

COYOTE FORK

A THRILLER

JAMES WILSON

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SLANT



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*For Paula, Tom, and Kit,
with my love*

1

THE GLOBAL VILLAGE BUILDING in Santa Carla, California is a huge perfect circle, studded at regular intervals with windows and solar panels. When you see it, what immediately comes to mind is *spaceship*. As if, when the moment is right, Evan Bone will just say *lift off*, and it will rise up, its rockets flattening the grey-green semi-desert scrub, ruffling the evil-smelling waters of the Bay, and carry our species to its destiny among the stars.

That's the impression you get inside, too. It was a sultry evening when I arrived, the air electric with the sound of crickets, the knapped-flint range of mountains on the horizon shimmering with heat haze, but when I walked into the lecture hall, I suddenly found myself on the ice-cool command bridge of the *USS Enterprise*. Overhead monitors streamed live images from the International Space Station, a blue slice of earth framed by spars and struts, as if we were already out there, looking back at what we'd left behind. The whole rear wall was a giant screen masquerading as a window on the night sky.

All around the podium were banks of switches. Their shape was mirrored in the raked tiers of seats—1,800 in all, according to the publicity, and arranged with the geometric perfection of the cells in a honeycomb. On the walls above hung a series of banners: *Global Village: The Community of the Future. Global Village: We are. Are you?*

As the crowd filed in—faces glowing, eyes wonderstruck—you could feel the anticipation arcing across your skin. This was

the holy of holies, where the ultimate secret of human life was steadily being revealed, one technological miracle at a time.

I was seated in steerage class, towards the back. All around me was a sea of beards and buns and baseball caps, with here and there a pair of thick-rimmed glasses that looked as if it had been cut from one of those Mr. Big-Nose faces you used to find in joke shops. There was talk, but it was the hushed conversation of a congregation waiting for the ceremony to begin. I started to compose an opening paragraph in my head:

I lost my job because of Evan Bone. My friend Anne Grainger lost hers because of him, too—and, when she protested, was subjected to a hideous campaign of online trolling. I loathe the social media network he has created, and the way it encourages that kind of virtual mob rule. I detest his attitude to language, to writers, to the truth. And yet here I am, sitting in the secular cathedral he built with billions of our dollars. Any moment now, one of his minions will unveil the latest weapon in his virtual Blitzkrieg on my profession. I should be immune to the revival-meeting atmosphere—but oddly, I’m not. It seems the desire to see the future is infectious. My heart is doing a lively warm-up act in my chest. I’m almost as excited as the next man—who, in this case, is an uncoordinated twenty-something with a t-shirt saying Measure Everything . . .

Looking back, I realize that—though nothing could have been further from my thoughts at the time—this was more or less my last moment of innocence.

The crowd suddenly fell quiet. A lone figure walked to the podium. From his worn jeans and trainers, the relaxed roll of his hips, you’d have thought he’d been on his way to get a coffee and come through the wrong door. He turned unhurriedly towards us, blinking in the glare of the spotlight. He had an untidy flop of dark hair and a pale, unformed face, with thick eyebrows that looked as if they’d been smeared on with chocolate. I switched on the voice recorder on my phone.

“Hi. Hi,” he said. “Welcome to Global Village. My name’s Jeff Lamarr. I’m one of the engineers on the Tomorrow’s News program. And I’m going to be talking about a new product we’re developing. You may have seen stuff, heard rumors. But I guarantee, you won’t know what it’s called.” He laughs. “Because we

didn't know ourselves till a couple days ago. So-o-o . . ." He half turned, to look at the wall behind him. "Please welcome—"

The night sky vanished. A jumble of huge primary color letters took its place:

Global Village News: Tomorrow's News Today

TOLSTOY

"Yep: *TOLSTOY*. The most enhanced predictive personal profiling software ever developed." He paused for a little outbreak of *Yeahs* and *All rights*, then went on, "If you saw the talk Evan did in Vancouver a few months back, you'll know what the end-point is for Global Village. It's—"

"Mars!" yelled someone close to the front.

Lamarr smiled. "That isn't what I was going to say. But OK, let's think about Mars for a moment. If we're going to get to Mars, *colonize* Mars, go *beyond* Mars and colonize the galaxy, what are we going to need? Not just better rockets and survival shells. We're going to need improved human hardware, too. And that means—"

"Neural implants!" called another voice.

