

New Fiction by Cory Massaro: “Gran Flower”



I fill the big bucket with soap and water and start heading across the field. It's early on a Sunday and Gran Flower will want his solar cells cleaned, which they say isn't really necessary, but Gran insists it helps. So I have woken up early and am hoping to reach Gran before he starts screeching and riling up the crows.

I pass through our low, flat garden plot. It used to be a marsh, and the rain still feels free to run downhill and stay awhile. From there, I head up the dusty northern hill, under the checkerboard shade of its acre-wide awning, half solar panels to farm the sun, half glass to keep the dust dry so we can farm that too. Then, descending the hill, I reach the desiccated riverbed fringed with crusty little succulents, which is where our property ends and the Gibsons' begins. Gran wanted to be set up there last Sunday so he could spend the week swearing about them, the Gibsons, his synthetic voice cracking and popping at max volume, then—I imagine—going silent with awe the moment he saw a quail. The Gibsons don't even live there anymore; the Government removed them decades ago. Gran knows that, but I think he just likes the solitude and the quail and a place to say “motherfucker” where the Holy Father can really hear him.

I get to the property line, and there's Gran just where I left him.

From behind, Gran Flower looks like an aluminum sculpture of a sunflower. He has a long metal stem which sticks into the ground, and about five feet up, big metal leaves curl outward

and upward. Hexagonal solar cells tessellate on the leaves' upper surface; it is these I'll need to clean.

As I walk around to face Gran, his head comes into view. It's his own human face from before he was a Gran, cast (I assume faithfully) in metal like Agamemnon's death mask. His head emerges from among the petals, as though they were a high starched collar and he a count.

"Hi, Gran," I say.

WHO ARE YOU? comes the scratchy monotone of his synthesized voice. He's probably filled up the tiny thumb drive stuck behind his head. Swearing at the Gibsons and God and country occupies a surprising amount of writable memory. He's probably dumped unimportant stuff like who I am, who anybody is now.

I take a solid state drive from my pocket. This one's much more capacious but nearly full just the same: eighty of a hundred petabytes. "Just a second, Gran. Don't be scared." I remove the small drive he's currently using and swap it out for the other. Eighty petabytes of Gran Flower, the Gran that tells me stories, the Gran I went to the city and the museum with. My Gran.

GUHGUHGUHGUH SSSHIIIT SHIT SSSSSSHHHHHIVER MY STAMEN, goes Gran. He gets glitchy when I swap drives since I am effectively replacing a bit of his brain.

"I'm here to clean your solar cells," I say.

OH BEES OH BEES OH NO OH OH OH NO OH JONAS, he says, WEREN'T YOU HERE JUST AN HOUR AGO?

~

Gran Flower would be my sextuple-great-grandfather. He was among the first wave of Grans, or at least the first after the program became public.

A group of scientists had found some birds living in the most uninhabitably toxic places on earth, these big landfills full of old phones and computers and batteries. Places where the temperature reached 45, 50 Celsius all year round, and the ground was so acidic you could never go barefoot. The people had to wear masks and hazard suits and take pills, and their hair still fell out when they hit thirty.

But somehow the birds were doing fine—thriving, even. The way pigeons and rats live off human cities' heaps of garbage, and not just live but live large, this one species of crow had found a way to turn people's insistent fuck-ups into vitality and food.

So the scientists did the logical thing and caught a bunch of the crows and cut them open. The birds' brains were all in various stages of conversion to metal. So they cut the brains open too and discovered that the metal was forming these perfect replicas of the nervous structure, down to little conductive nanotubes where there had been axons and dendrites.

Then they started experimenting on people. It was about two hundred and fifty years back, Gran Flower says. Nobody knew why all of a sudden there were so few homeless people. The poor and desperate just started disappearing off the streets, out of the campers they lived in, out of the factories and warehouses they worked in. People thought the president must be doing a great job, the economy improving, all that. But really some corporation was just plucking people up and taking them to labs to feed them bits of old laptops and see what would happen. And eventually that same president, who was president for life and had already had all his organs replaced three times, disappeared also.

The government held a candle for him and somehow installed an interim president. Then, five or six years on, the executive office called a press conference. Gran says everybody watched on the Internet as three secret servicemen wheeled something

out on a hand cart under a giant purple mantle. They brought it out and stood it up and whipped off the mantle and revealed the likeness of the president, standing nine feet tall and made of titanium. A big POTUS golem affixed eternally to a podium.

When the golem started to speak they realized it was really him, it was President Gran as he came to be called, and not a sculpture or robot or art stunt. He explained the Gran technology and said we had finally achieved immortality, "we" being wealthy and powerful people (but he made it sound like the United States of America), and "immortality" being innately desirable. Then a bunch more Grans came out on stage under an aurora of flags as coronets blared. Some were carried or pushed, and some walked under their own power on weirdly-jointed metal centaur limbs. They were all these old rich guys, CEOs and the like, whose disappearances over the years had garnered various degrees of conspiracy-theoretic attention.

President Gran served as head of state for thirty more years that way. My Gran says he went crazy after that—REAL CALIGULA STUFF. When President Gran declared himself a pacifist and a socialist and an environmentalist, the Senate realized he was too far gone and voted to impeach, then melt him down. They then released a series of commemorative dollar coins, made of titanium and bearing his image.

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I'm cleaning Gran's solar panels and explaining to him that it's been a year since we last loaded this version of his memory, not an hour. He says it's disorienting when somebody swaps out his writable memory, like waking up from one dream into another. But he understands why I did it. The last time I left him with a full memory like that, he raved for a week straight and could barely string together a sentence by the end of it.

I'M GLAD YOU LEFT ME ON THIS SPOT, Gran says. THIS USED TO BE A RIVER, AND THE GODDAMN GIBSONS LIVED ON THE OTHER SIDE BUT THEY KEPT TO THEIR OWN, AND IT WAS PEACEFUL DOWN HERE BY THE WATER. THE DUCKS USED TO SPEND SUMMERS HERE, DUNKING THEIR BILLS UPSTREAM TO CATCH GUPPIES UNDER THE SHADE OF THE OAKS.

