

# Future



**Merlin  
Smallbone**

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England 2359 AD. A boy grows up. Humans come out of their tunnels to recolonise the Earth.

In a colony that's survived the Great Wipeout by being underground for 250 years with no leaders, who should you pick to lead? A nerd with luck.

Poor boy, he's only 21, and without warning he's expected to deal with being married and worse – Sexing! At a drive-in cinema of the 1960s as recreated in the museum his new wife introduces him to fashionable and illegal food: chips. The sexing manual found in the glove box is worse than useless. It's the start of being bad, dishonest and independent that he must be to lead and make the future for them all.

**This is Peter Fox's seventh novel,  
and the first set in the future**



# Preview

The full version of [Future](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 325 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

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*Dear readers, some of you like to skip ahead to the ending. If you do then the story will be tainted. You can guess, dream, plan all you like, but the future is uncertain. If you visit the future and then go back then you'll be plagued by regrets.*

The Colony in this story is underground so it's only to be expected that the inhabitants use mining and tunnelling terminology as metaphors.

*Adit*, *drift* and *roadway* are basically tunnels.

*Gallery* is or was an area where mineral was extracted.

*Heading* is the working face of a tunnel.

*Vein* and *lode* are bands of valuable mineral.

*Shaft* is a vertical passage typically for access to various levels, all-important ventilation, and a *sump* at the bottom to collect water so that it can be pumped out.

For those of you who don't recognise the geography, this story is set in South East England.

..."/ then /" ... indicates an interruption.

## Twenty-one today

It was scary wearing a sweaty uniform when uniforms were forbidden. Even though the Caretaker of the Historians had made it clear that I'd got nothing to fear from my interview with the Colony Chairman.

He said "You lead Matt. It's your show. It's only for an hour or so and occasionally we must remind ourselves of the evils uniforms bring." It was hardly a five minute walk along the Serpentine Tunnel with its pretty light clusters, boutiques, and terrazzo-tiled floor to the Central Atrium. People turned to stare at the two of us. It was unnerving. "You've earned your cell with your studies. Now you've reached twenty one, you're fit, healthy and a good team-player. You know what comes next don't you Matt?" he said with a grin on his polished face teasing me from the shadows of his hat brim.

"You mean rose-screens and all that Sir?" I felt my grey cylindrical hat trying to tilt with the sweat.

"And all that goes with it Matt." He winked. "You'll be all right with women. If you have a problem then you can always ask me Matt." Now I was sweating everywhere.

"Thank you Caretaker. I wish I still had my parents Sir." What if the Chairman asked me questions on Mandela or De Gaul. I'd fail miserably.

When we arrived at the strange-smelling Central Atrium, with its walls covered in living plants and roof of artificial pure white light, the two of us were greeted by a secca-bot and asked to wait in the Chairman's ante-room. It appeared to have real wood on the walls. "Look at this seat Matt. Genuine IKEA. Go on. Sit on it." As I sat down my trousers stuck to my legs. The sofa was very comfortable but I wished I was wearing a normal kilt. The texture of the sofa was polished with wrinkles around lots of sort of eye-socket buttons. A bit like the Caretaker himself. The Caretaker seemed to be comfortable in his heavy black jacket, trousers, waistcoat and shirt that scraped on the chin. Though I'd seen uniforms in my studies I'd never thought how uncomfortable they must be to wear.

"It feels very soft Sir. Smells funny." I took my ridiculous tubular grey hat off and nearly pulled at my strange neck collar but remembered how long it had taken us to knot without it looking like a wrapper tumbling in tunnel drafts.

"It's animal skin – possibly leather – Matt. Probably about 2000. Many homes would have had something like it then Matt."

"But it's huge! How would they fit it in Sir?"

"Don't forget they had a lot more space on the surface."

"Please Sir? Do you think I'll ever get to document the surface for myself."

"I'm sure we'll get the call soon. Keep this to yourself but there are already people living Up Top and they don't seem to have the plague or cosmic-ray cancers. I think we're waiting down here as long as possible to be sure Matt."

"Shouldn't we go anyway? – The other colonies may get there first Sir."

"You're a real man now so here's something else I can tell you Matt. The other colonies went silent many decades ago Matt." He put his hand on my arm in a gesture of team strength. I resented his patronising for a moment then his wisdom shone to me like a candle in a cavern. The roof fell on me as the implications flooded my workings. I needed that touch.

