

Diaspora**By Lee Stoddart**

The silver Porsche hit the approach to the hump backed bridge at speed, the six-cylinder engine roaring as the driver dropped a gear in preparation for the bridge summit and the oncoming corner Kyle knew was immediately on the other side.

The sun briefly glinted through the driver's Ray-Bans as the 911 crested the bridge and gained air for a brief moment before jolting back to earth. The five-point racing harness strained across his chest, his head and body throwing forward before returning back into the bucket seats. Shocked by the severity of the impact, his grip momentarily loosened on the steering wheel.

The front air dam smashed into the tarmac, causing broken pieces of plastic to smash off and drag along the underside of the vehicle, fragmenting further and bouncing down the road.

No time to think about that as the corner approached fast. Breathing hard, he fought the wheel and dropped another cog to slow the approach – ready to pick up acceleration on the other side of the racing line he was taking.

All those track days were paying off but he was physically exhausted having driven hard for the last 10 miles or so. The cop was dropping back – his siren a more distant wail.

Even with the intervening 25 odd years of technological development his classic 2013 model 911 GT3 was still a match for anything on the road. Most vehicles were now electric or fuel cell powered which had a huge impact on performance and the police bike was no exception – it just didn't have the punch to keep up with him on these country lanes. Foresight had also led him to keep his classic car unmodified – it had none of the auto-drive or tracking technology built into modern vehicles, and he'd even had the relatively basic alarm and GPS system disabled so it couldn't report back his location – so, if he could just get away from this lone cop he stood a chance of evading capture.

Kyle was known for having great foresight. He had made his money as a young man from the exponential growth of social media in the early 2010s – building code that crawled across the web, befriending people and “liking” posts and pages - pretending to be human to boost website ratings. He had a genuine talent for software and moved into designing computer interfaces with human persona. Pretty soon he had several patents under his belt and was in great demand as the second space race developed, driven by the expectation of a future land grab on Mars. Isolated people would need relationships – even if it was with a machine – just to stop them from going stir crazy.

By 2030, at 51 years old, Kyle should have been a dyed-in-the-wool techno-nerd with zero chance of remission. But, everyone thought of him as the old 2D actor, Pierce Brosnan. Rolex wearing, slightly greying, devilishly good

looking - a James Bond clone with a love of gadgets, fast cars and faster women. He had everything he could want – great health and amazing physique for his age, a comfortable life and an absorbing career.

There was only one problem - he was a secret atheist.

The assassination of Dawkins in 2016 by a Muslim fundamentalist was widely seen as a tipping point for the Humanist movement which lost its key spokesperson and activist. It became dangerous to espouse any non (let alone anti) religious sentiment. Kyle saw which way the wind was blowing and began to suppress his own declamations and struggled to give the appearance of towing the line, attending church regularly and “tut-tutting” along with everyone else at the latest outrageous outburst from someone espousing a desire for a return to a more secular society.

Kyle was secretly devastated when, in 2018, atheism effectively became illegal in what remained of the UK. This was shortly after “bloody” King Harry had been crowned following the untimely deaths of both his more tolerant father and elder brother. The scandal of his succession and subsequent conversion to Catholicism had rocked the country and brought it close to civil war resulting in the dissolution of Parliament and the reinstatement of a monarchy, supported by, and buttressing, the Catholic power base in Europe.

In 2020 the major religious factions across the world, shockingly, united under a single mission, forgetting their differences in order to rid the world of the

“non-spiritual” who were blamed for all the woes of the world – secular science courted environmental disaster to line the pockets of heinous, avaricious corporations. The ageing Pope Francis at their head, the cleansing of the planet began as major companies were first nationalised, then put under the management of spiritual leaders – for only in this way could the Earth be healed.

So, it was that many people had to mask their lack of belief for fear of persecution. Those who went underground were systematically weeded out. Any belief system was better than none and non-believers were first shunned and refused work then imprisoned and “re-programmed” in what amounted to a second inquisition.

Kyle was therefore one of the persecuted – or at least would have been if his atheism had been known. He knew the turning point had been reached for the human race once Dawkins was dead and creationism pushed evolutionary theory out of the school syllabus. From that day forward, he hid his views and played on side – building a credible façade that would help keep him at the centre of developments. To all intents and purposes, he was the perfect citizen – respectful of both church and state which were rapidly merging into a single entity.

For Kyle, the centre of developments was the Santa Maria, a colony ship in orbit above Earth. Originally funded by the European Union Space Agency following rising concerns about global warming with the aim of setting up a

new territory on Mars, it had taken 15 years to build it and wasn't scheduled to leave for another year when it would take the first colonists to Mars – becoming their home for the next 100 years or so whilst the planet was terraformed. The church saw it as its opportunity to build a beach head in a new territory – monopolising the delivery of the spiritual needs of the colonists and creating a perfect Catholic community; so naturally took over the project, ensuring that only those scientists who were “on side” were able to contribute to its development.

Kyle had made sure he was both on side and vital to the development of the Santa Maria. He led the build of the ship's computer interface – a vast artificial intelligence that would execute the programmes needed to run the day to day operations and act as both government proxy and bishop – ensuring the physical and spiritual safety of the colonists.

Over the years, he had carefully built a cell network of contacts – like minded scientists and atheists - many of whom worked in the space industry but few of which knew he led the conspiracy. Secrecy was imperative until they could put their plans into action. Today was that day.

