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Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



Cities of Free Women

Nicolas Cuvi

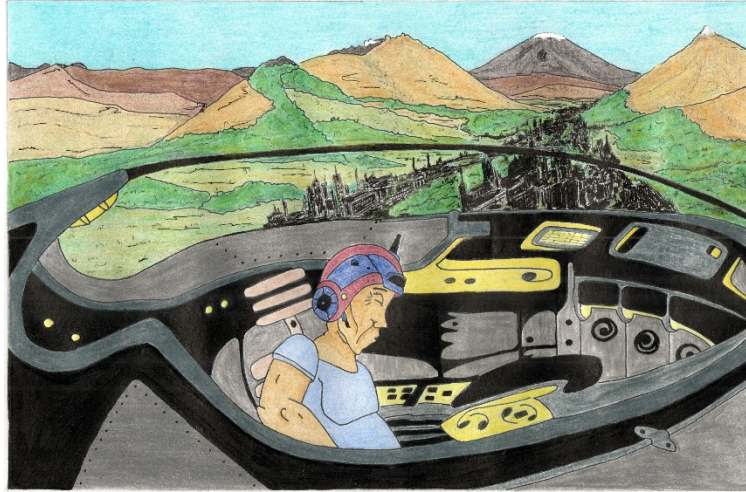


Image by Francisco Cordovez.

From the silent cockpit of the aircraft, with a 360-degree view, Francisco the peacemaker watched as the Quito plateau slipped away. Directly ahead it was clear, with no signs of rain, at least as far as he could see. Neither did the ship announce any storm alerts, so he decided to relax. After a verbal instruction, the machine confirmed the autopilot connection. He snorted twice, his particular way of ending something.

He glimpsed the mountainous landscape. Some of the colossi had a small white hat, a result of the previous night's snowfall. They were ephemeral covers, which would last just a few hours until the snow melted and the typically arid landscape of the XXIII century Andes returned. It was pretty, no doubt. But neither that beauty, nor the prospects of a pleasant climate for the trip, alleviated his recurring uncomfortable thoughts: the certainty that he was fulfilling, perhaps, his last official mission to the islands. In the lower cell, he was transporting who was, possibly, one of the last rapists in his city. Maybe the last one, he thought. "It's not bad, maybe just for me." He called out loudly for two coffee pills and blackberries, then moved his burly six feet to the hot water station, dissolved the tablets in a thermos, and snorted again three times.

A month hence would be his seventieth birthday. It was impossible to postpone his retirement any longer, much to his regret. He didn't feel old, but he was. His shaggy hair, disappearing in places, had turned gray a few years ago. But with a minimum life

expectancy of 100 years, what would he do in the next 30 years? He hadn't made plans, perhaps because he perceived that the moment would never come. He liked to capture the bad guys, but also had to accept that each day it was harder to do so. His muscles were toned; it was his speed that was diminished. That had become clear countless times, like the day before, during community workouts in the park, when he had finished among the last places of the two-kilometer race. It used to be he arrived first, and with a considerable lead. He snorted upward twice, waving a rebellious gray curl that fell on his forehead. He inserted the frozen blackberries in his mouth, and felt his teeth explode.

Below, the city, or what was sensed of it, was getting lost. From the continuous lining of the surface emerged some modern buildings, covered in vegetable green and yellow, distinguishable by their pointed shapes and sharp corners. Also, some ruinous masses of concrete and iron, abandoned for a long time because they were uninhabitable. Once luxurious apartments with views, they were now properties heavily exposed to intense daytime radiation. The buildings suffered from more than 100 years of human neglect, ever since outdoor activities had been limited to dawn and dusk, or walks and work at night. Some ruins had been covered, a few years before, with modern bio-solar panels, an ingenious way of reusing the obsolete infrastructure. Others were occupied by condors or birds of prey that, like humans, had adapted to twilight and nocturnal life.

The extensive vegetation was uninterrupted towards the wild areas. It was made up of trees such as *pumamaqui*, cedar, and hundreds of other species. Several showed leafy tops and were over 100 years old. They were called "guardians" because they protected the people from radiation and pollution. Francisco felt identified with these forms of life; he was also a guardian who protected the cities and their people. But most people were unaware of these elder green guardians. They preferred to stay underground, with artificial light and stable temperatures, in rooms, community centers, or recreational sites located two or three levels below the ground. "Cities of moles" they were called, alluding to an extinct species, with tiny eyes, which used to build and inhabit extensive underground galleries.

