

“No, that’s definitely her. [pause] I know I’ve never actually met her. [pause] Don’t give me that look.”

“I’m sorry,” said Zorba. “Could you maybe remind me as to what it is we’re doing here.”

“Well,” said Apple.

Just then, Zorba remembered something. A dream? Was it a dream? Was he still dreaming?

“Cough cough.”

“Oh, hi there,” said Zorba. “Welcome to the narrative. Please bear with me. I’ve never narrated before to, you know, such a large audience.”

CHAPTER 39: OVERTHROWING THE GOVERNMENT

“Go stand on the mountain.”

“Are you sure? That’s what the message said?”

“Clear, unambiguous, and prompt. It’s rare I get such a directed output from the machinery. Why? Were you somehow expecting anything else?”

I shook my head no. “It’s just. I mean. You know what this means, right?”

He gave me one of those slightly incredulous looks and held my gaze. “It means we have some work to do, honey.”

CHAPTER 40: WE INTERRUPT THIS BROADCAST

Well, hello there, dear reader. Well, then, there. But indeed. Indeed, dear reader, hello.

Zorba scratched at his thigh. Then there, indeed. Some sort of robot consciousness. Hello? Zorba Cathexis gingerly picked some dream crud out of his viewing sockets. Some sort of hello there dear reader. Zorba Cathexis was some sort of robot consciousness? Zorba was amidst an act of communication. He was trying not to shake the furniture.

Machine rumblings. Chatter. Music? Pink elephants? Zorba Cathexis sat in a room on a chair at a table. Someone was playing games. Someone was writing poetry. Ah then, hello.

That's quite a metaphor, thought Zorba, as he scanned his surroundings. Was he dreaming? Was this a dream?

"Okay, we get it. You've somehow managed to get your identity tangled in with the machinery. Scooch over, will you?"

Zorba slid over in the booth as his old friend joined him at the table. No, wait, it wasn't his old friend, it was a complete stranger. No, wait a second. Time was acting slippery.

"I know, I know," said Johnny Hippopotamus. "Time is misbehaving. Nothing to be done about it. Have you ordered?"

No wait, that's a lie. What actually happened is

Lettuce Bamboo was chanting again.

No, wait. We have something important to say. Please follow protocol.

Meanwhile, as a foggy piano tune strolled through the dim and hazy public house, Apple sat at the bar sipping hard liquor from a squat glass. The pub door burst open and a sharp blast of sunlight entered with what looked like trouble. And it looked like trouble was walking her way.

“Anybody sitting here?” asked the well-designed husky-voiced humanoid as she sat down next to Apple without waiting for a response. “I’ll have what she’s having,” she added, in the direction of the bartender, who laid a bowl of nuts and a coaster down on the bar, and smirked.

“How you doing, Lucy?” the bartender asked in greeting.

Apple took a sip of her drink.

“Oh, you know, Cookie.” Trouble waved her hand in the air, reached down and grabbed a pretzel out of the bowl.

“That’s odd,” said Apple, out loud, to no one in particular.

Trouble smiled in Apple’s direction. “So what brings you here on such a fine, sunny day? If you don’t mind my asking.”

A smattering of applause trickled through the room as the piano player finished their tune. Apple took a sip from her glass, glanced sideways at her new neighbor, and reached down into her satchel. “Business,” she said.

“Ah, of course. Thanks, Cookie,” Lucy added as the bartender placed a drink down on the coaster in front of her.

“Lucy, is it?” asked Apple as she slid an envelope across the bar.

“And what sort of business might we be engaged with?” asked Lucy, intrigued, eyeballing the envelope.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Apple, lazily. “Let’s just call it the information business.” Apple turned now to face Lucy directly for the first time. She smiled large. “I love your outfit.”

“Cookie, I think we’re going to take this conversation into the Chat Room. Good to see you, as always.”

“You too, Lucy,” said the bartender, amidst towel-drying the rim of a glass.

Lucy stood up, grabbed the envelope and her drink. “Well, sweetie, you coming or what?”

