

He led me through the entry barrier in the arrivals hall with barely a nod to the border officers on duty. Double glass doors at the main entrance whooshed open, and I was assaulted by a thick cushion of warm, humid air. Directly ahead of us at the curb was a long, black car – more like an immense steel needle with an engine tucked away somewhere – with another tall, black-clad figure standing beside it. Seeing us approach, he made a sweeping gesture toward the car, at which point there was a muffled click, and a wing flitted up and away from the side of the vehicle. Entering the car, I felt the humid cushion slough off my skin, and was instantly and intensely swaddled in cool air and hushed soundlessness.

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Paarol entered the car from the other side. The driver closed the door after him, seated himself behind the wheel, and prepared to drive. It was then that I noticed that there was very little traffic in and around the harbor area. Eventually I also noticed that short, extremely fast trains were whizzing by in all directions, suspended on elevated through-ways thirty feet above the street. It seemed strange that I hadn't seen them immediately, but then I realized that the reason was that I hadn't *heard* them.

"How quiet is it in here?" I asked, turning to Paarol.

"Here in the car? Oh, it is sound-proofed throughout."

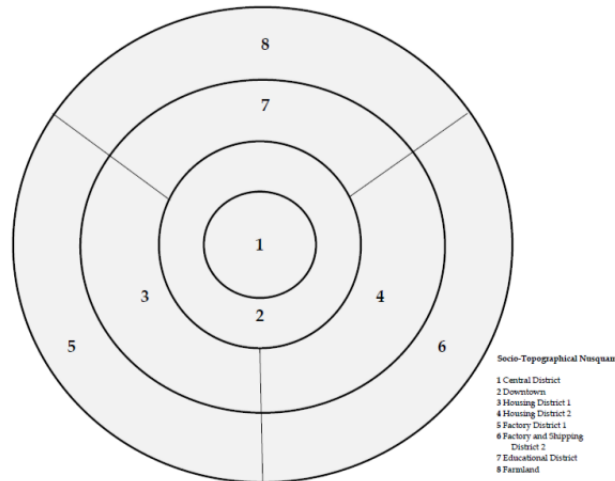
I reached out to hit the window switch, and Paarol said, "You still will not hear the trains, Professor. They run on an electro-magnetic system that is whisper-soft. In fact, people call them 'whispers.' "

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“And this is over the entire island?” I asked. The car had pulled away from the curb. I didn’t hear its engine either.

“Oh, yes, of course. The island is divided into eight main districts, four of which contain housing. . . .”

“Like eight wedges of a huge pie,” I piped up. *Hunger drives us like nothing else does, I reflected, having eaten nothing since brekker.* Then he handed me a schematic map of the island.



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“No, no, it is not quite so symmetrical,” he replied in all seriousness. “This socio-topographical map explains. The Central District is reserved for the Council and Administrative Offices, and the official residences of Premier Toft and all government officers. Ringing the Central District is the area known as Downtown, which contains retail operations as well as residences for administrative personnel. Housing Districts 1 and 2 are designated for housing of the general population. Contiguous to these is the Educational District, since all should have access to educational resources.

“Beyond the Educational District, along the northern perimeter of the island, is the Farmland District. Our large recreational area and beach are located along the coastal area of this district. Taking up the southern perimeter of the island are Factory District 1 and the Factory and Shipping District 2, which is where your NPAT docked, and where our Defense Facilities are located as well.”

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“And do the trains connect all of these districts?” I asked as we powered along in the silent car.

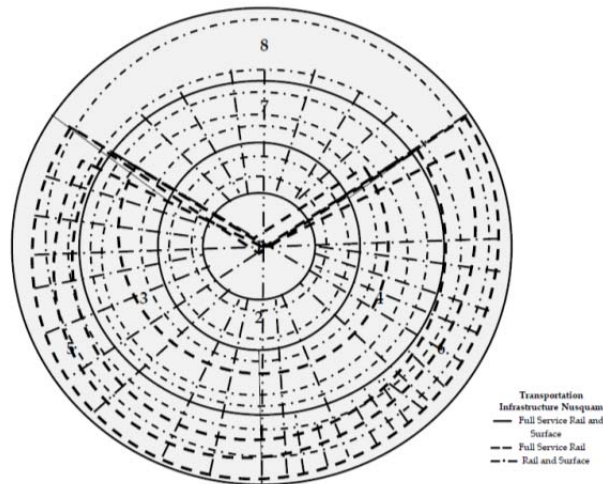
“The whispers connect everything,” Paarol said with a practiced enthusiasm. “The Full Service lines carry passengers and freight on a continuous basis, twenty-four hours a day, shadowing a network of surface roads at ground level, such as this road we are now traveling. A secondary network of full service rail spreads out the grid, particularly in and out of the Factory and Shipping District, shadowing often a network of secondary roads suitable for utility vehicles. The grid is then supplemented by a rail and surface network designed for local passenger traffic. It is so efficient that on an average day, one might criss-cross the entire island entirely by rail with virtually no delay at interchanges.”