Among the outdoor structures, Francisco preferred churches, sites of spiritual worship in the past. He went alone, as his two daughters, like their mothers, preferred the virtual reality scenarios underground. When he suggested they go outdoors for a while, they

called it old-fashioned. He assured them that these historical places helped people to relax, meditate, find themselves, recharge for community life. Sometimes groups were formed to share doubts, fears, insecurities, projects. There was a time when he reproached those important women in his life for being hooked on fantasies, ignoring the outside world, so different from the underground. "They haven't even taken the few opportunities to fly a hovercraft," he sighed. For them, the other cities and regions, not to mention the islands of plastic, formed by the accumulation of these materials over almost three centuries in certain points of the sea, were places to which it was unnecessary to move. When it came to reproductive sex, it was the men who traveled, although most women preferred their couples to be from the same city. It was not worth traveling, sometimes for long weeks on foot, facing the risks of bad weather or rural robbers, lawless people, bandits, who attacked the walkers. They preferred to know of other cities through virtual reality boxes, and from the tales told by people from other places when they arrived in Quito. They argued that encounters in virtual reality boxes, where you could have three-dimensional views and experiences with multiple speakers, were less expensive in terms of energy and less risky for the spread of epidemics. Those looking for adventure and long journeys could embark on cruises to other planets, asteroids, or megacities floating in the void of space, or travel the world on foot and by boat.

Eventually, he stopped complaining. They were a product of their time and the past. The Great Disconnection, characterized by energy shortages caused by the unique and strong solar pulses of the mid-21st century, together with the Era of Epidemics, promoted isolation, and autarkic urban processes. When the satellites fell to the ground and all electronics stopped working, there was chaos. Not even the countries with the largest reserves dared to go beyond their borders. When electronic communications were restored and power generation, always limited, was improved a couple of decades later, travel was resumed on a limited basis, mainly to maintain the spirit of planetary cooperation. Some individuals voyaged more: peacekeepers, diplomats, and students. Each citizen was also allowed to travel once every five years by collective aircraft to a nearby city, or every eight years to a distant city. And whoever wanted to could move at will on foot or in sailboats of different sizes. Many young people organized groups to see the world in this way. Several never returned, fascinated by other places. Francisco had used each of his trips to visit nearby cities. His goal was to walk and strengthen ties with fellow peacemakers in Lima, Cusco, Trujillo, Cuenca, Guayaquil, Cali, Bogotá, Medellín,

Cartagena ... He had studied his career mainly in virtual reality boxes and had trained martial arts in local dojos. He took exams for five years, and then spent a similar time training with several master peacemakers. Many things had passed in front of his eyes, but the women in his life did not even want to go to Guayaquil. He wanted to snort but held back.

Francisco left the cockpit and headed for the cargo area. He stood in front of his partner and apprentice of the last three years, the peacemaker Selena. She gazed absently toward the energized cell with translucent bars, where the prisoner seemed half asleep and lost. "At least the man doesn't scream or cry."

The anguish that this would be his last trip between Quito and the plastic islands, where the aggressors from all cities were sent, uncomfortably returned. A fundamental part of his life was moving in an aircraft over cities, mountains, and seas. He had undertaken more than 100 of the five-hour journeys between Quito and the vortexes of the Pacific Ocean, where the plastic islands floated. What would happen to his position? Urban peacekeepers had been a very important guild, but today it was a profession headed towards extinction, like fossil fuels or intercontinental travel. Capturing and transporting violent types, forest or plantation arsonists, animal torturers, and above all femicides and rapists, was less and less necessary. "These days, rural robbers give more work," he said. "But they are not a priority, dispersed as they are, and because they limit themselves to stealing batteries and food, never raping or murdering. For now."

Every so often the so-called "anomalies" appeared, people who were violent towards women in cities, known as such because cases were rare. They were mostly men who, for reasons unclear to him and much of the public, used force as a mechanism to get what they wanted. Why didn't they go to the public rings to bring out that fierce energy, desire for blood and domination? The dynamics of the rings were similar to the ancient Mayan ball games, although the losers were not sacrificed. They revived the jousts of the Roman coliseums, whose stories of gladiators continued to be successful in virtual reality boxes. But they weren't fighting to the death. Why did the anomalies not use those spaces? They wanted to dominate without consent. More than one influencer with millions of followers in the virtual reality boxes claimed that the anomalies had been driven mad by watching too much aggressive content produced until the beginning of the 21st century. They saw

women, other species, minors, and elders, as objects. Several influencers, good communicators and journalists, clamored to restrict access to certain contents of the Pluriversal Library, although everyone knew it was impossible. There were Library mirrors all over the Earth, on inhabited planets and on space stations, everywhere. Most people, Francisco included, considered them in bad taste. But they were there and had regular consumers. "I hated reviewing those videos in my peacemaker courses." He snorted twice.

