

## CHRONOLYSIS

*I strongly feel that, to a certain extent, there are almost as many universes as there are people, that each individual in some sense lives in a universe of his own making: it is a product of his being, a personal achievement he should perhaps be proud of.*  
PHILIP K. DICK

### I.

Robert Holzach stood up and the room came to life, like a peaceful landscape from the past. A brown cow continued grazing in a green meadow. Above was a zen koan: "Having walked 4000 days, the cow reaches the end of the Universe, what does she do now?" In the Hospital, everyone had a particular theory concerning this important point, apart from those who suffered from hepatitis and the apprentice philosophers who claimed the Universe had no end. The cow decides to go home, thought Rob. But 4000 days add up to more than ten years, and the same again to return all the way... She'll no doubt die during the journey back. We would do likewise. Why bother to leave? Robert, however, was preparing for a long, a very long journey...

He walked over to the wall panel and watched a mole busily digging up some earth. The mound moved and grew larger, but the small blind, gray head still would not appear. The cow turned around and stared intently at Dr. Holzach. At any rate, it appeared that way. The illusion was perfect. A masterpiece. The scene must have cost at least 2000 marks!

He took a shower, had himself massaged and shaved, then slipped on a white kimono. He was ready. The slow, cold voice of centrophord Michael rose from the TIC: "Phordal Network of Garichankar Hospital. The time is now 7:15 a.m. Your countdown began 30 minutes ago, Dr. Holzach. All is well. Your physiological diagram is normal. You must take two code one pills immediately. Please acknowledge."

"It is now 7:15 a.m. I am taking two code one pills. All is well."

"Phordal Network of Garichankar Hospital. Answer recorded. We wish you good luck."

There were two transparent bottles on his bedside table. With a flick of his thumb, he opened the bottle marked one and slipped two shining white pills with purple reflections into his hand. He popped them into his mouth without swallowing them. Chronolytic drugs were usually absorbed sublingually. He would later be given a high-pressure intravenous injection, which he would hardly notice, not only because it was quite painless but because he would already more or less be in a state of chronolysis. The function of the pills was to prepare him for the first phase of the operation. His conditioning had been going on for 4000 days... no, 80 days. For the past 72 hours he had been in total isolation 30 meters below the surface... He made a quick visit to the bathroom. For the last 48 hours, he hadn't been allowed any solid food and over the last 24 hours had only drunk water. He returned to the room and stretched out on the bed. He was feeling at ease. As Michael had said, all was well. He knew he was continuously being monitored by the Hospital's photon computers, or *phords* as they were commonly called. It was a little unnerving but nevertheless guaranteed his safety.

He crossed his hands behind his neck, eyes fixed on the ceiling, his favorite position for meditation. The two pills were slowly dissolving inside his mouth. He focused on some slight pain in his stomach and succeeded in forcing it to disappear within a couple of minutes. The cow in the meadow was becoming blurred. He had to make an unexpected effort to lean over the general control post set up by the bed. He switched on a gentler light and called up the Network.

"It is now 7:23 a.m.," answered Michael. "Your diagram is normal. All is well. Countdown one two minutes. Please acknowledge."

"Dr. Holzach here. All is well."

Rob knew he would soon lose his firm awareness of time. This was to be his ninth chronolytic journey, the two previous ones having included specific missions into the past. At the outset, his

experience would be of some help. Not much, though. And even less so during the journey. Each expedition into the Indeterminate was a new adventure in its own right. What is more, by merging with another personality, if he indeed succeeded in his task, he would lose his autonomy and even most of his memories. Sometimes, explorers of Uncertain Time returned insane, died on their arrival back, or spent the remainder of their existence in a state of deep coma not even the phords could explain. The reasons for these accidents were unknown. Maybe these unfortunate souls had remained “prisoners of the past,” or perhaps they had gone too far—to the end of the Universe—and had collapsed on the way home, like the cow.

