

8-Bit Gothic – A Tale of Time Travel and Retro Dystopia

by [Andy Thomas](#) (July 2022)



Untitled, Zdzisław Beksiński

Eddie was sitting on his sofa, surrounded by sweet wrappers and empty cigarette packets. A battered grey laptop, over which he was hunched, sat on a cheap glass coffee table in front of him. He wore a scruffy top and a pair of faded jeans. His hair was long and black, which he wore in a pony tail.

Grey streaks hinted at his age.

He had been sleeping in his clothes for over a week. The contents in his mug was a black treacle-like substance—four table spoons of coffee with a dash of hot water. He was taking a slug of the black glue when his new flatmate burst into his living room.

“Eddie!” yawned Andy, excitedly.

He turned, swallowing at the same time, and gave a big grin.

“Andeeey!” he replied, in a friendly tone the two used with each other.

“You gotta come and see this!” Andy cried, unable to contain himself.

“Give me sec. Just need to submit a *fucking* timesheet.”

Eddie stressed the profanity in an endearing way that only he could pull off. The way he swore lacked any hint of vitriol or vexation, and generally had the effect of making people like him, rather than the opposite.

Andy and Eddie, having worked together as programmers in their twenties, were long standing friends. They also shared the same working class English culture, which meant they swore a lot but rubbed along easily with each other nevertheless. Both normally lived alone, but this was the winter of 2020 and the pair had taken up residence together as a way of surviving Lockdown.

Andy disappeared back into the spare room, which had become his during his stay, while Eddie continued making up random numbers for his timesheet. When he had finished, he clicked “Submit,” and sprang up from the sofa.

“What is it?” he asked, stepping over the bedding on the floor, as he entered Andy’s room.

“You’ll never believe it!” Andy exclaimed, turning to face him.

Andy was sitting at a makeshift desk on a makeshift chair. The chair had actually broken several times, but was now lashed together with Gaffer tape. It flexed dangerously as Andy moved on it, threatening to impale him on a chair leg if it were to collapse.

“What is it?” Eddie prompted again.

Andy explained that he had received an email from an old school friend who had just discovered a computer cassette he had left with him back when they were kids. Years ago, before floppy disks became popular, it was normal to save computer data on audio cassettes. His friend had managed to read the data off the cassette and email it to him as a file.

“Guess what was on it?” Andy asked, rhetorically.

“Erm...” said Eddie, trying to guess the answer, but quickly giving up. “No idea,” he admitted.

“The first game I ever wrote on the Spectrum!” beamed Andy, triumphantly.

The Sinclair Spectrum was familiar to Eddie, as it was a popular home computer in Britain in the 1980s. Many shared the experience of it being their introduction to programming, including these two renegades.

“Oh man! And you have it?”

“Yes,” he replied, “I’ve just got it running in an emulator. Want to see it?”

Eddie stepped over a further pile of washing on the floor to get close to the screen. “Yeah!” he said, enthusiastically.

Andy typed “LOAD” into the Spectrum emulator running on his

laptop and, a few moments later, the words "SHUTTLE DEFENDER" appeared on screen in huge block letters as the speaker began beeping along to the *StarWars* theme.

"Wow!" Eddie exclaimed, as the game began to play.

The game play was simple: there was a crude depiction of a Space Shuttle on the left, which moved up and down in response to the keys, and UFOs came in from the right which you were meant to shoot at.

"And how old were you when you wrote this?" Eddie asked.

"Not sure. About eleven I think." Andy was silent for a moment, as he reminisced over his youth. "It's been nearly forty years since I wrote that."

"Those were better days," said Eddie, joining in the nostalgia as they watched the screen, enjoying the 8-bit magic of the past.

"I'm guessing it's written in BASIC, right?" he asked.

"Yes, it's BASIC," Andy replied. "I didn't do machine code until a few years later, and by then I had moved on from writing games."

"Let me see the source code," Eddie demanded, trying to get in front of the computer.

