

Six Short Excerpts from

Once and Future Cities

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Flat Top

Strange knockings from above. What is he planning now? What is he constructing now? Some sort of further espionage to undermine my position. Undermine? In a literal manner, I am under him but I shall turn this hierarchy upon its head with the application of stealth technology and wariness.

As a youngster I was quite handy with the saw, the scissors, the vice and the craft knife. I made myself a cool periscope with mirrors and tubing and I shall consider again – in the absence of opportunities to gain physical access to his property – how best to observe his plans and machinations.

Where to lay my spying devices? How to arrange my optical traps and snares. Knowledge is power. Observation is everything.

Future Cities

Though still obviously a city, this is also the semi-pastoral idyll long pictured and dreamt of by poets, painters and philosophers. We have partly patterned the layout on a mythical version of Venice. Everywhere is linked by water and walkways. There are softly splashing fountains around every corner; the air is fragrant with the fresh smell of apples, lemons, figs and olives; most habitations look out over pleasant courtyards ripe for relaxing and mingling with one's neighbours.

New concepts are abroad. No property is privately owned anymore. Sleep where you wish. Move on after a few days. Since the advent of Lux energy our needs are easily catered for. There is no work or labour as conceived in the olden times. Except for within the arts.

Plays and shows spontaneously spring up almost anywhere: unannounced, unrehearsed, sometimes *unseen*. They have their moment in the controlled sunlight and then they are gone to memory. Let the musician play for your ears only: a gentle ode in pentatonic mode. Let the costumier festoon you with garments so fine that you forget you are wearing them. Let it not matter what you wear or whether you wear. Stand still and muse awhile on the uncharted extent of this jewel of the future. There, now your portrait is done. Hang it in the alcove tonight. Take it with you when you move on tomorrow or leave it behind as a facial footprint; it matters not.

Tonight we are gathering a small crowd to go up onto the roof and observe the stars. Remember when we stretched out to try and conquer? Remember how it was before we realised that we should not seek paradise but make it, right here and now at home? No, you're probably too young. But come and count the astral blessings, anyway, if you will.

Shirts

On his way back from the *New Honesty* shop, he was confronted by a solo Shirt. Initially taken aback to encounter one unusually on its own, Kevin stood his ground and placed his light bag of groceries on a clean bit of pavement.

Stalemate. Ten seconds. Twenty seconds.

At last, “Go on, try your tricks,” Kevin provoked.

Almost immediately, the Shirt began its merry dance of confusion around Kevin's personal space. A blur of imprinted fabric blurting out threats and imprecations, “Join us! Don't resist us! Ours is the right way!”

Unarmed but stoically calm, Kevin poised one palm to repel and the other hand to chop in pale imitation of a martial arts master. With a brief, successful flurry, he reduced the transformed wretch to a twisted, motionless rag at his feet. It had been a person once; now it was a matrix of thought impressions, memories and metamorphosed desires preserved on electronic elastane. It would likely recover and bother the world again but for the moment it was non-functioning.

“You should burn it, mate,” said a male voice at his shoulder.

“I thought they were fireproof these days.”

“Not against one of these,” the stranger snickered. “Look – it's a super-oxy torch.”

“You see to it, pal,” Kevin suggested, walking away, feeling the sweat under his arms and atop his thighs turning icy and uncomfortable.

Why did reinforcements always turn up too late for the actual battle?

(from "Shirts")

Beholders

We were in coastal Kent within an hour and a half. The weather was dull as a drain and there was hardly anybody about apart from a posse of workmen working flat out along the promenade. I couldn't decide whether they were improving the sea defences or hastily constructing a huge wall to block out the view across the English Channel.

We dropped our bags at the guesthouse then I insisted on exploring a little further afield. We still had the gas stove and some tins in the boot from a camping expedition last month – we could find a place to park up and picnic cowboy style on sausage and beans.

Looking for a beauty spot, I somehow wound up on the winding tarmac of a derelict industrial park. The warehouses and factory units were either boarded up or casually vandalised. Many sported the ugly white tag *Draz* repeated endlessly in bright emulsion. Didn't anyone spot him and stop him? The reprobate must have taken hours, even days to accomplish his shoddy masterpiece.

Finally, we found a council car park on the cliff top a few miles out of town. Fallow farmland and tumbledown cottages stretched away in western undulations. I was relieved to spot a group of kids on the foreshore digging in the time-honoured fashion. When they turned, I could see that several of them were wearing the Hayley Mask as a buffer against the briny wind. They seemed to be constructing walls and trenches and I was suddenly desperately nostalgic for my own childhood of co-operative sandcastles decorated with colourful heraldic flags.

A pair of parents hurried the diggers away from their beach improvements. The dull, grey, Great British overcast miraculously gave way to a beautiful sunset. The pink hues over my shoulder coloured the sands golden and gave a wondrous lustre to the topaz, shining sea. I squeezed Cheryl's gloved hand, suspecting that she was studiously failing to watch, instead shielding her gaze behind deeply polarised shades.

I'd hoped we might re-ignite our relationship with a romantic meal out. However, my still lovely but temporarily depressed wife wanted to stay in glued to the news reports on the television. Even *Millionaire* was truncated by hospital updates. I dashed out to the garage to pick up sandwiches and filter coffee. I didn't miss anything important about the dying kid. I decided to cancel our second night and come home on Sunday.

D-Leb

I was thinking about Oliver purely because from my cramped position by the tube carriage doors all I could see clearly was an advert for some men's health supplement and the guy's face was vaguely similar. I'd bought a copy of *Heat* on my way in. Standing on the grey platform, I flicked through the contents and was annoyed to notice several of the pages were either blank or unprinted. It was too late to go back for an exchange. The station started filling up. The indicator board froze on the 'next train one minute' announcement. By the time it actually arrived, the vehicle was seriously over capacity. A one-metre surge of desperate commuters at least got me aboard for the half-hour hell ride to Kings Cross Sans Pancreas, where I could gratefully change lines. And if that suit with the laptop and the half-folded *FT* poked me in the tits once more I swear I'll take my stiletto and rupture his cruciates.

If I could lift my foot. If I could breathe enough regurgitated air to oxygenate my flabby muscles sufficiently.

Why had we stopped again? There had been no trains ahead of ours within ten minutes so what could possibly be the hold-up down the line?

Looking askance over my left shoulder, I could see that the tunnel wall with its trunks of wiring was no longer visible, which meant we were close to one of the innumerable sidings and access tunnels which were attached to the main tube lines like barnacles to a cetacean. An old boyfriend had once conjectured a story in which a computer glitch causes points failure and all the trains are re-routed down these dead ends. *Passenger Peril*, he called it. I think it even got published somewhere.

The boyfriend was Oliver.

Canoe Boy

We were standing in the kitchen and I was sorting out the recycling. The radio was playing some old song of love and loss, although the signal strength was fluctuating in the high winds blowing through the neighbourhood. The coffee pot was bubbling and the scene ought to have felt and smelt as cosy as Eden.

There were too many empty brown bottles in the bag. I didn't get through San Miguel or Budweiser at quite that rate. Even though the fridge was as full as I'd normally expect, a few other puzzling furniture changes and sixth sense premonitions built up in my mind like a slow tsunami.

She was a strictly white wine girl.

I didn't ask who he was. I didn't particularly want to know.

In red knickers, she was hotter than prime time Kylie.

“I think you'd better look to get your own place,” I muttered before my voice could dry up completely. “I think you know why.”