Chronolysis, which some saw as a means of extending the subjective length of human life, or even as a way of attaining immortality, in fact cannibalized travelers at an ever increasing rate. At Garichankar Hospital, no one had attempted more than 14 journeys (a number achieved by Dr. Guair Norlan), and the world record stood well under 20. From a certain age onward, people were no longer capable of time travel, not so much because of physical incapacity but due to a psychological block: it no longer became possible to perceive heavy dreams.

Robert Holzach was not unduly worried. His preparations were, as always, proving most efficient. By the middle of the 21st century, the psychological techniques had been mastered—regardless of cost. Anyway, it was still cheaper than an expedition to Alpha Centauri. Furthermore, in small doses, chronolytic drugs proved to be excellent tranquilizers. Anxiety always seemed to be tied in with the consciousness of time. When time slowed down or blurred, anxiety was replaced by indifference, a smiling form of passivity well appreciated by dilettantes who aimed for no more than second rate nirvanas. And this side effect proved useful, for travel into the past, and the more or less utter integration with another personality, were both terrifying experiences.

Rob scrutinized with detachment the small circular room where he had now been kept locked up for nearly five days. Maybe he would never see it again. It was beginning to fill with thin, pinkish fog. It was less and less like the cell of a Blue Elephant Sectarian monk and more like the room of Rob’s childhood at Arizio. His eyes came to rest, with a hint of nostalgia and humor, on the triple screen of the TIC (Transmission-Information-Communication), connected to the memory banks and the Phordal Network, and on the control panel with the brown cow’s decorative landscape, the busy mole and the zen koan. He was anxious to go now. He was beginning to hate this luxuriant prairie and that fat, placid creature who would never reach the end of the world. Of course, he would have much preferred a sea landscape, like in his room at Park Europa IV when he was ten years old. In those days, he would dream of seeing the brig *Superb* reach land after centuries of sailing over seas of oil. Preferably an island in the Caribbean. He also used to wish for a second character to join the man at the wheel. Possibly a golden-haired woman, in a long red dress with a lace bodice. Stowaway passenger, a guest at the party, or a prisoner... But the technicians who devised the somewhat skimpy panels for the Park’s authorities were, alas, quite incapable of imagining such romantic situations.

“Countdown one hour 30 minutes,” said Michael in a distant voice that belonged to Jean Holzach, Dr. Holzach’s father, and chief caretaker of Park Europa IV. “Diagram normal. Situation unchanged. Please acknowledge.”

An hour and a half... Rob tried to work it out. What time was it now? Eight, nine o’clock...? He began to laugh. He was, of course, not allowed any watch in Isolation A and, anyway, time was beginning to seem like something of a ridiculous invention. This was a good sign.

“Countdown one hour and a half,” he groaned while yawning. “Now, enough, leave me alone!”

He began to discard his kimono, which he was finding unbearable against his skin. Another effect of chronolytic drugs: the desire to be naked. Nothing between my skin and the universe! And the longing to be elsewhere, to become something else: a cow, a pirate galleon, a mountain or a star, a mole or a lady in red... He could no longer remember whether Central had spoken to him through the TIC or if the message had been relayed directly to his brain, by means of the microchip elements grafted inside his frontal lobes. He was a sort of cyborg; but the word had a sinister feeling about it, ever since some experiments had failed, and was no longer widely used. The implant of fixed elements in the brain, even for medical reasons, was banned by most governments. Only forms of mobile prostheses were occasionally tolerated. Chronolytic research took place more or less in secret at the lower levels of the Autonomous Hospitals. The statesmen of Auriga viewed psychonauts with singular mistrust, although President Ben Barka himself often indulged in journeys. Europe was in fact ten years behind the Sino-American Union. However, Garichankar Hospital itself was slightly ahead

of the rest of the Muslim-Christian West. Rob was about to try and emulate the researchers of the California Republic (Utopia 01) always at the forefront of progress in psychology and chronautics.