"So we're the only ones left. We've survived Sir."

"The others had feuds. We heard their cries on the radio and then we heard their silence. That's why you've been learning about leaders and the conflicts they bring Matt. 'No leaders means no wars.' Our best brain on the job." I was glad of his closeness. I'd been afraid of many things but the plagues of the Surface and being attacked were boy's stuff compared to the responsibility of being a man. Now he'd called me 'best brain!' I'd been scared by myths as a boy but now I was scared by true knowledge. I wanted to shrink into the sofa. What a difference a day makes. One day a prospector like all the other hopefuls, the next a miner with gold in his pocket.

"I'm scared Sir." My trousers were clinging to my legs. My neck was itching with perspiration.

He said "Don't worry about the Chairman or... Or anything." I caught something unsaid. There was no time to follow this up as a 'ping' sounded and a 'PLEASE ENTER' panel lit up. We heaved ourselves out of the luxurious sofa then shook our trousers straight. "Is my hat on level Matt?"

"Yes Sir."

"Lead on young man." He slapped me on the shoulder. "I'll be the last person to call you a young man. You're a real man now." I was trying to remember who Mouseetung was when the Chairman himself opened the door.

"Hello. Do come in." He was wearing trousers but then his office was cool. It was dimly lit in that way I knew meant individual lights could be brought up if the host liked you. "Delighted to have you chaps visit. Ronnie old boy, you keep

bringing these young gents to see me. They can't all be as good as you say." To me he said "I have to take his word for it young fellow – Ronnie and me were in the same cohort." This must be another becoming-a-man thing. He was wearing an over-jacket made from an odd furry material with square black lines drawn on a sump sludge background. I'd seen pictures of men with facial hair but the Chairman was the first really hairy-faced man I'd seen. It was a whole strata of long brown hairs extending horizontally from between nose and upper lip. I wish I'd paid more attention to details in the archives.

"I see you're looking at my moustache. I'm wicked aren't I 517206 or should I say Matt now you're no longer a young man!"

"Yes Sir. I'm impressed. Is it real?"

He looked shocked. "Real? Of course."

"Sorry. The Caretaker has just told me the lies told to youngsters so I'm putting in double roof beams. I apologise Sir."

"No apology needed young shaver. Come on let's get the formalities over. We can't have diamond-points like you lurking in boyhood. Are you ready Ronnie!" He didn't wait for an answer but led us ten metres to the famous crescent table. Ten metres of space in one office! There was a dark blue carpet almost as soft as the sofa to walk across. I'd seen pictures of the Chairman without his facial hair but now he became more than a figure of blame. "Take those hats off chaps. Save them for later." I don't know if I'm intelligent, super-intelligent, best-brain or super-stupid but I recognised 'later' as a glint-of-promise, a trouble-promise that almost broke my spirit. The Chairman smiled at us while a clerk brought a well-used cardboard folder. This was the test! Did Thatcher kill more people than Hitler? I couldn't remember facts, excuses or eras. Stalin had a moustache. So did Hitler. Should I say nice things about them to humour the Chairman? The Chairman put a monocle into his eye and pulled out a record card.

All historians instantly recognise record cards. I saw my number 517206 on the top in red ink of a ten by fifteen centimetre card. My summary. I couldn't resist probing.

"I see you're serious about history Sir."

"How do you mean Matt?"

"You keep paper records Sir."

"You sharp historians need to spot details. Your sort of history is of the Surface. Ours is tiny for our colony of ten thousand but we have to take our own history seriously. One day the electricity might fail so the planners said we should keep records on paper. Clever johnies the planners."



The Caretaker said "We know there must still be some physical records Up Top. We train for that day when we're researching the ruins Chairman."

"Well here are the records for '206 or should I say Matt." The pattern of dates and different handwriting down the card was instantly recognisable to a historian used to looking at paper records. The Chairman looked at it for some detail. "In 2345 when you were seven you were found to be a bully to your class mates. Do you remember that Matt?" I did. It was once when we'd been down an adit on emergency drill in the pitch dark when I shouted at my class-mates to be quiet until we'd got one light working between us. The teacher made me apologise next day. My neck was itchier with the shame. Yes sir. "I made a mistake but we were under attack – or so we thought."