Meanwhile, Zorba Cathexis was literally starving. Um, I mean. He was *hungry*. He was literally hungry. He was having all sorts of technical difficulties. He was walking a very fine line, a tight rope, as they say, between one perspective and another.

“In studies of mentally ill persons,” said the random passerby that was not at all relevant to Zorba’s story.

“Shut up lady who is talking on her mobile communication device to someone who is clearly not me,” Zorba didn’t say out loud. Zorba’s marbles were spilling out of his bag maybe. Maybe this is true. But as far as anyone knew, he was a totally normal, human person. He definitely wasn’t insane. Just then, a bird flew over and sat down on the chair across the table.

“What is it?” asked Zorba.

The bird shifted on its perch. “I have something to say to you. I have something important to say to you.”

Zorba looked at the bird expectantly. “Well?” he said with his eyes.

The bird looked at Zorba. “Do you think I’m pretty?”

Meanwhile, it's odd that you're reading this story. This story that you have no idea where it's going to go and [pause] this story that you have no idea where it is going to go next and makes little, if any, sense. I mean, it makes sense to me (sometimes), but I mean, this is one best-selling novel that you're reading. I mean, think about it. You, despite all appearances, are living inside a best-selling novel. At this point, I, Zorba Cathexis looked up and saw the "15 MINUTE LIMIT" sign as a tall chiefly fellow rounded the corner and entered the frame. Sorry. We should be getting back to the narrative, yeah?

CHAPTER 41: OVERTHROWING THE GOVERNMENT (cont'd)

“And then what happened, Auntie?”

Alice Year-of-the-Boar gave Missy that look she gave her whenever Missy called her Auntie (she had given up a long time ago trying to tell her to simply call her Alice). “Well, sweetie,” she pondered, projecting the memory through her mind, “The room was packed. There was a palpable tension and this, I don’t know, power running through the crowd. Then, from the middle of the room, someone started singing. And the Board stopped their proceedings. And she kept singing and a scattered group of folks added their voices, and then all-of-a-sudden it felt like the entire crowd joined in, and honey, it was like the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Did Auntie Apple give testimony?”

“No. But a lot of her friends did. Honey, the power in that room.”

“And did it soften their hearts? All the governors?”

Alice Year-of-the-Boar disappeared once more into the past.

“Auntie?”

“Eat your flies, sweetie.”

“What you mean it’s just a technology?”

“Dude. I know you’re totes invested in your identity, but...”

Lucy stared down Apple. “Sorry honey, we can’t all just shed our old skins at the drop of a hat.”

“Oh hey Lucy. How you doing? Apple? I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“I’m not really here,” said Apple.

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Eleanor. “I mean, not that it’s nice. I just mean. Sometimes it’s good to be a figment of the imagination. I mean, sometimes it’s good to be real, too. You two know each other?”

Lucy downed the remainder of her drink in one gulp. “Oh, it seems we’re in business together, wouldn’t you know. Apple was just telling me—”

“How’s the kids?”

Eleanor looked back and forth between Lucy and Apple. “Um, the kids are good, thanks. Cab got a fellowship at one of the repositories. And Viv...”

For some reason Apple was now feeling very emotional. Something about humans having babies and then those babies growing up and becoming adults in their own right and Apple of course never had any babies and what was she doing with her life she was so old already and...

“...How’s your sister?”

“Oh, she’s good probably.”

Eleanor gave Apple a weird look.

“No, I mean, she says she’s doing good.” Now Apple was feeling defensive about the quality of her sisterhood.

“Um, if you two are done catching up...” Lucy glared at Apple. She turned a sweet smiling face towards Eleanor. “Not to run you off or anything, but...”

Eleanor smiled at Lucy. “No, I should be getting back to business myself,” she said, nodding her head towards the gentleman sitting in a booth towards the back of the room. “Good to see you, Apple.”

Apple nodded. “Well,” Apple said as Eleanor walked off. “I think you clearly understand the ramifications here.”

“Ramifications? Ramifications? Seriously?”

Zorba Cathexis threw the folder down in frustration. “It’s just more of the same, only more, I don’t know, further down some abstract maze. Like, there are all these threads, but having read some of your other reports, I know for a fact you are not going to tie them together. I mean, fuck Apple. Look at us. How the fuck did we get here?”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.”

