

Windmills of New Amsterdam

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

When I first got the Summons from the Mayor's office, I was alternately terrified and elated. I could barely contain my emotions, with joy and pride and fear of failure all mixed up. When I had simmered down a little, however, the accompanying enigmatic instructions, written in the same cursive script on the parchment I had just been handed, provoked a more thoughtful reaction within me.

"Think about your life, your childhood," the letter instructed, "Your schooling and, especially, your history lessons. Be prepared to answer questions about what you have learned."

On the day appointed, I make myself ready for a journey. I drew on my best leather boots and the heavy woollen cloak I reserved for cooler weather, then drew up my hair braids – I still grew it long, almost to my waist – inside the woollen hat I habitually wore. Finally I picked up the leather satchel containing the hand-copied books I was currently studying and my precious notebook. With a last look around the little house I had shared with my family since I got married, I set off.

I had a journey of perhaps three hours in front of me, on foot. Most of my route would follow the towpath of the New Cut and, later on, the Grand Circular canal. The waterways were busy, even at this late time of year, with winter really only a few weeks away. Long narrowboats laden with goods and materials were being towed by placid horses, the animals so familiar with the route that they plodded along with almost no human guidance.

Alongside the cut stood the squat towers of the windmills, the wooden frames of their sails creaking as they pumped water to keep the canal system running. The heavy stone-built towers of the mills were a familiar part of the landscape hereabouts. Elsewhere, windmills pumped water for irrigation or drainage in different seasons, or ground wheat to make flour for bread.

In this part of our country, the local gradients are too small to provide adequate power for water-mills. In the hills, the ridges of foothills that effectively formed the boundary of our little settlement,

water mills are commonplace, driving sawmills for timber and cutting stone blocks, or powering the forges which wrought iron for wheels and hinges. The timbers and cut stone from the quarries are of course transported first by wagon and then by narrow boat to the more populous centres.

Nodding politely to the men and women working the boats and horses, I strode onwards, head down against the brisk wind and scudding clouds. As I walked, I reflected on what I had learned about our world during my forty or so years, as instructed by the Mayor herself.

The area centred on the city of the same name was called New Amsterdam. The city Mayor was the *de facto* leader of the entire community. He or, more usually, she was elected for life but rarely, it seemed, against any serious opposition. The Mayor chaired a Grand Council in the long building near Landing Central, made up by the hundred or so representatives from all the communes and townships in our country.

My portentous news was that I had been asked to become the Mayor's Assistant, her private aide – a post which, over the generations, has been seen as a stepping-stone to greater things. Some people say this is almost a position of "Mayor-in-waiting", although I personally believe this is an exaggeration.

I have been the leader of our commune council for near four years, doing my best to guide and direct the township of Garden Welwyn. In practice, this has meant I have been a personal advisor and confidante to what seems like most of the five thousand adults who live in the town, or in the villages, hamlets and farms nearby.

I applied for the Assistant role several years ago, writing a long letter detailing my qualifications – such as they are – and explaining why I felt myself fit for the responsibility. I suspect that many apply for the position, and it was quite a surprise when I was asked to meet and be assessed by increasingly senior representatives from the Council.

As I had been doing increasingly frequently, I was leaving behind my husband and two children – hardly children any more, more well-grown teenagers. The elder boy, Johann, is already employed almost daily on the waterways improvement programme, labouring at building the extension to the western docks at Welwyn Port. We are

hoping to confirm his apprenticeship with the Waterways Guild next year.

Our younger girl, Gwendolyn, is already showing a remarkable affinity with growing things – she has almost single-handedly run our vegetable patch for many years. She has expressed an ambition to join the Forest Watch, the highly respected body responsible for managing and replanting the upland woodlands we rely upon so much for both winter fuel and building materials.

But this will not be a short trip away – at least, if the Mayor accepts me as her Assistant. Gwendolyn has already expressed her unease at the prospect of an unsettling move, away from the friends and neighbours that she had grown up with – indeed, in most cases, that *I* had grown up with. Despite the risk of family upset, we have agreed that both husband and children will move to the city, to be with me in my new role.

I was now walking steadily downhill on the towpath of the Grand Circular, following a series of locks and short reaches as the canal dropped down towards the city. I crested a low rise and caught sight of New Amsterdam.

