



Sixty Days and Counting

By Kim Stanley Robinson

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But the president-elect remains optimistic and doesn't intend to give up without a fight. A maverick in every sense of the word, Chase starts organizing the most ambitious plan to save the world from disaster since FDR—and assembling a team of top scientists and advisers to implement it.

For Charlie Quibler, this means reentering the political fray full-time and giving up full-time care of his young son, Joe. For Frank Vanderwal, hampered by a brain injury, it means trying to protect the woman he loves from a vengeful ex and a rogue “black ops” agency not even the president can control—a task for which neither Frank's work at the National Science Foundation nor his study of Tibetan Buddhism can prepare him.

In a world where time is running out as quickly as its natural resources, where surveillance is almost total and freedom nearly nonexistent, the forecast for the Chase administration looks darker each passing day. For as the last—and most terrible—of natural disasters looms on the horizon, it will take a miracle to stop the clock . . . the kind of miracle that only dedicated men and women can bring about.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Inside-the-Beltway policy wonks and government scientists strive to save the world from environmental collapse in the well-written third installment (after 2005's *Fifty Degrees Below*) of this hyperrealistic, near-future SF series. The Gulf Stream—slowed by global warming—has been restarted and nuclear-powered naval ships stand by to generate electricity for frigid coastal cities. Phil Chase, an ecologically minded Democrat from California in the Al Gore mold, has won the presidency, due in part to the efforts of NSA scientist Frank Vanderwal and his spook girlfriend, Caroline Barr, who helped foil a right-wing attempt to fix the election. But only time will tell if the world has both the scientific know-how and the political will to reverse the ongoing rush toward an ecological precipice. Combining surprisingly interesting discussions of environmental science with Robinson's trademark tramps through nature and an exciting espionage subplot, this novel should appeal to both the author's regular SF audience and anyone concerned with the ecological health of our planet (*Mar.*)

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About the Author

Kim Stanley Robinson is a winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Awards. He is the author of eleven previous books, including the bestselling Mars trilogy and the critically acclaimed **Fifty Degrees Below**, **Forty Signs of Rain**, **The Years of Rice and Salt**, and **Antarctica**—for which he was sent to the Antarctic by the U.S. National Science Foundation as part of their Antarctic Artists and Writers' Program. He lives in Davis, California

From the Hardcover edition.

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Chapter One

By the time Phil Chase was elected president, the world's climate was already far along the way to irrevocable change. There were already four hundred parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and another hundred parts would be there soon if civilization continued to burn its fossil carbon—and at this point there was no other option. Just as Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected in the midst of a crisis that in some ways worsened before it got better, they were entangled in a moment of history when climate change, the destruction of the natural world, and widespread human misery were combining in a toxic and combustible mix. The new president had to contemplate drastic action while at the same time being constrained by any number of economic and politic factors, not least the huge public debt left deliberately by the administrations preceding him.

It did not help that the weather that winter careened wildly from one extreme to another, but was in the main almost as cold as the previous record-breaking year. Chase joked about it everywhere he went: "It's ten below zero, aren't you glad you elected me? Just think what it would have been like if you hadn't!" He would end speeches with a line from the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley:

"O, Wind, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

“Maybe it can,” Kenzo pointed out with a grin. “We’re in the Youngest Dryas, after all.”

In any case, it was a fluky winter—above all windy—and the American people were in an uncertain state of mind. Chase addressed this: “The only thing we have to *fear*,” he would intone, “is abrupt climate change!”

He would laugh, and people would laugh with him, understanding him to be saying that there was indeed something real to fear, but that they could do something about it.

His transition team worked with an urgency that resembled desperation. Sea level was rising; temperatures were rising; there was no time to lose. Chase’s good humor and casual style were therefore welcomed, when they were not reviled—much as it had been with FDR in the previous century. He would say, “We got ourselves into this mess and we can get out of it. The problems create an opportunity to remake our relationship to nature, and create a new dispensation. So—happy days are here again! Because we’re making history, we are *seizing* the planet’s history, I say, and turning it to the good.”

