

# The Difference Between Milton Keynes and Milton Keynes

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Early one morning in the year 2070, Charles Millington Jr. wakes up, takes a shower, and reaches for his toothbrush. **His** shower unit is ‘HI-POWA’, but its surge is alas disappointingly feeble. Given that Charles Millington Jr. lives in the future, his electric toothbrush, likewise, is surprisingly hopeless. Charles’s routine ablutions signal some of the ways Charles himself possibly feels out of step with his environment — **he** shaves, whereas most of the contemporary populace have **their** hair removed by surgery — so it is perhaps not for nothing that he surrounds himself with tools and technologies that fail their function. He is mostly persevering — he uses the useless stuff anyway — but he does express some exasperation with the toothbrush. ‘Damn this toothbrush,’ Charles mutters, ‘whoever thought of an electric toothbrush that wasn’t waterproof!’ Whoever would have thought a gadget or gizmo could be so self-destructive. Ablutions nonetheless completed, Charles walks into his living-room, which is furnished with an ‘assortment of odd and antiquated’ chairs and sofas ‘quite unlike the cube furniture’ favoured by late-twenty-first century citizens. There is a ‘bicycle rigged up on a conveyor belt’, but this too turns out to be a technological anachronism. It previously belonged to Charles’s grandfather and is now lushly rusted. ‘Vast quantities’ of iron oxide have converted a ‘sturdy machine into a death trap’, so that what once must have seemed futuristic has become, via time or time’s passing away, an image of the way the future accumulates as detritus. Sometimes the future is just rust on a home-rigged cycling machine. Sometimes it never even comes to be. Like a soggy electric toothbrush, the future isn’t always that futuristic, and like the odd and antiquated furniture in Charles’s living-room, the future often loiters in disappointed versions of itself — as it once was dreamt to be, as it might have been, as it nearly was but wasn’t quite. But still, Charles uses his useless toothbrush. Charles occasionally jumps on the rusty bicycle machine. He doesn’t this morning, though. Instead, he downs a glass of vitamin juice, takes a few sips of whiskey, and gets on his way. For all that his home is furnished with outmodedness and purposelessness — for all that his rooms are jumbled with the future as it would have been, or could have been — Charles Millington Jr. is somebody with places to go.

I had been warned, before I went, that where I was going was not somewhere it was possible to arrive. ‘It’s not that it’s not there,’ I was told, by whom, I won’t say. ‘It’s just a little, you know, shy.’ ‘Shy?’ I said, having checked that each of my elbows rested equidistant from the table’s edge — I had recently come to realise that the way I held myself during conversations had a direct bearing on the way I felt about whatever my interlocutor said, and as I already felt anxious about what my present interlocutor would say next, I thought it wise to arrange my arms and torso in a form that would, when scrutinised, suggest the opposite of soft. In short, I wanted to be butch, and honestly I thought I was. I thought my demeanour and appearance was muscular and robust. ‘Yes, shy,’ said whoever it was I was talking with. ‘Like you,’ whoever I was talking with rudely added, and I felt a tepid smile breach my lips. I felt my face make amends and relent to what had been said, so I snapped my laptop shut and set off to where it was not possible to arrive. I went as fast as I could, without stopping to think about the correspondence of qualities my interlocutor had administered between myself and where I was headed — without even stopping to think how it was that somewhere could be ‘shy’.

But who is this Charles Millington Jr., or more to the point, where is he? Where does he live? Clearly Charles lives in the future — in a version of the year 2070 — but this doesn't tell us everything necessary about his whereabouts because Charles, it turns out, is a fictional character from the future as it was once imagined in a community newsletter, a newsletter produced in Netherfield in the New Town of Milton Keynes. Not Netherfield now, but as it existed in Milton Keynes's early years. Charles story was originally serialised in a publication called the *Netherfield News*. The future in which he lives, this means, is *the future as it once appeared* from a time and place for which 2070 was much further off than it is today, but also closer, because Charles's future is the future as it seemed to somebody living in an urban environment in its nascent years, when everything was fresh and unaged, when all was lushly unruined. In that space — in that difference between what could have been and what came to be — is where Charles lives. Charles Millington Jr., lives, let's say, in the difference between Milton Keynes and **Milton Keynes**.

