

Future Perfect

Prospect Park, Brooklyn, July 1972

The young man in the dark suit walked purposefully through the park, doing nothing to attract attention to himself. He checked the crowded playgrounds, but they contained no one of interest to him. Music was playing from a radio nearby: Jimi Hendrix singing "Stone Free", a jarring anthem to the anarchy of the times, its churning rhythms agitating his mind.

He hurried on, taking a path past the ball fields. Lately he had become highly sensitive to sounds. With forewarning he could block them out, but a police car siren was lacerating, the abrupt ringing of a telephone like a jolt of electricity. His colleagues at work had noticed. They were worried about him, he knew.

It was a hot day, and he lay down for a moment in the middle of the meadow. The sky was that vast featureless blue that made you feel you could fall into it and be lost forever.

At the zoo, children were clustered around the wire-mesh fences where the goats and sheep were housed, attentive parents at their sides. He veered away, satisfied that none of the adults was the man he had come to think of as the Shaper. Weeks of observation had shown that the Shaper favoured more tranquil destinations, often spending the entire afternoon basking in the sun. Sometimes the Woman and Child were with him. A keen eye was all that was needed; a keen eye and the courage to take action when the moment came.

All around him there were families and individuals dotted around on the green expanses. Ordinary people at their leisure, ignorant of how so much of life could be determined by someone like the Shaper. For all he knew there were others, secret Makers of

Chris Evans & Roy Kettle

the World who dictated everything. But he could only take action against the one he knew. The one who had shattered his own life.

The carousel. Children clung to the golden poles, riding horses, a giraffe, a lion. They whirled past, though with a curious staccato sensation, like a motion picture with missing frames. He walked on, dodging a teenager on a home-made skateboard, thinking of his lost Minna, a woman of grace and tenderness whose life had been extinguished by the Shaper. And no one knew. No one except he knew.

He had been forced to use the resources of the agency to track down the Shaper's home address and had been almost disappointed to find him an ordinary-looking man living in an anonymous brownstone. He even had a mundane day job at the Methodist Hospital on Park Slope. His role as the Shaper was secret, known only to a few.

"Hey!"

He had collided with a fat man in a windowpane shirt and plaid shorts, almost knocking him over.

The man stepped back with a surly look. He bulged out of his clothes as if he had been inflated inside them.

"Not enough room on this path for two?" he said with sour aggression. And getting no reply: "What's so funny, pal?"

His own laughter felt distant, remote from himself. He walked on.

And abruptly there he was.

The Woman and Child were with him, sitting in a grassy space just along from the carousel. The blonde-haired Child was perched at the Woman's lap, in a white romper suit, both of them wearing sun hats, the Woman in a sleeveless lemon dress, her arms and legs sun-browned.

The Shaper lay on his belly in faded jeans and a white cheesecloth shirt, reading a paperback book, his spectacled eyes shaded under a Yankees cap.

Keeping the bushes between himself and them, he circled, surreptitiously drawing closer. For a moment he felt the self-control seeping out of him. He steeled himself, crouching as he crept forward.

Future Perfect

The Child spotted him first, pointing as he approached. The Woman's mouth opened in alarm as he drew his Smith and Wesson. He heard her shout, saw the Shaper roll over and start to get up, still holding the paperback, a science-fiction novel with an egg-headed alien on the cover.

He straightened his gun arm, pointing the pistol straight at the Shaper's face. Again there was a softening inside him, a flicker of uncertainty. It was unfortunate that the Woman and Child were present. But no. They were his companions. They must know what he was capable of.

"You can't control me," he told the Shaper. "You've no idea what I can do."

The Shaper looked as if he didn't know who he was. He looked terrified.

The Woman lunged at him. He flung her to the ground, heard the Child start to bawl. The Shaper had raised the book to his face, as if it could somehow offer protection from a .38 Special. The bullet penetrated it effortlessly, blood bursting in all directions, the Yankees cap flying off. It was the first time he had fired it in the field.

