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The Night Sessions

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Extract

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'The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion, nor on any other.'

Thirty-First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States

PROLOGUE: ONE YEAR EARLIER

'Science fiction,' said the robot, 'has *become science fact*!'

John Richard Campbell groaned, as much at the cliché as at having been wakened from his uncomfortable doze. He shifted in his seat, pushed the blanket away from his face, resettled his phone clip and sat up. As he adjusted the backrest to vertical he noticed only a score or so of other passengers stirring. The great majority were sleeping on, and even most of those awake were staring blankly at whatever was playing in their eyewear. Business flyers, he guessed, who'd already seen the sight often enough. Campbell had opted to be wakened at the approach to the equator, for the same reason as he'd chosen a window seat. He didn't want to miss seeing the Pacific Space Elevator. With its Atlantic counterpart – or rival – it was possibly the most impressive, and certainly the most massive, work of man. A new Tower of Babel, he'd called it once, but he had to see it.

'The elevator is now visible to passengers on the right-hand side of the plane,' the robot's voice murmured in the phone clip. 'Passengers on the left will be able to see it in a few minutes, after we turn slightly to avoid the exclusion zone.'

Campbell pressed his cheek against the window and his chin against his shoulder, cupped his left hand to his

temple to cut out the reflections from the dim cabin lighting, and peered ahead and to starboard. In the dark below he saw a spire of pinprick lights. From its summit a bright line extended straight up, for what seemed a short distance. Carefully angling his gaze upward along the line, Campbell spotted a tiny clump of bright lights directly above the spire, about level with the aircraft along the line of sight. He had time to see its almost imperceptible upward motion before the nose of the plane slowly swung starboard and cut it from view. Campbell felt the window press harder against his cheekbone as the aircraft banked.

'You can no longer see the crawler,' said the robot voice, 'but if you look farther up, to the sky, you may just be able to see the elevator in space. From this angle it appears as a shorter line than you may expect, but as bright as a star.'

And so it was. Campbell stared at the hairline crack in the night sky until it passed from view. Near its far end, he fancied, he could see a small brightening of the line, like a lone bead about to drop off the string, but he couldn't be sure: at 35,786 kilometres (less twelve, for the height the aircraft was flying at) the Geostation was tiny, and even the more massive counterweight beyond it, at the very end of the cable, was hardly more visible.

Campbell settled back. The sight had been worth seeing, but he could understand why the frequent fliers hadn't stirred for it. At the cockpit end of the aisle the cabin-crew robot had turned its fixed gaze towards the left-hand window seats and was no doubt murmuring in the phone clips of those passengers now craning their necks and peering out. Campbell guessed that they had a

better view. He decided to book a window seat on the other side on the way back; the return-flight corridor passed on the western side of the elevator.

He turned to the window and let his eyes adjust again to the dark. The viewing conditions weren't perfect by any means, but he could make out the brighter stars. After a few minutes' watching he saw a meteor, burning bright orange; then, shortly afterward, another. Each time it was his own intake of breath that he heard, but the fiery meteors seemed so close he imagined he could hear the whoosh.

After a while the position became uncomfortable. He switched off the robot commentary channel, tilted the backrest as far as it would go, pulled the blanket over his head and tried to sleep. He was sure he wouldn't, but the next thing he noticed was that the blanket was on his knees and light from the window was in his eyes. The dawn sky glowed innumerable shades of green, from lemon to duck-egg to almost blue, like the background colour in a Hindu painting, and turned slowly to a pure deep blue over ten minutes or more as he watched. He dozed again.

The cabin bell chimed. The robot channel clicked itself back on. The drop-down screen above the seat in front showed the aircraft approaching the US West Coast, the local time as two p.m. Up front, and far behind, cabin-crew robots had begun shoving trolleys and handing out coffees. Campbell looked out, seeing white wakes like comets on the blue sea; wavy cliffs like the edge of a corrugated roof. Campbell's legs ached. He stood, apologised his way past the two other passengers beside him, and made for the midship toilet. By the time he got back the

trolley and its dollies were two rows away. He settled again.

The trolley locked, the trolley-dolly halted. It had an oval head with two lenticular eyes and a smile-shaped speaker grille, and a torso of more or less feminine proportions, joined at a black flexible concertina waist to an inverted cone resembling a long skirt.

