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The Transition

Written by Luke Kennard

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The Transition

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For Zoë

The Transition

1

WHENEVER KARL TEMPERLEY felt that he couldn't endure another moment he would imagine that he had just run over and killed a child. The shock of the impact, the screech of his too-late emergency stop, the tiny body in the gutter, a parent – sometimes the mother, sometimes the father – running towards him as he stood by the bloodied bonnet of his wife's Fiat Punto. This imagined, he returned to his real world and its trivial sorrows with relief and gratitude.

'... your marital status notwithstanding ...' the notary public was saying.

Lately though, facing fifteen months in jail for fraud and a tax infraction he still couldn't quite fathom – neither what he had done or neglected to do, nor how exactly he had accomplished or overlooked it – he found himself spending longer and longer at his inner roadside.

Karl Temperley wrote consumer reviews of products he had never used and bespoke school and undergraduate essays as 'study aids' for ten pence a word. It was a lowly portfolio career, but such was his determination to do something literary with his education: he had read English and taken a Master's degree in the Metaphysical Poets. It

had cost him £78,000, an amount which seemed impossible and therefore easy to ignore.

His employers were email addresses who signed off with different names, but their tone was warm and jovial enough and he was well thought of – of this they assured him – for his ability to write essentially the same thing as if it were being said by ten different people. Where some saw a carbon-fibre laptop case, Karl saw a Russian novel.

His wife, Genevieve, taught at a local primary school. An enviable demographic once known as Double Income No Kids and yet, once the rent and bills were paid, their debts serviced, Karl found that he had to think twice about buying a pair of shoes when his old ones wore through at the sole. The rent kept going up. He was aware they brought some of this on themselves; they had expectations. Every day they drank flavoured coffees the size of poster tubes, which cost as much as the baristas serving them would earn in an hour. They loaded supermarket trolleys with snacks and treats which could largely be consumed on the way home. In the last week of every month they were inevitably down to the wire, so he would put a week's shopping on his credit card. Then a return train fare. The pair of shoes he needed. A birthday present for Genevieve. Dinner. The bank was happy to increase his credit limit, increase it again and, instead of increasing it a third time, to offer him a temporary loan to consolidate his debt, so that the double-capacity credit card went back to a tantalising £0.00. Karl decided he might start taking advantage of the daily invitations to take out more credit cards, credit cards with banks he hadn't even heard of, cards in every colour of the spectrum, cards with limits of £300 which

he could use for small purchases, cards with limits of £5,000 with which he could chivalrously pay for a new head gasket when Genevieve's car got into trouble and, the following week, take her on a five-star mini-break to Paris when she turned thirty-two (her thirtieth had been marred by a minor psychotic episode, and her thirty-first was not much better, so he felt the need to compensate). Finally, there was one beautiful, transparent credit card which shimmered like a puddle of petrol and had a limit of £11,000. He used it to pay off some of the smaller credit cards and make the minimum monthly payment on the middle-sized ones. Whenever this one needed servicing he would take out another bantamweight card or a short-term advance.

Genevieve knew nothing of his seventeen-card private Ponzi scheme. As far as she could see, both she and Karl worked damn hard all week then collapsed, exhausted, and spent all weekend either asleep or streaming complete seasons of American dramas to get back to full strength. Whenever they had some time off they both came down with head colds. It never occurred to her that they might be living beyond their means and it took three years for Karl to finally max out his most copious line of credit, the rat queen of his nest of cards. After that, letters printed in red ink started to arrive. Statements with lateness penalties, interest on the lateness penalties, penalties for exceeding the credit limit and lateness penalties on those penalties, punitive rates of interest and demands for final settlement. The double dose of sleeping pills he was taking with a tumbler of mid-priced brandy to silence the grinding gears of his incipient ruination stopped working. He was

getting crotchety with Genevieve and it was upsetting her. His very *raison d'être* was to not upset Genevieve; it was, so he told himself, the reason he'd got into so much debt in the first place and yet it had led to him upsetting her anyway.

Maybe I should kill myself? he thought, looking at his face in the communal bathroom mirror one winter morning, his cheeks covered in shaving foam. He pressed the five-blade Ultra Smooth Advanced Wet Shave System safety razor to his left wrist and shaved a Parmesan-thin centimetre of flesh. Blood appeared like a watermark. It really, really stung. *Maybe not.* He put his watch on over the top of it.