There's not a tree for kilometers in either direction now, but I believe him.

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Grans choose how their bodies look. Or, more often, their families or caretakers or lack of money choose for them. In Gran Flower's time, they couldn't efficiently compress neural structures to digital memory, so a Gran would only be able to remember new things for a few hours or so. This meant their minds were basically static: they could hold a conversation, but eventually they'd start to forget how the conversation had begun, and who you were, and hey why were you talking to them anyway?

Gran Flower hadn't been able to afford the procedure; it was a benefit for military service. He'd been in The War for a long time: central Asia, then eastern Asia; then all over Europe; then putting down dissidents in unquiet cities throughout the U.S. But it was all The War. He got a leg and an arm blown off, so while he was becoming a Gran—doing the breathing exercises, reading the books, feeling his body and brain ossify—he designed his floral body plan. And once he was metal and his internal organs were useless, the family took him to a metalworker who forged his torso and remaining limbs down into a stem and welded the leaves on.

We went to Chicago once, Gran and I, to visit my mom's side of the family. They had owned a few properties there in the city, and had been pretty well-off from landlording, enough that my great-great-great grandmother had been able to become a Gran. Gran Sticks, they called her. She had been really into video

games. Of course now we don't have "games" as such, just massive virtual worlds that you have to remind yourself every few minutes aren't real. But in her time, you sat in front of the computer with a controller or a brain shunt. So that's what Gran Sticks does. She plays games on a computer so antiquated the family can barely find parts for it.

That side of the family's down to just one house now. They rent half of it to make a little cash and live huddled in a few rooms downstairs. You can hear Gran Sticks cackling at all hours in the singsong tones of her cutting-edge voice synthesizer as she blasts away virtual Communists, Fascists, extraterrestrials, insects, or disgruntled workers. The family wipe her memory once a week and delete her games' saves, too, so they don't have to buy her new ones.

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WHAT ARE WE PLANTING THIS YEAR? Gran asks.

I've explained to my version of Gran the dust bowl, that we can't plant much anymore, how it's mostly a solar and sand farm. "We'll have okra, and some wild cherries, black-eyed peas, nopales."

THE CROWS WILL BE WANTING TO GET AT THE CHERRIES, I EXPECT, says Gran. SET ME UP THERE FOR THE WEEK; I'LL SEE IF I CAN'T SCARE 'EM OFF.

Even after two hundred years of dust bowling, and climate change, and droughts, Gran still knows how to work the land. And I think he enjoys playing scarecrow.

I pull his stem up out of the ground and strap him across my back, into a kind of bandolier I've made for this purpose, and start walking.

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That's how I got Gran to Chicago on our trip—I carried his

long, light body. I hitched a ride in the bed of a pickup truck from the farm to the train station with Gran balanced on my crossed legs. On the train, I leaned him against the window, and his metal nose tapped the glass as we bumped over rail ties.

Walking the streets after our visit with Gran Sticks, I kept Gran Flower in the bandolier, slung diagonally across my back. The sidewalks were full of people and Grans of all shapes. Somebody had placed their Gran in a baby stroller, a smooth little eggplant of a Gran with an artfully etched face. A pair of Grans across the street terrorized the sidewalk in wheeled go-cart bodies, their heads mounted like hood ornaments. An old man held hands with a humanoid Gran and rested his head on the round chrome shoulder. The pair trundled along aristocratically, careless of the impatient crowds.

We didn't head back to the train station immediately but checked out the natural history museum, where they had an exhibit about human evolution. I walked Gran down the line of taxidermy and animatronics, from rhesuses to orangutans to gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees, Neanderthals and Denisovans. Finally us, "us" being humans who haven't become Grans.

At the end was an art piece consisting of two busts: a furious-looking chimpanzee and a surprised, wilted-looking old lady. The chimpanzee wore glasses with an archaic, silver chain around the frames, and he stared the old lady down. The old lady wore a plastic tiara.

In front of the art stood a placard outlining an evolutionary theory. It talked about how, sometimes, evolution works by lopping segments off an organism's life span or adding new ones. How maybe humans were just chimps that never grew up all the way. "Neotenuous apes," the theory was called. It noted that most other mammals stop being so plastic and tolerant and apt to learn after a certain age. They get set in their ways,

like an old dog you can't teach new tricks to.

I peeked over my shoulder at Gran, his stem crossing my back like a greatsword, his petals nearly poking me in the eye. Sweat soaked my still-flesh ape back where the stem pressed into my skin. Gran was a bit languid in Chicago, the weather being so cloudy and he being so solar-powered. But I thought maybe this metamorphosis into a sleepy, near-deathless Gran was like humans' next stage of life, the one we neotenuous apes were missing. Like old dogs who can't learn new tricks but somehow know when their human has a seizure, or that an earthquake's coming, or not to trust the guest you've invited home. We won't all reach that stage. Unless I get rich like Gran Sticks, or go to The War and manage not to die like Gran Flower, I'll live a few short decades as an unfinished mammal, sweating and stinking and never setting in my ways.

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I arrange Gran in the bandolier and take him to the cherry orchard. He's facing backward and telling me bits of family history as we pass.

THAT'S WHERE WE SET UP THE STILL; OH, THE PARTIES WE'D HAVE AND THE MOONSHINE FLOWING TILL SUNUP, Gran says, AND AUNTIE STERN'S FIDDLE COMMANDED OUR FEET TILL THE DEVIL BANGED A BROOM ON HELL'S CEILING.

I am trying not to think about average memory formation rates. How many megabytes per minute are filling that drive, the one that holds my Gran. How many more times I'll be able to talk to him like this. When the drive fills, that's it, and I don't have anywhere to back him up to. He'll start babbling and swearing as virtual neurons half-overwrite each other. And I guess I'll have to delete this bit of him, the memory of Chicago and the museum, and introduce myself again: "Hi Gran. You don't know me; I'm your great-great-great- ..."

We reach the orchard and I plant him. I wipe away a tear.