Some scoffed; some listened and took heart; some waited to see what would happen.

As far as Frank Vanderwal’s personal feelings were concerned, there was something reassuring about the world being so messed up. It tended to make his own life look like part of a trend, and a small part at that. A hill of beans in this world. Perhaps even so small as to be manageable.

Although, to tell the truth, it didn’t feel that way. There were reasons to be very concerned, almost to the edge of fear. Frank’s friend Caroline had disappeared on election night, chased by armed agents of some superblack intelligence agency. She had stolen her husband’s plan to steal the election, and Frank had passed this plan to a friend at NSF with intelligence contacts, to what effect he could not be sure. He had helped her to escape her pursuers. To do that he had had to break a date with another friend, his boss and a woman he loved—although what that meant, given the passionate affair he was carrying on with Caroline, he did not know. There was a lot he didn’t know; and he could still taste blood at the back of his throat, months after his nose had been broken. He could not think for long about the same thing. He was living a life that he called parcellated, but others might call dysfunctional: i.e., semi-homeless in Washington, D.C. He could have been back home in San Diego by now, where his teaching position was waiting for him. Instead he was a temporary guest of the embassy of the drowned nation of Khembalung. But hey, everyone had problems! Why should he be any different?

Although brain damage would be a little more than different. Brain damage meant something like—mental illness. It was a hard phrase to articulate when thinking about oneself. But it was possible his injury had exacerbated a lifelong tendency to make poor decisions. It was hard to tell. He had thought all his recent decisions had been correct, after all, in the moment he had made them. Should he not have faith that he was following a valid line of thought? He wasn’t sure.

Thus it was a relief to think that all these personal problems were as nothing compared to the trouble all life on Earth now faced as a functioning biosphere. There were days in which he welcomed the bad news, and he saw that other people were doing the same. As this unpredictable winter blasted them with cold or bathed them in Carribean balm, there grew in the city a shared interest and good cheer, a kind of solidarity.

Frank felt this solidarity also on the premises of the National Science Foundation, where he and many of his colleagues were trying to deal with the climate problem. To do so, they had to keep trying to understand the environmental effects of:

- 1)the so-far encouraging but still ambiguous results of their North Atlantic salting operation;
- 2)the equally ambiguous proliferation of a genetically modified “fast tree lichen” that had been released by the Russians in the Siberian forest;
- 3)the ongoing rapid detachment and flotation of the coastal verge of the Western Antarctic Ice Sheet;
- 4)the ongoing introduction of about nine billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every year, ultimate source of many other problems;
- 5)the ensuing uptake of some three billion tons of carbon into the oceans;
- 6)the continuing rise of the human population by some hundred million people a year; and, lastly,
- 7)the cumulative impacts of all these events, gnarled together in feedback loops of all kinds.

It was a formidable list, and Frank worked hard on keeping his focus on it.

But he was beginning to see that his personal problems—especially Caroline’s disappearance, and the election-tampering scheme she had been tangled in—were not going to be things he could ignore. They pressed on his mind.

She had called the Khembali embassy that night, and left a message saying that she was okay. Earlier, in Rock Creek Park, she had told him she would be in touch as soon as she could.

He had therefore been waiting for that contact, he told himself. But it had not come. And Caroline’s ex, who had also been her boss, had been following her that night. Her ex had seen that Caroline knew he was following her, and had seen also that Caroline had received help in escaping from him. He also knew that Caroline’s help had thrown a big rock right at his head.

So now this man might very well still be looking for her, and might also be looking for that help she had gotten, as another way of hunting for her.

Or so it seemed. Frank couldn’t be sure. He sat at his desk at NSF, staring at his computer screen, trying to think it through. He could not seem to do it. Whether it was the difficulty of the problem, or the inadequacy of his mentation, he could not be sure; but he could not do it.

So he went to see Edgardo. He entered his colleague’s office and said, “Can we talk about the election result? What happened that night, and what might follow?”

“Ah! Well, that will take some time to discuss. And we were going to run today anyway. Let’s talk about it while en route.”