"No, you can't! I'll be embarrassed to let you see it." Andy countered.

The pair laughed as Eddie tried to force Andy out of chair in horseplay.

"You'll break the damn chair!"

Eddie stopped. "Oh fuck!" he said suddenly. "I'm meant to be in a meeting."

With that, he rushed out of the room, leaving Andy at the computer. A few seconds later, Eddie cried out a further profanity from his living room, but this time in anguish.

“What’s up?” asked Andy, having followed him back in concern.

Eddie didn’t say anything, but stood in front of his corporate laptop. By way of reply, he waved toward it in futility. The screen had gone blank except for the familiar words “Updating...”. Underneath, it showed “Progress: 17%”.

The value appeared to be stuck, but after a minute or so, it incremented by one.

Andy picked up a bizarre looking cuddly toy which a relative of Eddie’s had lovingly knitted for him. He had become rather attached to it during his stay and had christened it “Mongo” –after a database engine used in IT systems. It looked rather like a stoat or a weasel, but with gangly limbs. It had a warped lob-sided smile which had been haphazardly stitched on by its maker.

Andy cuddled the knitted stoat as he lay back on the sofa next to Eddie and began reading from his book: *The Fountainhead*. He had been at it for three months, but at over a thousand pages, had only managed to get a third of the way in.

Eddie checked how many cigarettes he had left while he waited out the Windows update.

“They’re all psychopaths!” said Andy out loud, looking up from his book after a lengthy period of silence. The progress bar on the screen now showed “100%” but had been stuck at that for the last ten minutes.

“Who?” he asked, “You mean Microsoft?”

“No. I mean all of Ayn Rand’s characters. All of them. Even her heroes are psychopaths.” Andy turned to Mongo, who was snuggled under his arm. “What *do you* think Mongo?” he asked

it.

Mongo nodded and looked at Eddie, with its head cocked slightly to one side.

“That’s really creepy,” said Eddie, laughing as Andy manipulated it like a puppet.

The laptop screen suddenly flashed a pale blue colour and the single word “Hi!” slowly materialised. It faded softly out again and, in its place, the ominous message “We’re just getting everything ready for you” appeared.

“I hate this shit!” Eddie exclaimed, not so much in anger, but in despair. “Why do they have to pretend that they are my friend?”

Several more faux-friendly messages appeared and disappeared before, finally, the computer displayed a login prompt with his employer’s corporate propaganda as a background image.

“Look at that!” Eddie groaned. “I mean just look at it. It’s not even correct English!”

Looking like the wallpaper in a child’s nursery, the backdrop showed a cutesy pattern of circles with a proud corporate tagline along the top: “Our ability to Imagine Possible starts with your VOICE”. Beneath it, there was some blurb about the company’s diversity policy and an invitation to participate in an inclusivity survey.

“We have more Human Resource managers than programmers,” he complained. “The bastards pump out this crap all the time so that no one can escape it.”

He looked dejected and continued dejectedly: “And woe betide anyone who actually responds to one of their fucking inclusivity surveys and doesn’t tell them exactly what they want to hear.”

Mongo looked at him, trying to offer sympathy in the best way a deformed stoat knitted out of wool possibly could.

Eddie took a moment to regain his composure before logging in. A minute or so later, he had managed to join the meeting he was now over half an hour late for.

“Sorry I’m late,” he spoke into the laptop and explained that his computer had been down for an update.

There was a brief acknowledgement from the project manager, after which Eddie immediately muted his microphone and sat back. There were 127 people on the meeting and the manager was going through each of them in turn for progress updates.

“Fuck!” said Andy, watching. “How many people are on the call?” The question was rhetorical because both could see the participant count on screen.

“I know” said Eddie, now visibly more relaxed as he realised he wouldn’t have to speak for some time. He reached for an industrial sized bag of jelly babies that was sitting beside his laptop and handed it to Andy. The bag had its weight, 5 KG, printed on the side in big black letters.