Inevitably, Faraway Tower was the first thing I could make out in the distance. This tall white tower is made of some amazingly resilient material – not metal, not stonework – and grows steadily narrower towards the summit, with a large ball, a sphere, at the very top. No-one now alive can conceive of how it was constructed. It appears to be some kind of ceramic, much tougher and smoother than the pottery plates and mugs we use at home.

The Tower was constructed by the Settlers themselves, shortly after First Arrival. Everyone knows that, set all around the base of the tower, there are darker areas – almost like windows – which, we are told, sometimes light up with messages from other worlds, but this has not happened recently.

Settlers Square, the open area around the Tower, was the original landing site for the new arrivals. The city of New Amsterdam which grew up around it and the surroundings areas form one of a handful of settlements scattered across this world of New Earth.

Like the original, this Earth orbits its Sun – a star once known in the catalogues as Bygones – at a distance of ninety-three million miles, turns on its axis once every twenty-four hours and with a year of 365-and-a-bit days. This year is 977, based on our year zero – the date of

the first official landing. Our history tells us that Humankind was aware of our planet for thousands of years before anyone actually landed here. There was a long and slow process of terraforming – literally, earth shaping – turning this world into a near-duplicate of our original home.

I knew that the not-very-well hidden secret purpose of this world is simply to survive, forever. The residents are expected to live long and happy – but not artificially extended – lives, to raise children to replace their parents, to live with minimal impact on the environment, and to propagate the basic human form into the far future unchanged. The people in this settlement represent the widest possible cross-section of the human phenotype and genotype, with every possible skin colour and body plan that our ancestors would have recognised.

So this world is a carefully-constructed utopia, an insurance policy against unforeseen and indeed unimaginable disasters – part-zoo, part low-tech living DNA repository. This purpose is known and understood, respected by adults, and this history and policy are carefully communicated to the children. Our mantra is “stability and survival”. Perhaps our forebears would have found this world a little humdrum, even boring, but we understand our purpose and, generally speaking, accept our position in the universe.

Elsewhere in the galaxy, we know human beings have been much more adventurous. Our books are full of daring tales of humans elsewhere in the Stars. There are stories of spaceships making explorations in space, visiting strange new worlds, seeking out new life and new civilisations, and going boldly where no human has gone before. There are other legends of wars and empires amongst the stars, with exciting accounts of battles in planetary orbits and an order of protectors with an almost mystical ability to manipulate the universe. These tales, and others, I first heard as bedtime stories at my Father’s knee, and learned the details in the more interesting parts of school history lessons.

Our planet is one of those that are rarely visited and with extremely infrequent communications with the rest of humankind. Our predecessors had liked it that way, presumably as a security precaution to discourage the accidental arrival of unwanted alien visitors, whether viral or bipedal.

The original settlers had carefully selected the site for New Amsterdam. The city nestled against the wide estuary of a major river, protected by mountain ranges and a narrow isthmus against the worst

ravages of the seasonal storms. It was rarely very cold in winter, with little snow. True, a thin film of ice will occasionally form on the canals in the coldest of winters, but this is never enough to prevent the movement of the boats. Conversely, it gets pleasantly warm in the summer, but never dangerously hot, so that we do not often require protection from the sun's harmful rays.

The area of our settlement is green and very fertile, watered and refreshed by the rivers and streams which also feed the canal system, and in turn drain into the sea. The fields are laid to crops and grazing in strict rotation, with sheep and pigs and goats and cows being kept for meat and milk, and materials for clothing and footwear.

The edge of our settlement furthest to the south-west is dotted with villages and harbours on the coast of a warm and shallow sea. The people in this area keep small boats for fishing, make pots to catch lobsters and crabs, or maintain tidal beds for shellfish.

This part of my route was deserted, with no boats or people visible in any direction. The wind had died down a little but a light drizzle had started, and I took shelter in the porch of one of the many stone-built warehouses that lined the canals. This one appeared to be disused. There was no sign that anyone had been here in recent months, although the stout wooden doors were firmly shut and bolted. Even so, I could see that both masonry and woodwork was in good order, obviously recently repaired and carefully re-painted.

