

Things To Come By David Silver

“Can I get a Coke” said the elderly man to the Autowaiter.

“I’ll **have** a Coke” said the much younger woman with undue emphasis.

“Why do you speak in that quaint old-fashioned way young lady?”

“Oh come on Granddad, keep up with the times, it’s the fashion to pretend we’re back in the 1990s. Anyway let’s not bicker, I know you like to pretend you’re grumpier than you really are but at 100 you’re doing pretty well”.

“Okay you cheeky thing, and thanks for organising the family party for my big birthday, and I know you’re planning to do it all again for Nana in a few months”.

The Flying Fish food drone arrived and delivered its load to the Autowaiter, which deposited their orders on the table. This Caferie had the latest table designs with cutaways to accommodate diners’ PersPro units. Apparently, the premises used to be a bank, one of the last to survive since all banking had gone online and physical money had become extinct, certainly in the UK. The sound of revelry filtered in through the half open door. Not an unusual sound for Weyford High Street these days.

“So, Granddad, when I was a little girl you would tease me by saying that you knew everything. I know now that you were joking but back then I thought you were being serious and it would upset me that you would try to deceive me. But you do know an awful lot about an awful lot. Do tell me about the changes you’ve seen in your lifetime”.

“Well now my Chloe, where shall I start? Okay, back in 2020 when you were just coming up to five, the Great Pandemic came to the world”.

“Yes, I remember that. Mum and Dad always tried to reassure me that things would soon go back to normal when a special medicine was invented although I was terribly worried about having to have an injection. It made it so difficult to see you and Nana in real life and not just on a computer screen. There were some promising but premature announcements during that first year but the disease kept crossing species and mutating. For several years there was a constant assurance that a cure was just around the corner. It never came did it, but here we are in the centre of Weyford with no fear of catching it from each other or anyone else”.

“No my dearest, technology came to our rescue. Science was making huge inroads into quantum computing and artificial intelligence. Blisteringly fast information processors together with increasingly sophisticated programming. And best of all was the multidisciplinary Oxford team led by Professor Unity Kramer, comprised of specialists in energy capture and storage and atmospheric filtration. The developing science of gaseous boundary effects, resulting from the exploration of the moons and planets in our solar system, had the biggest impact. And so it was that the first crude PersPro units came to be hastily developed, so-named as they offered the wearer personal protection from hostile environmental factors”.

“Yes, I remember being fitted with my first one when I was around 10 although all the adults already had them. It was quite heavy but I suppose that made children a lot fitter and stronger, having to lug that around all day. My children have it a lot easier.”

“Oh yes, I do remember how heavy the early adult units were too. Their power packs had to be charged every night and people would panic if they were away from home and their battery levels were running low. Recharging stations sprang up everywhere”.

“But I mean, how do they actually work Mister ‘Knows Everything’ Grandad?”

“Ah, okay, now we’re in business” he said rubbing his hands in anticipation of showing off his knowledge. “Shall we **have** some more Cokes and perhaps a bit of lemon drizzle cake?”.

“These boxes ...”. He inclined his head toward the unit strapped to his chest. It was around 30 centimetres long, 25 wide and 15 deep. “... they contain an incredible amount of miniaturised technology. Energy collection and entrapment, laser body proprioception, mass movement gyroscopy, ultrasound edge effect generation, infra-red and microwave gas manipulation, Dyson bladeless fan and suction devices and QEPFs – that’s quantum efficiency particulate filters - all managed in perfect harmony by fabulously powerful computing power, or AI as it’s generally known, although it’s not intelligence in the human sense. As you know, when you get a new PersPro model, and every few weeks, you have to use your Very Personal Computer – we used to call them smartphones back in the day - to perform a full laser scan of your body shape which is then transmitted to your PersPro so that the unit understands its environment. Now it has everything it needs to generate a body-contoured boundary layer acting as a ‘force field’ around you. All air permeating through the field from the outside is directed by the lasers, fans and suction devices into the filters where pollutants are extracted before the purified air is directed toward your face. The snorkel behind your head protruding out through the field – ending in that particularly delightful tulip on your hat in your case – serves as an additional air intake into the unit. We’re all in our own little bubbles”.

He paused to let her ponder all this. She’d never really considered the detail, having lived for 25 years taking the wearing of her unit for granted. A bit like the way some people put their wristwatch or removable tattoo on in the morning and take them off at night. But she was also one of those who had taken to using the wonderful additional artistic functionality of her M-class unit to the full.

The pleasant sounds of people enjoying themselves in the sunshine outside continued. Another drone arrived with their new order. He got lost in thought considering how interesting it was that all the comestibles for all of the Caferies in Weyford came from one single economy-of-scale preparation centre on an industrial estate on the edge of town. Solar-powered drones made easy work of rushing orders to customers. Strange to think that in the old days every establishment had its own kitchen, chefs and waiters. So crude and inefficient.

“Carry on Grandad”.

“Oh yes. There were rapid improvements – head-worn solar cells reduced battery size and weight. Body-movement energy capture took it further. And of course all units have a hand-operated pump just in case of a power failure, which is rare of course.

Now we come to the first of two stunning and completely unanticipated spin-offs. As time went by, statisticians noticed that mortality rates in the older population were starting to diminish. At first nobody could understand why. Most people were delighted, older people of course and their families. But the government was having to anticipate higher health service costs and having to pay out state pensions for decades longer than before. They needn’t have worried as there were fewer geriatric cases occupying hospital beds; in any case they started to raise retirement age in line with the increasing lifespan. The PersPro industry and

all its spin-offs employs many thousands of people and there's always a shortage of workers”.

“But why did it happen – I mean I'm so pleased I've still got you Grandad, but what had changed?”.

“Well it seems that the ultra-efficient air filtration, as well as doing its job of removing the airborne pandemic virus also removed other common microorganisms – the flu, the common cold and many other diseases, and also carcinogenic pollutants. The boundary effect also reduced the amount of UV light reaching the skin which was especially welcome as global warming has continued to be a problem. So, with their bodies under reduced attack, older people live longer. And here I am!”

“Wonderful. And what was the second thing you were going to say about it Grandad?”

“Oh yes, and this is perhaps the most fascinating and society-changing thing of all”. The music and excited voices outside seemed to get a bit louder. “Because of the need to wear a solar cell array all sorts of fancy decorative hats became fashionable. Those disguising the rather unsightly cells as flowers became especially popular. Then came Ronald Mumming from Ducklington who set the world alight with his scientific paper ‘A Waveform Adaptation For PersPro Units’. Distilling his rather long and dry treatise into simple terminology, he suggested that as wearers of PersPros had upon themselves a device that drew in and expelled air and a hand-operated bellows originally intended for emergency use then with the addition of a keyboard and some tuned metal reeds it could also double as a musical instrument.

Well, what a storming success that became. Older units were ditched by the thousand as consumers sought the latest PersCordions as they became known. I have to confess I was one of the first and, with a bit of encouragement, you got one not long after. Soon we saw groups of people at home, in the street, anywhere and everywhere, bursting forth into music and dance. Complete strangers would twirl around in a revival of the old customs of street dancing which had long been abandoned because of the pandemic”.

“Come on Grandad, let's go and join the others”.

They finished the last of their refreshments, straightened their flowered hats and walked out into the bright sunshine to join the cheerily-dressed crowds dancing and gyrating with pure joie de vivre all the way up and down Weyford High Street. ‘Boris Dancing’ they called it, in honour of that great celebrated politician who had saved the country from the worst of the pandemic in those dark distant days.

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