

HOXTON

Hoxton's notes:

Principle places featured in this tale.

Survurvia ~ the inner state (also called the egg)

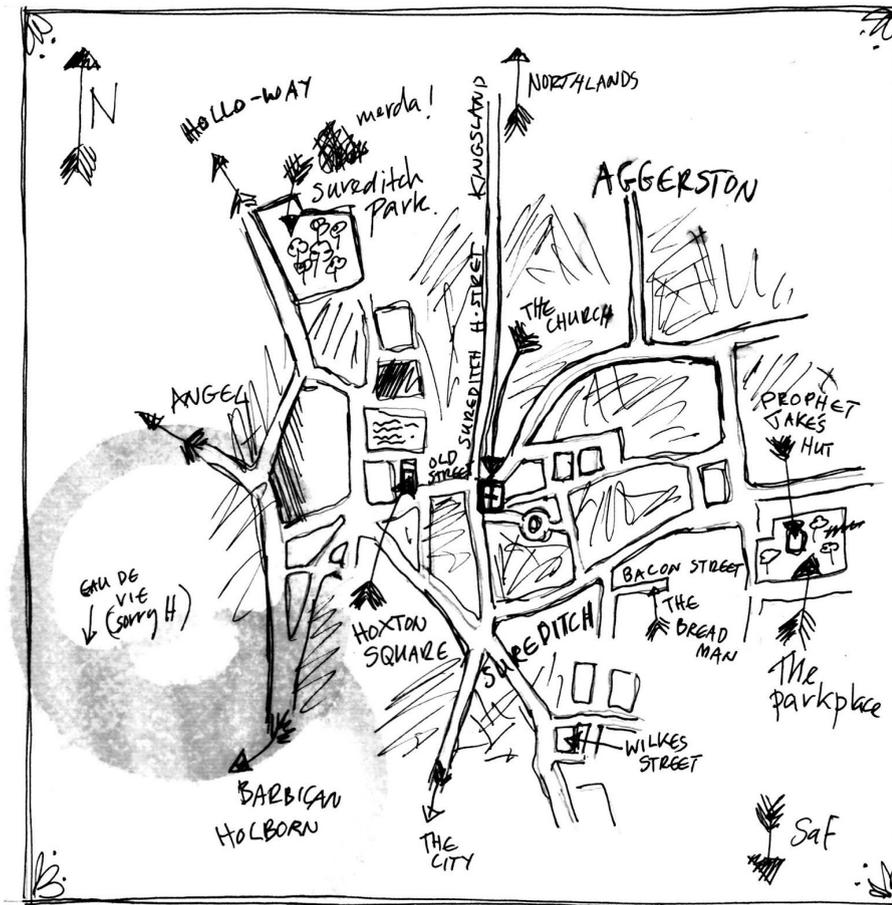
Cincture ~ the hyper centre (also called the yolk)

Londonia ~ the rest

Glossary (explanation of possibly unfamiliar words) see back of book.

Apologies for any errors in printing, changes of fonts, etc. This book you are holding was produced in the (intermittently-functioning) Sureditch Press with the help of Bert the Swagger and Prophet-Jake.





Rough map of Sureditch.

Created by Spike the route-master and Jarvis (during a night of drinking plum eau de vie).

Chapter 1

Londonia winter 2070 or cycle 60

“Hoxton . . . what sort of a name is that anyway?”

I turn my head and look at him in his post-coital sprawl.

“You know I don't know – what does it matter, it's a name.”

He lights the bowl of a broken clay pipe and squints at me through the smoke.

“Yeah, but I'm Tom, right? Tom. Simple, straightforward, Tom. Proper name.”

“Why are you smoking that?”

“It's what they do in films.”

“That's cigarettes, clod-head.”

He rolls on top of me, kisses my forehead, hair flopping.

“Beauteous, you are.”

We stare at each other for a moment then he grins disarmingly, peels himself off me and jumps up.

“Late. Gotta get to the forest by darking.”

He locates his clothes in the gloom and steps into patched trousers, hoisting them up and yanking the leather belt into a well-used notch. As he leaves the vestry he calls back. “See you.”

“See you,” I echo, my voice lost in the groan of the door and the dogs barking outside. They're hungry. Jack the Rabbit better be doing the rounds today, or it'll be me down The Parkplace with a gun.

Not so bad on a warm day, to stand waiting and watching, but these are the grey, cold short days of a long winter; dim days of persistent rain churning the detritus in the streets into grey rivers, soaked buildings and scudding clouds; days of hurrying back to warmth, least exposure possible.