'Black, no sugar, please,' Campbell said.

The machine's arm extended, without its body having to lean, and handed him a small tray with coffee to spec, kiwi-fruit juice and a cereal bar.

'Thank you,' he said.

'You're welcome,' said the robot.

The passenger next to him, a middle-aged woman, accepted her breakfast without saying anything but: 'White, two sugar.'

'No need for the please and thank you,' she said, as the dolly glided on. 'They're no smarter than ATMs.'

Campbell tore open the wrapper of his cereal bar and smiled at the woman.

'I thank ATMs,' he said.

Campbell turned the robot commentary back on as the aircraft flew over LA. He couldn't take his gaze from the ground: the black plain, the grey ribbons of freeways, the grid of faint lines that marked where streets had been.

'. . . At this point the Christian forces struck back with a ten-kiloton nuclear warhead . . .'

Irritated, Campbell cut the commentary and sat back in his seat. The woman beside him, leaning a little in front of him to look out herself, noticed his annoyance.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

Campbell grimaced. 'Calling the rebels "the Christian forces". There were just as many Christians on the government side.' He shook his head, smiling apologetically. 'It's just a bug of mine.'

'Yeah, well, it isn't the government side that has plagued us in NZ ever since,' the woman said. She folded a scrap of her breakfast wrapper and worried at a seed stuck between two of her broad white teeth. 'It's the fucking Christians.'

'I'm a fu— a fundamentalist Christian myself,' said Campbell, stung into remonstrance.

'The more fool you, young man,' the woman said. She probed with her tongue behind her upper lip, made a sucking sound and then swallowed. 'I used to go to church too, you know, when I was your age. Nice little church we had, all wooden, lovely carvings. Kind of like a marae, you know? Then these American Christians came along and started yelling at us that we were heathen for having a church that looked Maori. Well, the hell with them, I thought. Walked out through their picket line, went to the nearest kauri tree to think about my ancestors, and never looked back.'

'I'm very sorry to hear that,' Campbell said. 'A lot of these American exiles aren't true Christians, and even those that are are sometimes high-handed. So I don't approve of what happened to you. Not at all.'

'Well, thanks for that!' She didn't sound grateful. 'And what would "true" Christians have done, huh?'

'Oh,' said Campbell, 'they'd have first of all proclaimed the gospel to you, and only after they'd established that you or some of you were seriously and genuinely trying to follow Christ – and the apostolic

form of church government – would they have raised the secondary matter of church decoration.'

'Jesus!' the woman said, blasphemously but aptly. 'You mean you think just the same as they did, you'd just be more tactful about it.'

Campbell smiled, trying to defuse the situation.

'Not many people call me tactful.'

'Yeah, I can see that. OK, let's leave it. What do you do?'

'I'm a robotics engineer,' Campbell said.

'My son's studying that,' the woman said, sounding more friendly. 'Where do you work?'

'Waimangu Science Park,' Campbell said.

'That place!' The woman shook her head, back to hostility again. 'You know, that's one of the things I resent the most about these goddamn Yank exiles. Cluttering one of our NZ natural wonders with their creationist rubbish!' She gave him a sharp look. 'Robotics engineer, huh? I suppose that means you maintain the animatronic Adam and Eve and the dinosaurs and all the rest of that crap.'

She crushed her empty coffee cup and threw it on the floor, apparently by reflex, as she spoke. Her anger took Campbell aback.

'The displays aren't as intrusive as you might think,' he said. 'There's only a handful of animatronics, and a few robots. Most of the displays are virtual, a package that visitors can download to their frames.'

The woman compressed her lips, shook her head, turned away and put her frames on. Campbell shrugged and looked out of the window. The afternoon sun picked out the table-lands and mesas and escarpments, and after a while the landscape below opened up into a single

enormous feature. Campbell became aware of the woman leaning sideways again. He leaned back, to give her a better view. She looked down, her eyewear pushed up on her forehead, until the Grand Canyon was out of sight.

'Doesn't look much like Waimangu,' she said.

Campbell found himself giving her a complicit grin.

'You're right about that,' he said. 'I don't believe in flood geology.'

'What *do* you believe in, then?'

'I believe the Bible,' said Campbell. 'Which means I believe it about the Creation and the Flood, and the dates when these happened. I just think it's presumptuous to look for *evidence*. We should take God's word for it.'

