

## Phyllis in atomic wonderland

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In the Riverview Observatory, Father O'Connell readied his seismographs - seven of them. The possibility of breakdown had to be considered, and now, with the coal miners out - a blackout at the wrong moment ... So the clockwork instruments were oiled and tested, set up alongside their electric successors. Springs taut, whirring, they waited. No anomaly would escape the methodical priest.

But when the time came, when the Bomb was exploded, nary a flicker was registered on the caefully prepared charts. The shockwave from Bikini never arrived. No vibration was detected in Sydney. Yet it was there, that subtle tremor. A ripple moved across the earth, shifting the ground beneath our feet. A ripple formed as some massive bulk shifted, flexed, deep, deep down.

§§§

A winter morning in Melbourne, 1946. On the kitchen stove the porridge thickens and burps, solidifying. Attention is focused on the wireless set, as Phyllis watches her parents bicker.

'I'm sure its the ABC', insists her mother, hands on hips.

'Yes ... yes', her father, oblivious, drives the tuner on through peaks of signal and wash.

'You passed it'.

'Wait ... just wait. There, that's it'.

'See'.

'I can't hear', protests Phyllis.

'Come over', her father draws her to him and the family stands gethered in the kitchen, listening.

Yes folks it's live. Everyone can play their part without leaving home - witnesses to the atomic age. Settle back now and enjoy the extravagnza, just 'No noise thanks' and 'Keep out of the way'. Extras on the set of the future.

'We are now crossing to our reporter aboard the observation ship ...' The American commentary is being relayed around the world. No expense spared on this premier public performance. Breathlessly the scene takes shape. Dawn over Bikini Atoll and the doomed test fleet. In chains or cages, pigs, goats and rats eat, shit and be merry. A compelling experiment in metaphor. The seconds tick away.

Tick tick.

Over the radio a metronome is used to heighten the dramatic effect.

Tick tick tick.

Standing between her parents, Phyllis reaches up and takes their hands. Holding tight she closes her eyes.

'Hrumphh!' a pig snorts indignantly. But too late!

'Bombs away!' the broadcaster cries. Then in that moment before detonation another voice breaks in, slicing through time: 'Listen world, this is the crossroads'.

§§§

The future is now, is 1948. Phyllis stands at the crossroads. Short for her thirteen years, the signpost looms above her, standing unmistakably at the focus of the exhibition. It's two arms exclaim a choice: 'PROGRESS' or 'DESTRUCTION'. Two paths lay open, two roads ahead ...

'Funny', thinks Phyllis looking at the map in the souvenir booklet, 'the arrows only go one way.'

Brusquely a rack of suits bundles past Phyllis and takes up its position in front of one of the dioramas. It is hot again today and, in moving, the official party casts a wake of sweat that eddies around Phyllis. She wrinkles her nose and moves over to the gamma ray display - 'EVERY CLICK IS AN ATOM EXPLODING'. Tick tick tick. Phyllis holds her breath.

Harold Giddy, the accountant made good, is ringmaster in Murdoch's unexplained absence. 'As you would understand Premier, the Herald's aim in sponsoring this Atomic Age and Industrial Exhibition is to present atomic energy in terms that the average man-in-the-street can understand.'

Indeed the Promotions Department, for it was the Promotions Department that organised the exhibition, had gone to great lengths to ensure that this was so. Armed with R.I. Brightwater's definitive volume, *Product Recognition in the Advanced Physical Sciences*, they had road-tested the atomic idiom to see how it weathered the harsh Australian linguistic conditions. PROGRESS and DESTRUCTION had scored well in all their tests. 'Death rays', 'billiard balls' and 'a golden age of peace and prosperity' had also demonstrated a high level of familiarity. The preferred unit of measurement, of course, was shown to be the 'teacupful'.

'The exhibition', continues Giddy, 'displays the possibilities for good and evil, with an emphasis on the constructive uses of atomic energy.' A man of capital and a frustrated engineer, Giddy feels desire rise as he surveys the industrial and technical displays that fill the bulk of the hall. Ah sweet progress.

'A golden age of peace and prosperity, Premier, if ...', he stops, looking for unspoken understanding in Hollway's distant gaze. If ... The socialists are still in Canberra, communists in the unions - a firm line is needed.

Thomas Tuke Hollway stares through Giddy to the diorama. A young premier, a young party - his promise to deal with the unions only partially fulfilled. But at this moment Hollway sees that Giddy's golden future will somehow never be his. His credentials are impeccable, yet he feels cursed, doomed to be eternally turned from the door of the club - 'I'm sorry sir, we have our instructions' - by a bouncer who looks just like...

Hollway is lost in the New Mexico desert. The diorama shows a group of stick-figure scientists looking to the horizon and a burst of light that signals birth - codename 'Trinity'. And there amidst the dark and billowing clouds - CONGRATULATIONS ITS A BOY! - there the atomic genie stands.

