

The Illumination

:

Jens Lubbadeh

Translation **Kyburz & Peck**

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The ringing woke him from a deep and dreamless sleep. What a shame. He had been sleeping poorly for weeks.

“Well, I sure hope this is urgent...,” he whispered drowsily and irritably into his brand-new cell phone.

“Derek, I’m so sorry to wake you up.” Kenneth’s voice entered his consciousness as if it were weaving its way through cotton wool.

He wasn’t awake yet, but then how could he be? It was 3:43 according to his cell phone. His consciousness wasn’t due to kick in for another three hours. But now he had to cold boot his system. His mouth tasted foul. Was that saliva on his pillow?

“I’ve got something you absolutely need to look at,” Kenneth said.

Derek breathed heavily. He looked up at the ceiling. A beam of light from the street lamp outside entered his room through the curtains; its projection onto the ceiling was distorted. Kenneth and his amazing troves. Derek knew about these. For instance, that time when Kenneth believed he had traced Marilyn Monroe’s curler. God, the fuss Kenneth had made! The bet was “as safe as hell,” Kenneth had trumpeted, “one-hundred percent genuine.” Well, they were curlers, for sure; not Marilyn’s, mind you, but—as it later transpired—the “absolutely trustworthy” informer’s mother’s. Or how about this: one day Kenneth showed up with a cigar that he claimed was Bill Clinton’s legendary one. In the end, it just turned out to be just another fake that Kenneth had been palmed off with—on his perpetual hunt for devotional celebrity items. To this day, Kenneth had to endure the slithery jokes his workmates made at his expense.

“So what is it this time, Kenneth?” Derek muttered into the receiver. He yawned. He could hear nothing but a static, rushing noise. Was that the wind? Kenneth seemed to be outdoors. What on earth was he doing outside in the middle of the night?

“Derek, this is amazing. You’ve gotta see this.”

“Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Yes, I know. But I got this hint. And I wanted to be there before the guys get wind of it.”

It was truly incredible. Kenneth and his little side deals.

“Okay, where are you?”

“In Livermore.”

“Livermore?” Derek asked incredulously. “What the heck are you doing in Livermore?”

“So how about it—are you coming over?”

Derek pondered this for a moment. So far, he had ignored or simply tolerated Kenneth’s side deals. He made a couple of dollars extra, or rather tried to, unless someone

fobbed him off with fake curlers. Sometimes these deals did actually amount to something. A signed book here, or a musician’s autograph there, and then of course the small fry: laptop or car clock resets. So what? Many of the guys did this. The state didn’t pay that well, and the constant new purchases cost a pretty penny. Next week, for instance, Derek’s television was expiring and had to be replaced. What a stinker! Another 500 dollars gone for a new machine. But those were the regulations. Every machine had a fixed life-span. Thereafter it was obsolete and had to be destroyed. Technical equipment was fitted with predetermined breaking points that ensured they would just stop working. All other products—houses, furniture, clothing—had to be destroyed by the consumer. If Kenneth had been caught trading obsolete goods, he would have instantly lost his job on the Obsolescence Surveillance Team. Derek, as a confidant, would have lost his, too. Besides, they’d have to face a court notice and perhaps even a jail sentence. Derek thought about what it could be this time. He’d never experienced Kenneth so full of vim. Matters seemed more serious this time. Derek didn’t want his pal to get into trouble because of this latest episode.

“Alright, I’m on my way. I’ll be there in an hour.”

It was roughly fifty miles from San Francisco to Livermore. Derek didn’t take the staff car, because that would have been too dangerous, but instead climbed into his Ford Mustang retro. It looked like the 1960s model, but it was brand-new, just a year old. It was his fourth Ford Mustang. He always bought the same model—never change a winning team. Quality was hard to come by these days, especially with cars. He had done well with Ford Mustangs, so he knew this one would serve him well for the remaining five years of its lifecycle. His first Ford had even lasted seven years, but then the damned politicians had once again amended the Obsolescence Act of 1935 and reduced the expiry date on cars—under pressure of the automobile lobby of course. If they could have it their way, people would be buying a new car every week.

