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The Tourist

Written by Robert Dickinson

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THE TOURIST



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’88

You’re staring at the wall when it’s announced. You spend most of your days staring at the wall. If anyone asked you’d say you were gathering your thoughts.

Visitor, says the voice.

Your thoughts scatter like cockroaches. You stand up so quickly you feel dizzy.

You don’t have visitors.

Room Six, says the voice. The door of your cell slides open.

The corridor outside is white, brightly lit. There are no obvious doors in this corridor but you know they’re there, flush with the walls. Twice a day, when you walk to Room Two to eat, you knock against the walls as you pass. You don’t expect a reply but if there’s another prisoner they might take heart from knowing they’re not alone.

You don’t have visitors. Isolation is part of the sentence. Your captors have a horror of solitude and believe you share it. The only living things you see are the doctors (for monthly examinations) and the doctors’ guards, and, once a year, the Consideration Panel. The rest of the time there is only the

voice. It tells you when to wake up, when to eat – always in Room Two, a room hardly bigger than your cell, where the food is left on a tray chained to the table and the table is bolted to the floor. It allows you an hour to eat before it tells you to return to your room.

The voice hasn't changed in all your time here. You suspect it isn't human. Synthesised, a machine. It sounds like your own voice, or how you imagine your voice sounds.

The corridor leads to an enclosed courtyard with an opaque glass ceiling. You can't tell the colour of the sky, or if the diffused light is the sky. You stop for a moment and look up as you always do and wonder if what you can see is daylight.

The door to Room Six is already open.

Keep walking, says the voice.

Room Six is three times the size of your cell. The only furniture is a single metal-framed chair that faces three other chairs. All of them are bolted to the floor. This is where the Consideration Panel – a Safety, a Happiness, a Facilitator, different people each time – sit in judgement, with a guard standing by the door behind them. You've never seen that door open but know there must be another room beyond it with people watching. The meetings are the same every time: the Consideration Panel ask questions and you stare at them until they send you back to your room. This has happened seventeen times. Or eighteen: you seem to have lost count. Each time they expect you to talk about what they call your crimes. Saying nothing is a small victory.

Your visitor is sitting in the middle chair. He's wearing the formal greys you expect for a Facilitator but his posture is military. He's familiar. Your first thought is that you've noticed a family resemblance and he's the son of an earlier guard. He's

barely out of his twenties. You've been here long enough for that to be possible.

Sit down, says the voice.

You sit.

Your visitor looks at you carefully. His hair, you notice, is cropped and patterned in a way that was popular before your sentence began. The style must have come round again. "Karia Stadt," he says. "I expect this is a surprise for you." It's small talk, meant to put you at your ease. It sounds rehearsed.

Normally you wouldn't talk at all, but there is something different about this man. "I don't get visitors. My people are dead." Your voice sounds dryer than you expect. You wanted it to sound like a reproach but it comes out like self-pity.

"You grew up in City Two East." He relaxes, but only slightly. "That's the reason I'm here."

City Two East is their name for your old home. It's their way: give everything a number, erase the past. Pretend they had nothing to do with the old world. Your city had a name. You resist the impulse to correct him. "You're military."

"No." He says it firmly, as if the suggestion is offensive. "I should introduce myself. My name is Riemann Aldis."

The name stirs a memory.

"I'm with Awareness." He follows his script. "I have been seconded to the Safety Executive in order to find one of their people and a high-status Happiness. The evidence suggests they're in the vicinity of your old home."

You don't believe him. "And?"

"You're the last person familiar with the terrain."

"Don't you have maps? Satellites?"

"Nothing reliable. Your people didn't make maps and nobody goes there now."

"Why should I help you?"

He blinks. "I'm giving you a chance to return to your home city."

"How is it home? Everybody I know is dead."

"The alternative is that you stay here until the end of your sentence. Twelve more years, isn't it? This is your chance to leave."

"Under what terms?"

"You'll be in my sole custody. If you agree to help it will count at your next Consideration Panel." He seems to realise this is a weak argument. "You can see your old home," he adds quickly. "Or you could stay here."