Taking advantage of the slight shelter, I rested for a few minutes, shaking out my cloak to dislodge the fine drops of water. As I left to continue my journey, I looked back at the stonework, all ornately carved and lavishly decorated, with the date 790 N.E. – New Earth – carved into the keystone of the arch over the doorway. I knew that so many of these warehouses and workshops were rarely used, although it was uncommon to find one which was sloppily made or poorly maintained. Our people take such pains to make sure all these jobs are done well – such pride in their work.

Suddenly I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye, followed by a faint splash as if some large creature had rapidly but stealthily entered the water of the canal.

Unbidden, thoughts of the Webbed Ones sprang to my mind. These strange beings, whose existence is officially denied although frequently debated in quiet corners, are thought to be some strange alien, or perhaps an original native of this world from before it was

terraformed. The Webbed Ones are said to be basically humanoid in shape, adapted with webbed hands and feet for a mostly aquatic existence, and wear little or no clothes – such clothing as they adopt is for decoration, rather than modesty.

I stood unmoving, hardly breathing, but I saw or heard nothing more. At first I thought I must have imagined the entire thing, but then I noticed a rope hanging over the low wall that edged the canal here – a rope that had previously been neatly coiled and laid at the edge of the pathway. I shook my head, gathered up my belongings and set off for the city.

On my arrival at the Council Chambers, I was ushered without delay to my meeting with the Mayor. Gillian Atashi-Klima was a tall and painfully thin woman with silver-grey hair cut very short, with a sallow complexion and the slight suggestion of epicanthic folds around her astonishingly bright blue eyes. She had a rather slow and precise way of speaking although, as I had heard, frequently showing great insight in her choice of words.

I had met the Mayor briefly once before, on one of her peripatetic journeys, and I sincerely doubted that she would remember me at all. I had expected that my pre-selection would have been undertaken almost entirely by some unseen committee, with only the briefest of assessments from the Mayor herself.

As I entered her office, Madame Atashi-Klima was sitting behind a modest desk, reading a sheaf of papers in the fading grey light from the window behind her. Through the leaded glass, I could just make out the carefully trimmed shrubbery of the Major's garden that led right down to the edge of the Grand Circular canal itself.

The servant directed me to a comfortable seat right next to the Mayor. He proceeded to light some of the candles set on stands around the room and on the desk in front of us, then quietly left the room closing the door carefully behind him.

I sat demurely, with my hands in my lap, feeling nervous – just a little like the very first time I had applied for a post in local governance.

“Pleased to meet you again,” the Mayor addressed me, setting down the documents she had been studying. So she did remember me!

“I read your letter of application with great interest,” she continued, waving the papers at me, “And I have studied reports from the Assessors very carefully.”

Then, in a deliberate and rather formal tone, she asked me if I would accept the position of Assistant to the Mayor. I must have visibly jumped, having considered this moment with so much anticipation over recent months, and I accepted with alacrity.

“Madame Mayor, I would be honoured to take up this post.”

She nodded slowly, taking both of my hands in her own.

“There is much we must discuss, this very evening,” she continued, “It will take quite some time. And, please, call me Gillian.”

“As you wish, Gillian,” I stammered.

“Very good,” she said, looking at me appraisingly, “But first, there is a solemn and important ritual I must perform.”

“A ritual?” I echoed.

“Yes, an initiation, if you like. Now, have you been thinking about your history lessons, as I instructed in my letter?”

I nodded eagerly, anxious to embrace my new role.

“For the first step of the ritual, I have to tell you that everything that you have learned about our world – all you have heard from the teachers and read in the history books – is a lie.”

I did not know how to react. My head swam with confusion and disbelief; indeed, I was gob-smacked, to use that modern term the youngsters prefer. I could see that the Mayor appeared entirely serious. Perhaps this was some kind of a test?

“What do you mean, a lie?” I finally blurted, “To what purpose? And why do you have to tell me this now?”

The old woman looked at me astutely with those piercing blue eyes, perhaps even with a modicum of approval.

“The last question,” Gillian said carefully, “Is a very good one indeed. So, I will answer your questions, and it is probably best done in the order you asked them.”

She settled back into her chair with the air of one about to embark on a long tale to while away a dark and stormy evening.

“Firstly, then, our planet – New Earth – is not a settled world at all. In reality, it is the original world for *Homo sapiens* and, once upon a time, it was named simply Earth.”

