

SMITHI

Note from Jake the Prophet and the Sureditch Press

You lucky person.

These is few, these books. Had to be written – too much lost over the cycles, and it's time to record what we can. Not me doing the pen scratching – leave that to the educated few, like Smithi and Hoxton. I got stories though and they'll leak out onto a few pages before I'm dust in the Parkplace. I'm good with the machinery and when ink's for the having and Bert's found the right paper we get the job done.

She's a bit cranky, the old press, so forgive the odd typography glitch.



Principle places featured in this tale.

The Domes: Manchester of 2070 – also called Manchestershire

The three new states of 2070 London:

Survurvia - the inner state (also called the egg)

Cincture - the hyper centre (also called the yolk)

Londonia - the rest

Important terms

ww#W - the great collapse, also casually known as The Final Curtain

Unknown time/ Un-time, following ww#W

Chapter 1

Manchestershire 2070

You have three hundred and forty affirmations, twenty-two, denials; seven, undecided, and two that shall be reported to central information. Have a great day.

The robotic voice cuts off leaving a weedy tune that I have almost learned to ignore – something implemented to create calmness but that induced total rage within me for months.

Sitting up, I look at the other half of the bed almost expecting to see Hugh's long, white limbs. The guy from fuk-buds lies there instead, wrapped in our linen sheets. I paid him extra to stay thinking it would bring me some of that warm complicity we used to share . . . but it didn't. And he snored.

I sneeze suddenly and seconds later the medi-screen flashes on: *Cold, grade 3, possibly developing from flu-strain H6. Precaution of lynotrid, good.*

A memory stirs in my mind: a recording of something to do with the sea . . . Father's Father in the old house: 'listen to this, Smithi. Like Poetry it is.' The shipping forecasts – that was it. I wonder if I could –

“Hey, Mate, can we get some coffee?” The Hugh replacement is looking at me, a question other than the voiced one hangs in his eyes. Have I been talking to myself again?

“Yes.” Swinging around the compute consul I stroke the screen into life and tap the order.

“Don't you use voice-activate?” the guy says, looking at me even more curiously.

“Needs a service. I kept getting soufflé instead of coffee.”

He nods blankly and heads towards the shower. I suppose I didn't opt for a sense of humour along with muscles. Actually, I hate 'voice-activate'. I hate it all. This flat, the job - how can I teach kids about plants when I don't know enough myself. Well, I do know as in I studied, did all right.

I flop back onto the bed and study a perfect white flower from the stem of lilies that splays from a vase on the side table; an extravagant purchase but worth it for the pungent perfume and the memory of Hugh, his face part-obscured by a bouquet of the same blooms . . .

“Kitchen?”

The guy's returned, bronzed torso gleaming with my orange flower oil. I could pay more, blot out the questions with another sweating tussle. No. Enough temporary oblivion: sex, drugs, dark zone sex, dark zone drugs . . .

“Through there. I'll be along in a moment.”

The shower is good. For a few minutes, everything disappears in steam haze and drumming water. Perhaps I should just exist in the shower – turn into a bloated, white bag being fed an occasional sandwich by the robo-abode-aid.

By the time I'm air-dried and wrapping myself in a robe, the kitchen is deserted. Muscle's chrome beaker sits on the counter top along with his voice-card. I tap it mindlessly and his soft Scottish accent slips into my ears again.

“Thanks for tossing my caber, hot guy. If you want more, just beep me.”

Grimacing, I flip the card into the carved wooden tea box along with the others then slump into Hugh's chair. My shower-soft hands catch on the worn leather as I recall the day he bought it.

“Come on, Smithi . . . just half an hour.”

“It'll be ludicrously expensive. The stuff that's left fetches stupid money.”

We stand outside Edifice Thirty, the reconstituted stone building that houses sales of whatever *they* decide we should be exposed to from time to time – keep the people happy.

“You enjoyed the fetish forum,” says Hugh, eyebrows jumping as he pinches my arse.

I recall the black rubber item stashed well away from discovery by anyone making a random search.

“Well, yes, it was . . . enlightening.”

He takes my hand. I squeeze his lovingly but then let go, still uncomfortable after the recent attacks. Homosex was decreed to be equal, but there are many who disagree, and sometimes violently.

He pushes me towards the sliding glass door.

“Don't worry, you know I'll never find it anyway.”

“The chair?”

Hugh harbours a desire for a brown leather club chair, but then he desires the whole thing: panelled wood, roaring fire, brandy and real books. These things exist rarely, mostly in nostalgic memories and not even our memories; recollections from my parents, photo images and stored magazines.

We stand, arms stretched out, bodies palpitated by bored, uniformed strata A's. Hugh holds in a grin, just, as the young guy flicks practised hands down each inside leg. The blonde with ice eyes currently feeling around under my armpit taps the lump in my jacket inside pocket. She steps back, and with one swift movement I seem to be staring at the black round hole of a firearm.