You realise why he's familiar. It's the way your memory works: you try to remember a name or a place and find a blank. Minutes later, when you're thinking about something else, the name or place comes back, making you forget your latest train of thought. Riemann's name is familiar because it's the name of the man you met back in the 21st. That Riemann had been an older man, talking about an event in his past. Standing on a street in the 21st, asking why you were there, hinting he already knew. The memory is vivid. You remember the name because you were told to remember it. You had a good memory then. You'd been told to remember everything he said. *One day, a long time from now, you meet me again*. You assumed it was a lie, a trick to make you talk.

You study the face opposite you. It's young, genuinely young, not reconstructed the way some of them are. You can tell by the eyes. Either it was a different man or the events you can remember are in this one's future.

There's a phrase they use: *Travel is confusing.* You heard it all the time when you were pretending to be one of them. They say it as a joke. They say it and it stops the conversation. You

can understand why: when you try to think of what his presence means your head starts to ache.

You decide to say nothing. If this is the man you once met it might be information you can use later. Or you might have misremembered. It's been a long time. Your visitor could have given you any name and you would have adjusted your memory to make it fit. "When would I leave?"

He gives a thin smile. "We made the application for a temporary release before you were sentenced. It was approved five years ago." The smile is familiar. "If you agree you will be out of here in the next two hours."

It has to be a trick. "How have you done this?"

"That's not your concern." He's pleased with himself. The other Riemann had been smug, keen to make it clear he knew something you didn't. "Do you accept my offer?"

"Is this true?" you say aloud, not to him. "If I agree, am I free to go?"

You can go, says the voice. *You are not free.*

Typical 21st

It should be simple. A coach ride from the resort to the attraction, the kind of uneventful trip I've accompanied before. According to the brochure the journey takes thirty-five minutes and we stay at the attraction for two hours. There's a novelty: the journey back will take longer because of an accident. It will be a minor accident, nobody hurt, the coach barely dented. Some of the clients are excited by the prospect. Some of them have booked the trip *because* of the accident. It's something new. There's a hint – but no more than a hint – of danger.

I count the clients – fourteen of them – onto the coach. On the way I give them the talk about the attraction, a typical early-21st shopping mall. It's the kind of thing they've seen in the old entertainments or heard about from kin who have already made the trip. "This may be the early 21st," I tell them, "but it's still an advanced and sophisticated civilisation." I give them the standard warnings about the food, the reminders about changing currency: "You may be offered a better deal, but there are strict protocols governing this. If

you see something you absolutely have to buy, use the plastic cards provided. They are as good as currency. If you're not sure about anything, come and talk to me." I end with the joke about not offering to buy anybody's children. A few listen. The rest stare out of the window, shocked at how ugly and crowded everything is. Tri-Millennium Travel has a grand name but it's cheap and doesn't attract the most adventurous travellers. For many of them this is their first time outside the resort.

I'm bored of the early 21st. I've been doing this for a year and a half now, and I'm tired of the cramped houses, the noise, the crowds, the gathering pollution, the omnipresent advertising. I'm unmoved by their entertainments (they use pictures, even for grown-ups) and bored, mostly, with the company of the other reps. The only thing that keeps me going is the knowledge that in three weeks I'll be sent home for breach of protocol. (Four years after that I join a kin, and forty after that is an end date. I've seen my record.) I have a few more weeks of shepherding these cautious people from one heavily monitored location to another and living in the off-resort accommodation that's supposed to make me a better rep. There's a theory that you can't really understand an era until you've had an affair with one of its natives and unless one of them has a radical change of diet and hygiene that isn't going to happen. I'm definitely not going to join the extemps and pretend I belong here. I want to go home and find out which kin I join. And then I want to go to the early 19th, the era I actually studied.

I'm curious about the breach of protocol that gets me sent back. A fling with a client? I look up and down the transport. I can't imagine having a fling with any of these. Apart from a woman at the back who keeps her hood up and avoids eye contact, they're all at least my parents' generation.