The Chairman said "They say it's a natural human instinct but we can't have instant leaders. Or any leaders."

The Caretaker said "That's Matt's special subject Sir. We're hoping he'll have some time on 3V to explain."

"Smashing idea Ronnie. Recently some sports clubs have needed a warning word where what they call 'kit' is concerned. A bit like uniforms. We can't have factions down here. Something to think about eh Matt?"

"Yes sir. My javelin club all wear sleeveless vests of the same pattern. Is that wrong Sir?"

"Debatable Matt. On one hand you've got to throw your spear without hindrance. I can see that but on the other what would you say if others who didn't throw javelins started cutting sleeves off their tee-shirts?"

"I don't know sir. It's a matter for your wisdom." That moment of stress was over but how much more could I take. Then I realised! It was are you a boy or a man test. I'd be a man! Thank goodness for the chilly air vent above us.

"You are no longer a young man 517206 – you are now a man Matt. It's a great pleasure to see the next generation come on. Soon I'll be following your parents to New Eastbourne – But I'll be happy to think there are such fine fellows as you looking after the colony. Perhaps one day you will be the History Caretaker."

The Caretaker said "No reason why not but now he's got his decade of civic responsibility which matures a man – and although Matt is an outstanding researcher he should learn a bit more about our little world first."

"The Caretaker's report is positive so you're a man now Matt." He leant towards me. "Actually it was more than positive. Ronnie tells me you spend twice as much time studying as the rest and have three times the insight. Keep your drill

clean for a year and you'll soon be asked to do more than the less able. A lot more Matt. My door is open to you."

"Sorry Sir? I'm only just a man and this is new to me. Can you speak more clearly to a boy?"

"Doors opening for you. You're one of the elite Matt. Special. Your talents are exceptional." I looked at the Caretaker in case he could be coaxed to explain. "Ronnie's done a good job. Here's what I say to all new men. 'Our future is in your hands.' That's always been true. There's only one future. You only have two hands. Don't drop it!" I WAS A MAN! I understood he meant my hands were better than the average man's.

I said "Since my parents went to New Eastbourne the Caretaker has been the one to help me. He should get the credit Sir."

"That's what Caretakers are for. That's what were all for. Helping ourselves. There's nobody else now the other colonies have gone silent."

"Thank you for your wisdom Sir." I knew I was truly a historian when I asked by reflex "Might I see my records Sir?" The Chairman looked confused for a moment then passed the summary card across the table. I wouldn't let the Caretaker down now. "I was thinking of the full records Sir. We historians like to have all the facts." He was confused. "I can't let you have all the other records of the others in your cohort. Is that what you meant Matt?"

"No sir. Just mine. The Caretaker has trained me in curiosity." The Chairman called over the clerk and after a whispered question the clerk shook his head.

He said "Curiosity leads in many directions. That is you complete record. There isn't anything else Matt. I can let you have a copy."

As I held my record card, apparently the complete record of my life, I knew many people knew a lot more about me even if it wasn't written on this card. The Caretaker saw my frustration at being baulked by incomplete records and intervened into my thoughts. "Our world history matters but your Colony history is nothing more than administration." I knew this was wisdom. I knew with wisdom you had to return to your sources with a new light but just now this was an enigma beyond my reach. The Caretaker's phrasing suggested he wasn't part of the Colony. I grew up and reached out with the hint. I would be on the Surface!

The Chairman pocketed his monocle and stood up. We stood up. My horrible damp trousers clung to my skin. "As I was saying Matt. On behalf of the Colony I welcome you to the rank of men. Ronnie and others have told me you're a valuable vein to follow. We need strong veins to follow Matt." He shook my hand

and the Caretaker's. "You're now a man Matt. And don't forget you're a lot more than average. Keep it secret of course but there's an elite and you're one of us. I'm going to introduce you to the Mother Lode." I wasn't sure what he meant but the basics were clear. I'd jumped across more than one shaft today. He shared unspoken question and affirmative glances with the Caretaker. "Now then Matt – ordinary men would start to get rose-screens in due course but for you there's already a sweetheart waiting. Perkis has kindly vacated his office so we may see you entranced. I believe Ronnie is representing your parents?"

