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opening extract from

# Genesis

written by

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# GENESIS

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IS THE SOUL MORE THAN  
THE HUM OF ITS PARTS?

Douglas Hofstadter, *The Mind's I*

## FIRST HOUR

Anax moved down the long corridor. The only sound was the gentle hiss of the air filter overhead. The lights were down low, as demanded by the new regulations. She remembered brighter days, but never spoke of them. It was one of the Great Mistakes, thinking of brightness as a quality of the past.

Anax reached the end of the corridor and turned left. She checked the time. They would be watching her approach, or so it was rumoured. The door slid open, quiet and smooth, like everything in The Academy zone.

‘Anaximander?’

Anax nodded.

The panel was made up of three Examiners, just as the regulations had promised. It was a great relief. Details of the examination were kept secret, and among the candidates rumours swirled. ‘Imagination is the bastard child of time and ignorance,’ her tutor Pericles liked to say, always adding ‘not that I have anything against bastards.’

Anax loved her tutor. She would not let him down. The door closed behind her.

The Examiners sat behind a high desk, the top a dark slab of polished timber.

‘Make yourself comfortable.’ The Examiner in the middle spoke. He was the largest of the three, as tall and broad as any Anax had ever seen. By comparison the other two looked old and weak, but she felt their eyes upon her, keen and sharp. Today she would assume nothing. The space before them was clear. Anax knew the interview was being recorded.

EXAMINER: Four hours have been allotted for your examination. You may seek clarification, should you have trouble understanding any of our questions, but the need to do this will be taken into consideration when the final judgment is made. Do you understand this?

ANAXIMANDER: Yes.

EXAMINER: Is there anything you would like to ask, before we begin?

ANAXIMANDER: I would like to ask you what the answers are.

EXAMINER: I’m sorry. I don’t quite understand...

ANAXIMANDER: I was joking.

EXAMINER: Oh. I see.

A bad idea. Not so much as a flicker of acknowledgment from any of them. Anax wondered whether she should apologise, but the gap closed quickly over.

EXAMINER: Anaximander, your time begins now. Four hours on your chosen subject. The life and times of Adam Forde, 2058–2077. Adam Forde was born seven years into the age of Plato’s Republic. Can you please explain to us the political circumstances that led to The Republic’s formation?

Was this a trick? Anax’s topic clearly stated her area of expertise covered the years of Adam’s life only. The proposal had been accepted by the committee without amendment. She knew a little of the political background of course, everybody did, but it was not her area of expertise. All she could offer was a classroom recitation, familiar to every student. This was no way to start. Should she challenge it? Were they expecting her to challenge it? She looked to their faces for clues, but they sat impassive as stone, offering her nothing.

EXAMINER: Anaximander, did you understand the question?

ANAXIMANDER: Of course I did. I’m sorry. I’m just... it doesn’t matter...



Anax tried to clear her mind of worries. Four hours. Plenty of time to show how much she knew.

ANAXIMANDER: The story begins at the end of the third decade of the new millennium. As with any age, there was no shortage of doomsayers. Early attempts at genetic engineering had frightened large sectors of the community. The international economy was still oil-based, and the growing consensus was that a catastrophic shortage loomed.

What was then known as the Middle East remained a politically troubled region, and the United States—I will use the designations of the time for consistency—was seen by many to have embroiled itself in a war it could not win, with a culture it did not understand. While it promoted its interests as those of democracy, the definition was narrow and idiosyncratic, and made for a poor export.

Fundamentalism was on the rise on both sides of this divide, and the first clear incidents of Western Terrorism in Saudi Arabia in 2032 were seen by many as the spark for a fire that would never be doused. Europe was accused of having lost its moral compass and the independence riots of 2047 were seen as further evidence of secular decay. China's rise to international prominence, and what it called 'active diplomacy', led many to fear that another global conflict was on the horizon. Economic expansion threatened the global environment. Biodiversity shrank at unprecedented rates, and the last opponents of the Accelerated Climate Change Model were converted to the cause by the dust storms

of 2041. In short, the world faced many challenges, and by the end of the fifth decade of the current century, public discourse was dominated by a mood of threat and pessimism.