We reach the coach park of the attraction on time. I count them off, a little ritual of reassurance, and tell them that if they need help I'll be in a particular coffee shop on the upper level. Tri-Millennium has an arrangement with this shop: they reserve a reps' table that gives a view of nearly the whole shopping area. We're allowed free coffee and one of their least disgusting pastries. They know that a quarter of the tourists will get bored after about an hour and join me. (I usually take a bite out of the pastry when they turn up: it gives them a thrill to see one of their own eating this era's notorious food.)

They have the usual wariness about getting off the coach and walking in the open air. I tell them they don't need suits, and point to all the native shoppers in their drab period costumes. *They're* not worried. Some of the older clients are sceptical. I can sympathise: you never really get used to the sky. They jog across the car park as if the atmosphere here will kill them (the Near Extinction Event isn't for another sixty years, but these people's grasp of history is shaky at best, and some of them grew up with stories of the Cloud). Once inside, I point them in the direction of our preferred stores (Tri-Millennium has deals with them; their staff are supposed to have had special training) and take the escalator to Coffee Monarch.

Li Tran is sitting at the reps' table, wearing earphones attached to a native mobile. I'm pleased it's her. Most of the other reps are second- or third-gen Happiness straight out of Further Ed. We're both a few years older and weren't always Happiness: after my parents died I'd been identified as having potential but, without any other Happiness in my kin, had to work the Tunnels to qualify for the education. It's not the usual rep progression. Most of the people who work the Tunnels end

up in Safety; the ones who enjoy it get requisitioned by the Millies. I had the usual offer from Safety but turned it down in favour of more education.

Li's path was also different. She's from City Three North, a rough place, although she claims it's not as bad as its reputation ("We have power and clean water, you know. And schools with teachers. It's not like we're City Two East.") And she travelled before she became a rep, which is rare.

The other thing we have in common is that we're shorter than the average Happiness. Not by much – nobody would mistake us for natives – but just enough to make it clear (if only to us) that we don't quite belong.

Li nods at me and takes off her earphones. I can hear a snicker-snicker sound like shuffled cards. Native music. "Spens," she says without smiling. "Welcome to hell."

Li works for Heritage, a slightly more expensive operator. Her clients come to the same attractions as mine, but they're ironic about them. They'll wander around, pointing and laughing and quoting the guidebooks to each other with knowing little smiles.

I don't like Heritage clients. Li likes them even less.

I sit down. "Problem?"

"I knew today was going to be a bad day. I didn't realise how bad."

"What's happened? Or going to happen?"

"Nothing on the record. But the record doesn't include how annoying people can be. The Shin family." She looks down at the main shopping area. Our clients stand out in their shimmering jackets and dark visors. Also in the way they gather in doorways, blocking the flow of foot traffic, transfixed by the pictures of things for sale. (The early 21st loves pictures. It's like people have grown tired of reading.)

Our clients – Heritage or Tri-Millennium – are not impressive. The natives walk round them without any overt signs of resentment. Not that I expect any: they've had ten years to get used to us. "How about you?" Li asks. "Anything about to happen?"

I tell her about the accident. "Some of mine are looking forward to it."

"At least they won't have to go to a hospital. That's an adventure." Li spent a night in a hospital after being punched in the face at a musical event in the 1970s when she was here as part of a research team. The hospital was scarily primitive, but Li considered it part of the experience. Nineteen seventy-six was wild, she says. It's a period before we made our presence known, so everything had to be clandestine. Li had been chosen for the team because she was clever and short enough not to stand out. She'd had to dress like the natives and speak their language. Early 21st is tame by comparison, she says, but she liked the popular culture. She still goes to gigs, as she calls them, and, earlier this time around, had a two-month affair with a native which ended because he kept asking about lottery numbers and sports results and didn't believe her when she told him she didn't know. He couldn't understand how that information was lost, and she couldn't tell him about the NEE. If she had, she said, he'd either have refused to believe her or thought he could do something about it.

A lot of the natives think if they've been warned about an event they can stop it from happening. Li calls it the Terminator Fallacy, a reference to one of their entertainments. Li has an anthropologist's interest in their culture.

