

2084

Nick Jacobs

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It was a bright cold day in April, and the overseer robots were watching us leave the Woodruff estate as the day shift ended at six p.m. I was incredibly lucky to have a job cleaning up after Mr Woodruff's children; it was a lot better than the jobs of most people I knew, but still it was a relief to get away from them. Jon's job was weeding part of the gardens on the estate, and that's really backbreaking work.

I need to tell you about Jon, because he was an unusual man: he read old books. I don't mean he downloaded books to read on his phone, none of us can afford to do that, because the copyrights of everything published before 2000 are owned by Oldboox Corp, I mean he'd found the discarded stock of an old bookshop somewhere and was reading them from paper impressions. It was probably illegal, but the chances of discovery were small. Unlike ordinary books, these paper books didn't record the identities of everybody who read them. I know it sounds strange, but Jon says that once upon a time, all books were like that.

Jon's special interest was history. We all got a pretty good introduction to history at school, covering the great American Presidents all the way back to Bush II and Trump I who liberated the American people from slavery, but it was lacking in detail, and I'd sometimes wondered about what happened in prehistory, in the time before Bush II - what Jon called the Dark Ages. He'd found books that were written before that time but they seemed unreliable - describing a fantasy world, so remote from reality that they simply could not be recording historical facts.

That week, all four of us - me, Jon, and our wives Judy and May - were on day shift, so we met up at the local diner for a quick meal before going home to bed. Being on day shift, of course we all had to be on the job at 7 a.m. the following day.

The door asked us if we wanted our usual, and directed us to a vacant table. The diner was nearly full, but the owners had bought an extra robot so the service was pretty quick, and we were served within a couple of minutes of sitting down.

Judy has a similar job to mine on the Craig estate, and told us about the latest annoyances from the unruly children she has to look after. The rest of us sympathised for form's sake, but in truth she is lucky to have such a cushy billet. For myself, I was really eager to hear about Jon's latest exploration of the old bookshop, which he'd found partly buried under the ruins of an old shopping mall a few blocks from his apartment.

"We went there together," said May quietly. "There's a whole section of history books, different authors, different publishers, different dates. It can't all be fantasy. Some of it must be true!"

"The stuff about ordinary workers having their own cars? Working only forty hours a week? But how can it be? If the estate-owners had to pay people so much for so little work, surely they'd have just replaced them with robots?"

"Back then, there weren't any robots. All work had to be done by people - even running a diner like this. There'd be human cooks in the back, humans taking the order and serving the food, cleaning the place, and everything. In fact, when robots started to replace workers, some people thought they'd replace all workers."

That was a pretty silly thing to think. Part of the pleasure of being an estate-owner is being able to lord it over an army of flunkies and servants, we all know that. Having the power to throw somebody out on the street for not being servile enough, I mean, come on, that's obviously a lot of fun! Replacing a robot doesn't do much for anyone's ego.

Something Jon had found out earlier prompted me to ask a question.

"What about the story that the Congress used to be elected by a majority of ordinary people? That seems completely pointless. How would people know who they had to vote for?"

"That's still a bit of a puzzle," said Jon. "I don't think it was ever quite like that. The President was always elected by a group of a few hundred people called an Electoral College. Until about 2030, the Electoral College seems to have been elected by ordinary citizens, but it obviously made no sense to keep doing that. Under Cruz II, the system was streamlined by just having a permanent Electoral College, chosen from the last ones who had been elected, but requiring the members to show that they were responsible people with a minimum net worth of \$50 million each. This worked so well for the Presidency that in 2040, under Cruz III, it was extended to Senate elections. There used to be another part of the government, called the House of Representatives, but it was abolished at the same time. I never really figured out what it did anyway."

"I read something about that," put in May. "There were times when the House and the Senate couldn't agree about something. That's why it was scrapped. It made no sense to have multiple decision-making bodies in the government, because when they disagreed with each other, nothing could be done."

"Well, why do we need a Senate and a President?", said Judy. "Doesn't the same argument apply?"

"It was something about 'separation of powers'," explained Jon. "The idea is that you don't want just one group of people controlling everything. So there was the Senate, that used to make the laws, and the President, who actually ran things, but he had to run them within the laws that the Senate had passed."

"It doesn't seem to have worked," I observed. "The estate-owners are basically the electoral college, so they control both the Presidency and the Senate."

"But apparently at one time it did work," said Jon. "There was some kind of revolution in the first four decades of the 21st century. Before that, there was an oppressive government that took away part of what you earned from you. It was called Income Tax. You had to work for four months every year, up to a day called Tax Freedom Day, to pay your Income Tax before you could keep any money for yourself."

"How could that work?" I said. "Judy and I barely get enough money from our jobs to pay Social Security and live on. If the government took a third of our income, we'd starve to death."

"Apparently, the rate of this Income Tax depended on how much money you got in a year. People like us, on low incomes, paid little or nothing. It was only if you got three or four times as much that you paid a third of it in tax. But the Freedom movement in the early

2030s eliminated this oppressive Income Tax altogether. It replaced it by reforming the Social Security system.”

“I don’t think that was such a good idea,” I said. “Half of everything you get as wages goes to Social Security. How is that better than an Income Tax?”

“Well, for a start, it isn’t half of everything you make. It’s only on wages and salaries up to \$120,000/year. Everything above that is yours to keep.”

“Oh, right,” the other three of us laughed hollowly. Of course, nobody I know except my boss, Woodruff himself, makes anything like that amount of money, and he probably gets ten times as much.

“But that 50% of your salary is really used for your benefit. It goes to providing a pension when you’re over 75. And it’s used for things that ordinary people need, like roads outside the estates, and the police and military. They’re really there to protect you - the estate-owners have their private security forces.”

“I don’t know, Jon. Seems to me that the country is run by and for the estate-owners, and our role is just to provide people that they can yell at, fire, and generally lord it over to make themselves feel good. But didn’t you say that it used to be different? That ordinary people once had a say in the laws and the way the country was run?”

“I’ve thought about that a lot”, said Jon. “I think it was true. It must have been between the great liberation - when Presidents Bush II and Trump I got the oppressive government off our backs - and the later elimination of elections in the 2040s.”

“And how did it go bad?”

“It seems that the estate-owners took over all the media. And then, the media persuaded the people to vote the way the estate-owners wanted. By the time Cruz II came to power, voting was more or less meaningless. The rich estate-owners owned all the land, all the corporations, and all the wealth. So nothing really changed when Cruz III eliminated voting completely.”

The four of us sat there, listlessly finishing our soyburgers, contemplating the vision of a past America which Jon and May had discovered.

“How wonderful it must have been to live under Trump I,” I said. “We should remember him. Perhaps, at some time in the future, another President of his merit will arise, to make life more bearable for the ordinary people. We should drink to his memory.”

We all raised our glasses of alcohol-free beer reverently.

“To Trump I !”

“Trump I !”

“Trump I !”

“Trump I ! ”

The cleanup robot came to take away our plates, and reminded us to free up the table for the next customer.