It is, of course, easy to be wise with the benefit of hindsight, but from our vantage point it is now clear that the only thing the population had to fear was fear itself. The true danger humanity faced during this period was the shrinking of its own spirit.

EXAMINER: Define spirit.

The Examiner's voice was carefully modulated, the sort of effect that could be achieved with the cheapest of filters. Only it wasn't technology Anax heard; it was control, pure and simple.

Every pause, every flickering of uncertainty: the Examiners observed them all. This, surely, was how they decided. Anax felt suddenly slow and unimpressive. She could still hear Pericles' last words. 'They want to see how you will respond to the challenge. Don't hesitate. Talk your way towards understanding. Trust the words.' And back then it had sounded so simple. Now her face tautened and she had to think her way to the words, searching for them in the way one searches for a friend in a crowd, panic never more than a moment away.

ANAXIMANDER: By spirit I mean to say something about the prevailing mood of the time. Human spirit is the ability

to face the uncertainty of the future with curiosity and optimism. It is the belief that problems can be solved, differences resolved. It is a type of confidence. And it is fragile. It can be blackened by fear, and superstition. By the year 2050, when the conflict began, the world had fallen upon fearful, superstitious times.

EXAMINER: Tell us more about these superstitions.

ANAXIMANDER: Superstition is the need to view the world in terms of simple cause and effect. As I have already said, religious fundamentalism was on the rise, but that is not the type of superstition I'm referring to. The superstition that held sway at the time was a belief in simple causes.

Even the plainest of events is tied down by a thick tangle of permutation and possibility, but the human mind struggles with such complexity. In times of trouble, when the belief in simple gods breaks down, a cult of conspiracy arises. So it was back then. Unable to attribute misfortune to chance, unable to accept their ultimate insignificance within the greater scheme, the people looked for monsters in their midst.

The more the media peddled fear, the more the people lost the ability to believe in one another. For every new ill that befell them, the media created an explanation, and the explanation always had a face and a name. The people came to fear even their closest neighbours. At the level of the individual, the community and the nation, people sought

signs of others' ill intentions; and everywhere they looked, they found them, for this is what looking does.

This was the true challenge the people of this time faced. The challenge of trusting each other. And they fell short of this challenge. This is what I mean, when I say they faced a shrinking of the spirit.

EXAMINER: Thank you for your clarification. Now please return to your story of the times. How did The Republic come to be established?

Just as Pericles had predicted, Anax was buoyed by the sound of her own voice. This is what made her such a good candidate. Her thoughts followed her words, or so he explained it. 'Everybody is different, and this is your skill.' So although the story she was telling was a stale one, left too long, examined too often, Anax found herself wrapping it in new words, growing in confidence with every layer.

ANAXIMANDER: The first shot of the Last War was fired in misunderstanding. It happened on 7 August 2050. The Japanese–Chinese alliance had spent eighteen months trying to piece together a coalition to oversee the sulphur-seeding project, in the hope that the heat-trapping effects of atmospheric carbon could be countered. That the coalition was unable to advance was due largely to the distrust I have mentioned. The US blocked the initiative, believing it was part of a greater plan to establish a new international order,

and China in turn believed the US was deliberately accelerating climate change in order to crush the Chinese economy. In the predictable way these things unfold, China set about a plan for a secret unilateral action.

The plane shot down over US air space in the Pacific was engaged in the first of the seeding trials, although as we all know, the US never wavered from its official line that it was a military plane engaged in hostile actions.

EXAMINER: It is better you assume we know nothing.

Anax bowed her head in apology, feeling her cheeks glow with shame. She waited for a signal to continue but none came. In any other circumstance she would have railed against their rudeness.