I don't share it. I prefer a different kind of music: Beethoven. His 22nd December 1808 concert is my favourite recording,

and one day I mean to go. It won't be soon. Early-19th Vienna is difficult. It's a long stopover and there's a lot of prep: languages, medical, plus the usual hazards of being a freakish outsider in a war zone. "Anyway," Li says, "have you found out what your breach of protocol is yet? It can't be long now."

"Three weeks."

"It might not happen."

"It's on my record."

"If you can believe that."

Li isn't typical. She enjoyed the 1970s and she's one of the few who hasn't checked her record. She doesn't trust them: she claims we can't be sure they're from the 25th and for all we know the authorities made them up. And if they are real we *shouldn't* trust them. We've had long conversations.

Back home, when records from the 25th suddenly appeared a lot of people made a point of refusing to look. Eventually nearly everybody gave in. The records were, it turned out, scrappy: my employment history stopped with Tri-Millennium, then had the year I joined a kin – just the year, with a symbol next to it that was never explained – and an end date (2388). Other people had lists of occupations but no dates, or they had kinship history but nothing else. The fact some had no end dates led to speculation they would still be alive when the records were compiled. It's more likely the records were corrupted, deliberately or not, before they were released, either by the 25th or our own authorities. Too much detail might reduce our sense of agency.

Agency has been a concern since the early years of travel. It's still the subject of most entertainments. If you know your loved one is going to be killed in an accident do you try to stop them leaving for work? If you find out they're going to commit a crime do you try to talk them out of it? The

entertainments always give the same answer: you can't change what's going to happen. You warn somebody about the accident; they take a different route, which results in the accident. You warn them not to commit the crime and it turns out you gave them the idea. The 25th is, if anything, even more cautious. They discourage travel – the last few attempts to get there were bounced back – and they never visit. Apart from these skimpy records nothing has come from them: no tech, no art, nothing. I'm not sure if this is from some high-minded moral objection or because they just enjoy being mysterious.

Li is pensive. "I'll be sorry to see you go."

"You can't be here for much longer."

"Five more months. Unless something happens."

"Haven't you checked?"

"I want it to be a surprise."

"Knowing doesn't take away the surprise," I say. "The records are always incomplete. I don't know why I get sent back. And all I know about this afternoon's accident is that it happens on the journey home and that nobody gets hurt."

"But isn't even that too much?"

"No. For some of them it's comforting." I nod down at our clients in their shimmering coats. Some of the braver ones have entered the shops.

"And you? Do you find it comforting?"

"I don't find it anything. The company record makes my job easier. My personal record – it doesn't tell me anything I couldn't have guessed."

"That's what's different about here." Li looks at the shoppers below. Our clients are outnumbered three or four to one by the natives. "The people here don't *think* they know what's going to happen. Or when."

"Does that make them better than us?"

"It makes them less fatalistic."

"I'm not fatalistic. Apart from a few details, I know just as little about my life as any of the people down there." I'm careful not to say *natives* in front of Li. She doesn't like the word.

She turns back to me. "A few details. You mean like thinking you know when you're going to die?"

"I know the year. It's only a date. And it doesn't give an age. Travel changes everything."

"I don't know how you live with it." She looks down at our clients again. "Why do you think they come here?"

"It's a shopping mall. They're a defining feature of the culture." Once it was temples and cathedrals, then railway stations. In this era it's shopping malls and airports. Tri-Millennium don't organise excursions to airports (the natives have security concerns); occasionally a few clients will make the trip by themselves just to watch the planes.

"But why the 21st? What do they expect to see here?"

There are lots of reasons. The main one is this period has a fixed link: spend a month here, go back and find a month has passed at home. Our clients are here for a holiday. They're not roughing it in the fourteenth century or trying to establish if King Arthur actually existed. The early 21st has short travel time, amenities and relative security. Our clients choose it because it doesn't need much medical preparation, they can understand some of the language and the natives are sophisticated enough not to burn them as witches or worship them as gods. "They're here to see something they can't see at home. They'll feel they've done something adventurous and be glad to get back."

"It doesn't seem much."

"Not everyone is like you, Li. The 21st is available, so they come here."