My thoughts of finding boots and an extra thick felty to brave the elements are interrupted by a coloured ray of light sliding across the bed and onto the floor. I can't remember the last time I saw these pink jewels spotting the stone slabs. Sun, at last.

Cold now, the sex blaze gone: to wriggle back down into the blankets, or brave it? Go on, just a couple more minutes of simplicity and quiet. I

curl back down feeling the warm straw pricking under the rough sheet; hibernation, that would be a useful thing. Bert the Swagger told me they've achieved it in The Cincture, but he's not the most reliable source of information.

I'm dozing, shouldn't be but . . . Sundry; a day of rest, isn't it.

Trees, lake, so warm, the sun on the heath. 'Just another few paces' he says.

'Why are we here?' He stops and strokes my face,

'You'll see'.

That was so close, that time.

Sitting up, the remnants of the dream play in my mind. I want to know more, but the images fade swiftly. My mouth is dry, throat parched. Perhaps I might still catch the water-man on his early round.

I throw the covers back and the hovering chill hits.

"Christ in a fridge! How can it be this cold? And where the hell!" . . . I search desperately for my knapper and wool-shoes dispersed in our frantic wrangling last night. A blanket suffices, and I scoot to the church's main door door, the slabs wincing my soles.

The doors creaks, and sun glances in through the narrow crack as I peer through at the scrambling scene outside.

"Hey! You little squits – Va!"

Gosses again: only ten, perhaps eleven cycles. This winter's extra harsh weather has caused many a crop to fail, and my cabbages and leeks are prized more than gold at the moment.

"Pizzpizz yourself, Miss," one calls and jumps up onto the wall, ripping his felty. Careful, I want to say, suddenly aware of his fragile frame.

I look up into pure blueness, broken only by a few white clouds moving fast. It's so good to see that colour again.

My gaze drops as the pressure of giant paws lands on my back.

"Fagin," I start, and turn to greet the great-hound. "Where's Tilly?" The other beast appears from the back of the church, a rat's tail dangling from her huge jaws.

The clanging bell and scrunching cartwheels of the bread man are now audible above the general street noise. A lumpy cloth bag is slapped over the wall, a shout following.

"Hoxton, you owe me – be round later."

Merda! Three week's bread owed; he is going to be round. I've spent days looking for his request, a lead-lined document box which is proving elusive.

Unlocking the gate, I peer down the street. As I had hoped the water-man is still making his deliveries. We did collect water from the roof of the church, but the pipes have all burst . . . another springtime job – if it ever arrives. The donkey ambles towards the church, canisters and bottles rattling. I call out.

"Salut, Tig. Two bidons, please."

He pulls the donkey to a halt, and heaves off two glass flagons.

"We still good for bacc0 trade?"

"Sure. Can I give it to you Wedsdy?"

"Pas problem," he grins, looking down at my revealed undergarments.

Gathering the blanket out of the mud, I grab the flagons and the bread bag, lock the gate and walk back into the church, to be greeted by my horse. He stretches back his whispery lips in a grin, stamping a hoof and speaking to me in his head. I return his greeting.

"Salut, Kafka, busy day today." I drag some more hay over and check the tin bath of water. "Should be able to get some oats later, when we go north." He answers with a snort and lifts his tail to deposit a useful load of compost onto the stone floor.

If the last congregation of St Leonard's could now see their hallowed place of worship they might have been outraged. My home of the last few years, almost all the pews have long

gone, burnt in the harsher patches of winter; the nave, now a horse's stable; the vestry, a fairly comfortable nest of books, bed, wood stove and detritus of the everyday struggle.

The fire is still in, just. I throw on some wood, getting it to blaze, fill the kettle and clunk it onto the stove top. A little time later, I've found my clothes and am sitting in front of the fire with a toasting fork and a bowl of tea from my diminishing supply.

The sacred brew is now scarce. A fellow finder recently came across a stash from the pre-cycles, a welcome change from nettle or elderflower but it came at a heavy enough price in trade.

Toast in hand, I open the agenda and check the jobs. Day 30: lead box, Jack Russell for Bert, ham, denim, oranges, meet Mrs Sandsbury.

Mrs Sandsbury, *in Survurvia* . . . my thoughts are curtailed by a key turning in the main door. I leave the fire and go to help Jarvis as he struggles in swearing, carrying a pile of boxes.

"Fuksaker, these gosses, they want to break a mec . . . and mother, she's broke her glasses, can't see a foiteling thing . . . got to take a dechet, Hoxton."

I smile at the sweating figure and point to the confessional.

"In there – bucket, then take it out round the back. There's a new sawdust pit."