Entranced! "What's happening Sir?"

"I didn't want to worry him Chairman so I haven't told him anything. Did I do right Sir?"

"It'll be all right Ronnie. I'm sure Matt's had enough to worry about without women and all that." He smiled at me and gave me the coach's 'don't be downhearted, everything will be all right' shoulder-hug. That was nice. But I was still scared and sticky with chilly sweat. "Shall we have you entranced Matt? What did you think the morning suit and top-hat was for?" He shared a fatherly joke with me. "Got to have a uniform to engage the enemy son." The clerk brought three tiny glasses of water. The Caretaker knew me well enough to know I thought I was being pitched into a battle with a real enemy. "Stop teasing him Kev! Women aren't the enemy."

"You haven't met my wife!" They shared a joke that was many strata deeper than my level. "Let's have a toast." I needed that water! "To the enemy. May they be our friends!" As soon as he lifted his glass I drank mine. Cracky! There was something burning in the water. I nearly spat it out but this must be part of the test. My eyes watered with the shock. After a couple of little coughs, the smiles on their faces told me I'd passed.

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The Chairman indicated a door I couldn't escape from. I pushed it open to reveal another luxury office, this time with the lights fully bright. There were nearly a dozen people in uniforms! Now I realised! This was 'the brides's army' in their uniforms of suits like mine. From the far door the bride entered in her white cone uniform with two smaller girls in matching pink uniforms. Obviously I'd mis-understood. When the Chairman said I'd skipped the rose-screens it meant more than that. The System had decided the girl in white was to be married. That meant to me! Now! She lifted up her safety mesh and I recognised Marline! So that was all right. She must know what to do. The System had got things right for a change. She held out two silver-gloved arms towards me. Even I could understand that every eye in the office was looking at me. I had no choice but to be sociable. There were some sprites in the strata! I went to take her hand.

Then realised I had to take both hands. Then realised she could pull me closer and this was what I'd heard a mate call 'a moment of intimacy'. Now what? Not sexing surely? If I had to sex her I didn't know how so I let myself be drawn to her and see what happened.

She said "Hello sweetheart." Her voice was the softest crumbly chalk.

"Hello sweetheart." I improvised. I whispered "Are we entranced?" hoping her parents, if that's what the others in uniforms were, wouldn't hear.

"No not yet dear." I know I looked an idiot because only idiots get kissed like she kissed me. "Give me a kiss dear." Dear! She was trying to sex with me already! I'd heard about women who preyed on men like stream-following Klondikers. I was trapped! When I looked at the Caretaker and the Chairman for support I could see they were pleased so I would have to be pleased too. And anyway Marline was one of the nice girls. Why not! ...Because I didn't know how. I kissed her on the cheek. She gently clasped my head with her gloves then kissed me on the lips. I wish I'd had time to revise. Should I have kissed back?

The Chairman said. "We're gathered together underground to match Matt and Marline both being first level. I'm thrilled by it all."

The Caretaker said. "As Matt's family representative I'm thrilled and positive." Poppy the Caretaker's wife smiled at me and blew me a kiss! Scary sexing smile of flickering eyelashes!

The long-jawed old boy next to Marline said "As Marline's father I'm thrilled and positive." The lady next to him in mauve hat and uniform dress looked at me with deep pools of eyes that drowned me cold in an instant! Uniforms! Dresses to challenge and betray me. I knew I had to leave those eyes to history but every glance away meant a glance back. I tried to focus on Marline.

The Caretaker held my hand. He made me look at him. I couldn't forget those two huge invitations. "Here's the ring."

"What?"

"The ring" It was a gold ring. I knew what that meant! Sexing. I was a fraud!

"What?"

"You give it to Marline."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"Here you are – er – Sweetheart." I tried to pass the ring to her but her gloved hands weren't ready. Her gloves had gone! How did she do that in the five

seconds since I'd met her? Of course! I'd been day-dreaming. So why was I being victimised? No rose-screens and now I'd got a ring to give! I whispered "What do I do with this?" I hoped nobody else heard me but knew I'd never have secrets.

"Oh! How lovely! A ring! Put it on my finger Matt." What was the little man with the 3V camera doing? What was I doing?

Arghh! I was falling in the dark. "Which finger Marline?" Sweat was stinging my eyes and blurring my vision.