-The world has changed fast. Too fast for my liking- he heard himself speaking towards Selena, who barely twisted her face a little.

He liked this apprentice. She was really big, something unusual and intimidating, ideal for chases and captures. And attractive, although he wouldn't have the slightest chance of her choosing him to date. Selena was staring at the prisoner while chewing lavender pills. Her neutral look could mean anything. Francisco appreciated that neutrality, the scent of lavender, and the silence. It helped him to avoid the waste of useless conversations. The few moments in which they had talked served, from the first day, to make clear that she cared little about the whys of the work. Selena wanted, above all, action. Persecutions, arrests, inquiries, even false alarms. They had not stopped a real rape attempt in Quito for three years, which seemed eternal to him. In other cities, it had been like this for more than 30 years. The last real rape in Quito occurred 50 years earlier, when Francisco was an apprentice. The last femicide happened a hundred years ago; the subject was alluded to as savagery before the Age Shift. Maybe that's why Selena was a statue before the prisoner, her first actual transfer and capture. "Do you hate it or do you feel compassion?"

Francisco returned to the upper cabin and monitored the weather. Meteorologists were not to trust; weather was more complex than a series of measurements, and experience had taught him to be vigilant.

The aircraft maintained its cruise elevation, two kilometers high. They flew over the city of Manta and headed out to sea. Yellow and dry, this coastal area was less inhabited than the highlands. Below, some ruins looked like old 21st-century peripheral neighborhoods. These dystopian territories were of interest to him. In Quito, they had been made up of thousands of fragile rooms built with cement blocks and thin, rusty iron rods. Population

decline after the Era of Epidemics and the later Age Shift had led to the abandonment of these precarious homes. A few families had stayed on, rebuilding some spaces as the facades of entrances leading to underground rooms. Houses built on slopes, previously abundant and always affected by landslides, were not even good for that, so they had been completely reclaimed by the Andean and opportunistic vegetation coming from the lowlands due to increased temperatures. Why had people built such insecure houses?

Many flat parts of the Quito plateau, previously covered with asphalt and cement, were regenerated as orchards. Farmworkers took turns at night, under artificial light, inside greenhouses or outdoors, sometimes supported by fans and heaters to ward off frost. In the orchards, animals, vegetables, and mushrooms flourished. Their main promoters, the urban *agropops*, argued that in addition to good food the orchards provided a way to cool the planet and create carbon sinks. Their biggest detractors, the *robopops*, argued that machines could do it. Agropops also pointed out that it was harmful to people to spend long times in the virtual reality boxes, that this way of living was dangerous for their own subsistence. They remembered that those kinds of disconnections, when people believed that food grew in markets or vending machines, or that it magically arrived in aircraft to cities, had accelerated epidemics and the Age Shift. The *agropop movement* emphasized that eggs were laid by chickens, that those chickens controlled pests in crops, that bees fed on real flowers, and that all this helped to have healthy food. Repeatedly, they alluded to the brutal impact of pesticides, known above all from a 20th-century book, *Silent Spring*. "No one wants to use poisons as in the past".

He called out for an updated weather forecast. Storms obsessed him, especially over the ocean. Those sudden and intense curtains of white water, in the form of very strong waterspouts, fell without warning. In the mountains they did not at all help the aircraft and could disrupt communications, thus many rapists took advantage of them to act. But at sea they were deadly. A map unfolded before him. Zero rain. He headed back to the lower deck, where Selena continued in the same position. Was she analyzing the prisoner or just watching over him? Now the anomaly was drooling a little and muttering. He wanted to go over and ask him about his musings, but quickly regretted it, and instead decided to entertain himself for an hour. Back in the cockpit, he put on his helmet and searched one of his favorite repositories: "The Age Shift."