"Yeah," said Lamarr. "Neural implants. Because when we have them, they will massively enhance our cognitive abilities, and allow us to instantaneously process a whole different order of data. The order of data you *have* to be able to process to survive in a totally alien environment." Another smile. "Don't get too psyched: we're still a ways off from that right now. But the *TOLSTOY* program does take us a big step closer. So what does that mean? Well, what it means, first off, if you're a blogger, and I guess most of you are, is that using *TOLSTOY*, you could leverage your impact by a factor of five, ten, maybe even twenty."

There was an audible *aaaah*. Lamarr acknowledged it with a nod. *Yeah, you heard that right: five, ten, even twenty*. He was more animated now, his voice less affectless.

"So how'd we do that? By a paradigm shift in the way we collect and use data. Up till now, we could track what people bought, who they communicated with, the kinds of movies they watched, the sports and music they were into. And as you know, that can give you a pretty good profile, a close to 90 percent probability you'll be able to predict income, educational level, religious background,

what kind of car they drive. Which is useful, if you're selling a movie or a car or a religion. But it's still just a profile. It's still only looking at the outside. You want to get any further, you have to go *inside*. Understand the stories they listen to, and how they connect with the stories they tell themselves."

A distant buzz started to sound in my ears. Jeff Lamarr turned towards the screen again. A new image appeared: what looked like a group of stone-age hunters, long-haired and heavy-browed, sitting around a fire. They were dressed in shaggy animal skins and holding spears. In the distance, a bronze sun was setting beyond a wall of forest, sending spiders of shadow across the ground.

"It's kind of a cliché," he said, "to say that we're a story-telling species. But, as Evan says, that doesn't mean it isn't true. Telling stories is one of the things that *define* humanity. It's something we're hard-wired to do. And if you think about it, that's pretty weird. Why would it help our ancestors survive to tell each other lies? Because, when you come down to it, that's really what a story is: a whole series of lies." He pointed at the screen. "You look at those guys, you can maybe get a clue. Life is short, hard, and dangerous. What do they have? Pretty much nothing. If they don't kill an animal soon, they're going to starve. Maybe another tribe will attack while they're sleeping, club the men, drag the women off and rape them. When that's what reality looks like, could be that it helps to believe there's a better one you could get to some day."

He waved an invisible wand. The hunters vanished, to be replaced by an aerial view of some unidentifiable modern city, clusters of high-rise apartment blocks festooned by a network of roads.

"Of course, we don't live like that anymore. But seems like nobody bothered to tell our brains. We still take scraps of data and process them into stories. That's how we make sense of the world, set goals, kid ourselves we're in control. Most important, it's how we give the illusion of coherence to our own lives. You know, the illusion that amongst all the other stuff going on in here"—tapping his head—"there's some kind of a permanent *me*, one continuous voice giving a running commentary on what's going on, even though our bodies are forever changing.

“And if *we* do that, why shouldn’t computers be able to? After all, the hardware’s basically the same. To begin with, couldn’t we at least program them to recognize the underlying *patterns* of stories? You know: Hard scrabble. Victim. Success against the odds.”

The buzz in my ears was getting louder. I felt as if someone were filling them with polystyrene, distancing me from everything around me. I could still hear what Lamarr was saying, but it was like listening to a conversation in another room.

“And that,” he went on, “was the starting point for TOLSTOY. Figuring out the *stuff* people are interested in: that’s easy. But if we can make a program that tells us the kinds of *angle* they’re hungry for, too, then we can progress profiling to a whole new level. Let’s take, I don’t know, *work*, OK? Two guys have lost their jobs. So they’re both going to be into a story about unemployment, right? And we don’t just have to take their word for it. We have scans to prove it.”

He half-turned towards the screen again. The cityscape gave way to an enormous image of a human brain. After a moment, a ragged-edged patch in the frontal lobe flickered from grey to red, like a light with a faulty connection.

“That,” he said, tapping his head, “is what happens in here when we see something that grabs our attention. But what we didn’t know, until now, is just *how* that data gets processed into a meaningful narrative.

“So back to our two guys. One of them wants to believe he was fired because the world’s against him and there’s nothing he can do about it, so it’s OK for him to stay in bed all day feeling sorry for himself. And the other guy wants to believe the world’s against him, but he can fight back and *beat* the world, get another job, a *better* job.

“Thanks to TOLSTOY, we can now see which of those guys fits which profile. And if you put that together with all the other data we have on them, where they go, who they hang out with, you’re really, for the first time, getting inside their heads. And you know what that means? It means that, using TOLSTOY, you’re now going to be able to target *your* blog, with a 97 to 98 percent accuracy, so it reaches the guy who’ll invest in *your* take on the problem.”

