

When the future is just that much more of us

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1.

Things can turn out much better than you first expect. Like when, in the spring of 2023, bees start to eat meat. Their first victims are domestic cats. Our pets. Because they're easy meals that are already on the go. Because they're fast food that's neatly packaged in moisture-resistant fur. Because they stay fresh without adding preservatives. Because they're tidy tidbits that are always available to snack on.

It doesn't get any fresher than being alive. Predator's creed.

So hungry swarms of bees will descend upon confused and rather small-brained animals. Like clouds of brown teeth with wings. Like a dirty fog with an appetite. Being curious won't help the cats. Not even a little bit.

Then the bees move on to other stuff. Larger stuff. But it will all turn out to be not that big a deal. Because bees don't play that much of a role in things, I guess.

Bees do go extinct. Honey does become a thing of the past. The real stuff, I mean. Wax too.

Some company based in Arkansas will apologize. Oops, they'll say. Didn't mean for those things to get out.

Things can turn out much better than you expect. Or much much worse. This is coming from someone with a lot of experience in the future. I wish the story I'm about to tell you will end as happily. I really do. But not all stories will end happily. Not all stories can end happily. There's one guy hanging out with us who claims he can see the future too. He's all for happy endings. He tells us that Jesus is coming. He gets laughed at a lot. By the rest of us, I mean.

Never going to happen, I try to explain to him. No way, I tell him. That would be too sweet a deal, I add, too good an ending for the likes of us. Even for the ones Jesus sends to hell. This guy doesn't see futures at all, I think to myself. Not even a little bit.

Sometimes good things only come around once. You just don't get a second chance with them. I'd imagine Jesus to be like that. I mean if I imagined him to be like anything at all.

2.

It all began in bed. Like a lot of other stuff.

I started hearing voices. If you hear one word, once in a while, that's not so bad. That's actually pretty common. Your name, up close and intimate. In your ear. Maybe in a voice you recognize. Your mother's. A girlfriend's. If you hear two words, that's still okay. Your first and last names. Calling to you in the voice of a camp counselor that you remember as a kid. Three's the limit. Hearing three words or more means you're in big trouble, that you're crazy, that you need health insurance. A lot of it.

The thing was, I didn't hear the voices in my head. I heard them in my pillow. My pillow is haunted, I thought. Pillow talk. This is so annoying. Little voices crying out for help in there. It's a bad sign when something's crying out for help because you've fluffed your pillow. Even if it's disembodied. Either something is in trouble or you're in trouble. That's trouble either way.

I could still sleep alright. I just couldn't sleep on my pillow. Or near it. The little voices weren't in the mattress or anywhere else. Just in the pillow. I considered throwing the pillow out.

Recycling it. But I thought I should know who the voices were first. I didn't want them coming back mad at me. Maybe disembodied voices have powers. You never know. You don't want disembodied voices talking about you behind your back. Or however they do it.

Next I started seeing things. Things that talk to me. That say mean things. This isn't good, I say to one of the things I'm seeing. The thing I'm seeing sort of looks like cow parts. You know, I say to the cow parts, I had a happy childhood. A very happy childhood, I add. Happily married parents who loved me. So this shouldn't be happening to me. Good people, bad things. Uh huh, the cow parts say back. I'm seeing food ghosts. That's what I'm seeing. That's what the cow parts tell me I'm seeing.

Digestion, the cow parts say to me, is just about as intimate as it gets. Um, I'm not following, I say. I'd back off, but I'm already flat against the wall in my bedroom, the cow parts closing in on me. It smells bad, really bad. Like something is dead. Like a bunch of something is dead.

Next to the cow parts crowding me in are some pig parts. The pig parts are angry. The pig parts are being kind of mean about the whole thing. You *ate* us, they say pointedly. Um, I say. There's been some sort of mistake, I tell the pig parts, because I keep kosher. At least some of the time, I add. Not very often, I think to myself. Given the size of them pig parts there. I guess bacon really does count. If you eat enough of it.

We hatched, the pig parts say. Hatched? I ask. You know, from your pillow. Uh huh, I say. I look at the pig parts. I presume they're looking back at me. So where's the rest of the story? I say. Eh? the pig parts say back. If I ate you what are you doing over there? Why aren't you in a sewer somewhere? Karma, the pig parts say. Karma? I ask. For sure, the cow parts chime in. When you reach a certain age, your karma starts to talk back to you. What do you think lung cancer is?

