



THE PRETERNATURALISTS

Professor Hiram Waterman woke to muted light and the sound of a boom fading into silence. He sat up and his head broke through a blanket of ground-hugging fog. The fog stretched away to a vague horizon and then feathered up to a fuzzy dome that twinkled with tiny points of light. Another boom sounded.

“Hello!” Hiram called. He waited but no one answered. “Is anybody here?!” No answer.

He started to stand but remembered the pain in his chest. It had been so intense that it drove him to the floor before he blacked out. That was in the teacher’s lounge. So where was he now?

He knew he must have had a heart attack, and he probed the ribs around his heart. There wasn’t any discomfort so he got to his feet. He stood for a moment hunched like a question mark. Still no pain. He straightened up and began a slow turn to take in his surroundings.

The fuzzy world was like no place he’d ever seen, and he figured he was dreaming. Maybe he was lying drugged in a hospital bed. Or he could have been in a coma. Whatever the case he decided to take a closer look at the twinkling lights. He set off walking for one that was down close to the horizon.

His step was buoyant, like there was less gravity than he was used to. Before long he’d developed a bounding gait. The light he was approaching grew stronger, until he was close enough to see that it came from a radiant blue-white whale. The whale hung high in the air and flexed as if pushing through water ahead of its fanning tail. But it

remained in place, and the huge undulation was eerily silent. Hiram paused and stood looking up, mesmerized, until another boom sounded. He took off walking toward another light.

He reached it fairly quickly. It was circling high above him but spiraled down and hovered a yard away. A hummingbird. He lifted a hand to it and for the first time noticed that, unlike the bluish/white of the bird and the whale, he glowed a honey gold color. The bird touched his thumb with its tongue before rising again to resume its circling.

He walked on, and as he approached the next light it resolved into two. Two bears standing upright leaned close to each other. They seemed to be engaged in an earnest conversation that Hiram couldn't hear. They too were blue/white, as was the drooping willow he went to next, and then the napping horse.

Then he saw a pinpoint of light that was golden, like his. He walked toward it and after a while made out a woman bent to some kind of work that was hidden beneath the fog. The woman was quite shapely—thin-waisted, well-bosomed and roundly-hipped. She wore jeans and a blouse, and her long hair fell like a golden wing over the side of her face.

Something in her form seemed familiar. Something about her movements too, and the way her hair swayed as she . . .

Hiram stopped.

“Judith?”

His heart raced and he thought he might be having another attack. He closed his eyes and began to count. By the time he reached ten his pulse had slowed. He opened his eyes and continued toward the woman. She looked like his wife, but how could that be? He'd seen her die.

He stopped a couple of steps away and stared. The woman straightened to a standing position and smiled at him. "It's about time you got here," she said.

It was Judith, no doubt about it.

She slapped her palms together like she was brushing away dirt. "What do you think of the new me?" she asked with her slight Oklahoma drawl. She went into a twirl and her hair flared as she spun twice before stopping to face Hiram again. "Or actually it's the old me. But I'll do, won't I?"

Hiram was dumbfounded. He stepped close and touched her cheek. They both glowed more brightly, which accentuated the age spots on the back of Hiram's hand. "Good lord," he said. He touched the wattles under his chin.

"Why am I so old, Judith? I mean, I want to be young like you."

"You'll adjust. Give it time."

He studied her face. She looked the same as when they'd first met, with her clear, piercing eyes above high cheekbones, and full lips that he'd wanted to kiss even before he heard them utter a word.

He tore his attention away from her and waved an arm.

"Where are we?"

"In the hereafter."

"I'm in a hospital, right? Hallucinating because they gave me drugs?"

"No, you're really here. And we're together again."

"But how?"

"I don't know."

"But . . ."

Hiram was caught by her eyes. They beamed love and he wanted to tell her how much he'd missed her. He wanted to describe the long, des-

perate ache since her death, but his throat constricted before he could speak.

They'd had nearly a quarter century together, wonderful years that began with a blind date. She was just out of medical school and working as a pediatrician at a hospital in Tulsa. Without a doubt she was the brightest woman Hiram had ever met, and with that and the beauty, he couldn't believe she wasn't married. "No time," she said when he broached the subject. "School, school and more school. And then work, work and work. But what about you?"

His story was more convoluted than hers. He too had put off romance so he could go to school, but while she sailed from scholarship to scholarship, he navigated the locks of academia one pay-as-you-go semester at a time. During the Depression he worked various jobs to save for college, and then when he got there he juggled jobs with classes. And he read at every opportunity. History and biographies. He read between jobs, between classes, and he read himself to sleep at night. Fortunately he was blessed with an eidetic memory; he could recite whole chapters years after reading them.

He joined the Navy at the start of World War Two and served for the duration. He was twenty-three when he went in and twenty-seven when he got out. Following his discharge he returned to school on the G.I. Bill. Two years of furious study later he was just beginning work on his doctorate, when he met Judith. They married after he graduated and secured a job teaching history at a college in Oklahoma City. She transferred to a hospital there, and within a year she was pregnant. They had three happy children and life was as good as it gets. The children grew and went off to school, then married and started families of their own.

