

Agents of the Internet Apocalypse

A novel

The Internet Apocalypse Trilogy

Thomas Dunne Books

1.

There are certain fibers in the world. Man-made. Artificial. And sometimes, we take those fibers and weave them through something natural. Rayon stitched into cotton with systemic efficiency, creating enough support to form things like a hospital blanket. The label says cotton, but if you wrap it around yourself at 3 A.M., letting it rub up against your cheek in a failed attempt at comfort, you'll only feel what's fake, like trying to absorb the warmth of a baby chick through a wire fence.

The blanket doesn't soften with time. You can't wear it smooth like a waterfall over rocks, crags turning to silk over centuries. Your efforts only destroy the good parts. Nature fails, the cotton wanes, and the man-made network of interlocking fibers holds only itself together, providing neither warmth nor comfort, despite technically still being a blanket.

"You're writing about the Internet again," Dr. Kreigsman said, closing my journal and placing it on my hospital bed.

Unlike my first therapist, Dr. Kreigsman had read my journal, thinking it provided valuable insight. Dr. Laurent, however, had said such efforts weren't necessary. Of course, she seemed to believe a psychiatrist's duties were limited to prescribing pills and asking about sexual side effects. She was also good at never debating. At any prickly point in our talk therapy, she'd go limp, frown slightly, and say, "I won't argue with you" as if the desire for answers was, itself, a sign of mental illness. The third time she tried that I held the fingertips of my left hand to my chest like a sane gentleman and said, "I'm sorry, Dr. Laurent, let's get back to the important discussion of maintaining erections while medicated."

"Now you're being hostile," she said.

"No, hostility would be saying something like 'Let's not blame the Cymbalta when having to spend every day with you would make any man's junk retreat into his body like a frightened animal.'"

That was the end of our relationship. She probably made some nasty notes, and then they brought in Dr. Kreigsman to give it a try. He asked permission to read my journal. Even called it a book, which I have to admit, made me kind of happy until he explained “book” was a more appropriate word for a work of fiction. We spent most of our time talking about that. What was real and what was imagined in those two months after the Internet died. I also slept. A lot. After a couple weeks, he tapered the Haldol way down, and moved me from Cymbalta to Wellbutrin which didn’t make me quite so sleepy and kept my junk in fine shape—not that I had any use for it in my time at Bellevue.

“I’m writing about my blanket,” I replied, and Kreigsman smiled.

He did that a lot. Laughed at my jokes too, clearly falling into the build-self-esteem camp of shrinks. At first I resisted his attempts to butter me up, but he was just too charming. Pushing fifty and standing about five-foot-ten with an extra twenty around the middle, he kept his clothes kind of ruffled, and didn’t seem to notice that the collar of his lab coat was usually tucked under. Still, his delicate, frameless glasses were always immaculate, and sometimes he’d polish them if he needed more time to phrase his response. Once, I tried to call him out on his avuncular bluff after he told me I was obviously good to my friends.

“How could you possibly know that?” I asked.

“Well, for one,” he said, nodding at the journal on my nightstand, and working his gray cloth over his lenses, “You gave Tobey all the best jokes.”

I laughed, and that’s how he got in, because humor’s a powerful shortcut for men. We rarely just sit back and divulge, but when guys continually laugh at the same things, it means more than sharing the same sense of humor: it’s sharing the same world of referential knowledge, the same moral philosophy. Your laughter acknowledges similar wiring without revealing anything.

Kreigsman took out his penlight. “Let me see your eyes for a second,” he said, checking for dilation.

They did that when they pulled me from the Hudson River, too, fully dressed and soaking wet. I wasn’t aware of that at the time. All I saw was a framing halo, like a camera aperture from an old-time movie. The kind that holds the action in a circle, opening to begin a story or closing at its end. And at that exact moment, I guess it was both. I could see myself on a raft, paddling west. Steady, determined strokes on a calm

sea. One man with a letter close to his heart, searching for his love as he headed off into the setting sun. The end.

But the circle was opening on another story I wasn't aware of. Dr. Laurent had told me they pulled me from the water, babbling about my ex-wife Romaya and finding the Internet. That I had proclaimed myself the Internet Messiah, capable of returning the Net to all. I became agitated when they tried to touch my journal and violently protective of the love letter I clutched through the fabric of my breast pocket. A wet mess of angry delusions. The kind of person you sedate and commit. And that's what they did.