He paused. As the implications sank in, there was a spontaneous surge of applause, peppered with loud whoops. It was that that did it for me. It had taken me months to get this writing commission—months of being told, in effect, that in the Brave New Post-Truth World my journalistic skills were surplus to requirements. That, in fact, was the main selling point for the editor who finally hired me, who half-jokingly suggested the title *Christmas: A Turkey Writes*. But it was too late, clearly, even for that. Christmas was well and truly over: we were at Boxing Day already, *fricasseeing* the scraps. In a world where computers are simply flattering people, telling them what they want to hear, who's going to pay a writer to take them to new places, show them different points of view, encourage them to *reflect*?

I got up. My neighbor was so engrossed by Lamarr that I don't think he even registered the dark shape crossing his field of vision on its way to the exit. The security guards in the hall looked startled that anyone lucky enough to penetrate the inner sanctum would willingly leave it again before the end of the service. But then I was wearing a tie and leather shoes, so maybe that explained it. As I passed the giant photo-portrait that hung above the entrance—a black-t-shirted, crinkly-haired, ethereally pale man, with grey unworldly eyes, and a smile that suggested esoteric knowledge—I muttered, “*Fuck you, Evan Bone.*”

The moment I stepped outside, the evening swaddled me in heat. It was only then that I realized I was shivering. Without the competition from Jeff Lamarr, the buzz in my head was louder than ever. I moved around the building until I couldn't be seen from the entrance and took out a cigarette. I hadn't actually smoked for days—I only carried the packet to keep myself from panicking—and after a couple of puffs I felt sick and stamped it out again. Something was fluttering under my skin, as if my heart had dissolved and spread itself evenly through my body. I leaned against the wall and shut my eyes.

I feel as I imagine a coachbuilder must have done after the advent of the car. For thirty years you've been learning and refining your craft. You know exactly how to shape the frame, attach axles and springs, fit and paint the panels, stitch the upholstery. At every step, you're guided by a vision of the finished article, a perfect harmony of

form and function, designed to carry the lucky traveler from A to B as efficiently and beautifully as possible. And then, suddenly, you find nobody wants anything but a mass-produced box.

I opened my eyes again. Ridiculous. The truth—as the last half hour had demonstrated beyond doubt—was that the war was lost. And yet here I was, so trapped in the habit of writing, that I was already trying to find the words to explain to someone who would never read them why no one would ever read them. The eating-my-own-tailness of it made me giddy. I needed to get back to my motel, before the mix of jetlag and despair left me incapable of driving. Then in the morning I'd change my plane ticket and fly home.

As I set off for the car park, I heard distant voices, as though someone were calling me. I looked towards them and saw a huddle of a dozen or so people standing on the far side of the perimeter fence, close to the main gate. A few of them held placards, although they were too far away and the light was too dim for me to read them. As I watched, one of the group raised a lantern, as if to attract my attention.

I pretended not to notice and hurried on. The parking lot was an enormous inland sea of tarmac, stretching—in the dusk—almost as far as I could see. I suddenly panicked. What was I looking for? What color was my rental car? What *model* was it? I tried following several trains of association back to the answer, but they all ended in the same cul-de-sac. Then I remembered the key. I took it out, angled it to catch the glow from a lamp and read off the number on the plastic tag. That was something. But my mind was still clearly malfunctioning. And if I had to check every license plate in the place, using the torch on my phone, it could take hours—by which point, at this rate, I'd have probably forgotten the name of where I was staying.

I quickened my pace. As I reached the end of the second row, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, between a car and a pick-up truck. There was something furtive and odd about it, as if whatever it was—a coyote? a deer?—had strayed accidentally into the human world, and now couldn't find its way back into its own. I stood still, watching. If it *was* a wild animal, it might feel

threatened and attack me in self-defense. I didn't want to risk letting it out of my sight.

But it wasn't an animal: it was a woman. She raised herself slowly and peered at me over the top of the pick-up. She was almost in silhouette, but—from the way she craned her neck—I had the sense that she was as startled to see me as I was to see her.

“Hello?” I said.

She didn't reply, but edged forward, head down, until she was standing in the murky stream of light from the car park lamps. Then she turned towards me and looked up. Middle-aged, delicate-featured, short dark hair parted in the middle.

I knew her. I knew her intimately—but in such a completely different context that it took me a few nanoseconds to retrieve her name.