Francisco's ability to understand history was limited, and he always had doubts regarding the interpretations of documentaries and influencers. There was too much information and at times he felt lacking in filters to select it. He understood more about persecutions, arrests, and violent anomalies. There were some things that, however, were quite clear, such as the role of epidemics and solar pulses. The epidemics of the 21st century were crucial. Viruses first appeared in Asia and then from almost everywhere. Some said it was the revenge of nature, because people treated domestic animals badly, especially those that were useful for food, fiber, vaccines, or medical experimentation. Wild animals were being eaten everywhere and deforestation accelerated, taking away their places to live. Cows, chickens, pigs, and other animals lived huddled and stuffed with hormones on farms. "How unpleasant to eat a chicken with hormones, almost as much as a tomato with pesticides". The first great pandemic was the Covid in 2019. It spread quickly. The resulting mourning and confinement left behind all kinds of consequences. The worst came years later, however: a deadly virus that was transmitted through water and air. The survivors began to think more locally and to subsist under more peaceful contracts. New epidemics arose, some contained at continental levels. Traveling became difficult, as entire countries closed their borders for years. They let you out, but do not re-enter. The stories of people trapped far from their homes were dramatic and no one dared to go far. If you left, it could be forever.

Then came the solar pulses and the Great Disconnection, the end of communications. It seemed somewhat metaphysical and strengthened the appeal of whatever was local. The first cities to make radical changes were those with lesser violence and corruption indicators in the 21st century. Populations, fed up with states and politicians who did nothing but give flowery speeches, took the reins. They were not violent, although some things did require a certain use of force, particularly in the face of those who continued to applaud the cult of violence and domination. One of the first actions was imprisonment for femicides. As more urban territories were transformed, there were fewer femicides and rapists. In order not to waste efforts, it was decided to create a few global spaces to bring together the anomalies and, incidentally, improve the situation of the oceans somewhat. Since the 20th-century, various ocean vortices had concentrated vast spaces where the debris of fossil fuel civilization floated: the "plastic islands". These degraded and released undetectable and toxic microplastics. In each vortex, huge machines gathered these plastics into large, compact islands, several meters high, floating like

gigantic, multicolored rafts. The anomalies were banished there, condemned for life to collect the floating plastics around them, using collected flotsam to build-up the island they lived on. Food and water were regularly sent, and social organization left to their discretion, albeit with certain limits. Stories about those places were a mixture of myth and legend, even for recurring visitors like the peacemakers. It was said that at first they were chaotic systems located nowhere. Unable to reproduce, the populations of those islands slowly declined, and in some cases became peaceful. Those floating jails, the potential banishment for life, functioned as deterrents. Corrupt practices and, more slowly, rapes, ceased.

The peacemaker Francisco decided to view one of the documentaries on the change in relations between men and women. It was called "Cities of Free Women." Before, urban areas were dominated by men, in a system called patriarchy. But his grandmother had been free to choose, as were his mother, couples and daughters. His granddaughters would be as well. They had chosen whether or not to have children, how many, when. No one had forced them to be mothers using physical or social violence. Before they had been raped, from a very young age, or forced for metaphysical or religious reasons or, simply, due to an abuse of power. Raped in their homes, in churches, on the streets, on the roads, even in educational centers. Raped on television and in art. "Being a woman was living at risk" Francisco thought. The Age Shift left those ideas and practices behind, in good measure with the aid of peacekeepers and the sending of violent anomalies to the islands of plastic.

In the documentary, it was explained that among the first people opposed to women's free will, were those at that time self-defined as "socialists" or "progressives." They were concerned that this would undermine their chances to decide the fate of many based upon the State's authoritarianism. In Quito and other places, this group needed vast poor populations to dominate, and it was essential to control women, to make them reproduce sadness and submission. And it worked. Some women even publicly declared themselves submissive to their male leaders. As the Age Shift came about, those who called themselves "capitalists" were happy to see such futile and desperate resistance from their longtime opponents. They speculated that, as on other occasions, markets would finally adapt and impose themselves. But they did not count on the powerful inertia that the Age Shift had brought about. As the socialists fell, the capitalists went with them, since both

were sustained by the domination of others. They all practiced obsessive violence against nature, which they called “a resource”. "It was a world too confused, manipulated by a few and settled into sterile, dichotomous thoughts."