“Take it out, sir.”

Slipping the black rectangle from my pocket, I hold it aloft: “It's OK – just a Smartphone.”

She looks blank and the gun drops a little: “A what, sir?”

“Twenty-first century communication . . . before the implants.”

Of course she's probably only just reached her eighteenth birthday, and maybe history and science weren't high on the list of security training. The sleek gun still points at my forehead as her expression freezes into concentration. *Shusti!* She's meta-contacting some higher up security lunks.

"He bought it here," tries Hugh, "at the last antiquities fare."

She snaps out of the momentary trance: "Receipt?"

I scrabble for the accounts card in my wallet and bring up the exchanges for the last solar year.

"Here . . . month of Novob – twenty-four dollars."

Her partner verifies the code matching on phone and receipt, the gun drops and she waves us through.

Pocketing the cause of trouble, I pull Hugh towards the coffee zone. Scrote to no caffeine – I need some.

"Why do you carry that thing about?" he hisses.

"I like the primitiveness of it, and it's a good torch when the power-outs come."

This time, for the sake of retro, the fair managers have replaced the usual curved bar and roboexpresso for real people, a wooden counter and a large machine from which an enticing aroma drifts.

"Zowee, the real thing," sighs Hugh, pulling up a bentwood stool and gawping at the Italianate youth zipping from machine to client, the words 'Espresso 2020 style' emblazoned across the back of his shirt.

I sip fragrant coffee and watch Hugh scanning the visible stalls.

"Supposing there was a chair?"

He grins manically: "Well, I'd have to buy it, wouldn't I." He downs the last of a rice beer and slips off the stool. "Come on - we can have another in a bit."

The halls evokes scenes present very different images today; gone the oiled muscles and groaning soundtrack from our last visit; now pastoral scenes and Vaughn Williams set the mood. As I pass a stall of china figurines a small statue of a greyhound beckons.

"Staffordshire," says the moustached old guy as I pick it up. "Very few examples left now."

"Your price?"

His clever old eyes regard me, weighing up if I'm netted: "Hundred and forty-five steel."

A week's earnings, and dental work needed . . . "I'll take it."

Hugh turns from looking at kitchen equipment on the next stall and ambles back.

"Thought you had no credit left?"

"I don't, but I did have some steels put by, and I can't have the real thing after all."

Hugh smiles, eyebrows converging over the grey eyes: "True."

We watch the guy tenderly wrapping the dog and I hand over the coins.

"Ad a greyhound we did," he says, "before the sanitisation. Beautiful 'e was." He places the package in an old box marked *Eggs. Handle with care*. "An extra present

– box from the second World War. I'm surprised it survived the third."

I follow Hugh to the back of the hall where he stops suddenly and swings round, hands dancing about.

"Smithi, look!"

On top of a raised section of staging sits a club chair, its leather a comforting, glowing brown. It is in fact the whole deal: books, fire, brandy – all in one piece of furniture.

"Calm down. They'll put the price up just looking at you!"

Hugh approaches and mutates into his 'monthly figures presentation' persona.

"The chair – do you have a date of manufacture?"

The bejewelled woman looks up from her activity cube crossword.

"Around nineteen hundred and thirty, young man. It's very rare."

They commence mental battle and I watch, fascinated.

"Has it been passed on all hygiene tests?"

She bristles: "All."

"The price?"

She hesitates. It's quiet; perhaps Hugh will be the only possibility of a sale.

"Six hundred."

"Credit A?"

"Yes, or steels."

"Five hundred."

The coiffured head shakes: "No."

"Five fifty including transportation?"

"Where are you?"

"Bay Lodge – 587."

I sense the deal closing and wonder if Hugh has considered his monetary affairs, at all: too late.

"All right Mr . . ."

"Benkinson."

She passes Hugh a miniconsul and he keys in the amount then waits for the finger print match.

"5day for a delivery?" she suggests, consulting another small screen.

"Can it be after sixteen hours?"

She nods: "Done. Thank you Mr Benkinson. I hope you enjoy the chair. By the way, I kept this for whoever bought it." She searches under a pile of books, draws out a mass of faded sheets of paper and gives it to Hugh. He unfolds the first layer, eyebrows knitted in question. "It's a newspaper," she assists, "dated 1996, from London. It was stuffed down under the seat cushion."

He fingers the fragile paper, examines his fingers where a hint of ink has left a mark.

"There were thousands of these produced every day, but I've never seen one before."

Glancing over his shoulder I scan the second page and stop at a photograph of a violinist, hair wild and face rapturous.

“Violin and Harpsichord duo, Peter Middleton and Howard Whiteman fill the Bloomsbury Art Centre last night.”

