

A story of the future
For Adam's 15th birthday

BEYOND

It is 11 Octo 3002

Fear is driving me to the edge of sanity. And perhaps beyond.

I know why I'm afraid - I'm afraid because I'm afraid - but I don't know exactly when or why the fear began.

Because I'm afraid, I sweat. So far, it's only in the dark, when I'm sleeping, when I'm experiencing a nightmare, the same nightmare every time.

But if the sensors were to catch me sweating at work or in a public place, I would be sectioned. I'm frightened, very frightened of being sectioned. My friend Jomika was sectioned eight months ago. Early on, she sent me several auto-clips and confirmed the worst of what one hears in the gossip rooms: limited movement, grade D powder food, 24 hour saliva restrictors, forced sleep, and extended coma sessions for the slightest breach of the rules. Then the auto-clips stopped coming, and she never came back. My father was sectioned too, but I was too young to know about that. My mother never recovered, and coped with her loss and her fear for me, by going into automaton mode. I never saw her smile. She expired three months ago - the cold finally got to her.

The more I fear being sectioned, the more I sweat, and the more I sweat, the more thirsty I get. In the late hours of dark, I've taken to stealing condensation from the Great Dome Wall, which is just a few paces from my dwelling. If the sweat sensors don't detect me first, then the Wall monitors will get me soon enough - be sure of it. I'll be sectioned one way or another.

After my shift (working as a thought processor within the planning department of the recycling authority), I climb up a

rickety metal ladder to sit here, on the gantry of this derelict watchtower, staring through the thick transparent Wall to the Out-There. I've sat here, sometimes for hours at a time, almost every day of my adult life. All you can see is sand, kilometres and kilometres of sand. Sand that suffocates and swallows every living thing - and has done so for 100s of years. But I love the stillness, the curves, the unchanging dull brown-yellow colour. I find it soothing. Sometimes, like now, I process my own thoughts with a miniature recorder strapped behind the ear (it takes so little warmth energy, I don't even know it's there).

Once or twice a year a mighty wind in the Out-There blows up a sand-fog which lasts several days, and then I peer trance-like into the swirling depths and imagine. I imagine that when it falls still, there will be green pastures and fields with sheep and cows, and hedges and trees as far as the eye can see. And perhaps a river with stepping stones. Or else, I imagine there will be a mountain scene with a small town in the foreground and a forest of pine trees in the background. These are pictures from the story books of the Long-Ago. It's hard to accept that once such scenes were common in our world - before the greyness in the sky, before the great and terrible drought, and before the Domes. But, when the sand-fog settles, there is only sand in the Out-There, sand and more sand.

A wind has been blowing for days now, longer than I've ever known it, and the sand-fog is the densest I've ever seen.

I sometimes wonder if it is such a privilege to be living here by the Wall with the sight of the Out-There so near, and a constant reminder of our isolation, our endless predicament. This dwelling has been in our family for more than 200 years thanks to my ancestor KimSoy, one of the last immigrants into Dome 19. KimSoy became one of the great quark micro-engineers. He helped build the matter reconstructors which, combined with the light converters, allow us to have any water at all. I know this because the educators mentioned him in a lesson once - that was a good

day for me - but I already knew about him from my mother, and from his treasured notebooks that she passed on to me.

While still a young man KimSoy proved himself a clever physicist and thus earned a place in the specialist lotteries for scientists. It was a one in a 100 chance that he won a place in the Dome, and another one in three chance that he passed the medical - without his scientific position, though his chance of winning of a Dome place would have been one in 10,000 or less - or so the educators told us.

We also learned that, although all land-based links between Domes - pipelines, cables, tunnels - had fallen into disuse through lack of maintenance by around the 2790s, international freighters continued to fly between Domes until 2823. The last flight, carrying the last traded water shipment, docked on 33 Novo 2823, and the freighter dock was permanently sealed. Too much energy was being wasted, the government said. Things went from bad to worse and even worse - despite every government's proclamations of better times to come - and such flights never restarted. Fifty years later, on 2 Febo 2877 the last telecom satellite ceased operation and all communication links with other Domes and other parts of this world broke down once and for all.