'So you don't think the fossils were left by the Flood?'

'No.'

'So how do you explain them?'

'I don't *have* to explain them,' said Campbell. 'But I can point out that it's a *presumption* that they're the remains of animals. What we *find* in the rocks are bone-shaped stones.'

The woman gave him a look of amused disbelief. 'And feather-shaped stones, skin-shaped stones, footprint-shaped stones . . . ?'

'As you say, stones.'

'So God planted them to test our faith?'

'No, no! We can't say that. Before people started *believing* that these stones were remains, they believed they were natural created forms of rock. It didn't trouble their faith at all.'

She bumped her forehead with the heel of a hand. 'And how do you explain the stars, millions of light years away?'

'How do we know they're millions of light years away?'

'By measuring their parallax,' the woman said.

'Good,' said Campbell. 'Most people don't even know that, they just believe it because they were told. But what the astronomers actually measure, when they work out a stellar parallax, is the angles between beams of light. They then *assume* that these beams come from bodies like the Sun, for which they have no independent evidence at all.'

'Oh yes, they do! They have spectrograms that show the composition of the stars.'

'Spectrograms of beams of light, yes.'

'And now we have the space telescopes, we can see the actual planets – heck, we can even see the clouds and continents on Earth-sized planets, with that probes-flying-in-formation set-up, what's it called?'

'The Hoyle Telescope. Which gathers together beams of light.'

'Which just *happen* to form images of stars and planets!'

'It doesn't just happen. God designed them that way. Not to fool us, of course not, but to show us His power, His infinite creativity. He *told* us He had made lights in the sky. It's *we* who are responsible if we make the unwarranted assumption that these lights come from other suns and other worlds that God told us nothing about.'

'So the entire universe, outside the solar system, is just some kind of light show?'

'That's as far as the evidence goes at the moment,' said Campbell. 'And speaking of evidence, I'll remind you that if these supposed galaxies were real physical bodies

billions of years old, then they wouldn't hold together gravitationally. They'd long since have spun apart. The only explanation the astronomers have for *that* is dark matter, matter they can't see and have never found or identified, but which they postulate because it's necessary to explain away the evidence of a young universe on the basis of their assumptions.'

The woman screwed up her eyes for a moment.

'This is like a nightmare,' she said. 'Don't tell me any more of what you believe in. I just don't want to know.'

Campbell had several replies primed for that, but he just nodded.

'Fair enough,' he said.

He turned back to the window.

They didn't talk for the rest of the flight. Campbell alternated between dozing and looking out of the window, and came to full alertness as the long descent began. Around eight a.m., on what felt like a day too soon, he noticed the green tip of Ireland, then the green and brown hills of the West of Scotland. The seat-belt sign came on. The trolley-dollies cleared trash and ensured that everything was stowed. Quite suddenly, Edinburgh appeared on the horizon, and a few moments later the aircraft began to spiral down. The land whipped past in a giddy swirl that slowed gradually as the aircraft began, even more disquietingly, to yaw like a falling leaf. The woman beside Campbell grasped his left hand with her right. Surprised, he turned and smiled, but her eyes were shut tight. Campbell could see towers all around, shockingly close. The downward jets cut in, a brief blast. The craft swayed from side to side, side-slipped a little, then, after another

downthrust, it settled on the landing pad and rolled gently to its bay a few tens of metres away.

The woman opened her eyes and let go of Campbell's hand.

'Thanks,' she said, and that was all she said. Campbell was still feeling smug as he retrieved his rolling case from the overhead locker and debarked. He nodded and smiled to the robot that thanked him in the doorway and wished him a pleasant stay or safe onward journey. The heat struck him as soon as he stepped through the exit door. He'd known to expect it but, coming straight from a New Zealand winter via twenty hours in the aircraft's air-conditioned coolness, the thirty-degrees-Celsius heat opened his pores instantly. He strolled through Customs, dragged his case along walkways and underpasses to his pre-booked Travelodge check-in, and took the lift to his room. He thanked God it was air-conditioned.