“3 years, 355 days to live,” the Ford’s titanium-sealed lifelock read. The digital Smiley symbol was still smiling. But every day the smile curved in the opposite direction. When half its lifespan had lapsed, it would be a straight line and then the neutral face would assume a saddened look, a bit more every day. On day 0 of his five-year life, the Ford would quite simply refuse to start. Its life would have expired. Become obsolete. It would have to be replaced. Of course some people avoided this, by unlawfully taking apart their vehicle, locating and replacing its predetermined breaking point so they could keep it on the road. The Internet was full of blogs and forum discussions where people revealed the breaking points they had discovered. They were difficult to find in cars and you needed technical know-how and quite a bit of skill to replace them. Besides, the industry was constantly introducing upgrades. The

breaking points in electronic equipment, such as cell phones, digital cameras or laptops were mostly software-based and the hacker community was extremely busy outwitting the industry, presenting users with the latest downloadable unlocking codes and lifelock resets. Derek believed that the fight against hackers was a lost cause. There was no cure against the power, omnipresence, and speed of the Internet. But he couldn't care, because fortunately Derek was not with the Obsolescence Surveillance's Online Unit. Him and Kenneth were assigned to tracing the most serious cases in the real world. Their job was to check houses, cars, furniture, clothing, and pets for possible life span infringements.

Houses had to be torn down after 25 years at the latest, with the exception of public buildings and tourist or cultural sites. The White House would not be demolished of course. The maximum life span for furniture was ten years. And anyone caught wearing clothes more than a year old risked a hefty fine. But Derek believed this all made sense. The economy would cease functioning otherwise. Because at some point every market was saturated. How else could unemployment be coped with? After all, he owed his own job to preplanned obsolescence. But the constant building work was really enervating. The construction and real estate sector was pleased of course. It had meanwhile become one of the most powerful sectors, probably worth more than Google and General Motors put together. Things had all started with a real estate broker called Bernard London, who had conceived predetermined obsolescence in 1932—during the Great Depression. Actually, it was perfectly insane that a real estate agent of all people would come up with such an idea, Derek thought. But the idea had worked for a hundred years, and there had never been an economic crisis since. And even if there was a slump, expiry dates were lowered to spur consumption. Plain and simple. It's the economy, stupid.

Livermore was Hicksville. Detached houses made of wood, painted white, well-cropped front lawns, broad, hardly used streets, electricity pylons everywhere, low-hanging transmission lines. There were acres of space, and all that was missing were human beings. 4550 East Avenue. This is where he was supposed to meet Kenneth. The fire station was a one-storey building located on a side street; it was completely inconspicuous. Like everything else in Livermore, its façade was light-coloured. There were four rolling shutters, each a fire-engine exit. Derek parked his car in the drive. A light shone above the entrance. The building's lifelock was next to the entrance. Its smiley looked sad. The house had another two years on the clock. He rang the bell, a Big Ben imitation, After a while the door opened and Kenneth's face appeared.

"Jesus, at last!"

Kenneth was excited. Derek stepped inside.

"So, what's so urgent?"

He looked around. A long hallway led to a large indoor hall

where the fire trucks were parked. There were rooms on either side of the hallway. Framed photographs lined the walls. Old black-and-white shots of firefighters, wearing uniforms no longer worn these days. The men were standing in line, grinning, their faces covered in soot, their arms round each other's shoulders. The pictures had been taken after various operations.

"Derek, there's this guy called Manny. Do you know? We busted him about six months ago, for freezing car lifelocks..."

"I know who Manny is."

Kenneth squinted. Evidently, he couldn't be trusted to remember.

"Well, anyway, Manny's out again, because he works as an informer..."

Derek sighed.

"I know, Kenneth..."

"Well, anyway, Manny gave me a tip last week. 'You're not gonna believe this,' he said. 'You've never seen anything like this before. There's this thing, right here, in Livermore fire station.'"

Kenneth was really excited. He kept chewing his gum, nervously, his cheeks flushed, his forehead covered in sweat. He was about 5 foot 5 and somehow seemed lost. Behind him an old man came out of a room. He looked unkempt, his hair sticking out in all different directions. He was wearing a T-shirt with a grinning smiley. He was silent and looked inquiringly at Derek. Derek returned the old fellow's gaze for a while, but said nothing. Then he looked at Kenneth again. Kenneth took his arm.

"Com'on." Kenneth literally dragged Derek down the hallway, toward the hall. The old firefighter waddled behind them. The hall had grey concrete walls, and the grey floor glistened. Up above the large hall, metal fencing went all the way round the building, like a gallery. Four neatly parked, glistening fire trucks stood in the hall, each stationed behind a rolling shutter.

Kenneth purposefully strode across the hall until he reached the left, rear wall. Derek followed him, then the old firefighter. At the wall, there was a small metal staircase. Kenneth climbed up, followed by the other two men. There was a clothes rail in the corner, on which uniforms were hanging. Before the rail stood a wooden table with six chairs. Firefighting equipment was piled up: hoses, helmets, nozzles, gasmasks. A folding ladder was leaning against the wall. Kenneth turned round to the old man:

"Please show us."

