

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, **Love**reading**** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

This Opening Extract is exclusive to **Love**reading****.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Cryptonomicon

Neal Stephenson

PROLOGUE

Two tires fly. Two wail.

A bamboo grove, all chopped down

From it, warring songs.

IS THE BEST THAT CORPORAL BOBBY SHAFTOE CAN DO ON short notice-he's standing on the running board, gripping his Springfield with one hand and the rearview mirror with the other, so counting the syllables on his fingers is out of the question. is "tires" one syllable or two? How about "wail?" The truck finally makes up its mind not to tip over, and thuds back onto four wheels. The wail-and the moment-are lost. Bobby can still hear the coolies singing, though, and now too there's the gunlike snicking of the truck's clutch linkage as Private Wiley downshifts. Could Wiley be losing his nerve? And, in the back, under the tarps, a ton and a half of file cabinets clanking, code books slaloming, fuel spanking the tanks of Station Alpha's electrical generator. The modern world's hell on haiku writers: "Electrical generator" is, what, eight syllables? You couldn't even fit that onto the second line!

"Are we allowed to run over people?" Private Wiley inquires, and then mashes the horn button before Bobby Shaftoe can answer. A Sikh policeman hurdles a night soil

cart. Shaftoe's gut reaction is: Sure, what're they going to do, declare war on us? but as the highest-ranking man on this truck he's probably supposed to be using his head or something, so he doesn't blurt it out just yet. He takes stock of the situation:

Shanghai, 1645 hours, Friday, the 28th of November 1941. Bobby Shaftoe, and the other half-dozen Marines on his truck, are staring down the length of Kiukiang Road, onto which they've just made this careening high-speed turn. Cathedral's going by to the right, so that means they are, what? two blocks away from the Bund. A Yangtze River Patrol gunboat is tied up there, waiting for the stuff they've got in the back of this truck. The only real problem is that those particular two blocks are inhabited by about five million Chinese people.

Now these Chinese are sophisticated urbanites, not suntanned yokels who ye never seen cars before-they'll get out of your way if you drive fast and honk your horn. And indeed many of them flee to one side of the street or the other, producing the illusion that the truck its moving faster than the forty-three miles an hour shown on its speedometer.

But the bamboo grove in Bobby Shaftoe's haiku has not been added just to put a little Oriental flavor into the poem and wow the folks back home in Oconomowoc. There is a lot of heavy bamboo in front of this truck, dozens of makeshift turnpikes blocking their path to the river, for the officers of the U.S. Navy's Asiatic Fleet, and of the Fourth Marines, who dreamed up this little operation forgot to take the Friday Afternoon factor into account. As Bobby Shaftoe could've explained to them, if only they'd bothered to ask a poor dumb jarhead, their route took them through the heart of the banking district. Here you've got the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank of course, City Bank, Chase Manhattan, the Bank of America, and BBME and the Agricultural Bank of China and any number of crappy little provincial banks, and several of those banks have contracts with what's left of the Chinese Government to print currency. It must be a cutthroat business because they slash costs by printing it on old newspapers, and if you know how to read Chinese, you can see last year's news stories and polo scores peeking through the colored numbers and pictures that transform these pieces of paper into legal tender.

As every chicken-peddler and rickshaw operator in Shanghai knows, the money-printing contracts stipulate that all of the bills these banks print have to be backed by such-and-such an amount of silver; i.e., anyone should be able to walk into one of those banks at the end of Kiukiang Road and slap down a pile of bills and (provided that those bills were printed by that same bank) receive actual metallic silver in exchange.

Now if China weren't right in the middle of getting systematically drawn and quartered by the Empire of Nippon, it would probably send official bean counters around to keep tabs on how much silver was actually present in these banks' vaults, and it would all be quiet and orderly. But as it stands, the only thing keeping these banks honest is the other banks.

