

Chapter 4: The Oracle

"The known is finite, the unknown infinite, intellectually we stand on an islet in the midst of an illimitable ocean of inexplicability. Our business in every generation is to reclaim a little more land." T.H.Huxley.

Nicholas Woichek was dreaming. It was a crazy dream. He was chasing a train. Why was he doing that? He was on the tracks. There was no chance of catching the receding carriage. He was a stubborn man. That was it. Or perhaps the dream was a metaphor for his life. He was never going to catch *life*.

His eyes opened. The Plexiglas canopy above him was steaming up. That meant he was defrosting. In a couple of hours he would be able to feel his arms and legs again. And move them. At the moment all he could do was blink. He was aware of a shadow in the distance, and occasionally a face would appear on the other side and smile at him. He wanted to smile back but his face was resolutely immobile. This was a good time to review memories. But instead he was fantasising about a Sunday roast. Next he started thinking about women. He could feel his heart beating now, and the smock rubbing against his chest as it rose up and down with his accelerated breathing. His big toe was twitching. That was rare. In the four hundred odd times he had defrosted before, that had happened only half a dozen times. This might be significant? It must have been eighty years ago when it last happened. That was when he met Lucy. She almost convinced him to marry her and join the stream. Eight decades ago, as his body returned to the grip of the icy cold following a wild fortnight, she bent over his sleep pod and mouthed the words *I love you*. He never saw her again. Each year when he woke up he put out feelers, but she obviously didn't want to be found, and two weeks was a very short time to do anything.

Week one tended to be ritualistic. First there was *the meal*. The meal wasn't actually the first material of calorific value his digestive system would encounter. His first technical meal would be a raw juice, supplemented with electrolytes and enzymes. Next would come a sort of baby food, that tasted like smoked bananas, but they assured him it would reactivate peristalsis. Sometimes a bolus of food would get stuck in his oesophagus and they would have to electronically stimulate it into contraction. That wasn't the worst thing that could happen. The worst thing was if he had the same problem with his descending colon. But he didn't think that would happen this year. This was a lucky "toe twitch" year. Once his digestive system and his senses were up to speed, which generally took twenty four hours, he would indulge in whatever culinary delight he desired. From one viewpoint, it was only eight hours since his last meal, but from another it was a year. Every year he was reanimated. He would catch up with the news. His management company was kind enough to collect the significant events in the year and print them out onto

crushed wood pulp as they called it. He called it a newspaper. It was fairly thick. He usually picked out movies to watch and music to absorb in the next thirteen days. Day two was reserved for business. He met his lawyer and accountant. He logged into his financial account and made sure no one was ripping him off (except his lawyer and accountant). One time, not a "toe twitch" year, he logged in to find his money gone. Frantic calls to the bank could not resolve the issue before he was "fish fingered" again. But when he woke a year later, the first thing he was given was an apologetic letter from the bank and a bottle of wine. Day three he met his fan club. It was common for him to receive cards from many of his members and several included invitations to dinner and a contact number. Days four and five were spent with Ministry Ten (also days eight and nine). They were paying for his package now. Everything was laid on. Ministry Ten were involved in making predictions. This worked best if they had an accurate version of the past. The strange thing was, their versions of the past changed frequently. They were continually introducing new references to their version. They last called it M10 version 7.1 Reality 2 build 3.14159. Sometimes Woichek found the next virtual re-creation different in only minor details, sometimes more accurate. But other times there were lots of changes, some innocuous, others bizarre. The most important aspects of the changes were that they often triggered some buried memory which the Ministry could include the next time round. The fact that Woichek slept for fifty weeks each year meant that the Ministry's reality engineers had enough time to recompile their programmes. It was important. When they re-versioned the past, their predictions also changed. Woichek could move his arms. He knocked on the Plexiglas. "Hey, you haven't forgotten about me have you?" A young man of around a hundred appeared. The glass slid open. He put a straw in Woichek's mouth. "Suck", he said. Woichek took a sip. "Anything interesting happened?" "Cubes" said the young man.

Woichek was cutting into a beautifully crisp Yorkshire pudding. He pushed a little gravy onto it and placed it in his mouth. The fork stayed there for a moment then slid out slowly. Feelings of delight swamped his cerebrum as deep, onion caramel flavour met the back of his tongue. He was scanning the newspaper for anything that might be salacious or interesting before he returned to page one and got stuck in. He pushed a piece of lamb past his lips, the meaty tones rising to his nose moments before the rich juices were released into his mouth. Of course, it wasn't real lamb. Humans stopped the expensive and protracted business of rearing animals for slaughter centuries ago, or a few hundred weeks back in his experience. But there was nothing ersatz about his ecstasy.

