but part of the good news is that she's still a very private person and doesn't post exercise selfies on social media. The other good news is that she more energy for sex. You don't want as much sex as she does, but a reasonable amount of friskiness is not a bad trait in a wife.

One night, Colleen returns from a two-week work trip to Houston. It's long after dinner, and you're reading in the living room. When she walks in, you do a double take. When she left, her hair was long and wavy, with white streaks coming from her widow's peak and over her ears. Now it's dyed black and cut into a layered bob that stops halfway on her neck. She pats the sharp bottom of the bob.

"What do you think?"

"It looks great." You put on a smile. But your feelings are mixed. On the one hand, you find it disturbing. You liked her hair long. It was soft, comfortable, maternal. This is shocking. If not for her smile, it would be severe. The new cut shows off her shoulders. She is fit and tan and seems to be bursting out of her tight tube dress. You are half horrified by the strange woman in your living room, but you also want her. You remember that Maeve and William are in the house. They're probably still up, studying. The house is not very big.

"Really?" She senses your ambiguity.

"Yes. I think we should go check for mold in the bungalow."

"It's probably a bit dusty in there."

"I don't care."

When Colleen undresses in the bungalow, you notice that her breasts are as fuller and firmer than they were the first time she was pregnant. She must have gotten implants on her recent trip to Houston. They're not stripper or comic-book implants, but they're implants. You feel a mixture of lust and rage. She makes most of the money now, but shouldn't she have at least consulted you before doing that? What will people think? What about the kids? Why does she think she needs to be more attractive, more sexual? Aging is the natural order. Old people are not supposed to be hypersexual. Has she really done it for you? Or someone else? The old jealousy surges in you.

The sex is furious. Lying together afterwards, you fumble for something to say.

"You're... *pneumatic*."

"Am I more of a Lenina, or a Linda? Or am I a Fanny?"

Your gut right now is to say Fanny, but you're not going to say that. No need to pile on. Colleen must know that *pneumatic* is not a positive reference for you. And you're wondering how she recognized the reference and how she remembers the characters from *Brave New World*. You both read the book at the charter school. That was 30 years ago. You've reread the book a half dozen times since then, but Colleen almost never reads books.

“I’m surprised you recognized the reference. Did you reread the book recently?”

“I think it’s the Cerebritolo. It’s a nootropic. I got a script for it a few weeks ago from Alain. It’s amazing what I’m starting to remember. Sophomore year I wrote a paper about the women in *Brave New World*. But up until a few days ago, I couldn’t have told you what their names were. It’s been great for work.”

The Arizona Legislature hasn’t legalized Cerebritolo yet. The legislators have expressed some concerns about the long-term effects of the drug, but mostly it’s a moral issue: they’re concerned that people will get addicted and turn out like the Bradley Cooper character in *Limitless*. Alain must have gotten her a script from a prog State. Alain is the chief medical officer at the genetics lab. He’s 30-something and immigrated five years ago from France.

At the moment, you’re not especially bothered by the idea that your wife is taking an illegal drug. Right now, you’re struggling to contain jealous thoughts. Alain’s a very nerdy Frenchman, and uglier than Sartre. But if you’re any guide, Colleen must have a soft spot for nerds. You’re a middle-aged man with gray flecks in his mustache who wears tweed and occasionally smokes a pipe. Is she fucking Alain? You fight to purge the thought. You really like Alain. He’s not all science. He visits the library sometimes and checks out books. He has been following a Gallic-Celtic thread in his recreational reading. Maybe it’s fueled by Cerebritol? Politically, he has Euro-socialist instincts, but he grapples with them. There

are very good reasons he's working in Arizona, rather than France. And he respects the classics of world literature. If Colleen has to fuck another man, better Alain than some beefy idiot from her gym.

"What's wrong, Georgie?"

You think for a while before responding. You have to make it about you, not about her.

"I'm becoming an old man. If you keep this up, you're going to need somebody new. Somebody athletic."

She laughs.

"You've always been an old man, Georgie. And I love that about you. I'm just not ready to be an old woman yet. I want you to *want* me."

She offers her left hand, and you take it in yours. It's small and tan, and the fingers have little callouses from the barbells she uses. Despite her supplements and moisturizers, you can see that the skin on the back is thinning, with tiny wrinkles across the surface. Her freckles have gotten darker.

"How much is the Cerebritolo?"

“It’s about four hundred a month right now,” she says. “But it fits in our budget. And it improves my productivity at work. I’m thinking that Dave Ramsey would approve.”

“Can Alain get me a script?”

She says she’s sure he can. And it’s not technically illegal. Alain has an “Arizona Sandbox” license to run tests of new drugs on small samples of people.

“Shucks. I was kinda hoping to do an illegal drug. I never have.”

She laughs.

“My tweedy old man wants to do an illegal drug. This is fun.”

As she laughs, her breasts jiggle slightly. They’re plausible – just short of being absurdly hard. The cosmetic surgeon in Houston did a great job. It turns out that she really was on a work trip, but had a few days of down time, and decided on a whim to get a boob job. They’re next-gen implants, with literally pneumatic mechanisms. From her smart phone, she can inflate or deflate them by varying degrees of volume, up to 30 percent, within minutes. She can adjust their volume to fit different dresses and tops. As you talk about her boobs, you notice that the small nipples are erect, standing attentively on their symmetrical half globes. She wants you again.

“But I’m not getting a dick job.”

She moves her hand down.

“I think this one will work just fine.”

And it does. This time, you’re making love to Colleen, not fucking a strange pneumatic woman.

CEREBRITOLO IS SUBTLE. The nootropic effects are better than nicotine, and without the highs and lows. And it’s not physically addictive. When you and Colleen quit occasionally (you take November and June off every year to have “stupid months”) you don’t feel bad. You just notice after a week that you’re not quite as sharp as you were. You have more trouble remembering things. You’re not stupid. You’re just going back to the “old normal.” You have less energy for work and for reading, but it’s nice to slow down for a vacation.

Cerebritolo is many magnitudes less dramatic than the drug in *Limitless*, but it’s still a game-changer. With the Arizona Legislature still vacillating about fully legalizing (or even medicalizing) the drug, most of your colleagues and competitors are not as sharp. You work faster and come up with more innovations. Part of the reason you come up with more innovations at work is that you are absorbing a lot more information – and from more diverse sources. You find yourself listening more carefully to what coworkers and donors are saying. You think more about how to solve their problems and achieve their goals.

Three months after you start taking the drug, you have a good conversation with a low-level donor and inspire him to cut the library a check for \$500,000 to put on two new exhibits. Your board gives you a \$20,000 pay raise and a promotion to a position that includes fundraising. You've always hated fundraising. Before Cerebritolo, you probably would've declined the promotion – even at the risk of losing your job. Now, you see fundraising as a fun exercise in problem-solving. You give such thoughtful advice to donors that several of them consult you regularly for your thoughts on other charities in their donation portfolios.

You read more quickly now, and you read more broadly, including news articles about science and economics. You read many of the historical classics of Chinese and Indian literature (in English). You read more 21st-century literature (and attempts at literature). Previously, the only books you had read on the *New York Times* list of best 21st-century books were a couple of Irish-themed works that happened to overlap with the syllabus for the library's book club. (The best was Keefe's *Say Nothing*, about the Troubles in Ulster. You liked it so much you also listened to the audio version, narrated in Matthew Blaney's entertaining brogue.)

You also read more 19th- and 20th-century books, including ones that haven't make the cut for the Best Of and Great Books lists. As you do, you are aware that you are surfing in the widening gyre. It's fun, but also dangerous. You understand that the "classics" are to some extent a product of *survival bias*. We think certain works are great because they happen to be the only things we have from a given era. For example, Homer's works

appear to be almost the only ones that survived the Greek Dark Ages. From a postmodern perspective, Homer should not be privileged: scraps of trashy doggerel from that same period should receive equal attention.

Maybe. But the problem with the 19th and 20th centuries is that there's just WAY TOO MUCH, even with Cerebritolo. As you surf the widening gyre, you use AI surveys to focus on the books that large numbers of critics from the last two centuries considered to be near-greats. The Top 500, rather than the Top 100. In a strange burst of extroversion – perhaps brought on by the drug – you want some of your reading to be relevant to other people. You want to read books that a significant number of readers and critics are still reading.