SWEATING SO MUCH? DON'T TELL ME THAT LITTLE WALK WORE YOU OUT, BOY. HA. HA. HA. WHEN WILL I SEE YOU NEXT?

"Soon, Gran," I say, as I remove the solid state drive.

OH NO OH OH OH NO, he says.

New Fiction from Henry Kronk: "We Found Out"

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"Could be an ambush."

"Could be."

"But here? The corps is miles back."

"Looks like it broke down."

It was true. Steam trailed through the windows in the engine. Driggs could see the shimmer of heat from the stack all this way o□ without the bins. The tracks went through a wooded stretch, but the high desert loomed o□ in the distance and vegetation grew sparse. They could see intermittent open stretches along a length of the train. And in those stretches, no cigarettes burned, no bayonets glinted, no enemy moved. Not that Driggs could see.

"Let's take a look."

"Let's report back to Captain first."

Driggs looked from Cote's left eye across her freckled nose to her right and back to her left. Cote gazed, unblinking, back. She broke the silence.

"You know about Captain's and Donwalla's beef. You were at muster this morning. You were standing right next to me when he leaned in with his pink cheeks and spat in my face. Shouldn't be wearing my SSI for the 3rd Rangers? Are you shitting me? After what happened? Driggs, the man doesn't trust us. He doesn't like us. He has no faith in us. Until we do something about that, we're on our own."

Cote had been blessed with the gifts of persuasion. Driggs had been wary of this fact since soldier onlining in Tacoma. Despite the war, one night she had gotten her hands on a bottle of whiskey. When half of it was gone, she then had talked Driggs into climbing one of the base's mobile towers. From the top, they could see Mt. Rainier in the moonlight and, to the north, the remnants of Seattle still smoldering.

"The Janks could be back any minute," Cote broke in again. "If we take this back to Captain, he'll chew us out for not taking a closer look. And then he'll round up a half dozen more experienced rangers and investigate. And if-if-this freighter is still around when they come back in a couple hours, they're going to keep all the scotch and cigars they find for themselves."

Driggs twitched. Cote chewed a twig and stared o□ at the train. It didn't resemble any commuters or freights he'd seen. It was black and dilapidated. It looked like the trains from the pictures he'd seen in his history textbook.



Finally, he spat. "Ok, we take a closer look. And then we report back."

Driggs scrambled down the blu□ face after Cote. He jumped the

last ten feet and skidded through the scree. The two rangers made their way forward, hugging the red pines and stopping every 100 yards to listen and scan. Only hawk calls broke the silence, along with their own footsteps, which were impossible to stifle on the tinder-dry pine needles.

Whenever the sirens used to blow and they sheltered in their basement, Driggs' father would always tell him by the light of their LED lantern about how he took up smoking on the day of November 3rd, 2062.

"It was then that me and just about everyone else in Port Angeles knew for sure that the house was divided against itself," he used to say. "You had President-Elect Morrison parading across screens and broadcasts, celebrating his 92% landslide victory over the so-called 'Supreme Commander.' We thought he was such a plushed-up load of wash—the 'General' or whatever else he was calling himself. He really showed us. Suddenly, everyone realizes we're not hearing a chirp from regions all across the country. The Southwest, the Rockies, the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic, Alaska, Florida, Maine—they all went dark. Nothing. 404 Error Page Not Found. Then we heard rumors about the transport and information sector sabotage, the round ups, the murders.

I walked to the corner store and asked for a pack and a lighter. Red Robert who owned the place knew all too well I was 14. He didn't say a thing to me. Didn't even look at me. He just kept staring at his screen.

I walked home, sat on the front porch, and I'll always remember this: The Church of Latter Day Saints across the street, they'd put up a new sign a few days before. It said, 'Free trip to Heaven! Details inside.' I hated it and I loved it. I wanted to believe it. I wanted somewhere to escape to. I wanted faith. But all I had was a pack of smokes. I flicked my

butts at that sign all afternoon.”

There in the high desert, twelve years after his father had passed, Driggs remembered the last cigarette he had smoked with painful clarity. When the word got out that tobacco rations had been cut altogether three weeks back, he started measuring his supplies. He took out his three remaining packs from the waterproof pocket in the top of his rucksack. He lined the blank government issued labels side by side. Two were full, and four remained in the third. He took out two darts, lit them at the same time, and resigned himself to two a day for the next three weeks. Maybe by that time, things would change.

Six days and twelve cigarettes in, the Third Rangers made it over the Cascades and down onto the plains. Screening the movement of the main corps, his unit skirted the edge of the forest. Then they were ordered to scout ahead. Intelligence believed a Jank division sat camped some miles off and were backed up by guerrilla mountain people, no less.

At dusk, the corps was 10 miles back, and dark clouds began to pour over the foothills to the West like slow-flowing lava. Captain Donwalla ordered the rangers to camp. They posted sentries, ate a cold supper, and staked out their bivouacs for the night. Cote had wandered off to piss. When she came back, she told Driggs about a cave she'd found and how there was room for two. And then the rain started coming down by the gallon. Driggs gathered up his roll and followed her through the storm. It was some ways out and it took Cote ten minutes wandering around before she found it again. But a cave it was, and it was dry. The two laid out their rolls and soon were sound asleep.

They woke at first light, collected their things, and headed down the gentle slope. Mist hung just above the treetops.

Their fellow rangers' shelters lay among the pines glistening from the rain.

"How about that," Cote said. "First ones up. Guess that proves Donwalla does sleep after all."

But as Driggs stepped beyond the next tree, his captain's eyes met him with a stare. He wheeled about in horror. Donwalla's high-and-tight head was pinned to the tree with a rebar stake. His body was nowhere to be seen.

Driggs ran over to the nearest bivvy and kicked it. No response. Same with the next. And the next. Looking closer, he saw knife cuts through the denier nylon.

"We need to get out of here," Driggs said to Cote, who was slumped down below Donwalla's head with her rifle raised.

"Cote!"

Cote held up her hand, and Driggs clammed up. He caught some movement at his 2:00. And then Cote's rifle went off and a body fell in the distance.