ANAXIMANDER: Plato's power base came from his global economic interests. He made his initial fortune in hydrogen technology, and compounded this with wise investments in the bio-cleansing industry. With his wealth and contacts, Plato was better placed than most to foresee the likely outcome of an escalating conflict between the superpowers. Always a prudent man, he began to move his money to a group of islands at the bottom of the world known then as Aotearoa. By the time war was declared, he and his associates were said to own seventy percent of the island economy, and were already moving it towards a state of technology-rich self-sufficiency. As the international situation worsened,

Plato found it a simple matter to convince the people of his adopted homeland of the need for a more effective defence system. What is still regarded as the twenty-first century's finest engineering feat, the Great Sea Fence of The Republic, was completed by 2051, eleven months into the Last War.

By the time the first plague was released at the end of 2052, The Republic was already sealed off from the world. Plato was revered as the saviour of Aotearoa, and, as the reports from the outside grew grimmer, he became known also as the saviour of the human race itself. By the time the last external broadcast was picked up, in the June of 2053, it was widely believed within The Republic that theirs was the planet's last habitable homeland.

The refugees were expected, of course, and when they came they were dispatched. Approaching aircraft were shot down without any attempt at communication, and in the early days the people gathered on cliff tops to watch the spectacle of ghost ships exploding on the horizon as they drifted through the mined zone. Over time, the explosions became less frequent, and the laser guns were offered fewer airborne targets. It was then the people turned to Plato, and asked him to take them forward, to better times.

EXAMINER: A fair summary, Anaximander. And this then is The Republic into which your subject of special interest, Adam Forde, was born. Before we get on to his extraordinary life, can you please tell us a little about the Republic Plato constructed?

ANAXIMANDER: Historians say that The Republic was best understood by its motto 'Forward towards the past'. Plato, or perhaps we should say Plato's advisers, for most now believe Helena to have been the key architect of The Republic's social order, preached a new style of conservatism. Plato told the people that the Downfall had come about because people had strayed from their natural state. They had embraced change uncritically, forgetting the most fundamental law of science, that change means decay. Plato told the people of The Republic that they could return to the glory of the great civilisations only by creating a society based upon stability and order.

Plato identified what he called the five great threats to order: Impurity of Breeding, Impurity of Thought, Indulgence of the Individual, Commerce, and The Outsider. His solutions were radical, but the people were frightened and clung to his many promises. 'The state has saved you,' Plato told them, 'and now you must toil to save the state.'

The people were divided into four distinct classes, based upon genomic readings. Labourers, Soldiers, Technicians and Philosophers. Children were separated from their parents at birth, and details of their parentage were never divulged. At the end of their first year each child was tested, and either allocated to their class or terminated.

All children were subject to a rigorous education, both physical and intellectual. Wrestling and gymnastics were compulsory, along with mathematics and genetics. In the

summer months the children went naked, as this was thought to lessen the desire for individuality.

The best athletes were able to advance from labouring to soldiering classes, even if their genomes did not predict it, and similarly the best thinkers were given the opportunity to rise to the Technician class, but never any further. The class of Philosophers was reserved for the anointed few.

Men and women lived separately, eating and sleeping in their working communes. Romance was allowed, and once couples had received clearance from the Department of Genetic Variation they were encouraged to marry. But even after marrying, they remained living among their own kind, and had to earn share-time allowances.

That I think is a fair summary of the major aspects of early Republican society.

Anax realised there would be no signs of approval from the panel, but nevertheless she could not help looking up at them, in the way a child in her first week of school might look at her instructor. If not for encouragement, then at least acknowledgment. But this wasn't school. This was The Academy.

EXAMINER: Who is your tutor, Anaximander?

ANAXIMANDER: Pericles. Mostly. I've had help in the school, of course, and I have done a lot of my own research, but—



EXAMINER: Pericles.

The Examiner said the name as if it had a special power over him. Anax could not tell if this was good or bad. She waited for the next question, hoping that soon they would get to the material with which she was most confident, the remarkable life and times of Adam Forde.