'But how *can* somewhere be shy,' I asked myself, when I realised that I was, after all, thinking about just that. Was 'shy' just a word for the way in which buildings and structures never completely reveal themselves? I cannot see the inside of a wall when I'm outside, but I always suppose an inside exists anyway, and it's because of my supposing that the world exists to me three-dimensionally. It's like the underside or other side or unseen side of an object — the world would fall apart if I could see around the object all at once, because if I could see around an object all at once there wouldn't be any way of approaching it. There wouldn't be any way of going towards it, and it would be impossible to hold.



After all, the future is a funny old thing. It's never as young as it used to be. If 2070 is nearer now than it was in 1967, when the New Town of Milton Keynes was formally designated, then 2070 is also *older* today than it was when Charles's author was writing. 2070 has been around a while since then, and Charles's version of it has in many ways aged, become quaint. Thus does the future become something it's possible to look back upon. Thus does the future become a possible object of nostalgia. The present is always the cemetery of what might have been as much as what was — of what did not come to be and of what could have occurred but did not, and there is no tomorrow that is not already weighted with the prospect of doneness — with the ache of eventually having been and gone, which is also why the future, as a concept, so often fails its function. As a tool or technology, futurity is not unlike an electric toothbrush that forgets to be waterproof but which gets used again and again anyway. As a template or scape, the future is at once blank and uncannily familiar. It marks a departure from its surroundings that is impossibly awash with its context, with what brought it about and with the history, too, of whoever it was that dreamt up that particular tomorrow, that version of 2070, that toothbrush. If history often appears flatter from a distance — if the technologies that are lost to us live on within whatever gone content they once would have made legible — then that's why the future's past is forever catching up with it. That's why the future's forever ghosting itself, and if the lure and excitement of looking forwards is in part the possibility of foresight and prophecy, of predicting things, deciding where and how Charles Millington Jr. will live, then that also means that the future is susceptible to predictability, and to tedium. Sometimes the future is rust on a home-rigged bicycle machine, but sometimes it's rigged *per se*, a vehicle for the same old same old.

'But then what's the difference,' I wondered, 'between going somewhere and arriving? How can somewhere, anywhere, be at once reticent and forthright?' Was I too both of those things, and if I was then would I feel instantly at home where I was going? Was I somehow the archive of where it's not possible to arrive? I had no real clue what that would have meant but was excited by the idea, and as I entertained it some further questions entered my mind. Would I, when I got there, instinctively know how to get around? Would I, for once in my life, know exactly how to organise my time? If it wasn't possible to arrive where I was going would I ever know when I had left? Would it even be possible to leave? And what if, when I got to where it wasn't possible to arrive, I finally felt that I had arrived?

How else to explain the ‘Pic of the Week’ that regularly featured in another of Milton Keynes’s early publications, the Development Corporation’s own magazine. With what could only have been a wink and a nod, that publication, the readership of which was the team responsible for realising the plans for Milton Keynes, was called the *Insider*. Apart from a few exceptions to prove the rule, the ‘Pic of the Week’ was predictably gendered, with those pictured mostly being secretaries or working in administration, which in turn is markedly suggestive of the distribution of labour when it came to the making of Milton Keynes, who sharpened the pencils and who drew up plans with them. But still, the future’s the future. This doesn’t necessarily mean that there cannot be newness. On the contrary, the new is perhaps nothing but the future’s happy ending, what exactly happens when the future fails its function. Failed functions are how newness comes into the world, how it becomes visible. This is something understandable by anybody who has ever *not* walked beneath one of the porte-cochères that organise pedestrian routes across roads in Milton Keynes. Themselves a structure of gentle grace, elegant and deft in their administration of space, the porte-cochères orientate pedestrians towards crossing the road via a given path. There is nothing to stop somebody not following their suggestion, which is probably why they are so successful, which in turn is why to digress from them — to go another way, to ignore them — is less a transgression than it is just the emergence of a new perspective, the surfacing of a crease in the plans. Too often transgression too easily becomes another design on tomorrow’s world, another totalising vision, which is also to say that Milton Keynes might ultimately be most itself, and at its best, when Milton Keynes is not quite Milton Keynes — not quite what it was designed to be, but not entirely otherwise either. It’s perhaps also a matter of thinking of newness — about what happens to the *new* in the New Town — less in terms of invention and grand sweeping gestures and more minimally, in terms of affordances, in terms of what would not necessarily have been, but which was, which is nothing but the dream or the unconscious of what could have been, but was not. The future is an old story, but again, that doesn’t mean that newness is impossible. This is something we can discover by going back to the future of Charles Millington Jr.