“I’m 2 stone heavier because of you,” said Andy, trying to invoke guilt. Nevertheless, he took the bag and filled both hands from it.

The meeting continued with a speaker from Bangalore who was giving a tale of woe concerning something called “Kubernetes”. After some minutes of that, the speaker switched to a guy who insisted on talking through, in painstaking detail, every error message in a huge log-file, the meanings of which were absolutely incomprehensible to everyone except himself.

“This is madness,” Andy exclaimed, after a few minutes of listening. “Is she going to go through everyone like this?”

“Yes,” replied Eddie, morosely. “I hardly do any programming

these days.”

The two of them returned to their reminiscing over the halcyon days of computers, with Mongo following the conversation, as the microphone remained muted.

“I just want to go back to the Linux command line,” Eddie said, earnestly. “All you need is a bash prompt.”

Mongo looked back to Andy, as he replied.

“The graphical user interface is where everything went wrong,” Andy agreed. “If all you have is the command line, then it just looks like gibberish to your boss and he can’t know what you’re doing. But once we had GUIs, well then, that gives him something visual to point at and, before long, he’s telling you what to do.”

Eddie laughed, as Andy continued: “That’s also when ‘normal people’ began to get their hands on computers, and it ruined everything. And now look where we are—Facebook, TikTok and Tinder.”

There was a long silence, as the meeting droned on in the background. A young woman with an Irish accent was talking about “unit tests.” Mongo looked back and forth between them, waiting for one of them to speak.

“You know,” said Eddie, finally. “Programming used to be such a joy. Back in the 80s, I’d be working on some really hard problem and then I’d suddenly see how things could be written in a way that was beautiful and elegant. There was a certain satisfaction in that which made everything worthwhile.”

Mongo stared, waiting for more.

“Now all we do is manage infrastructure. All this,” he said, waving dismissively at his laptop, “...is just technocracy. I’m just a technocrat now. It takes over a week, with meetings and online bureaucracy, just to update one fucking line in a

file.”

His misery was interrupted by the sound of his name coming out of the laptop speaker. It was his turn to provide a progress report and he fumbled at his keyboard, trying to disable the mute.

“Oh, hi,” he spoke into his laptop, finally. “Yes, yes, it’s going well …” he stumbled, “I’m working on making progress and moving forward.”

At that, he screwed his eyes closed and threw his arms over his head in a defensive posture—and prayed that his ridiculous update would be accepted. Andy was also curious to learn whether or not his project manager was going to swallow what he had just said.

“OK, thanks Eddie,” she replied, audibly relieved at his brevity, and moved on to the next person.

He switched back to mute.

“Smoky?” Andy asked, now that Eddie’s role in the meeting looked to be over. Mongo was sat on Andy’s lap, nodding enthusiastically.

The pair of them got up from sofa and went outside for a cigarette. Mongo was left behind to handle the rest of the meeting.

Eddie’s place was an end terrace beside a churchyard in the centre of Aylesbury. It was currently against the law to be outdoors without “lawful excuse” and the streets were deserted. As the two stepped out into the cold damp air, they joked how smoking was now an essential activity in these times.

They stood, huddled, beside the terrace end-wall, trying to light their cigarettes in the freezing wind. In normal times, people would describe St. Mary’s Church and its graveyard as

picturesque. Now, however, the ominous sky bathed the bleak world around them in grey light, such that Andy wondered whether even George Orwell could do justice to it.

“Now is the winter of our discontent,” he commented dryly, as he finally managed to light his ciggie. He began pacing up and down the short length of the wall, as the pair engaged in their usual banter and characteristic bitter humour.

“If smoking wasn’t good for my cough,” said Eddie, “I’d quit.”

“Is this a real coal cellar?” asked Andy suddenly, having come to a halt beside a low wooden door in the wall. The door’s green paint was old and flaking, revealing the wood underneath. He kicked it gently as a means of inspection.

