

By Kurt Vonnegut

AMERICA'S FAVORITE VISIONARY ASKS THE QUESTION "WHERE THE FUH-KAR-WEE?" AND LOOKS TO KILGORE TROUT FOR THE ANSWER

LAST WORDS FOR A CENTURY

After World War II, I set out to become an anthropologist—and in fact earned an M.A. in that field from the University of Chicago. That was a big mistake. I couldn't stand primitive people. They were so *stupid!* But I still have a favorite Native American tribe, the *Fuh-kar-wee*, who actually exist only in a joke my brother, Bernie, told me.

The joke: In the late 19th century, supposedly, there was this tribe of Indians, see, who had become nomadic. They were forced off their ancestral lands by pioneers, peace treaties and the United States Cavalry. OK?

So an agent from the Bureau of Indian Affairs was sent to interview them at one of their temporary encampments, to learn who and what they are—or, to be more exact, who and what they used to be. He asked the name of the tribe. They said, "We the *Fuh-kar-wee*." The agent wanted to know if the name had a special meaning. They said it had in fact been adopted only recently and was based on what their chief, who had just died, wailed in despair at sunset on every day of their aimless wandering:

"Where the *Fuh-kar-wee*?"

Ancient Romans didn't say, "Where the *Fuh-kar-wee*?" but they might as well have. "*Quo vadis?*" they said.

Yes, and where the *Fuh-kar-wee* as the odometer, which Christians have hooked up to the wheels of history, is about to come up with the number 2000? That all depends on who you are. One thinks of signs displayed next to elevators of many hotels—featuring a floor-plan and an arrow and these words: YOU ARE HERE.

Describe yourself: height, weight, hair color, eye color, age, race



or subrace, home address, marital status, number and ages of children, make and year of car, known health problems, present occupation and who should be notified in case of an accident.

Besides waiting for an elevator in such-and-such a year, where the *Fuh-kar-yeew?*

In nations employing the Christian calendar, of which ours is one, we will almost all, for the fun of it, become numerologists at the start of the third millennium. Numerology is an entertaining, sociable superstition like astrology—benign except to paranoid schizophrenics. It pretends that the inevitable, predictable, clockwork behavior of Arabic numerals locked into the decimal system can, on occasion, give us occult messages we should not ignore. If a year numbered 2000 isn't an all-points bulletin from on high, what is?

Any excuse for a party.

That the odometer is slightly out of whack, that Jesus was born in 5, 6 or 7 B.C., shouldn't be allowed to spoil the party. Jesus was born a few years before himself? Chalk that up as another miracle and party on.

My late brother, Bernie, who introduced me to *Fuh-kar-wee*, said the non-stop, maniacal merchandising during the Christmas season made him feel as though clowns were beating him in the face with bladders. The whole of the year 2000 is going to make many of us feel that way, or I miss my guess. Simply because of what the calendar says, and not because of anything Jesus said, God knows, we will be told to go out and buy a lot of crap for ourselves and our business associates and loved ones: millennium wristwatches and cars, bras and boxer shorts, toilet tissue and Coca-Cola.

Why not give an enemy on your shopping list a millennium wireless telephone? It will encourage the recipient to make a perfect asshole of himself or herself by standing in the middle of a crowd, relating to no one in it but chuckling and cooing and snorting, getting happy, getting mad and gesticulating extravagantly, and maybe even doing a little dance, while talking to something the size of a bar of bath soap.

The science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, dead like my brother now, and God rest both their souls, wrote a story about flying-saucer people who visited earth. Two things about the United

States really bewildered them. "What is it," they wanted to know, "about blow jobs and golf?"

Trout wrote that story long before American television newsreaders, for the better part of a whole year and to get the largest possible audiences for their advertisers, who had made them multimillionaires, made this the major issue facing the country: whether or not the president of the most powerful nation on earth had had an extramarital blow job in the Oval Office.

The actual millennium has come and gone, as unremarked as a sneeze. Gesundheit!

Trout's story, published in the now-defunct *Black Garterbelt* magazine, was eerily prescient in yet another way. His E.T.s predicted what is happening only now: that the slathering of antibiotics on every sort of itch or worse would cause germs to evolve into countless

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diseases that are incurable.

One perfect communicable disease, but only one so far, AIDS, had been identified back then, in the nick of time to make that issue of *Black Garterbelt*. And Trout's bug-eyed little green anthropologists had this to say about AIDS: "After the Rape of Nanking, the Holocaust and the gratuitous atomic bombing of Nagasaki, not to mention humankind's poisoning of the air, the waters and the topsoil, your planet's immune system *is trying to get rid of you.*"

Yes, and the planet will soon run out of petroleum in any case—so our great-grandchildren will inherit an enormous junkyard.

But listen:

Back in 1932 A.D., when I was ten years old, Dad, Bernie, my sister, Allie, and I were driving along somewhere in Indiana in our family's old four-door Studebaker sedan—with Dad at the wheel. I don't know where Mom was. Don't know where Mom is.

The Great Depression was going on. Dad, an architect, had just let his secretary and his draftsmen go and closed his office in downtown Indianapolis. There was no work. The stock market had gone bust and banks had failed, and people had lost their savings.

We were rolling along on our way to somewhere. I don't remember where. And then unexpectedly, for no apparent reason, Dad steered the car to the side of the road and stopped it in the middle of nowhere.

Where the *Fuh-kar-wee?*

But then Dad told us three kids to look at the car's odometer. It read 99,999.9. We were only one tenth of a mile from 100,000!

The moment was breathtaking!

You want to hear about a high adventure? It was as though we had unexpectedly arrived at the rim of the Grand Canyon! Oh my God!

Oh wow! Oh whee!

Dad put the car in motion again. When the Studebaker had gone one tenth of a mile more, the odometer sent the old sludge of all those toxic nines down the toilet of history.

Catharsis!

In their place was an innocent, dinky little one, and then all those zeros. So unsoiled by life—so new, so spanking brand-new.

And our father was so happy! He laughed and laughed. His troubles had vanished along with the nines. The odometer had made him feel like a lucky kid again—in a world that was his oyster.

Tabula rasa.

And so it will be for me, if I'm still around, and for all the rest of the braves and squaws of the *Fuh-kar-wee* tribe when the Christian odometer of history reads 1999 A.D. And the calendar says it's December 31. And our digital watches tell us it is 11:59 P.M.

Holy shit! I can't breathe!

And then the stinking past will go down the toilet of history. The year will become 2000—and *Fuh-kar-wees* everywhere, no matter how old they are, and even if their lives as grown-ups have been lousy, will do what my dad did during the Great Depression so long ago: They will laugh like crazy and feel like lucky kids again.

And the world will be their oyster.