So long as I have KimSoy's notebooks, I retain entitlement to this dwelling in the Outer-Area, at the Dome's edge, with its extra space which has protection from the internal Inner-Area chaos. Long ago, when KimSoy's descendants fell to violent fighting over who had the right to live in this dwelling, the matter ended up in court. The judgementer - who could not be bothered to read them - decided that whoever had ownership of the books also had entitlement to the dwelling. When the collection of 20 or so books were split up leading to further fighting, another judgementer refined the ruling on appeal so that it applied to one book only - the one called 'KimSoy - Reflections (2800-2830)'. I have that one of course, and most of the 20 other notebooks he filled.

Lately, I have taken to trying to read them. The eccentric hand-written text and the pre-Dome english is hard to decipher, but I can understand some parts. Making sense of what he says, however, is more difficult. He seems to be all muddled up about the dates, and he seems to think that the lottery he won was not to enter the Dome in the first place, but to stay in the Dome - which, as everyone knows, cannot be true.

When I wake in the middle of the dark, this is what I remember of my nightmare. I am strapped, as usual, into my work chair, sitting perfectly still, my eyes closed, my concentration in tact, when suddenly I feel something soft and granular fall on my head. Instinctively, I stop the thought processing and look up. My eyes fill with sand. I look down and shake the sand off my face. Then, more sand falls on my head and tumbles down around me, and then more and more and more sand, until I notice that I am being buried in a huge mound of sand. I cannot release myself from the chair, and for some reason, I'm not struggling or moving, I just let the sand pile up around me until it is about to cover my mouth. Then, suddenly, the sand flow stops and a grotesque face appears directly in front of mine. (It belongs to Ioppico, the cannibal. He has black warts on both lips, scar tissue beneath the eyes, and streaks of blood along the cheeks and across his bald scalp. A familiar face from the weekly news. He was convicted, starved to death, and then reduced earlier this year.) The warty lips move and I can hear him say: 'If you sweat, you must die, die, die.' Then the sand flow restarts, and I cannot keep the sand out of my mouth. I feel the grit on my tongue, on the roof of my mouth, in my throat . . . and I wake coughing and spluttering. I wipe the sweat off my forehead and the back of my neck; and I lick the salty fingers dry.

I've only come here, to the gantry, now, at night, because there is a full moon. Not that I have ever seen the moon (or sun), of course. But spending so many hours, here at the edge, my eyes have become accustomed to the different

shades of light and grey and dark in the Out-There. For three or four days a month, during what is normally full darkness, I can detect the shape of the dunes, or, if there's a wind (like this one), see movement because of the full moon's faint light.

Maybe this time, when the sand settles there will be an old 1st millennium church with a village pond and ducks, and a horse and cart filled with hay. I do know where these imaginings come from. In the dwelling, I have an antique glass ornament, hundreds of years old. It's a small dome, from before the time of the Domes, about 10 centimetres in diameter. It used to belong to KimSoy who calls it, in one of his books, a sign of the beyond. Inside the glass, there is a tiny Long-Ago style cottage with a roof made of grass, window-frames painted white, a red door, and a green, green garden with flowers of yellow and blue and orange. When you shake it, the inside of the hemisphere fills with white sandy fluff (something called snow) and then you can't see anything inside at all except for the white sand-fog. After a few seconds, the sand begins to settle and you can see the house and garden again. It's like that in the Out-There, only the inside is the outside, and the outside is the inside, and when the sand settles, there's still only sand.

I wonder if KimSoy ever sat here on this gantry, wrapped in three overcoats and an inch thick bonnet. How bizarre to think that once, in the early days of the Dome, these watchtowers were built because the authorities thought we might be attacked by rogue armies or hoards of immigrants or even other Dome authorities. If this gantry had been built of plastic it would have been recycled; but the metal recycling authority was closed down 100 years ago or more - metal revision takes too much energy. According to one of KimSoy's notebook which I was reading before dark, four of the 100 watchtowers were built with secret exit routes built beneath ground level - I may have a poke around when the light comes. I'm feeling rather tired now. It wouldn't be the first time I've fallen asleep out here. Oh, but I'm so thirsty.

