

# Excerpt of PsyBot: A Novel of the Near Future

by Nowick Gray

## Prologue: The Dream Car

I stumble against the broken asphalt and scattered gravel of the parking lot. Overhead the wires moan against a dirty-sheet sky murky and full of warm October air so foul you could spit it out. In the deserted street overseen by restless, bored security cameras, the garish signs of the month hang leering, already faded, soot-gray:

*Tired of feeling tired? Drink Jolt.*

*Reverse Aging: Biotrain Boutique.*

*Top of the World: ARMY!*

Ah, there's Myrtle, her sleek lines of molded steel a lovely polished green. And what's this? A square of white notepaper flaps from the driver's side mirror. Walking around to full view I spot, propped against the door, two pieces of a disassembled scope rifle, and on the asphalt, a compact leather carrying case. I glance around: no one else observing. I ignore the note, fascinated by the gun. I pick it up, greasy to the touch, and glean from the blue-metal sheen that it's new. From the opened case on the ground, specially packaged in shrink-wrap, one silvery bullet winks up at me.

A bullet—for whom?

I'm a stranger to guns, yet this leading question pops clear into my dreaming head, even as I dutifully place the two halves of the rifle into their slotted beds in the case's yellow velvet.

The note hangs against the window. I'm afraid to read it—I want to hold onto my ignorance.

The question of a target, with its implication of mission unknown, keeps knocking on the back of my brain. In a slow funk I slide into the car, putting the gun case on the back seat; casual yet deliberate, as if it were a small hydraulic jack or evening newspaper. Without identifying source or destination, I'm mesmerized by that vague sense of purpose. There is only the next

action ahead, what I know to do. Pulling the key out of my pocket, I insert it into the ignition, and give it a twist...

In my waking sweat I thought I might have chosen a way out: an alternate future, enticing as a carrot to my donkey mind. A matter of a step or two, to cross a vital channel and follow a different timeline. But no; my incidental choice, however far back on this progression, had already been recorded, logged, tagged to my profile. I'd already committed, somehow, to this strange fork in the road, and it was too late to go back.

Like saying to Moira, "I'm sorry," after sleeping with her sister Sheila. Or telling my boss Gerald, "I told you so," after our company has been dissolved in the great merger. Or at any point along the way, finding that the heaven I'd been promised (even if only a promise I'd made to myself) turned out to be another version of hell.

In Moira's circular bed, with the covers off, I could see my fairly long, medium-fat, moderately hairy middle-aged body shivering in my shorts. I grabbed the covers back from Moira. She lay breathing heavily beside me, her flank in a pink nightgown rising and falling with the rhythm of sleep. I'd nearly surfaced to the comforting familiarity of Moira's bed, and the dream persisted. I had the distinct feeling I was stuck in that green dream-car for the duration of the ride. My eyes drifted shut again.

Dead oak leaves swirl in the rearview along Tournay Crescent. I lean back in my driver's seat, satisfied with the automatic motions of steering, my two-forefinger method. Everything in the drab outside world seems normal. Light traffic in this part of town, mostly residential. I pass a light blue garbage truck, am passed in turn by a Hardacre cab, growling from a faulty muffler. I crank the window down for a breath of the dank breeze. The unread note ripples outside the window, held between the mirror and its housing. I suppose I should read it—when I get home to Moira's. For now, I'm content to watch the row houses and shabby duplexes file past.

Time-beaten love songs filter down from upstairs apartment windows. Contrary to reputation, there is life in Philadelphia: men in pastel sweatshirts and windbreakers, women in perm jobs and plastic boots, dogs pissing on mutant trees.

And now I'm afraid: it's all too easy. A private sector of my brain rebels. My instincts call me back to waking light—a journey of learning to crawl on hot tar. My inner ears prick up.

Expectation, result. An eerie mechanical voice crackles like a drive-in movie speaker: “Wanna see a new film, chum? Come on in. Just step through the revolving door.”

What?

There’s no window speaker at this drive-in. No revolving door. No one in the back seat, with the gun.

There was a voice, though. With an indefinable accent resonating of London, Chicago, Tijuana.

My eyes focus ahead, seeing nothing different but this homely brick-brown city everyone loves to hate. I want no part of any invisible hitchhiker’s scenario. My foot remains on the accelerator; my fingers continue steering; the dream persists. I begin to realize that I’m accepting this grimly pleasant voice’s invitation, still without knowing what’s in it for me.

Underneath my anxiety I sense a kind of grace that accompanies the inevitable. A peace which settles in beyond the moment of choice; though in this case, I can’t see where there was a choice to be made. Unless—well, I did pick up the gun.

I glance behind to double-check that it’s still there. Mute black leather case—funny, I imagine it *purring*—at rest on the vinyl upholstery cover.

I attempt to argue: I didn’t deliver this artifact to my car in the first place. Finding it staring me in the face, I took the next logical step.

When the drink is mixed by another’s hand, it can go down oh, so smooth.

The voice chimes back in: “By the way, did I tell you? It’s a horror movie. Depending on your POV. In any case, a thrillah. Don’t fret: you’ll have a leading role. Hmm—what’s the mattah? You prefer romantic comedies? Ah, too bad! There are, sad to say, no refunds. No exit doors in this here show.” Then, hollow, metallic laughter.

By rights I should panic. Instead, I drive on, an automaton in my own flesh, at one with my ’87 Olds, lulled by the hum of her motion. I drink in the October air, a cocktail hinting of latent snow, with notes of soot.