“What the fuck!” Eddie replied incredulously, having just noticed what Andy was looking at. “Never seen that before.”

“What’s in here?”

“Dunno man,” he said, now standing beside Andy to stare at the door in the wall. “I’ve never seen it before,” he repeated.

The door was around four feet high and had an old-style latch commonly used on garden gates. Andy reached down and depressed it. The door opened after a little pushing to reveal steps leading down under the house.

“I believe many houses in Stockport have tunnels beneath them,” said Andy. “Perhaps yours does too?”

“We’re not in Stockport—this is Aylesbury,” Eddie replied matter of factly, as they bent down to peer into the new found hole in the wall.

Andy took out his phone and swiped at it in order to find the torch app. “You don’t know what’s down here then?” he asked again.

"I swear man, I've been here seven years and I haven't seen it before."

Andy shone his light down into the darkness. "Let's find out," he said, grinning at the prospect of adventure.

They had to stoop and manoeuvre themselves through the door but found a little more headroom once they had descended a few steps. Andy led using the light on his phone, with Eddie uttering a stream of incredulous profanities behind. It wasn't far before the steps bottomed out at a tight passageway leading under the house.

Andy noticed that the walls looked old, having been built from stone rather than brick. Eddie joked that they were going to find a bag full of dead kids but stopped when he realised the trouble that would probably bring for him.

After only a short distance, they came to another staircase leading directly upward again. As they began to ascend, another door was visible with a chink of light coming from under the gap at the bottom.

Andy found a similar latch on the inside and tried pushing. The door did not move, so he tried pulling instead. This time, the door swung inward and the pair climbed out into the bright sunlight of a glorious summer's day.

The church of St. Mary's Square stood just a short distance away, with the sun hanging in the sky above its squat bell tower. The graveyard, with its lush green vegetation, looked beautiful now against the backdrop of a bright blue sky.

Eddie was momentarily lost for swear words.

Andy ran his hand over the door that they had stepped out of. It was painted green, but unlike the door they had entered, the paint was fresh here. He looked down, back into the darkness and, being of a mathematical disposition, wondered

about its non-Euclidean geometry.

How was it possible, he thought, to travel in a straight line and yet emerge at exactly the same location?

"We're at the same spot beside your house," he acknowledged, finally.

"Look man!" said Eddie, pointing. "That's a Mark 1 Ford Escort. Haven't seen one of them in years."

"Haven't seen a blue sky in years either," Andy half-joked sarcastically, referring to how the weather had changed, if not the season. However, he turned to look at the car that was parked further down the street and commented that his grandfather used to own one.

They walked around to the front of the house, and stood in the street in an effort to gain a sense of things. It was clearly the same house but, where Eddie had a modern PVC front door, his house now had an old-fashioned wooden one with a decorative window. It was painted green – the same colour as the door in the wall. White net curtains hung in the window, but a tall floor standing lamp with an old fashioned lampshade was visible inside the front room.

"Doesn't look like you live here any more," commented Andy, as the pair stared at it with incredulity.

"Should we knock to see who answers?" suggested Eddie.

As they contemplated on who might live there, a car came along the road and they stepped onto the pavement to allow it to pass. Black smoke poured from its exhaust and it made a whining noise as it trundled on by. Given their age, they both recognised it as a Morris Marina, a car that was commonplace in the 1970s.

"Bet you haven't seen one of them in years either," said Andy.

Just then, a mischievous glint came into Eddie's eyes. It was a look Andy hadn't seen since before Lockdown. "I have a better idea," he said, grinning.

"What is it?" asked Andy, cautiously.

"Let's find a pub," he suggested, his face beaming.

A wide smile broke across Andy's face too, as he realised that the idea was a good one.

They spoke excitedly of time travel as they walked the short distance toward the market square in the town centre. They emerged out onto the square, where they encountered more cars from yesteryear. The square looked familiar, although the road layout and shops had all changed.