On page three he thought he saw a face he recognised. Above the picture he read the headline, "Gillian M'Jo murdered by Quaker Terrorist." It was all happening at Ministry Ten. Four hundred years of nothing, then the cubes, Travers absconding and now a murder. "Bloody hell" he said as he forked up

a dollop of gravy soaked mashed potato. Gillian had interviewed him several times. She even asked him for a date. He poured himself a glass of merlot. He savoured the rich, blackcurrant tones as the distinctive liquorish flavour hit the back of his tongue. In the space of four of his weeks the cubes had been discovered, that discovery had been disseminated and already a murderous counterforce had appeared who had history altering intensions. The world spun fast when you were an Oracle.

Day two had been predictably boring. Woichek's purpose was to finish as early as possible. His solicitor was a seventh generation Virtual Personality called Barrington. VPs were a fraction of the cost of hybrid solicitors and were almost as good. A VP was a weather machine programmed with an adaptive linguistic database and a heuristic personality programme. They were not AI's. AI's would wipe the floor with any hybrid or VP, but they wouldn't be seen dead chasing legal work. AI's were usually scientists, mathematicians and philosophers, and often artists.

Barrington was as sociable as usual and told him, as he did every year, that his rolling contract with Ministry Ten would expire in twenty years. That was always forty weeks away for Woichek so he decided to ignore it. The accountant VP called Chrissy went through his expenditure, income, tax and so on. It felt like going back into deep freeze. He could almost feel the icy tendrils gripping his soul. Meeting his supporters on day three was always a good day, although he felt a little helpless faced with the sycophantism. The problem was that so many Oracles had joined the stream of ordinary life. They usually did so for love. Once an Oracle fell in love they usually stayed out of the deep freeze. Sooner or later you fall in love. Then you leave. There *were* Oracles who were married, and the spouses didn't seem to mind their partners being on ice, but it was rare. This meant that the initial large pool of Oracles had steadily dwindled and those remaining were gaining in importance. When another Oracle joined the stream it meant the remaining freezer crowd could charge more. There were only one hundred and twenty one of them left. He could never extort the kind of premium Cliff Richard or Robert Maxwell could, he had less to say anyway, but Woichek's celebrity was for being ordinary and that appealed to the largest constituency. Woichek was looking forward to examining the profiles of the various well wishers, calling them and arranging dinner and sex.

The convention was packed. He recognised several of the faces.

"Hi Woichek." It was that big guy, Anders. Anders was *way* too friendly. He had been turning up for the last twenty years. Something about him disturbed Woichek.

"How was sub sleep?"

"Same as usual".

"Still kaleidoscoping eh?"

"Yeah. I do it a lot."

"No-one's been able to figure out why. You are the only one."

"I'm an insomniac." A lot of people laughed at that.

"Maybe it's significant?"

"Well a lot of people think that, but as I've said many times..." Woichek paused for emphasis, "It's easy to read meaning into all kinds of events, especially where Oracles are concerned."

"Twenty two Oracles joined the stream last year, how long do you think the freezer crowd has left?"

"That number has been diminishing every year. I think we are getting down to the diehards now."

"Have you ever fallen in love?" The question was from the back. Woichek seemed to recognise the voice. It was a woman. She had long red hair under a trilby hat and big sunglasses. She was drinking a milkshake.

"No. Never. I put all that behind me" he lied.

"They say your contract increased by twenty percent last year. Would you like to comment?" The voice sounded familiar.

"I'm paid the market value. I don't really worry about the money side of things."

"It's true though that Oracles have become amongst the best paid individuals in the solar system? Memory is one of the most valuable commodities around. It's blue chip. It hasn't left the top ten of most valuable traded equivalent equities in the last fifty years, and there have been two crashes in that period."

"Serendipity has traded even higher. The market suffers from irrational exuberance and I'm not isolated from it. We're all in the same boat."

At the end of the session Woichek scanned the room to see if he could attract the attention of the trilby woman. Various fans were allowed to walk past. His ID chip was on, and it would send a unique one time signal to the chip in each fan, signifying that they had got within one metre of him. Woichek felt ambivalent about the morning. He downloaded the dozens of cards onto a nearby desk. No trilby woman. The coffee pot on the desk started buzzing. He touched it. "Nick?" it said.

"Who is this?" Evidently somebody had hacked into the chip in the coffee pot.

"We need to meet." Woichek recognised the voice. It was *trilby woman*.