Thanks to Cerebritolo, you even finish *Ulysses*. You have fun digging for the allusions and obscure references. When you're done, you conclude that you don't like the book. Thanks to your new extroversion, you decide to tell the world. You write a short paper titled, "*Ulysses* is Overrated." One of your donors gives the library a \$10K grant to promote the release of your paper, and you attract a small crowd of 200 lit buffs and Irish enthusiasts from several States. A thousand people watch remotely, including many in Ireland. One guy even tunes in from Turkish Kurdistan.

You start the discussion by acknowledging that the proposition "*Ulysses* is overrated" is itself overrated. Many reviewers from the 1920s onward have dismissed or hated the book, even as it rose to the top of the Best Of literary lists. (You also note the irony that your paper and the discussion are helping to maintain *Ulysses*' notoriety.)

The first prong of your argument is to cite dozens of *avant-garde* works from the late 19th and early 20th centuries to suggest that what Joyce was doing was not especially revolutionary. The second prong is a metaphor. You contend that if *Ulysses* achieved anything, it was to reach a kind of “South Pole” of postmodernity. And there’s no point in going to the literary South Pole. It’s a “Waste Land.” (The capital letters are a nod to Eliot.) Joyce got to the “South Pole” early (if not first) and discovered that there was nothing there. There’s no point to going back. You finish with a general attack on postmodernism and pomo lit, concluding that readers and critics should focus on books that actually tell stories, and tell them in ways that the average person can understand and enjoy. If books do interesting things with words, and go a little bit meta, that’s a bonus. You suggest that Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* is a better candidate for best book of the 20th century.

With your newfound intellectual energy, you also write poetry and fiction. Some of your poems are good enough to get published in journals and magazines. (Through your paleo connections, you get several published in *First Things* and *Modern Age*.)

Cerebritolo also seems to activate your body. You still hate gyms, but you go for long hikes on weekends with Colleen. Even in the sparse landscape of the Phoenix Mountain Park, you find yourself being endlessly curious about the variations of rocks and plants, and the way the light plays on the schist, quartzite and cinnabar during the golden hours early and late in the day. You are most fascinated by the time scales involved in what you see:

the ancient Precambrian basement rock, the products of the less-ancient volcanic uplifts, and the scarce remnants of sediment layers that were almost completely washed into the surrounding alluvial plains in more “recent” eons.

Sex is a similar phenomenon. Colleen is a complex geology, a slowly but constantly shifting combination of layers. She has girlish tectonic energy from her college days, but slowly aging skin from the sun. She has a stronger jawline from strenuous workouts, her lean diet, and the encroaching menopause she is fighting to slow down. And she has the “volcanic uplift” of her gym muscles and her artificial breasts. Thanks in part to Cerebritolo, which subtly boosts your sex drive, you rediscover these things at least three days a week. You used to find the thought of middle-aged sexuality undignified – a desperate struggle against nature and death – but now, it seems natural.

Cerebritolo doesn’t change your core paleo-con ideology. But you’re more likely now to be curious about how people could come to such different conclusions, and more likely to cut them some slack. Your explorations in ideology are like your explorations in literature: you venture out from your core for the first time since the alien abduction, trying to discover the near-greats. You find yourself reading a lot of works by libertarians, left-liberals, and neo-conservatives. (As the decades pass, nationalist conservatism looks more and more like it was a brief flash in the American pan – though your imposition of a paleo-con regime may have contributed to the brevity of the nat-con moment.)

Most strikingly, you now have more curiosity about utilitarian arguments. Rather than retreating reflexively to first principles, you now have the patience to look at data studies. You rarely find that the data lead you to new conclusions – you’re still subject to confirmation bias – but the world feels more gray than it used to. You had never objected to some kind of minimal Welfare State, but now you find yourself sifting through the data from different American States and foreign countries, trying to identify governments that have achieved something close to optimal, as measured by economic growth, well-being statistics, social cohesion, and various indicators of morality. The studies you read seem to be divided according to the ideologies of their authors. Most left-liberals (and some soft libertarians) nowadays favor direct cash support to the poor, with few strings attached. Conservatives and progressives favor programs that try to incentivize behavior. (For progressives, the programs have the added virtue of requiring more government workers.) You don’t come to any hard conclusions.

IN THE FOURTH decade of the alien experiment, American society goes through a lot of changes. With the frequent advent of better drugs and therapies, middle age goes on for a long time for most Americans. (The new stuff eventually gets to the rest of the world, but America is far and away the most innovative country on the planet and has tens of millions of consumers – especially in the paleo States – who have the surplus wealth to splurge on the New New Thing.)

As generations of paleos predicted, longevity is socially disruptive. People from their 30s to their 80s behave like 20-somethings who are “not ready to

settle down.” With better health and with brains fueled by nootropic drugs, people of all ages switch jobs often, as much to sate their curiosities as to look for better opportunities. The good news is that young – and *young-feeling* – Americans are mentally flexible and physically energetic. They adjust quickly to the challenges of robotics and AI, which routinely take old jobs away from human workers.

In earlier generations, when big shocks hit American labor markets, existing workers were too old and too mentally sluggish to adjust well – as happened at the turn of the century, when a billion Chinese workers rapidly entered the world’s labor markets and depressed the nominal wages of Americans working in manufacturing sectors. Nowadays, the shocks are continuous and small, and the adjustments are continuous and small. Company leaders use AI advisors to routinely game out change scenarios on their companies’ “digital twins.” And they focus on their “auto cores” – functions that can continue smoothly regardless of changing personnel.

Much of the potential stress from robotics and AI is mitigated by market forces. Although nominal wages fall, the lower prices for manufactured goods and services caused by robots and AI mean that real wages (wages adjusted for the effects of prices) actually rise: workers may have fewer dollars, but the dollars buy more than they did before. Say’s Law (supply tends to create its own demand) seems to work in the long run: when consumers save money on the cheap goods and services produced by robots and AI, they then demand new services provided by the supply of displaced workers.

At the same time, the Baumol Effect seems to be working to keep income inequality from skyrocketing. As the economist William Baumol noted a century ago, labor compensation rises over time even in industries in which labor productivity does not increase. The original example used by Baumol was that of a Beethoven string quartet. The productivity of the musicians playing the quartet has not increased in the two centuries since Beethoven wrote the piece. And yet, the compensation paid to the musicians today is 40 or 50 times higher in real terms than it was back then.

From the viewpoint of workers who are not in relatively productive sectors – for example, people working at Irish libraries – the Baumol Effect is a feature, not a bug. If a person enjoys being a musician or working at a library, much of his or her salary derives from the fact that with sufficient training he or she could potentially be employed as an AI programmer or a robotics engineer. To keep people playing live music and working in libraries, consumers and donors must pay them well enough to keep them from doing other things. (The Baumol Effect also helps to explain – at least partially – why people working for governments usually make competitive salaries, even if they are doing some of the least productive jobs in society.)

Say's Law and the Baumol Effect have created millions of new niche jobs. For example, although basic food is incredibly cheap, consumers increasingly demand farm-to-table and field-to-table cuisine prepared with great care by farmer-chefs and hunter-chefs who can tell diners exactly how the food got to the plate. Aside from going on a single dove hunt – in which you shot at 30 birds and hit only one – you have not taken up hunting. But at Wingshot, one of your favorite restaurants, Chef Willy comes to your

table and shares stories and barrel-cam videos of him shooting the birds that you eat. Wingshot is open only from January to August, because Willy goes hunting all over North America from September to December. (After some persuasion, Colleen starts coming to Wingshot with you – and eating game birds. With Colleen, Willy is always very solemn about the “circle of life,” and only serves her birds that were killed instantly.)