Frank took the point: no sensitive discussions to take place in their offices. Surveillance an all-too-real possibility. Frank had been on Caroline's list of surveilled subjects, and so had Edgardo.

In the locker room on the third floor they changed into running clothes. At the end of that process Edgardo took from his locker a security wand that resembled those used in airports; Caroline had used one like it. Frank was startled to see it there inside NSF, but nodded silently and allowed Edgardo to run it over him. Then he did the same for Edgardo.

They appeared to be clean of devices.

Then out on the streets.

As they ran, Frank said, "Have you had that thing for long?"

"Too long, my friend." Edgar veered side to side as he ran, warming up his ankles in his usual extravagant manner. "But I haven't had to get it out for a while."

"Don't you worry that having it there looks odd?"

"No one notices things in the locker room."

"Are our offices bugged?"

"Yes. Yours, anyway. The thing you need to learn is that coverage is very spotty, just by the nature of the activity. The various agencies that do this have different interests and abilities, and very few even attempt total surveillance. And then only for crucial cases. Most of the rest is what you might call statistical in nature, and covers different parts of the datasphere. You can slip in and out of such surveillance."

"But—these so-called total information awareness systems, what about them?"

"It depends. Mostly by total information they mean electronic data. And then also you might be chipped in various ways, which would give your GPS location, and perhaps record what you say. Followed, filmed—sure, all that's possible, but it's expensive. But now we're clear. So tell me what's up?"

"Well—like I said. About the election results, and that program I gave you. From my friend. What happened?"

Edgardo grinned under his mustache. "We foxed that program. We forestalled it. You could say that we un-stole the vote in Oregon, right in the middle of the theft."

"We did?"

"Apparently so. The program was a stochastic tilt engine that had been installed in some of Oregon and Washington's voting machines. My friends figured that out and managed to write a disabler, and to get it introduced at the very last minute, so there wasn't any time for the people who had installed the tilter to react to the change. From the sound of it, a very neat operation."

Frank ran along feeling a glow spread through him as he tried to comprehend it. Not only the election, de-rigged and made honest—not only Phil Chase elected by a cleaned-up popular and electoral vote—but his

Caroline had proved true. She had risked herself and come through for the country; for the world, really. And so—

Maybe she would come through for him too.

This train of thought led him through the glow to a new little flood of fear for her.

Edgardo saw at least some of this on his face, apparently, for he said, “So your friend is the real thing, eh?”

“Yes.”

“It could get tricky for her now,” Edgardo suggested. “If the tweakers try to find the leakers. As we used to say at DARPA.”

“Yeah,” Frank said, his pulse rate rising at the thought.

“You’ve sent a warning?”

“I would if I could.”

“Ah!” Edgardo was nodding. “Gone away, has she?”

“Yes,” Frank said; and then it was all pouring out of him, the whole story of how they had met and what had followed. This was something he had never managed to do with anyone, not even Rudra or Anna, and now it felt as if some kind of hydrostatic pressure had built up inside him, his silence like a dam that had now failed and let forth a flood.

It took a few miles to tell. The meeting in the stuck elevator, the unsuccessful hunt for her, the sighting of her on the Potomac during the flood, the brief phone call with her—her subsequent call—their meetings, their—affair.

And then, her revealing the surveillance program she was part of, in which Frank and so many others, including Edgardo, were being tracked and evaluated in some kind of virtual futures market, wherein investors, some of them computer programs, were making speculative investments, as in any other futures markets, but this time dealing in scientists doing certain kinds of biotech research.

And then how she had had to run away on election night, and how on that night he had helped her to evade her husband and his companions, who were now clearly correlated with the attempted election theft.

Edgardo bobbed along next to him as he told the tale, nodding at each new bit of information, lips pursed tightly, head tilted to the side. It was like confessing to a giant praying mantis.

“So,” he said at last. “Now you’re out of touch with her?”

“That’s right. She said she’d call me, but she hasn’t.”

“But she will have to be very careful, now that her husband knows that you exist.”

“Yes. But—will he be able to identify who I am, do you think?”