“The legends of the First Arrival of the Settlers and of the terraforming of the planet are just that,” the Mayor continued, “Legends with no basis in fact. And there has never been any interstellar space travel – at least, not by humans. It has never been possible to engineer for sustained space flight. Even inter-planetary travel proved to be far too expensive, the economic benefits too intangible.”

She shifted in her chair to look even more directly at me.

“Truly, we rest on the home of humanity, the only planet in the Universe that people have ever lived upon.”

“But what about Faraway Tower?” I exclaimed.

“The Tower, yes. The last remnant of the technology of the Ancients. It still works – at least, we think so. Although there has been no report of activity of in my lifetime, or that of my predecessor, or hers.”

Gillian sighed sadly.

“The messages from people on other worlds are a fraud; indeed, the technology for this to happen does not even exist. Oh, there were a few long-term deep-space probes, robot spacecraft who would take hundreds of years to reach their destination. The Tower was built to receive their reports, their intelligence. It was the pinnacle of the technologies, multiple redundant systems, intended to last for generations.”

“The probes, the explorers, were all failures. Nothing remotely resembling a habitable planet has ever been found anywhere within reasonable reach of their technologies.”

“Perhaps there will never be any more reports, nothing more to discover. Perhaps all of the probes and robot spacecraft our ancestors send into the void have made their analyses, transmitted the results. Or perhaps the technologies of the Ancients have failed, finally, the machines fading, deteriorating to the point of uselessness. We just can’t tell.”

“But surely there are thousands, even millions of world out there?” I insisted.

The Mayor sighed.

“True, But even the Ancients’ technologies to live on other worlds without a natural biosphere, even on the Moon, proved to be too expensive and, more importantly, too fragile to be relied upon for a long-term existence. And this knowledge, together with undeniable evidence of climate change fuelled by the consumption of irreplaceable natural resources of all kinds, and the consequential catastrophic failure of our industries and societies, led to an Agreement for Stability, and a Grand Plan to achieve it.”

“But why the lie, the histories?” I asked breathlessly, “And what is this Agreement?”

“We live in a carefully-constructed society,” Gillian replied steadily, “With a small and stable population. We are the ultimate endpoint of an ‘ecological sustainability’ agenda” – I was only just aware of the significance of the words – “Perhaps the only part of our history which is actually true – is that we are here to survive, to ensure that humanity survives, forever. That’s what the Agreement was intended to achieve.”

“The wind- and watermills, and the canals, are the upper bound of the technology that we still permit ourselves. The mills remove some of the heaviest labour, essentials for our everyday food and water, the cutting of wood and stone for shelter for our families. They are an indefinitely renewable resource – as long as the sun shines, the rains fall and the wind blows, we can live we way we do now.”

She paused, again piercing me with those blue eyes.

“The canals have an altogether more subtle purpose,” the old woman said, “I wonder if you can guess what it is?”

“Transport? Communication to help hold our society together?” I volunteered.

Gillian shook her head slowly.

“The basis of the canal system was dug by machinery of the Ancients, generations ago, but it was designed to be capable of being maintained forever by human – and domesticated animal – labour. Of course it is true that transportation of goods relies heavily on the narrowboats, the canals are not quite as important as you might think. We could survive with just horse-drawn wagons, or oxen for the heaviest items, or perhaps pack mules and donkeys for the more inaccessible places.”

“Most importantly, the maintenance and extension of the canal network is vital to absorb any available effort – surplus wealth, in other words – generated by the population.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

The Mayor sat quietly for a moment, evidently deep in thought.

“The history of Earth has included many examples of deliberate attempts to invoke social stability, stasis,” she said finally, “The stories of space travel, and a galaxy-wide human empire are just stories, myths and fables intended to make the humble, even boring lifestyle that we impose upon ourselves feel somehow noble.”

She hesitated, almost seeming nervous for a second before continuing.

“And all this without resort to religion, which was felt to be too risky to the society.”

“Religion?” I asked. I had heard the term before, I think, mentioned briefly in one of my more tedious history lessons.

“A belief in God, or Gods, and an eternal afterlife that only the virtuous or well-behaved shall enjoy,” she explained, “With all others doomed to pain and torture in perpetuity.”

