

KILLED BY A HUMUNGOUS FART

This new mini-chapter or snippet is to reside between the snippets “*There’s no fuel like an old fuel*” and “*Don’t mention the Hindenburg*” in the novel “*Icecubes in Rockets: A Future History of Human Folly*”

Date: February 2030

Location: Headquarters of the US *Energenron* Corporation, largest energy corporation in the world

Present: Kenneth Michael Besler, CEO of *Energenron* and Howard Lickspittle, obsequious flunky

Howard Lickspittle burst into the office excitedly, hyperventilating like a breathless teenage drama queen. “It’s a friggin’ disaster!” he exclaimed in a shrill voice, “a goddam catastrophe! Have you seen the Newsmedia cable channel yet?”

Kenneth Michael Besler was perched forward over his desk, pocket mirror in one hand and makeup pencil in the other, touching up an eyebrow. “Ehh,” Besler blurted out, “wassup?”

“Dead,” Lickspittle declared, “thousands dead. Could spell big trouble for our subsidiary, the KleenKoalKorporation. Look boss, it’s on the breaking news.” He took a TV remote control from Besler’s desktop and pointed it at a screen on the wall, pressing a button.

A talking head appeared on the screen with a grave expression: “...*dioxide acts almost immediately as a lethal knockdown agent. Most of the victims fell over in their tracks abruptly, not realising what hit them. The scene here is surreal, like a still photograph capturing a frozen moment in time. A silent Armageddon. Perfectly preserved bodies strewn about everywhere, unscarred, uninjured, lying eerily still, apparently sleeping quietly – but in fact stone cold dead.*”

Once again, we have breaking news of a horrific tragedy. More than two thousand residents near Lake Traf in Southern Queensland, Australia, have perished suddenly, along with all animal life in the vicinity. State emergency services were contacted by survivors and arrived within the hour. Wearing biohazard suits, they combed the area, obtaining air and water samples. Initial concerns of a nerve gas or industrial toxin have been excluded. We have Southeastern University Geophysicist Professor Andrew Spinifex on the line. Professor Spinifex, once again, can you explain to us how this tragedy came about?”

The face of a grey haired bespectacled scientist now filled the screen. “*Well, Ron, we have solved the puzzle. The disaster response team found extremely high levels of carbon dioxide deep in the lake water. Furthermore, the pattern of deaths was very striking. The trail of fatalities began from the lake edge and snaked down along the valley in the direction of the prevailing wind. These findings indicate that a cloud of carbon dioxide emerged from the lake, was blown along by the wind, engulfed the town and travelled down the valley before dissipating. This situation is similar to the 1986 Lake Nyos disaster in Cameroon, West Africa, when seventeen hundred people died after a massive cloud of carbon dioxide was expelled from the lake and flowed down the hillside, killing everyone in its path.*”

The reporter joined back in. “*Where did the carbon dioxide in Lake Traf come from Professor? My understanding is that Africa’s Lake Nyos is a volcanic lake, but the stable continent of Australia has very few volcanic lakes and Lake Traf is certainly not one of them.*”

“*Australia’s Lake Traf,*” the Professor answered, “*has no known natural source of carbon dioxide which can account for this event. I believe there was chronic accumulation of CO₂ in the lake depths by leakage from a nearby underground carbon sequestration reservoir. Ten years ago, the Swandri coal fired power station started pumping pressurised carbon dioxide two kilometres underground, in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere. Experts hired by the coal company assured everyone then that CO₂ escape would not occur. They said that monitoring for leakage was not necessary, even if monitoring was possible. I believe that previously undetected gaps in the so called impermeable rock capping the underground reservoir enabled the carbon dioxide to track into the base of the lake, dissolving in supersaturated solution until a trigger such as an underwater landslide caused sudden release of a massive quantity of gaseous CO₂.*”

The TV picture changed back to the face of the reporter. “*That is a very serious assertion you make, Professor. If true, it could spark a flood of multimillion dollar lawsuits from relatives of the deceased. It could bankrupt the energy company. How can you be sure your theory is true?*”

The Professor’s face filled the screen again. “*The evidence is undeniable, compelling and utterly consistent. This is the only plausible explanation. There is no other mechanism which could possibly explain the speed with which the victims died, the numbers in which they died and the geographic and temporal pattern in which they died.*”

Kenneth Michael Besler turned the television off. “Hmm,” he said, “looks like our Australian counterparts are in a bit of a pickle.”