Hiram watched Judith grow more beautiful as she aged. Each year brought forth a face more ravishing than the one before. She seemed beyond the reach of time, but what time couldn't touch disease pummeled. The cancer came on quickly. Judith shriveled, took to her bed, and wasted down to a knot of flesh fed by a dozen tubes. She passed in 1973, when she was fifty-four.

"Why are you frowning?" she asked.

"Because I . . . I saw you die, Judith. But now we're together again. I don't understand. Are we ghosts?"

"I couldn't say. I've given up trying to figure it out. We might be ghosts. Death is a wall, and we don't know what's on the other side. This place could be supernatural or the most natural thing in the world. But I've come to think it's somewhere in between, someplace that's . . . what's the word I'm looking for? Preternatural?"

Hiram felt his eidetic memory kick in. He pictured the page of a dictionary and said, "Preternatural: surpassing the ordinary or normal. Otherworldly. Transcendental." He looked around. "I guess that would apply here. This could be limbo, you know, Catholic limbo or Zoroastrian. That one's called hamistagan. And the ancient Greeks had the Fields of Asphodel, midway between the Elysian Fields and Tartarus."

Judith smiled. "Always the historian. You taught me so much. I was glad you stayed with teaching after I passed."

"So you've been watching me?"

"Of course, dear. Couldn't you tell?"

Hiram remembered feeling sometimes that she was watching. He'd be reading, or he'd awaken in the middle of the night, and he would sense her eyes on him. Whenever that happened he would still his mind and wait. He didn't know for what exactly, but he waited, hoping that through

some miracle she would appear and complete the moment.

He felt compelled to touch her again, and he reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her face. Again she glowed more brightly. So did his hand, and as he watched, the age spots on the back of it disappeared. He felt his neck. The warts were gone.

“Look at that,” Judith said. “You’re learning to control things.”

“But I don’t know how I did that. I just wanted to be young like you, and now I guess I am.”

A boom overhead made him look up. A couple of lights blinked off, a couple blinked on.

“Each light is a life,” Judith said. “Plants, animals, stars. They come and go. And every few billion years they all rush together, when the universe contracts before rebirthing itself. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve been through that, but I always make my way back here, to wait for you.”

There was another boom.

“That was a big one,” she said.

“A big what?”

“Civilization. They fall all the time. But you’ll see. I think you’ll like it here, Hiram. You can tap into any period in earth’s history and observe.”

“So which civilization just fell?”

“You tell me. Close your eyes and try to see.”

He did, but he couldn’t picture what she was talking about. He told her so and she said, “That’s okay. Soon you’ll be able to see everything that’s ever happened.”

“Well, I’m pretty current up until I died, so tell me what happened after 1985.”

“Not much good, I’m afraid. You know how bad off the world was by ’85. Humanity was in an intellectual and moral meltdown. And then, in two thousand and . . . No. It’d be too depressing to

talk about it. But you should make that your first project here, to look at the year 2020 to see how the world began its collapse into tyranny.”

“Collapse into tyranny?” I don’t like the sound of that. Come on, Judith, at least give me the short version of what happened.”

“Okay,” she sighed. “Let’s see . . . In late 2019 a group of elites released a deadly new virus in China. It spread across the world, and democracies began to shut down.”

“Shut down? How?”

“They surrendered their core freedoms, in the name of public safety. They curtailed travel, and the right to assemble, and freedom of speech. The world became a medical prison that used the internet to . . .”

“The internet? That computer network?”

“Yes. It was still being standardized when you died, but you had it on your campus.”

“I know. Some of the students used it.”

“Well, by 2020 it was everywhere. It was vital to the world’s economy, and the elites controlled it.”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned ‘elites.’ Who do you mean? Bankers? Businessmen?”

“Those and others. Members of the World Economic Forum. A man named Schwab founded it. His family worked with Hitler and the Nazis in World War Two. By the 1980s he’d signed up more than a thousand corporations, foundations and other big organizations, and they acted as an unofficial world government. The WEF was behind the fake climate crisis that stripped people of their rights in the name of saving the planet. That was its most ambitious project, but it had lots of others. Around the time of the virus scare it targeted professional sports in America, and it got the leagues to promote kneeling during the national anthem.”

“Kneeling? Why?”

“To protest against the country.”

“Big business protested the country that made it big?”

“Yes. If your business was a member of the WEF, you had to do whatever it ordered, no matter how crazy. And the results were bad. Fiscal mismanagement and social manipulation drove the world into chaos. The WEF should have been held criminally liable for its actions, but it wasn't, and it continued to expand. Then in 2020 it released a video that made eight predictions. One of them was, 'By 2030 you'll own nothing and you'll be happy about it.'”

“That's communism.”

“Well, authoritarianism. The WEF was more fascist than communist. It merged private industry with elected government, the way Mussolini did.”

“But fascism was defeated in World War Two. Why would people give in to it seventy-five years later?”