When your karma hatches in your lifetime, the cow parts say, it can get pretty ugly.

It's like bad memories, only worse, the pig parts tell me. Think acid indigestion. Acid reflux. Esophagus cancer.

I'm just not getting it, I say. You eat meat? the pig parts ask, and not nicely. Um, yeah? I say. Okay, so that's us. And us, the cow parts add. Then something meows pointedly to the left. There's some barking too. Something else whinnies. And then there are a couple of animal noises I don't recognize. And what feels like snails without shells shimmying across my bare feet. You've got to be kidding, I say without daring to look around. Or move. The rewards of cheap food, the pig parts tell me. They've moved up close and personal. I'm choking from the

smell. But they sound like they could be commiserating with me. Pigs, after all, are omnivores too. They've been there.

3.

I'm seeking advice. Some way to escape from these waking nightmares I've been having whenever I'm awake. These things that I see following me around. That I see following everyone around. Like our past is stalking us.

I'm desperately seeking advice from a shaman, a *neo*-shaman. Who specializes in these things. New age hauntings. Meat karma cleansing. He's wearing black leather rags. He has an underbite like Donovan. Goth tattoos. Dreadlocks. I'm desperate. Even palm readers are shunning me these days. And they'll cheat just about anybody.

Like I'd eat a cat, I tell him. Surely I'd notice, I add. It'd be kind of gamey, wouldn't you think? Uh huh, he says. He refuses to commit himself.

They were really mean about it, I whine to the shaman. I lay it all out to him. What we're trying to figure out, the cow parts told me, is how come you're still alive. Imagine that, I editorialize. Why should I be dead? I said back, and with some bravery I might add. Not much point to you from our point of view—that's the pig parts talking now. Hey, I'm decent, I protested. Yep, the pig parts go on, like they're missing their ears or something, we sure went to waste in this one.

They're just playing with your head, he tells me. The parts of things I had for dinner are just playing with my head? I say. That's what you're telling me? It's the unborn, he says, messing with you. They're very angry. And resentful. They're kind of pissed. Because they know what's coming. Uh huh, I say. Your children are messing with you, he says, that's how you have to think about this. I don't plan on having any children, I say sullenly. Especially if they're going to pull shit like this, I add.

I'm speaking collectively, he says. All our children. Whether they're particularly yours or not. What do all these collective children have against me? I ask. Me in particular I mean, I add. You can see them, he says. Not many people can. You can see the future. Not many people can. Think of yourself as chosen. Uh huh, I say. This is just the beginning, he adds. You've got powers. They're going to grow. You're going to be able to see a lot more of the future soon. A lot more details. Oh joy, I say.

It's a gift, he says, that's how you have to think about it. Some gift, I say. What's the return policy for this gift? I ask. It's not a gift for you, the shaman says, it's a gift for everyone else. You're the gift. Whether you like it or not. Um, I say. Think prophet, the shaman tells me. Think Old Testament prophet, he adds. Without God being involved, I mean, he tells me. You're supposed to warn people about the future. That's your new occupation. Your calling. Oh double joy, I say.

Think karma, he goes on. You can see people's karma. That's the future that you see, the future's the stuff following everyone around that looks like sentient black gunk. You can see everyone's

individual ecological footprints. What they're going to bequeath to their children, as it were. Their karma. Their ecological footprint. It's all the same thing. Actually, they sound like different kinds of things to me, I say, this ecological footprint, this karma. So which is it? I ask. Your calling, he says as if he can't hear what I'm saying, is to fruitlessly warn everyone about their futures. Fruitlessly, I say. He nods sagely.

4.

So I've suddenly got this compulsion to tell people their futures. In bars, for example. It's just not healthy to tell people their futures in bars. I say this from experience. Having done it, I mean. Bar scenes result. Literally.

I yell out stuff suddenly. That's something that can happen to me anywhere. Just like Tourette's syndrome. Just like an itch in my head. The future, I mean. An itch that I can scratch only by shouting stuff at people. So I yell this: *Outside, cannibals now roam the streets.* I yell: *Fresh Direct trucks deliver food only to those with gold in their cellars.* I yell: *We wander in packs now. On the streets of New Delhi. And São Paulo.* I yell: *Love terrorists they're called. They blow up people randomly so that the rest of us will have more room.* I yell this sort of stuff in subways too.