"I think that's very possible, if he has access to her work files. Do you know if he does?"

"She worked for him."

"So. And he knows that someone was helping her that night."

"More than one person, actually, because of the guys in the park."

"Yes. That might help you, by muddying the waters. But still, say he goes through her records to find out who she has been in contact with—will he find you?"

"I was one of the people she had under surveillance."

"But there will be a lot of those. Anything more?"

Frank tried to remember. "I don't know," he confessed. "I thought we were being careful, but . . ."

"Did she call you on your phone?"

"Yes, a few times. But only from pay phones."

"But she might have been chipped at the time."

"She tried to be careful about that."

"Yes, but it didn't always work, isn't that what you said?"

"Right. But—" Remembering back— "I don't think she ever said my name."

"Well—if you were ever both chipped at the same time, maybe he would be able to see when you got together. And if he sourced all your cell-phone calls, some would come from pay phones, and he might be able to cross-GPS those with her."

"Are pay phones GPSed?"

Edgardo glanced at him. "They stay in one spot, which you can then GPS."

"Oh. Yeah."

Edgardo cackled and waved an elbow at Frank as they ran. "There's lots of ways to find people! There's your acquaintances in the park, for instance. If he went out there and asked around, with a photo of you, he might be able to confirm."

"I'm just Professor Nosebleed to them."

"Yes, but the correlations . . . So," Edgardo said after a silence had stretched out a quarter mile or more. "It seems like you probably ought to take some kind of preemptive action."

"What do you mean?"

“Well. You followed him to their apartment, right?”

“Yes.”

“Not your wisest move of that night, by the way.”

Frank didn’t want to explain that his capacity for decision making had been possibly injured, and perhaps not good to begin with.

“–but now we can probably use that information to find out his cover identity, for a start.”

“I don’t know the address.”

“Well, you need to get it. Also the names on the doorbell plate, if there are any. But the apartment number for sure.”

“Okay, I’ll go back.”

“Good. Be discreet. With that information, my friends could help you take it further. Given what’s happened, they might give it a pretty high priority, to find out who he really works for.”

“And who do your friends work for?”

“Well. They’re scattered around. It’s a kind of internal check group.”

“And you trust them on this kind of stuff?”

“Oh yes.” There was a reptilian look in Edgardo’s eye that gave Frank a shiver.

In the days that followed, Frank passed his hours feeling baffled, and, under everything else, afraid. Or maybe, he thought, the feeling would be better characterized as extreme anxiety. He would wake in the mornings, take stock, remember where he was: in the Khembali embassy house’s garden shed, with Rudra snoring up on the bed and Frank on his foam mattress on the floor.

The daylight slanting through their one window would usually have roused him. He would listen to Rudra’s distressed breathing, sit up and tap on his laptop, look at the headlines and the weather forecast, and Emersonforthe day.net:

We cannot trifle with this reality, this cropping-out in our planted gardens of the core of the world. No picture of life can have any veracity that does not admit the odious facts. A man’s power is hooped in by a necessity which, by many experiments, he touches on every side until he learns its arc.

Maybe Emerson too had been hit on the head. Frank wanted to look into that. And he needed to look into Thoreau, too. Recently the keepers of the site had been posting lots of Henry David Thoreau, Emerson’s young friend and occasional handyman. Amazing that two such minds had lived at the same time, in the same town—even for a while the same house. Thoreau, Frank was finding in these morning reads, was the great philosopher of the forest at the edge of town, and as such extremely useful to Frank—often more so, dare he say it, than the old man himself.

Today's Thoreau was from his journal:

I never feel that I am inspired unless my body is also. It too spurns a tame and commonplace life. They are fatally mistaken who think, while they strive with their minds, that they may suffer their bodies to stagnate in luxury or sloth. A man thinks as well through his legs and arms as his brain. We exaggerate the importance and exclusiveness of the headquarters. Do you suppose they were a race of consumptives and dyspeptics who invented Grecian mythology and poetry? The poet's words are, "You would almost say the body thought!" I quite say it. I trust we have a good body then.