"Genial, back in five."

I peer in the boxes and think about Jarvis.

My finder-fixer partner of four grand-cycles now, we met at a café truck next to the dump in Leytonfields. It was an immediate friendship, no danger of sexual entanglement: he's homono and living with Parrot, a barge driver on the lower Thames spur. We clicked. I have the ideas and he does more of the legwork. Finding: it's literally that. People request stuff and we find it. It's not always easy, sometimes dangerous.

Jarvis ambles into the vestry with a happier expression on his gnarled face. He takes off his homburg, lays it down on the table and sinks down into an ancient leather chair.

"You got it good in here! Right chaudy 'tis."

"Toast, tea?" I offer.

"Tea," he says. "*Proper* tea?"

"The vrai. Assam, apparently."

"That finder in Hollo-way got it, did she?"

"Yes . . . and don't ask what I had to part with for it! So, the glasses?"

"Yeah – really broke, like into pizzy bits. She can't see so much as a cat's arse without 'em, *and* Dad's wandering again. She found him Commercial road on Mundy with a curtain pole. Thought he was fishing, didn't he? Merda!"

I add a spoonful of precious leaves to the Brown Betty and look back at my friend.

"Did you find them a new lodgings?"

"Gaff next to ours, Parrot took it when the fisherdame moved on. It's a bit fumey of fish, but warm enough."

"Good that it's close to you then."

Jarvis scowls then shrugs: "Yeah, s'pose so, anyway, let's talk about today's stuff."

Sitting down with the teapot, I pull the book towards me and check the list.

"Did you find out about the Jack?"

"There's a litter, only a boy-dog left but Bert'll be happy with that. I'll have to parler bit sharpish today – good ratters, everyone want's em."

"What's the deal?"

"Six bales hay, haricot beans, box of vinyl 33's and Marmite."

"Marmite! Merda . . . I haven't seen that for years."

"You like it, don'tcha? Got some put by for you!"

I could have kissed him; in fact, I do.

"Aw, you're welcome, girl," he says, a wide, cheeky grin lighting up the creased cheeks. He pours out a bowl of tea and sighs.

"What?" I ask.

"Mum and her glasses . . . don't know what to do."

"Take the box from here – there's bound to be something that'll work."

"Nah . . . tried that with a load Parrot found. Trouble is she 'ad some weird prescription ones from donkey's ago – even got the bit 'a paper that says wot it is, but that's about as much use as a wax casserole."

Thinking of my visit to come I announce it nonchalantly: "Well, maybe I can do something about it . . . seeing as I'll be going to Survurvia today."

I wait for the expletive.

"Putainfuker! You're going to The Egg? How, why?"

"Got a rendezvous with a certain Mrs Sandsbury."

"Through who?"

"Tom. He sometimes does their garden."

"What the fukdaz he know about gardening?"

"There's a lot about Tom that you don't know. He has a brevet in it. Good college too – that one in Actonia"

"What does she want? Bit weird isn't it, coming out here for something."

"You know it happens, when they can't find what they want in there."

Jarvis takes a slurp of tea and bangs the bowl down.

"Pepedi Survurvians!"

"You don't know anyone in there."

"Mother did. She worked for a while as a skivvy for a family."

"What did she say it was like?"

"Frightening. Identical houses and squares of lawn, very quiet, *not* like out here." He pauses, lances a piece of bread on the toasting fork and holds it to the fire.

"D'you reckon it'd be possible to get glasses?"

"I really don't know but I'll certainly try. It depends what she wants and what it's worth to her. I don't suppose you've got the prescription thing with you?"

Jarvis brightens: "As a matter 'a fact . . ." He checks through various pockets, pulls out a battered wallet and carefully removes a folded bit of paper. "There – watch it though, bit time-knacked, it is."

I glance at the faded writing then stow the paper safely in my carpet bag's buttoned pocket.

"You going on Kafka?" he asks.

"Yes, I'll call in to the exchange in Angel first. I've got to find the breadman's box."

"Watch it round there, it's Clasher territory at the moment. That gangs getting bigger and so's their reputation."

"Never travel without a gun . . . that's what you say, isn't it?"

He nods grimly and retrieves the toast, larding it with duck fat and salt. "Two preferably, and a cyanide spray."

I grimace at the thought, but there have been times where that could have been useful: *That kid, the two mecs; I just didn't aim quickly enough.*

"What you thinkin' bout, Kitten?" Jarvis asks.

"Oh, lots of things . . . could you cut my hair?"

"Ain't done that for years, 'spose I still got the knack. Why d'you want t' get rid of them black locks?"

