

The Party Guest.

Someone once asked me to describe 2024 in 2017. I found the future was never an easy thing to predict, especially then. Changes over time, used to be measured in eons, centuries, years or even months. In 2017, we resided in the age of the second. The future was being guided by the few, in less than 50 characters, over and over again, down a fractured path. I look back now and wonder how we ever got through, without falling into the cracks.

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By 2022, the web had stuck to everything we touched, we were entangled in trivial technology. Talking toasters, fridges telling us, no, demanding they needed milk, even ordering it for us, as a last act of defiance. The future was not ruled by menacing machines like *The Terminator*. It was worse, the future was ruled by *The Appliance*.

Devices were getting smarter and smarter, so we did not have to be. Everyone was as close as a screen, and had access to as many friends as they could imagine. The glorious twins, technology and innovation, had become a jester and a stylist. Creating never ending amusement in unlimited shapes, colours and textures. Smell was the only sense left to exploit, to make that next game the biggest, best ever, extraordinary, unmissable, never to be repeated, life changing event you have been waiting for. We were comfortable, weak in mind, body and soul, but comfortable.

Automated cars were roaming the streets. No danger of dying in car crashes now.... if the other eighty percent of drivers took care. Although, car crashes were old news, a new phenomenon called impact, had caught the eye of the editor. Headlines like *Lasting effect of family feast* were common place. To anyone from 2017 this would imply many things except the reality. Falling objects of various sizes and weight, had become a common occurrence, since drone deliveries were permitted. Never leave your home for anything ever again, just make sure you have a detachable front wall for forklift or crane access.

The combination of drones, and virtual reality everything, made people comfortable. They could relax, virtually lose themselves, and forget about the robots who spared them of tedious tasks.

Hovering pet drones and rolling pet balls following your every move, were all the rage for a couple of months. Shop fronts and advertising boards had almost disappeared. Who looks up these days? Just plug in your ear-trodes. Google Synaps will take over your visual cortex and body. Tell yourself the address, and you will take you, to wherever you want to go. Watch a movie on the way, or catch some nap time. If you did not pay attention, you would be hacked and sent into a store to buy something, or sent to do some chores for someone else. It would have been very useful to rob a bank, but banks are gone, so is cash.

Space travel was slow. We were still using chemical rockets (a bang in a can). Mars was the focus of everyone in the space travel business. Not everyone was looking for a return. There were some who were doing it for humanity. A journey for a few individuals bound for a desolate, dry, barren, dusty rock, with a poisonous atmosphere, so the human race could survive a global catastrophe, was a stretch. We still had a long way to go with this vision. Stranding people on space stations would achieve the same outcome, in the case of a cataclysmic event on Earth. Mars was still too far away for us. We needed a more advanced, faster way of getting to Mars if any colony had a chance of survival, until they were self-sustaining.

Technology was still a tool to improve the profit of men, not mankind. There was no urgency for real advancement. A giant leap for mankind had smaller profits, than small steps for man. We were being conquered by cost. The ever-present danger of extinction, did nothing to stop us leaving our future to fate. In my experience, fate has always been an early party guest.

All these thoughts about technology, and where mankind might be going, started to make me think. Why is it, when we think about mankind's achievements, it is always scientific? Flying

cars, medicines for extending life, and space travel are but a few. Technology and innovation are our measures of success. Is this the real measure? Shouldn't we be gauging humanity? Do we have a measure? Number of conflicts in progress? Murders per capita? Violence? Divide between the rich and the poor? Maybe, it would be as easy as measuring peoples access to basic human rights, like water, food, shelter, and let us not forget, purpose. Was it something which would ever be the first measure of how far mankind had progressed? These were questions I thought would never be answered in my lifetime.

But an amazing thing happened about two years ago in late 2022. The world changed.

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Nobody saw it coming, because they believed it was a black hole. It behaved like a black hole, and seemed to be swallowing stars like a black hole. When an amateur astronomer noticed a comet, she was tracking, go behind the black hole, and appear out the other side. NASA had a closer look and realised, what they thought was a black hole, was an asteroid, heading for Earth at a terrifying rate. It was too late to do anything other than predict the trajectory and size of the asteroid. There was not even a tiny rocket available to nudge the asteroid away from Earth. The plan to mine or deflect asteroids had been shelved a long time ago, and of course, we were told, an asteroid would not threaten the Earth for hundreds of years.

There seemed to be plenty of time to invent, build and test a few advanced engines, but not before we spent a couple of years developing robotics for three-legged goats. A few more years for social giants to litter the sky with satellites. Bombarding every inch of the planet with data, to feed the unfortunate with visual feasts in the blink of an eye. Turning blind to the fact, the poor needed to be fed, before they could turn their hunger to knowledge and education.