Tired, frightened and thirsty. Tired, frightened and thirsty.
Poor Jomika. Poor me.

I took a stroll a little while ago, half way towards the next watchtower, to wipe some condensation off the Wall. I wiped even more than usual - a real treat. Even if the Wall monitors didn't catch me (I suspect they haven't worked for years), some keen-eyed official in charge of the condensation collectors might notice a flow discrepancy and send out an investigator. If he does so today or tomorrow, I might still be here and he won't have to search far to find where I've hidden my illegal sponge.

Here comes the light, I don't think I'll go to work today. There will be ramifications, but I'm past caring. Whereas I love being here, watching, I hate going into the inner Dome - even though it's marginally warmer there (especially in the work tower) - when there is a sand fog. The density of the solar emissions arriving at the Wall is only slightly reduced, but nevertheless the reduction in available energy means less water, which in turn means more social chaos than usual: physical and mental breakdown cases being led off for sectioning; and fighters being taken away for reduction. At times, I wish I could be like my mother was, and turn off all thoughts, all feelings.

Now a dim light is here, I see the wind is finally beginning to drop, the swirl is softening, the sand-fog is starting to thin. I am watching and waiting. I'm ready to see the new Out-There - the country cottage, the snow-covered mountain, the river valley.

KimSoy must have had a friend involved with the watchtower projects. How else would he have known about the secret trapdoors. Did he choose his dwelling knowing that it was by one of the four towers with such a trapdoor? Why would he do so? Did he perceive the day would come, when people wanted to get out, rather than in? It's hard to believe.

Perhaps, he thought security would be better near the special four, or perhaps it was just a coincidence? Maybe the answer lies somewhere in one of the books I haven't read.

Too much excitement. I'm not sure how I found the energy to be so active, but I managed to break off a bar of metal from the end of this gantry - a railing was severely rusted (because of the condensation, the air is marginally less dry near the Wall - another reason why this Outer-Area is desirable). After climbing over various layers of rusty spikes and razors into the central base area, I was able to employ the bar to lever a concrete slab out of its nested position. There were stone steps that led down into blackness. My heart was pumping unsustainably fast, so I had to retreat. I've left the slab out of position - I hope it's not noticed - and will go back later.

Jomika wasn't sectioned for sweating. No, she was removed from free (hah! - what a joke that epithet is - yes, free as in tied and gagged) society for crying. Not once or even five times, but for persistent bouts of crying. I don't think she wanted to stop. We had made ten applications for an egg-sperm in-vitro match and, the dreaded red stamp came with the tenth rejection, denying us the possibility to ever apply again. No explanation, nor even any kind words, just a red stamp. Like most couples, we did the maximum amount of sex allowed, once a month, and followed the minimal movement rules we'd been taught in school. These times were the best of my life (watching the sand-fog doesn't even come a close second). But, for Jomika, she could only take pleasure in sex because, in her mind, she saw it as an essential precursor to having a child, even if sex and conception have long been divorced from each other in a practical sense. When the red stamp came, she was devastated. She didn't cry at first, not until it was time for us to have sex again. Then she started and didn't stop until they took her away.

My own belief, for what it's worth, is that we are all doomed. It's clear to all people with half a live brain left that the overall water supply is diminishing. Despite the best efforts of the recycling technicians some water gets lost because of uncontrollable particle corruption, and despite the most imaginative physico-chemistry the particle engineers cannot make up the losses. We know this from the gossip rooms. As the water supply diminishes, so must life. There have been no believable Dome population figures published in living memory, and there can only be one reason for that - people are dying or being killed/reduced in ever greater numbers, and the authorities don't want us to know. No-one talks about it. Many consciously choose the way of my mother, cutting off feelings and too many thoughts, others seem to have an innate ability to live like automatons. And every day, more and more people are sectioned, or disappear, we don't talk about them either - we might think about them, but we don't talk about them. Is it any wonder I break into sweats of fear at night.