The tiny abrasion tingled and throbbed sporadically throughout the day. It made him laugh. Karl thought of a story he'd once heard about a would-be martyr in the third century who was on his way to the capital with every intention of being tortured and killed for his faith. He had to break his journey and a monk put him up in an old barn and, in the morning, asked him how his night had been. He complained about the draught and the flea bites, and the monk told him that he probably wasn't ready to face martyrdom.

Karl knew what to do. He wrote to his anonymous employers. Anyone he had ever worked for, all eighty-two email addresses. He needed more work, better work, urgently, whatever it was. He got only one reply, from someone called Sot Barnslig, offering to make him supervisor for two click-farms, enlisting people from around the world to generate fake traffic for websites, paying them out of the same reserve from which he would draw his own

fee. The work was menial and morally dubious, but the pay was better than his fake copywriting and he started to make a dent in the most pressing credit cards.

Actually, said Sot Barnslig – after Karl had been successfully paying down his seventeen debts for a fortnight and was starting to get some rest again – actually, the click-farms were a front for an enormous skimmming operation. Sot Barnslig confessed that he was stealing tiny amounts from thousands of different accounts and credit cards, amounts too small to be noticed by their owners, and Karl was unwittingly assisting him.

Karl emailed Sot Barnslig: *Why did you tell me that?* and carried on.

Unfortunately Sot Barnslig had either been compromised by investigators or had been an undercover agent all along. Karl was required to give up his laptop and, in desperation, he called his old university room-mate, Keston, an accountant, told him everything, and tried not to cry during their preliminary conversation.

‘Oh, K-Pax,’ said Keston. ‘You’ve got yourself in a right pickle, haven’t you? That gross yellow one.’

‘Am I going to prison?’

‘This is where being male, middle-class and white comes into its own,’ said Keston. ‘Nothing but safety nets. And you’ve touched the hem of the right garment.’

Keston organised a lawyer, who failed to adequately demonstrate Karl’s ignorance and now it seemed that Karl was going to have to spend some time in a low-security prison.

★ ★ ★

The young, owlish notary public had been talking for some time. The only representative of Spenser and Rudge currently willing to talk to him pro bono, he was telling Karl it was neither the best- nor the worst-case scenario. Did he know, by the way, that the origin of the phrase *worst-case scenario* was not legal, but in fact military? Karl said that he didn't. It's a strategy, the notary public told him. Before a manoeuvre you must always imagine the most awful thing the contingent world might throw your way.

There was a strong antiseptic smell in the notary public's office. He must have injured himself somehow.

'It's a good product, Mr Temperley,' said the notary. 'The Transition. It's worth considering as an alternative. Your accountant is working out the finer details. He agrees it's a good product.'

Karl pictured a pearlescent turquoise ball bouncing into the road between parked cars and he imagined slamming down the brake and the clutch at the same time, but he was doing almost forty because he was a terrible, negligent driver. What is the first thing you say to the parent? It doesn't matter. You're *so, so sorry*? Well, that's just great. Real voices, official voices with their assurances, codes and timbre would take over at some point. Voices like that of his notary public, who had just said,

'I appreciate this is probably not what you were expecting.'

Such was Karl's distraction that by the time he realised that the notary public was offering him a place on a pilot scheme called The Transition in lieu of fifteen months in jail, he said yes without asking for further information,

without calling his wife to discuss it with her, without pausing for breath.

The notary public blinked twice and handed him a thick, glossy brochure, saying that he might like to read it over before making up his mind. The cover depicted the blueprint for a house, but the rooms were designated things like EMPLOYMENT, NUTRITION, RESPONSIBILITY, RELATIONSHIP, BILLS, INVESTMENT, SELF-RESPECT. A semi-transparent overlay had THE TRANSITION embossed in capitals.

‘Your accountant was actually the one who drew our attention to it,’ said the notary public.

‘Keston,’ said Karl.

Aside from the online fraud, Karl’s tax infraction went back several years – a thread that snagged and unravelled the whole of his self-start marketing operation – and it was going to cost him and his wife a lot to pay it back. On top of Genevieve’s car payments and the credit card Karl had been using for groceries for the last six months, they were in a tight spot. And they were two months in arrears with their rent. Genevieve had texted him just before the meeting with the notary public and the text read only *Eviction*.
Next Week :(

It was unseasonably hot for March. It was hot in the notary public’s office, and although Karl was only wearing climbing shorts and a red Cookie Monster T-shirt, the sweat was running sunblock into his eyes. He peeled open the brochure and scanned the first page but couldn’t take the words in.

Piaget defines the cognitive task of adolescence as the achievement of formal operational reasoning ...

