



VETOPIA

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Vetopia

Alys Meiriol

Stream House

For Pee and Lai and all my beloveds, past, present, and future

*It often happens that the universal belief of one age,
a belief from which no-one was free nor could be free
without an extraordinary effort of genius or courage,
becomes to a subsequent age so palpable an absurdity
that the only difficulty is, to imagine how such an idea
could ever have appeared credible.*

John Stuart Mill

The light was blinding. As I regained my senses, I realised that I was lying on the ground, in the middle of a street. Everything looked the same, and yet different. An indefinable softening of the air, the pale colours of the shop fronts, a sense of calm, of a world at peace with itself. From an unseen hinterland I could hear distant noises - laughter, birdsong, the hum of life. My eyes were still dazzled and I blinked to clear them. I felt a pressing need to see. Then out of the light a face appeared above me, the brown eyes kind, quizzical.

“Are you all right?”

“I think so” I said. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure” said the stooping figure. “I came round the corner and there you were. You must have had a black-out or something - fallen, and hit your head.”

“I do feel - strange.” I fingered my head. There was an egg-sized bump above the hairline.

“Do you think you can stand up?”

I took the proffered hand. Its grip was reassuring and firm, gentle. As my vision returned, I saw my companion clearly for the first time - he was of indeterminate age and medium height, brown-haired and whip-thin. The most striking thing about him was the air of calmness that radiated from him. To stand close to him was like bathing in a warm sea. I felt myself relax. The pressing questions I had dissolved. Even my throbbing head quietened.

“Look, why don’t we go and get a coffee or something? Or maybe you’d prefer a brandy? It’s probably not a good idea for you to be rushing off anywhere straight after a shock like that.”

Truth to tell, I couldn’t quite remember where I had been going - or, for that matter where I’d come from. But it didn’t seem to matter. I walked slowly along beside my new friend, whose name was Asa.

“It’s not far” he said. “The café, I mean.”

As we walked, I glanced at the shops, at their name-boards and their window displays. Something was not quite right. And yet not wrong either. Just a subtle difference that I couldn’t quite pin down. The people we passed smiled and nodded - even those who were obviously hurrying had a leisurely air. There were no frowns or tensions, or anxious faces. It was as though everyone was on his way to a party, or else had just come from one.

“Something in the water” I thought, and smiled at my own whimsy.

“Here we are” said Asa, and we stopped in front of a moss-green door. Flowers cascaded from tubs beside it, and a vine heavy with purple grapes tumbled lazily over the entrance. Somewhere I could hear a fountain plashing. We stepped down, out of the sunlight. The interior was dark and cool, and smelt of spices.

“You sit there” said Asa, indicating a table by the window. “I’ll get these - my treat. Tea? Coffee? Fruit juice?”

I must have answered, because he smiled and turned away. While I waited, I studied the blackboard that hung over the counter. My eyes skimmed the list - soups, main courses, desserts. Everything sounded - luscious. But the menu, like the rest of the world I’d woken to, was dislocated, slightly off-kilter, and I still couldn’t think why.

Until, that is, Asa came back with the tea.

As he offered me the milk jug, I noticed a circle of bubbles floating round the rim, while the milk itself had a creamy yellow tinge.

“It’s soya, of course” he said, noticing my puzzlement. And then I realised. The whole menu contained not one mention of meat.

“Welcome” Asa said. “Welcome to Vetopia.”

We were walking down the street again. Asa had invited me to stay the night at his flat -“until you get yourself sorted out again” he said. I knew it was strange that I felt neither curiosity nor a sense of urgency. It just seemed the most natural thing in the world to be where I was. For some reason, what lay behind or before me caused me no concern.

In the distance, I saw a low, white building, shaded by trees. It stood by itself, planted on the earth.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That’s the Empathy Site.” And then, as I must have looked perplexed, Asa continued “We don’t have many laws here. Well, we don’t really need them. People are considerate of others. But now and again something happens and when it does, the instigator has to spend some time in there.”

“So it’s a kind of prison?”

“Not exactly. You see, a prison is really a person’s mind. With all the advances we’ve made, we’re able to open that mind to the minds of others, so the pain and misery of the consequences of an action can be felt by the person who caused them.”

“And does it work as a deterrent?”

“Put it this way. Nobody goes in twice.”

Trees lined the road, their branches full of fluttering and twittering. Birds accompanied us as we walked along, flying around our heads and dipping from perch to perch. They seemed to have no fear of us. Again, Asa read my thoughts.