A young woman smirks at me. Once upon a time I might have been able to date her. Before I got this calling, I mean. So you can see the future, she says. Oh you have no idea, I say. Take you for example. And then I go into it all. In detail. What I don't tell her before she walks away, clearly furious with me, is that it isn't quite her future I'm predicting. It's her daughter's future. I'm

telling her all about her unborn daughter's future. She's pregnant. She doesn't know it yet. She will soon.

Another woman, with a baby in a stroller, is saying to me: You get the fuck out of here now. I don't get to tell her baby his whole future. I'm often yelling at babies. I can see what they're going to do. And a lot of it isn't very nice. Not at all.

This gets me arrested. More than once. Did I mention that I don't have my job anymore? Or a place to live?

In bars it's much much worse. I turn to the guy on my right. I'm drinking a beer. He's drinking a beer. That's usually all it takes to start a conversation in a bar. I can see the future, I tell him cheerily. Oh yeah? he says. Your future looks like this, I say. Your son will talk to squirrels. He'll say: It's just bad luck to be a squirrel, squirrel. It's bad luck to be anything, pretty much. Some of us humans, we're okay, we're lucky. Too bad for you, squirrel.

And then he'll deftly kill the squirrel with a flip of a garbage can cover, I say. Your son is kind of clever and witty, but he's crazy too, I tell the guy on my right. A steady diet of squirrel can do that to a person, I guess. I don't think it's a complete protein, I muse. He cooks them, by the way. He's lucky. Most other people in his age group have to eat them raw. The guy's gotten off his stool, moved away from me. I don't miss a beat, I turn to the guy on my left. I can see the future, I tell him cheerily. Oh yeah? he says. You'll tell your daughter stories. I have a daughter? he

asks. You will, I say. You'll tuck her into soft mounds of dirt each evening. Once upon a time, you'll say, we had things. Things? she'll ask. What are things?

I'm telling a third guy that his son is going to grow up to be a housing inspector. We'll going to be living in wrecks of houses, I say. Half under water, I add, that sort of thing. We'll call them houseboats. Even though they don't move. Even though everything's wet inside. It's sort of a joke we tell each other. Your son's job will be to inspect them, to make sure these wrecks of houses half under water are up to code. New York City regulations. They'll be even more pointless than they are now. He'll take bribes, by the way. But because there's no currency anymore, he'll take the bribes in other forms, like cooked food or sexual favors—from children for example.

This is the first guy that punches me out. Some other people in the bar cheer him on. Others call out that I'm crazy. I get pretty injured even though several people try to stop the fight after I've been knocked down and kicked a few times. I've now learned that people always kick you when you're down. I mean if they've knocked you down in the first place. I guess that's the whole point of knocking you down. For some people, anyway.

Maybe it's 2025 or maybe it's 2030 I'm saying to someone. I'm not sure, I say, because I'm always a little hazy on the dates. He's looking at me. This conversation isn't going well, I can tell. None of my conversations go well anymore. But I can't stop myself. The itch in my head won't let up. One day, I say to this guy, your son. He interrupts me. My son? You're going to have a son, I say, two sons actually. Oh, he says. So where was I? I say aloud. Oh yeah, so one

day, this is the older son, he's going to say to you, I like porcelain. How's that? you're going to say, just like that. It doesn't die from natural causes, he's going to tell you, porcelain always dies a violent death. That's so cool, he's going to say. The man looks directly ahead as if he's thinking about something. Really? he says finally. That's kind of weird, he adds. That's exactly what you're going to think, I tell him. It'll be too late, of course, I add. But the man has already gotten off the stool, and moved away from me. He's conferring with what looks like the manager. They whisper and point at me. They're not hiding what they're doing. I can see the manager's future too. He gets to die from complications from some weird new disease. That means I'm going to have to tell him that if he comes over. He isn't going to like it. Which he doesn't.