I was bewildered and horrified.

“What’s the point of all that?” I gasped.

Gillian raised an eyebrow.

“Maintaining the status quo,” she said calmly, “Most of the attempts at an engineered social stasis that were made before, most notably by the various religious organisations in that period of history known as the Middle Ages, relied on religion to stifle change. And it was certainly successful in suppressing the advance of technology and engineering, and even radical thought for years, but it was always ultimately undermined by the social gap between the rich and powerful, and the serfs and peons, the haves and have-nots.”

The Mayor sighed again.

“Religious excess and bigotry engendered to wars and battles between powerful men – and they were almost always men – leading to the unpleasant experience of generations of warfare just because of religious disagreement. So, religion is a luxury we cannot afford.”

“But what has all this to do with the canals?” I asked, my head still spinning, “And the Agreement?”

Gillian paused again, evidently formulating her words.

“Inevitably, social tensions grew in those ancient religious societies, leading to revolution and civil instability. Breakaway individuals strived for improvements in the lot of the common people – better conditions, more food – and of course increases in personal wealth. This led to the runaway development of resource-hungry engineering, allowing more leisure time and the time to develop more sophisticated technologies, and so on – a vicious circle which threatened to consume the entire world again, and again.”

She sighed.

“We took a different approach. The dedication we apply to maintenance of the canals, and their extensions, and all the associated buildings, is analogous to the role that the building of churches and cathedrals had taken in those previous worlds. The purpose of the canals is to provide a sink for labour, a way of preventing idleness and sloth. And it is to give a visible result – a focus for pride and satisfaction in a job well done. But there is always, *always* more work to be done. It is a task for *forever*, a vital part of the success of the Agreement.”

I thought about this. Of course, work on a canal could be slowed down or stopped for a season or a year, or even a generation, if other work was more pressing – a famine or flood, some emergency or contingency which consumed all available resources.

We sat quietly, both deep in private contemplation lit only by the flickering of the candlelight. The chill of the autumn evening crept into the room. The Mayor made no attempt to light the fire, which I could see already laid with logs and kindling in the fireplace on the far side of the office.

“The retrofitting of the world took generations,” The Mayor eventually resumed, “Generations where people were encouraged to have very few children – ideally, none. This was the Age of the Lost Cohorts, generations where almost everybody was old. Some people even demonstrated their commitment to the Agreement by volunteering for euthanasia, rather than burdening the world with a need for medicines and help in their old age.”

“Indeed some fanatics volunteered for tasks that were very dangerous – even fatal – reworking areas of the world poisoned by machines and industry. These volunteers knew they would die from the poisons, and undertook the tasks provided they could be assured of a quick and painless death afterwards; their reward being the knowledge that they have contributed to the long-term survival of the human species.”

“Each generation used less and less technology, slowly establishing the way of living with which we are familiar, and carefully destroying – very thoroughly, we are told – both the technology itself and all records of how the machines were made.”

“And so each generation had fewer people. As centres of population became untenable, people moved together, huddling, really, against an increasingly large and lonely planet, until the world, and the adult population, was ready for the Final Agreement.”

Again she paused, looking directly at me with eyes that seemed somehow to pierce my very thoughts.

“Remember, at some point in our history, every adult in the world – and I mean everyone – would have had to lie to their offspring, to set up the system of beliefs that they knew to be artificial, false. In short, to put in place the society that we now know. Even one person failing to honour the Agreement could have wreaked havoc with the Grand Plan, could have sown the seeds of insurrection and have instigated exactly the kind of instability that we had striven over the generations to achieve. Even our system of dates is a lie,” she concluded, “We actually achieved this stasis less than two hundred years ago.”

“So what happened to this Final Agreement,” I asked, my mind still racing at the revelations being put before me.

“Oh, it still exists,” the Mayor said, smiling sadly at my confusion, “Part of the Agreement was that, in each centre of population there would be one or two people who knew the truth. Typically, they would be an older person and a younger person, each in a position of responsibility and, quite frankly, power. In our settlement, for some reason – it’s not deliberate policy – more often than not the persons selected are women. And, right now, those two people are me, and you.”

Again, I gasped, beginning to realise my part in all this.