People, mostly women with shopping bags, walked without masks or fear.

"When are we man?" asked Eddie.

"Not sure," Andy replied, inspecting the Vauxhall Viva parked beside them. "But judging by the cars, late 70s or early 80s I reckon."

"Look," he added, motioning to the car's windscreen. "The tax disc is dated 1980."

The Rockwood, the pub on the corner of Pebble Lane, was instantly familiar to them both and its open door offered a welcoming sight to this strange pair of travellers.

As they pushed open the inner door excitedly, they were greeted by the smell of cigarette smoke from the pub's interior. This is great, thought Eddie grinning in delight—a cig already in his mouth.

Several people were located around the place and a man, who wore a tweed jacket and looked to be sixty five or so, was

seated at the bar. He occupied himself scraping out the contents of his pipe, while he nursed a pint jug with a handle on the side.

“Just had a terrible thought,” muttered Andy, as they reached the bar.

“What can I get you love?” the landlady asked Eddie.

“Just give us a minute,” Andy replied for him as he turned to speak to Eddie quietly. “They’re not going to take our modern money.”

“Oh shit,” Eddie said, his face dropping. However, it brightened almost instantly and he announced that he had an idea.

“How’s it going man?” he said in a bright and affable voice to the guy at the end of bar.

It always amazed Andy just how Eddie could engage strangers in trivial banter. In no time at all, the two of them were arguing over whether Kevin Keegan was a better footballer than Georgie Best.

Small talk wasn’t something Andy could do very well, so he stepped back from the conversation.

“I voted for Thatcher,” he heard Mr. Tweed say, as their conversation moved on to 1970s politics. Andy’s attention, however, had been caught by a relic of his childhood standing in the far corner of the pub.

“Oh, wow!” he mouthed silently, as he walked over to it and ran his hands along the edges of the large wooden cabinet now standing in front of him.

The artwork on its sides depicted a giant green space insect being shot at with a laser. It’s beautiful, he thought, as he stroked the sides with the affection of an archaeologist who

had just unearthed the tomb of a three-thousand-year-old Egyptian princess.

Along the top of this arcade machine from antiquity was its name— “GALAXIAN” in bold artistic lettering. On the front, beneath its cathode ray tube, was a slot inviting the insertion of a ten pence piece.

As Andy got out his wallet, he knew it was hopeless but tried anyway—the machine predictably refused his modern ten pence and spat it out of the return slot.

His mind was suddenly drawn back to reality by Eddie shouting his name from the other side of pub— “Andeeey!” He was holding two pints of bitter, while motioning with his head for Andy to come over to a table.

“You managed to get him to buy us a pint, you crawpy bugger!” said Andy, as he pulled up a chair. Eddie grinned his thanks to Mr. Tweed at the bar.

“This is great,” he said, happily lighting another cigarette. “You can smoke in here and no one cares.”

“Listen,” said Andy, speaking seriously. “This is 1980, right?”

“Yep,” Eddie replied nonchalantly, reaching for the ashtray on the table.

“We’re at the start of the 8-bit home computing revolution. And we’re programmers from the future, right?”

Eddie nodded, his eyes opening wide as he recognised the magnitude of Andy’s words.

“And not only do we get to program *real computers* again, but we know everything that is going to be a major hit for the next 40 years. Don’t you see how rich we could be?”

"Oh man," Eddie exclaimed, instantly sold on the idea. "You mean we get to program in BASIC with actual line numbers?"

"Not only that," Andy replied, "But right now, Matt Smith hasn't even thought of *Manic Miner* yet, and I've got the source code to it along with hundreds of other 8-bit games on my laptop back at yours..." *Manic Miner* was a hit game in the 1980s and what Andy was suggesting was to beat its author to it. However, his words, though started with enthusiasm, had trailed off toward the end.

"Could you imagine bringing a modern laptop back to 1980!" Eddie cried in delight.

"Yes, but I just realised something. We must go back and get it."