He was beginning to feel outphased and the sensation provided him with unspeakable pleasure. Yes, he was glad to get away from it all. The world he was living in could well have been much worse after all the mistakes made in the past. Mid-century society had set up an acceptable compromise between tolerance and justice; man had been freed from industrial slavery. A ration of rice and wheat was the same in Los Angeles, Garichankar, or Calcutta. The future of the species appeared secure. Rob enjoyed his work and was lucky enough to practice in that bastion of boldness, Garichankar Hospital. But he was bored. Worse still, he was suffocating. And the Hospital was important to him because it held open for him the door into the Indeterminate, the universe where everything might well prove possible. Between missions, he dreamed in secret of the Oradak Ocean and the continent of Oblivion by Ruaba, a mysterious land which Californian explorers believed they had found on the other side of Uncertain Time. One day, who knows, maybe he would set foot on those fantastic shores...

Up there, on the surface, the taste of freedom was not appreciated: you were considered mad to wish to escape from paradise! But perhaps man had, at last, earned the right to gaze one step beyond his daily bread and the blue sky, or at any rate what was left of it. Once all the economic problems had to a large extent been resolved, you were left on your own to face both anxiety and death. Waiting for eternity, the inner universe seemed the only way out.

"Countdown five nine minutes," said Central. "Diagram normal. Situation unchanged."

The Phordal Network had used its implants. For Rob, time was becoming chaotic. All was well. He felt a tremendous joy rising through the lassitude. The journey... He was on his way, he was on his way! With one final effort, he slipped out of his kimono. He was now quite naked and experienced a strong sexual thrill. A rictus twisted his face. He tried to remember. When time shatters, a tremendous form of physiological relaxation occurs... the brain's controls let go... a celebration of the body... He thought of Ellen who was to go with him. No, I'm getting things mixed up. Not going with me, only helping me to depart and return, or something of the sort... He could see her in the next room. In fact, it was a picture transmitted by the cerebrophordal connection. Ellen Laumer was already in a medium state of chronolysis. Stretched out on a couch, in a spider's nest, she was holding the hand of Dr. Lauris Nortrigen, who was sitting by her side. Robert Holzach admired Ellen's bare shoulders, her particularly pale face under the waves of dark hair, her straight breasts, fiat stomach, large hips, and the dark stain of her pubic hair under the translucent material. He waved her a friendly sign.

Then, he was ten years old again and flew to his room in Arizio. The brig *Superb* was at last nearing an unknown shore. He could already recognize the sandy beach and the coconut trees. Maybe this was Oblivion by Ruaba. The small sailboat had been navigating for so long on the far seas that it was only justice that it should reach a shore. Then, a woman clothed in red came to the quarterdeck to join the sailor with the damaged hand. Rob was standing close to the panel, the better to observe the whole scene. The ship grew larger as the island did. Rob noticed a giant turtle on the beach. He could clearly see the young woman. She was as pretty as Ziti and displayed a royal manner not unlike that of the Queen of Fomalhaut in the comic strips. Her skirt, inflated by the wind, filled the whole panel.

And, all of a sudden, she was in the room, standing next to Rob. She wasn't, after all, that similar to Ziti. Never, on the queen's face could you see the smiling gentleness that lit up the eyes and features of the unknown visitor. Her reddish blond hair was tied behind her head and revealed her oval face and thin neck. She had a small straight nose, a wide mouth, high cheekbones, and a round forehead. The tight-fitting bodice she wore opened to reveal her cleavage. With a graceful gesture, she lifted the bottom of her ample skirt of scarlet satin, disclosing an ankle sheathed in black. She held her left arm aloft, her fist clenched at heart level, and her fingers traced a discreet gesture of friendship. He breathed deeply and inhaled a warm perfume of pepper and lemon. He was naked and he would have liked the lady in red to undress too. It would have been more fun than a lesson in pleasure with the small girls whose anatomy he knew only too well.

"Hello Rob," she said. "My name is Serellen."

He remembered. Like Queen Ziti, Apple-Pip the little girl from Proxima, Captain Gayboda, and Spar the space cat, Serellen was a comic-strip character. Serellen the time traveler... Me too, he decided. I shall travel in time. I shall return to the years of pirates and long dresses... She took his hand and they began walking down the sand, followed by the giant turtle.