"Y'know," Dr. Kreigsman said, "there's nothing wrong with writing about the Internet or reading all those books on it."

Copies of *Wired* magazine flooded my nightstand, along with Blum's book, all dog-eared and highlighted. Funny that it wasn't until after my failed adventure that it first occurred to me to read about how the Internet even worked. Didn't think of it. Not even when I was walking the New York Public Library, looking for ideas.

"But," he said, "it would be great to apply all that energy to working on you." I sat up in bed. "What more work is there? I hated my job. I missed my wife. I lost my shit when she went away. Trust me, you couldn't sit at the worker's compensation office every day without love either."

"That might be true," he said, "but there were plenty of lonely, miserable people in shitty jobs who don't become shut-ins before suffering psychotic breaks from the loss of the Internet. Plenty of people who don't then hallucinate friends to keep them company on New York City adventures. So, y'know, there's that..."

He smiled as if he'd made a joke.

"Not everything was a delusion," I said. "I went places. Met real people, too. Had experiences."

"That's true. You didn't manifest a completely fake universe, just some people. And the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can move on. I'm sure you have places you'd like to go."

He kept it vague, but it felt like a threat, or at least a bribe. He knew I still had a letter to deliver to Romaya. My initial impulse had been to feign sanity to get to California sooner, to see the wife I had imagined as dead instead of divorced, but I soon realized

feigning illness would be better. That's the thing about psychiatrists, even good ones like Dr. Kreigsmann: The worse your complaints, the happier they get. It gives them purpose, and if you say you have something bad and don't ... well then, they're miracle workers, aren't they? But you still have to establish a baseline of hopelessness before they get to work.

Once I started really talking, though, I sort of lost touch with what I was pretending. I'd fallen very far from who I was, and trying to relive memories only pushed some of them further away. Often I could only hold them like still images from childhood. Screencapped memories of late-night movies on TV. But sometimes I could see the experiences from my own eyes, and that felt more legitimate. The POV became a helpful trick for sorting out the fake from real, but just for me. For Kreigsmann, I kept it mostly fake. I wasn't piecing out memories for him, just describing two months of chemically-fueled fantasy.

After about two weeks, Kreigsmann removed the Haldol. And after another week of me spouting like a 90's grunge song, I was ready for visitors. Not Romaya or my online buddy Tobey, who were on the other side of the country, and certainly not Oz, the wet dream of an Australian who existed mostly in my mind. But my mother.

I patted down my hair a bit and tried to sit up straight. Y'know, just the basic stuff to not look like a mental patient. No one likes their mother to see them fail. But given the hospital-issue pajamas and the fact that I was indeed in a mental-health facility, my efforts weren't entirely successful. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. I could have been in a suit, sitting in a fine restaurant, and my mother would have known if something were wrong. And now, everything was wrong, so deception was just one more failure.

She didn't hug me at first, just grabbed my forearm so hard I could feel the brittle of her bones as she stared hard and quick at what had happened to her boy before the advancing tears took the clarity away.

"I'll be okay, Mom," I said.

"I know that," she said, almost angry, wiping a tear with the back of her hand. "Do *you* know that?"

She bent over and hugged me, the bed rail digging into her chest as she held me round the shoulders and kissed my cheek. Then she pulled up a chair.

"You look thin," she said.

“I’ll grab a burger when they let me out.”

“Are you on anything?”

“Just a low-dose Wellbutrin,” I said. “The more crazy I tell them I am, the more they lower my meds.”

My mom frowned a little, and I recognized the shape of my own mouth in her face. She deserved a better joke than that. She was always funnier than the other moms, who were too busy plotting successful summer-camp strategies to crack jokes. They were like the scary ladies from the PMRC who popped up on TV, condemning Annie Lennox for androgyny while praising Michael Jackson. But music didn’t make my mother nervous. She was more concerned about the agenda of women who thought it was a good idea to wear pastel, shoulder-padded suits while they all marched single file toward a better tomorrow.

When I was a kid, we watched an episode of Donahue after school where Jello Biafra of Dead Kennedys complained the PMRC was trying to ban his album for containing pornography. Turned out it was a reprint of an impressionist painting of male genitalia that had hung in galleries throughout Europe. “Oh, yeah?” my mother asked.