KimSoy was much more optimistic about the future. He writes about the day - a millennium hence perhaps - when the clouds begin to part, and the sun's warmth returns to the Dome. He predicts that, in time, human kind might be able to live again on the face of the earth instead of being protectively caged against the weather. His modest role, he says, is to help man overcome the trials of this dark and terrible age. Little did he know how dark and how terrible.

I've been into the base of the tower again - this time controlling my breathing very carefully. There are 25 steps down, then a tunnel which is a metre wide, two meters high and 30 paces long, and then there are 10 steps up to a landing with a door. I know it must be a door, because I could feel three hinges on one side and three bolts and a handle on the other. The bolts show it must be a door to stop incomers not outgoers - but why then have the door at all. I tried to pull back one of the bolts, and was surprised it

released so easily. My heart started pumping so hard again I had to retreat. Besides, I needed to urinate, which meant returning to my dwelling to use the puriwee. Despite being internally fresh from imbibing the Wall condensation, I decided to drink the puriwee product now and not save it for later. Ignoring two messages from my controller - a friendly XIP Mark 11 - who has shown me leniency on more than one occasion (I do hope she doesn't get into trouble herself because of me), I also decided, for some reason, to dig out from the store cupboard a portable puriwee and take it with me. As I only wee about once every 24 hours, and I'm in my dwelling every night, I haven't had much use for it until now. For some reason, I also checked the filter was in good order.

Although I've returned to the gantry to sit and watch the swirl diminish and the sand-fog thin, I can't stop thinking about the door, and what would happen if I were to release the other two bolts and pull it open. Would I drown in sand - as in my nightmare?

Perhaps I'll make another reccy to the door soon. I recall something KimSoy wrote. He said: 'I was asked today (1 Jano 2803) to predict what life would be like in 200 years time. I have no idea, I said, but one thing is sure, life will still be confined to the Domes and for many centuries thereafter.'

I still think about those auto-clips from Jomika too much. She looked so thin, so far away. I can see her trying not to sink into a coma, trying to hold onto her live brain. There is a faint appeal in her eyes, as if she expected me to rescue her, however impossible that would be. And then there is the last auto-clip she ever sent, in which she doesn't speak. She simply tries to smile, but cannot even manage that. That's what sectioning does to you. It's death by another name. They should rename Dome 19 and call it Doom 19.

Now I'm in trouble. There's a uniformed official below. He must be looking for me. So, the monitors might have caught

me after all, sneaking along the Wall's edge in the dark, or the condenser collector monitors might have raised the alert, or, even more likely, my controller might have demanded a check on my dwelling. Whoever he is, and whatever he is here, there can only be one result: an enquiry and subsequent sectioning.

I've driven myself, or been driven, to the edge - to the edge of beyond. And now I've gone too far.

I slipped down into the base of the tower without being seen. I'm going to try the door. I'm going to the Out-There, I'm going beyond - to be swallowed up, to be reclaimed by the sand.

I am on the outside of the Wall. I must be dreaming. The temperature is hardly any different, perhaps slightly colder. The sand-fog is nearly over, although there are still a few squalls, and I have to keep my eyes closed when they come. But, it is miracle, that I am not buried in sand. I can even walk on it - the educators must have been mistaken. I'm dreaming that I'm touching the outside of the Dome wall - it's soft, bouncy - but I cannot see it. The Wall is black - it was made so that no light energy could be lost. But if I am dreaming, then at least the nightmare is a new one. Now I'm on top of a dune. The black Wall is hideous, frightening. It seems to get bigger the further I walk away from it. I look away, I don't want to look at the Wall again, ever. Instead, I look towards the beyond. Am I really in the Out-There?

I've been walking a long time. I am tired, and it is hard to process my own thoughts. I am thirsty.