Except Thoreau had been a consumptive, active though he was in his daily life as a surveyor and wandering botanist. This passage had been written only two years before he died of tuberculosis, so he must have known by then that his lungs were compromised, and his trust in having a good body misplaced. For lack of a simple antibiotic, Thoreau had lost thirty years. Still he had lived the day, and paid ferocious attention to it, as a very respectable early scientist.

And so up and off! And up Frank would leap, thinking about what the New England pair had said, and would dress and slip out the door in a frame of mind to see the world and act in it. No matter how early he went out, he always found some of the old Khembalis already out in the vegetable garden they had planted in the back yard, mumbling to themselves as they weeded. Frank might stop to say hi to Qang if she were out there, or dip his head in the door to tell her whether he thought he would be home for dinner that night; that was hardly ever, but she liked it when he let her know.

Then off to Optimodal on foot, blinking dreamily in the morning light, Wilson Avenue all rumbly and stinky with cars on the way to work. The walk was a little long, as all walks in D.C. tended to be; it was a city built for cars, like every other city. But the walk forced him to wake up, and to look closely at the great number of trees he passed. Even here on Wilson, it was impossible to forget they lived in a forest.

Then into the gym for a quick workout to get his brain fully awake—or as fully awake as it got these days. There was something wrong there. A fog in certain areas. He found it was easiest to do the same thing every day, reducing the number of decisions he had to make. Habitual action was a ritual that could be regarded as a kind of worship of the day. And it was so much easier.

Sometimes Diane was there, a creature of habit also, and uneasily he would say hi, and uneasily she would say hi back. They were still supposed to be rescheduling a dinner to celebrate the salting of the North Atlantic, but she had said she would get back to him about a good time for it, and he was therefore waiting for her to bring it up, and she wasn't. This was adding daily to his anxiety. Who knew what anything meant, really.

Then at work, Diane ran them through their paces as they produced the action plan that she thought was their responsibility to the new president. They were to lay out the current moment of the abrupt climate change they were experiencing, and discuss in full whether there was any way back out of it—and if there was, what kind of policies and activities might achieve it.

One thing that she had no patience for was the idea that having restarted the Gulf Stream, they were now out of the woods. She shook her head darkly when she saw this implied in communications from other agencies, or in the media. It did not help that they were suddenly experiencing a warm spell unlike anything that had happened the previous year, when the long winter had clamped down in October and never let up until May.

This year, after several hard freezes, they were experiencing a balmy and almost rain-free Indian summer. Everyone wanted to explain it by the restoration of the Gulf Stream, and there may even have been some truth to that, but there was no way to be sure. Natural variation had too great an amplitude to allow for any such one-to-one correspondence of climactic cause and effect, although unfortunately this was something the climate skeptics and carbon supporters were also always saying, so that it was tricky for Diane to try to make the distinction.

But she was persistent, even adamant. “We have to put the Gulf Stream action to one side, and take a look at all the rest of it,” she commanded. “Chase is going to need that from us to go forward.”

Back in his office, therefore, Frank would sit at his desk, staring at his list of Things To Do. But all in a vain attempt to take his mind off Caroline.

Ordinarily the list would be enough to distract anyone. Its length and difficulty made it all by itself a kind of blow to the head. It induced an awe so great that it resembled apathy. They had done so much and yet there was so much left to do. And as more disasters blasted into the world, their Things To Do list would lengthen. It would never shorten. They were like the Dutch boy sticking his fingers into the failing dike. What had happened to Khembalung was going to happen everywhere.

But there would still be land above water. There would still be things to be done. One had to try.

Caroline had spoken of her Plan B as if she had confidence in it. She must have had a place to go, a bank account, that sort of thing.

Frank checked out the figures from the oceanography group. The oceans covered about seventy percent of the globe. About two hundred million square kilometers, therefore, and in the wake of the first really big chunks of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet floating away, sea level was reported to have risen about twenty centimeters. The oceanographers had been measuring sea level rise a millimeter at a time, mostly from water warming up and expanding, so they were blown away and spoke of this twenty centimeters’ rise as of a Noah’s flood. Kenzo was simply bursting with amazement and pride.