When I got to where it wasn’t possible to arrive, I was nicely surprised to find that I had come by train. I was surprised as well to find that my interlocutor from Skype was there waiting for me, stood by a hoarding advertising holidays. I introduced myself as the archive — I didn’t know what else to say, and didn’t want to give my name — and then excused myself. I held my chin at what I thought was a wilful and severe angle and concentrated on making an exit, which would also be, of course, an entrance. ‘But how do you know that you’ll know where to go?’ said whoever it was who had met me, with a tone of amused concern. ‘How will you make friends? Where will you eat? Where will you sleep? Do you have *any* kind of plan?’ The latter question baffled me. The question about friendship meanwhile seemed fairly presumptive, and since it hadn’t occurred to me that I would stay wherever I was long enough to want for companionship, I began to worry that something personal was being hinted at. I wondered what was known of me — whether my backstory had been here ahead of me.

Charles Millington Jnr. should not *not* have been a detective. **His** destiny is written brazenly into his detective-like name, **which** he has, his author tells us, inherited from his dad and **his** dad before him. But Charles cannot be a detective because **his** world or environment won't let him be. In the version of 2070 in which Charles lives, all serious crime has ceased **thanks** to the 'great life programme of 2055'. The programme **doesn't** receive much more explication than this, but seems **definitive**. It changed everything. So Charles's destiny lives **on** in his name, but defunct or lapsed, yet it's exactly because **of that** lapsed destiny that Charles must find something to **do** with himself. It's exactly because Charles cannot be the **detective he** should have been that Charles has *a story*. Getting **into trouble** for hurdling the Perspex fences that separate the **moving** sidewalks of wherever it is that he lives is one of the **things he** finds to do with himself. But we also know that his **story is** 'To Be Continued', and we also want to know what else **he will do** with himself. His future is over and done with — he **cannot be** the detective he is destined to be — but it's for that **exact reason** that his story is interesting and full of possibility. **Thus does** the editor of the *Netherfield News* enthuse, in a **handwritten** note beneath one episode of Charles's narrative, **about the story** being "EXCITING" (isn't it). Thus do I **too find myself** wanting to continue Charles's story — I find **myself wondering** what would happen to another version of **Charles in** another version of 2070, in another version of **this piece of** writing, in another story. I find myself trying to **imagine more** about Charles's surroundings, whether where **he lives there** are buses or just moving sidewalks, whether there **are community** centres and swimming pools and cemeteries **and if so where**, and why — how do you decide where to **put a cemetery** — and I wonder too whether there would be **cruising grounds**, which are the dream or unconscious of parks **and woodlands** and which are never likely to be written into **a design brief**, but which always come to be anyway. Milton **Keynes has many** of them. Charles does not live in Milton **Keynes — he lives**, as we've agreed, in the difference between **Milton Keynes and** Milton Keynes — but perhaps what enters **his world as he jumps** the fence is something like a distant **memory or new perspective** on what could have been true of **Milton Keynes**, but was not.

The moving sidewalks of Charles's environment themselves are like a memory, dreamlike and distorted, of the monorail city imagined by Fred Pooley, County Architect for Buckinghamshire City Council. Pooley's plans preceded the plans for Milton Keynes and were titled 'A City for the 70s'. Then, the title would have signalled a city that looked to the future. Now, 'A City for the 70s' reads very differently. 'A City for the 70s' feels retro to our ears, but when we think of the 70s we still think of an era heavily weighted with the future, deeply invested in the futuristic. Tomorrow's world is a different planet these days, and neither Pooley's future nor Charles's exist — but both have been and gone, nonetheless. Both have come to rest somewhere.