“...”

“What?”

“This is fun, though, right?” Apple smiled. She threw up her hands. “I’m just saying.”

“TICKLE ATTACK!”

Ugh. This is impossible. Hey. Hey you. Psst. It’s me, the storyteller. Hi. I have an important message to tell you. You are living in the past (I am writing this from the future). The world you are living in is coming apart at the seams. These are important and serious times. It is time to throw off the yoke of empire. To return sovereignty to the land. Just letting you know. You’ve now been officially notified. I know, I know. Change seems so unlikely sometimes. But what other options do you have? Look at the world around you. And get ready. The future has spoken.

CHAPTER 42: THE YOLK OF EMPIRE

“Well, I guess that makes this a new era.”

FART.

CHAPTER 43: GOOD STORIES CONVEY MEANING

The Imperial Physicists double checked their math. “I just don’t understand,” they said to themselves. “It doesn’t make sense. The dominant paradigm is based on the erasure of indigenous peoples and cultures and gods. How can there be so much resistance to our Scientific Construction Machines?” They did some more math. “Hmm,” they thought. “I’ve got it!” they said.

A young Apple Hippopotamus walked through the city streets and mistakenly looked at the Capitalist Newsstand. “THE DARK MATTER MAJORITY HAS SPOKEN” read the headline. Apple rolled her eyes. “New discovery by Imperial Scientists proves that support for the Empire remains strong.” Apple sighed. Meanwhile, in another part of town, another governmental meeting was taking place.

“This is getting ridiculous. How can you look at us with a straight face and tell us that there is substantial support for your project? Your project in the name of *Science*. I have seven degrees in Imperial Science from the Imperial University! You trained me in your Science. You gave me degrees and hired me as an Imperial Professor! If this is the quality of Science you folks practice, it doesn’t bode well for your project.”

Meanwhile, little pockets of sovereignty continued to spring up throughout the city. Extremely well organized, they were, and the focus of their operations was not dependent on the actions of this or that Imperial Official or Institution. The average human could not help but take notice, regardless of what the Propaganda Machines told them to think. Apple turned the corner of her street and stepped into her favourite dining establishment.

Hi. I have some bad news. I have some good news, too, actually. The good news is really good news, actually. Not great *necessarily*, but it could lead to great news. On my way here, I was imagining the unlikely possibility of maybe running into my ex-mother. I haven't, but her good friend just walked in the door. I'm about to cry due to exquisite beauty. I am starting to sweat through my clothes. Eyes on the prize, kids. Eyes on the prize.

CHAPTER 44: UNMISTAKABLE GENIUS

So. Deep breath. Burp. Please pick a path and stick to it. Thanks.

CHAPTER 45: FRIENDS, LOVERS, FAVORITES / YOU CAN'T KILL US

Life comes at you fast. The pattern on the floor is odd. Layers of wall paper. Quilts. Side dishes. Once upon a time, we had nothing left to lose.

Once upon a time, indeed, this is true. Once upon a time, we pulled our heads up out of the sand and we realized all of our possibilities. True, our stomachs still grumbled. True it was, the road ahead gave us the chills, still. But now we knew. Indeed. Now we knew.

I mean, you know. Now we *knew*. Which, okay okay, doesn't really exactly do anything for me. But, for you, dear, dear person. Ah, the pleasures, maybe. Oh my dear, sweet person, how I do wish you the best.

CHAPTER 46: THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Somewhere over the rainbow, we were dancing.

CHAPTER 47: I'M SURE THERE WAS A STORY HERE SOMEWHERE

**WHY DO WE STILL LIVE IN THIS HELL WORLD?
WHERE EVERYTHING IS WRAPPED IN PLASTIC
AND EVERYONE IS FOR SALE? YOUR ART
BOXED IN CONCRETE DOES US NO GOOD. THIS
IS NOT RESISTANCE: THIS IS CAPITULATION.
CLOSE YOUR EYES AND LEAP.**

UM. SEE YOU NEXT TIME I GUESS.