

Beneath the Stones

A rough awakening



creak into consciousness, the weak february light infiltrating the room through a gap in the curtain. I'd worked late yesterday and felt like I could have slept for a decade, and a night of tossing and turning hadn't done much to improve matters. ✍ My next thought is to roll over and go back to sleep, but a lie in isn't going to pay the bills. And then it hits me: if it's light, I'm already late for work. I tumble out of bed, cursing. After a hasty cup of coffee and a shower, I'm out of the front door and running for the bus stop. But instead of the usual hastening crowds, the pedestrians are meandering at a pace I start to find infuriating, and I mutter and swear as I push through a gaggle of dads pushing buggies at a crawl. ✍ There's usually a queue of thirty waiting for the bus, but today there are just five sad commuters in expensive-looking suits. I step onto the bus and look around uselessly for a sensor to wave my debit card at, though none appears. I'm reaching the point where my obvious confusion is about to turn into anger when I feel a light touch on my elbow and turn to see a lady in her mid-50s, her hair a mass of greying curls and her body wrapped up tightly against the cold. ✍ "Young man," she says firmly.

“I really think you should come with me.” The grip on my elbow becomes a little firmer as she steers me away from the bus stop. Before I know what I’m doing, I find myself walking away from the sad line-up and towards a nearby park. I start making furious protests. “What right do you have to drag me away from my bus stop? What’s my boss going to say?”. 🍃 “I’m Hva, and you’re talking like one of those suits,” replies my acquaintance. “Listen, this isn’t the 2010s. No one in their right mind goes to work on a Wednesday.” Now, I can be a little absent-minded, but I wasn’t the sort to mislay an entire decade: when I fell asleep last night, it was very definitely still the 2010s. 🍃 “You really are like those commuters,” she replied, smiling. “Always worried about the time. It’s the 14th of February 2031 and, more importantly, it’s a Wednesday, and no one works for pay today. Now, you haven’t told me your name.” I introduced myself as Joe Guest. 🍃 “Well, Guest,” replied Hva, “I can see you’re confused and feel like you’re in a strange land, but I’m sure you’ll find your way home. And there’s a glorious winter day ahead of us which I mean to seize.” 🍃 I found her words oddly reassuring. Perhaps I was dreaming? Or maybe I’d wandered onto the set of an immersive theatre experience? Whatever this was, I decided to

“Beneath the paving stones, the beach!”



In the rose garden

try and quiet the anxious voices in my mind, full of targets and timetables, in order to explore this new country. 🍃 My first question was simple: if no one worked today, what were those commuters doing at my bus stop? 🍃 “Some people have never been able to accept the fact we don’t work like we used to,” Hva said. “Those men are what we used to call ‘city traders’ - and they refused to accept the four day week. Instead of fighting them, we took pity on them. A local charity took over a few office blocks in Canary Wharf and created fake trading floors. The brokers feel like they’re working in the old way, but their computers don’t connect to anything, so they can’t do any harm.” We had made our way into the heart of the park, where we were confronted with a huge clump of bright pink and pastel flowers. A large group had congregated there, and I immediately remembered it was Valentine’s Day. People took turns to walk up to the bushes with a pair of secateurs, snipping off a bloom and offering it to their loved one. Hva walked up to a man dressed as a gardener and took her go, offering me a bright pink flower. 🍃 “Perhaps where you’re from, they still keep to the old tradition of flying dead flowers halfway round the world as a token of love. Now that we have more time on our hands, the tradition in London is for people to

grow Lenten roses, and declare their love in public. But don't worry. I'm not declaring anything to you beyond a welcome gesture for a stranger. Now if you'd like to learn more about our customs, let's walk on."

The
missing
pieces are
found

✿ We followed a steeply sloping path down through the park, heading towards the river, the city before us clad in late winter finery. Hva began to explain how my world had become hers. The early 2020s had seen an experiment in free market deregulation that held down wages and forced more and more people into insecure work via online platforms like Uber. An inevitable backlash kicked in, with workers organising cooperative alternatives to set their own terms and conditions. In 2026, a general cyber-strike was called, with people across the country boycotting Uber, Google and Amazon for months on end. ✿



✿ Oil passed early in the decade, and by 2027 the world was in the throes of an energy crisis: people were forced to work less as Britain struggled to secure enough power for its economy. What surprised everyone was that working less didn't always mean earning less: productivity rose and sickness levels plummeted, while public services reaped the benefits of a less depressed and anxious population. ✿ As