“They soon learned that we mean them no harm. People eventually lost interest in guns, even though there were still plenty of sports that used manmade targets. Chasing or taunting and then watching living beings suffer and die soon lost its appeal too. Bullfighting was abandoned. And keeping bears in chains and forcing them to fight dogs or dance for our amusement soon followed. So even though some mediaeval ideas had lingered well into the new millennium they gradually vanished. And of course hand-rearing birds so that they could be shot for entertainment was finally seen for what it was. Birds are valued as fellow beings, and we let them live their lives without interference as we do with all living things, though of course we try to help them if they need it. In the coldest winters, we leave a bird-flap open in our homes so that they can come and roost indoors, in the warm, if they wish.

Even domestic cats don’t bother to chase them. They too have adapted to a new life.

It's amazing how a permanently full stomach can counter the urge to kill."

We continued walking through the scented air. To our left, a series of mirrored buildings shimmered in the light. Huge telescopes and antennae peppered the roof, constantly moving like a field of wheat.

"And that" said Asa proudly, "that is The Centre."

Seeing my questioning look he continued: "That's where we study Visiscience."

"Visiscience?"

"The art of discovery through observation and empiricism. If we want to learn about the world, we look at it. No more incarceration of birds or animals in cages so we can study their behaviour. No more artificially constructed experiments to test their intelligence or their biology. No more trapping or removal from their natural habitat. No more enforced human contact. Just fellow creatures and their lives, living as they wish to. And we did away with vivisection years ago. People finally came to see that it was unethical, unreliable, and just plain cruel. Now, we use computer modelling, cell cultures from human volunteers (of which there are millions - everyone wants to help everyone else) - and our eyes. So far we've found cures for cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Oh, and Alzheimer's. Of course, diet helps. And one's state of mind. Being freed from unresolved guilt is the single most important step to good health there is."

He smiled again, and turned to the right.

"Now - shall we cut through the park?"

"But what about farms?" I asked as we turned into a green, shady space alive with flowers and the thrum of bees. "All those animals - what happens to them if they aren't killed for food? Isn't the world overrun with cattle and sheep?"

Asa laughed. "That's what all the doomsayers predicted. A world swamped by animals. They didn't give Nature enough credit. Populations soon stabilised after an initial spike. After all, the numbers had been kept artificially high by intensive farming and artificial insemination. People soon realised the rewards of stewardship rather than exploitation. Live exports were the first to go. We all realised there was no place for them in a civilised world. The slaughterhouses and factory farms closed and were turned into memorial parks. The country's largest abattoir was converted into a museum, with rooms documenting the history of animal abuse - videos, photographs, written and oral testimonies.

We're all encouraged to visit it at least once in our lives - it's important not to forget, you see. That way there's little chance of mankind slipping backwards into ignorance and deliberate cruelty again. And that building - it has such a sadness about it. You can still feel the desperation of all those who went into it to die. There's a quotation from one of the original activists over the entrance: "As long as there are slaughterhouses in the world, we will kill each other" - and it was true. As soon as people started to admit to themselves that the

unnatural death of any sentient being is wrong, violent crimes disappeared, and the concept of war became an anathema. Of course, territorial disputes still flare up occasionally - we are humans, after all - but they're settled with a tennis match -"

He broke off, seeing my look of incredulity.

"I know it sounds strange, but it's quite logical. Instead of spending millions on weapons and defence budgets, each country invests in sporting academies - the surplus is sent to poorer countries as aid. Any quarrels are decided by a tennis match - the best players from each of the countries involved play a five-set match and the winner is awarded the judgment.

No blood spilt, no cities or wildernesses devastated - and a truly global audience.

Everyone watches the match and goes home satisfied. It's quite - cathartic.

And much quicker than an old-fashioned war."

He glanced at me and said kindly, "Look, this is probably a lot for you to take in all at once.

Let's head home for something to eat. You can have a rest there, and decide what you want to do." We headed off under the trees and across the grass.

In the distance, I could see the thin azure line of the sea.

We came to a blue door, the colour of gentians. Inside, a wooden staircase led up to another door, the deep turquoise wash of a summer sky. Asa's flat was white and airy, with low cane furniture and bright patchwork cushions. Above a coffee table set against a wall was a rectangular screen. At first I thought it was a television tuned to a natural history channel, but something about the unhurried quality of the filming made me wonder aloud.

"This is one of the latest aquavisions" Asa said proudly. "People stopped keeping fish in tiny boxes years ago. They couldn't bear to see creatures that were used to swimming through vast oceans confined to such cramped, unnatural prisons. And often sentenced to solitary confinement when they were used to sharing the oceans with millions of their own kind.