"Go," she whispered.

Shots responded. The instinct for survival lifted Driggs' feet with the momentum of generations, tipping him onward.

After they reported back to the Colonel, Driggs smoked every cigarette he had left. Their unit, the Third Rangers, which now numbered two, was dissolved and absorbed by the Fourth.

They could see the train through the trees now and they began to smell the faint smell of death.

"Are those dogs barking?"

Driggs stopped walking and listened.

“Not dogs ... vultures.”

They followed the sound and sure enough came upon the bodies of three horses beside the first car. After pausing for a few, the rangers approached.

They hadn't been dead long. Their coats still gleamed and the few carrion birds that had arrived were only just beginning to battle over the choice spots. Driggs could see no apparent cause of death.

“If these horses just died, where's the smell coming from?”

Cote shook her head. A trail of blood ran o□ toward the train. They followed it across the coupling and around the other side.

A Jank lay slumped against a wheel. He wore a moustache not unlike the one Driggs' father used to grow. His bewildered eyes gazed up into the muzzles of Driggs' and Cote's rifles. With his left hand, he clutched his right arm. It had been severed o□ cleanly—surgically—below the elbow. His sand-colored uniform was stained crimson down one side.

“What happened?” Cote whispered.

The dying man raised his eyes.

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“No.” They said in unison.

His mouth went slack. And he lowered his gaze to the horizon.

“What happened?” Driggs said and nudged the dying man's stump with his muzzle.

He gasped and, in racking breaths: “We—we—we—we ...”

“We what?”

"We found ... out."

He used his last breath to say his last word. His left arm dropped and his head swung forward.

"Found out what?"

"Fuck knows. Check him and them." Cote gestured to a distance away from the train where a half dozen dead Janks lay lined up in a neat row. "I'm going inside."

Like the horses, none of these Janks bore any visible wounds. Driggs searched their khaki pockets. He found a locket holding the picture of a woman that could be a mother or a wife to the late wearer, a stained embroidered handkerchief, some worn polaroid porn, two journals, a deck of cards, fishing line and three lures, along with the six Jank regulation canteens, carbines, clasp knives, fire pods, watches, bivouacs, and extra rounds. The unit leader, one Captain Harrison, also carried a pair of binos, a compass, a spot device, and one melted 'government' issued Jank chocolate bar. Driggs tore open the package and shoved the melted bar in his mouth. He tightly closed his front teeth and slowly pulled the plastic out, trapping the chocolate within.

When Driggs was 17, Jank guerrillas blew up the Port Angeles supply stockpile. He and most of the others started walking south towards Olympia. The rumors were that the Mounties at the Canadian border had orders to shoot migrants on sight. Still, some scraped supplies together and set off in boats hoping to land somewhere on Vancouver Island or to venture further north and seek shelter with the Haida.

With his father dead and his mother off running a field hospital somewhere around Fort Vancouver, he loaded up a backpack and headed south alone. He walked from sunrise to sundown and on a little further, lighting the way with his

headlamp. The road was full of others like himself.

When the sun rose the next morning, he carried on. Toward noon around Briedablick, Driggs found himself in open farm land, with the Olympic range framing the horizon. The road ran beside a river bordered by blackberry bushes and poplars. Two quads motored up towards him, traveling in the opposite direction. It was two shirtless boys with shapeless torsos, younger than Driggs. As they neared, they slowed, and then stopped ten feet away. One showed him his shotgun.

"You can stop right there."

Driggs stopped.

"Put your pack on the ground and empty your pockets."

"I don't have any money or much of value. I'm heading to—"

"PUT your pack on the ground. And empty your pockets."

One of the boys' quads had a trailer fixed to it. Driggs saw other packs, suitcases, and miscellaneous gear in the back.

Then all three heard a ping followed by the sprinkling of glass. The left rearview mirror of the quad ridden by the boy with the shotgun had been shot off. A sandy-haired young woman wearing tan waders with a fishing net on her belt walked slowly up from the river bank with a rifle under her cheek.

"The next one is going through your ear if you don't throw that shotgun down."

The unarmed boy towing the load looked to his friend.

"Do it, Jackson."

Jackson tossed his shotgun on to the pavement.

"Good job. Why don't you go pick that up?" Driggs knew she was talking to him. He walked forward and grabbed the gun. The

woman now hurried forward to face the boys.

“If it were olden days, I’d say you boys are going to hell, robbing refugees in times like this. But we’re past that now. I guess I’ll say you better think about how you treat your fellow humans, otherwise you’re bound to wind up dead. Get out of here.”

The boys fired up their quads without a word and rode them past. At last, the woman lowered her rifle.

“My name’s Cote.”

“Driggs.”

“Driggs!”

He turned to see Cote’s head poking out the doorway of the engine.

“Come on and check this out.”

He sneezed as he entered the cloud of dust in the engine car. Cote had her undershirt up over her nose. It was hot; fuel still burned in the engine. A fine layer of dust covered the controls, the sills, every surface. It blew like smoke out into the car behind. The only marks in the dust were their own.

“Cote—what the...?”

“What?”

“What’s with the dust?”

“It was windy last night.”

“The windows are closed.”

“The door’s open.”

“This isn’t sand.”

“Whatever. Look at this.” Cote held a piece of a single piece of paper with a dull red seal at the bottom corner. “Can you read it?”

Driggs brought it into the light, but it was so heavily mildewed that the words had been all but completely obscured. He saw marks that looked like ‘□□□□.’

“Not a chance.”

They jumped out and headed to the next car. Driggs struggled to pull the iron latch down, and it creaked along the way. They needed to push together just to crack the door ajar. But the second they had it open, they were hit with a wave of aroma and moisture. Cote and Driggs climbed in to another world.

All was dark and dank; heavy and hard to breathe. Driggs had to sit down. An aisle ran down the center of the car and, on either side, there were dense rows of lush plants. Their green stretched out, down, and up toward the glass-paned ceiling.

Orange-purple flowers sprang from the gaps in the husky trunks and yellow fruit hung in bunches.