Eddie downed his pint swiftly, "I'll go," he said. "You drink your pint."

"For God's sake," said Andy, unsure whether he was being serious. "Whatever you do, don't bring your company laptop back—it has Windows and we don't want to relive that here. I'm running Linux, so bring mine."

With that, yet another realisation dawned on him—Linux was originally created by Linus Torvalds in the 90s, with its name being a combination of "Linus" and "Unix".

"Hey!" he said. "We could be the actual ones to create Linux while Linus Torvalds is still in school."

"Yeah, and what are you going to call it?" asked Eddie, laughing as he got up from his chair. "Andinux?"

"And don't forget my power supply," said Andy, ignoring his remark. "It will be a real bummer if you forget that."

"I won't. Back in a jiffy." Eddie went to leave, but returned briefly to whisper something in Andy's ear.

“The barmaid fancies you,” he said quietly, while waving and grinning toward the girl behind the bar.

Before Andy could retort, he was gone, having left the pub swiftly and exited onto the street. He jogged the short distance up Pebble Lane toward his house in the glorious sunshine. He was happy for the first time in a long time, he realised.

He arrived back at the green door in the side of his house, and it didn't take him long to make his way back down the stone stairs and along the passageway. Freezing rain hit his face as he emerged into the grey daylight of 2020 at the other end.

He didn't waste any time. Back inside his house, he grabbed Andy's laptop bag and shoved his laptop and power supply into it.

He hurriedly collected a few other things, including a carton of 200 cigarettes which he figured he could sell for 80s money, along with a kipper tie that he wore for fancy dress and job interviews. He thought that the tie might help him to blend into the past.

On his way out, he noticed Mongo staring at him.

“Can't leave you little guy,” he said, grabbing the knitted puppet and stuffing him into the top of the rucksack, leaving his head and arms protruding so that he could see out.

The pointless meeting was still droning on over his corporate laptop. He held down the power button to shut it down, relishing the thought that he would never have to endure another Microsoft Teams meeting again.

Outside, Eddie slammed the front door shut on his house for what he realised would be the last time, and hurried back along the time tunnel. At the door on the other end, he paused

to take a deep breath and contemplate his new life with excitement. Breathing heavily now, he decided that he might quit smoking.

This is going to be so cool, he thought, as he pulled the door open.

Instead of a summer's day, however, it was night as he stepped out this time around. A full moon shone brightly overhead.

He spun around in confusion. As panic began to set in, he heard his name called.

"Eddie? Is that you?"

He turned to see an old man peering round the corner of his house.

"Is that really you?" the man asked again.

Eddie remained rooted to the spot in stunned silence as the old man came limping over to him. His face looked pale and drawn in the moonlight, but Eddie recognised him almost instantly as he came up close.

"I knew you'd come back," the man said as he grabbed him in a bear hug. Eddie was speechless.

"Come, we must get inside," he said after a few moments. "The police shoot on-sight anyone seen outdoors after curfew."

"What the fuck's happened?" Eddie managed to get out, as a much older Andy released him from the hug.

"It's all gone wrong," he replied. "I'll explain everything."

As the pair began walking, Andy impulsively wrapped him in another tight hug. "My God, it's good to see you man," he said. "I knew you'd come back."

The front door of the house was painted green, just as before,

but now an iron grill covered the front window.

“You live here now?” asked Eddie, his mind reeling.

“Yes yes. I’ll explain everything. Come on.”

The door was opened for them from the inside by a woman in a blue housecoat. Before closing it after them, she cautiously looked up and down the street to check that no one had been watching.

She turned and smiled at Eddie as she bolted the door. “I remember you,” she said softly.

Eddie’s face was painted with confusion.

“Yes yes. You’ve met once,” explained Andy. “This is Bernadette. She was the girl behind the bar in the pub, remember? Well, it’s a long story, but she’s my wife now.”

“I don’t understand,” was all Eddie could say as they stood in the hallway.