As a serial entrepreneur in a constantly changing economy, Philip has gone through the life cycles of a dozen startups. His latest gig is more stable. His company does safety consulting for the new nuclear plant in San Luís, on the border south of Yuma, which also powers a sea water desalination facility on the Sea of Cortés. People have an inherent distrust of web-exposed AI

systems, and don't want their electrical power or water supply disrupted by glitches or hacks. Insurance for the nuclear plant is also massively expensive. The plant has hired Philip's company to run a digital twin that constantly models safety threats. (Unlike most twins, Philip's must be completely insulated from the actual operations of the plant, and he is constantly managing the secure transfer lag of almost-real-time operations data to the twin.)

Eliza is also on the payroll of the nuke plant and the desal facility. Her role is diplomatic. She travels constantly to every city and town in Northern Mexico with an earpiece and translator voice app, winning friends, listening to concerns and making tentative pledges on behalf of the sales team. Mexico is very market-oriented these days (and increasingly wealthy, as a result) so there is little chance that the country will try to nationalize the desal facility, which also provides clean and cheap water to much of Sonora and Baja California. But everybody Eliza meets is trying to work a better deal for water and power services. She uses an AI to help her keep track of how tentative pledges A through M might impact potential deals N through Z. (Contrary to Eliza's teenage fantasies, she and Philip have a very stable relationship, with three great kids and almost no drama.)

Despite the rapid adjustments of market mechanisms to constant economic shocks, labor agitators in prog States increasingly get a sympathetic hearing when they call on their politicians to provide subsidies to help displaced workers. The prog States dole out most of those subsidies as add-ons to their UBI programs. Thanks to AI systems, the basic UBIs and the add-ons are tracked with relative competence, and the add-ons are phased in and out

based on changing data. And thanks to nootropic and general health drugs and treatments, most subsidy recipients get bored sitting on their couches for too long and re-enter the workforce. Compared to historic welfare programs, the new systems in the prog States function relatively well.

Politicians in all States have strong urges to regulate. They're politicians, after all. But they have been slowed down by an American culture that generally favors *permissionless innovation*. For the most part, Americans want entrepreneurs to be free to invent and innovate, creating new goods and services in nearly every sector of the economy, including medicine, genetic engineering, flying cars, autonomous vehicles, robotics, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence. The would-be regulators are also slowed down by the fact of interstate competition: changes come quickly, and if innovators are blocked in one State, they can easily take their business to other States.

Except for carbon emissions regulations in the prog States, most American legislators have avoided embracing the Precautionary Principle: the idea that governments should preemptively ban new technologies or business practices until regulators have deemed them to be safe. That's good news for economic dynamism. If regulators block innovations *before* they are deployed, consumers will never know what they're missing, and never get a chance to weigh the benefits of the innovations against the risks and costs. If the principle had been dominant in 1900, legislators and regulators would probably not have allowed Henry Ford, the Wright Brothers, or Glenn Curtiss to mass-produce automobiles and airplanes (which were – and still are – genuinely dangerous machines). Thanks to permissionless innovation, the American economy is still among the most creative in the world.

In most States, moral and safety regulation tends to come after-the-fact, when the use (or abuse) of a new technology proves to have bad effects. For example, in the fourth decade, it becomes clear that too much exposure to virtual reality is strongly correlated with depression in teenagers, so governments pass regulations attempting to limit teens' exposure to VR. (In the paleo States, the emphasis is on attempting to block teens' exposure to VR porn.)

THE BIGGEST SOCIAL disruptions in this Brave New World are to sexuality and the traditional family. Wealth and longevity are challenges for traditional marriage – and to your worldview. For most of human history, as Hobbes wrote, life was “nasty, brutish and short.” Sex usually meant pregnancy. Pregnancy meant marriage. Marriage lasted 40 years, on average. Old age meant disability, and the need for many children, so that some would survive long enough to provide for elderly family members.

Everything is different now, with greater wealth and longevity. Life for most Americans – and increasingly, for most people on Earth – is pleasant, peaceful and relatively long. George and Caitríona have tried to follow the old model, marrying young, having children, going to church, and staying geographically close. (Early on, their families lived with Philip and Eliza in the mansion in the Biltmore Estates; now they live a few miles away, in the Baja Biltmore area.) But they have struggled with monogamy. George and Ramón (Cait's husband) struggled with extramarital affairs and VR porn

addictions until they found 12-step programs and targeted dopamine blockers.

Maeve and William are solidly in the post-paleo generation. Maeve works in Manhattan and Milan as a fashion designer, and William moves around to different States almost every year as a consultant in the “AI-human interface” industry. They don’t share any information about their sexual activities, but you can read between the lines. Longevity has brought on a recrudescence of the old Sexual Revolution. (Progs and other fans call it a time of “sexual flourishing.”) Without the Hobbesian biological and social constraints to incentivize monogamy, fewer people are lifelong monogamists. According to the latest statistics, national divorce rates among people ages 20 to 70 are around 65 percent – if people even bother to get married.

Although civil marriage contracts in paleo States still default to an unto-death-do-us-part “covenant marriage” model, many young people in paleo States avoid the statutory defaults. Contract law has a wide variety of other options that allow couples – and even groups of people – to design their unions as “projects” designed to achieve finite goals, such as child-rearing.

One of the blessings of the Paleo Revolution was that Americans had to become financially savvy in a hurry. Overwhelmingly, Americans – and especially those in paleo States – have become savers and investors from an early age. From a traditionalist point of view, the hidden curse to the massive surge in American financial literacy are the pre-nuptial defaults in savings, brokerage and trading accounts. The defaults ([click here](#), [click](#)

here, you're done) keep the individual as the sole owner of the accounts and name the new spouse as beneficiary only in the event of the owner's death. To override the defaults, married couples must sign multiple notarized "wet-signature" community property and power-of-attorney documents – with human witnesses and notaries on high-def surround video. Cultural conservatives have tried to popularize these events as "signing ceremonies," inspired in part by the Jewish tradition of *ketubah*. But most young people – and almost all older people (who have more accumulated assets at stake) – click through the defaults.

The only good news, from a conservative angle, is that abortions are extremely rare – even in prog States – because cheap and effective and ubiquitous contraceptives have almost eliminated unwanted pregnancies. (Of course, the Catholics in your supper club don't like the part about contraception, but there's nothing they can do.)

The new Sexual Revolution has even ushered in a new transgender movement. Culturally, Arizona and other paleo States are not very trans-friendly, but prog States champion the movement. On a weekend trip with Colleen to Manhattan Beach, a trans-kid waiter at a café tries to flirt with you. He is bold, and even hints at a threesome. ("What are... *WE*... doing tonight?") Colleen laughs. She is sympathetic to the new trans movement. She's sympathetic to everything new. You are uncomfortable, but the trans kid triggers some *pathos*. You can see the girl he wants to be. He looks somewhat like Caitríona, when she was a tall and gangly teenager.

For you as an individual, the good thing is that you seem to be blessed to be hardwired as a natural monogamist. That is very helpful. Even as you enter your early 70s (it's now the fifth decade of the alien experiment), the latest nootropics keep your sex drive going strong. Nowadays, most American women from the ages of 20 to 70 are at least somewhat attractive to you. Technology has made the people in the younger generations healthier, more slender, and passably smart.

In any case, Colleen keeps you busy on the sexual front. Like the trans waiter in Manhattan Beach, Colleen wants to be a teen girl. One of her favorite sex games these days is to put on a plaid skirt and a white oxford, put her hair in a ponytail (her hair is longer again), and call herself "teen Colleen," or "Lolita." You've never been that kind of pervert. Or any kind of pervert, really. And you're not into role-playing. But you don't have to dress up. In your customary tweed, you are a reluctant Humbert Humbert for her to seduce. You are not especially attracted to the "teen Colleen" – in any case, her pneumatic features are not those of a teen – but rather, to her beautiful desperation to be something she is not.

LONGEVITY IS NOT a huge challenge to your faith. For starters, at this point, it's clear that everyone is going to die eventually. Medical technology has succeeded in finding effective treatments for a wide variety of diseases, and in slowing down cellular senescence in almost all human organs. (People are more able nowadays to max out the Hayflick limits in various cells, but the upper limits have not been exceeded in dependable, replicable experiments in large study groups.) The number of people becoming high-

functioning centenarians has increased by a hundredfold. But so far, there are no verified cases of anyone living past 125.