The view was of the corner of one tower and the back of another. Shadows of aircraft passed over like predatory birds every few seconds. Campbell unpacked a change of clothes, laid his Bible on the bedside cabinet, and took his washbag to the bathroom. After showering, shaving, and putting on fresher and lighter clothes, he felt ready to face the Scottish August heat. He was, as he'd expected, jet-lagged, but he intended to surf that zoned-out sense of unreality to get him through the awkward confrontation to come. That, plus some instant coffee and a prayer. He suspected that the men he had come to meet were counting on the same thing to compel him to honesty. That seemed the most plausible reason why they'd insisted on meeting him the morning he arrived.

His instructions were quite specific. He was not to use

any public transport or taxi. He was not to phone. He just had to walk, following the map. The map was hand-drawn. Campbell had it folded inside his Bible. He took it out and looked at it while he sipped his coffee. He had been warned not to store it on frames or any other electronic device. Which was fine with Campbell. He had a good memory, drilled by childhood years of catechism and Bible study, and he didn't use frames anyway.

He folded the map, stuck it in his shirt pocket, and headed out. At the exit it took a moment's puzzled gaze at the sky for him to figure out which direction was north.

Turnhouse had a raw feel, like all airport developments. The strips followed the old runway paths. Of all the ways to get around – skybridge, tunnel, monorail, shuttle bus, bicycle – surface walking was the worst provided for. Campbell made his way along narrow weed-grown sidewalks between and around the feet of the towers. Office blocks of HSBC, Nissan, Honeywell, Gazprom; factories of ever-changing Carbon Glen start-ups; high-rise farms, car parks, the control tower like the hilt of a giant sword; slowly turning slanted slopes of solar-power collectors whose supercooled cables dripped liquid nitrogen through carbon-dioxide frost. Campbell sweated again, cooled only by the downblast of descending aircraft.

Beyond the commercial strips the paths opened to streets of fast-built housing blocks, their buckysheet sides arbitrarily coloured, their windows overlooking well-tended vegetable gardens and scuffed play areas. Every roof bristled with aerials. Every ground floor had its shop or cafe. Vehicles in the throes of repair or adaptation

almost outnumbered those in running order. Kids ran around and youths hung about. Campbell dodged soccer balls and pavement cycles, irritated and baffled until he remembered that it was the school summer holidays here. Old people and young parents were the only adults he could see; the others, he guessed, were working in the farm and factory towers or cleaning the offices. Despite these indications of full employment, the place had an air of newness and impermanence, of being the result of a displacement and decantation, the outcome of a scheme contrived elsewhere. Something in the weathering of the older folks' faces was rural rather than urban. Campbell guessed that most of the people were here as a result of losing their homes to coastal flooding, or their livelihoods to the high-rise farms.

The streets stopped where the bulldozers still worked, just beyond a bridge over a deep, fast river. Pennants marked a jagged footpath across the site. Campbell negotiated it to the raw edge of an expanse of long grass. He stopped, as if hesitating to dive into cold water, checked his map and the tiny compass on his key ring and walked on. After a few hundred metres of slogging through what was obviously an abandoned field he reached a cluster of deserted farm buildings. There he turned right along a road under a railway bridge, then turned left sharply off the road to head north again up a slope through trees.

The trees thinned, and at the top of the slope he saw the men he'd come halfway round the world to meet.

They could have been a rock band: six men on the skyline, their long hair caught by the breeze. They wore black homburg hats, long black coats, white collarless shirts,

black trousers, and black boots or shoes. As Campbell approached, grinning but apprehensive, the oldest of them strode down the slope to meet him. He was a man in his forties, with lean, lined features and bright grey eyes.

'Mr Campbell!' the man said, grasping Campbell's hand and almost hauling him up. 'John Livingston – pleased to meet you.'

'John Richard Campbell, likewise.'

Campbell held the grip for a moment, delighted and relieved that Livingston looked in life just as he did in his pictures, hale and spare, keen and sharp, like some tough old Covenanter who lived on water and gruel, on the run from moss-troopers and dragoons on the moors. There wasn't much about the man online, and what there was dealt solely with his business activities; he was the owner of a small company based right here at Turnhouse, manufacturing carbon-tech components for the space industries. His spiritual endeavours were conducted, it seemed, entirely by word of mouth and – as in his contact with Campbell – by physical mail.

'I trust you had travelling mercies,' Livingston said.

Campbell took a moment to parse this. 'I did indeed,' he said. 'It all went very smoothly.'

'Good, good.'