Back-of-the-envelope calculation: .2 meters times the two hundred million square kilometers, was that forty thousand cubic kilometers? A lot of water. Measurements from the last few years had Antarctica losing a hundred and fifty cubic kilometers a year, with thirty to fifty more coming off Greenland. So, now about two hundred years’ worth had come off in one year. No wonder they were freaking out. The difference no doubt lay in the fact that the melt before had been actual melting, whereas now what was happening was a matter of icebergs breaking off their perch and sliding down into the ocean. Obviously it made a big difference in how fast it could happen.

Frank brought the figures in with him to the meeting of Diane’s strategic group scheduled for that afternoon, and listened to the others make their presentations. They were interesting talks, if daunting. They took his mind off Caroline, one had to say that. At least most of the time.

At the end of the talks, Diane described her sense of the situation. For her, there was a lot that was good news. First, Phil Chase was certain to be more supportive of NSF, and of science in general, than his predecessor had been. Second, the salting of the North Atlantic appeared to be having the effect they had hoped for: the Gulf Stream was now running at nearly its previous strength up into the Norwegian and

Greenland Seas, following its earlier path in a manner that seemed to indicate the renewed pattern was, for now, fairly robust. They were still collecting data on the deeper part of the thermohaline circulation, which ran southward underneath the northerly flow of the Gulf Stream. If the southward undercurrent was running strong, they might be okay there.

“There’s so much surface pressure northward,” Kenzo said. “Maybe all we’ll have to do from now on is to monitor the salinity and the currents. We might be able to intervene early enough in any stall process that we wouldn’t need as much salt as we applied last fall. Maybe a certain percentage of the retiring oil fleet could be mothballed, in case we needed a salt fleet to go up there again and make another application.”

“It would take a change in thinking,” Diane said. “Up until now, people have only wanted to pay for disasters after they’ve happened, to make sure the pay-out was really necessary.”

Kenzo said, “But now the true costs of that strategy are becoming clear.”

“When it’s too late,” Edgardo added, his usual refrain.

Diane wrinkled her nose at Edgardo, as she often did, and made her usual rejoinder; they had no choice but to proceed from where they were now. “So, let’s follow up on that one. It would have to be a kind of insurance model, or a hedge fund. Maybe the reinsurance industry will be trying to impose something like that on the rest of the economy anyway. We’ll talk to them.”

She moved on to the West Antarctic Ice Sheet situation. One of Kenzo’s oceanographer colleagues gave them a presentation on the latest, showing with maps and satellite photos the tabular superbergs that had detached and slipped off their underwater perch and floated away.

Diane said, “I’d like some really good 3-D graphics on this, to show the new president and Congress, and the public too.”

“All very well,” Edgardo said, “but what can we do about it, aside from telling people it’s coming?”

Not much; or nothing. Even if they somehow managed to lower the level of atmospheric carbon dioxide, and therefore the air temperatures, the already-rising ocean temperatures would be slow to follow. There was a continuity effect.

So they couldn’t stop the WAIS from detaching.

They couldn’t lower the rising sea level that resulted.

And they couldn’t de-acidify the ocean.

This last was a particularly troubling problem. The CO₂ they had introduced into the atmosphere had been partially taken up by the ocean; the absorption rate now was about three billion tons of carbon a year into the ocean, and one estimate of the total uptake since the industrial revolution was four hundred billion tons. As a result, the ocean had become measurably more acidic, going from 8.2 to 8.1 on the pH scale, which was a logarithmic scale, so that the 0.1 shift meant thirty times more hydrogen atoms in the water. It was felt that certain species of phytoplankton would have their very thin calcium shells in effect eaten away. They would die, a number of species would go extinct, and these very species constituted a big fraction of the bottom of the ocean’s food chain.