The Shaper toppled, the book falling away. He fell on his back, his face a mangled bloody mess.

The Woman was screaming. She grabbed the Child. Both of them were covered with blood splatter.

He stepped over the Shaper, wanting to be certain he was dead before he made his escape. He shouted at the corpse:

"Didn't predict that, did you?"

ONE

The headline in the free newspaper was: DOOMSDAY CLOCK MOVES NEARER TO MIDNIGHT. What was it this time? Another rogue state claiming to have tested nuclear weapons while its citizens lived in peasant splendour? The latest neocon initiative to impose Republican notions of freedom on some ancient civilisation? Or even, as my business partner Ashad liked to suggest, a secret weapons programme financed by all those missing Iraqi oil dollars?

But it was none of these. A list of extreme weather events was followed by a report of renegade survivors in the Chernobyl exclusion zone who had apparently withstood lethal doses of radiation and were now preying on local inhabitants. Stronger and fiercer than ordinary humans, were they a worrying prelude to a sinister new turn in human evolution?

Evidently the newspaper thought so; but this wasn't all. A hitherto unknown star had winked on in the northern constellation of Draco. Its relative closeness meant that scientists were suggesting it be monitored carefully. More significantly, the newspaper's astrologer was concerned that both the location and the timing of the new star were full of ominous portents. Like bugging up his star charts perhaps.

I stuffed the paper into a recycling bin and walked into the hotel. It was ultra modern, undulating with tubes and bulges that had no doubt given some architectural awards committee a rush. A young woman wearing pale makeup and a frosty expression was seated at a reception desk.

"Name?" she asked.

Future Perfect

“Randall. Nick Randall.”

She tapped keys on her laptop. I spelled out my surname.

“Freelance, trade or fan?”

“Trade.”

She scrolled, studying the screen. Her name-tag read KIRSTY. She was about half my age, maybe early twenties, her nails painted oyster pink. On the wall behind her was a big poster with a swirly galactic motif carrying the words: VISIONARIES, A CELEBRATION OF FANTASTIC FILM.

“I don’t have you listed,” she announced.

“That might be because I haven’t registered.”

A flash of annoyance. “It’s twenty pounds for the day.”

And the day was already half gone. She pushed the credit card processor at me, but a £20 note was easier. She took it like I had offered her a used tissue. It *had* probably been up a few noses.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Nick,” I said patiently. “Nick Randall.”

She typed it in. “Company?”

“Xponential Productions. Starts with an X.”

She started to enter this, then stopped and looked up.

“You made *The Artificial I.*”

Our in-depth fly-on-the wall series about the world of reality TV programming. It had been broadcast on an obscure digital channel and got one respectable review—which was pretty good since it had only got one review at all.

“Not me personally, I told her. “But, yes, we produced it.”

“I thought it was brilliant.”

This was better. “And *DisOrg*?”

“Oh, yes, that’s us, too.”

DisOrg was a knockabout animated feature about a bunch of disabled secret agents, mostly incapacitated in the cause of duty, still capable of righting wrongs, albeit unconventionally. “A refreshingly un-PC satire,” the *Telegraph* had called it. “*Mission Impossible* meets jet-propelled wheelchairs.” It never made it beyond the independents, though DVD sales were still healthy.

“Is there going to be a sequel?”

“If we could get the funding. And that’s looking pretty unlikely at the moment.”

She finished entering my details and rummaged in her little strongbox, producing a £10 note which she offered to me.

“Actually, you only have to pay half after one o’clock.” She looked decently shame-faced. “You caught me at a bad moment. I’ve been sat here all morning with nothing but lukewarm coffee and a stale biscuit.”

“Right,” I said, snatching the note from her and flourishing it. “Tea or coffee?”

She looked at me as if I was joking. “I could murder a decent cup of tea. Just milk.”

I started making my way down the sinuous corridor.