The voice consoles: “Cheer up, chum! There’s a perfect place for you, right over the horizon. In fact, my friend, that’s where we’re headed right now.”

*Friend?* My skin puckers like used aluminum foil.

“Why me?” I want to protest. “I didn’t ask for any damned horror movie or romantic fantasy. I want to get on with my life. I’m happy right where I am.”

A relative lie. Yet in nearly saying so, I regain the comforting sense that I’m lying unabused in Moira’s bed, and not driving that suddenly hellish car I thought was mine.

If this were a human passenger I could confide in, I might have confessed the more objective truth of that safe, mundane niche in the universe:

“It’s a circular bed, y’see, which takes getting used to. You sometimes wonder where you are, half-asleep in the middle of the night. Moira’s a large woman and she tends to lie smack in the middle, sprawled with her heavy arms out. She likes the fact that she bought this bed, that she owns it. Anyway half the time I’m not there—on furlough, we call it, over at my man-cave—so we figure it doesn’t pay to sink a lot of cash into a bigger bed, even a conventional king. One of these days, we might get serious, and I can move in with her on a more permanent basis, instead of this kind of semi-commitment we have going at the moment. Make that the past four years. But hey, Moira still insists on paying the rent...”

My present listener, no human I can discern, indulges my inner chatter only so far, then interrupts with its own shrill, unwelcome pitch:

“We’re selecting a few of the most deserving... call them souls if you wish. Introducing them, one by one, to an old friend we call Uncle River: the river of time. We like your potential, your flexibility, your openness to new ideas. You do have choices, and we mean to help you arrive at the right one, each one in its turn. To board this boat requires your free ticket. No deposit, no return...”

“Yeah, I get it,” I bark back. “No purchase necessary.”

To hell with his would-be chumminess. I’m determined to offer nothing gracious of myself to this faceless, schmoozing huckster.

The voice keeps on talking, takes on a resentful edge with the flavor of transistor static: “Look. Every experience, even on your blessed Earth, is a doomed adventure if you only look to your own desires. Time’s cutlass marks every face. Have you no social conscience, no will to serve the greater good?”

That’s all fine, but under whose definition? What does he mean, *on your Earth*? And who is this *we*?

Myrtle—trusty Olds Cutlass in your own right—what have they done to you, and where are these dream-pirates taking us?

Shivering, I grip the wheel and force the green beast right, merging with traffic on Haliburton Boulevard. The voice goes silent. I breathe easier.

This is my Earth, my ancient Earth, I console myself. Downtown Philly, in fact. This is without a doubt my own and only green vintage Oldsmobile, with full-sized retractable and reclining seats, medium chrome trim, power to burn. I know I walked up to it as I do every working afternoon, in the parking lot outside the computer consulting office where I work, in the same tacky part of town: bits of newspaper blowing around, stray mutts roaming, homeless beggars huddled against the walls of abandoned warehouses...

Christ, I've circled the block. We're back at the parking lot ringed with scraggly young oaks wrapped in anti-dog cages. I pull over and stop by the curb, taking stock. The voice remaining silent, my own head rattles in its cage.

How and why have I ended up back here? Have I forgotten something at the office, something I was supposed to bring home? Did I neglect to turn off my computer before I left?

Strange, I can't remember. There's a light on up there—in Gerald's office. He's working overtime again. The gray blocks of warehouse stone surround him. (*Warehouse, whorehouse.*)

Me? I do my job, and then punch out.

Is that why I'm not farther ahead in this once-promising career?

Is that what this voice is telling me, to get back to work? Or more, nudging me to get on board with the great merger that's supposed to save our insignificant silicon ass?

I'm forty-eight. So yeah, it's crunch time, as they say. Now or never. Maybe it is time to pay the extra dues.

Thing is, about this car, and this gun, out of nowhere—I'm supposed to do something, to someone?

No. I'm going home.

Home... where the hell is that?

I feel the cold sweat again, even as I tell you that I came to discover, much further downstream in that dusky river, that you can go home only for a while. You think you are waking up with a

chilly memory, that your body and the body beside you are rousing from an actual sleep, at worst “disturbed.” Meanwhile the jealous other, the “nightmare” let’s say, this certain other affair tugs at your soul in the unending dark, telling you that you can’t cancel your return reservations, not anymore. You’ve already chosen, or been chosen; it comes to the same thing in the end.

Again the choice will beckon. Only tonight, the next night and the next, it’s not really the same time or place, not the same size or shape of choice, because you’re farther along, deeper in.

You tell them, you tell yourself, you’re just doing a job. Forget, for now, whether it’s your job or their job. The problem is, the supposed target always eludes the roving window of your scope, their scope. The silver bullet never gets fired, not quite yet. Because you’re looking for the sure way in, the way back home.

You go to visit, for instance, the other, the next secret object of your desire, her green eyes vibrant and alive. Then you see in those eyes also windows to a farther shore, twin discs headed out in a one-way night speckled with stars. To enter her, those eyes, is to enter the spiraling path, with no backspacing, no escaping the hungry parasite in the computer mind.

(PsyBot.)

Only later could I give it this name: the name it was given. When I first came awake—which is to say, more or less but not yet truly awake—I heard the echo of its voice as warning:

*Coming soon to an interface near you.*

Yeah, right, I said to myself, shaking off a poor night’s sleep. Then rubbed my fingers together, and they felt like vinyl. Took a whiff, and smelt gun grease.