"How do you travel in time, Serellen?" Rob asked.

"I have a time-traveling machine, my darling."

He admired her in silence. She had high eyebrows, long lashes, luminous eyes. Her eyes made him think of space, infinity, eternity. Her smile was an enigma. She now smelled of faded flowers and autumn undergrowth, the very smell of the past. A man awaited them by the shade of a coconut tree: it was the sailor with the damaged hand.

"This is Renato, my lover," Serellen told Rob.

She sat down by the man who seized her mouth and kissed her deeply, then began to caress her with his right hand with the two missing fingers...

"Countdown 40 minutes," Central said in a maternal voice, lisping slightly. It was Serellen's voice. "Chronolysis has now accelerated. Do you hear me, Dr. Holzach?"

"Do you hear me, Dr. Holzach?" Rob repeated, without understanding.

"Chronolysis has now slightly accelerated."

"Chronolysis has now slightly accelerated..."

"Think cold."

"Think cold..."

"Can you hear me, Dr. Holzach?"

"Yeah, it's all right. Go to Hell, leave me alone, Michael."

"Dr. Holzach, your entry into chronolysis is too fast. Do you understand me?"

"Too fast..."

"Too fast..."

"Too fast."

"Think cold."

"Cold..."

He was ten years old and it was Christmas in Park Europa IV. Every year, a party was given for the children of the staff at Regional Headquarters, where his father worked. Everyone wanted snow. The weather bureau was overworked. In the plain, a few, small, half-melted snowflakes lay around under the gray sky, but how joyful the children were when the lesobus unloaded them at Neufont! A white blanket came midway up their legs, a cold wind assaulted their faces and hands. Skiers swept down the slopes leaving behind them endless colored whirlpools.

The buildings of Regional Headquarters rose between the pine trees, and wooden chalets surrounded them on all sides. The children jumped into the dog-drawn sledges. All were laughing, singing:

*Poor sailor*

*Traveling to the deep south*

*Hunter of dreams*

*Don't you fear the wrath*

*Of kings, brave men and captains?*

Snow continued falling as if it would never end. A large weather leso circled up in the sky. Then the children rushed into the illuminated hall, where genuine pine trees from the forest seemed to be planted in a ground of solid snow. Above the trees floated holo-balloons full of pictures, like the ones that swim by in the sky that you need a special antenna to listen to. But these were nearer. You could almost touch the characters moving inside: Uncle Tib, Queen Ziti, Captain Gayboda, Spar the cat, and many others.

Covering the trees were elusive garlands, full of rivers of light and all the children's presents. There were toys, cakes, fruit, useful things, candy, and of course animals trained in the recycling of household rubbish, like the big-eared mice from planet Berg, obviously an imaginary planet. And also marvelous little multicolored balls swirling gently above the room. They probably were filled with a very light gas or something of the sort. During the last years of the Leso Industrial Empire, they had even been capable of creating antigravity fields. The balls escaped by bouncing away as soon as you neared one. The bigger children sometimes managed to catch one above the heads of the others, but the smaller kids had no real chance in the ever-growing crowd gathering in the room.

Rob suddenly saw a blue ball fall onto the snow and bent on his knees to pick it up. There was a crack in the shape of a star on its side and it could no longer float, but it was nevertheless still very beautiful. The blue ones were the prettiest of all. Too busy admiring his treasure, he did not see the fist approaching to steal it. The ball fell to the ground and was trodden on. Rob crouched on all fours and

had his fingers crushed in vain. He rose, desperate. He wanted to have one of these things more than anything else in the world. Had he asked for one, he probably would have been given it; it was that simple. But he would not reveal his childish need and remained there, storing up all his anger. He thought he would never forgive *them*. He dearly wished he could go away, very far... The sea, white sand, coconut trees and a slightly mad crab which, from time to time, climbed up the trees to cut a nut down. Was there, on this planet or any other, crabs capable of climbing trees? Rob wished with his whole heart it could all really exist. Otherwise, life would not be worth living.