Your own parents seem to be par for the course. Your mom died two years ago in a car accident, at the age of 96. She was driving with AI assistance on the scenic and curvy Highway 191 north of Morenci. She was hit by a reckless (human) driver who had disabled the safety controls on his car and was going at high speed. In the impact, her car was pushed off a cliff. (Accidents involving two AI-driven are exceedingly rare, and legislatures around the country routinely discuss – but haven’t yet passed – bills to ban human drivers.) Your mom was part of a trend: as people in their 80s and 90s remain active, and are less likely to die of disease, they are more likely to die in catastrophic accidents.

Your dad recently turned 100, but he is not really “high functioning.” He was first diagnosed with a form of Parkinson’s 30 years ago but refused at the time to get on any of the cutting-edge drugs (the manufacturers could not guarantee that fetal stem cells had not been used in any of the precursors). About 15 years ago, he started taking a great drug derived from a trace molecule found in breast milk, but he was already very disabled by the time he started taking it. He spends most days dozing in a chair while watching history videos and uses an electrode suit and a walker to get around the house. With food deliveries by drone, he’s mostly independent.

On Sundays, your dad still walks to church. It takes him a half hour to walk the five blocks, but he treats it like a pilgrimage. He’s an inspiration to a lot of the parishioners and visitors. In case they don’t get the point, he likes to

remind people that if he can still get to church, they “sure as hell can, too.” He also likes to joke about how he’s progressing back to infancy: thanks to his Parkinson’s drug, he’s back to “sucking on the teat.”



Your dad is mostly alert and upbeat, thanks in part to the nootropics you add to his protein shakes, but he often wonders out loud “why the good Lord won’t just take me home.” When you first told him that the nootropics had a small chance of causing fatal seizures in very old brains, he said, “Feel free to double the dosage.” He also tells you and Eliza and his grandchildren often that you’re “not allowed” to die before he does. (He eventually dies in his sleep from an undiagnosed apnea at the age of 104.)

One of the big downsides to the combination of increased longevity and a slowing birth rate is that older Americans are more likely to see their only child or only grandchild die in accidents. It's still very rare: wealthier societies are usually safer and healthier. Also, effective antidepressants help people medicate their way through everything these days. But a variety of support groups have sprung up to help people deal with the phenomenon of losing children and grandchildren.

For your part, you help to run the new Nain Fellowship at the church. Some of the other guys on the advisory council wanted to call the new group the Absalom Fellowship, after David's sorrowful declaration:

O my son Absalom,
my son, my son Absalom!
Would that I had died instead of you,
O Absalom, my son, my son!

It's a beautiful epigraph, in isolation. But you reminded the advisors (who were apparently not close readers of Scripture) that Absalom had not just started a rebellion against his father, but had added many insults to the injury, including "sleeping with" ten of David's concubines – presumably, raping them in a public way. By contrast, the episode about the widow of Nain was entirely sanitary, and it invoked the hope of the Resurrection.

As part of the Nain Fellowship, and your general church duties, you go to a lot of funerals. But it's more than a duty. You like to remind yourself – and others – that we have come from ashes, and to ashes we will inevitably

return. Among other things, you have gotten the new priest, Father Taylor, to include the old sixth verse when the church sings “All Creatures of our God and King.” For at least a century, that verse has tended to disappear from the hymnals, even in traditionalist churches:

And thou, most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our latest breath...
Thou ledest home the child of God,
and Christ our Lord the way hath trod.

Colleen doesn’t like it. The first time the congregation sings the verse – it appears on the screen against a backdrop of gravestones in an old English churchyard – she tugs on your arm and whispers.

“When did *that* get added?”

“About 1225. By Saint Francis.”

Although you are not naturally much of an empath, the nootropics seem to have opened up some neural pathways for understanding and patience. It turns out that you have a talent for ministering to older people who are grieving. (And your apparent physical age gives you a certain authority.). You listen carefully, and when people are ready, you remind them that the material world is a Vale of Tears. This sorrowful world is not the way things are supposed to be, in God’s good and orderly creation, but it is the way things will be until Christ completes the Restoration of All Things. You give people the hope of Eternal Life, but you tell them they are

supposed to mourn, and you counsel strongly against trying to take any shortcuts.

IN YOUR EIGHTIES and nineties, you spend a lot of time at the library. You're officially retired as a librarian, but you work on contract, helping customers write their family histories. Genealogy has always attracted the elderly: as people begin to feel in their bones that death really is approaching, they start to take an interest in putting their own lives in the context of their ancestors. Nowadays, the definition of "elderly" tends to mean people in their eighties and nineties. People like you.

Using any basic AI web-searcher these days, anyone can generate a reasonably accurate family history book within hours and print it on demand as a keepsake or a holiday gift. Your real value-add as a contractor is the conversations you have with the customers and the stories you tell them in the courtyard cafe while refilling your pipe. Your age and the nootropics have turned you into a talented *raconteur*. You're good at connecting a customer's family history with the funniest and most interesting elements of other people's genealogies, and with Irish and Irish-American history generally. In an age in which human interaction is a prized commodity, talking with people and telling them stories pays your bills.

You are taking one of the latest longevity drugs (Colleen is on a cocktail of three of them) and you go in annually for T-cell therapy. But you can feel yourself slowing down. Like most Americans these days, you do a lot of sleeping. With longer life spans – and with AI running most systems in the

background – people have a sense that they can stop and rest. According to smart watches and home monitors, the average American gets ten hours per night of sleep, and a fifth of Americans regularly take a nap in the afternoon. It's a virtuous circle: good sleep and regular exercise help to make people healthier and happier.

Of course, the people who come to the library to work on genealogy want to trace their ancestors back as far as they can. But there is vastly more information available from the 20th century, and people in your generation tend to be fascinated with life in “the 1900s.” They want to find out when their great grandparents got their first telephones and televisions. They want to find out when their parents and grandparents sent their first emails and what messages they sent. Thanks to AI, you can scour the records of early internet companies and find out when people first subscribed. A half century ago, some of the databases of the early ISPs and usenets were hacked, and the content of many early emails is now available.

Among other things, you discover that two years before your first parents met – at a tech conference in Boston in 1993 – they had briefly communicated from their university computer labs. Your mom was at Yale and your dad was at MIT. Your mom asked the MIT complab usenet for a bulletin board where she could find a new patch for a packet translator that was buggy. Your dad sent her the address, and then sent her the code for a patch. Your mom wrote, “Thanks from Yale.” At that time, your parents were just numbered addresses to each other. They never knew about that early exchange.

As people write their family histories, you help them to sort through the historical context. Your go-to for the early-to-mid 20th century is Paul Johnson's *Modern Times*. You order multiple print-on-demand and vintage copies and send them home with your clients. Thanks to the enduring Paleo Revolution, things are going pretty well. But you don't want people to forget how dangerously relativistic and statist and centralized the world became just a mere century before.

Colleen is in a similar situation with her work. She's still on the payroll with a genetics firm, but works only part time. Her role is to help onboard new workers and to nurture their human relationships at the firm to try to retain employees who are prone to bouncing around. Colleen has always been a great empath, so it's a perfect role for her.

When your dad dies, you move into the old house and sell the newer one. Your dad saved over four million dollars, part of which you invest in four sections of farmland north and west of Dateland, in the plain below the Kofa Mountains. Your farm is irrigated by desalinated water from the San Luis plant. The use of cheap desal water in southern Arizona allows the Gila River to run – at a trickle, at least – almost year-round these days. (Hunters and other conservationists have bought most of the rights to the Gila watershed between Gila Bend and Yuma.)

Much of your portfolio is in various tech sectors, but you and Colleen both have a sense that you want to invest in something real. Thanks to robotic farming machines and irrigators, you don't have to do much. But you enjoy riding in the observation decks on the machines. Your favorite machine is

the rock picker, which allows you to inspect the black igneous treasures it finds before its catapult flings them into the volcanic debris field to the west of your property. Most years, you have the machines plant a section each of canola, barley, sorghum and durum.