Hugh sighs: “What I would give to hear live, classical music . . . especially him!” He folds the paper. “And now, I need coffee – strong!”

After a loving re-inspection of the chair we walk back to the coffee bar and order triple espressos. Hugh swallows his, clunks the cup down and groans: “Kroist, what did I just do?”

“You always said you'd buy one if”—

“I know but I can barely just afford the loca on my place, let alone stupid extras, and where's it going to go in my pissy apartment anyway . . .”

I wander back through the memories of the last few months. It's been good, really good, funny . . . hilarious.”

“Hugh?”

“Mm?” He looks up, his usual smiling mouth set in a line of worry.

“You could always put the chair at mine . . . I mean, with you in it – permanently.”

The grin stretches back: “Me, move in with my fantasy blond and his flying fish?” He pushes my shirt sleeve up and strokes the skin of my forearm causing the aqua-blue tattoo to undulate.

“As long as I can use the chair too,” I say with a grin.

Draping an arm around my neck, he pulls me into a crushing hug.

“I think that's a fair condition.”

So. The chair came, but without the contents. I never knew what actually happened. I was just informed by the main computeconsul; matter-a-fact as the ambient temperature reading of my flat's temperature: *Central force alert. The death of Hugh Benkinson has been recorded. Please contact records. You are listed as receipt of goods.*

There once would have been emotional flapping about funeral cars and food; tears and God, or so I understand. I was just led down an echoing corridor into a clinical room and shown a small box set into a wall along with thousands of others: Hugh Benkinson; the letters black and final, his body now dust.

I feel very cold, despite the voice that has just drifted across my memories informing me that the room's air temperature is 22 degrees and correct for my body mass. For the billionth time I wonder what temperature Out-Side is and what is actually behind the opaque light providers. Would it be somehow possible to smash the material, glance beyond the walls and register anything before you were shrivelled to bare bones as They say you would be?

You have invitations to affirm. You have forty-seven minutes until transport to main edifice. Your entertainment menu is available now.

The metallic voice continues to babble as I sit immobile staring at my greyhound next to Hugh's few treasured books. The small china form blurs as my eyes fill.

I've missed the transporter and now stand in the shower room half listening to various admonishments from Edu-central.

Present your reasons for absence. You have thirty minutes to comply before credits are docked.

The mirror reveals a blotchy red face. I splash cologne about hoping the visible sadness will fade.

*If you suspect one of the following maladies, inform Medi-central immediately:
Airborn scarpox, Flu – strain H7, Pnumonic fever . . .*

Sighing, I struggle into a clean suit and hastily eat two bagels. Perhaps it's still possible to make the transporter's second round. I hastily tap in a random excuse, locate my bag and leave the Abode-aid to clear up.

My shoes clack resonantly on metal grids as I run along the suspended walkway towards the transporter halt. The engine's whine sounds from at least two blocks away and relief flushes through me; it's late – a rare event. An announcement verifies: *Central corporation presents apologies for any delay caused by a body on the line. Refund credits will be apportioned.*

Between habitation blocks thirty and thirty-two the transporter appears, water jets sluicing away a red splash on the corporation's white coachwork.

Something clicks within me as I step into the cloying warmth of the cabin, an idea that refuses to dissipate as I sit looking out at the uniform buildings. Does anyone else in this box have similar thoughts of escape? The man occupying a seat opposite stares fixedly beyond me, his eyes telling of ICC, something I have so far resisted. The thought of a chip implanted at the base of one's skull and to then be in permanent communication is something I live in fear of becoming statutory.

I have three classes today including a visit to Nourishment Zone One, or at least the part that is accessible. The youngest children are still enthusiastic, the older ones bored and glassy eyed, plant life being of little interest. Perhaps I can't blame them – what beauty is there in rows of manipulated flora? I long to see a real forest or a meadow, things only visible on edu-cubes.

The transporter beds into its holding bay with a small clunk. The man opposite mentally returns to his physical surroundings at the sound and stands up, Pavlovian. As the crowd move towards the door this new feeling looms within me. I feel panic as I join the grey-suited swarms heading for the main edifice. I want to scream. A hand on my shoulder freezes the sound in my throat.

Swinging round I stare into the dark eyes of Mara.

“Mara – kroist! You scared me.”

She stares back at me: “Smithi! What happened? Your eyes . . . you look like you've been summoned to the finality zone.”

I try a smile but the muscles sag.

“Look, have you got time for a drink – at downtime?”

Mara slips a tab from her jacket and barks: “Agenda.” The thing recites her day’s events including a useful gap at Downtime 2. “OK. Where?”

“The Hare and Hounds.”

“That dump!”

“I like it. It feels . . . safe.”

She shakes her head: “Mad. Eighteen hours then. Ciaozy.”

I watch Mara march away in her tight satin suit verbally assaulting some poor secretary through one of her voice tabs, and wonder how I still know her.