"Think cold."

"Michael..."

"Countdown three eight minutes. Chronolysis has now slightly accelerated. Can you hear me, Dr. Holzach?"

"Go to Hell, Michael. Leave me alone. Ellen?"

"Rob."

"How are you?"

"Somewhat bored. You're having a wild fling while I remain at home."

"Your part is as important, you know that."

"Yes... And how are you?"

"Fast chrono, as usual. Always early for appointments..."

"You shouldn't."

"I need cold."

A feeling of laughter reached him, amplified by the cerebro-phordal complex: like a flight of pigeons, then, crescendo, a stampede of centaurs and the orgasm of a desolate virgin.

"I am not frigid, Dr. Holzach."

"But you're so good at making me go cold, Dr. Laumer."

"Get ready, baby, it's going to hurt."

"I know. When you say life is awful, I feel like killing myself."

"All yours!"

Rob winced, his breath taken away by intense, formless pain. It was like the despair that sometimes besieged him at night, when he thought of his life's failures—all life has failures—of old age and death. But worse, a thousand times worse. It was the immediate nearness of death, the frozen presence of the void. A deep sadness flowed through his nerves, drowning him. The tears he had been keeping back for more than ten years now rapidly filled his eyes, his throat tightened, his heart felt caught in a vice. Colors drained from his mind. All he could see was a dirty and endless gray: under-sea rain, fog around birch trees. He wondered how men had for a thousand years been capable of forgetting about nearby death and struggled to survive. There was no hope. Anyway, hope had to be killed off. You come from the cold and return to the cold. A cramp twisted his stomach, his heart, his belly. He felt about to scream like a lone wolf starving to death in the snow. And then it suddenly stopped, as quickly as it had all begun. Thank you, Dr. Laumer.

"Countdown three six minutes," Central said. "Chronolysis now much slower. All is well. President Ben Barka wishes you a good stay in 1966... Can you hear me, Dr. Holzach? President Ben Barka..."

"Tell President Ben Barka that I hope he dies of hunger in the snow... or of thirst in the desert... alone like a dog!"

"We all live and die alone. Your message will be passed on."

"How's it going, then?"

"Darling, I wish you could suffocate in..."

"Calm down, it's over."

"...too many peaks in this diagram."

"Dr. Holzach is not supposed to know..."

"The year 1966 was chosen just a moment ago by the phords."

"Generally speaking, it's all going pretty well."

"Holzach and Laumer have been through this before, Dr. Carson."

"...Ben Barka knows what he's talking about."

"Dr. Holzach," Central said, "your diagram is now back to normal. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Michael."

"In exactly 30 minutes, you will enter a state of deep chronolysis. Your general destination being the 1950 to 1975 period, we have succeeded in isolating a contact who fits most of your specifications. He's in 1966. A man. His mother tongue is French, but he also knows German. He's more or less your age. He's had some scientific training and works in a Paris laboratory. His name is Daniel Diersant. Do you hear me, Dr. Holzach?"

"Remind me what I am supposed to do in 1966?"

"It's now too late to remind you of the general instructions. You will make out as best you can."

"I feel as if I've just arrived from planet Berg."

"You feel a bit lost? It's normal. In deep chronolysis, all your memories will disappear. You will fade behind the personality of your contact. You must become Daniel Diersant, if only for a few seconds. This is what we are suggesting for your own assistance... Daniel Diersant has been in an accident, possibly criminally induced. He's also likely to be drugged, which has assisted us in establishing a chronolytic connection with him, but we do not know the nature of the drug or the circumstances under which he ingested it. Maybe, if there was aggression, his attackers injected it. We just don't know. You will try to discover what happened. It will prove difficult, no doubt about it. Investigations in the Indeterminate are never easy."

"You want me to be some sort of cop, Michael? A time agent or something like it? Are you sure you haven't been reading too many comic strips?"