In another issue of the *Netherfield News*, there is an anecdote that further complicates the question of Charles Millington Jr.'s whereabouts. 'NETHERFIELD DOES NOT EXIST', reads the type-written title. In the anecdote, which has the tone of both a joke and a frustrated lament, the anecdote's narrator boards a bus and asks for Netherfield. 'Tinkers Bridge', the bus driver replies, and not as a question, but as a statement. 'No', says the narrator, 'Netherfield.' The bus driver will not budge, however. 'That's right', says the driver, 'Tinkers Bridge.' At this point the anecdote's narrator is prompted to ask whether Netherfield exists. 'Yes', comes the reply, 'but we say Tinkers Bridge'. The nonplussed narrator sits down, tries to follow the bus driver's 'queer logic'. The anecdote concludes with a description of a woman boarding the bus and likewise asking for Netherfield, being told Tinkers Bridge, disembarking the bus but then being called back again by the driver, who admits to his nearly lost passenger that the bus *does* go near Netherfield after all.

'Well, I'm not sure about any plan,' I said, deftly unfolding a piece of paper with one hand while scrunching the other in a tight fist. 'But I know I want to see the crease,' and when I said that I showed the paper to the person I was talking with, who was no longer my interlocutor from Skype but a woman stood by a water cooler. I had already made my way from the railway station to the library, it seemed. Or else I had been driven there. In any case I liked the building. It was cool and considerate. 'The crease?' she said, touching her lips with a small paper cup. 'Yes, the crease,' I said, suddenly worried that I was mispronouncing the word and also that I was flirting.

'Oh yes,' the woman said, 'I know what you mean. It's gone. I think they realised it was a mistake. A shame, I was fond of it. Not that there was much to see. It was really just a slight discrepancy, an interpretative error at the point of construction if you know what I mean,' and when she said that she winked. I winked back. I have no idea why. Sometimes my body is avant-garde in its choreography. 'Yes. Gone,' she said. 'But I thought it gave the place — what's the word?' 'Character?' I boldly offered, to my immediate regret. 'Character' in this context was perhaps the naffest word I had ever said. 'Yes, exactly!' she exclaimed. 'But it was never meant to be.'

Near, but not quite — the bus driver's admission is **not a total** reversal of what he said previously, but instead a **moderation**, a slight amendment, and so the queer logic of Netherfield's nonexistence lives on, suspended over the story, **despite the** narrator's insistence that Netherfield will be insisted **on in** future. 'Now I always insist on Netherfield', writes J. **Mackinlay**, the name that signs the typewritten text. But the title **of the** anecdote suggests otherwise. The title remains true **to the** queer encounter between the J. Mackinlay and the **bus driver** and true, as well, to something about Netherfield — **to its** newness, its netherness, and perhaps too to how it **might have** felt to live there in its nascent years, when all was **lush and** unrusted, when anything could have been anything **and** anybody, anybody. I sometimes wonder whether it **must have** felt like the end of the world, living in the **beginnings of** Milton Keynes, and as should be clear by now I mean **that in** the best possible sense. I wonder too what it would **have been** like to be there when hardly anybody else lived there, **when** it wasn't known for sure whether everybody would **arrive**, whether the envisaged population of 250,000 would **definitely** be reached. I wonder if the New Town of Milton Keynes **ever** felt abandoned by its future inhabitants like my body **sometimes** feels abandoned by its alternate lives, whether it felt **anxious** or excited, whether it knew what it would do with itself **once** its future had come to an end, once the envisaged population of 250,000 had been reached — as it now nearly has. **Does that** mean that Milton Keynes now exists in the present **tense**? Is Milton Keynes no longer a New Town or more **completely** a New Town than it has ever been?' If Charles Millington Jr. lives in a version of Milton Keynes that has slipped off **the** grid — which in itself exists both as an index and a **symbol of** Milton Keynes's amendability, a proposition for the form **that** the town might in the future take *and* might once have taken — then I wonder if the difference between Milton Keynes **and** Milton Keynes actually exists.

Her gaze then became glazed,  
and I wondered whether her mind  
had already fled to other things.  
I wondered too if the building we were  
stood in liked me as much as I liked  
it, and if it did, what that would mean.  
What would it mean for a building to  
like anybody? What would it mean for  
a building to like *every* body? 'Can I  
see you again?' I asked the woman by  
the water cooler then, even though I  
hadn't planned to, even while I winced.  
She smiled and said I could find her  
in a magazine — she had once been  
'Pic of the Week', on page three of the  
Corporation's gazette, and I gasped,  
shocked at the existence of such a  
derogatory anachronism, but she just  
blinked — or else I could find her in  
the grid square where she lived, which  
didn't exist.

I think it does — in Milton Keynes.