He looked up at the clock, at the maroon leather book spines, at the notary public's suit jacket baking in a shaft of sunlight and mingling a distinctly sheepy smell with the TCP.

'Can you summarise it for me?' he said.

2

KARL WALKED HOME through the Thompsons' suburb. The last decade had seen the professionalisation of the amateur landlord. Entire terraces were bought up, the houses divided and divided again. *Is it not time, finally, for the government to curb this rampant greed which is draining our country's resources and disenfranchising an entire generation?* an editorial would occasionally ask. In fact three administrations had tried: a certain percentage of property portfolios had to be dedicated to social housing, to key workers, to people in their thirties, but the sanctions only made the landlords, who had inherited their property portfolios from their parents, put up their rents to cover their losses. They felt their losses. Karl's own landlord, an affable man with toothbrush hair who always wore a grey Crombie, impressed this upon him. They had school fees and gastro-holidays and multiple mortgages to pay. Families spent their money raising their children and, as the years went by, savings became the preserve of the shrinking caste who already owned several houses. The average age of leaving the parental home drifted into the early forties. For Genevieve, raised by her grandparents, several years deceased, and Karl, who was the youngest child of an older

couple, his father now convalescing in sheltered accommodation, this wasn't an option. They were living, with their two-bar heater and all-in-one toaster oven, in the former conservatory of a Victorian semi-detached villa, a shared bathroom on each floor and a sense in both their minds of having made a bad decision at some critical juncture. The conservatory's Perspex ceiling had been wallpapered, but it was peeling at the corners and let in a nimbus of brilliant light.

Well, whatever. The fact remained they had running water, supermarkets, cinemas.

'I mean for goodness' sake, we're still wealthier than ninety-seven per cent of the world's population,' said Genevieve, whenever Karl complained. 'We're still a three-per-cent leech on the side of the planet, sucking most of it dry. And you have a cold half the time. You could be the richest man in the world and you'd still spend most of the day blowing your nose and moaning about your sinuses.'

Karl sniffed.

If their generation were waiting to have kids, or perhaps electing not to have kids at all, that was all for the better. It wasn't as though the world might run short of people. The development of a safe male contraceptive device, a tiny chip implanted in the thigh (occasionally, and in Karl's case, without spousal accord; the doctors never asked), had its part to play in this, for sure. 'Does any man ever really *want* to have children?' its inventor asked, palms upward at a press conference. This was met with some derision. 'Yeah, because I've hit a nerve,' he said. 'Mark my words: the languor and fecklessness of the male gender will be the

salvation of the human race. There are plenty of orphans if you want to adopt.'

Karl crossed the road between two yellow sports utility vehicles and walked by the Ravencroft Community Centre which had been converted into eleven luxury condos by the Thompsons.

The Transition was founded, the notary public had explained to him, because there had been a steep increase in cases such as Karl's. A generation who had benefited from unrivalled educational opportunities and decades of peacetime, who nonetheless seemed determined to self-destruct through petty crime, alcohol abuse and financial incompetence; a generation who didn't vote; who had given up on making any kind of contribution to society and blamed anyone but themselves for it.

So Karl ignored the pamphleteer, a young white guy with dreadlocks who stood by a cracked bathtub on the communal green with a stack of statistics about the Thompsons' neglect of their 700 tenants. Fronting for the Socialist Workers Party. *Thompson Slumlords Extraordinaire*. But as far as Karl could see, the Thompsons' tenants had it pretty good. Fixed contracts, solid walls and ceilings.

'I'm fine, thanks.' He kept his hands in his pockets.

'You're not fine,' said the pamphleteer as Karl walked on, 'you've been conditioned into total indifference.'

'Same thing, innit?' said Karl.

3

GENEVIEVE PUT HER hair up with an enormous tortoise-shell hair-clip and wiped her eyes. Ten minutes before, when Karl had told her he was off the hook, she had cried and hugged him. Then she read the Transition brochure while smoking three cigarettes with increasing speed and intensity. Karl made two cups of tea in someone else's mugs from the shared kitchen. Everything else was packed. One of them, a shiny black mug, bore the motivational slogan: *Don't fear the future. Be the future.* It was supposed to be heat-activated, but something had gone wrong so that when Karl poured boiling water into the mug the only words visible were *fear the future. Be*

He was stirring one sugar into Genevieve's tea when he heard her give a long, low howl. Not quite a howl, he thought, as he tapped the spoon on the side of the mug and threw it into the sink. It was too flat and unemotional to be called a howl. It was more like the cry of an animal in the jaws of a predator when it resigns itself to its fate. Karl pictured himself driving along a suburban road ... He walked towards the sound.