"It isn't practical, and I just felt I wanted to look a bit neater, more anonymous . . . going in there."

"Cut it now?"

"We could trade it too."

"True – got scissors?"

I get up and look in the jumble of knives and cutlery in a box.

"Here, these'll do."

"You sure, Hoxton?"

"Yes."

He hesitates: "Well, maybe it's just as well I did that drawin' of you – on Kafka."

"What drawing?"

"Last winter, don't you remember?"

I think for a moment then recall a day of dark clouds and wind whipping hair across my face; Jarvis sitting opposite the church, his head bent over a rectangle of white.

"Yes, and I remember saying you were mad for having chosen such a time for drawing. Did you finish it? You never showed me."

"I forgot – 'til just now. I'll bring it next time – if I can find it. Say goodbye to the mane then."

I sit. Jarvis limbers up his ex-barber hands, brushes and cuts. My hair falls, snakes on the flagstones, and I wonder who were the parents that gave me the gift of thick, black hair and skin that stays pale brown even in the depths of winter.

He steps back, cocks his head this way and that, looking at his work.

"Yeah . . . not bad that."

He passes me the ivory hand mirror and I smile at my revealed features.

"More than not bad!"

He grins: "Not my cutting wot's made you shine. Jake always says you're the most beautiful dame in Londonia – just as well I'm gayster, eh! Yeah – beautiful."

I look away from my reflection to my friend's leery face and consider his words.

"Even in these ancient woollen layers and smelling of horses."

"You know it, H – since you was a goss, I wouldn't wonder." He looks at me quizzically. "How many years d'you have on you?"

I shrug, the idea odd, never having been raised between us before.

"I don't know – more than thirty. What about you?"

"A tadly bit older . . . praps." He crams a last half slice of toast into his mouth and jerks a thumb street-wards: "Right, better get movin'."

Then he stops, an unusually concerned look on his face.

"You sure about this trip into *there*?"

The tone of his voice pulls me up. Am I sure? No, probably not – at all.

"It'll be fine, and hopefully I can sort out your mum's problem."

He smiles: "Just be careful, eh?"

I lean over and kiss his stubbly face: "Of course."

Perhaps this is mad – to risk a trip into the unknown world behind the walls but something more than just trades to be had excites me.

Draining the tea bowl, I stand up pull on the felty that's been warming near the fire. My neck feels cold after the hair cropping so I select a scarf from the many hung on a hook near the door. A flash of off-white amongst the wool catches my eye; I peer at the word printed on a faded label: 'Next'. Presumably the name of some shop, now long gone, from a time when fashion existed.

I look at Jarvis as he hauls on his vast coat over blue, shiny padded trousers and sweat shirt that has the words 'Keep calm – drink beer', across the front.

"What are those trousers?" I ask

"Got them in the Spitalfields Freeforall – skiing kit the guy said."

"Skiing?"

"You know, snow, hills, chalets. Don't suppose anyone does it now, apart from the buggers who might live up there, chasing elk around."

How do I not know about skiing?

He notices my expression: "Look it up in some of those books you're so fond of hoarding."

"Yes, maybe."

He retrieves his hat and jams it on, looking at me.

"Talking of books – Jake was wondering if you'd teach him some stuff."

"Stuff?"

"A bit of writing learning."

"Why not? We owe him for that stash of scissors he gave us, and I like teaching anyway."

Jarvis hoists his canvas bag over his shoulder and heads towards the door.

"I'll be back at darking . . . want to hear about Survurvia."

"Bring Parrot, and something to eat. I'll probably need a drink by then. I've got a bottle of red, St Emilion, 2018 that I traded for those sacks of windfalls."

He smiles and strides up the isle, his voice echoing in the musty space.

"See y', Kitten."

I stand for a moment thinking about my unusual visit to come. Perhaps I should go to the bathhouse first. A week ago was the last time; I might smell offensive. It's difficult to tell. Tom doesn't complain, but then everyone seems to smell the same: damp, woolly, bitter somehow. There's a bathhouse in Angel, and I'll be there, so why not.

I get the horse tackled up, lead him outside and do a quick check round. The great-hounds are sharing the last of a rabbit. I glance again at the leeks, considering their worth. I'll pull some later. A box to the cafe equals coffee, and hopefully bacon for several sittings.

The scraping calls of the crow colony in the tallest plane tree cause me to glance up, and for a moment as I stare at the waving winter-bare branches the dream returns to me.

Those familiar night-visited trees are full with foliage, my skin hot and dusted by the wind. His hand is heavy on my arm.

"Just a few more paces."