Another time when I've been knocked down this guy is kicking me pretty viciously. The rich will wear special glasses so they can't see the poor people, I'd told him. Like you and your children, I'd added, all of them. Your grandchildren too. All dirt poor. Eh? he'd said, like he was really listening to me. His eyes were glistening. I'd never realized that eyes could glisten. It's pretty dark in bars, all things considered. And yet I can see his eyes glistening at me. It's kind of a warning, but I don't see it coming. Just because you can see the future doesn't mean you can see all of the future. You're all going to be poor, I'd told him. And invisible. Until your family line dies out altogether. And that's when he punches me in the face. Hard.

5.

So I'm talking to the shaman as best I can with my swollen lips and face, my broken arm, my nearly closed right eye that's going blind. I limp these days too. Something is wrong with one of

my kidneys. There are problems with my neck. I'm pretty angry, all things considered. Okay, I say to the shaman. Seeing the future is one thing. But this compulsion to tell people their future, and their children's futures. Yes? he says. What the fuck is *that*? I say. Involuntary altruism, he says right back. You think good people want to be good? he asks me. Never thought about it, I say. And I'm telling the truth. Why would anyone want to think about that? Good people, he says. They'd like to be selfish just like the rest of us, he says. Good people aren't *crazy*, he says, they're just good. Goodness, it's a disease, he adds. Goodness, he says, it just isn't natural. It doesn't pay off. Just like you're noticing.

I'm not seeing the goodness in all this, I say. Can people really do anything about their futures? Is telling them their futures going to help? Even a little bit? It doesn't seem like it's going to help. It's certainly not been helping me. The shaman shrugs his shoulders, his dreadlocks not moving the way all dreadlocks don't move. Some of us see the future, some of us don't, he says to me. And some of us can't help telling others about the futures that they see. Maybe they get believed once in a while. Maybe it helps. Maybe not. It's just like any other sort of information I'd guess. Sometimes you can use it sometimes you can't. He pauses a moment. How would I know? he says finally. I never said I could see the future. Thank God for that, he adds. I couldn't handle the responsibility.

I really admire you, he tells me, I really do. People who can see the future. People who can't keep their mouths shut about the future that they can see. But I need to do my admiring from a distance. Like most people. Sorry I couldn't be of more help. Then he says: I'd like it if you don't come back, by the way. Things don't look good for you. Not that I'm predicting anything.

6.

A bunch of us are in group therapy. We're crouched under a bridge somewhere, around a garbage can with a trash fire in it. Goodness, I've just finished telling everyone, is a disease. Goodness just isn't natural. Uh huh, someone says in response. Jeff cuts me off. Jeff is always cutting people off. I can hear the past, he whines. Little voices in the background all the time. It's driving me totally nuts. And I keep thinking, he goes on in that strange little monotone that he always speaks in, why do I hate stripes? *What* do they remind me of? Jail? Office work? Free associating isn't going to get me the answers I need. You have to stop interrupting everyone, Peggy says to Jeff. Jeff is embarrassed. He nods and puts his hand over his mouth. We all understand, we all commiserate. We all have this compulsion to talk. Especially when no one wants to hear what we're saying.

We're all really thin, by the way. No one feels much like eating anymore. We're all trying to keep our ecological footprints as small as possible.

So the pigfat sits down next to me at the diner, Michael is saying, and it says to me, so you got any ideas about the point of you? I ask the pigfat back: Aren't you nervous about being seen in public like this? Nah, it says back to me, no one but you can see me.

I'm looking around the diner, Michael says. People are looking back at me. No one? I ask the pigfat. We prefer it that way, the pigfat tells me. On top of everything else you look crazy. And how did that make you feel? Peggy asks, when the pigfat said that to you. We all look at Peggy.

She's not a real therapist. She's not even close. We don't have a real therapist to run our sessions. No one would do it. We understand that Peggy is doing her best.

If you can see the future, they make sure you're homeless and that no one will believe you, Pete says bitterly. Nice, really nice, he adds. I don't think it's a conspiracy, I tell Pete, trying to engage him in conversation. Science is the pursuit of knowledge? he says as if he's responding to me. Hah! Science is just giving a moron a knife. And we're the only ones who can see it, he adds. Um, I say. You've interrupted Michael, Peggy tells Pete. Sorry about that, Pete says, and he covers his mouth with his hand. And you too, Peggy says to me. I apologize to Michael, and then I cover my mouth with my hand too.

