

OffCut: Wild Abandon

I'm always impressed by books built on elaborate structures. *Cloud Atlas* with its neatly zigguratted chapters, each of the six stories linked yet independent. The severed beginnings of ten novels that make up Italo Calvino's *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*. The apartment block in *Life: A User's Manual* where the author, George Perec, acts more like the building's caretaker, moving methodically from room to room, tending to each.

One of the reasons I am so taken with these books is that, in my own experience of writing fiction, if I set out a structure ? or do any planning at all, if I'm honest ? it derails the project immediately. The moment I know where I'm going, I don't want to go there.

The following extract was part of an idea I had for my second novel, *Wild Abandon*. Initially, I had a scene where all the members of the commune take part in a meditation session together in which they visualise what life will be like after the apocalypse. I had an idea that I would write fifteen of these visualisations, one for each character. They would be published in a standalone book ? or maybe on top-trump cards ? to accompany the novel. This way, I thought, each visualisation would act as a kind of handbook to that character. A whistlestop tour of each character's mind. Plus there would be instructions for how the reader could do the meditation at home! Plus it would all be highly collectable!

I got as far as writing seven visualisations. What they revealed was that many of the characters were not the sort of people who would sit in a room meditating. They sabotaged the idea, interrupting to say what a dumb idea this was. In the end, the book only contains one visualisation, that of eleven-year-old Albert.

What follows is one of the offcuts. ("Offcuts" was the title of the novel until I started having nightmares about the headlines of future reviews: *Offcuts Deserves To Be* and so on.) In this scene, Marco ? a Welsh-Italian chef, one of the community's alpha males ? imagines what life will be like after the paradigm shift. This scene, I should say, is in no way representative of the published novel, and for that we can be thankful.

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? We are the few. Three months with no weather, just blue, and then, one morning, the kitchen lights dimmed and we knew the first body had hit the fence. The chargrilled smell wafted across the farm on the criss-cross griddle.

? We spent twenty-five years telling people to live right and only now ? when it was too late ? did they listen.

? We heard their voices calling from the perimeter fence. *We're dying out here. There's no food, power, nothing.*

? *We told you, we said.*

? *We know you did, they said. We're sorry.*

? *No, we're sorry, we said.*

? We had built two ringed fences, only the first was electrified. Albert was on look-out. He saw them coming, the tip of their ladder appearing above the trees. They came with thick rugs and mattresses.

? We went down with the shotgun and an axe.

? They were desperate: hungry, pale, thin, with sores on their lips and foreheads.

? One of them had managed to leap both fences but had broken his ankle on landing.

? *You've got to help me, he said.*

? It was difficult, but we were still human. His name was Alain Houston. We gave him food. We had conversations.

? *What was it like on the outside, Alain?*

? In the cities, carnage, he said. Organised gangs patrol the supermarkets, stock-watching. Blood in the aisles. Smaller gangs go from home to home, murder for a four-pack of tinned tuna, less. We live on a small island and only now we realise. A few stable communities exist ? or we hear of them existing ? but never see them. This place ? this heaven ? is the only community I know that has stayed strong.

? What can you do Alain Houston, for us?

? Before the shift, I was a systems analyst, he said.

? Then you must leave, we said.

? And he looked at us and he sobbed for his lack of foresight.

? There will be no systems in the next world, Alain.