Chef Willy comes out in the late fall for a week to hunt doves over your harvested fields. You join him sometimes, wearing warm tweed coats that have padded patches on the right shoulder. You get better at hitting doves, but you have less luck with ducks, which Willy hunts from blinds along the Gila. And, you have no luck when chasing quail (and Willy's dogs) across the Kofa foothills. By 20th-century standards, you're in great shape for a man in his nineties, but chasing quail is hard work, and you're usually too exhausted to shoot by the time a covey flushes.



At the farm, you live in a modern pod that was air delivered by a giant balloon drone and set along an ancient wash lined with tall cottonwoods, next to a small grove of pecan trees. The pod is completely encased in a glass shell, which allows you to have a 360-degree view from most of the rooms. You dim the shell during the day, and you usually keep it clear from sunset to sunrise so you can watch the stars.

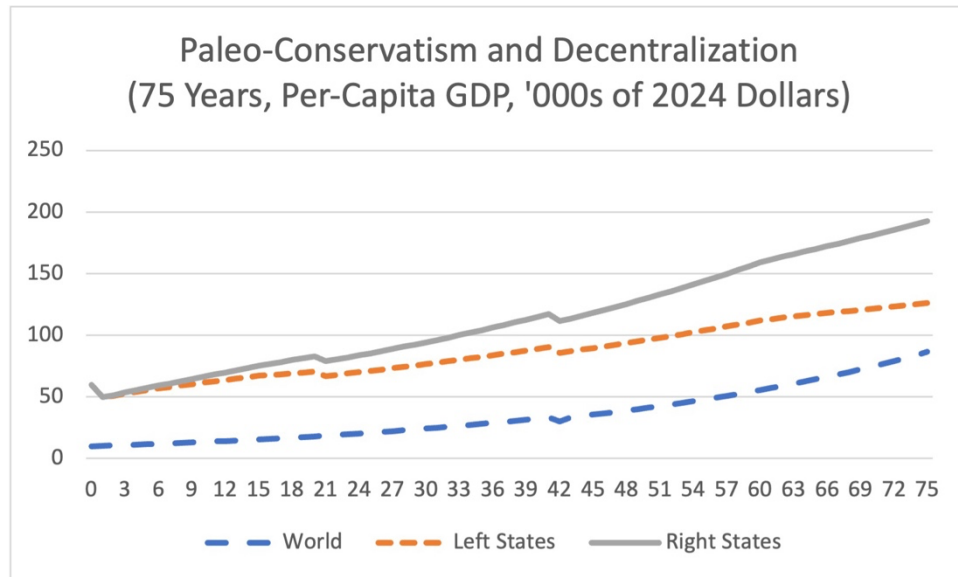
Colleen is slowing down, too. She seems to be satisfied with making love about once a week, usually in the late afternoon after your nap. You usually have a performative argument before sex about the shell setting on the pod. Colleen would prefer to have the shell on its default inside-out transparent setting. She says she wants to make love in an open field, under the trees. You tell her she's a crazy exhibitionist and you want the shell to be opaque. She reminds you that the shell's default is to be opaque from the outside, and that even the most advanced spy drones cannot see inside. You usually insist on having it be opaque both ways. Then she calls you an "old poop," and you call her a "wild young thing." Then it begins.

AS YOU APPROACH your 100th birthday, you believe that things have turned out very well for Americans in the 75 years since the aliens gave you a choice of ideologies. As nearly as economists can agree on how to measure the effects of technology gains and longer lifespans, the long-term economic growth rate in terms of real per-capita GDP has been about 1.5 percent in the paleo States and about one percent in the prog States. The average American in a paleo State is three times as wealthy as he was 75

years ago, and the average prog-State American is twice as wealthy. (The average person on Earth is about eight times wealthier than he was before, and standards of living appear to be converging, as longevity and other technologies spread across the globe.)

Ironically, income and wealth inequality are roughly the same in the prog States as they are in most of the paleo States. Across the country, the Gini coefficient – a measure of inequality of wealth (0 = perfect equality, 1 = perfect inequality) – is about 0.45, which is slightly higher than it was before the experiment began. Although the prog States have high taxes on the wealthy, and generous health and welfare programs (including UBIs in some States), there are huge income and wealth gaps between the investors, entrepreneurs, and workers in the high-tech elite and the huge populations of poor and lower-middle class immigrants.

Around the world, extreme poverty and unemployment are almost nonexistent. The differences between rich and poor countries are increasingly difficult to measure, in terms of the daily lifestyles of the average person. Automation and AI have made jobs much safer and more satisfying for people around the world. Space exploration has continued, and there are now small colonies of Americans living permanently on the Moon. Aside from some military expeditions to deploy and repair defense satellites, American space exploration is done by private companies.



Average life expectancy for newborns on Earth is now 90 years, with some people now living to 130. Dependable hibernation technologies have begun to come online, meaning that people may soon be able to stay alive for centuries. You don't think hibernation is a good idea – but as with so much in the modern world, there's nothing you can do about it.

Most birth defects are prevented before conception by genetic engineering, and most others are eliminated through prenatal therapies (though many American conservatives choose “natural reproduction”). People are healthy and productive for almost their entire lifespans, with the majority of early deaths now resulting from traumatic accidents. A growing portion of accidents takes place during recreational activities – often involving thrill-seekers taking bigger risks. Occasional outbreaks of new diseases are suppressed quickly with personalized gene therapies.

Technology is the main reason why differences in wealth and material well-being between countries are narrowing. Supply chains are increasingly international and the transfer of productive technologies between countries now happens more quickly than ever. Enforcement of intellectual property (such as patents) across borders has always been challenging, and it continues to be – especially with America refusing to sign most IP treaties. Some virtual products and services (such as those founded on blockchains, or those whose transmissions are encrypted) are easier to protect or are effectively self-enforcing.

In such an environment, modern firms rarely rely on a strategy of securing a patent, guarding it internationally with armies of lawyers and lobbyists, and milking its monopoly for decades. Instead, firms now compete to rapidly mass-produce and deploy innovative physical products, and to link them to internet platforms that have network effects and give the firms a shot at a first mover advantage. (For example, most pharmaceutical firms do not focus on trying to monopolize the production and sale of physical drugs and therapies, but rather, on building virtual platforms that use AI and encrypted genetic information from millions of subscribers to individually optimize applications and dosages. As a result, health care innovations spread rapidly to even the poorest of the world's people.) With health care and education rapidly equalizing, the main differences between rich and poor are now measured in terms of how big people's houses and estates are and how exotic their vacations are (a virtual-reality trip into orbit or to the Moon does not confer the same bragging rights as the real thing).

Around the world, homelessness is increasingly rare, mostly due to the advent of highly effective therapies for mental illness. Crime is also low, in part because of increasing wealth, in part because of surveillance – public and private – and in part because most of the world’s countries have decriminalized drugs and there are very few black markets for them. (Financial hacking and fraud continue to be minor nuisances.) Privately-operated roads and dependable flying cars have made traffic much less of a problem for the foreseeable future.

The environment has seen huge improvements in America and around the world. The private owners of land and water resources have generally managed them with the aim of sustainable long-term profitability, with good results. In the oceans, aided by international legal accords, private owners have homesteaded sustainable fisheries and charitable organizations have successfully asserted ownership of marine mammals, which are tagged and monitored for protection against poaching.

Technological changes (including better batteries and synthetic meats) have radically reduced carbon output, and most power is now provided by small-scale nuclear power facilities using ultra-safe radio fuels. One of the most promising developments in low-carbon energy is the advent of new drilling technologies that allow companies to drill ten miles down into the Earth’s crust to tap geothermal heat and convert it into electricity.

To control residual warming, a consortium of governments, billionaires and charitable organizations has planted billions of trees and dumped iron filings in the oceans to grow carbon-absorbing algae. As a bonus, it has established

launch platforms in space for vehicles that will use nuclear bombs to steer killer meteors out of Earth's path. America's federal government has refused to join the consortium, but many Americans donate money to support the international efforts.