Others who opposed the end of patriarchy, aligned with socialists and capitalists alike, were the Catholics and their preachers. Francisco found it difficult to understand the religious practices in so-called churches. There was a kind of psychological collective control, based on fear, that allowed for the accumulation of land and money for at least two thousand years. Some historical videos from the Pluriversal Library showed their rites: people moving up and down, singing in unison, kneeling, making huge lines to receive a very thin cookie, sometimes flagellating themselves. According to the influencers and other less famous communicators, their ideology was more patriarchal than socialism and capitalism. In their books, women were punished, pointed to as inferiors, accused of human misfortunes for something called the original sin, incapable of leading spiritually, and, above all, exhorted to have many children.

According to some documentaries, societies of the past had opted for numerous populations that grew at an exponential rate. To a large extent, this was due to recurrent and socially accepted sexual abuse, the rape of girls and adolescents. Dark times when they weren't even allowed to have an abortion; if they did, they were even held criminally liable. The video ended with exciting phrases about the present and the future. Still distracted by the information, Francisco removed the helmet, checked the meteorological information, glimpsed around without much conviction, decided that there was no risk, and went back to the repository. The repository had that ability to transport him and even dangerously distract him from his obligations. He chose an archive on the history of new martial arts and rings, sites that, according to influencers and other documentaries, were decisive in the transition to a postpatriarchal society.

As images of fights from the beginning of the 21st century passed, a thick voice-over slowly recounted: “Violence, blood, conflicts, adrenaline... Common for a long time, they still are, but now accepted by the parties involved. No one is hit or assaulted without wanting to. All thanks to ... The rings!" The video was of course sponsored by the ring managers, in almost all cases, city governments financed by selling tickets, broadcasts, and multifaceted paraphernalia of objects and associated products. The blood and

collective euphoria, the passionate and hysterical shouting, the dazzling advertisements, had replaced other coliseum, stadium, and track sports that were ultra-popular in the 20th and 21st centuries. Fights between men, between women, mixed. Anyone could participate from the age of 20, under very clear agreements. But they also confounded some people, who were content to go to the dojo to train, sometimes with simulators, without blood or noise. A minority.

Combats and conflicts were limited to the rings, under the acceptance of the participants. Never before had so many people been trained in martial arts. Academies and dojos offering courses in karate, taekwondo, kung fu, aikido, and judo, abounded. The rings were even more visited than the underground virtual reality boxes. People loved to see, hear and participate in fights without deaths. The recently invented *fu-ta-ya* included ingredients of ancient wrestling and had to be quickly regulated by the many accidents at home during unsupervised practices. Francisco was an expert in ancient and modern martial arts. When he felt the desire to hit someone, he approached the local ring, chose the soft mode with protectors, and ended up hugging his rival and a beer in silence. The video ended by emphasizing that, since it was not happening against the will of anyone, rings had become a good way to prevent the appearance of anomalies.

In a neutral voice the ship announced the arrival at the oceanic airport in 30 minutes. Already flying over the huge plastic island, in the distance Francisco could see the mountain of accumulated materials and the many structures built by the residents. Although new plastics were no longer being produced in the world, they continued to arrive from everywhere, compacted and placed as additional blocks on the mountain.

He switched off the automatic pilot and maneuvered to cross, at a height of 500 meters, the threatening electric fence that isolated the runway. In previous years there had been attempts by exiles to capture ships, and although they had been quickly prevented by the protocols for using aircraft, the fence was reminiscent of potential problems. Only one-way tickets were obtained to the islands. Human rights groups considered it cruel, but no city was open to receiving such people back.

The aircraft unfolded three wheels and landed vertically. Selena deactivated the cell and raised the prisoner, who remained crestfallen and silent. Francisco didn't care who he was;

his curiosity about anomalies had long since disappeared. Before, he had tried to help them, being empathetic to their state of shock. Some were repentant, asking for forgiveness, claiming that they had watched too many videos and gone mad from experiencing domination. They started by destroying trees, then clandestinely killing animals, finally women. The sequence usually repeated itself. This anomaly, about 50 years old, had tried to rape a woman in an abandoned area of a metropolitan park, attacking her while exercising at dawn. The young woman activated the help button on her watch and in less than five minutes ten drones had arrived to make noises, film, and disperse some stun gas. The man was prepared and managed to take down five, but more arrived. Everything helped buy time. The victim had studied martial arts and liked the ring, so was able to defend herself. Fifteen minutes later Selena and Francisco were chasing the anomaly through the vegetation. She caught up and subdued him. Francisco arrived a minute later.

A concrete fortress was the only structure on the electric fence. There a door was opened that allowed a glimpse of a long tunnel through which the prisoner walked. In the background, another door opened and he entered the territory of anomalies on the floating plastic island.