EXAMINER: In your own judgment, was Plato successful in achieving his aims?

ANAXIMANDER: That would depend upon what you take his aims to have been. If what he sought was his own personal power and stature, which I think is a fair estimate of his motivations, then at least for as long as he lived, he was able to exert considerable influence. If, however, you are asking whether he was successful in producing an ideal state, one in which the people and the society were best able to realise their potential, then it is harder to know. Perhaps history would have found it easier to judge Plato if Adam Forde had never been born.

Just saying the name relaxed her. For three long years, Adam had never been far from her mind. Although he died long before she was born, Anax felt she knew him as well as she knew anyone. She had studied so many transcripts, downloaded so many traces, but more importantly, she had what Pericles called 'the feel for him'. If she couldn't

impress the Examiners now, then she couldn't impress the Examiners. And that—well, she wouldn't think about it. She had promised Pericles she wouldn't think about it.

EXAMINER: Yes, Adam.

Anax was yet to meet anyone who could say the name without pausing at its significance. The new thinkers were revising his importance downward now. 'There need be nothing special about the match that lights the fire,' was their motto, 'save that it is the match that lights the fire.' But they too paused, when they said his name.

EXAMINER: Anaximander, the first thing I need to hear is a little about Adam's background. Who were his parents, what were his early years like? Everyone knows about the night on guard duty, every young one can tell us the story word for word, but Adam's life didn't begin on that night. Tell us how, in your view, he got there.

ANAXIMANDER: Adam was born in the year 2058. He was raised in the Tana nursery for the first year. Legend has it that his mother had devised a method of marking her baby out and had herself transferred to his nursery so that she could watch over him during that time, but it is almost certainly just a story. The myth of causation again. For those who wish to understand what it was that made Adam the way he was, the answer 'everything, and therefore nothing', does not rest easy.

What we do know is that Adam was born into the Philosopher class. At the end of his first year, he underwent the normal physiological testing, and had his genome read. His learning status was confirmed but a warning was placed on his file. At least two genetic markers flagged a possible unpredictability in his behaviour. In fact, the legendary Clark memorandum suggested that termination be considered. In normal circumstances he would have been submitted to retesting in two months' time. But 2059 was the time of the second great plague scare, and when Clark died all her possessions were destroyed as a precaution so the retesting order was never put on file. By the time the mistake was discovered, Adam had passed his first verbalisation tests and termination was no longer a consideration. In the confusion surrounding Adam's file, the warning markers were overlooked, and the information was never passed on to the schooling bodies.

EXAMINER: So he entered straight into the Philosophers' stream?

ANAXIMANDER: Yes. The records tell us he was a top scholar who impressed immediately, particularly in mathematics and logic. He also excelled in wrestling, and at the age of thirteen represented his city at the annual tournament. It was there we first note a display of the individuality that was to lead inevitably to his greatest role.

At the tournament he met a girl called Rebekah, a fellow

wrestler, and he decided the two of them should be friends. That they did not live in the same city or even on the same island did not deter him. On the last night of the tournament, Adam hid himself among Rebekah's team's luggage. He managed to travel seven hundred kilometres south of his allocated zone and, with Rebekah's help, avoid detection for three days before a cook discovered him hiding in the dry food store of Rebekah's commune.

Adam was returned home with a black mark against him and, it might be said, the pattern had been set. He had shown himself to be combative, impulsive, unafraid of censure and drawn towards female company. Normally such a transgression would see a child transferred automatically to the labouring classes but his teacher made a special plea on Adam's behalf, citing what she saw as his potential. As a concession he was transferred to an elite soldiering academy of the Republican Guards. And as a result of that decision, perhaps we can say history changed forever.

EXAMINER: If we were to believe in simple causes.

Again Anax was forced to blush at such a simple mistake. She had heard a rumour that no candidate was allowed more than two such errors. But then she had heard many rumours. This was no time for thinking such things. She had let herself become carried away by the story. Pericles had warned her this might happen. She resolved to temper her comments.