

Judy Novak

TIME BOMB

As a primary producer, Liza was in the top five percent of time maximisers. She woke every morning at six o'clock to milk the flexi-time cows and worked diligently for the next six German hours. After a stylish French ten minute break, where she was contracted to eat a warm, fluffy croissant and to drink two litres of sub-standard Chardonnay to reduce the World Wine Lake, it was back to the next round of cows.

The brown cows arrived for milking bleary-eyed and confused, having slept a massive twenty hour Norwegian night. The new government of Farga had recently and unwisely imported 30,000 hours of cut-price Norwegian time, which needed to be consumed before the next full moon. Few had forgotten the dreadful timewave of 2014, when the year had lasted for seven and a half years. Those in power were anxious not to repeat past mistakes. Lost time ticked its way into the World Time Pool, which was slowly overtaking the World Wine Lake and the World Plastic Mess.

Surplus Norwegian hours were therefore being slotted into working days where they would be noticed least. Targeted groups were lawyers, the unemployed, market researchers and brown cows.

Their udders aching and their cuds over-chewed, the brown cows stumbled into the barn. They were not entirely happy with the situation but denied bovine representation, milk chocolate and polished cow bells (unlike their counterparts in the picturesque Swiss alps) they suffered in silence.

Tender-hearted Liza was always mindful of treating the second cow shift with respect, although she was often too drunk to properly attach the milking machines to their bulging udders. Flocks of unemployed persons were always lurking to directly squirt the untapped milk into their slack bodies. Caught between Norwegian time and government prejudice, they roamed both the rural paddocks and suburban streets, searching for five minutes of overlooked Polynesian pleasure or a twelve second Thai takeaway.

Liza turned a blind eye to the sad and saggy unemployed and embarked on an obligatory cocaine-filled lunch hour, courtesy of the World Snow Cone. Through a haze of wine, cocaine and cows, she recalled a time not long ago when she was at agricultural school, allocated twenty-five Australian hours a week as part of a study grant. The government of the day had no real use for

lazy, happy Australian hours, which flowed all too freely into the World Beer Keg. However, it had been a diplomatic move to accept the suntanned hours, which had been given as a gift by the Australian government. Australia always had extra hours but down there, nobody cared that it had been 1970 for 62 years. Some fashions never change.

Liza thought Australia sounded perfect. Until the Fargan food stores were full, she would not have the luxury of leisure time. She was even considering adopting the Japanese time schedule, waking up nine hours before she went to sleep. Vast quantities of amphetamines from the World Speed Freak were always available to assist wakefulness. Turning on her portable television set, Liza watched the lead news story, which featured the neighbouring island nation of Smug and its rapidly declining population. Smug had been, for centuries, the land that time forgot. Unfortunately, time had now remembered and was claiming the island.

Sickening time-lapse footage showed citizens aging and dying within days. The World Council of Time Keepers had already released 60,000 aid hours from the World Time Pool but these had been swallowed up within minutes, to cover Smug's accumulated time debt.

A further 100,000 hours from the Pool were being emailed over. Countries with extra time were being encouraged to donate. Australia faxed over the rest of the 1970s. Farga was texting all unused Norwegian time to Smug and sending a freighter full of plastic watches for the children to play with.

While Liza felt sorry for the Smugs, she was happy for the brown cows, who could now revert to a reasonable timetable. As she turned off the television, the last image she saw was of a young girl holding a hand-lettered sign which read "Please help. We just need more time."

By the next morning, Smug had completely drained the World Time Pool. The island was sinking lower and lower into the ocean, having exceeded its time limit. All fit, able Smugs were gripping onto any flotsam and jetsam and paddling to Farga, the nearest land mass. Relatives left behind on Smug tried to convince each other that help would be found and their loved ones would return. Many floating and swimming Smugs were turned away by the Fargan coastguard or redirected to other countries before reaching Fargan shores. Those who made it onto the beach promptly absorbed 1,000 hours on arrival and Farga quite simply didn't have the time to spare. Limited numbers of Smugs were, however, permitted to stay on Fargan soil until conditions at home improved.

Several weeks later, the island of Smug stabilised. This was largely due to the distribution of controversial Genetically Modified time by the World Council of Time Keepers.

Some Smugs returned home to their families with pathetically small 200 hour care packages.

Several thousand Smugs who didn't want to go home applied for and were granted Fargan residency, before the immigration gates slammed shut. Many other countries also took in Smugs, when they could find the time.

Zack was one of the Smugs who floated to Farga and stayed. Farga was lush, underpopulated and prosperous where Smug was poor, overpopulated and slightly crumbly around the edges.

Liza was ploughing the top field when a bus carrying Zack and ten other Smugs trundled up the dirt track towards her. Even from a distance, she recognised the Minister for Timing as the driver of the bus. She grunted with displeasure.

As well as working for the government, the Minister was an amateur stand-up comedian, who frequently tested new material on Liza. Despite his enthusiasm, it just wasn't possible for him to be funny. The world supply of comic timing had been sucked up by America in the 1950's. Initially, they used it well, then let it loose on television, where most of it died. America eventually spat the remaining four seconds of comic timing left in the world into England in 1971. The tiny comic timing maintained its dignity and worked its way independently up to Scotland, found a comfortable host in Billy Connolly and stayed there for the rest of its life. The Minister didn't stand a chance.

To Liza's great relief, he didn't have any jokes today. He did, however, present her with ten assorted Smugs who would be employed by the state to work on Liza's farm, under her guidance.