Kyle and his closest team had worked tirelessly to ensure that everyone working on the ship was part of this network or were marginalised into non-critical roles and had carefully hidden the accelerated progress of the development – achieved through additional funding from the secret team's personal wealth and some extraordinary additional hours from those in this

cabal of dissidents. They had circumvented the design and subtly changed the specification to ensure the ship was able to travel vast distances over many lifetimes and eventually reach worlds where they would not be bothered by the governments of Earth – at least until they were well established and able to defend themselves. Most importantly, Kyle had built two personalities for the central computer to ensure their flight would be unencumbered by fighting a built-in theocracy.

Now they were ready – it was time to take flight and leave the planet that they no longer loved; to build a beautiful new society based on Humanist principles, on a distant world...or at least their children's children might. There was no guarantee of success – but it was their only hope – a Diaspora of the irreligious based on a faith in science.

The morning had started as planned for Kyle. He was on his way to the launch pad, which supplied the regular shuttle service to the orbiting Santa Maria, on the Island of Thanet. The Island, once connected to the mainland and home to 60,000 people, was now virtually deserted following the global rise of water levels. Most people had left the island voluntarily and those that hadn't were turned out by the government as they compulsory purchased the land for the vast project.

Kyle's iPhone was carefully disabled so he couldn't be tracked – he felt like a primitive without the constant stream of information being force fed through the implants behind his ear straight to his brain. He couldn't contact anyone

and no one could contact him. The data feeds were quiet and he didn't get a constant stream of location-based info-adverts advising him of where his friends were and what they were up to. He didn't know where he was from the normally always-on GPS, what the temperature was, what the stock market was doing or the daily papal message. Silence.

So he wasn't aware when the cop saw he had a light out on the otherwise meticulously maintained, vintage car. Normally the cop would expect him to pull straight over once he received the "traffic violation" message through the mandated implant. As there was no response, the next step would be for the cop to force the car's on-board computer to stop the vehicle. Of course, this car didn't have one, so the cop had to give chase – his electric motorbike's near silent acceleration broken only by the shrill howl of the siren. Kyle wasn't going to be caught. He had key codes to enable the early launch of the Santa Maria and to switch the computer personalities over – he had to be there or the plan would fall at the first hurdle.

Kyle considered his situation. A very unique car, being tracked by a cop used to being able to exert control remotely on automated vehicles – he wouldn't be used to giving chase and he had no idea who Kyle was or where he was going - the Porsche was completely off-grid. He'd probably already called for support but there would be few out here to help him as technology had substituted for boots on the ground long ago. He was a way ahead, so had time to think. Calmly he slowed a little, waited for the next turning and went

off down it – being out of sight before the cop reached the junction. The cop continued past, oblivious to this most basic of subterfuges.

Turning around in the road, Kyle retraced his route and then headed towards the city of Canterbury where he parked the car down a side street and went to look for an auto-taxi. One way or another, he wouldn't need this car again. He programmed the taxi for the Thanet launch pad and sat back. Nothing to do now but enjoy the ride. He could still make it in time.

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“Where the fuck have you been?”, demanded the woman. “We're running late – the launch window is nearly closed and we need those codes!”.

“No sweat. We've just got time. Is everyone on board?”, Kyle tried to placate her but he always found it difficult when she was upset – she was just 30, blond, devastatingly attractive, a Nobel prize winning physicist, yet with a filthy mind and foul mouth. An almost cartoon-like characterisation of the sexy scientist in white lab coat and black thick-rimmed glasses. They were madly in love. He always enjoyed reflecting on how he had managed to capture such a rare prize - especially at his age. Perhaps she had a James Bond fixation, he thought – people said he looked like the actor who portrayed him in the 1990s.

“Whether they’re here or not, it’s time to leave. Most of the key people are here. We can’t afford to wait any longer!”

Hand in hand they rushed across the tarmac towards the shuttle. Overhead the sound of helicopters pierced the sky. The swoosh of rockets marginally preceded the explosion in front of him and the shockwave threw him back. It felt like a boulder was sitting on his chest and he felt the blood trickling down his face from his skull. “I must have been hit – how irritating”, thought Kyle calmly as he began to drift into unconsciousness, “Just when it was going so well. How the hell did they track me?”.

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The policeman heaved the contents of his stomach up into the scrubby grass by the side of the totalled silver Vauxhall Astra GTi. He would never get used to this kind of mess.

Recovering his composure, he reviewed the scene. Most of the front end of the car had been destroyed by the collision with the tree and the young driver lay dead, half through the windscreen, his head a bloody, lacerated pulp and his chest caved in by its journey across the steering wheel. The passenger, a young, blond woman, looked in little better shape slouched in the seat beside him. The engine had stopped running but, in the otherwise silent scene, the radio continued to report the news that Pope Francis had been elected in Rome.

He returned to his BMW motorcycle which was parked on the brow of the bridge, picked up the radio and called the accident in. Another tragic accident where a stupid kid had thought he was some kind of hero and over-cooked a notoriously dangerous bend – he'd been driving like a maniac and literally took off from the brow of the bridge, losing control on the other side - going straight through the apex of the bend and hitting the tree head-on.

“Why the hell did he take off like that?”, asked the policeman into his radio, “I was only going to warn him he had a faulty brake light”.