“We believed the time tunnel would open again. We heard you in the passage from the living room. You see—we were waiting. That’s why we took this place.”

“I don’t understand,” repeated Eddie again.

“Come on through,” Andy said. “I’ll explain everything.”

Eddie followed them into the living room. The wallpaper inside was a miserable dark green colour with a wilting flower design on it. Their brown patterned carpet was cluttered with partially disassembled electronics and bits of circuit boards with wires hanging from them. An old CRT television stood against the wall.

Eddie saw an ominous looking CCTV camera that was fixed to the wall so that it could survey the living room. It was a large black metal box construction, with the words “BBC Servalan”

down the side.

“Yes yes. Don’t mind that.”

Eddie noticed that Andy had developed the odd habit of starting sentences with “Yes yes,” in his old age.

“It’s used mainly for TV viewing enforcement,” he explained. “It’s now mandatory to watch the BBC—well the nightly news at least. Usually no one is actually checking, but it’s best to sit over there out of its line of sight.”

Eddie put the laptop bag down and sat in the armchair to which Andy had motioned.

“Oh, I see you’ve brought Mongo,” Andy exclaimed in delight. “I missed you too buddy,” he said.

Andy and Bernadette sat down together on a sofa facing Eddie. He remained silent and looked about while trying to understand where and, more to the point, when he was.

“You see Eddie,” Andy began, “It’s not 1980 anymore. I waited for you in the pub, but you never returned.”

“So after a while,” he continued, “I went back to the time tunnel, but the door in the wall had vanished. There was no way back.”

“What year is this?” Eddie asked, finally gaining the ability to speak.

“It’s 1991 here now, and everything is fucked up,” he replied. “And it’s worse than you could possibly imagine.”

“Why? What happened?”

“When you didn’t come back, I was just hanging around trying to figure out what to do. Fortunately, I got talking to Bernadette in the pub and she took me in.”

Andy turned to Bernadette next to him. "You believe me now, don't you?"

"I've always believed you," she replied simply.

"Yes yes, showing you a mobile phone from the 21st century helped a little, if you remember?"

"So what happened next?" prompted Eddie.

"Then I had this idea that I would track down Sir Clive Sinclair. You remember, the guy who created the Spectrum computer?"

"Yes yes," said Eddie impatiently, realising that he was picking up Andy's annoying habit.

"Well, I went to Cambridge and waited outside the offices of Sinclair Research. I managed to intercept Sir Clive in the car park."

"And he actually believed you?"

"I got his attention by pushing my mobile phone in his face. In the end, he believed me. He was pretty taken aback actually."

"Wow!" was all Eddie could say.

"So I ended up working at Sinclair Research where we began reverse engineering the ARM chip in my phone. I remember that Uncle Clive, as we called him, took a certain delight in learning that the technology originated from Acorn Computers in the old timeline, but that he was to get his hands on it first in this one."

"For a while," Andy went on, "I worked on the development of the Sinclair QL Computer. Remember that? It was going to have a breakthrough processor decades ahead of its time – not the Motorola 68008 we remember."

“So what happened?”

“Those were great days, but it wasn’t meant to be,” he said somewhat philosophically. “In a way, I kind of deserved it I guess. I thought that I could come back here with technology invented by others before their time. Anyway, word got out about the things we were working on, as it was bound to, and one day Clive was found dead – a heart attack they said.”

Andy’s eyes now dropped to floor, as Eddie waited patiently for him to continue. When he finally began speaking again, he spoke with faltering emotion.

“I was detained under the Mental Health Act and spent a few years in solitary at Broadmoor Insane Asylum. You see, it doesn’t do to tell people that you are a time traveller from the future—that and the fact they wanted to interrogate me for everything I knew.”

Andy lifted his trouser leg. “You see this?” he asked.

Attached to his ankle was a clunky metal box with a flashing red light on it. His skin was badly chaffed where its steel bracelet rubbed against his leg.

