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Futzbuckers Forthcoming

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It all began at three in the morning on the twenty-first of December, two thousand and twelve, on the day of the winter solstice, when within the compartment of a train traversing the snow-laden mountains from Yrvia to Stretzven, under the muffled whistle of a snowstorm and the hustle of the flustered conductors around, Felix Futzbucker first beheld the world, and the world, shuddering, first beheld him. The world was anxious and agitated, for, if one were to believe the calendar of an ancient civilisation, precisely on that day, it was supposed to end, be that due to a devastating gravitational interaction related to "galactic alignment," Earth's magnetic field inversion, or a collision with the suddenly materialised Planet N, which caused it, the world, to nervously bite its nails all day, watching every falling leaf, every butterfly's wing flap, every child born, but just at that moment when Felix Futzbucker, before beginning to demand his freedom, hiccupped one last time inside his mother's womb, precisely at that moment, a chill ran down the world's spine from top to bottom for the first time, and it understood – "it has begun".

A burly woman tumbled into the compartment, eyes bulging as she looked at Felix's yet-to-be parents: his perspiring mother, Fumiko

Futzbucker, and father, Friedrich Futzbucker, who stood beside his wife, a clock in the palm of his left hand and a white towel in his right. Next to him on the floor lay a gutted suitcase filled with books covered with similar towels, an improvised cradle he had hastily prepared for Felix. Friedrich adjusted his spectacles nervously and looked at the conductor.

—This isn't a maternity ward!—the attendant blurted out.

—Well, do pardon us! You're hard to reach,—said Friedrich,—and it's too late to pack him back in!

Fumiko shrieked, and the attendant clutched at her head.

—I'll find a medic!—she exclaimed, slamming the sliding door as she exited the compartment.

—Towels! Bring more towels!—Friedrich called after her, but she had already disappeared in the aisle.

—Bloody hell!

Shuffling through the tomes of physics, history, mythology, anthropology, and many others strewn on the table, Friedrich found a parenthood guide among the teetering stack of books and started skimming through its pages. Catching sight of the cover with her blurred vision, the panting Fumiko looked at her husband.

—What do you expect to find in there? That's for when a child is out!

—Well, there must be some sort of introduction or a prologue! At least a couple of paragraphs...

Fumiko screamed again, this time in what seemed like desperation, cursing the train, the weather, her husband, herself, and the rest of the world. She tried to find a more comfortable position where she could labour without the risk of tumbling onto the floor, but the berth she had settled on was too narrow even for her. Friedrich breathed on the dial of his watch, wiped it, and started the stopwatch in an attempt to measure the time between contractions.

—Breathe! Don't get distracted! Inhale deeply through the nose. Exhale slowly through the mouth. Just like we did in yoga.

—Oh, for goodness's sake!

With all her might, Fumiko began to bear down and growl through clenched teeth. Friedrich checked his watch and shook his head. He was racking his brains over fragmented knowledge of female anatomy, how to deliver a baby, and was attempting to silently cite tongue twisters, which he was making up on the fly, whose utility was but unknown.

—Bloody attendant!—he exclaimed.

He adjusted his glasses, looked at the closed door, saw his dishevelled reflection in the mirror, with his watch and towel, and for a moment he was terrified and instead of tongue twisters, he started to reel off his lecture notes and breathe in exactly the way he advised his wife. He

realised that he had accidentally reset the stopwatch, looked at Fumiko, and prepared to restart it.

—Push!

Fumiko did not listen to him and was simply trying to regain some control over the situation. She didn't want to push at all, she wanted to give up and just lie down, but her body didn't leave her a choice. She, like her husband, was terrified too, and it seemed that the train, although moving smoothly, was racing headlong into the abyss, the sound of the blizzard outside was becoming louder, and little Felix's desire for freedom inside her was growing stronger.

—At the very least,—she said, trying to calm herself,—when Felix grows up, we will have something to

Cutting herself off mid-sentence, Fumiko howled again, this time, it seemed to Friedrich, louder than before.

—The head!—he squeaked.—I see the head! Well, I think so at least! Keep bearing down.

The compartment door opened a crack, and someone's eye peeped inside. Friedrich looked hopefully at the guest.

—What do you want? Are you a doctor?

—No, I'm not a doctor. I'm just insanely curious. Are you delivering a baby?

—What do you think?!—Fumiko shouted.

—Well, one never knows,—the guest answered, confused.

—If you want to help, please find a medic,—Friedrich said politely.

—Now bugger off!—Fumiko barked.

The blushing guest nodded and hurried to vanish into the corridor.

—Push, continue to breathe!

—I can't anymore!

With a napkin, Friedrich wiped the accumulated sweat from Fumiko's forehead again and removed back the hair stuck to her cheeks.

—Everything will be fine. Would you like some water?

—A-a-a-a-a-a-a-a!

—The universe may seem unfair, especially at a moment like this, in such circumstances, but remember, we have everything under control, everything is going according to plan, though we have to make it up on the fly...—Friedrich bustled and stuttered.—If needed, we have a paper knife for the umbilical cord.

—No way! I can't bear it anymore. Give me a book.