I see something green, far away.

I see green pastures and fields with sheep and cows, and
hedges and trees.

Everything is going black.

20 OCTOBER 3502

FIRST WOMAN: THAT'S ALL THERE IS ON HIS RECORDER?

SECOND WOMAN: YES, EMPRESS. THE TRANSLATOR IS CONFIDENT OF HIS WORK.

FIRST WOMAN: DO YOU BELIEVE WHAT THE MAN SAYS?

SECOND WOMAN: INCREDIBLE AS IT SEEMS, I DO. IN ANY CASE HE MUST HAVE COME FROM SOMEWHERE WHICH IS JUST AS INCREDIBLE.

FIRST WOMAN: WHO KNOWS ABOUT HIM?

SECOND WOMAN: ONLY THE PERIMETER SOLDIER THAT FIRST SAW HIM, AND ONE OTHER SOLDIER. THE WATCHTOWER GUARDS KNOW SOMETHING ODD HAPPENED THAT'S ALL. THE TRANSPORTER OPERATOR MAY ALSO HAVE SOME SUSPICIONS. OTHERWISE ONLY THE TRANSLATOR, TWO OF YOUR OWN STAFF, A MEDIC, AND ME.

FIRST WOMAN: AND HE STILL HAS A CONSCIOUS BRAIN?

SECOND WOMAN: YES, EMPRESS. HE'S RECOVERING NOW.

FIRST WOMAN: WE HAVE TWO CHOICES: ONE QUICK AND EASY; AND THE OTHER - THE OTHER WHICH WHICH WILL CHANGE OUR WORLD FOR EVER.

SECOND WOMAN: YES, EMPRESS.

FIRST WOMAN: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

SECOND WOMAN: IT IS NOT FOR ME TO SAY.

FIRST WOMAN: BUT IF IT WERE?

SECOND WOMAN: ONE CHOICE FACES INWARD, AND ONE CHOICE FACES OUTWARD. YOUR PREDECESSORS FACED

INWARD - AND THAT WAS RIGHT. WE HAD TO SURVIVE. NOW WE ARE STABLE, AND HAVE RESOURCES TO SPARE. DOME 19 IS DYING - AND WE COULD ASSIST. EXCUSE ME, EMPRESS, FOR SPEAKING PLAINLY.

FIRST WOMAN: THANK YOU WISE LADY. I AM OF THE SAME MIND. BUT IT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN TO OUR PEOPLE THAT HISTORY IS WRONG - THAT LIFE OUTSIDE THIS DOME DID NOT BECOME EXTINCT OVER 500 YEARS AGO.

SECOND WOMAN: DOME 19 WILL HAVE A HARDER TIME COMING TO TERMS WITH 500 YEARS OF LOST HISTORY.

FIRST WOMAN: MAYBE IT IS NOT LOST, JUST HIDDEN. I AM VERY INTERESTED TO SEE THESE BOOKS WRITTEN BY KIMSOY.

SECOND WOMAN: SO YOU'LL PROPOSE AN EXPEDITION? IT WOULD BE THE FIRST IN CENTURIES.