Eddie just nodded.

“It’s called a ‘Home Area Safety Enforcer’, or a HASER for short,” he explained. “If I ever try to leave my designated hometown or take it off, the electric shock will be fatal. I was one of the first to get one, as it was a condition of my release. But most people have these things now.”

Bernadette put her hand on Andy’s shoulder to comfort him. Eddie said nothing, for he didn’t have any words.

Andy hung his head as he continued in a subdued voice.

“Eddie, people like you and I were very naive. We were excited by technology because we only saw how good things could be.

But *they*—the elites or technocrats or whatever you want to call them—always understood that technological progress would one day give them control over everything and everybody. You see, the Internet has been planned for since the 1960s, only it's called the 'Servalan Network' here now. And what I did by going to Sinclair was to hand them the future on a plate, thus bringing everything forward by thirty years or so."

"There is one way things are better though," he went on, after a short pause. "At least here the oppression is honest. No lies dressed up in cutesy language as virtue. We all know where we stand here."

With that, he looked up suddenly. "You know who's prime minister now?" he asked rhetorically.

Eddie didn't try to guess, but simply stared blankly.

"Jimmy Savile, that's who!" Andy spat.

"No! What? How?"

"Yes yes, Jimmy Savile," he answered, his voice shaking quietly with repressed rage. "While I was in Broadmoor, the BBC ran a TV drama called *The Prime Minister* in which Savile was the star. After Thatcher died—another sudden heart attack by the way—he just stepped into the role cleared for him. Incredible, isn't it? But it was all reported as being the completely normal thing to happen. They said that he was such a natural statesman after all, and everyone just swallowed it."

"Well mostly they did," he added. "Anyone who questioned things too much was disappeared."

At that, Bernadette brought Andy's dystopian telling of events to a close by rising to her feet.

"I'm sorry. How rude of us! Would you like a drink Eddie?" she asked.

Feeling he was about to be sick, Eddie shook his head.

“No no, he can’t,” said Andy with a sudden start. “What was I thinking? He must go back!”

“What do you mean?” Eddie asked.

“The time tunnel de-materialised after you left here the first time. If it’s still open now, you must use it to go back. There’s nothing here for you.”

Eddie’s mind was in turmoil. He was unable to argue even he wanted to – which he didn’t as the Lockdown of 2020 had begun to seem positively appealing compared to this.

Andy jumped up from the sofa and gripped his arm. “Come on, come on, no time to waste,” he said urgently. “What was I thinking in bringing you inside?” he repeated.

Eddie grabbed the laptop bag he had brought as Andy pulled him roughly to his feet. The three of them filed down the hallway to the front door. Bernadette opened it carefully and poked her head out to ensure the coast was clear.

“You’re both coming with me? Right?” Eddie asked, having realised he was leaving.

“We both have HASERs,” Andy answered. “They’re activated by the loss of a local radio signal, so we can never leave here.”

Before Eddie could protest, Bernadette motioned for them to follow her out onto the street. Without delay, the three of them marched around to the side of the house. Eddie’s heart was in his mouth as they reached the side-wall where the small green door was.

They found, however, that the door he had stepped out only minutes earlier had gone. The three of them could only stare at the blank brickwork that was the end-terrace wall.

Eddie dropped his rucksack to the ground and the knitted puppet fell out. As they all hugged each other for solace, Mongo lay on his back and stared up at the dark sky from a muddy puddle.

The full moon, having been vanquished by dark foreboding clouds, had disappeared as well.

This work is autobiographical, with almost every word being almost true, although some names and locations have been changed. The time tunnel existed in our deranged fantasies during Lockdown. We didn't actually find it, if I'm completely honest you, but it wasn't through any lack of looking for it.

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Andy Thomas is a programmer, software author and writer in the north of England. He is interested in the philosophical implications of science, the nature of nature, and the things in life which hold 'value'. You can find him on substack: <https://kuiperzone.substack.com>.

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