—A book? Have you gone mad?

—Maybe I will if you don't give me a book. My brain, Friedrich, I can feel it, it's not listening to me anymore, it's not listening at all... Ugh, a-a-a-a-a!

Friedrich was taken aback, stopping to wipe the sweat flowing down Fumiko's face. He wanted to object again, but decided that no matter how whimsical was his wife's request at that moment, he had no right to question it.

—Um... which one?

—For goodness's sake! Any!

In response, Friedrich handed her a tome on morphogenic cosmology, about five hundred pages thick, which she had attempted to finish reading just a few hours before attempting to sleep. Fumiko snatched it from her husband's grasp, tried to open it at the place where she left the bookmark, but the bookmark slipped out and zigzagged to the floor, sliding under the adjacent shelf, which, judging by her face, sent her into a state of terror so profound that her skin on the nape tightened, her eyes darted around, and in that instant she felt pain, probably the most intense since the onset of the process, and an overwhelming urge, rather a necessity, to push, but before she could scream, she shoved the book between her teeth and bit down, piercing the hard cover, making Friedrich flinch and almost drop his watch.

—Don't forget to breathe!—Friedrich continued to shout, glancing at the watch face, then at the door, then at his wife, now moaning and

growling.—Bloody attendant!

It went on for a long time. The entire train was awake. The Futzbuckers had woken up their carriage, while the rest were awakened by the attendants. At the first attendant's behest, who had witnessed the commencement of the labour, they ran through the train, methodically knocking on every door, asking the same question, to which most, rudely roused and puffy-faced, grumbled a negative without opening their bleary eyes and went back to sleep; yet some offered help, identifying themselves as veterinarians, dental technicians, psychotherapists, mediums, professors of vaguely medical sciences, photographers — anyone, it seemed, except someone who could actually assist with the birth.

At some point later, all of a sudden, the train brakes squealed, all the passengers were dragged forward, and one of the attendants almost fell, grabbing someone's door. Immediately another attendant ran out of the next carriage, stammering. They both shrugged, looked out of the window, saw nothing but night and the outline of a black rock, ran to the nearest compartment on the other side of the carriage, ignoring the shocked and frightened passengers, looked out of the window but found nothing but the blizzard that immediately pounced on their faces. The train stood still round the serpentine, headlights illuminating a frantic swarm of snowflakes that seemed to race in one solid substance. They looked back out of the compartment and saw the passengers, incredulous, indignant, who had also stepped out into the aisle and were now looking questioningly at the attendants. From the

next carriage another attendant came running to them and began to urge everyone not to panic, which made the passengers, who had not panicked before and had not even thought about it, panic, walk nervously up and down the aisle and swear silently. The attendant who had just arrived whispered in the other attendants' ears: "Avalanche. Somewhere further ahead of us there was an avalanche, they reported it from the station. Our driver said that we cannot go any further, so we are waiting for the avalanche to be cleared away." The attendants' hair stood on end, and they scampered away from the carriage, to the driver — for some reason they needed to know the information, the accuracy of which could hardly be disputed, first hand.

At the same time, when the train began to halt its abysswards movement, Fumiko in the Futzbuckers' compartment screamed in time with the squeaking brakes, which startled Friedrich, he closed his eyes and thought for a moment that something had gone wrong and the universe ended, but to his great relief in a few seconds he was holding a wet Felix in his arms, while his exhausted wife was trying to catch her breath, come to her senses and understand what had happened. The squeak of the brakes that for a time occupied her head with a deafening hum , had already ended and was, she thought, part of the process, as was the fact that she lost gravity for a second and leaned to the right, against the compartment wall, and felt a strange sudden alleviation at the moment when Friedrich, from the sudden deceleration, almost fell right on top of her laying on the berth. To him, before his body began to lurch, the sound had seemed just another of his wife's screams, a

scream that almost pushed him to madness, but in the surrounding mixture of sound, somewhere amidst the meaningless noise, he suddenly heard the name they had long ago chosen for their future son, Felix, and then his, Felix's, scream too.

The train stopped, and there was silence, broken only by the whistling of the snowstorm outside the window and the turmoil heard from other parts of the carriage.

—Felix!—exclaimed Friedrich, and, carefully removing the throbbing umbilical cord to the side, handed the bellowing Felix to his mother. Later he would tell his son how on the day he was born the mountains themselves whispered his name, and the whisper was as grand as the mountain, a whisper that made the whole world shudder.

At that moment the door to the compartment opened with a clatter, and a grey-haired woman appeared in the aisle, armed with a first-aid kit, together a pair of dishevelled attendants, and, throwing up her hands, shook her head, either in relief that all seemed to be well, or in indignation at the "unprofessional" delivery of the baby. The exhausted Fumiko, still sitting with a book in her teeth, unwilling to let go of either it or the screaming boy, still couldn't believe that the ordeal was over and was sure that something else was bound to follow, but when the grey-haired woman had finished the rest of the procedures (without using a paper knife) and assured her that everything, except of course for the stuck train, had gone well, Fumiko figured that the torment was over. Felix was there.

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The Void Travellers

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