All bronzed red and muscles, hands with fingers spread, held as a wizard might in calling on mystic powers. Bohr electrons whizz around his head like bush flies. This is the exhibition's pin-up boy.

'Letters of blood or letters of gold?' asks Hollway quietly.

'Yes Premier, indeed', insists Giddy, 'and only a teacupful of uranium...'

'EXCUSE ME'. The words are heard as a rumble that set the display boards rocking. Exhibition-goers nervously eye the exits.

'A ... a ... teacupful of ...' Giddy stops, noticing Hollway, pale and reverent. Following his gaze, Giddy comes upon the genie, who speaks again.

'If I can just..' The genie painfully flexes his fingers and hands. 'A bit stiff', he explains. When finally relaxed, he sighs and steps from the cloud, right on to the stick-figures. CRUNCH! Poor little Oppenheimer. 'Oops' says the genie as he scrapes the unfortunate physicist from the sole of his large, glowing foot.

There are screams and a rush for the doors. Flee flee the clumsy radioactive giant!

'Oh' he says, embarrassed, 'I didn't mean to ...'

Phyllis, meanwhile, crouches hidden behind a partition and watches. The genie sits down on a scale model of the devastated Hiroshima, triggering a recorded commentary that describes the approach of the American bomber. KABOOM! Ending with suitable sound effects and a flash of light. Just like being there yourself. The genie giggles.

Giddy is calmly accommodating. 'How ... unexpected', he says, approaching cautiously.

'Really?' the genie asks, suprised. 'You mean you don't recognise me?'

'Oh well, of course', soothes Giddy, 'You are the embodiment of the inevitable progress of science, evidence of man's increasing control over the forces of nature. At the same time you are a challenge to humankind's moral and spiritual development. You present a choice ...'

'I bring you blessing and cursing, life and death', says the genie in his most bored tone of voice. 'Ho hum'.

'On the one hand this' continues Giddy, indicating the Hiroshima model, 'On the other ...'

'On the other - rocket ships to the stars, ocean liners that never need refuelling, power too cheap to meter ...' Beckoning to Giddy, the genie leans over and whispers conspiratorially, 'Is that what you really want?'

'Yes,' Giddy straightens, 'we all do.'

'Oh' says the genie, bored again, 'I just thought ...' Silently the genie examines the scaled-down ruins of Hiroshima. 'Cheap special effects', he mutters.

'Pardon?' queries Giddy.

'Loud noises and flashing lights - Welcome to the show!' The genie claps his hands. FLASH! The simulated bomb burst is triggered again. This time, however, two children hiding near the model are vapourised, and the backdrop bursts into flames. 'Oops' says the genie.

'Ah ... I just have to make a telephone call.' Giddy backs out of the hall, leaving only Hollway and Phyllis, still hidden, with the careless man of the future.

The genie begins a one-sided conversation with the awe-struck Premier:

'I'm really a character player you know. I'm used to roles with a bit of depth. Horror yes, but character as well. Recently though there's been more and more of this macho shit. Frankenstein's monster, or saviour of the universe, or both... Ah sweet progress -I've got to get out of these trashy sci-fi extravaganzas.'

Hollway answers, vaguely nodding, 'I know what you mean.'

Giddy slips back into the hall. Approaching slowly he whispers to Hollway, 'It's OK, they'll be here soon.' Then to the genie, boldly, 'So, what do you intend to do now?'

'Ummm ... aren't *you* supposed to tell me. I thought that was the whole idea ... Who are *they* anyway?'

'They ... ah ... we ... that is ... you', Giddy's stammering is propitiously halted as the doors burst open to a determined phalanx of press officers. Striding at their head is the purple-robed figure of Rudolph Iscariot Brightwater himself, international discourse consultant and conceptual troubleshooter. This is PIRG (PURGE), the Public Image Response Group established by Brightwater at the request of the Australian Government. 'Its lucky I was in the country', he says, hurrying through the exhibition, golden ponytail streaming behind.

'For the newspapers Mr Brightwater?' an aide asks.

"We must be increasingly vigilant to guard against those pernicious forces that would endanger our Australian way of life" ... Use a family shot.'

'Yessir.'

Brightwater nods briefly to Giddy and comes to a halt in front of the genie. Without speaking, he snaps his fingers at the bronze giant and points to a large pair of white overalls held out by one of his aides. Meekly the genie dons the overalls and is led away by the PIRG team to a hastily contrived photo opportunity.

'All under control', pronounces a satisfied Brightwater. He shakes Giddy's hand and pats Hollway on the back, 'Courageous Premier - courageous and defiant.' Anointed thus, Hollway follows Giddy silently from the hall.

Turning to leave, Brightwater stops. 'Well, well ... an observer.' Phyllis had been spotted. 'You saw everything - how lucky you are.' He held out his hand to the nervous child, who hesitantly emerged from her concealment.