“A key part of the Agreement is that, in each generation, the truth was explained, understood and, most importantly agreed to, for the next generation, It was there to allow those in the know the ability to make informed decisions, to understand just what the Agreement is, and why it is so important.”

Just at that moment, there was a tapping on the window. I started, turning towards the source of the noise. Gillian stood, raising a hand in reassurance.

“Ah,” she said, “My other visitor this evening.”

The Mayor undid the latch, allowing the window to slide open, then stepped back from the aperture. A sinuous figure slipped inside, moved swiftly to the centre of the room as if it wished to keep plenty of space between itself and the other occupants. The newcomer brought with it a damp smell, faintly unpleasant but somehow familiar, which after a few moments I recognised as that of water from the canals.

The creature stood upright, standing perhaps five feet tall, dripping water onto the stone flags of the floor. It was one of the Webbed Ones. In the candlelight, I could see the overlarge webbed hands and feet, the mottled brown and green skin with the slight suggestion of scales. It regarded me with its mobile and faintly luminous eyes.

“Good evening,” it said politely, lisping very slightly through its lipless mouth, “Call me Snake.”

I must have been sitting immobile, shocked by the appearance of this mythical figure in the quiet room.

“So you are to be the new Mayor?” Snake continued, pacing to one side and then the other, looking me over appraisingly.

Finally, the Webbed One stopped, still keeping its distance from myself and the Mayor.

“I think you will do well enough,” it continued, “I know you. I have been watching you for some time. I saw you on the bank of the canal earlier today” – I gasped – “I apologise for any alarm I may have caused.”

I could contain myself no longer.

“Snake, what are you?” I burst out.

The creature emitted a series of hissing puffs which I took to be its laughter.

“Our people are an even more extreme human survival strategy – one of several, I should say,” Snake said, “We were once as you. But we were modified, engineered, by the vanished science of the Ancients, to a kind that can live in and out of water, a kind that did not need even the limited technologies you permit yourselves. A different approach to human survival, in case the world changed in ways unforeseen even by the Old Ones.”

I stared at it – him? her? – incredulously. He twisted his lips curiously, showing numerous sharp yellow teeth.

“There are other groups, all over this world, some not so far from here,” he continued, “Some are peoples like yourselves, basic humans. Others are adaptations such as ourselves, one of a myriad of kinds in shapes you cannot even imagine.”

Snake laughed again.

“We call you ‘the mice’,” he said, “Living quietly, timidly in your houses and windmills, busying yourselves with your canals.”

“Why are you here?” I demanded, “I mean, in this room, at this time?”

Again, the Webbed One displayed that twisting of the lips, and I was forced to conclude that the creature was smiling.

“I am a witness,” he said slowly, with a serious tone at odds with the facial expression, “To the continuing Agreement. The leaders of our kind – I am their representative – wish the Agreement to continue. And I am here, tonight, to hear from you in person your commitment to its continuation.”

I now understood the temptation, and the danger, embodied in the Agreement. Of course, I could not change things overnight. Even if I ran outside right now, shouting the truth to the four winds, I would not be believed. I would be considered mad, or possessed; I would be feared or pitied, or incarcerated for my own protection.

But I could be more subtle, particularly with the influence of the Mayor behind me – or even as Mayor. I could put in place changes which would change our society. I could order a slowdown – or a complete stop – of the works on the canals and the associated buildings. Instead, I could encourage the building of ships, to travel the outer world, and send out explorers – and traders, too, now that I understood that there were more groups of humans on this planet than I had known. I could arrange that the brightest of people could have

leisure time to think, and more schooling and education to give the intellectual tools with which to do it.

And, most importantly, I could suppress all knowledge of the Agreement, and the lies that our histories are. With that impetus of belief, I could engineer the re-birth of a technological society that could, in a few generations – perhaps only ten or twenty – build the machines that could take us to the stars.

Or, I could decide to leave things as they were, unchanged until the next millennium.

I stood slowly, understanding the formality of the moment.

“The Agreement stands,” I said slowly and clearly, “Unto the next generation.”

Snake and the Mayor nodded their approval in strange synchronisation. Then, without another word, the creature turned on its tail and slipped out of the open window as quickly and quietly as he had come. Gillian shut the window behind the vanished Snake, and bent to light the fire.

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