“What on earth ...”

Driggs wandered closer. He’d never seen flowers like these. And now that he was close, he could smell the ripeness of the fruit. He picked o□ a bunch and brought them to his mouth, bit, chewed, and swallowed.

“Cote!”

“What the hell, Driggs?”

“Try this fruit!”

Cote grabbed her own bunch. A second passed.

“Jesus on a jet plane! That’s good!”

“Hehehe, pretty tasty, aren’t they?”

The laugh sounded a guttural baritone and echoed throughout the car. Driggs and Cote froze. In the corner, a dark figure rose from a sitting position in the shadows.

“FREEZE JANK.” Juice ran in a stream from Cote’s chin down on to the stock of her raised rifle.

The shadow raised its hands and spoke. “*Hinene*. There is no need, for I am unarmed.”

“Where is this train headed?”

The figure walked forward. He was tall and wore a black coat with tails. A black, brimmed hat hid his downturned face from view.

“The official documents say Seattle, but its true destination is Vancouver, and on from there.”

“Seattle? But our forces are all the way south to Bend.”

“The present conflict between your state and your opponent’s state does not concern me.”

“Well then how’d you get all this fruit past the Jank inspectors?”

“They’re called chupas, and I have a few cards up my sleeve.”

“Are those cards Verified Greenbacks?”

“Hehehe oh no.”

“Why’d you break down?”

“I didn’t. I received word your forces have pulled up the tracks a few miles north. I just stopped.” He drew these final words out.

“Who are those Janks outside?”

“Part of a platoon from the Army of the Supreme Comander.”

“Why are they dead?”

“Why? Were you family?”

“No, but—“

“Why’s the engine so dusty?” Driggs’ voice cracked.

The figure paused, slowly turning his head. “I like it that way.”

“So, what is this? What—“ Cote paused. Her rifle dipped. “—what are you bringing north? Why are there a half a dozen dead bodies outside? It’s time to start making some sense here pal.”

“Why don’t you see for yourself?”

Driggs’ mouth opened wider. Cote stomped her foot.

“Whatever man. First, I want you to step forward. Driggs, go pat him down.”

When Driggs slapped the figure’s breast pocket, a hollow thud sounded. Out of it emerged an unopened pack of Marlboro Reds.

“Want a smoke?”

The figure raised his head to reveal a pale grin.

Outside, his skin looked even paler. Nicotine washed over Driggs in gentle waves. Despite the heat and the black dress, the man did not sweat.

“What’s your name?”

Cote had already finished her cigarette, after dragging furiously with it clenched between her teeth. She still held her rifle raised with both hands. The man offered her one more.

"You can call me Jo."

"Where are you from?"

"Down south."

Driggs finished his cigarette and took one more. They all smoked in silence down to the filter.

"Ok, let's see the rest of the train."

"Yes Private Cote. I have another car of the chupas here." He gestured inside the following dank container. "Their root can be used to mix a psychedelic tea. Many find it heals afflictions of the nerves and the mind. It can also serve as an undetectable poison in highly concentrated doses."

Jo cracked the latch on the car and thrust it effortlessly open. Cote and Driggs followed him inside to the close air.

"Chupas have an amazing ability to regenerate if injured."

He reached out and snapped off a green outgrowth.

"And their shoots make for an excellent salad addition."

He popped it in his mouth.

"Look."

Driggs and Cote bent close. In the place where the shoot had grown, already another young outgrowth had emerged to replace it.

"I love these organisms for their structure. Human society for centuries now has prized and supported the lone individual, The Napoleons, the Michael Jordans, The Supreme Comandante who

overthrew the hold of the technologists that bound him.”

“That’s not us, pal.”

“But he’s still in charge, isn’t he?”

“Down there he is.”

“It makes no difference. The purpose of life is to live, to love, and to spread life and love. And with luck, new creations will do the same. Over the years, organisms typically do one thing well. They either love well and spread love, or they live well and spread life. Too often, they destroy life to spread love or destroy love to spread life. They see things as a competition. But these chupas strike a balance. Like the poplar, or the hive, or the rhizome, they have no conception of the individual. They may appear to be single organisms, even being potted here individually for more convenient transportation. But in the wild, they exist as a network. Each grove represents a hub of chupa life. If one falls ill or suffers damage, others will divert resources to help it rebuild. In potting them like this, I have done them a great injury. I hope they will forgive me.”

“So this is what all those Janks got jacked up for?”

“I doubt those men had seen a chupa in their lives.”

“Look, Jo,” Cote scratched her narrow hip. “These plants are great and all, but we need to get this tour moving so we can make our report to our superior. And I’m also gonna need another of those Reds.”

“As you wish, Private Cote.”

The next car was refreshingly cool, refrigerated well below the heat outside. The walls were lined with illuminated glass cases filled with glass cylinders. The cylinders were filled with liquid, and through the liquid floated particulate matter.

“What’s in those?”

“Other creatures. Well, their DNA at least.”

Driggs coughed. He remembered his mother’s lab where she collected dead specimens in jars. Always in the evening, after her office hours had ended, his father sent him down there to call her for dinner. She left her work with gravity. Driggs’ older brother and sister had died of the measles. His own cheeks and forehead still bore the scars from when he had it. His mother would talk about how humans once knew how to cure and vaccinate against it. But since the Breach, doctors in the Resistance had lost much knowledge.

“What creatures?” Cote still held her rifle pointed between Jo’s shoulder blades, though she had lowered it to her hip.

“Some of my favorites. The cuttlefish, the bonobo, the venus fly trap. The three-toed sloth—they’re cute. I very nearly made room for the Welsh Corgi too ...”

“Why aren’t the chupas in one of those?”

“Well, they can’t bear fruit if they’re just DNA in a test tube, can they?”

In other cars, Jo showed Driggs and Cote an assortment of bins filled with precious gems and earth metals, jagged materials that glinted with sunlight. Another held rows of filing cabinets. In another, they found dusty shelves full of old holy books, all written in honor and glory to the creator.

They walked back outside just before the caboose. Jo turned and said, “I want to tell you about a people I once knew.