"The wedding ring finger."

"Which is that? I don't know."

"This one." She held out a finger held between two others. She charmed away my anger at being an idiot in front of everybody with a glance of utter welcome softer than that sofa. I obeyed.

# Marriage night

After half an hour of being an elite man who everyone from the Chairman down seemed to think was in their words was 'a cracking good chap', we were accompanied to our new shared cell by the 'Ronnie the history wonk' and 'Frank the bus bod', Marline's father. They wished us well and smacked us. Me on my back and Marline on her bottom. Inside I was happy. Inside our two man cell. By mutual help our stifling uniforms were off within seconds. She was nice. I hoped I was nice too but felt cheap. She kicked the noisy wreckage of her wedding uniform away while struggling with the knot of my bow tie. At last we were in our sweaty undies. So far so natural. She showed me the ring on her finger. I held her hand softly. As a first attempt it met with success. I'd met Marline quite a few times now but never researched what she really looked like and how she reacted to pressure and distractions. Her hair was blond and curly like nutri-bix...but much more lovely. Her cheeks were full of rosy smiles making allies of blue eyes to gaze into and scary bright red lips waiting to bite again. Looking at her then feeling her tummy against mine then her breasts against my chest a shivering invitation. Her mother's eyes flashed as beacons of sanity. Two magnetic eyes boring into me. What did her borings hope to find? What was I to do? We lay on a larger than normal bed together to recover from the shock of the last hour. We'd heard our parents talk about marriage and whispers of sexing but we'd both been reassured that there would be rose-screens to introduce us. We were keen but ignorant.

As I was the man perhaps I ought to say something. "If we're married then you're a lovely wife Marline."

"I think if the Chairman was there then we're married Matt. And then there's the ring." She held it in front of my face.

I held her hand as something to do. I started thinking 'what if we're not suited' then I caved-in. "You're my sweetheart, dear and wife but I don't have a glossary for those terms Marline."

"You're my childhood sweetheart and that's good enough for both of us."

I had no answer... Except "You smell lovely Marline - Dear."

"Be practical! I like you Matt. I've always liked you. Now we're together I'll try to smell nice but dad said there's never been such a bypass of the System before." I tried to find places to kiss her that weren't bullying. One of her hands found

mine and lead it to a soft part of her – her bottom cheek – how annoying she was wearing knickers – it blocked the slip-grip of sweat.

"I don't know what you're talking about Marline. I'm a historian who the Caretaker thinks is a bit special. So what?" Her hand took mine to her other buttock. I supposed I was to stroke it.

"You must be the man of all men." She urged me in a dream to sit then lay back on the bed.

"Stop being a daft girl! Oh! Sorry. Can I say that dear? To my wife?"

"I don't know. What's daft anyway Matt?" She did something with her hair and bits of it fell onto my face.

"Stop making me out to be better than the others ." I needed to research the facts!

"But you are. You must be. Why else would the System skip the rose-screens Matt?"

"I tell you what Marline. Let's pretend this is our first rose-screen meeting? Then we can worry about sexing like normal people."

"Don't you know how to sex Matt?"

"No. Do you Marline?"

"No. I was hoping you'd know Matt." Her mother's eyelashes and smile came back to me.

"How are we supposed to guess! That's what the rose-screens are for aren't they Marline." Her hand pushed mine deep underneath her buttocks. I was a wooden puppet.

Being a rogue fossil didn't invalidate my history. Marline pushing my hand around her skin wasn't good enough. I was a man. It was my duty. "We've got to find out about sexing Marline." She kissed me in the way that her mother's eyes had looked at me. Aha! The historian could add 39 and 1 to make 40! I'd ask her mother who must know or she wouldn't be her mother. "I love you Marline." I don't quite know where the word 'love' came from as it was saved for special occasions when I was a child. "I love you. Be proud. You're a woman for a man." I'd heard those words before but couldn't recall when. She stroked my face as we lay together on bed of our new cell. As it says in the Emergency Manual there are times to be active and times to rest. This was a time to rest. I was covered with skin and scent. Even if I'd had a reason to be active I think I'd still have rested with strange smelling hair tickling my face. The auto

knock-out killed the cell light but we didn't care about the clock. A part of me surfaced for a moment before retreating back into it's adit. 'Someone is looking after you Matt.' It made sense, just like the dozen previous times I'd thought it. Someone must be looking after me and now Marline without any rose-screen! What more could any man want? We were happy but ignorant. Had I come across that phrase before? 'Ignorant but happy?' No I couldn't place it. I made a note to research it tomorrow. Sexing was now another challenge not a threat. I didn't want to frighten Marline but if we didn't sex properly then we might have broken children. We were both adults! Marline asked the Console for guidance on sexing. It responded by printing two vouchers to a thing called a drive-in cinema. "You're a historian – What's a cinema Matt?"

