

WHITE FUNGUS

GUEST WRITER

As I was explaining to you last time, I named the boy ‘Vitruvius.’ I was younger then, and maybe a little too proud of my architecture degree. It was one of the last, full, cum-laude degrees from a major European university.

After I graduated, the Education Bubble burst. Universities were noble institutions nine hundred years old, but their business model had failed. Their value chain had been de-linked. Their unique value proposition was declined by the consumer. Globalization had routed around the Academy.

Maybe you can remember how people used to talk back then. We were impotent in our long emergency, but we were wonderfully glib.

So Petra and I, and baby Vitruvius—‘Rufus’ for daily use—went home to the Eurocore. The world was in turmoil, but I was young, I was strong, I had training. It was time to make a go of my architectural career.

I wanted to build in the place where I grew up. Our home was not Brussels, or Lille, or Luxembourg, or any of the formal venues in the Eurocore that were legal, historical cities. My home was that nameless locale that my professors called ‘white fungus.’

White Fungus was the edge-city. Semi-regulated, semi-prosperous, automobilized expanses of commercial European real-estate. Mostly white brick, hence the name. White Fungus had paved the region, while city planners were bored, or distracted, or bought-off.

We were natives of White Fungus. After eight years in school, I understood architecture, but White Fungus was what I knew.

There were six huge, civilization-crushing reasons why the white fungus could not survive. First, the energy problems. Second, the weather crisis. Third, the demographics. The elderly people in charge of our law and finance were hiding in gated enclaves. They still had the votes, they held the official positions, but

they potted around in their shabby-genteel misery, terrified by the weird turn the world had taken. They lived in a computer-game where they pretended to have incomes, pretended to obey laws, and pretended to lobby non-existent world governments. We were their children. So we pretended to read their emails.

The world financial crisis was world-smashing factor number four. I'd like to explain that financial crisis. Nobody can do that. Let's just say that a 19th-century method of mapping value no longer fit the networked reality of the 2020s. Money had tried to cover too much of existence. Money was over-stretched, like an abacus that fails to do advanced math. The Euro was long gone. Tiny national currencies made no more economic sense than local newspapers.

I tried to explain some of this to Petra, including crisis number five, which was our huge public health crisis, and also world-crisis number six, which, frankly, I've forgotten now. Number six was a major issue at the time.

I explained that the lives that our parents had led had no further relevance for us. We were a modern European couple with a child, yet we were beyond help. No 'man on horseback' was going to save us. No authority had coherent answers for our woes. I had every piece of music recorded in the past 200 years inside a backup the size of a match-head. But computers were not sources of wealth for us. Moore's Law had smeared computers around the planet, with silicon cheaper than glass. The poorest people in the world had cell-phones: cellphones were the emblems of poverty. So we were badly off. We were worse off than former Communists in 1989 missing their Nomenklatura. We didn't even have the 'ability to begin to define' what had gone wrong with our existence.

We would have to architect some other order. Another way of life.

This was not what Petra perceived as our marriage bargain. We were two children of privilege with arty instincts. Our worst problem should have been picking the storage units for last year's couture. We also had a baby, a bold act Petra now regretted.

Our young family's safety and security was supposed to be my responsibility. There were better places in the world than White Fungus; why not flee there, why not rush over and emigrate? Petra could see those cities just by clicking on her screen. London, New York, Barcelona, these ancient cities still existed, they hadn't vaporized. They were, however, visibly panicking as the seas rose at their docks, washing in boats full of the rootless and hopeless. Petra had a screen; I had a screen; everybody in the world had those screens. Any city that looked like a lifeboat would surely be besieged by émigrés.

I knew that. We were safer in White Fungus, where we belonged. There we were humble, nameless, and steeped in massive urban failure, which was our heritage.

The truth was that I was born a regional architect. I wanted to build where I lived, in the locale that had shaped me. The ruins of the unsustainable were the one frontier fully open to the people of my generation. Our great challenge was not the six great bogies that we feared so much. It was our own bewilderment, our learned helplessness.