When once, they were lonesome, I took them in. They had nowhere to go, no values to live by. I gave them purpose. When once, the yoke wore and wore till it fit too snug, I handed them the axe. I gave them the grinder, the haft, and the bronze point to crown it.

I bade them to rise up against their enslavers in Mizraim, and brought them to the land which I promised unto their fathers; and I said, 'I will never break my covenant.' I parted the waters.

When once, and many times more, fires of rival tribes burned too close, I raised the spirit in them and sent rider after rider galloping down the mountainside. I cared for them like children, and in return, they called me father.

They were very much like you—taking up arms, offering their lives to further their cause, even under a commander who thinks you should have perished alongside your comrades and his rival whom he hated. I know they would recognize you both as a brother and a sister in arms in the fight to preserve life and love.”

Driggs felt his vision go warm and hazy. A low buzzing became audible. He realized that he was slowly nodding. Cote fixed him with a quizzical expression, and he quickly regained his focus. Jo was still talking.

“With them and with those that came before, I built a beautiful society of plants, mammals, fungi, cetaceans, bacteria, Noah, Abraham, Lot, and countless other houses, domains, and families.

But these great men and women have passed. Like rain upon the mountain, they have all passed. As the years went on, fewer and fewer loved me. Some claimed they had killed me. And now, I fear the conflict between your warring factions will destroy all I—all we—have built. I ask that you grant me safe passage. I carry with me only life and love. All I ask is you help me spread it. Go unto your commanders and rally your brothers and sisters with my message. Re-lay the tracks south of Bend and allow me safe passage north.”

The sound of Jo's voice died away slowly in the dry desert air. Driggs looked from Jo to Cote. He was about to speak. And

then—

“What’s in that car?” Cote asked, sucking on another red, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder to the caboose of the train.

“That—that car holds more chupas.”

“Uh-huh.”

The buzzing subsided. Driggs stood up straight and raised his voice. “Why aren’t those chupas with the others at the front of the train?”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d have room.”

Cote looked from her fellow ranger to Jo.

“Go open it, Driggs.”

“It might interest you to know a unit of the Commander’s cavalry will arrive within minutes. I can only delay them for so long. I beg you, make your report.”

“I don’t hear anything except those vultures.”

Cote pointed her rifle at Jo again.

“Open it, Driggs.”

Driggs started walking toward the caboose. Jo looked to Driggs and back to Cote, who kept her rifle raised.

Impossibly fast, Jo crouched to the ground and threw sand in Cote’s face.

“Driggs!”

He wheeled around to see Jo flying across the sand. His knees collided with Driggs chest and knocked him to the ground.

“I thought I could convince you—I thought I could inspire

you," Jo spat, his face growing taunt and drawn beneath his black brim. "But it appears you're like the others. And like the Amakelites, you shan't be spared. It is written."

At that moment a bullet passed through Jo's head from jaw hinge to jaw hinge. He was knocked sideways onto Driggs. Cote sprang forward, running toward the caboose door. Jo rose unscathed.

"NO," he shouted. Driggs felt his bones vibrate. Cote made it to the door and popped the hinge down with the butt of her rifle. A sound like a shell blast emitted from the car. The door exploded open and Cote and Driggs were lifted from the ground and thrown through the air. Cote struck a tree and landed unconscious among the dry needles.

Driggs landed hard a few dozen feet away and scrambled over to his fellow ranger. But before he could rouse her, he raised his head to watch the train. A kind of smoke or cloud was issuing from the caboose. Behind it, he saw what looked like masses of limbs and pulsing organs. They were hit with a wave of stench. It smelled like thousands of nameless carcasses left to rot under the sun. Soundless bolts of lightning flashed, followed by a howling gale. Jo stood beside the train, but had inexplicably grown in size. He grew larger still, towering over the train, seeking to contain the cloud with his hat. His enormous bare head revealed tattoos of ancient characters and deep, purple scars.

Fire, ice, toil, and sickness flew from the open caboose, igniting the forest floor beside the tracks. The wind from the train spurred the fire on, toward where Driggs and Cote lay. Driggs hoisted Cote over his shoulder and ran north along the track. Past the train, he crossed the ties and made his way into the forest. He knelt and laid Cote on the ground. After gently lowering her head, his hand came away bloody, and he uncorked his canteen to splash water on his friend's face.

Through the storm issuing from the train, he shouted her name. Her eyes flickered.

“Cote, we have to go!”

Her eyes snapped open, her jaw clenched, and her hand thrust up to catch Driggs’ shoulder.

“Help me up.”

The rangers ran back toward the blue and scrambled up it. At the top, they collapsed with heaving chests and looked back. The fire had spread impossibly fast. It had crossed the tracks, and approached in their direction.

“Look.”

A section of the horizon shimmered.

“What is that?”

“Hell is murky.”

Driggs raised his binos. Three Jank columns marched forward. Refocusing, he saw cavalry units peppering the sparse forest. Driggs looked back to the train. The now-massive Jo still battled amongst the storm that issued from the caboose. A noise sounded at their nine and the two looked up to see incoming Resistance birds.

“Wonder what good they’ll do.”

“Maybe a little more damage than my rifle.”

The two watched as the aircraft rained down missiles onto the Jank cavalry and into the cloud in which Jo was now obscured. Upon contact, the train erupted and flung ash and smoke miles overhead. Below, the fire drew nearer and nearer.

“Cote.”

She looked at her ranger in arms. Driggs held out the half empty pack of Reds, with one protruding in her direction.

“They were knocked loose when that thing had me down.”

“Driggs,” Cote said, lighting up, “you’re one hell of a ranger.”

Do Nazis Dream of WWII Dystopian Future Pasts?