Here's how they do it: during the normal course of business, lots of paper money will pass over the counters of (say) Chase Manhattan Bank. They'll take it into a back

room and sort it, throwing into money boxes (a couple of feet square and a yard deep, with ropes on the four corners) all of the bills that were printed by (say) Bank of America in one, all of the City Bank bills into another. Then, on Friday afternoon they will bring in coolies. Each coolie, or pair of coolies, will of course have his great big long bamboo pole with him-a coolie without his pole is like a China Marine without his nickel-plated bayonet-and will poke their pole through the ropes on the corners of the box. Then one coolie will get underneath each end of the pole, hoisting the box into the air. They have to move in unison or else the box begins flailing around and every-thing gets out of whack. So as they head towards their destination-whatever bank whose name is printed on the bills in their box-they sing to each other, and plant their feet on the pavement in time to the music. The pole's pretty long, so they are that far apart, and they have to sing loud to hear each other, and of course each pair of coolies in the street is singing their own particular song, trying to drown out all of the others so that they don't get out of step.

So ten minutes before closing time on Friday afternoon, the doors of many banks burst open and numerous pairs of coolies march in singing, like the curtain-raiser on a fucking Broadway musical, slam their huge boxes of tattered currency down, and demand silver in exchange. All of the banks do this to each other. Sometimes, they'll all do it on the same Friday, particularly at times like 28 November 1941, when even a grunt like Bobby Shaftoe can understand that it's better to be holding silver than piles of old cut-up newspaper. And that is why, once the normal pedestrians and food-cart operators and furious Sikh cops have scurried out of the way, and plastered themselves up against the clubs and shops and bordellos on Kiukiang Road, Bobby Shaftoe and the other Marines on the truck still cannot even see the gunboat that is their destination, because of this horizontal forest of mighty bamboo poles. They cannot even hear the honking of their own truck horn because of the wild throbbing pentatonic cacophony of coolies singing. This ain't just your regular Friday P.M. Shanghai bank-district money-rush. This is an ultimate settling of accounts before the whole Eastern Hemisphere catches fire. The millions of promises printed on those slips of bumwad will all be kept or broken in the next ten minutes; actual pieces of silver and gold will move, or they won't. It is some kind of fiduciary Judgment Day.

"Jesus Christ, I can't-" Private Wiley hollers.

"The captain said don't stop for any reason whatsofuckinever," Shaftoe reminds him. He's not telling Wiley to run over the coolies, he's re-minding Wiley that if he refrains from running over them, they will have some explaining to do-which will be complicated by the fact that the captain's right behind them in a car stuffed with Tommy Gun-toting China Marines. And from the way the captain's been acting about this Station Alpha thing, it's pretty clear that he already has a few preliminary strap marks on his ass, courtesy of some admiral in Pearl Harbor or even (drumroll) Marine Barracks, Eight and Eye Streets Southeast, Washington, D.C.

Shaftoe and the other Marines have always known Station Alpha as a mysterious claque of pencil-necked swabbies who hung out on the roof of a building in the

International Settlement in a shack of knot-pocked cargo pallet planks with antennas sticking out of it every which way. If you stood there long enough you could see some of those antennas moving, zeroing in on something out to sea. Shaftoe even wrote a haiku about it:

Antenna searches

Retriever's nose in the wind

Ether's far secrets

This was only his second haiku ever-clearly not up to November 1941 standards-and he cringes to remember it.

But in no way did any of the Marines comprehend what a big deal Station Alpha was until today. Their job had turned out to involve wrapping a ton of equipment and several tons of paper in tarps and moving it out of doors. Then they spent Thursday tearing the shack apart, making it into a bonfire, and burning certain books and papers.

"Sheeeyit!" Private Wiley hollers. Only a few of the coolies have gotten out of the way, or even seen them. But then there is this fantastic boom from the river, like the sound of a mile-thick bamboo pole being snapped over God's knee. Half a second later there're no coolies in the street anymore-just a lot of boxes with unmanned bamboo poles teeter-tottering on them, bonging into the streets like wind-chimes. Above, a furry mushroom of grey smoke rises from the gunboat. Wiley shifts up to high gear and floors it. Shaftoe cringes against the truck's door and lowers his head, hoping that his campy Great War doughboy helmet will be good for something. Then money-boxes start to rupture and explode as the truck rams through them. Shaftoe peers up through a blizzard of notes and sees giant bamboo poles soaring and bounding and windmilling toward the waterfront.

The leaves of Shanghai:

Pale doorways in a steel sky.

Winter has begun.