“*Anne?*”

Her mouth moved silently. But I could see the shape it made: *Oh, Rob.*

What was Anne Grainger doing on this side of the Atlantic? Speculations log-jammed in my mind. She'd come to plead secretly with Evan Bone to call off the trolls. Or to write another article about him, that she didn't want to mention to me. Or—in some way I couldn't imagine—to take her revenge on him. Whatever it was, to judge by her expression, she wasn't happy with how it was going.

I took a step towards her. “What on earth are you doing here?”

She gazed at me a moment longer, then spun round and began to move away.

“Anne! Anne!”

I hurried after her. She started to run, looking back every twenty paces or so to see if I was following her. In the dim patchwork of greys and blacks I kept losing her, then seeing her again. At one point, she vanished for more than ten seconds, and I began to think she must have gone inside the building. But then she reappeared, much further away now, heading towards the main gate. I sprinted in pursuit, but she had too big a lead. By the time I reached the entrance myself, there was no sign of her.

The little group of people was still clustered outside the fence. They watched curiously as I leaned panting against the wire mesh.

It was a few seconds before I'd recovered my breath enough to look up and ask,

"Did you see where she went?"

A woman edged closer to me. She was broad-shouldered, black-haired, high cheek-boned. In her hand, slanted like a pilgrim's staff, was a sign that said, *Remember Carter Ramirez*.

"Who?" she said, in a surly voice. "Who you talking about?"

"A woman. My sort of ageish. Just a minute ago."

"Where?"

I pointed at the gate. She shook her head, then turned and asked her companions, "Anyone seen somebody go by?"

More head-shaking. A murmur of *uh-uhs*.

"But she was just here," I said.

The woman shrugged. I squinted through the fence, searching for movement.

"Where you from?" she said.

"England."

She grimaced, *Thought so*, then nodded at the Global Village Building. "You work in there?"

"I'm a journalist. I'm meant to be writing a piece about them."

She hesitated, then glanced behind her and said, "Hey, guys. Someone give me a leaflet."

A hand appeared, clutching a sheet of paper. She took it and held it towards me. In the acid glare of the prison-style floodlight by the gate I saw:

Remember Carter Ramirez. Underneath was a photo of a smiling, dark-skinned man with a crooked jaw. And below that: *Justice for the Ohlone*.

"You heard about Carter Ramirez?" said the woman.

I shook my head.

"Well, take this."

She rolled it into a cheroot and poked it through the mesh. I pulled it out and rammed it into my pocket.

"You want to know more," she said, "my cell's on there."

"And you are?"

"Corinne Ramirez," she said, as if the question surprised her. "I'm his daughter."

I made a final scan of the hinterland beyond the fence. There was still no sign of Anne. No sign of anything, except a few pricks of light in the grey muzz from the houses around the bay.

“OK,” I said.

I raised a hand and headed quickly back towards the car park, before she had a chance to press me further. I was tired and starting to be seriously worried about my own mental state. I didn’t have the time or the energy to be drawn into the case of Carter Ramirez, whoever he might be.

After half a minute or so, I suddenly remembered that my rental car was a black Dodge Charger. It didn’t take me long to find it. I let myself in and sat there, trying to separate out the individual thoughts from the cacophony in my head. Eventually I managed to get them into some kind of coherent order:

I had seen a woman in the car park. She was probably just a petty thief, looking for easy pickings in some Global Village employee’s Mercedes or BMW, but in my semi-deranged condition I had imagined she was Anne Grainger. There was some physical resemblance—and, given that I’d been thinking, only moments before, about the impact of the internet on journalists, it perhaps wasn’t surprising that, in the poor light, my eye had turned her into the journalist I knew who’d been worst affected by it. Then she’d managed to escape, without anyone seeing where she’d gone. That made sense, when you thought about it: if she was a criminal, she must have had plenty of practice making herself scarce.

It added up. Enough, anyway, for me to feel that normal service had been restored, and I was able to distinguish between what was really there and what wasn’t.

Very slowly, I drove back to my motel. I ordered a club sandwich from room service, then took a couple of Valiums and went to bed.

It was just before seven when the phone jerked me out of a deep sleep.

“Yes?”

“Rob?”

I knew that voice. Another intruder from a different world.

“Graham, do you realize what time it is here?”

“Yes, I know, I’m sorry. I left it as long as I dared. I didn’t want you to see the news online. I thought I should tell you in person.”

“What? Have they cancelled my contract or something? Because if they have—”

I could hear him swallowing. “Worse.”

What could my agent have to tell me that was worse than that?

“It’s Anne,” he said. “She’s dead. I’m afraid it looks like suicide.”