'Lucky?' she asked.

'Very lucky, the luckiest girl in the world ... to have been a part of this.' A sweep of his arm looses a stream of sparkles that, glittering, flutter to the floor.

'But those children ... I thought ... I was frightened.'

'Let us have no irrational fears. Preparedness is our only defence. Our enemies do not place the same value on human life that we do. what is your name my dear?'

'Phyllis.'

'Come Phyllis, there's no time to lose. let me show you wonderland.' Brightwater grabs Phyllis by the hand and drags her around the exhibition. Through the industrial and manufacturing exhibits, past fly-spray, refrigerators, toys, radios, sewing machines, vacuum cleaners ... Suddenly he stops, hands outstretched in revelation, 'All this will be yours!'

'F-flyspray?'

'The FUTURE!'

Slowly Brightwater begins to turn on the spot. To pirouette. Faster and faster, soon a spiralling blur, a tornado. Phyllis feels herself being drawn in. She resists but cannot hold on. WHOOSH! She's away.

§§§

Phyllis lands with a thud on the broken back of Old Father Time, or is that the Rosenbergs? I don't think we're in Kansas anymore Ethel.

Crowds of Munchkins with dirty, smeared faces, freed briefly from their menial jobs, gather around Phyllis. They sing:

'Flash! Bang! The Japs are dead. Evil Japs, wicked Japs. Flash! Bang! The wicked Japs are dead.'

'Back to work!' Brightwater, clad now in a gleaming white lab-coat, snarls and cracks his golden whip. The Munchkins scatter to the strains of 'Flash! Bang! The Commos die', while Brightwater floats towards Phyllis like a high-tech butterfly.

'Welcome to the new age my dear. Everything you could ever desire is available here ... and at an extremely reasonable price. Scientists have been working tirelessly to provide you with a happy and healthy life - a life of leisure. Look!' Brightwater points his whip towards a strange object in the sky. Sickly, phosphorescent green it glows - a city, a suburb, a shopping centre.

'Its not far Phyllis, just a little way beyond. Always keep to the freeway and remember', laughs Fairy Brightwater, 'There's no place like ho-ome'.

Dazed, Phyllis takes a few faltering steps onto the desolate asphalt. Suddenly vast chasms open on either side. She hears a rumbling behind and turns to see the genie aboard some steamroller contraption, bearing grimly. There is no way but on, ever on, until at last she staggers and falls. Sticky, tarry hands reach up from the road and seize her. Sinking down they take her into darkness and forgetting.

§§§

Phyllis, now grown, wakes with a start on the couch in front of the TV. The baby is crying. She sits up and stares at the framed tapestry hanging on the lounge-room wall - 'There's no place like home'. She embroidered it herself, yet something rankles, biting at her memory.

Her child, fed, nursed and changed, is sleeping again. Phyllis hurriedly prepares her husband's dinner - no time to lose. She listens to the radio while slicing vegetables. A news report - another series of atomic tests is to take place in Central Australia. What? Atomic tests? Where? The Prime Minister speaks, eyebrows audibly bristling, 'Let us have no irrational fears...' Phyllis drops the knife with a clatter. Stooping, elbows on the kitchen table, head in hands, she closes her mind. After a few minutes she stands again. THUD! Her head hits the ceiling. 'How curious', she thinks.

Crawling with difficulty through the tiny doorway, Phyllis makes her way into the lounge and switches on the television, seeking an explanation from the source.

The wrestling is on.

The good guy, the one in the clean, white singlet emblazoned with a golden 'H', is climbing up on the ropes. His opponent, the evil foreigner, lies prone in the centre of the ring. Lauching himself from the top rope, the man in white falls crushingly on the evildoer - the atomic drop! Arms raised, victorious, the genie flashes a Chesty-Bond smile at the camera. And winks.

Phyllis screams and the house collapses, leaving her amidst a pile of pasteboard and dust. Standing unsteadily she sees, in the distance, a purple-robed figure who waves. Yes, there is only one way now. Striding over houses, factories, onward to the precipice.

'Welcome to the crossroads!' calls Rudolph Iscariot Brightwater, 'Glad you could make it!'

Phyllis waves back, but keeps on. The contained logic, the containing logic, offered only one choice - and that was freedom.

§§§

## **FREEDOM**

Electroshock is used to bring unconsciousness. Then, with head tilted, the sharp, pointed leucotome is placed under the eyelid, on the occipital bone. WHACK! Splintered bone and into brain. Back and forth, the leucotome blindly severing. Ah sweet progress. Science at last grants Phyllis her freedom.

The genie, dressed now in a grey, three-piece suit, closes the file and replaces it in a pile on his desk. He turns slowly to the camera, smiles and says, 'I am become death, shatterer of worlds'.

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