So far, at least, the economic and humanitarian impacts from climate change have been mild. Sea levels appear to have risen by about a meter over the course of the 21st century, caused by the melting of polar ice and perhaps accelerated by carbon dioxide and methane released by the thawing of some of the Arctic permafrost. Global weather systems appear to have shifted somewhat, but scientists are unclear whether rainfall patterns will change long-term and cause severe problems (such as turning larger parts of the world into deserts). So far, climate change appears to have increased rainfall on net. The damage from flooding associated with hurricanes and monsoons, measured in money, continues to increase, but that may be a statistical illusion: as countries get wealthier, the value of coastal assets rises. Scientists debate whether hurricanes and monsoon rainfalls are truly stronger or more frequent than in previous centuries.

The good news is that a wealthier world is better able to handle the impacts of climate change. Hundreds of millions of people have moved away from coasts and out of floodplains, and most formerly poor countries can afford to build sea walls, raise cities, and/or relocate coastal populations. Liberal immigration policies in many wealthier countries have helped, allowing climate refugees from desertified regions to move to places with more opportunities. And, liberal (in the sense of mostly free-market) trade

policies also help, ensuring that global supply chains (especially those for food) are able to adjust quickly to changing climate patterns.

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS activities continue to be a big part of human life in America and abroad. Even with great designer antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs, many people yearn to connect with the Permanent and the Transcendent. Many American historians now think of the two decades after the Great Adjustment as the country's Fourth Great Awakening, because tens of millions of Americans joined churches. But as with America's previous revival movements, the effects of the FGA appear to have dissipated over the following decades.

You can see the trend in your own family. Among your children and grandchildren, only half regularly attend church. Oddly, the religiosity seems to skip generations. Four out of the six grandchildren you have through George and Cairíona have fallen away from church-focused lives – though some may be wandering back in middle age. Meanwhile, Maeve's son Antonio (her only child) has become a Cistercian monk at a monastery in southern France, and William's daughter Clara is an integral part of an ultra-Calvinist Reformed church in Prescott, as well as the mother of six children. (You don't like Clara's church. It feels cultish. Not because everyone follows a dominant personality, but because everyone in the church is expected to constantly affirm a rigid intellectual adherence to the doctrines of the Synod of Dordt. For you, the primary sign of a cult-doctrine church is a default assumption that the theologies of other Christian churches and denominations are leading their congregants to Hell.)

As has been typical for the past two centuries, the dominant historians are materialists. They see the economic and social turmoil of the Great Adjustment as having driven the Fourth Great Awakening, rather than the other way around. In general, you see that kind of materialist history as a mistake: a failure to be guided intellectually by First Things. You want to be with Max Weber, seeing the theologies of the Protestant Reformation as the drivers of entrepreneurial capitalism in Northern Europe. You want to be against economic historians such as Rosenberg and Birdzell, who argued that the politically fragmented trading societies of Northern Europe in the 16th century had adopted Protestant theologies because those theologies suited their proto-capitalist cultures.

The difficulty for you, of course, is the fact of the alien experiment. *You* caused the radical decentralization of the America polity and the economic turmoil of the Great Adjustment. To the extent that most Americans had paleo-conservative attitudes for a decade, *you* made it happen. You believe strongly that the aliens did not tinker with people's core theologies. God did not allow the aliens to interfere with people's free will or consciences at that highest level. You saw firsthand how people came to your church for help, and even joined the church as official members, but did not necessarily have deep conversions.

In the end, however, you never adopt the view that social and economic factors drive changes in individuals' *inner* theologies. Instead, you conclude that social and economic factors merely drive the *outward* appearances of theological changes. For example, in some Northern European countries in

the 16th and 17th centuries, official doctrine became Calvinist; but half the people sitting in the pews believed in free will and longed for the structure and grandeur of the Catholic (or Anglican) liturgy. In America's Second Great Awakening, when millions of people got swept into Baptist and Methodist tent revivals, some were genuinely moved by fiery charismatic preaching; but others went because the revivals were the best show in town, or because they were just hoping to get Daddy to lay off the bottle. During the early part of the Cold War, surveys showed that most Americans were regular churchgoers; but your suspicion is that many were there by social default, or because they were looking for community support in the wake of the Great Depression, or because they felt a patriotic duty to act like Americans and not godless communists.

The softening of American religiosity does not mean that moral debate has gone away. Genetic engineering continues to be controversial, and many paleo States continue attempting to ban technologies that alter the genes of sperm, eggs and embryos. Regardless of what State they're in, some adherents of traditional religions refuse to select genes for their children, or to eliminate birth defects through prenatal therapies. It appears that pro-life policies have had some success in reducing abortions in America, but abortions are increasingly rare around the world – thanks mainly to cheap and effective contraception.

ALTHOUGH YOU WOULD prefer that all Americans were more culturally and politically conservative, there are things you like about the enduring geographical diversity of America after the Great Sort. Human nature is

universal at some basic level, but people are different. Six decades ago, when the aliens stopped tinkering with people's ideological preferences, their innate political intuitions reasserted themselves quickly. Thanks to political decentralization, Americans can usually find cultures and political systems that work best for them. You rarely visit any prog States, but a lot of the time, you're glad they exist. Wishing Californians wouldn't be so Californian is like wishing the French wouldn't be so French.

Most importantly, the radical decentralization of the American polity that you and the aliens instituted has continued to restrain any budding movements to grab the Ring of Power in Washington. During the past two decades, Democrats from prog States have tended to dominate the US House of Representatives. They occasionally float amendments to reinstitute a national income tax, and bills to create a national sales tax or a value-added tax, but Republicans from paleo States have held the Senate with comfortable majorities. So far, centralist Democrats in the House have not been able to offer decentralist Republicans in the Senate anything attractive enough to get them to compromise on any new national taxes. And large numbers of Democrats are apparently satisfied with the *status quo*. In nationwide polls, strong majorities of Americans express a "live and let live" attitude about policies in other States that they don't like. For now, at least, it appears that the center (the *decentered* center) can hold.

Compared to what it was seven decades ago, Washington is a sleepy town. There are still a few thousand lobbyists in DC, but with the demise of the federal Regulatory and Welfare State, the biggest game in town is tariff rates. Even so, it's not a very big game. Generally, Americans in the late

21st century favor free trade and a relatively low basic tariff on imports – which has tended to fluctuate between 11 and 14 percent. Politicians like to spend money, but the consensus in America is that 15 percent would be too high for the main federal tariff. Tariff lobbying thus tends to be for industry-specific special tariffs. (Lobbyists also try to win subsidies for their industries, but apart from national defense contracts, Congress is usually cold to their efforts.)

Congress does occasionally pass industry-specific or company-specific tariffs, but the reality is that the global economy is changing too quickly for special tariffs to give much help to targeted companies. Most of the time, American companies must swim or sink, and they adjust quickly to foreign competition. Big American firms still dominate the world economy, and conservative-Staters are the wealthiest people in the world. (Excise taxes on things like liquor and gasoline and legal drugs are constitutional and traditional, but the States tax those items, and there's wide agreement among Americans that the federal government shouldn't also tax them.)

In America, the old fears about globalization are disappearing. More than ever before, Americans trade with anyone in the world they like, and people from around the world come and go freely in most of America (though foreign visitors to paleo States must usually post bonds to guarantee that they will not overstay their visas). Despite the lax enforcement (or non-enforcement, in some States) of anti-discrimination legislation, racism continues to decline and interracial marriage is increasingly common.

AFTER SEEING THE success of the American model in the first few decades (and noting the success of a similar Swiss model for centuries) many countries – including Britain, Spain, Italy, Poland, Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia, India, Afghanistan, Botswana, and Somalia – have chosen to move toward decentralized federalist systems. They have mostly seen very good results in terms of social harmony and have been lifted by the general rising global tide of economic prosperity and individual freedom.

Several dozen countries – including Malaysia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, and Ecuador – have followed the old Singapore model, running their countries like very market-oriented homeowners’ associations, with relatively strict social rules, minimal welfare services, and strong emergency powers for dealing with pandemics and other disasters. They have also prospered.