"Lucy?" he said.

Woichek suggested they meet in his favourite restaurant, Chez Bobbets, but Lucy wasn't keen. They settled on Kets at eight pm. Woichek got there early but Lucy was already there. She looked the same as when he left her. Unless she'd been fish fingered for fifty years there had to be some cosmetic surgery involved.

"Yes. I had a little work done. But not for the reason you think" she said.

"It's a beautiful job. They changed your nose."

"Yes. And my eye colour. Actually my whole retina. Alterations in my junk DNA. Stuff like that."

The manager, a short swarthy man waddled up, following the raised markings in the floor. "Hello Julia. Nice to hear you again. What can I get you?"

"Two kets for starters." She looked at Woichek. "Do you still drink it?"

"Yes. It keeps me awake." He was wondering why she changed her name.

"Two kets it is" said the manager. "The chef has made a beautiful moussaka tonight. I'll bring the menus."

"I forgot you don't sleep much in your two weeks."

"When you defrost you feel sleepy for days, and if you want to hit the ground running you need to wake up as quickly as possible."

The drinks arrived. He wanted to ask her what she'd been doing for seventy years but he had to time it right, because he knew such a question implied he wanted to know why she hadn't contacted him.

"I need to tell you some things." There was a plaintive look in her eyes. He had learned over the last two hundred years that women's faces were an infallible root to understanding. Since men were blind, sexual deception was based upon voice and touch. Makeup was almost unknown.

"It started with shoplifting...."

"Shoplifting? Is that even possible? What about the technology?"

"To every technology there's a counter measure."

"That's not easy to come by. And if the Marks and Spencer secret police get hold of you, you're cooked."

"I got involved with some people. They have resources. It was after we finished. I was distraught. At a loose end."

"So was I. That was when I started kaleidoscoping. I was so disturbed. Getting married and joining the stream. That's a huge decision. I wasn't ready. Two weeks is a whirlwind romance."

"I was really cut up. I had a long time to think about us..."

"There's still an *us*?"

"There'll always be an *us*." Woichek felt his eyes fill. Lucy responded. "I wanted to kill myself at first but I met this guy. He turned me around."

The meal arrived. "That's when I joined the Quakers."

"Christ!" said Woichek. He ducked his head down and looked furtively from side to side. "Keep your voice down. There are plenty of sharp ears around."

"Don't worry. There are a lot of friends in here."

"You changed your face and your name. Now you are a fucking terrorist. They kill people you know." Woichek was forking moussaka into his open mouth.

"I'm an assassin" she said.

"Christ!" Woichek spat out his mouthful. He was looking around again and trying to mop up the splashes with a napkin.

"That's just a side job. I'm a weapons specialist. Most of the time I'm involved in infiltration."

"I must be dreaming" said Woichek.

Lucy took his hand. "I still love you. Listen, we need your help."

"Eh? Lucy, this is a bit sudden? You disappear for seventy years and now you're a one woman killing machine. *How can I help?* I'm just an Oracle."

"Yes but you're embedded in Ministry Ten. Let's go to my place and have sex. We can talk later."

"I'd better go back tomorrow" said Woichek "I told the Ministry I was taking some impromptu leave, but they need my input."

"Perfect" she said.

They had been watching old movies. *Casablanca*, *Donnie Darko*, *Arsenic and Old Lace* and making love in between with the help of V. They had had sex four or five times a day for the past five days. They had gourmet meals delivered and walks in Regents Park. He half expected her to be living in Buckingham Palace hostel, as she didn't have any money when he knew her, but she was now renting a split-level apartment. They were relaxing in the pool in the basement.

"Lucy?" said Woichek.

"Yes."

"I've decided. I'm joining the stream. We can get married and all that. If you'll have me?"

Her head bobbed below the water and she pulled his trunks down with her teeth. "I'll take that as a yes."

Her head bobbed up. "We'll need you to stay in Ministry Ten for a while. They'll want that. They'll keep mining you for information for a few months, and they'll want to go on debriefing you yearly, even though you won't be in deep freeze any longer."

"You want the cubes right? But I don't see why. They stopped working when Travers left. You say you need them to travel to a new place. But you don't know where it is."

"There's something I didn't tell you and it's very important."

"What's that?"

"We have a top level mole in Ministry Ten. They've been running secret simulations based on your dreams... you call them *kaleidoscoping*, images, thoughts that don't make any sense. If you factor them into the scenarios then some very odd futures are predicted. In fact there's one that appears again and again".

"And what is that?"

"Our world is coming to an end."