The tired, simplistic, bargain-basement Cold War narrative of WWII sucks and it's time we got over it. According to my eighth grade history teacher, the USA won WWII by beating the Nazis and the Japs. If we hadn't beaten them, they would've conquered the world. That's how the story goes, and many board games and video games embrace it. It's comforting, comfortable bullshit. That version of history—the \$59.99 version where you get to kill the bad Nazi colonel or fight buddies multiplayer with antique weaponry—ignores basic facts that are widely available outside academia. Chief among those facts is the near-pathetic weakness of Germany and Japan heading into WWII, as well as the wholesale aggrandizement of our intervention and participation in WWII in ways that make us feel good about ourselves but also totally distorts how war looks and how reality worked and works.

Being honest about how WWII went down and what was actually at stake is important because history is important, and shapes

how we evaluate our surroundings, our present, our acts and actions. This, as it turns out, is the thematic heart of Phillip K. Dick's science fiction dystopian novel "The Man in the High Castle." Dick, at his best when using strange and challenging scenarios to interrogate the relationship between individual and society, contrives an alternate reality where America loses WWII when the Germans develop and drop A-bombs, forcing us into negotiated surrender, occupation, and servitude. The novel—and the series—is an incredibly subversive take on how history operates, both in the logic of the story, and in the logic of our own reality.

Amazon (not one to shy away from a sexy narrative featuring Nazis) has taken what was in Dick's hands an interesting meditation on the nature of perception and put together a mostly-faithful rendition that promises to entertain and educate viewers with a cautionary tale about what it feels like to live under a totalitarian dictatorship in America. [I watched the first couple episodes using my Prime membership.](#) And I was mostly impressed.

The series is set in a counterfactual past—it seems to be the 1960s—and begins with a shot of two men in an old-timey movie theater (the younger of which is Joe Blake, who promises to be a major character in the first season) watching a lousy piece of fascist, pro-status-quo propaganda. This is a subtle nod to you, the viewer of the show. Films go on to play a big role in the series, as well as peoples' reactions to film—in fact, the single greatest threat to the "Nazi" led reality is a series of subversive films showing a reality in which the Allies win, and the Nazis and Japanese lose. Both in Dick's novel and the series, this is an honest and accurate idea of how Hitler seems to have viewed narrative—a fact echoed in "Inglorious Basterds," Tarantino's masterpiece that deals with similar themes. People watching the film of Allied victory in World War II are transported, blissfully and tearfully watching and re-watching footage, in moments that are reminiscent of our

own reactions to this type of video on Memorial and Veterans Day, on the History Channel. Where “The Man in The High Castle” takes flight, however, and removes itself from just another nostalgic retread celebrating victory of freedom over tyranny is in its secondary or tertiary level, wherein the critique ends up being not of the Nazis, but of ourselves and our consumption of narrative history.

The series is filled with these double-scenes, moments that have special resonance on multiple levels, which is true to Dick’s vision and the intention of his fictionalized world. Things in dystopian Nazi-America are a bit shoddier than they should be, given the timeframe. There’s a great deal of factory labor that’s put front and center in the series as part of the economic backdrop to the Nazi-occupied society, and much of the show feels like noir. If the Nazis had won, the show claims implicitly, things would be worse in America than they are today.

But not that much worse. Noah Berlatsky noticed this same phenomenon, watching the show earlier this year. [In a review for the Atlantic](#), he found the show to be subversive in its claim that life would have been crummier, lousier, but not *fundamentally* worse than it has been for our real actual selves. There are no lines for food, no dead people lying in the streets. Gangs of Nazis and Japanese police chase down pro-democracy “resistance” advocates, but the people who keep their heads down and work hard are rewarded. It’s not difficult, in other words, to imagine that if there were a group of pro-Nazi, pro-imperial Japanese agents running around today with films showing how in *their* reality Hitler and Hirohito won, our own government would be clamping down on their activities, and would view them as a direct threat. Would our real police be shooting them down on the streets? Well—people who are devout followers of that violent brand of Islam sweeping the Middle East aren’t exactly treated with hospitality when the US security apparatus gets their hands on

them.

Suburbia in Nazi-America is inhabited by Nazi party members and functionaries, but apart from kids having to wear silly school uniforms, things are about the same. Kitschy television shows the type of which people consumed in the 1950s and 1960s are on the air, but with a Nazi twist. There seems to be a functioning interstate system (Eisenhower is, after all, said to have been inspired by Hitler's autobahn, so this is not totally surprising).

In the Midwest, the truck Joe Blake is driving blows a tire, and he gets help from a Nazi policeman who offers him help and part of a sandwich. During the exchange, Blake spots a tattoo on the policeman's arm, and the policeman self-identifies as a veteran of the war against Nazi Germany—then claims not to even remember what they'd been fighting for. White flakes are falling from the sky, and Blake asks the trooper what they are. The policeman cheerfully volunteers that "Tuesdays they burn cripples, the terminally ill... [they're a] drag on the state." In this series (and in the book), people in the south and Midwest have adapted easily and enthusiastically to Nazi rule.

The resistance, on the other hand, is made up of (frankly) irritating ideologues who rant about "freedom," which, presumably, is the kind of thing Moderate Syrians wanted in 2011, or the kind the West enjoys today—contextual freedom. "The Man in the High Castle" deserves huge credit for showing the resistance critically, and giving them real weight, real complexity, rather than simply having them be the sympathetic heroes to whom everyone is accustomed. Even though many of the resistance freedom fighters don't know what freedom actually is, it doesn't stop them from expressing willingness to die for the idea—to "do the right thing," as Joe Blake says. Thus the show subtly but undeniably reinforces the notion that perhaps the world we see today—the real world—is not as we imagine. This is not what our noble ancestors fought for.

Interesting side-note—in Europe, when you talk with people it seems like everyone's family was in the resistance in WWII. I've always found that fascinating, like, if everyone's grandparents were all in the resistance, how did the Germans conquer so much territory? But I digress.

So far, the series has decided to portray the Nazis and Japanese as brutal if thuggish occupiers, with an incredibly sophisticated and all-encompassing intelligence-security apparatus. The Nazis are recognizably Nazis—tite uniforms, imposing architecture, annoying habits, and superior military-aviation technology. The Japanese, on the other hand, turn out to be eastern spiritualists who do martial arts on the side and are in the logic of the show (and the book) presented as morally superior to the Germans. Gone are the massacres they carried out against whites, Chinese, and “inferior” people in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere—in this show, they are unwilling puppets of the Germans, occupiers almost in name only.