“Partly because of the little catchphrases that the WEF used. 'Build Back Better,' 'The Great Reset,' 'The New Normal.' People heard those and assumed they'd benefit somehow if they gave up their rights.”

Hiram stood thinking, taking in what he'd just learned, then he said, “Okay, so the world got duped into accepting despotism, but we continued to evolve, didn't we? What about space exploration? Did we make it to the stars?”

“No. The elites set up mining colonies on the moon and Mars, but that was it. They didn't want us escaping their control. Solar flares killed off the miners and everybody on earth, then a few million years later the sun went nova. End of story.”

“So we never even left the solar system?”

“No. The desire to do that kind of thing died with the crushing of the individual. You were right about collectivism. You used to say, ‘Many hands don’t just make light work, they make slight work.’”

“Apparently I didn’t say it loudly enough.” Hiram felt an overwhelming sadness. He shook his head. “I thought for sure we’d make it to the stars.”

“Maybe we do.”

“But you just said we don’t.”

“Yes, but I’m not sure that history’s predetermined. I’ve heard about people going back in time to make changes, so maybe something will happen to . . .”

“Wait a minute. People can go back in time? From here?”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“Then I want to go back. I might be able to help get the world back on track in space exploration. If the sun’s going to explode, then mankind needs to relocate. That means that whatever happened to put us off of space travel needs to be fixed.”

“Do you think it would matter?”

Hiram was surprised.

“Judith. Did I just hear . . . despair?”

“Yes. Please don’t be disappointed. I’ve tried to maintain a positive attitude since I got here, but learning as much as I have, seeing such a big picture, it’s made me realize how silly it is to think the human race can survive. We might learn how to stay ahead of the exploding stars, but no matter what we do the universe will eventually contract and destroy everything.”

“But if we could figure out how to move from star to star, then maybe we could figure out how to survive the contractions. You’ve managed to survive them, so maybe we can find a way to do it as a species. We need to try.”

Judith didn't respond. Hiram could see that she was debating with herself. He let her think for a moment, then he said, "What about pain and suffering?"

"What about them?"

"Did people suffer under the tyranny that began in 2020?"

"Of course."

"How did they suffer?"

"Well, millions starved to death when the WEF sabotaged the world's supply chain. And then there was the social isolation. The medical industry created a pandemic out of fudged numbers, and whole nations were forced into quarantine. Workers couldn't go to their jobs and children couldn't go to school. Suicide rates skyrocketed. And those awful injections . . ." Judith shuddered. "The spike proteins produced by the Covid shots migrated to the testes in males and the ovaries in females. It was the biggest sterilization program in history."

"So people were starved and injected with poison, gave up freedom of movement, and were driven to suicide. That's suffering, all right, and the Judith that I remember would want to do something about it. Even if there's no future in it."

Judith squirmed and Hiram said, "I'm sorry to make you feel uncomfortable, darling, but you became a doctor because it's in your nature to alleviate pain and suffering. You have a chance to do that now."

Judith squirmed some more, then finally she said, "You're right, Hiram. I guess I put everything on hold while I was waiting for you. But now . . . Let me ask around. I'll find out if we can go back. But how would we change history? Do you have a plan?"

"Maybe. You told me that the man who founded the WEF had Nazi connections, right?"

“Yes. Klaus Schwab. His family’s company was Escher Wyss, one of Hitler’s favorites. They built flamethrowers and helped the Nazis place stolen gold in foreign banks. Allied intelligence protected the company, so it came out of World War Two stronger than ever. It was the first building block of the WEF.”

“Well, what if there’s no war to build on? What if we prevent it?”

“Prevent the war? Can we do that?”

“I think so, if we neutralize Adolf Hitler.”

“Murder?” Judith gasped. “I know it’s Hitler, but we can’t just. . .”

“Not murder. Hear me out. The war was the result of a thousand factors, but everything hinged on Hitler. His politics were the key. The odd thing, though, is that he never planned to go into politics. He wanted to be an artist.”

“I remember that. He was a painter, but he couldn’t sell his work.”

“And he was bitter about it. But what if he’d sold some paintings? Enough to keep his passion for art alive?”

“Then he wouldn’t have gone into politics.”

“Exactly. So I propose that we go back to when Hitler was just starting out as an artist and buy a bunch of his paintings. That might avert the war. And with no war, there might not be any WEF in 2020.”

“But what about space travel, and the contracting universe?”

“We’ll deal with all that later. Hitler first.”

“Hitler,” Judith muttered. Her brow furrowed. “We’d probably have to display his paintings, on the walls of our home. Could we live like that, Hiram? Surrounded by the paintings of Adolf Hitler?”

“Well, he wouldn’t become the mass murderer of the war, so there’s that. And we could mix some

other work with his. Winston Churchill was an artist, too. With no war to make him internationally famous, we might be able to pick up some of his paintings.”

Judith smiled. “I like that. We could decorate our walls with the paintings of Churchill and Hitler. But I expect they’re different styles. What if people say they clash?”

“We’ll tell them it could’ve been a lot, lot worse.”