

# Bootstrapping

Part 4 Previous episodes at <http://www.solysis.com/Home/articles>

15<sup>th</sup> February 2043

I have not gone back to the hatch behind the wall panels. I have not even thought about the hatch very much over the two weeks that have passed since the day I discovered it but decided at the last minute to leave it shut.

Re-reading my journal entries so far I realise that, despite the calm surroundings I find myself in, I am about as calm inside as a hyperactive mosquito. One moment I wallow in detailed descriptions of sensory perceptions, the next moment I throw around random philosophical thoughts about the purpose of life as the sole leftover of humanity, then I crawl around the place looking for an exit, and in between I try to keep control over reminiscing too deeply about my previous life. The four weeks I have been here feel like a big blur, and the contrast between living in conventional comfort and safety on one hand and the monumental issues facing my mind on the other hand is almost unbearable. Meanwhile, I fight a creeping sense of claustrophobia, not so much in a physical sense but because my life has suddenly been constrained to one particular path. Despite being apparently free to do as I please within the confines of my living space I feel like I have been robbed of the opportunity to shape my life on a larger scale. Being able to do the latter is obviously a luxury but one I am attached to too much to just let go.

Paradoxically, though, I don't just suffer from having lost aspects of freedom

but also from having gained others. I realise more and more just how much I have been controlled not by my own aspirations and well-considered choices but by social expectations. I had a framework that told me what to do and what not to do. I never had to face the question why I don't put on my jumper inside out. Or cut off the legs of my trousers in a diagonal line. Or take a bath in hot chocolate. Or pee into the kitchen sink. Or just stay in bed all day and get up in the evening (Actually, I cannot tell apart day and night here anyway.) I never had to make a conscious decision whether my favourite three-course meal ends with ice cream, or starts with it. I guess I feel a bit like an 11-year-old whose parents have gone away for the weekend for the first time. Except that it is not for a weekend but forever.

I used to think that societal norms are a burden. Now I am not so sure any more.

I remember the first hiking trip with Grace. I had originally met her through her work in the Global Governance Organisation – she was running compliance audits on regional education initiatives and had pulled off the feat of not letting the utter futility of the project sap her cheeriness and lightheartedness. I was engaged by the GGO as a technical efficiency consultant at the time, a role I loved because there was so much scope for putting a stop to wasting people's talents and initiative, but a role I loathed because my reports disappeared effortlessly in the bureaucratic machinery. They were not consciously ignored or delayed but seemed to slip into a parallel universe where time is not one of the everyday four dimensions. I sometimes imagined catching a glimpse of my recommendations in a strange world behind a curtain of indeterminate optical illusions. But nothing got ever acted upon.

Anyway, it definitely was not love at first sight, and I am not sure Grace and I

ever “properly” fell in love with each other, at least not in the old-fashioned sense. But when we first chatted to each other while queueing for lunch, having had no prior contact beyond saying hello in the corridor, we both immediately recognised a kindred spirit. I am struggling to put it into words ... in some sense it was for me like meeting a part of myself. And so we arranged a week-long hiking trip together there and then, as casually as other people might have made plans to meet up at some concert. It did not even strike me as odd until a particularly tactful colleague of mine asked in all seriousness how much I was paying for Grace's company, and what the rules of engagement were.

### **16<sup>th</sup> February 2043**

I drifted into sleep yesterday remembering that hiking trip with Grace. Certain sections of the path are etched into my mind almost step by step – I see my feet finding their way, a stream of split-second decisions which rocks to step on, which patches of grass to enjoy as a soft interlude under my shoes, and which plants to carefully step over because I could not bring myself to squash them for the benefit of a tiny optimisation of my route. I vividly remember how the smell of the air changed over the course of each day.

This was one of the times in my life when I felt completely at peace. At peace within myself, at peace with the people around me (Grace of course, but also the people we occasionally met), and somehow an integral and appropriate part of nature.

If only I could recreate that state of mind now. Yes, I know it is a state of mind, and I should theoretically be able to go there without assistance in the form of forests, meadows, mountain ranges, streams, flowers, rocks, and an intriguing yet weirdly familiar woman. But the awkward reality is that I

have never been more than a fair weather meditator, exploring and observing my spiritual world when I felt like it and indeed drawing considerable strength from it on those occasions, yet unable to actively access that source of strength when I was down and depressed.

And so I have gone into a kind of non-physical survival mode. I try to keep on an even keel mentally and emotionally, I force myself into a daily routine of eating, sleeping, researching HCEP, reading; I even time these activities with the only clock around here, a strangely antique-looking wall clock mounted near the kitchen that seems to be watching me casually but with a slightly unnerving intensity.

Heck – half a century after Star Trek, why is there still no holodeck to offer a bit of diversion?

### **18<sup>th</sup> February 2043**

I mentioned “researching HCEP” as part of my daily routine. Well, the effort is starting to pay off. It is not easy to find out anything – the technical manuals in the pile in the north-west corner (yes, I have assigned compass directions to my “apartment” – I managed to put a blue sky program on the window screens, complete with the sun rising and setting over some generic landscape, and hence a notion of where south is) ... anyway, the technical manuals in the pile in the north-west corner were written for engineers, and it took me many days on the media terminal to even understand the jargon and the acronyms. It is unfortunately nowhere near a complete set of documentation – my initial excitement on realising just how much hard information was contained in these manuals died a meek death once I had leaved through the last one of them and still had not found a single blueprint of the whole construction, let alone any hint of what lies outside.

That did not keep me from literally savouring a small victory yesterday. It was my birthday, and I had set my mind on getting the food generator to make a proper birthday cake for me. The FG has numerous cakes in its menu, even catering for cake-making traditions from different countries, and the cakes I have tried have mostly been delicious, but there is no birthday cake! But from the FG-related manuals I pieced together how it works, that it constructs tastes and textures from just under one hundred intermediate materials, and that there is a testing mode that prompts the FG to spit out those intermediate materials without processing them into meals.

And so I got out flour, an egg-like mixture, sugar, butter (well, some yellow fatty stuff anyway), and even marzipan. There aren't many kitchen utensils here so I used my bare hands to mash everything into a smooth dough. Recipe? Pah, who needs a recipe! I kept back some marzipan, coloured it with a bit of beetroot juice courtesy of the food generator, and shaped it into a purple "37". Baking the cake was another matter. There is no oven, and in the end I constructed a cavity from a large salad bowl and the biggest dinner plate I could find, put the cake mixture and an electric hair drier inside and prayed that the cake would be ready before the hair drier melted. I have to say I was rather surprised that this worked.

When I meticulously set the table, complete with candle and flowers (another hidden feature of the food generator), there was a fleeting moment when everything did feel alright. I wondered whether to set the table for two, just in case Grace walked in as if nothing had happened.

To be continued ...

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