The greatest minds were entangled in trivia like artificial intelligence (wasn't there enough artificial intelligence in the world?), or travelling in straws between cities. Our gaze was taken from the stars, and focussed on the perpetual void in ourselves. Our purpose was lost. We were born from the stars. The future for us was in the stars. Now here we were in 2022, waiting for an asteroid, which no robotically enhanced three-legged goat, a hundred satellites, or artificial intelligence could stop.

Predictions were, the thirty kilometres long and ten kilometres wide asteroid would skim, or hit the Earth in two days, forming a fiery tail estimated at 100 kilometres long, when it hit the atmosphere.

The social media world knew more about the theoretical collision before most Presidents, Prime Ministers and Dictators. The news machine ramped up, choking the world in statistical analysis. Obscure experts on asteroids, comets, meteors, meteorites and satellites, were reluctantly pulled out of their shells, and sedate existence, to sit in front of cameras, like startled deer in the headlights. In some cases, the odd scientist would emerge like a butterfly from a chrysalis. Becoming confident and animated, wooing the audience with big words, bigger hair, and an extreme passion for the subject. This ultimately ended much like a meteorite, the bright start, ending in a black smudge on the earth, when there was just nothing else to say about a bit of rock, hurtling towards the planet.

Oddly enough, there was no mass hysteria or panic. The population were so engrossed in the reports, details, and simulations of the impending theoretical impact, that they slipped into the unreal world of reality TV. Conspiracy theorists headed to their bunkers. Not believing it was going to happen. If asked, they were just going to check out the bunker, to do a tally of the bullets, knives, grenades, rockets and cans of food.

The asteroid arrived around midday. A churning mixture of fear, fascination and disbelief flooded our minds. The primeval need to cower or flee was overcome by our addiction to

watch. It skimmed the atmosphere, cutting a huge dark scar through the blue sky. Sonic booms and an intense crackling sound filled the air. A scattering of small meteorites fell from the tail, leaving black trails like scratch marks, as they were dragged reluctantly to the Earth. A smell invaded our senses. Of heat, hot metal and something else, unknown, but forever imbedded in the psyche of a population.

It took thirty minutes for the asteroid to sling shot around the Earth, before it roared away, and disappeared into the darkness of space again. All sizes of meteorites peppered the Earth. Impacts were minor, fires were numerous. And after all this, there was only one question on the minds of the experts. The most furious of debates erupted between the experts. When was an asteroid a meteor? The small bits were certainly meteorites, or were they?

But something had changed in the minds of mankind the day the asteroid entered our world. We were all looking to the sky that day. We were all thinking about what could have been. We were all wondering if it was coming back.

People awoke from their life of observing and started to become involved in life again. Breaking away from the screens, which took so much of their lives and returned virtually, nothing. A euphoria had gripped the world, reminiscent of those heady days in the sixties, during the Apollo missions. Then, the excitement of the seemingly impossible achievement of landing on our Moon, was something which belonged to all of us. There was a magic in the air; Camelot existed. Now, Camelot was back.

We realised it was time to do something. The web was at last uniting us in meaningful discussions. Mankind finally became involved in its destiny, not waiting for it to happen. All of us, not the few, had the potential to become part of this amazing adventure, we knew it, and were hungry for it. Finally, we had a purpose: The survival of humanity, on and off the planet.

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The Earth was a quieter place in 2024. Maybe quiet was the wrong word. Peaceful would be more accurate. There were still some problems, but in the last two years we had achieved more than we had ever achieved in the past four decades, and it did not take a world war to do it. Just a real glimpse and smell of Armageddon as it passed us by.

The Future Fund was created to make technology and innovation, tools to help all of humanity. Any robot used for a job to save humans from those tedious tasks, had to have a human benefactor. The benefactor was paid 75% of the value of work done by the robot.

Benefactors were chosen through a lottery. Companies soon started to use people again.

Economists were baffled at how people with purpose and funds strengthened the economy.

Automated buses, trains, and trams outnumber automated cars. Space travel is as common as flying in an aeroplane, now that we have advanced Gravo-Magetix engines. The Moon is finally populated, and is the first Stella State, Mars is the second Stella State, both owned and supported by all. The trip to Mars from Earth is from two to four weeks, depending on our relative positions. Mars with its atmosphere of 95% carbon dioxide, is also the largest producer of Graphene products used for space. Our Solar system is our backyard. Now we are looking to other Galaxies to challenge us.

The Future Fund has three principles.

1. Humanity - Provide every person with basic rights. Clean water, food, shelter, and a purpose. These are now the measures used to gauge the advancement of the human race.
2. Space Technology - Increase the probability of the survival of the human race, by populating other planets and moons. (There were thoughts of populating asteroids until NASA noted, that the asteroid which nearly destroyed Earth was a constant visitor. It usually gave us a wide berth, until we put a tiny probe on it when it last passed. Seems to have been enough to change the course of history)

3. Security - Free the world of global conflicts. No population will be suppressed, harmed, or denied humanity.

We were lucky to reach the year 2024.

Armageddon was the party guest who arrived early, but fortunately, did not stay to the end.

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