“I haven’t done your badge,” she called after me.

“If I’m arrested you can vouch for me. Are you vegetarian?”

“Only if they eat pork pies.”

I went straight along to the womb-like main hall. On the stage a panel discussion was taking place, four figures hunched over microphones and laptops while a scattered audience of professionals, passers-by and film buffs listened.

At this point my new mobile rang, or rather made a chortling noise. It was Ashad.

“Any luck?” he asked immediately.

“I’ve only just got here.”

“I checked again. There’s over a dozen names on the website. Our man could be any of them.”

“Or woman.”

“I can’t understand why they didn’t give us a name.” His Brummie accent was echoey. “It’s a bit bloody suspicious—”

“Ash,” I interrupted, aware of his tendency to see hidden plots everywhere, “let’s not get overheated about this. It was just an email.”

“OK. But it might be a wind-up. A waste of our time.”

“We’ve been over this already. It’s worth checking out. We should be showing our faces here anyway. Let me get on with it.”

“Well, be careful, know what I mean? And even if you’re offered something, don’t make any big promises, especially in writing. Ring me if there’s any development.”

“I deliberately came without a pen. Aren’t you supposed to be in a script conference or something?”

Future Perfect

“I’m on a comfort break.”

“You’re in the loo, aren’t you?”

“Where else could I talk freely?”

“I’m going now,” I said, and cut the call.

The hotel restaurant was just along the corridor, quiet in the post-lunch period. I loaded a tray with tea, a frilly tuna salad and a couple of Danish pastries.

“Wow,” Kirsty said when I delivered it. “You shouldn’t have.”

She had made up my badge, name and especially the company capitalized in neat bold letters. I clipped it on my shirt pocket.

“I had an ulterior motive,” I told her. “I’m supposed to be meeting someone, but I don’t know who. Someone from the Filmscope Foundation. Ring any bells?”

“Sounds familiar,” she said, turning back to her laptop. Her fingernails tap-danced over the keyboard. “Of course. Cyrus.”

“Cyrus?”

“Cyrus Hammond. He’s head of their UK operations.”

“Where would I find him?”

Another pink flurry on the keys. “He’s doing a panel on the future of film right now.”

“In the main hall?”

She nodded. “You can’t miss him. American, lots of white hair, fit-looking for his age.”

I headed down a twisty corridor, feeling like I was inside a giant alimentary canal. Plasma screens were showing trailers for upcoming blockbusters. I felt a pang of envy. Something like a blockbuster was just what Xponential needed if we weren’t to go under.

The panel discussion was winding down. A video link to Los Angeles had the action star Ryan Carmichael saying goodbye in an intense self-congratulatory way. California tanned and handsome, Carmichael had shiny eyes that were as blue and empty as the sky. Eccentric and self-absorbed, he was also hot property, having starred in several recent hits.

Cyrus Hammond was instantly recognisable, an older leonine man in a loose-fitting pale suit. I loitered as he came down from the stage and offered my hand.

Chris Evans & Roy Kettle

“Nick Randall, Xponential Productions. You asked me to attend.”

He shook but didn't show any sign of recognition. I had anticipated that my name, or at least the company's name, would be familiar to him.

“We advertised recently and got an email response from your Foundation,” I said. “We're looking for intellectual property—” I stopped myself, aware that I was in danger of slipping into corporate-speak. Hammond was probably badgered all the time by people hoping for a hand-out from his Foundation. According to their website they had helped with the funding of several interesting movies in recent years.

“We're looking for the next Philip K. Dick,” I said. “Or at least someone whose work is just as inventive but not currently under option.”

“And you got a reply from us?”

“Well, it wasn't signed but it came from the Foundation's address. Suggested that we make contact here at the festival.”

Hammond led me into a bar, asked me if I wanted a drink.

“Let me,” I said. “I'm the one who approached you.”

He gave an insouciant shrug. “Perrier, ice and lemon.”

I ordered two. We took them over to a corner table and sat down.