“Was it well hung?” That was a big part of my mom: humor as part of a quiet, unflappable rebellion.

“How’s the world doing without me?” I asked.

“The world was already living without you,” she said.

“I know, but what’s going on out there?”

She readjusted herself her chair. “Your doctor asked me not to discuss it. He doesn’t want you agitated.”

It was true. For all his kindness, Dr. Kreigsmann did not allow me television. There were many patients sicker than I who were granted that privilege, but Kreigsmann believed the news and all the Apocalypse talk would only distract me from the work I had to do. “Let’s worry about you,” he’d say, sounding a lot more like a Jewish mother than my mom ever did.

I pressed her again. “What’s going on with the Internet?”

“Who knows? You know I didn’t go online even before the Apocalypse.”

It was funny to hear my mother say “Apocalypse,” considering she’d lost something she never really had.

“But it was back, sort of, I heard,” she continued. “For a bit anyway.”

“It came back?”

“Yeah, a few weeks ago. Not great, but yeah.”

I sat up in bed. “Really?”

“Yeah, who’s that one on MSNBC in the morning? Not him, but the woman next to him. She said that supposedly people had always been able to get on in little fits and starts around the world.”

I tried to remember if I could recall a single instance of someone getting online in those two months. I flipped through my Rolodex of still images. My mother put a stop to the spinning.

“But now that’s all done. It’s dead. Completely. And the government is taking it over.”

“Whaddya mean, taking it over? It’s not a factory.”

“I don’t know. The ... um. The points?”

“The hubs?”

“Yeah, hubs. I think.”

A few months ago I wouldn’t have known what that meant, but I’d read the books now. And although I’d never understand the science of packeted information traveling through fiber-optic cable at the speed of light, the infrastructure of the Net was still a very real and startling simple thing. Just like electricity, you still needed poles and cables to connect the world. There were only a handful of hubs on the planet—places where networks met up directly with other networks, transforming little pocketed e-villages into worldwide communities. Turns out there was one on 60 Hudson Street, walking distance from Trinity Church where I spoke to Hamilton Burke. I don’t know what I would have found if I had gone there, standing outside, drunk and depressed,

but I'm guessing it would have been more productive than jerking off at the Rule 34 club for a week. Or at least productive in a way that required less clean up afterwards. And that was the other thing I learned in the hospital: more information about Hamilton. Obviously I knew I was speaking to a wealthy man outside Trinity Church that night, and, yeah, in the back of mind, the name was familiar. But apparently Hamilton Burke was one of the richest men in the entire world. Like Warren Buffet rich. Bill Gates rich. So rich that Dr. Kreigsman didn't believe I'd met him.

"Hard to believe a man like that is just hanging out waiting to talk to you, don't you think?" he asked

"Well, he *wasn't* waiting for me. I just approached him. And is it really so weird to believe one of the richest men in the world would be in New York City's financial district?"

He let it go, but I already knew what he was thinking. Dr. Kreigsman was big on the theory that I needed to believe I was more important than I am. And certainly pretending to hobnob with the rich and powerful could support that. But why would I make that up if I didn't even know who Burke really was? And if it was wish fulfillment, why did that late-night New York City conversation fill me with such shame?

"Are you getting better?" my mother asked.

"I think so."

"So you'll go back to work?"

"Never."

For the first time, my mother sat back in her chair, pulling away from me. "Your father didn't retire until he was seventy."

"Well, I wish he would have," I said, and she came forward again until I finished my sentence. "Or would have been able to at least."

"So, no job?" She asked.

"I don't know, Ma," I said. "Dad worked to support us. To send me to college. And fucking law school, for that year anyway. I don't have those kinds of obligations."

“Well, maybe you should get some.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But when I get out of here, I’m going to California for a bit.”

“What’s in California?” she asked, but already knew. “Romaya’s not your wife anymore.”

“I know that.”

“But isn’t that the point? That you didn’t know that? Didn’t you forget everything?”

“She wasn’t the whole problem. I hated my job, too. The job you’re so eager to throw me into again.”

“I don’t care what job you have, I just don’t want you to lie down.”

“But they’re paying me to. That’s the whole point of disability.”

“Well if you’re so proud, maybe you should print up business cards.”

I knew she’d disapprove, but there had to be an order for everything. It wasn’t time for a job. It wasn’t something I could do now.