"Like 3V but Twentieth century. Everyone sits in a dark room and they show photographs Marline."

"Sounds boring Matt."

"But they sat next to each other."

"So what?"

"Up Top they had so much space they needed an excuse to be close together. That's my guess." She removed her cell-coat.

"Come on Dear. You've got to look your best." She fought with a closet packed with outfits. I was shocked by so much womanly skin but if all else fails be practical! I held the wedge of clothes on the rail back for her. "Shall I put some of your clothes into my closet dear?" She looked at me in blank incomprehension.

"Why?"

"It's almost empty."

"Haven't the bots brought your stuff from your old cell?"

"Yes they have. Look for yourself." That was the moment I became an honest husband.

"Goodness! Three outfits. Is that all?"

"One for sport, one for work and one for leisure. Why do I need more dear?" Her expression changed from horror to pity. That was the moment I became her husband for life.

"You're special Matt. You'll be all right with me. Don't worry." That was the moment I fully realised there were invisible forces shaping my life. Veins Marline knew about but I'd not the slightest hint of until this moment... Or until I'd met the Chairman. And until I'd seen the Chairman share jokes with Marline's mother and father. "You're so clever Matt. I've always like the way you were silently



clever." My analytical training instantly spotted the flaw in 'always' but knew she meant whatever she meant kindly.

"I'm slow Dear. It just looks like being clever when I can struggle to an opinion after all the others have given theirs." That was the moment I realised honesty and desperation were almost the same thing.

"Please can I put some of mine in your closet Matt? That's really nice of you." That was the moment I realised honest words could cloak a deeper honesty. I nearly threw my three miserable outfits out to give her the whole space. Later the same happened in the wet-room where she had an army of bottles to my electric shaver and single man-smell dispenser. I tried to keep focussed on this cinema and not be confused by the distractions of women but it didn't work.

On the bus all the way down to the drive-in cinema on level twenty-two, the tops of my ears were burning. I was sure everyone on the bus could tell we were frauds who hadn't sexed. The cinema was in a gloomy general purpose industrial cavity. Black curtains hung from the roof with the end wall painted white. We were shown to our car, like a bus for two or four, how to put the top up, move the seats back and switch the reading light on and off. The attendant asked if we wanted a snack in the interval. I shared my first moment of married questioning by looks alone. Her eyes trusted me. Her whole face smiled a daring 'yes!'. I flushed cold at this new intimacy. He clipped a speaker to the top of the window, showed us how to adjust the volume then suggested we might investigate a thing called the glove box. After a struggle to find out how the catch worked the door to the glove box flopped open. "Hey! It's like a reefer they have at eatins. A light comes on when you open it Matt." She shut the door while trying to see when the light went off until the catch clicked then opened it again. "Look! Like a gnome-grotto. It's on - now watch carefully and it goes off just as you close it Matt."

"They knew a few things in the old days. Show me again Marline." There was a leaflet with a picture of our car on the front. She pulled it out and started reading it to me as if I couldn't read it for myself.

"1957 Chevrolet Bel Air Convertible. Made in U S A."

"Four hundred years old Marline!" There was a while until the film started. It was set right in the middle of my study period of the late 20th century. My notepad was ready to pick up the details of '1984'. Marline found something else in the glove box and gave my hand a nice squeeze. Thank granite! A sexing manual. The System worked in mysterious ways. I was sweating with nerves assuming everyone could see we were not really properly an item yet. She studied the booklet in silence. Looking around I could see other cars with their reading lights on.

"Is there a book for me as well Marline?" She looked in the glove box.

"We have to share it I think Matt."

"Oh. I'd always assumed we'd be following our own instructions Marline."

"Me too but it says on page one the woman – that's me – is to be the steersman and the man – that's you – is to be the commander."