“So,” he said, “Xponential does—what?”

“We're a production company based here in London. We make stuff that interests us. Documentaries, contemporary drama, zany satire—you name it, we've probably done our own twist on it. Half our output is for television, mostly cable and satellite, the rest for cinema release. Next year's our tenth anniversary.”

I listed some of our recent productions. He rolled his ice in his drink, not saying anything. I could tell he recognized some of them; if he ran a movie foundation, it was his business to know what was out there.

At length, when I was done, he said, “Another Philip K. Dick?”

“Something along those lines.”

“That's a pretty tall order given that he was a one-off.”

“Well, we're not looking for a clone. But someone whose work might have similar fascination and potential. In cinematic terms.”

Future Perfect

He contemplated his glass. "Did you know Dick barely made a living from his writing? That he existed on dog food for a while? And that by the time *Blade Runner* was released in 1982 he was already dead?"

I knew the story. Dick's estate must have been doing very nicely ever since, given the success of movies like *Total Recall* and *Minority Report*.

"Now every corporation between here and Hollywood is ransacking his back-list for material. That your idea, son?"

His tone was just short of patronizing, a southern gentleman slapping down an upstart Limey. I didn't let it ruffle me. "We're hoping to find something we can turn into a commercial movie. A story or proposal or script that's out there somewhere but hasn't been picked up. Anything that challenges the conventional way of looking at things, that has great visual potential and hopefully audience appeal. Check us out if you don't know us already. You'll find that we're no cheap and nasty outfit. We believe in what we do and we do it well."

Hammond was watching me from behind his glass. Watching and waiting.

"We've also got a looming cash crisis," I confessed. "Some of our backers are demanding a more commercial project before they'll stump up any more money. Without it we won't be able to finance all the other worthy stuff that's never going to make us rich."

Two women and a man came over and began chatting to him. They were young and professional looking, obviously in the business, asking him questions about the British Film Institute. He was friendly enough, but his body language and the fact that he didn't get up made it plain to them that he was in the middle of something else. They took the hint and drifted away.

He had a certain magnetism, there was no doubt about that. But then people who held the purse-strings generally did.

"The obvious properties have all been snapped up by the majors," he remarked.

"Don't we know it."

"You might have to dig a little deeper if you want to find some gold."

Chris Evans & Roy Kettle

I liked the idea of that. "That's why we've been sending out feelers everywhere."

Hammond abruptly got to his feet. "Come with me," he said.

He took me to the room hosting the art show. The tables were cluttered with models of vampires, cyborgs and extraterrestrials with more tails and tentacles than a Borough Road fishmonger's. One wall was devoted to whimsical portraits of favourite movie characters: Chewbacca eating a burger, the Alien sipping a cocktail, that sort of thing. Another held meticulously realistic landscapes of imaginary planets with multiple suns, ringed gas giants and thrusting spaceships out of a host of Freudian wet dreams.

It wasn't the kind of art that appealed to me. But in one corner was a display of what looked like a page from a graphic novel, a series of bold, dramatic scenes showing a man whose hands were sinking into a warped console while his brain opened up like an exotic flower under the impact of the bizarre images flooding through it.

Each fragmented panel had been sketched with marker pens, the outlines executed swiftly and assuredly, the colours hatched in without fuss. The strip had an air of confidence and brashness quite in contrast to the rest of the reverential stuff on display.

"Ever heard of Leo Parrish?" Hammond asked me.

"Who?"

"I thought not. Aren't too many that have."

He was looking at the same strip as me. I had the impression that he approved of the fact I had been attracted to it.

"He was a writer," he told me. "So far down the pecking order he was practically invisible. Hard to find his stuff these days. I do believe these are scenes from one of his stories."

"Really?" If the artwork accurately reflected the writer's imagination, maybe I was in business. The display had a NOT FOR SALE sign on it. The artist's name was Claire Whitney.

"Would you like to meet her?"