“I’d be very interested to try that out,” I said. “I love commuting by train, but it’s rarely

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pleasant or efficient in the typical urban setting in the States.”

“Well, we can arrange an excursion, certainly. Here is the Transpo-Infrastructure map, so that you can experience this for yourself. The Ministry will provide you appropriate guides to accompany you.”



“District 8 seems so under-served by your transportation system,” I said, reviewing the map.

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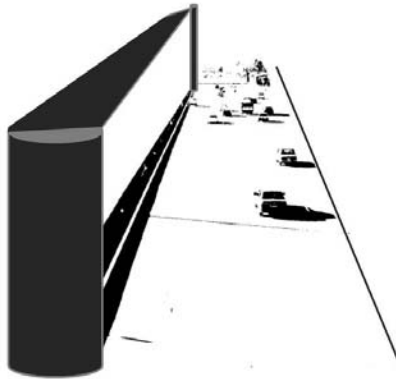
“No, no, Professor, you see - that is the farmland district. The secondary rail lines on the northern perimeter - here,” he said, tapping the top edge of the map, “and the southern perimeter of the district - here - are sufficient for traffic to the recreational and beach areas and to the farmland work sheds.

“Interesting. There’s also relatively little rail service within the Central District. Why is that? Am I reading this right?”

“Service there is primarily for the convenience of Premier Toft and other officials residing in the Central District, and of course those who have reason to visit the Council or are summoned,” he explained.

“I see,” I responded. My attention drifted, and I noticed that there was very little surface traffic at all, which seemed odd. “You know, in the States, the streets and highways around a major transportation hub would be buzzing with traffic at almost any time of day or night.”

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There was very little surface traffic at all.

“We do not encourage private transportation,” he explained. “It is not efficient, and it disaggregates individuals.”

“ ‘Disaggregates’? ” I said, unsure what that could mean.

“If we optimize human potential in accordance with scientific planning, there is little utility in behaviors that individuate citizens, separated from society. Collective transport is, in

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most circumstances, more efficient and more productive.”

“So, you discourage private transportation to increase efficiency?”

“Yes, of course, but also to increase social interaction and identification.”

“I see.” *I most decidedly do not see, but there are times when you need to gather more data instead of arguing from first principles alone.*

Suddenly, six small motorcycles – like grotesque metal wasps – zipped past us along the edge of the highway, with crazed blinking lights screaming at us soundlessly. It would have been the first distinct traffic noise I had heard since we left the port. They were bearing down on a small car in the right-hand lane that had been traveling at slow speed.

Three of them neatly cut the car out of the flow of traffic and maneuvered it to a stop along the shoulder of the highway. The other three swarmed up behind the car as it halted. Our car moved up towards this scene; the cy-

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clists, all in yellow-orange jackets, black trousers and high boots, were dragging the driver from the car. With the small car out of the flow, traffic was increasing its speed. As our car moved quickly past the scene, the cyclists appeared to be beating the driver with long, flexible truncheons.

“Wait! What’s going on?” I cried out anxiously. “We should stop this . . . we should call the police!”

Paarol seemed unconcerned by the startling event unfolding past our windows.

“No worries, Professor. Those are the police, the traffic patrol,” he explained calmly. “People call them ‘gliders.’ ”

“But look . . .”

“No, no, understand. That car was interfering with the efficient flow of traffic. On balance, it is best for society that such behavior be disincentivised.”

“Disincentivized? They are killing that man!”

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“Oh, not at all, Professor. The required procedure is very clear. A painful beating, public humiliation, yes, but that is all.”

“One mistake, and . . .”

“Not at all, Professor, we have never had a single problem. The procedure is quite stable.”

Silence. What do you say at this point? *‘Stop the car; I would like to walk home now’?*

The car tooted along at a speed that attracted no gliders. Occasionally I would see a swarm of them flitting by at the margins of the highway, back and forth, doubtlessly on some errand that I would prefer not to think about.

Paarol seemed anxious to keep the conversation flowing, a needful distraction. He sounded more and more like a travel guide, instead of a deputy assistant minister. *Or was it assistant deputy minister?* Looking at him and listening blankly, I was telling myself, *“This is the sort of person who ends up before the International Criminal Court,”* but of course, that wasn’t true. *I would end up there if I wasn’t very careful.*

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When was my flight out? When do I leave for home?

“Professor, we are just passing into Housing District 2, heading northwest, towards the Central District,” he said, almost like a voice-over narrating a travel film. I could have told *him* that we had crossed a district line, the transition was so abrupt. You could almost feel the car pass over the boundary between the two districts, the contrast was so striking.