Genevieve was lying on her side, like a shop-window dummy knocked over.

‘I’m so angry,’ she said, quietly.

‘I know it’s ...’ said Karl.

‘It sounds absolutely bloody awful,’ she said, sitting upright and closing the booklet. ‘Couldn’t you have just gone to prison?’ Karl put the cups of tea on the floor next to Genevieve, sloshing a little over the side so that it scalded his hand. ‘I’m joking,’ she said. ‘It does sound dire, though. So don’t try to pretend we have any choice.’

‘The way I see it is it’s like a speeding course – you take the points on your licence or you give up a day for re-education.’

‘Yeah,’ said Genevieve. ‘Except your wife has to go with you and it’s six months.’

‘No rent,’ said Karl, shuffling down to the floorboards next to her.

‘So we get to live rent-free in a loft apartment – that’s great, Karl. Maybe I’ll start painting again.’

‘It’s more like lodging.’

‘I can see it’s more like lodging,’ said Genevieve. ‘Except the landlords don’t get paid. So they resent us. Even more than normal landlords.’

‘Well, the programme pays them,’ said Karl, taking a sip from his tea, which was still too hot, ‘but they’re not really doing it for the money. The notary said it was more like jury service.’

‘You know I don’t take sugar,’ said Genevieve.

‘What?’

‘My tea.’

‘I thought you—’

‘Only in coffee. It calls them “mentors”. I don’t like the idea of having mentors.’

‘So we put up with it,’ said Karl. ‘It’s supposed to help us and, you never know. It’s a pilot scheme; they haven’t ironed out the kinks yet, so it might actually be more helpful than they mean it to be.’

‘It’s patronising.’

‘That’s true.’

‘It says it’s a “fully holistic approach to getting our lives back on track”. It says they give us advice on being married. As well as the financial stuff. We’ve been married four years! It’s enormously patronising. And what about privacy?’

‘I’m not trying to argue that this is a good thing, G.’

‘It’s humiliating.’

Karl looked at her. Saying he was sorry seemed redundant.

‘You’ve read this?’ said Genevieve, flicking to the fifth page. ‘There’s a section on healthy eating. There’s a section on how to vote. *A generation suffering from an unholy trinity of cynicism, ignorance and apathy*,’ she read. ‘That’s you and me, honey.’

‘It’s certainly me,’ said Karl. ‘You’re just getting dragged down by the rest of us.’

‘And who *are* they, anyway? Are we randomly assigned? Is it like a dating website?’

Karl looked at his feet. They had already been allocated mentors. Once he’d agreed to the terms and signed and dated two documents, the process had been seven mouse clicks on the other side of the notary public’s desk.

‘Do they pick us out like puppies?’

‘We meet them tomorrow,’ said Karl.

‘Oh God,’ said Genevieve. ‘What are their names?’

‘Stu. Stuart Carson. And Janna Ridland.’

‘Janna,’ said Genevieve. ‘Janna. The name sounds half empty.’

‘You’re doing this to keep me out of prison. Do you need to hear me say how much I appreciate it?’

Genevieve turned and kicked her legs over his. She shuffled closer.

‘This is what I don’t like, Karly, we’re —’ she put her head on his shoulder — ‘we’re going through the same ups and downs young couples have always gone through, and they’re treating us like we’re an aberration.’

Karl took a sip of his tea.

‘I’m thirty-four,’ he said. ‘When my father was thirty-four he and Mum already had my two sisters. And a Ford Escort. They owned a house. They went on holidays.’

‘When my father was thirty-four,’ said Genevieve, ‘he had my mother sectioned, dropped me and Nina at Granny’s and drank himself to death in Madrid.’

‘Madrid?’ said Karl.

Last time it was Berlin and, now that he thought of it, he was certain that Genevieve never mentioned the same city twice.

4

IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, every room looked like a waiting room, lined with low oblong benches and school chairs, one strip light flickering. It was hard to get up from the deep spongy bench when their mentors came through the double doors of 151.

Karl's first thought was that they didn't look any older than him or Genevieve, but then maybe there was only a decade or so in it. He had expected an aura of age and experience: authority figures, the way teachers looked when he was a pupil. Janna was angular and pretty, a white blouse tucked into a black leather pencil skirt. Her mouth was very small, like a china doll's. Stu at least looked weathered. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt with a lightning bolt on it. He had a black and purple Mohican, four inches tall, five spikes.

'God, this place is depressing,' said Stu. 'Sorry they made you come here.'

'Don't get up,' said Janna, once they were up. They exchanged air kisses.