"Does she know this Leo Parrish?" I asked.

"You remember *Nightscares*?"

"The TV show?"

Future Perfect

“Do you recall the episode about the blind man who’s given artificial eyes that let him see the secret creatures which really keep the world of humans running?”

I did. *Nightscales* was an American anthology of weird tales, broadcast in the graveyard slot on Channel 4 about five years ago. A mixed bag of psychological horror and dark techno-fantasy, it had been patchy in quality and never made a second series.

“His wife died,” I said, with reference to the tale. “The creatures reanimated her, but he didn’t exactly welcome the results.”

Hammond was already walking out. I followed.

“It was based on one of Leo Parrish’s stories,” he told me.

“The special effects were pretty ropey.”

“But you remembered it.”

“Sure. It was unsettling enough despite that.”

“Claire Whitney brought the original story to the company’s attention. I believe she acted as the agent when they optioned it. That’s about as much as I know. But if you want to find out more about Leo Parrish, she might be a good place to start. Then, if you can get something together, we can talk money.”

Hammond led me into another room. This one was filled with children playing tame-looking computer games, with a fenced off corner where toddlers were rolling around with inflatable Minions from the *Despicable Me* movies. Central tables had been set aside for more hands-on activities like modelling and artwork.

Three adults were present, a thin young man with spiky hair, an elderly woman in a white smock who was asleep on a chair beside the toddler pen, and a woman in her late thirties who was overseeing the kids sketching and painting.

Now with a sudden briskness, Hammond took me straight over to the younger woman.

“Miss Whitney,” he said to her, “this is Mr Nicholas Randall. He’d like to have a word with you.”

I offered my hand. “I’m usually known as Nick.”

She shook it, her hazel eyes giving me a quick once-over. She was good-looking, wearing jeans and a black T-shirt that accentuated the lean muscularity of her body. Her hair was drawn back in a loose ponytail.

Chris Evans & Roy Kettle

“Mr Randall was impressed by your contribution to the art show,” Hammond said. “I told you I’m not the only one with good taste.”

“Really?” she said sceptically, still eyeing me.

“Really.”

“It’s there under false pretences. There’s no connection with any film or TV show.”

“Interesting you should say that,” I responded. “I thought it had the air of a particularly good storyboard. Do you draw for a living?”

“After a fashion,” she replied, tucking an errant strand of hair behind one ear. She had a smear of green paint on one cheek.

She didn’t elaborate but asked me what I did.

Hammond had already melted away. “I’m in film production,” I told her. “Small company but we punch above our weight. A big minnow in a sea of sharks.”

“Is that so?”

“Can I buy you a drink? I’d like to pick your brains. It can be somewhere really public so you can escape if you decide I’m a nutter or a bore.”

She glanced at the artwork table, where four adolescents were busily working away on their compositions, and at the old woman, who was still fast asleep.

“Daniel,” she said to the skinny guy, “can you keep an eye on things for ten minutes?”

Daniel, was thrashing a soggy lump of modelling clay as if auditioning for the Richard Dreyfuss role in *Close Encounters*. “No problem, mum,” he said.

The bar was more crowded than earlier but we managed to find a couple of stools. She didn’t want a drink.

“Are you here on business?” I asked.

“Not really. I got an invitation out of the blue, along with a request to contribute something to the art show. I don’t get many opportunities to display my work. We’re just here for the day, got free registration in exchange for a couple of hours’ supervising the kids’ room. So you produce movies?”

“Features of all kinds. I’m the co-owner of the company.”

“Really? What have you produced?”

Future Perfect

I gave her a varied shortlist. She focused on a recent TV documentary investigating the continued existence of possible new “black sites” where political prisoners were being held by the US government on foreign territory.

“That was mainly my business partner’s doing,” I confessed. “He’s got strongly developed anti-authoritarian tendencies. Loves a good conspiracy theory.”

“Is that all you think it was?” she said.