The old man didn't react, but just looked at him expressionless. Then he turned his head to Derek.

"It's okay," Kenneth said. "Show us."

The old man took the small ladder, unfolded it beside the table, and climbed up. Above the table was a box-shaped metal protuberance—which Derek hadn't noticed on entering the room. Instinctively, he had thought he was an air duct or an air-conditioning system. But the old

man unhooked the box with a few, shaky movements. It contained something that surprised Derek: a light bulb. It gave off a faint amber light, which was drowned out by the LED light engulfing the room. Its casing was made of metal. It looked old. Derek had never seen a bulb like this. He hadn't seen any for a long time anyway; the last ones had been taken off the market twenty years ago, following the worldwide ban. Not for reasons of obsolescence, but efficiency. Meanwhile, there was only LED lighting, and you sometimes came across energy-saving bulbs in developing countries. Anyone caught possessing a light bulb faced two charges: one for violating the Obsolescence Act, the other for wasting energy. Kenneth remained standing beneath the bulb and looked up, utterly mesmerised. This bulb was different. If one looked up at its gleaming filament, one could see two prongs, which were attached at the side by tiny loops.

"It's been burning for 125 years,"

Kenneth said softly, awestruck. Derek was silent and looked up at the bulb, indecisively. Was this yet another Marilyn Monroe curler?

"I saved it from the Obsolescence Authority," the old firefighter said suddenly. Derek spun round in surprise. It was the first time the old fellow had spoken. His voice was brittle.

"Each time they tore down the station, I unscrewed it and hid it from the condemned bulbs." Derek shook his head.

"You do know, don't you, that that is strictly prohibited?" But the old man ignored Derek's objection and looked him at him blankly. After a while, he smiled and said:

"Obsolescence is a false god. An usurper. The light of this lamp is shining straight in its face."

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The Power of Darkness in Africa

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Judith Wyder

Translation Kyburz & Peck

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The victory over darkness, which began 130 years ago with the introduction of the light bulb, is (still) a long way off in subsaharan Africa. The following reportage is a balancing act through the darkness that engulfs a continent, which for those prepared to look long enough is not quite as dark as it seems.

Strangers are especially struck by the light in Africa. Morning erupts into bright light in Africa, and temperatures rise quickly. Sunrise is like the starting shot in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Suddenly, everyone is on their feet, setting off for work or wandering over to the Tangana

breakfast café, a warped wooden shack by the roadside. At sunset, the sun bids farewell with a final, spectacular flaring up on the horizon. Thereafter, black night lays itself like a heavy mantle over the countries south of the Sahara. The continent soon descends quickly into complete darkness. Few lights illuminate the streets.

Nights in Mali are both liberating and peaceful. The dark hours are the beautiful hours. Temperatures become manageable, the day's work has been accomplished, there is the sound of children at play in the backyards, the noise of bleating sheep, the clattering of dishes, and the smell of smouldering fireplaces and stoves.

We stand together in the dark, a closely knit community, and the darkness is filled with life, voices, and an array of timbres. Everyday sounds, which are drowned out during daytime, are the black continent's soundtrack after sunset. And the blackness fades under such colourfulness—slowly and steadily, like an old coat of paint. A blaring transistor radio, the chanting of the Muezzin, the honking of the tro-tros and sotramas, or whatever the overcrowded public buses are called in Africa: they form the colourful atmosphere of darkness. In Bamako, the capital of Mali, the sounds of the boutique owner's television outside my open bedroom window rock me to sleep, as do the polite, rhythmic, and lengthy greeting formulas of the passers-by.

If I had the power to arrest time for a moment, then I would choose that brief span of time before sunset, although this great moment lasts only a few minutes. Nevertheless, these minutes are magical, and as a spectator one witnesses a grandiose mise-en-scène, applauds the imaginary African lighting technicians, admires the final rearing up of the day in the golden light. For many, Africa is the continent with the most beautiful colours: rich green, yellow gold, fiery red.

No victory over darkness

And yet many people in Africa still live without electric light. According to the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), only twenty percent of the rural population in Senegal and other West African countries have access to electricity. The victory over darkness, which began 130 years ago in the industrialised countries with the introduction of the light bulb, is (still) a long way off in subsaharan Africa. Even in large cities like Abidjan, Antananarivo, Accra, the lights go out—literally—once darkness falls.

Power outages are the order of the day, even in the large metropolitan cities. In Dakar, the locals, annoyed by the incessant "Coupures de courant," have recently taken to the streets in protest. Nigeria's Power Holding Company, a state enterprise, used to be called Nepa, dubbed Never Expect Power Again by the locals. Entire districts are engulfed in total darkness, relieved only by diesel genera-