'You probably weren't expecting us to look like this,' said Stu.

'Oh, what, the Mohawk?' said Karl.

‘The Mohawk actually wore a patch at the base of the skull and a patch at the forehead,’ said Stu. ‘This is closer to an Iro.’

‘Do you have any ...’ said Genevieve. ‘Indian blood, I mean?’

‘Genevieve,’ said Stu, ‘I am merely an enthusiast.’

Stu busied himself collecting four flimsy cups of coffee from the machine in the corner. The two couples sat opposite one another over a pine and clapboard table too low for the seats.

‘Drink,’ he said. ‘It’s terrible, but, you know, ritual. Everything feels better when you’re holding something warm. You’re a primary school teacher, I’m told?’

‘That’s right,’ said Genevieve.

‘That’s brilliant,’ said Stu. ‘You’re one of the most important people in the country. And Karl?’

‘You know those fliers you see stuck to lamp posts that say *make £1,000 a week online without leaving your house?*’ said Karl.

‘You stick those up?’ said Stu.

‘No,’ said Karl. ‘I make a thousand pounds a week online without leaving my house. Except it’s not really a thousand pounds a week. I suppose it could be if you never went to sleep.’

‘So you’re self-employed,’ said Janna. ‘But what’s the work?’

‘Search-engine evaluation, product reviews,’ said Karl. ‘Literature essays for rich students. It’s actually duller than it sounds.’

‘A fellow middle-class underachiever,’ said Stu.

‘You know the type.’

‘I *was* the type. Look, you don’t need to rush into anything, but this is a chance to do something with your life. The Transition isn’t a punishment, it’s an opportunity.’

He took two thick, stapled forms out of his shoulder bag, and a blue pen.

‘You’ll be living with us as equals – we eat together, talk together, leave the house for work together. Or, well, Karl, in your case you’ll be staying in the house to work, but you get the point.’

Genevieve and Karl, who had never read a contract in their lives, both turned to the final page of their forms, wrote their names in block capitals, signed.

‘The thing is, with the hair, it’s a lightning conductor,’ said Stu. ‘People think, oh, the guy with the hair. Or they think, in spite of the hair, he’s quite a nice guy. Any opinion that anyone ever holds about me is in the context of my hair. It’s the equivalent of being a beautiful woman.’

‘To be fair, it *is* the most interesting thing about him,’ said Janna, giving Stu a friendly but very hard punch on the shoulder, which he rubbed, pouting. ‘The removal team are picking up your stuff now, so that’s taken care of. We’ll see you for the general meeting in the morning, okay?’

Stu folded up their contracts and slipped them back into his shoulder bag.

‘Tomorrow, then,’ he said. ‘The Transition will send a car. Eight thirty.’

They stood.

‘We want you to know that we don’t judge you,’ said Janna.

‘Oh,’ said Genevieve. ‘Thanks.’

‘What she means,’ said Stu, ‘is that we don’t expect you to be grateful for this ... situation. But we hope you’ll be nicely surprised by the set-up tomorrow. We hope you have as brief, as useful and as mutually pleasant an experience as possible.’

‘Okay,’ said Genevieve. ‘Thank you for ... Thanks.’

‘What made you sign up to this as mentors?’ said Karl. ‘If you don’t mind my asking. What’s in it for you?’

‘We love this company,’ said Janna. ‘We’re proud to work for The Transition.’

‘A few years ago my generation kicked the ladder away behind us,’ said Stu. ‘This is our chance to teach you to free-climb.’

‘Oh, God, always with the analogies,’ said Janna. ‘It’s so embarrassing.’

‘Besides which, and I’m going to be honest with you,’ said Stu, ‘only crazy people lie; we never wanted children—’

‘We never wanted babies,’ said Janna.

‘Right, babies,’ said Stu. ‘Or children, really. Or teenagers. Plenty of our friends did and I can’t say it appealed.’

‘But sometimes we’d be talking and Stu would say, what if we’d had kids?’

‘What if we’d met each other at, say, twenty, and had kids?’

‘What would they be doing now? And it just got me thinking, *what would my grown-up kids be doing now?*’

‘What kind of advice would we give them?’ said Stu.

‘But you can’t adopt a thirty-year-old,’ said Janna.

‘Until now,’ said Genevieve. ‘Well, if it’s the only way out of the fine mess my husband’s landed us in, consider your—’

selves *in loco parentis*.'

And Karl was surprised to see his wife put her arms around Janna who, a little disconcerted, patted her on the back, lightly and rapidly as if tapping out a code.