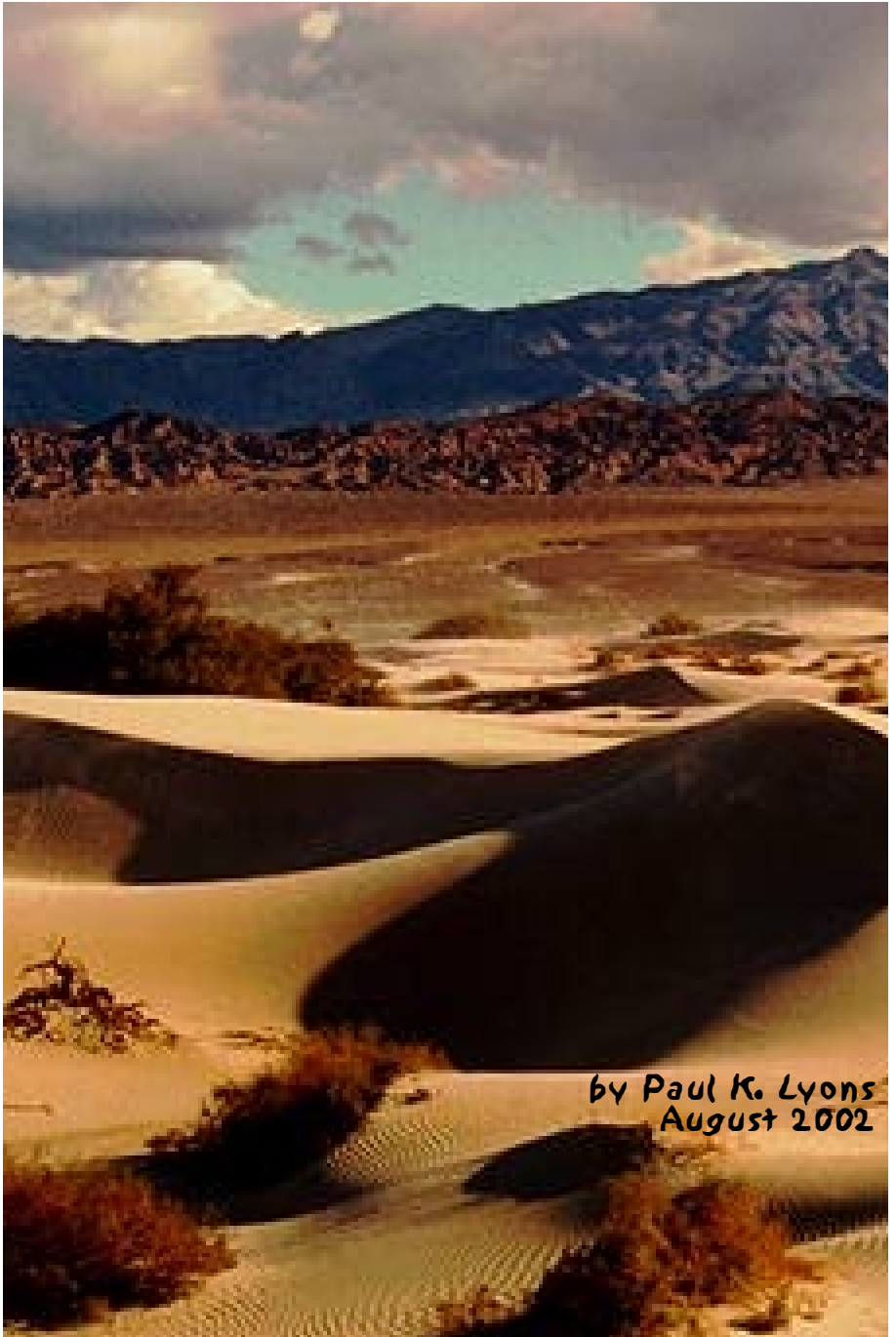
FIRST WOMAN: I SHALL HAVE TO CONVINCING THE DOME COUNCIL, BUT, AS WE SPEAK, I AM BEGINNING TO SEE THIS AS A SIGN FROM THE GOD OF AGES PAST - JUST LIKE THAT PATCH OF BLUE WE SAW THROUGH THE GREY WHEN THE SAND STORM FELL A WHILE AGO.

SECOND WOMAN: YES, EMPRESS, THERE IS MUCH TALK ABOUT THAT PATCH OF BLUE.

FIRST WOMAN: THERE IS NO DOUBT IN MY MIND. THIS MAN AND THE PATCH OF BLUE ARE SIGNS FROM THE GOD OF AGES PAST.

SECOND WOMAN: THE GOD OF AGES PAST, EMPRESS?

FIRST WOMAN: WELL, BETWEEN YOU AND ME, LET'S CALL THEM SIGNS FROM BEYOND.



by Paul K. Lyons
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