Which is where the show's deviation from the book and challenge to History as we know it begins to get really interesting—in the logic of the show, Hitler is the one who insisted on détente with the Japanese at the end of World War II, and who insisted on peace. Hitler, in other words, is the peace-bringer. In the world of the show, Goebbles and Himmler are jockeying to replace Hitler as the Fuhrer, and that's seen as a bad thing.

Another decision that's sure to bring the show in for criticism is its handling of Jewish characters. One of the main characters in the book (and thus far in the show) is a Jewish worker with artistic aspirations named Frank Fink. To begin with, he produces “degenerate” art, which is an odd confirmation of Nazi propaganda (he appears in the logic of the show's world to be guilty of the thing that Nazis expect him to be guilty of). Then, he's captured and presented with what appears to him to be a dilemma—save his girlfriend, or

save his family.

And this is where things get really strange, in the show. The audience, at a certain point, understands that it doesn't matter what Fink chooses—his girlfriend is already being tracked by the Nazis. A member of the resistance, Randall, warns Fink that if he gives her up, he'll sacrifice his soul, a point that is reinforced to the audience because viewers know that whether Fink gives her up or not is completely irrelevant to her fate. The Japanese don't know this either, though, so they threaten to kill Fink and his sister and her family, for being Jewish. The Japanese claim not to be racists like the Nazis (as already described) in the sense that presumably their racism is directed toward other Asians, and not based on religious discrimination, so it doesn't matter to them whether they kill Frank or not. But they do end up killing the family—Fink's sister, his niece, and nephew, with an improved form of Zyklon-B gas. It's an accident, bad timing. The Japanese apologize, which is a neat bit of Holocaust-logic—this is how occupied people are treated, and especially Jewish citizens, as essentially expendable.

In return, Frank's character swears vengeance in the police station. "If you need Jews, you know where to find me," he says, enraged and embittered at the Japanese decision to kill his family (as they promised to do if he did not give over the useless information, which he refuses to do). The Japanese police chief looks him in the eye and says "I know." Because it's a totalitarian society! OF COURSE they know that he's Jewish, and where to find him. The governments know almost everything about almost everyone in their societies—much like the totalitarian governments imagined in 1984. It's also worth pointing out that the entire city where this takes place is under imminent threat of being destroyed by a hydrogen bomb wielded by the Nazis.

The decision to use a Jewish character to unpack complicated philosophical questions of causality and moral agency is

dangerous and potentially offensive—maybe even certainly offensive. Because to do so puts the viewer in the role of Holocaust victim—and the dystopian future imagined by Dick (and revisited by this series) means, if there are still Jewish people alive in America or anywhere, that the Holocaust is ongoing. It also makes the subtle point that we like or should like Frank Fink, which implies that we ourselves are in a sort of cultural Holocaust, an annihilation of identity, which is an interesting thought experiment but one that doesn't seem like it's welcome yet in popular culture.

Another way in which the series may provoke controversy is that the basic premise—that America could have lost World War II under any circumstances—plays on bad history. Our narrative of the war overplays German and Japanese strengths while underplaying the Allies' economic and military might. Here's the truth: Germany and Japan were doomed to lose World War II in almost EVERY reality. Their military accomplishments despite that fundamental weakness were extraordinary, but testify more to the astonishing incompetence of American, French, British, Chinese and Russian political leadership and bad generalship early on than to any advantage enjoyed by the Nazis or Japanese. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the Germans have developed the Atomic bomb before America—we now know that, despite provocative History Channel specials to the contrary, the Germans were nowhere near the bomb, although one of their scientists (Werner Heisenberg) got about one third as far as the entire Manhattan project with a hundredth of their budget before crapping out due to bad math. On top of this, the fact that WWII happened at all is due largely to greedy and grabbing western politicians who fucked over Germany at the end of World War I, hamstrung earnest diplomatic efforts at rapprochement during the depression, and manifested an almost-willful desire to misunderstand Hitler's intentions in the mid- and late- 1930s. Knowledge of Nazi strengths versus Soviet and Allied strengths leads one inexorably to the conclusion that our dimension must be the only one in which

the Nazis weren't crushed before 1943—it's a minor miracle they lasted until 1945.

An accurate characterization of Germany and Japan in WWII is not that they almost won—it's that they almost lost, over and over again, until finally they didn't not lose. That's the true history of World War II. We fucked around and fucked things up until we decided, kind of, to sort things out, then lazily and shittily continued fucking off and underestimating the Nazis and Japanese until we eventually didn't lose, as we were always going to.

Sorry mom's dad and dad's dad. It's the truth.

The real genius of Dick's novel, and of this series, is that there was and is a fascist threat in America, and it's going on every day. Where a physical dictatorship of Hitler and Mussolini (and, later, Stalin) was defeated, the result of that defeat was not freedom, actually. What we got is the corporate dictatorship we enjoy today, the anti-intellectual monopoly that began with LBJ and Nixon and the squares of Philip K. Dick's day. These happy Eichmann-types have been replaced by well-meaning, bright-eyed Hillary Clinton supporters, Jeb Bush (wait does anyone support Bush?) workers, and the hordes shouting Donald Trump or Ben Carson's name. They're people developing apps or leveraging synergies in New York City or Palo Alto, California in order to make a couple bucks peddling the escapist farce that a human life should be so easy and predictable that one must never encounter anything unpleasant or inconvenient. They're the social, corporate, cultural and technological fascists who will doom and damn our country more certainly than David Semel will direct himself into a box of unmet expectations from which he cannot escape by the beginning of Season Three.

End the series by (no later than) Season Two, David Semel. Don't you screw us again.

After indulging in a fantasy where one gets to rebel vicariously against Nazis in an alternate universe, viewers may consider a more modest rebellion of not supporting the shittiest cast of Democratic and Republican candidates since Rutherford B. Hayes. Otherwise, the future dystopia imagined in this series has already come to pass.