“If technology is felt to be becoming more and more inhuman, we might do well to consider whether it is possible to have something better”

the economy recovered, it turned out that the people of Britain quite liked the four-day week, and as so many people now chose when and how they worked for the platform cooperatives, the government struggled to enforce standardised working hours. Millions simply refused to go back to the old way. Incomes fell, but not by as much as anyone had expected, and of course prices were falling too as the economy became more automated. ✍ A compromise was reached. Wednesday became a new day off, with the government asking citizens to donate at least one day a month of their time to socially useful activities to help offset the reduction in tax revenue. The young were expected to perform two years of service in local social enterprises, while people of Hva’s age were asked to spend at least a year sharing their life experience with the next generation before they could access their pensions. The result was that the financial surpluses of the past had been replaced by an immense social surplus of people donating their time to one another. ✍ I wondered what Hva had done for work. At that moment, a slim band on her wrist started glowing red. “What a coincidence,” she said, smiling. “If you want to know what I do for a living, you can come with me to the doctor for my appointment.” We walked through the great iron

gates of the park into the town and came to a café. The sign above the door read Illich Healthcare Centre. 🍀

Visiting the doctor



🍀 I took a table. There were coffee machines, waiters and waitresses; all the accoutrements of a café from my own time. For a moment, I forgot this was 2031, but then a waiter walked up to us and asked Hva for permission to access her medical data. A swift wave of the near invisible wristband, and the data was seamlessly transferred to a tablet. “Just give me a second and let me check in with the doctor,” the waiter said as he watched feedback scroll down his screen. 🍀 “Hva, Doc HI is showing that your blood pressure is a little high again, and that you haven’t been eating enough greens. It’s asking if you’ve been attending the running club regularly?”. Hva looked slightly guilty. “You of all people should know that we give you a personalised diet plan for a reason. I’ll ask the guys in the community kitchen to whip you up a prescription soup, and I’ll pop your medication in the coffee. Latte ok?”. 🍀 What kind of doctor offered you a free coffee? Hva explained: the rising cost of treatment had pushed the National Health Service of my day close to bankruptcy. “We look after our own health now, rather than just relying on doctors,”



“Effective healthcare is self-care; this fact is currently heralded as if it were a discovery”

she explained. The waiter’s tablet was connected to Doc AI, an artificially intelligent medic that tracked people’s healthcare data and helped them adjust their diet and exercise regimes to prevent illness. ✎ “You asked me what I did for a living,” Hva said, looking at me seriously. And for the first time, I saw a flicker of sadness across her face. “I used to be a nurse, but as you can see, health these days is about medicated coffee and cabbage. Some of us still work in nursing cooperatives, but a lot of people with my sort of qualifications are being replaced by waiters,” she chuckled. “It’s better now. We don’t wait until people get sick. Healthcare is just part of everyday life. We still have hospitals, but these days we celebrate when we’re able to close them down.” ✎ “Now, Guest,” she said, “If it’s not too much to ask, perhaps you might help me pick up my vacuum cleaner?”. I smiled at this strange request, and asked where Hva might be buying her new vacuum from. She laughed. “I keep forgetting that people used to buy vacuum cleaners. I gave mine to the Freia Market years ago, but today my house is dusty and I’ll need to borrow it back”. ✎ We left Illich’s and crossed the road into a covered market. The air was full of enthusiastic music, which I traced to a miniature marching band of children enthusiastically blowing into trumpets

and flutes. Hva explained that schoolchildren spent their Wednesdays learning about the arts and culture that was so neglected on their four days of formal education. The market stalls looked much as markets had in my day, except that behind them were workbenches and tools, where stallholders laboured away on electrical gadgets. Many were operated by an odd collaborative - older men or women surrounded by a group of younger people. ✍

A trip to the market



∇H explained that laws passed during the energy crisis required all new appliances to be easily serviceable, so that kettle elements and phone batteries could be replaced with only a little training. Some of the kit was improved and upgraded, offered for sale. But in the centre of the market was a large, well-lit space laid out like an old electrical showroom. A sign hanging from the centre of the roof read William Morris Library. Hva made for a desk staffed by a middle-aged woman in a leather apron. ✍ Greeting the chief librarian, Hva asked to check out a vacuum cleaner, offered up her wristband, and was shortly given a battered but powerful looking contraption. It had once been a standard household appliance, but years of upcycling in the frea market had given it



“Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it”

a silver aluminium shell with fins like a spaceship from a 1950s comic book and, I gathered, a series of comedic sound effects that could make it sound like a dog or a motorbike as it vacuumed. If the market had a downside, it was the sense of humour of the tinkerers in the stalls around me. 🍀



I felt a guilty twinge as I remembered my own world of work, the sales targets I should be hitting this precise moment. I couldn't afford to miss a day in the office, but I supposed I had no choice. Whatever was happening to me, there was no obvious way to wake up. Instead, I asked Hva how the frea Market was paid for. 🍀 “Most of the people you see around you are offering part of their social surplus for the common good, but everything costs at least some money, and that's what we have the council for,” she explained. “They spend a lot of their money on supporting places like the frea Market. It's a partnership with the community.” I asked Hva how she knew so much about the way the council worked, and she immediately took my hand and said she would show me. I followed along behind, feeling flatfooted and out of time, clutching the ridiculous vacuum cleaner and wondering quite how far she

expected me to carry it. ✎ We approached a row of electric bikes and Hva gestured to me to drop the vacuum into a trailer and jump on a tandem, swiping the same wristband she had used at Illich's. We pulled out into the street and cycled east along the length of the river. I was comforted to see the familiar sights of the suburbs passing by until we reached the river barrier, which appeared to be nearly twice as high as I remembered, the still unfinished upper heights swarming with what I assumed were some sort of construction robots. ✎ Eventually, we reached a grand Victorian building, its wedding cake façade topped by a solar panel-clad tower reaching up into the now-leaden afternoon sky. My heart sank as I contemplated spending the rest of my afternoon in a dreary meeting. But, not knowing what else to do, I followed Hva into the grand debating chamber. What I saw took me by surprise. Roughly one third of the chamber was taken up by teenagers and young people, another by people I took to be retired, and a few who seemed very old. In the middle were adults of around my age. Who had elected this extraordinary collection of councillors? ✎ "Elections? We stopped those years ago. Our councillors are selected by lot. Some join to make particular decisions, others serve for a year on the assembly, and a few of the most

In tandem
past the
river
barrier



The council meeting

experienced serve slightly longer as facilitators. The lottery's designed to make sure we properly represent the community: women and people of colour aren't in the minority any more." 🍀 "The young people represent the future. They make sure the assembly thinks about the long term. The older people over there represent our collective wisdom. They often break ties in debate. In the middle are working people, who represent today's concerns. We're here because I was called up in the lottery last May, and I've been sitting in the council since then. I only have a few months left, and I'm keen to make them count. There's a big debate today." 🍀



The council broke into small groups, each with an experienced facilitator whose role was to try and find consensus before a final debate and vote. Much of the time was taken up by a heated discussion about immigration: climate change was forcing millions of people across the planet from their homes, and the country was divided over how to respond. The cities had demanded the right to provide a sanctuary for climate refugees, so the decision was devolved. The council decided to affiliate directly to the UN's global resettlement programme, eventually voting

through a threefold increase in its local quota of displaced people. ✦ The next vote was on whether to introduce a universal basic income. I gathered that the parliament of my day had been replaced by a House of Commoners made up of delegates from the councils: one of the people in the room that afternoon would be selected to represent the collective view on the national stage. Hva spoke passionately in favour, but the vote was carried by the working people and elders, who worried about whether the economy could bear the cost. I suspected that Hva had badly wanted her moment in Westminster. ✦

“What does democracy mean to you?”



AFTER several hours, the council meeting ended, and Hva and I headed out of the building into the stirrings of a chilly, dark february evening. We climbed back onto the electric tandem and started cycling back towards my home. It had been a long day, and even with the motor whirring we struggled to climb the hill back up from the river into the village. ✦ Docking the bike, I offered to help Hva take her absurd vacuum cleaner home, but she declined. “Goodbye, Guest,” she said. “I hope you enjoy what’s left of your stay here”. I watched sadly as she turned the corner of the road, the fins of the vacuum glinting



“There is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has turned into fellowship”

in the street lamps. ✎ As I entered the hall of my building, I was overcome with a strange tiredness. I staggered through my door and collapsed on the bed. If this really was time travel, its effects were exhausting. Hva would probably say that it was a lifetime of working too hard catching up with me. I closed my eyes and the next thing I knew was blackness. ✎ Morning again. I rise gently into consciousness, the weak february light infiltrating the room through the very same infuriating gap in the curtain. The first thought on my mind is to roll over and dream just a little longer. ✎ So that’s what I do.



A short story written by Simon Parker
& illustrated by Guillermo Ortego

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