"Hurry up. The film starts in less than ten minutes Marline."

"Didn't the man say there would be an interval Matt?"

"Oh I suppose so. You're so clever Marline."

"I love you name of man. No sorry – that should be I love you Matt."

I couldn't help jest like we were playing children's games at the Going Back Day Festival. "You silly name of woman!"

She was so engrossed to notice my smile. "No you're supposed to say 'I love you too Marline.' Matt."

"Nesh! How can I see what I'm supposed to say if you're hogging the book Marline?"

"Sorry. That's called part one – Flirting."

"I can't wait for ever. Let me look Marline." I reached out for the book. She snatched it out of my reach.

"No. I'm the steersman. You'll get a chance later. You don't want to get it wrong do you. If we're going to be partners for life then what difference does five minutes make? Let's do the job properly Matt."

"The film starts soon. Come on. There must be a diagram. You know – like how to break the window of a bus if it crashes. Find the hammer and hit it in the right place to break the window. Women are no good at diagrams."

"Stop it! We mustn't argue! It's not right! What will people think!"

"They'll think we're married. What's your problem woman! Give me the stupid book!" This was great! My first argument even if we were still acting under false pretences. I snatched it from her.

"Bastard men! I'm going back to mother." Should I hit her? Gently of course. I was a real man now. The white screen started flickering then moving photographs appeared.

"Here you are dear. I must look at this history." I chucked the book back at her hoping to hang onto my edge of contempt. I gazed up at the huge pictures, three

metres square, covered with washed out colours. In two dimensions! Just a flat wall painted white. It was so different! An authentic window into the past. My eyes were pulled out of my head towards the picture. For a while I was worried by strange light rays coming out of the wall in case they should come in my direction but they seemed to be heading safely to a spot somewhere behind. This was so different from the 3V. A picture wriggling on nothing but a surface! Looking at a drama in two dimensions was so strange it was magical. The flatness of the screen makes you have to imagine the people in your head.

The screen went white then a caption "15 minute interval". It was like the cascade of confusion when losing grip on a chasm-climb to swing on the safety rope. I'd been so engrossed by the film I'd forgotten the chasm. I'd forgotten Marline. She was clinging to my arm without me realising. "I'm surprised this is allowed. You read your book while I find the people who run this place. I've got to get their buzz-code Marline."

"It's on the pamphlet but wait. They serve unhealthy food! Try some. That's why people come. It says so in the pamphlet. Chips Matt!"

" 'Chips today Pizza tomorrow' so my mum said."

"There's no law against it."

"If it will make you happy then I'll try one chip but I won't have you ballooning! Is that clear Marline?"

"Yes. It must be OK in moderation Matt."

"Moderation! My father used to say 'The road to Hell is paved with moderation' Marline."

"I don't care you meanie! I'm going to have some!"

"Some!"

"Yes! Four or five. See if I balloon."

"Stop arguing like we're an item. I was brought up to be respectable. Now I feel defiled arguing still not an item. The film can't start for ten minutes yet. Let's get this sexing done so we're legit Marline."

"I've read more of the book. It might take more than ten minutes. On the front it says 'Price five shillings' Shall I give the attendant five shillings Matt?"

"I'm not sure if you're going to turn into an elephant that I should take the risk."

"I've had chips before Matt."

I was about to explode but an inner voice, the voice of a married (if not itemised) man, told me that a chip or two might be cool and now Marline was showing me the second new exciting thing tonight. First the 2-D film and now chips!

There was the same loss of contact with the film when writing started moving up over the pictures at the end. This time it was more gentle but just as confusing. I'd just floated back more than three hundred years into history and back but it was now now. I'd just had Winston and Julia and Big Brother inside my head even though they didn't actually leave the screen. I wondered who would understand a fraction of what I could say.

"Relax dear! It's just a 3V story." Marline! I was married but not yet itemised. A real man. She smiled and reached out to hold my shoulder and chest with her hands. "Relax! We'll do sexing another time. Nobody will know we cheated." There was something I knew in a horrible knowing way when you realise the claim has been salted. The System had led me to the Chairman and his promise then Marline and her promise and shown me this film and its promise. It wanted me to be a hero. I couldn't relax. Marline was definitely a part of the System. Winston and his girlfriend flirting with rebellion without sexing. Oh but then it was fiction. So the fiction sexed and the historical context sexed and perhaps there had been offspring in the intervening years. Perhaps I should see a Clive for a calm-down. Was every day of being a real man going to be like this?