Most of the old democratic welfare states – such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, Japan, Canada, Israel, and the Nordic countries – have maintained their models, with modest reforms. The United Koreans, Taiwan, Thailand, and Chile have adopted versions of those models. In part, most of the citizens who disliked those models have moved elsewhere. The welfare states have not seen as much economic growth as countries following the American/Swiss and Singapore models, but they enjoy high levels of individual freedom, along with relatively generous social insurance schemes. Thanks to the threat of taxpayer emigration, the social insurance schemes of the welfare states are relatively efficient.

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY has continued to be minimalist, even six decades after the Paleo Revolution. And the world in general has become an increasingly peaceful place, with a few small separatist struggles and jihadist terrorist incidents.

Over the years, you sometimes worried that America's absence from the global stage might cause some geopolitical destabilization – and more importantly, that such flare-ups might force America's domestic politics back on a centralist path. After all, as you see it, human nature hasn't changed (and it never will). Throughout history, there have always been cunning and talented individuals who have chosen to exercise their personal *Wille zur Macht* through military aggression. Throughout the 21st century, the Chinese and Russian regimes have been both authoritarian and well-armed. You don't know for sure if America's military isolationism has helped to make the world more peaceful – or if the world has just been lucky.

In the power vacuum created by American withdrawal, China and Russia have solidified their statuses as regional great powers. (China has been more successful.) Their ruling regimes continue to exercise authoritarian policies at home, but they seem to be moving away slowly from mercantilism toward more open markets. In large part, their efforts at industrial planning have been a bust: government planners put bets on the wrong industries and companies and government subsidies ended up weakening the competitive and innovative drive of company managers. The long-term result is that average citizens in China and Russia are half as wealthy as those in the

world's freer economies. Aging populations have not helped, either. Even with longevity drugs and treatments, the portion of productive citizens in China and Russia has steadily declined. In America and Europe, by contrast, the immigration of young people has kept the productive sector of the population roughly stable.

The Chinese and Russian strategies of meddling in the politics of developing countries do not seem to have gained them any kind of sustained advantage in global commerce. Large amounts of military spending occasionally allowed China and Russia to bully various African and South American regimes into giving them exclusive access to raw materials. But the Chinese and Russians often supported opposing sides in civil wars and *coups* – and ended up with no decisive advantage.

ON THE MORNING of your 100th birthday, you wake at the farm pod to see that it's "autumn" in Arizona. (It's early December.) The leaves on the cottonwoods and pecans outside your bedroom window are turning yellow and orange and shake minutely in a light morning breeze. There is supposed to be a big party for you today at Philip and Eliza's Biltmore mansion, but you have lots of time before that. You fall asleep again and find yourself having a lucid dream. In the dream, the aliens communicate with you for the first time in 75 years. They thank you for participating in their experiment and give you three scores, on a scale of 0-100 points: 25 for economic prosperity, 95 for social harmony, and 95 for individual freedom.

As you wake, you have questions for the aliens. You're fine with the harmony and freedom scores, but you wonder what scale they are using to measure those things. And it's hard to imagine how economic prosperity could be much better than it is now. But the aliens are silent.

As you're thinking, Colleen enters, wearing a bathrobe and carrying a tray. You sit up in bed and prop some pillows behind your back. She has made breakfast for your birthday. She's still mostly vegetarian, but the sausages taste like real ones, and she has fried up a neighbor's eggs with beautiful yellow yolks. As you finish eating, you're thinking about telling Colleen about the alien experiment. But she has a different plan. She straddles you and removes the bathrobe. She is naked, but she doesn't dim the pod shell. You're pretty sure the default one-way setting is not on, either. It's your birthday, so she ought to let you have your preference for privacy. It's as if she wants to show the world her muscles and her tan and her bulging breasts. You don't argue.

Colleen is beautiful, rocking on top of you under the trees, with their leaves twinkling in the breeze in the early morning light. You wonder how old she looks. Maybe 60? You can barely remember how people used to look before. The climax is an especially good one. Maybe the best you've ever had. Your mind is filled with white light, but you're not looking at the sun. Your last thought on Earth is the knowledge that you're having a seizure from the nootropics.

~~The End.~~

YOU ARE NOW floating above the farm pod. Then you're floating higher, above the trees, with the farm fields stretched out under the rising sun to the east. You can see Colleen below, where she is crumpled on top of your body, weeping. You know she will be okay. Better than okay. Better than she can possibly imagine. You understand that you are experiencing what people have glimpsed in near-death experiences. Except that you are comforted to know you won't be going back to the old life.

The farm pod disappears and you're at your parents' house, or a version of it – the version when you were a teenager. You can smell the scented candles your mom has lit to try to rid the house of the odor of the ribs that cooked all afternoon in the crock pot. You see your mom and dad, sitting in the living room after dinner with a very young-looking Father Robert.

"He's a good kid," your dad says.

"Sometimes I think he's *too* good," your mom says.

"How can a person be *too* good?"

"I know what you mean, Debbie," said Father Robert. "Some people are burdened by being naturally well-behaved. It can be just as bad as having the usual sin problems people have. Or worse."

As he says it, you know exactly what he's thinking. It's what he told you later, when you were 30 and confessed your suspicions about Colleen. You can also see Father Robert sitting alone in his study at the church when you

were ten years old, reading Timothy Keller's *The Prodigal God*. In your earthly life, you never read the book. But now, you have read it. You can see every word on every page. You can see Keller, in *his* study, writing the sermons that he later published as the book. You know his thoughts as he types a sentence on his laptop. This new life is like being on one of the better nootropics, but multiplied trillions of times.

When your thoughts return to the living room, your parents and Father Robert are looking at you. They are smiling. And glowing. You are glowing, too. It reminds you of that feeling of the sun on your shoulders in those perfect moments when the chill was finally gone and you were truly warm and you could barely remember being cold only minutes before.

"Glad you're here, Georgie," your dad says. "This is what Paul meant when he wrote, 'We will know as we are known.' And when he wrote that we are 'surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.'"

"Go out and explore," your mom says. "We'll be here. Or anywhere. Think of us and we'll be there."

YOU BEGIN BY exploring your old life. Every moment is available to you. Every moment has that feeling of sun on your shoulders and the chill being gone. Even the moments where you know that the old you was sad or angry or in pain. You remember, in an intellectual way, that those feelings *were* there somewhere, but you can't quite feel them.

You remember your sins in a similar way. For example, there's a scene in the courtyard at the church. It's during the toughest months of the Great Adjustment. It's a Monday, a day off from work. A young homeless guy named Kaden (you never knew his name) is standing on the grass, watching the 25-year-old you as you sit at a table in the shade. Near you is the sign saying, "Who is Jesus? Ask this guy." You're reading Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* for the second time. You can't quite feel it now, but you know that the 25-year-old you is annoyed by Kaden's presence, annoyed that another stranger is about to interrupt your reading. At the same time, the 25-year-old you is annoyed by the difficulty you have in being empathetic and evangelical and Christlike.

Then you see the scene from Kaden's perspective. He used to be a reader, before his parents divorced and he got on drugs and dropped out of high school. He used to love books. When he sees you reading, he wants to be you. He wants to be a guy in a tweed sport coat with elbow patches. He also knows at some level that he would be interrupting you if he comes over and starts a conversation. He doesn't want to interrupt your reading. He wants to get to a place in his life where he can read again. Where he can even think clearly for long enough to read something. Instead of walking over to you, he decides to go find the weightlifter guy who keeps pestering him to join the drug and alcohol recovery group that meets at the church. You feel the warm sunlight touch the shoulders of Kaden's soul.

Over and over, you see the same theme in the stories that unfold in every moment of your old life. Even at your self-centered worst, God was using you to draw people upward into the Light.

You explore the endless universe of your moments and other people's moments where they touched yours. Everyone's life touches yours. Not through distant degrees of separation, but directly. We'll try a metaphor.

In your old physical life, you were part of the Church, the Body of Christ on Earth. As a tiny cell in that Body, you were connected to (in communion with) all the other cells through the DNA (Christ) you all shared. But much of the material in your own cell was not DNA, and the billions of other cells were far away from you in a physical sense. In this new life, the Body is all DNA, and it's all connected, an unending tapestry woven from a single thread. You can follow that thread almost anywhere, in an instant.