The hunting of whales and dolphins or treating them as a means of entertainment was rejected first - that deep affinity which humans feel for them was just too powerful in the end.

And the last aquariums were turned over to The Stewardship about the same time as the last zoos and battery farms were closed and prison cells were phased out.

They'd become redundant, you see. This aquavision is a live video feed from the Caribbean. You can choose your ocean to match your décor - if you really want to. The camera works at night too, in natural moonlight. No-one wants to subject sea-creatures to conditions they're not used to. The days of pointing blinding lights into marine trenches that have been in darkness for millennia are long gone."

I watched in fascination as shoals of brilliantly-striped fish ebbed and flowed and turned like flocks of jewelled starlings across the screen.

Guessing my unspoken question, Asa continued:

"The Stewardship is what used to be called the Government. We still have elections, but

there's no name-calling or underhand trickery. The campaigns are based on positive politics and aspirations. Turn-out is usually in the high nineties now."

"But meat -"

"That didn't happen overnight. It's amazing how hard it can be to let go of what you're used to, even when you know it's wrong. For many years there was a back street - nicknamed Slaughter Alley - where meat could still be bought under the counter at hugely inflated prices. You'd sometimes see a furtive shadow slipping past, clutching and fumbling a newspaper bundle which was oozing blood. But gradually it became as socially unacceptable as driving while you're drunk or smoking in front of your children. All the old skills came back. Telepathy, intuition, instinct - they hadn't really been lost at all, but were just buried under the great weight of consumerism masquerading as civilisation, and all its attendant ills. And we refound our ability to communicate with animals. Once that psychic blockage had been removed, behind which we told ourselves that it was somehow all right to eat and wear and torture our fellow beings because they seemed somehow lesser than us - oh, what riches followed. We had so much to learn about the world, about each other - still do. Did you notice there are no phone lines? It's so easy to contact people now - and you're never put on hold!" Asa grinned, and I wondered how he seemed to know so much about the old order of things.

"We study the past" he said, again reading my thoughts. "It's like the Museum of Slaughterville. We must never become complacent, never forget."

Asa smiled at me, his almond-shaped eyes crinkling at the corners. Suddenly he looked very young. "And I know what you really want to ask" he continued. "How? How did it all start?" He was right. I'd been about to burst out with that very question.

"I suppose you could say that one day everything just connected. Like a vast spiritual jigsaw puzzle that finally slotted into place. All those separate pieces - the knowledge that if we could live without killing - and that if we did, there were enough resources in the world to sustain all of us - there could be no justification to continue such slaughter; the feeling that experimenting on animals to try to cure human diseases was wrong; the growing abhorrence that people felt about chasing animals for sport or using them for entertainment; the realisation, especially by those who shared their homes with animals, that our fellow creatures are infinitely more complex and intelligent and capable of intense feeling and more like us than we ever gave them credit for - all those things came together until even the most sceptical and committed carnivore had to accept the truth: that for generations we'd been groping through a fog created by vested interests and corporate greed and fear of change and that we could no longer just keep stumbling through it. After that, it was easy - one by one countries embraced the change - Thailand first, then India - Britain was one of the earliest - and those countries you'd expect were the last, though when the market for animal products collapsed even they had to adapt to the new order of things. No-one fought any more, wars just didn't happen - once people accepted the concept of reverence for life (Albert Schweitzer

was way ahead of his time), the spiritual world tilted on its axis and all became right again. That was the Apocalypse that everyone feared. Bad news for meat-producers and animal circuses and those research labs that hadn't given up animal testing to use the newer, better technology - but the best news for the planet. And for us."

"But what was the last piece?" I asked, seized with a burning, crushing need to know.

"What was the thing that happened to make it all knit together?"

Asa turned to the fish flicking backwards and forwards in their invisible, intuitive net on the aquascreen, and then back to me. He smiled again.

"Well, of all things, it was something quite trivial, seemingly insignificant. Never underestimate the power of small."

He leant towards me and started to speak. But a sudden roaring in my head drowned out his voice, and as I looked at him, he became smaller and smaller, disappearing as though I were looking down the wrong end of a telescope. I tried to reach out, to grasp him, to hold on to some fragment of that future life. But all was noise and darkness. And then nothing.

I opened my eyes, felt cold concrete beneath my cheek. The remains of what looked like a burger lay in a pinkish-grey spatter by my head.

Everywhere was bleak, dismal.

I was back in the real world, in the twenty-first century, and it seemed that nothing had changed.

Vetopia is a vision of a future world -
The Peaceable Kingdom in a green Utopia