Zack emerged from the bus. Tall and semi-luminous, with eyes the colour of a purple translucent pencil sharpener, he winked at Liza. She was a particularly luscious Fargan, a meld of peachy scent and eyes as dark and swirly as liquid chocolate. She winked back. Her legs quivered. Her breath got stuck in her chest. Her words got stuck in her throat. Her feet got stuck in the mud. Her eyelashes fluttered. She became very aware of her filthy overalls and wished she was wearing lipstick. She fell in love.

Zack was cool with that.

The quiet lustrous Smugs taught Liza their traditional farming techniques and she showed them the Fargan way. The mixture of methods proved to be fruitful. Empty Fargan food stores filled rapidly.

Zack moved into the farmhouse. Liza became pregnant. She hoped that their baby might ease Zack's suffering. He missed his parents dreadfully and worried about his little brother, who had reacted badly to the GM time and now required four-hourly shots of cold, clean Antarctic time to survive. Zack's frequent requests to the Fargan government to allow his little brother Fargan residency were denied for the time being.

Liza lazed fatly around the farmhouse, leaving the competent Zack in charge of her farm and his co-Smugs. The efficient Smugs were now working most Fargan farms with little supervision.

One lazy afternoon, Liza wandered into the barn to check that the milking machines had been serviced. She inhaled a lungful of the delicious cow/hay smell and noted that the machines were in excellent condition. As she turned to leave the barn, she heard a distinct ticking noise.

Following the sound, she clambered up the stairs into the hay loft. Or rather, what used to be the hay loft. The area was filled with partly dismantled timing devices. All the clocks were there — cuckoo, grandfather, alarm, speaking and radio. Wrist, fob and stop watches jostled for space with parking meters, sundials, hourglasses and egg-timers.

Liza screamed. She'd read hundreds of stories in the newspaper of people being caught with illegal time extraction facilities. Time Inspectors the world over were enthusiastically investigating any reported tickings and tockings. The penalties were severe.

She sank to her puffy knees and wept, while the clocks chimed and whirled regardless. Several hours later, Zack found his lovely Liza asleep in the loft. Enfolding her in his long, strong arms, he apologised tearfully for endangering Liza and their foetus but explained that he had no real choice. Without extra time sent to Smug through black market timesters, his family and most other Smugs would be dead. Time atrocities were still occurring regularly on Smug. Babies were dying at birth, having inherited their mother's time deficits. Having children had never been so time consuming. As it was, most Smugs were living on borrowed time. They appealed regularly to the World Council of Time Keepers but the Council was busy trying to contain a very mean Greenwich time accident.

He went on to say that Smugs residing in other countries were taking even bigger risks to save their families on Smug. Some boarded aeroplanes and crossed time zones, smuggling the extra hours through customs on returning to their adopted home. They took advantage of stolen moments between lovers. Time-share apartments were pillaged. They raided sleeves on hearing that someone had a few minutes left up there.

Time-saving devices including dishwashers and microwave meals were dismantled and the relevant parts removed. Athletes who beat their own best times were forced at watchpoint to surrender unused tenths of seconds. The time that cosmetic surgeons turned back was packed in brown paper bags and mailed to Smug. When extra time was called during an unresolved sporting match, a Smug was always the one holding the stopwatch, which was then carefully pocketed. The stitches that were supposed to save nine lost both timing structure and rhyme to the Smugs.

Liza asked the pearly Zack what she could do to help. Soon she was up to her elbows in slippery minutes.

Three months later, the farm was visited by Time Inspectors, whose mission was to destroy all methods of mass time extraction. The Minister for Timing attended the inspection, poking at the ravaged clocks and sealing cogs in evidence bags. He put three watches on one wrist and told the Inspectors he had too much time on his hands. They asked him if he'd heard of Billy Connolly. The Minister said Billy was an old timer and held up an old egg timer. The Inspectors asked him if he'd heard of a knuckle sandwich and would he like one? The Minister asked for time out and was punched in the face. Liza was visiting her mother when the raid occurred. Zack took responsibility for the entire operation and was promptly arrested, along with his co-Smugs. At their time trials, they were forced to endure the antics of sheep dogs, showjumping horses and Olympic swimmers before judgement was passed on them. Zack was given a five year sentence.

Fortunately he was a good reader.

The prison was full of Smugs doing time. Soon they had set up another factory underneath the laundry, with the help of sympathetic prison guards.

Zack missed Liza with a fiercely aching heart. She was allowed to see him just once a week. With each visit she grew fatter and fatter, glowing with health and brimming with life. A new gaggle of Smugs was working the farm and looking after her extremely well, out of respect for Zack, now widely regarded as a Smug hero.

When Liza failed to show up for her regular visit, Zack was concerned. A friendly guard called the farm and was told that Liza was in hospital and in labour. Zack spent an anxious night in his cell.

The following morning his cell door was unlocked by an unfamiliar Smug who explained to Zack that there had been an overnight coup. Smugs now controlled all Fargan farms and Fargan time. A state of immediacy had been declared and all time prisoners were being released.

The new President of Farga, a healthy-looking Smug in his early thirties, met Zack at the prison gates with a baby in his arms. He was accompanied by ten soldiers of similar age, who also carried tiny babies. The President's baby cooed gently and touched Zack's face with a wrinkled finger.

"She likes you, dad," the President said to Zack.

"She loves me, son," replied Zack. "You have no idea how much." He held out his arms for the baby. She looked up at him with eyes as dark and swirly as liquid chocolate and gurgled. Zack kissed the baby's soft forehead.

"Thank you, darling Liza," he muttered into the baby's fuzzy hair. "Let's get you to a factory and pump you up again. You've given our son the best years of your life and I think we've taken up quite enough of your time for now."

Liza nodded and rapidly became smaller and smaller, regressing to newborn, foetus and finally a tiny speck which dwindled to nothing. Zack sadly cradled the empty space in his arms as the new President became another two seconds stronger.

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