“Sir,” Lickspittle rejoined, “as you know, Energenron’s fully owned subsidiary, the American KleenKoalKorporation, has several coal fired power stations which have been pumping CO₂ underground for years. This

tragedy could have terrible repercussions for us here in America. Our share price could go down the toilet. It's a real worry."

"Whaah, don't you fret none, mah precious honeychile," Besler lapsed into his native Southern accent, "behind every cloud there's a silver lining. Even a cloud of carbon dioxide."

"I don't understand, boss," Lickspittle looked perplexed, "I don't see how this calamity can do us any good in any way."

"Do I have to do *all* of the thinking *all* of the time?" Besler asked. "OK then, let me take you through things one step at a time. Let's do a little exercise in strategic thinking. Tell me Howard, how would you respond to this situation if *you* were in charge?"

"Well if I was managing the Australian coal company," Lickspittle answered, "I would first vigorously deny any responsibility. I would insist that it is impossible to conclusively prove that the CO₂ came from the power station, hence it is impossible to prove my liability. Step two of my usual S.O.P. is to discredit my critics. I would get investigators to dig up dirt about this Spinifex guy. Maybe he shoplifted as a kid. Maybe he used false I.D. to buy drinks as a teenager. Take out full page advertisements in the Newsmedia Company rags portraying him as a crook and a liar."

"True to form as always, Howard," Besler commented, "You are a nasty, small minded, mean spirited little shit. Good thing you're on *my* side. Whereas deny and discredit may be what we *usually* do to manage public perception, in this case it just won't wash. I'm pretty sure an independent inquiry will find the *Swandri* power station culpable. And you can be sued for libel for attacking that Spinifex guy in that way." Besler concluded, "So you see, that Australian coal company is completely fucked."

"As I said before Sir," Lickspittle repeated, "I don't see how this calamity can do us any good in any way,"

"That Australian company may be fucked, but it could be a *good* situation for our KleenKoalKorporation here in the States," Besler said.

After a pregnant pause and blank stare from Lickspittle, Besler let out a sigh and clarified further. "*Number one*: CO₂ geosequestration, what I call *carbon burial*, was forced upon us years ago by those damn greenies who were scaremongering the public about global warming. Of all our options though, it was the best one: it allowed us to continue making money burning off our massive coal reserves and we didn't have to spend time and money monitoring for CO₂ leaks because, well, it wasn't *possible* to monitor for leaks. Hence we went along with it. But the large costs of carbon burial ate into our profits. *Number two*: Now we have a major catastrophe as a direct consequence of the greenie agenda. This is a golden opportunity for us to point the finger squarely back at them, to blame all those innocent deaths on those misguided Eco-tree huggers. A great chance for us to resurrect our old argument that global warming is a myth. And even if it is real, I ain't seen no one who's died from global warming yet. Have you?"

"No Sir," was Lickspittle's reply.

"But here we have thousands who died as a direct result of those holier than thou do-gooders. There's blood on their hands." Besler smirked. "*Number three*," he continued, "this tragedy gives us a reason to immediately stop all carbon burial at all our American power stations. We don't want no Americans killed by some humungous fart from the bowels of the Earth, now do we?"

"No Siree," Lickspittle responded.

"So we cut spending on carbon burial and straight away our profit margins go up," Besler said, "now ain't that a *good* thing?"

"Yes Sir," replied Lickspittle.

"*Number four*," Besler was on a roll, "let's just say for argument's sake that global warming *is* real and that it *is* a bad thing. Let's be generous and concede some points to those greenie fuckwits, shall we? Well, scientists have shown that dispersed particulates increase cloud cover and cause global *cooling*."

"Dispersed particulates?" Howard inquired.

"Smog, my boy, smog. Smog causes global dimming and thus counteracts global warming," Besler explained, "yet another *good* thing. So we stop scrubbing our exhausts and let the smog out to counteract global warming and we save even *more* money. What do we have altogether? We discredit the greenies, we stop carbon burial and we stop scrubbing our exhausts. We cut costs on two fronts, we make obscene profits and we laugh all the way to the bank. Now ain't that *all* good?"

"Yes Siree indeedee," Lickspittle concurred.