“Do you see those panels lining the roofs and upper stories of the residential buildings?” he asked. “Solar panels . . .”

“So you rely on solar energy?” I said, as a response seemed to be prompted.

“Only as a supplement. They are used in limited amounts, mostly to supplement electric power for personal use in the housing districts and in the Downtown, arrayed on the roofs.”

“Well, then, what is it supplementing?” I asked, drawn into the discussion despite my state of mind.

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"Sorry?"

"You said it - the solar energy - was a supplement. Supplement to what?" I explained.

"Oh, yes, of course," he said. *Apparently I am interrupting the script.*

"Do you rely on nuclear energy?" Now I was prompting him.

"No, no. There is no infrastructural nuclear energy, nor any nuclear material aside from what is used in the labs for experimental purposes, and to produce radio-isotopes for medical devices and treatments."

"I see," I responded. *I'm not sure that I do, actually.* "So what *does* it supplement?"

"Sorry?"

"The . . . ah . . . the solar energy - it's a supplement to . . . ?"

"Oh, yes, of course," he said. "The submarine surface of the island is studded with thousands of hollow chromium-steel pillars extending 200 meters below the sub-surf. Within these, sewage treatment, water processing, and

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the geothermal pipes operate to produce the majority of the energy for the entire island.”

“You must be close to energy efficient, I would imagine,” I said, exercising my imagination in an effort to move the gliders out of my immediate thoughts. *Unsuccessfully, as it turned out, since another swarm of them buzzed past the car at that moment.* Paarol was still talking.

“. . . and as a result, the government does not tax property or sales . . . ”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Energy efficiency. We are indeed energy efficient – the source of our independence and national safety and security. In addition, of course, submerged hydroelectric piers girding the perimeter of the island harness tidal energy as an additional source of power.”

“I see.”

“This is a genuine *public* utility! The entire population accesses electric power from the government, free from any unit charge, although this is one component of the periodic

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tax determinations. The more electricity a resident consumes, the greater the surcharge on the pro rata individual share of the government resource budget, up to a maximum amount equal to five percent of the individual and GRB share. The share is calculated on the basis of total projected government expenditures, prorated over total resident population yearly income from all sources. So those earning more are proportionally subject to higher tax amounts. The surcharge therefore generates the public surplus, which funds the capital fund and the long-term contingency fund.

“So the legislature . . .”

“Supervisory Council.”

“Right . . . supervisory council . . . calculates the tax rates and liabilities . . .”

“GRB share.”

“Yes . . . GRB share . . . each year . . . or each fiscal year . . .”

“No, no, the GRB itself is, of course, approved each year on the basis of the plan and

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recommendations of Premier Toft and the Office of Fiscal Planning, but the GRB *share* is then generated in due course, on the basis of the algorithms developed by Premier Toft upon the establishment of Nusquam.”

“So this isn’t . . .”

“. . . and, of course, the algorithms have since been refined and adjusted from time to time by the OFP as needed.”

“So there isn’t a legislatively established tax code as such . . .”

“This is purely a technical matter; there is no role for the Supervisory Council, except of course for the formal approval of the periodic audit of the GRB and budget report of the OFP.”

“But the political dimension . . .”

“There is no political dimension. The object of taxation is subsumed into the basic operating principle of the government – to advance the human condition in accordance with rea-

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son, not the accidents of history. 'Incidence, not accidents,' as Premier Toft says."

"But, surely, questions must arise about allocation of resources and budgetary planning."

"Contingencies are best addressed without the exigencies of politics. We rely on science and technology to achieve the goals of a just and ordered society, where the welfare of the people is 'advanced by the advance of knowledge.'"

"Alright, but shouldn't citizens have a voice, through their representatives, in the allocation of government resources? I would think that, ultimately, that is the point of politics."

"Politics is a useful tool to create national unity and identity," Paarol seemed to concede. "It can invoke nationalism and pride in one's country. However, individual *politicking* goes against the core tenants of the Nusquami ethos, defined as a free-thinking, open society that allows education and the arts, not politics, to

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nourish the minds and souls of the citizens. Of course, in some cases, where the speech being produced creates an immediate and present danger to society, censorship and external control must be utilized to protect the citizens from being exploited.”

This seemed to me to be little more than a rationalization for excluding citizens from participation in their own governance, and I was tempted to respond. Yet it could be that I was bringing a narrow angle of vision to bear on what was, in fact, an extraordinarily complex set of issues and relationships. Or it could be that I was afraid, in some vaguely defined way, of what might stand behind this blather.

Our trip continued in polite silence, interrupted occasionally by the screaming sight of gliders swooping past the car, on their way to some fresh offence against efficiency. Thus we passed through the Downtown District and into the Central District, dominated by a gleaming tower at the center of the island.

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Twenty minutes later, the car pulled up at the entrance of a chromium-steel-clad hotel that stretched up 200 stories.