"I need time Marline. Didn't you see Winston stand up to the System." She fidgeted with the interior light but didn't put it on. "That needs guts dear. I know our System has shown me their system and given me the choice."

"What's that dear? Can't we go back to our cell now?"

"No! Listen. I'm going to change the system. I want to be a Winston. Don't you?"

"No. If there's nothing wrong don't fix it. We've"/

/"Really! Don't you want to be like Julia then?"

"Only if you're a Winston." Swinging on my safety rope I smashed against the chasm-face of un-logic. I was still trying to measure the effect of the film on me. The System wanted me to be a challenger. A prospector to seek out new lodes in new places. Why else would it show me such a film? I hung on tight to the rope.

"I'll be a Winston if you'll be my Julia dear." She slid her hands round my cheeks then pulled my face to hers. This was a softer meeting with un-logic that made the first bearable.

After hoping I'd satisfied her emotions I said. "Let's go back to our cell. Ours! Our home. How long have we been married dear? We've had a lovely first day."

"You're easy to love Matt."

"So are you. I think. I don't know what loving is. But I want to find which bit of me is Winston and which is Matt."

"It's only a 2V dear. Don't take it so seriously." She clung to my arm as we walked towards the exit.

"It's only history and love together. I know you're my Julia."

"And you're my Winston."

"Winston to you but a lesson in failure to me." I knew what I meant by that. I wondered whether Marline would chase my details as we waited in the tunnel for the up-going bus. She confirmed my suspicions.

"The System needs original thinkers Matt." I put my arm around her waist and targeted a logical kiss on her lips.

"I need you." I said to the System while looking into her eyes.

## Love lesson

It was strange sleeping next to a woman. The next morning the console informed us we had five days of Marriage-leave. We'd never had to make our own futures for more than a day before. Everyone thought we were now 'an item' but we'd never sexed! How embarrassing! Marline stroked my breasts and I stroked hers. I nibbled her ear and she nibbled my lip. Everything about teenagers in mini-skirts 'dropping-out' to make riots against Vietnam and then against anything for the sake of a riot that I'd been coming across at the history office came back to me. All right I was twenty-one and now a real man but I felt the sex book had a suspicious flaw. A flaw that must be deliberate to test us.

Marline said "What would our parents have done?"

"They had grandparents in those days. We could have asked them."

"Eughh! Fancy talking about sexing to your grandparents Matt!"

"I was reading all about it a few months ago. It's echoingly tedious. Boy meets girl. Boy meets girl's parents then all hell breaks loose." Marline is about average height, has neat blond librarian hair with a cute straight fringe and symmetrical curls on the side, blue eyes, round face – healthy arm muscles and quick reflexes. When she looks up at me there's a bare neck behind a plump mouth. I know my mouth must be as exciting as my closet but she seems to be fascinated by it. Her legs might be a little short and muscly but then she is second-lieutenant in a kick-skittles team. She wears all her long-term wealth round her neck; saying the three stones are worth a hundred guineas each but I wonder, and anyway what use are stones? My shares in agri-bots are real wealth I can trade-in with a single buzz. Anyway now we're nearly an item I shouldn't be thinking these things. By cracky sexing is a palava! There must be an easier way than the book says. I wanted to stroke her hair. "Is there anything in the book about stroking your hair dear?" By the way she flipped the pages back and forth I could see she was having difficulty making sense of it.

"You can if you want to. That would be nice." She threw the book on the floor and shook her hair provocatively. I reached out to stroke it but she confused me by falling on top of me on the bed. I think she did it deliberately. There was another thing that worried me. Why did the System match us when she was a Monitor and I'm only a Researcher? The Chairman had said we were both first-level. Why not give us some rose-screens? What difference would a few weeks make? Anyway we were happy, and now nearly an item.

# Then...

Matt meets some very interesting women, including a mobile 'air-conditioning unit' called Connie. There are various types of leadership and adapting to new circumstances of a very different surface world. Matt is 'bad' but then a very interesting change begins.

The full version of [Future](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 325 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.