“I just want to talk to her,” I said, swapping topics in the false belief that I could handle the discussion.

Kreigsman had already put me through the ringer about Romaya. At first he wasn’t sure I was really going out West for her, considering California is also ground zero for the tech industry. What if I were continuing the investigation, and doing it on a coast that made a lot more sense than New York? But slowly he came to believe me, and even though he approved of dealing with my mental health and emotions instead of playing Internet detective, he did not encourage that plan either.

“You’re not ready for that, especially…” He polished his glasses again.

“They’re clean,” I said. “Especially what?”

“Especially if you’re going to try to win her back.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

For the first time Kreigsmann became, not angry, but more strident. “What’s wrong is that you’re not ready for that kind of rejection,” he said. “The last time you felt it, you lost your shit. Is that clear enough for you? We’ve spent the last two months putting you back together. You reclaimed your identity. You want to risk all of that? Throw that all away?”

I didn’t reply, and he took one more stab at it, this time with slower and more deliberate speech. “Do you want to risk losing everything you’ve gained?”

I didn’t answer.

“It’s nothing to smile about,” Dr. Kreigsmann asked. “You lost her and you became sheltered, delusional, dysfunctional. You lost everything.”

“I must have really loved her,” I said with a smile.

But my mother didn’t say any of the things Kreigsmann said. She just sat there, very still, before finally speaking in a whisper.

“You can’t fill someone’s cup when there’s a hole in it,” she said.

I was defensive. Too quick to respond. “Maybe my cup has a hole in it.”

“I’m sure it does,” she said. “So?”

I wanted to say something about love being more like puzzle pieces, or if not puzzle pieces then maybe love was putting one cup inside another without lining up the holes, so the two cups plugged each other, but then I realized that would only hold enough water for one. So I didn’t say anything. I just stayed quiet and stared a little longer. And when visiting hours were over, I felt it in her hug. The knowledge that our visit had made her no stronger. She was still carrying the weight of my hollow.

I tried to put that out of my mind for the next few days, mostly unsuccessfully. But then I caught a break to save me from contemplation. Kreigsmann busted in my room with an energy I’d not seen from him before.

“It’s your big day, Wayne,” he said.

“You proposing?”

“Even better. I think you’re ready to leave this joint.”

“You’re discharging me?”

“Yep.”

Dr. Kreigsman handed me his clipboard, showing the order and everything.

“But I thought you were too afraid I was gonna run around being an Internet Messiah instead of doing the work that needed to be done on myself.”

“I’ll be honest: That remains a bit of a concern. But you’ve made great strides. Also, they want you out. Not all the mental patients actually have an apartment to go home to.”

I could visualize the period at the end of his sentence, but I also felt something more coming.

“Oh,” he said, taking back his clipboard, “also there’s this.”

He dropped the *New York Times* on my lap. It had a banner headline: “THE INTERNET RETURNS!”

“It’s back?”

“Seems so. An uninterrupted signal, at least in America, for almost two days now. Some sites still down. Sites with information housed overseas still hit or miss, but yeah, since the government took over the hubs, it’s back.”

“Wow.”

“Yes, wow. So, y’know, investigation over, and time for you to work on you.”

I jumped out of bed, grabbing my books and journal off my nightstand and shoving them into the backpack that had lived beside me for two months. It took me more time to put my shoes on than it did to pack, and that’s including unzipping my Jansport to double-check that my letter to Romaya was still safely lodged in my journal.

“Doctor,” I said, extending my hand. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome. And remember, your work’s just starting. Stay on your prescription, and I expect to see you in two weeks. I can refer you elsewhere, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to keep seeing you for a bit.”

I liked Dr. Kreigsman, but it was very important to me that I not say anything more than thank you. Really, what more was there to say? He was the best, but only on the sliding scale of incompetence representing the psychiatric profession. He hadn’t fixed me. Weeks of being fed, sober, and safe fixed me. Quiet reflection on what I’d discovered on my journey fixed me. I fixed me.

“Sure,” I said, and putting my backpack on both shoulders, positioning my grandfather’s fedora, and heading for the door.

“It’s late October,” he said. “You’ll be cold.”

I looked down at my hospital scrubs, pretending to make note of the need for warmer clothing, but that’s not what I was thinking at all. I was headed someplace warm.

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