For example, you can follow the thread to the year 364 B.C., to moments in the life of farmer named Kumara in a small village on the Ganges floodplain near the modern Indian city of Kanpur. You can see his body in worship, kneeling in the dried mud at a shrine to Krishna. In his mind are the words of a Buddhist missionary who came to his village a month before, during the full moon. Kumara's soul and his mind are desperately trying to make sense of suffering. Suffering has always surrounded him, and he wants to believe the missionary, to believe that suffering is not real. But right now, it is real. It's the most real thing there is. His five-year-old daughter Amrita, his greatest joy, died a week ago. Everybody in the village got the fever, but most recovered. *She* died. His body has been wracked with sobs for seven days, and the pain is deep and dull inside his bones, thudding with every beat of his pulse. It took every bit of his remaining strength this morning to rise from his mat and walk to this shrine.

As Kumara weeps and prays, his mind knows from the words of a thousand rites that Amrita's soul will go on. He knows from the missionary that her soul will eventually be at rest and will stop struggling and suffering. But Kumara does not want to become nothing. For Amrita to become nothing. He wants to know that his soul will be with hers, in a realm of joy that restores their happiest moments. Like the moments before her daily nap, when she sat on his lap and fell asleep as he sang to her. He wants to know that there is a single, unifying God who will make sense of everything and fix everything. A God who feels his suffering, and Amrita's suffering, because that God has shared our suffering.

In that moment, Kumara's soul becomes a part of the DNA of Christ and is connected to yours in the great thread. In this new life, you can visit Kumara and Amrita anytime you want. You can share their joy in the moment when Jesus says to her soul, "Arise, little girl." You can – and often do – explore the universe with them, multiplying your joy together billions of times as you witness God's redemption in the life stories of billions of souls.

As you explore, you are only vaguely aware of the absence of some souls. Somewhere, beyond the edge of a Bright Everything that seems ever-expanding, is a "great fixed gulf" of Dark Nothing. It is like something you read once in textbook but forgot immediately after taking a test. You know that some souls torment themselves by continuing to reject God and thus hurling themselves further outward into the outer darkness, joining the

entities that fell away in the Beginning. But they are absent from the life stories you explore, including your own.

For example, when you revisit the cage fight you went to in high school with Alonzo, you feel his dad's intense love for Alonzo and his hope that you will be a good friend to his son. You feel the courage and discipline of the fighters, and the satisfaction of fights well won and fights well lost. You know that the demonic entity *was* there, in your first experience of the event. But it's gone now. You can't see it. Just like you can't see the outer darkness. Much of the time, you can barely remember it exists. The Light at the center of Everything is too bright.

In your explorations, you rarely think about the old politics. You were right about ideology being mostly unproductive – and often pernicious. Russell Kirk was right. (You have many conversations with him in his library at Piety Hill.) When you visit scenes in the old life in which people are involved in politics, you are often reminded of Solzhenitsyn's famous quote:

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts.

You have spent time with Solzhenitsyn during his imprisonment in Ekibastuz. You have been with him when the line first came to him as he was strolling back to his dorm, watching a dozen workers walk home from the gulag coal plant. The two of you don't see ideology. You just see human beings, looking at the situations around them and trying to make

sense of them. Trying to put things into categories. In their better moments, people use their ideologies to try to figure out what is the right thing to do. In worse moments, people use their ideologies to justify themselves and their actions, to flatter their pride and their belief that they are right and others are wrong.

YOU NEVER GAIN a perfect understanding of the aliens, or the strange experiment they conducted. They are created beings (not angels) from an ancient civilization that figured out over millions of years how to (mostly) avoid physical death and avoid internal strife within their civilization. The more poetic call their civilization Ice and Fire, referring to the geology of their planet of origin. The more clinical Icefireans call their civilization “7,389.” That’s their best estimate of their place in the sequence of known civilizations leaving their home planets. Earth is 304,922 in that scheme. (We’re using base-10 numbers here, though the Icefireans count in base 6.) In later epochs, the Icefireans also seem to have had very good communication with God through near-constant prayer.

For some reason (you know it was a good one) God allowed the Icefireans to conduct their experiment and sent angels to assist in altering the thoughts and memories of Americans for a decade without altering their capacity for free will. As you witness the Icefireans’ conversations over centuries and millennia – the conversations are slow, even slower than those of Tolkein’s Ents – you gather that they tried to choose you at random, even while understanding that nothing in God’s universe is truly random.

From what you can gather, the Icefireans are mostly pleased with your choice (as they communicated to you on your 100th birthday). They have a decentralist bent to their own thinking. After all, the universe's longest-surviving civilizations have mostly developed a live-and-let-live attitude with regard to other civilizations. Now that you're able to review their data, the Icefireans' scoring system – even their economic prosperity scale – makes sense to you. As statistical rubrics go, it's pretty good. Starting at similar baselines as you had when you made your choice of ideologies, over 75-year time periods some civilizations have expanded longevity by ten times or more, and their physicists have achieved multi-dimensional manipulation.

The Icefireans are not obsessed with economic growth – or material progress more generally. When observing civilizations in which there are trade-offs between material progress and social harmony or individual freedom, the Icefireans usually favor the latter two objectives. Despite their preferences, they have been scrupulous in later epochs about not intervening to impose their preferences on other civilizations – except when aggressive high-tech civilizations have posed existential threats to others. (In those cases, the Icefireans have usually reached through higher-dimensional space to retard the technological development of the problem civilizations.) Part of their reticence comes from a deep theological conviction that they should avoid interfering with the cosmic diversity God has created.

YOU VISIT COLLEEN often in her last years of physical life. Your death – and even the fact that it happened during sex – has helped her to come to

grips with the fact of her own much-belated mortality. Even with the anti-depressant effects of her nootropics and longevity drugs, she mourns you deeply. You marvel at how much she still loves you and thinks about you. Every day, she opens your old bags of pipe tobacco under her nose and she goes into your closet to smell the wool of your tweeds. Her love for you is beautiful, but in such moments, you always urge her soul to rest and focus on the Permanent Things.

As you relive your past moments with Colleen, you see how symbiotic the two of you are. There is infinitely much going on in every moment, but the major theme is a constant tension: you are pulling her to stay anchored in the Permanent Things, while she pulls you out of yourself and your books to engage with the world and with people and their souls.

Ironically perhaps, in Colleen's present moments – the moments since your physical death – you can see her body and mind turning more and more inward, toward the Permanent Things. You can feel your soul pull on hers. You're pulling because God is pulling. You can see her responding, spending more time with your family and at church and less time at work and the gym.

Among the many mysteries of this new life, you cannot see the future of the material world, beyond the point where people are in their earthly present. You cannot see when or how Colleen will die. It is one of the days and hours about which men and angels do not know. What you do know is the most important thing: that it will be the beginning of the best thing that will

ever happen to her, since the moment after God created her soul and sent it into the physical world.

GOD’S PURPOSES BEHIND everything that has happened, and everything that will happen, are inscrutable – but in every instance, they’re good.

God’s restored creation is an ever-widening gyre, and infinitely complex, but it’s not chaotic. It flows around you and carries you with it, like a great and gentle river that is perfectly cool. As you float, you can see every grain of sand in the bed below and know where each atom in each grain has been for the eons it has existed.



Every eddy of suffering in the whirl of existence has a sure and beautiful purpose. The waters swirl in the eddies briefly before unwinding and joining the great course of restored creation. As you are swept along, you see the fish you have eaten swimming alongside you. In the air above you are the doves and ducks you hunted. On the shores you pass are animals you recognize, including the Spanish pigs who were once part of your *chorizo* sandwiches. As the Psalm promised – and as Colleen reminded you – God has saved them, too. Seeing them whole and perfect brings you surges of great joy.

As you float, there are instants in which you almost think that the river might get too cool. You can almost remember being cold. But then you feel the warm Light on your shoulders. Again and again. Forever.

(Amen.)

[If this story were part of the e-book or the printed volumes, there would be a link or a prompt here to return to the Table of Contents to choose another ideology or another story outcome.]