“Not at all. We wouldn’t have made it if we didn’t think there was something in it. There’s more in the pipeline. I just didn’t want you to think we only do deep and earnest. We like to make our share of fun stuff too.”

“Have you got children?” she asked.

“No,” I replied, a little startled at the abrupt change in conversational direction. “My ex-wife and I spent too many years dithering about whether we should or not. Is your husband here with you?”

There was no wedding ring on her finger.

“We divorced years ago,” she told me. “He was a serial womanizer.”

“He must have been off his rocker.”

I said this without thinking, without consciously intending to flatter her. She gave me a penetrating stare.

“It was just an observation,” I said. “How old is your son?”

“Why do you want to talk to me, Mr Randall?”

“I’d much prefer it if you call me Nick. I’m really not trying to pick you up, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

I couldn’t tell whether she was looking at me with scepticism or a kind of amused tolerance. Probably a combination of both.

“The artwork you did. I thought it was pretty imaginative. I’m told it was based on a tale by someone else.”

“You’re right, I was story-boarding it. Just for fun.”

“Looked intriguing. Might make an interesting movie.”

She didn’t bite on this, so I prompted: “Who wrote it?”

“You won’t have heard of him.”

“Try me.”

Now she was starting to look—not exactly cornered, but uncertain of me again.

Chris Evans & Roy Kettle

“Is this my big break?” she asked with more than a hint of sarcasm. “Are you going to tell me you want to send it to Hollywood or something?”

“Hardly. I’m just interested.

What was going on here? Why the reticence? The suspicion?

I fumbled in my jacket, produced a company card and laid it on the bar. It carried my name and Ashad’s.

“See?” I said. “I’m on the level.”

“Leo Parrish.”

She said it like someone reluctantly divulging a secret.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“No.”

“I gather—Cyrus Hammond told me you once sold a story of his. To a TV company?”

“Why were you asking him about that?”

All her wariness was back in full force.

“I wasn’t,” I assured her. “He volunteered the information.”

She didn’t look mollified.

“Is there something I should know?” I asked. “I’m just interested because our company is looking for movie material.”

She relented. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

I was about to ask her what she meant by this but her mobile started ringing. She extracted it and took the call. As she listened, her expression slowly changed from quizzical to concerned.

“You’ll have to excuse me for a few minutes,” she told me.

And then she was up and off.

Ten minutes later she still hadn’t returned. In the play room a man and woman I hadn’t seen before were trying to stop one toddler from pounding another into submission with a big fluffy mallet.

“Claire Whitney?” I said to the man.

He wrestled the bludgeon out of the toddler’s hand, looking distinctly harassed. “She had to go.”

“Any idea where?”

He shook his head.

I tried the other rooms, the hall. There was no sign of her. Cyrus Hammond was back on stage in the hall doing a variation of a pub quiz, the raucous audience firing movie-themed

Future Perfect

questions at him and three others. For some reason he was now wearing sunglasses and a cream fedora.

I made my way back to Kirsty on the reception desk. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen the woman who was running the kids’ room. Claire Whitney?”

“She left a few minutes ago.”

“As in ‘left the building’?”

“I assume so.”

All my instincts told me she wasn’t coming back. “We were in the middle of a business meeting. She left before we could exchange addresses. You wouldn’t happen to have any contact details, would you?”

She hesitated, and then worked her keyboard before shrugging. “Normally we’re not supposed to give out that information, and I won’t have to battle with my conscience this time, either.”

She swivelled the laptop to show me.

The box said only: CLAIRE WHITNEY FREELANCE

There was a blue underlined ampersand next to her name. “What’s does the symbol mean?”

“Oh, that’s just a hyperlink between people attending who have some important connection like working for the same employer. Makes the admin much easier.”

Someone else came up to the desk. While Kirsty was distracted I clicked on the ampersand.

The page that filled the screen gave the details of anyone who had a key association with Claire. But there was just one name.

Mine.