But de-acidifying the ocean was not an option. There were fairly arcane chemistry reasons why it was easier for seawater to become more acidic than to become more basic. A Royal Society paper had calculated, for the sake of estimating the scale of the problem, that if they mined and crushed exposed limestone and marble in the British Isles, “features such as the White Cliffs of Dover would be rapidly consumed,” because it would take sixty square kilometers of limestone mined a hundred meters deep, every year, just to hold the status quo. All at a huge carbon cost for the excavations, of course, exacerbating the very problem they were trying to solve. But this was just a thought experiment anyway. It wouldn’t work; it was an unmitigatable problem.

And that afternoon, as they went down Diane’s list together, they saw that almost all of the climate and environmental changes they were seeing, or could see coming, were not susceptible to mitigation. Their big success of the fall, the restarting of the thermohaline cycle, had been an anomaly in that sense. The Gulf Stream had rested so closely to a tipping point in its action that humans had, by an application at the largest industrial scale they commanded, managed to tip that balance—at least temporarily. And as a result (maybe) the last month on the East Coast had been markedly warmer than the previous December had been. Perhaps they had even escaped the Youngest Dryas. So now, in one of those quick leaps that humans were prone to make (although science was not), people were talking about the climate problem as if it were something that they could terraform their way out of, or even had solved already!

It wasn’t true. Most of their remaining problems were so big that they had too much heft and momentum for people to find any way to slow them, much less reverse them.

So, at the end of this meeting, Edgardo shook his head. “Well, this is grim! There is not much we can do! We would need much more energy than we command right now. And it would have to be clean energy at that.”

Diane agreed. “Clean power is our only way out. That means solar power, I’d say. Maybe wind, although it would take an awful lot of pylons. Maybe nuclear, just one last generation to tide us over. Maybe ocean power too, if we could properly tap into currents or tides or waves. To me—when I look at factors like technical developmental readiness, and manufacturing capability, and current costs, and dangers and damage—I’d say our best chance lies in a really hard push on solar. A kind of Manhattan Project devoted to solar power.”

She raised a finger: “And when I say Manhattan Project, I don’t mean the kind of silver bullet that people seem to mean when they say Manhattan Project. I mean the part of the Manhattan Project that not only designed the bomb but also entrained something like twenty percent of America’s industrial capacity to make the fissionable material. About the same percent of capacity as the auto industry, and right when they needed every bit of capacity for the other parts of the war. That’s the kind of commitment we need now. Because if we had good solar power—”

She made one of her characteristic gestures, one that Frank had become very fond of: an opening of the palm, turned up and held out to the world. “We might be able to stabilize the climate. Let’s push all the aspects of this. Let’s organize the case, and take it to Phil Chase, and get him prepped for when he takes office.”

After the meeting, Frank couldn’t focus. He checked his e-mail, his cell phone, his FOG phone, his office phone: no messages. Caroline had not called for yet another day. No telling where she was or what was happening.

That night he wandered north up Connecticut Avenue, past the hotel where Reagan had been shot, past the Chinese embassy with its Tibetan and Falun Gong protesters in front singing, until he crossed the big bridge over Rock Creek, guarded by its four Disneyesque lion statues. Out on the middle of the bridge there was a tiny relief from the claustrophobia of the city and forest. It was one of the only places where Rock Creek seemed like a big gorge.

He continued to the clutch of little restaurants on the far side of the bridge and chose one of the Indian ones. Ate a meal thinking about the names on the wine list. Vineyards in Bangalore, why was this surprising? He read his laptop over milk tea.

When it was late enough, he struck off to the northwest, toward Bethesda. Back streets, residential, the forest taking over. Night in the city, sound of distant sirens. For the first time in the day he felt awake. It was a long hike.

Up on Wisconsin he came into the realm of the Persian rug shops, and slowed down. It was still too early. Into a bar, afraid to drink, afraid to think. A whiskey for courage. Out again into the bright night of Wisconsin, then west into the strange tangle of streets backing it. The Metro stop had been like a fountain of money and people and buildings pouring up out of the earth, overwhelming what had been here before. Some of the old houses that still remained undemolished suggested a little urban space of the 1930s, almost like the back streets of Georgetown.

From the Hardcover edition.

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