Livingston led him to the top of the slope, and through a round of handshakes with the other men, all older than Campbell but still in their twenties. George Scott, Archie Riddell, William Paterson, Patrick Walker, Bob Gordon.

'"John Richard", please,' Campbell said, after they'd all called him 'Mr Campbell'. He smiled awkwardly at the group. 'Most people call me JR.'

'Fine, fine,' said Livingston.

At that moment a shadow fell over them, sped across the land, and passed on.

'A superstitious person would have seen that as an omen,' Campbell remarked.

Livingston chuckled. 'As well we're not superstitious, then!'

He looked up into the sky, as though he could see the soleta.

'Mind you,' he went on, 'I'm no so sure it's a good work being done up there, for all that I make money from space. There's something well presumptuous about blocking the sun, in my opinion. "The heavens are the Lord's," as the Psalmist says, "but the Earth hath He given to the children of men." I fear we'd do well not to meddle with the heavens.'

'Well,' said Campbell, 'it's an attempt to correct previous meddling here on Earth.'

'Aye, there's that,' said Livingston. 'Still, that's out of our hands, and right now it is to the Lord's business we must attend. Follow me.'

Campbell saw that they stood at the lip of a quarry about thirty metres deep. A second later Livingston had quite alarmingly vaulted off the edge and disappeared. Campbell stepped forward, the others behind him, and found a drop of about a metre to a narrow shelf, then another such downward step, which Livingston had just taken. Campbell followed the bobbing homburg down a succession of shelves, scree slopes, gorse handholds and chimney gulleys to the quarry's floor. The flat expanse of gravel was cupped on three sides by the quarry cliffs and broken by huge puddles, rock outcrops, clumps of bushes,

rusted remnants of machinery, and the inevitable shopping trolley or two.

Livingston didn't look back. He strode to an open space in the middle of the floor and stopped, looking in all directions as the group re-formed around him.

'Walls have windows, Mr Campbell,' he said, noticing the visitor's puzzlement. His gaze flicked around his companions. 'Let us now ask the Lord's blessing on our meeting.'

He bowed his head, the others following suit, and said a short prayer. At the 'Amen' Campbell opened his eyes and straightened up. He tried to stop his knees from trembling.

'This is an informal meeting,' said Livingston, in a formal tone, 'of the Kirk Session of the Free Congregation of West Lothian. No minutes are to be taken. I ask those present to affirm that they will give a faithful account of it, if called upon by the brethren.'

Campbell, after a moment's hesitation, added his 'Aye' to the chorus.

'Very well,' said Livingston. 'We are here to welcome our friend, John Richard Campbell, and to satisfy ourselves as to his saving faith before accepting him to the brotherhood of the Congregation. Now, John Richard, do you understand what is required of you?'

'I do,' said Campbell.

'Do you promise to answer truthfully and without reservation?'

'Yes.'

'What, John Richard, do you understand by the sum of saving knowledge?'

Campbell answered that to everyone's satisfaction.

'And do you aver that that knowledge has by grace been brought home to you, to your soul's salvation?'

'Yes.' That was a question he had no hesitation in answering.

More questions followed: detailed, doctrinal, subtle. Campbell felt on less sure ground here, but his memory for the small print of the Westminster Confession and the Larger Catechism didn't let him down. At the end Livingston nodded soberly.

'Aye, John Richard, you have the root of the matter all right. We thought so, from hearing your discourses. Very powerful, spiritual, and experimental they were.'

Campbell's mouth felt dry. He'd never intended his discourses to go beyond their small circle of hearers in the woods of Waimangu. Yet somehow they had: they'd come to the attention of this tiny church in Scotland, and its elders had been impressed enough to pay his return fare. The airmail letter that enclosed the e-ticket code and the invitation, the instructions and the map had been insistent that no further communication would be possible, and that if any problems arose when he met the elders personally there would be no recrimination. He still felt like a fraud.

'Now,' Livingston went on, 'is there anything more you would like to tell us about your discourses?'

Campbell took a deep breath. 'There is something I have to tell you, which may shock you. I had no opportunity before, and I'm afraid you may feel this has all been for nothing.'

Livingston glanced around the Kirk Session. 'Go on,' he said. 'Spit it out, Mr Campbell.'

'My discourses,' said Campbell, 'were addressed to robots.'