As things worsened by fits and starts, Petra tossed in her recurring nightmares. She was sure that the lights would go out all over Europe. We would freeze and starve in the dark. We were doomed to a survivalist dystopia, with leather-clad science-fiction savages picking meat off each other's thighbones. I could not convince Petra that there were no savages in our world. In the 2040s, everybody from the Abidjan slums to the Afghan highlands was on the Internet. The planet was saturated, networked from the bottom-up like the mycelial threads of white wood-rot. So we could access anything, and yet we could solve nothing.

Unfortunately, my brilliant theoretical framing could not assuage her primal fears. Our marriage failed as fully and glumly as our other institutions. Petra left me and the boy. She fled to the south of France. There she became the girlfriend of a French cop. This gendarme couldn't protect her, any more than I could, but his jackboots and body armor made him resemble security.

Rufus and I moved in with my father. That seemed to work for a small while—then my father left us, too. He left us to engage in European politics, which he considered his duty. Sooner or later, my father assured me, our turmoil would return to a coherent European order, with a tax base, a social safety net, designer parking meters, and regulation low-flow green flush toilets. In stark reality, Europe was swiftly becoming a giant half-mafia flea-market where even Denmark behaved like Sicily.

In Brussels, the full repertoire of our golden civilization was still sitting there, on paper. All the codes, the civil rights, the human rights, the election rituals, the solidarity, the transparency, the huge regulation. Yet Brussels itself, as a badly overloaded urban entity, was visibly imploding. The surreal emanations from Brussels sailed right over the heads of the population without encountering the least resistance from the fabric of reality.

Despair is a luxury for a single father. I was rich in self-pity, but one fine day, I forgot about that. I had lost so much that the fabric of my new existence had a lively, parametric texture: it was like sand dunes, like foam. Rufus was beginning to walk, to talk. Rufus was never my burden: Rufus was my client. He was my strength.

My goal was to map the structure for his needs.

Food, of course. Young children are very keen on the idea of food. Where to get food? Like most European politicians, my father imagined that European cities were frail, artificial constructions, cordially supported by European yeoman farmers—the sturdy peasantry who pocketed the EU tax grants. This perception was untrue. Except for a few small-town hucksters clowning it up for the food-heritage industry, there were no European peasants. The reality was massive agro-business technicians organized in state-supported conglomerates. They enjoyed regulatory lock-in and vertical monopolies through big-box urban grocery chains.

That system no longer functioned. These apparatchiks were all broke. The rural zones of Europe were, if anything, worse off than the cities, which at least had some inventive options.

Logically, industrial farmers should move into places like White Fungus and industrially farm the lawns. Derelict buildings should be gutted and transformed into hydroponic racks. White Fungus was, in fact, an old agricultural region: it was ancient farmland with tarmac on top of it. So: rip up the parking lots. Plant them.

Naturally, no one in White Fungus wanted this logical solution. Farming was harsh, dull, boring, patient work, and no one was going to pay the locals to farm. So, by the standards of the past, our survival was impossible.

The solution was making the defeat of our hunger look like fun. People gardened in five-minute intervals, by meshing webcams with handsets. A tomato vine ready to pick sent someone an SMS. Game-playing gardeners cashed in their points at local market stalls and restaurants. This scheme was an ‘architecture of participation’. Since the local restaurants were devoid of health and employee regulations, they were easy to start and maintain. Everything was visible on the Net. We used ingenious rating systems.

People keenly resented me for this intervention. My coldly logical scheme was about as popular as Minimalism. I did it anyway. I designed the vertical racks for the outsides of old buildings, I designed the irrigation systems, and I also planted the webcams to deter the hordes of eager fruit thieves. I performed this labor in my ‘free time’, because the need to eat is not a ‘business model’. However, my child was eating fresh produce. All the children were eating. Once other parents grasped this reality, I received some help.

No mere fuel crisis could stop movement on the roads of Europe. The Romany came into their own in these surreal conditions; suddenly, these stateless, agnostic hucksters became the genuine Europeans. The gypsies still looked scary, they were still chiseling us, and they still couldn’t be bothered to obey the law. But demographically, there were hordes of them. They roamed the continent in booze-fueled bus caravans, which spat out gaudy mobile market-

places. The Romany bartered anything that wasn't nailed down. They were saving our lives.