The pigfat never lets up on me, Michael whines. Like yesterday it says to me, don't you think, as far as altruism goes, that you've been—um—a little too incestuous? The apple falls from the tree, this is the pigfat talking to me, bleeds off a little moisture into the soil underneath it, and then it thinks it's being generous. This is the pigfat talking to me. None of us know what to say to him. Meat eaters, the pigfat told me, you meat eaters need a serious shakeup. And then Michael says, can someone else talk for a while? Michael looks at the ground. He looks like he's going to be sick.

I can smell peoples' past, Jennie tells us. We oooh in commiseration. I can't do that myself, I think to myself, but I can certainly understand how rough it would be. What is that? I said to Angelo, Jennie says, I mean when it first started. Angelo was her husband. He's left her. Everyone's left all of us. It smells like something dead, Jennie says. I kept telling him that. I

think it annoyed him, she adds. And then I went to see this woman, she does past life regressions or something, and she tells me that it really is something dead that I'm smelling, that I'm one of those rare ones who can smell ghost. Ghost? Peggy says. Karma, she says. The dead shit that stays around after someone dies. You know, she says, their history. I couldn't stop crying, she cries. I cry all the time. I don't understand why this should happen to me. I just wanted what everyone wants. Nice clothes. A home. Kids. I don't deserve this. I don't deserve being with people like you.

She keeps crying, and blowing her nose into a yellowed rag. The rest of us murmur soothing sounds. But we know nothing can help her. We know that nothing can help us. I can see the ghosts of *dinosaurs*, Jack tells us later. Sounds kind of neat, I say. Because it does sound kind of neat. Jack's annoyed that I said that because he'd like some pity too. He's not going to get any pity with a bunch of dinosaur ghosts. Not with the things the rest of us can see.

I keep asking it if there's an afterlife, Miriam tells all of us. I guess sometimes I want to know that this shit isn't going to go on for too long. That when I die it'll all really be over for good. And just one time it didn't sit there grunting at me, spitting mucus up out of its hole, one time it spoke back to me, it said, well that depends on what you mean by an afterlife. And this one time I don't push it because I'm thinking that maybe I don't want to know. Maybe I shouldn't be too curious about things. Maybe it's bad enough, what I can see of the future I mean.

Newborn babies, Miriam goes on, and I can tell that she's about to get a little hysterical, about to start screaming at us again. Why do you think newborn babies are crying all the time? No one

says anything. We all know what's coming, we all know what she's going to say next. They know what's coming, that's why, she yells at us. That's ridiculous, I say compulsively. I can't help myself. Henry, Peggy says to me warningly. I know I know, we have to be supportive. I put my hand over my mouth. But this really is ridiculous. It's in Plato, Miriam says between broken sobs, looking straight at me, her tears streaking the dirt all over her face like a small child. Plato describes how babies forget what's coming, Miriam says. Until it hits them in the face as adults, she adds. Until what hits them in the face? Peggy says. You know, Miriam says, cancer. Hatred. Life. She's confused, I think. That's not in Plato. Nothing at all like that is in Plato. And even if it is, what good is that going to do any of us now?

Helen involuntarily bursts out in words again. We commiserate. We really do. We've all been there. But we're no different from anyone else. We don't want to hear what she sees, know about the futures that she can describe. I can see all the cancers growing, Helen screams again. And this time she's pointing at my chest. Thanks for sharing, I murmur. And then I think to myself, this really isn't a group conversation. Everyone's kind of narcissistic, I think, kind of self-absorbed, totally focused on the specific awfulnesses of the futures that they can see.

7.

I'm walking with Jeff, and we both see it at the same time. Some mom militantly pushing a baby carriage past us. Shit, Jeff says to me, did you see that? Yep, I say. Six, Jeff says, he's going to kill six women before they catch him. Yep, I say. And that's after he, after he. And Jeff can't finish his sentence. For once. Yep, I say, trying to get the images out of my head. Are you going to tell her? Jeff asks me. I stop walking and stand there, looking at the ground. For what feels

like a couple of minutes. What was it Pete had said to us the same evening that he'd gone on about science? Oh yeah, Christians got it ass-backwards, that's what he said. *As usual*, Christians got it ass-backwards, that's what he said. Original sin? Forget it. If you have children, their crimes are on your head. That's what he said. Then I'm sprinting after her, trying to catch up. The itch in my head, it's totally relentless. I've got to let her know. Even though there's no point. Not even a little point.