"Please, Dr. Holzach. This is very serious. And I must hurry. You have now reached the final level before you enter deep chronolysis. In a few more minutes, you will no longer understand... Your investigation will be the thread that will guide you through Uncertain Time. You will remember more or less consciously that you are trying to discover what happened to *you*. Truth might elude you, but you will learn a lot about the years you are going to visit, Daniel Diersant's world, his life, the customs and practices of 1966. And if you reach the truth, it will be a quantifiable result, a precise factor, a world-class performance that will put you at the top. This is what the Garichankar phords are hoping for.

"Now, remember. Someone may have tried to kill Daniel Diersant. To kill *you*. Unless it was an accident... or a suicide attempt. You will try and discover the truth. Do not forget..."

"...wanted to kill me, the bastards! But I'm alive, I'm... Ellen!"

"I'll be near you, one way or another, Rob. Have a good journey."

"Not an accident. The bastards..."

"Countdown two seven minutes. Do you hear me, Dr. Holzach?"

"The killers from HKH..."

"Countdown..."

"I'm on the Highway. Go to hell, you shit!"

"...gone into deep chronolysis at two six minutes point 15. Diagram normal."

"Welcome to Oblivion by Ruaba!"

"You'd better be warned right away: my paradise is full of lost souls and whores!"

"We're going in circles."

"We were waiting for you, Diersant."

"Do you have a pass?"

"I'd like to be by the sea with you, Renato my darling, a beach of white sand a deep blue sea... I love you!"

"Relax, close your eyes, sleep!"

"But, because I had an accident."

"Are you positive?"

"No, I'm not, but I think the shock threw me into chronolysis."

"You were put in a state of chronolysis by the phords of Garichankar."

"There were no chronolytic drugs in 1966."

"HKH exists and we shall prove it."

"Diersant is dead. I feel it. I know it. Something happened on the way back. An accident. Yet another one!"

"Renato! For the first time in the history of mankind, a bridge has linked two inexpressibly distant worlds..."

“Hello, Doctor. Escape is no answer, is it? I’ve seen enough of you dirty cop! HKH exists and we shall prove it! Come this way instead and I’ll keep your brown bag... I must phone those are the rules do you think you’re on the Highway but I am on the Highway dirty cop so you come from the future so I was going too fast Renato Rizzi this is your last chance!”

“Countdown ten seconds...”

“The message I’m trying to get to you is reaching you in a complex fashion and may be distorted during transmission. I am not what I appear to be...”

“Nine...”

“Dr. Holzach, a bad surprise is awaiting you at Garichankar try to reach the sea gong pizzicato and cymbals impossible to believe that something would really happen if I gave...”

“Eight...”

“...the steering wheel to the right to the trees you crash against a tree you are dead you awaken on the road steering wheel to the right you crash against a tree you are...”

“Seven...”

“...killed you awaken on the road the steering wheel you’re a poor soul who does not belong in the story HKH don’t give a fuck about science the injection of that thing old thing nothing ever...”

“Six...”

“...really in danger fascist industrial empire can you come to Monika Gersten Forestier’s place go to hell you shit seen enough of you seen enough of you Renato sailor engineer with the worn-out suit this bloody damaged hand you are...”

“Five...”

“...my only love Renato from Garichankar spending a terrible quarter of an hour in chronolytic space don’t try and be funny Diersant sailor with the damaged hand the silliest counterfeit I’ve ever seen...”

“Four...”

“...month of May 1998 ending in confusion and confusion in Uncertain Time it’s only straight away and eighteen months out of work my wife who shut up you poor bastard killed myself because of the...”

“Three...”

“...mustn’t sleep after the injection not on the same level of reality as that blue shell look if it’s the chief surgeon asking for you at the pass HKH boss old thing Garichankar telephone...”

“Two...”

“...follow Monika Garichankar Hospital about to collapse the phords will be unable HKH it’s the go and close your eyes waiting for you cop house laboratory subjective eternity...”

“One...”

“Dr. Laumer has never Renato what are these worlds under their domination by Ellen remind me I refuse to underestimate you HKH won’t escape us and Garichankar is stuck wish you long life in the mebsital Oradak Ocean...”

“ZERO!”