At this point in our epic, Lillian appeared. Yes, Lillian. I must finally talk about her now, although Lillian was an issue I've been avoiding for years. Lillian never seemed like a major issue, even when I tried to make her into one. Still, she was what she was.

Lillian was the first true citizen of the new White Fungus. Lillian was native to White Fungus in the way that Cubism was native to Montparnasse.

Certain people have an ability to personify a place, to become an instantiation of it. There are Cockneys more native to London than a chimney-pot, and Milanese more Milanese than a glassed arcade. Lillian had that quality. She was the White Fungus in its mushroom flesh.

White Fungus never lacked for vagrants, interlopers, and derelicts. We even had a mafia and some amateur terrorists. After all, Europe was suffering six major forms of turmoil. That meant that troubled, evil people shared our daily lives. These wretches were not primitive or ignorant people; they were net-savvy and urban, just like us. So every one of these marauders had some beautiful rhetorical justification. They were 'entrepreneurs'. They were 'community organizers', or 'security forces', or even 'rescue personnel'. The worst of the lot were religious zealots eager to abolish all things 'secular'. The second-worst were Marxists 'critically resisting' something long dead.

Lillian never went in for that behavior. Lillian was a backpacker, a silent drifter. Lillian was 'undocumented'. She was on the run from something, from someone—her creditors back in the former USA, presumably. Being American, Lillian was from a society that could no longer afford itself. Europe had blown six fuses, but the troubles in the United States of America were as dense as Sanskrit; the Americans had all of our troubles, plus several lost wars.

When I pressed the matter—I was impolite that way—Lillian told me that she had grown up in a trailer. Her parents had 'home-educated' her, inside some Beatnik tin contraption, randomly rambling the American continent. Lillian had never owned a home, she had not so much as a postal code. Criminals had stolen her identity. When I looked her up on the Net, there were thirteen Lillian J. Andertons, every one of them in debt and most of them on parole. It seems entirely possible that Lillian had somehow re-stolen her own identity—deliberately vanishing into bureaucratic ineptitude.

When Lillian appeared among us, with her agenda cinched round her waist like a secret money-belt, a new vernacular architecture was already gripping White Fungus.

The region had been designed for cars, of course. Built for portly car-driving suburbanites, people eager to plunge into individual home ownership, into its unsustainability, its eventual chaos.

White Fungus was a developers' mélange of mass-produced skeuomorphic 'styles', realized in lath, plaster, wire, glulam, and white brick. Those structures, dependent on climate-control, were rapidly peeling and rotting. The structures that survived had permanently opened doors and windows, and had vomited open their contents. Their occupants, deprived of delivery trucks and package services, were hustling permanent garage sales, living from barter. Abandoned buildings were torched by bored teens or ripped apart to tack, bolt and staple onto the living properties.

This denser, digital-feudal housing was easier to patrol, defend and heat. Almost everyone was growing marijuana, in the touching illusion that this fast-growing weed had some value. This was the new vernacular look of White Fungus: this tottering Frankenstein make-do patchwork, this open-air Lagos-style junkspace.

Lillian looked like that. That was her milieu. An indifferent female vagrant with a backpack, a billed hat, thick rubber boots, multi-pocketed work-jeans and, to top it all, a man's high-visibility jacket in tarnished silver and aviation orange. Never any lipstick, scissored-off hair. Never anxious, never in a hurry. She had no more origin or destination than a stray cat. Asking for nothing, demanding nothing. Commonly she was munching something from a small canvas bag and reading a used paperback book. Lillian had mushroomed among us when no one was looking.

In times of turmoil, people love to talk about their troubles. I still talk about those times, as you can see. That was years ago, and life has become quite different now, but those were my formative times, my heroic times. That's the consolation of a general catastrophe: that misery loves its company so dearly.

Lillian did not want to talk about her troubles, or about anyone's. Lillian wanted to act... [READ THE WHOLE STORY IN BEYOND NO.1](#)

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