

# THE AGE OF GENIUS

Phoenix Bailey

Part of

# WRITING THE FUTURE

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Inspired by science fiction, entries considered how health and healthcare in the UK will look in the year 2100.

The prize was won by Elizabeth Ingram-Wallace with her story 'Opsnizing Dad', and was published along with the five other shortlisted stories in October 2017.

At a time of reflecting on where healthcare has been, a further set of longlisted stories was published in the summer of 2018 to coincide with the NHS's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

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The future is...  
a place where  
we continue to  
make the same  
mistakes, but  
with cooler  
stuff

**A**malia Bailey stepped out of her front door and took in a deep breath through her nose. The crisp autumnal air raced through her nostrils as her chest expanded and in that moment, she convinced herself that she felt focussed and at ease. She hadn't felt at ease all that morning of course, but that was to be expected, she assured herself; nerves were a natural part of a day like today. She walked down the path in front of her family home that she shared with her two sons, her father, her two sisters and her mother, approached the family carriage and triggered the automatic doors which opened to allow her in. Here she sat and waited patiently for her mother to follow suit. The console in the centre of the carriage lit up to reveal the schedule for the day; on most days Amalia found this useful enough as she was forgetful by nature, but today was a day that Amalia had been working towards for much of her young adult life. It was her 40th birthday, and today Amalia would start work at the FUSE headquarters. Amalia sat and stared blankly at the console screen, seeing nothing at all. Her mind had started to race moments before, running a myriad scenarios through her mind, scenarios which invariably entailed her saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, or tripping over her own nerve-heavy feet and making a fool of herself in front of the people whom she would be working with for maybe the rest of her life... She jumped as the door to her left swung open and her

mother sat beside her. “Your mouth is open and you’re staring at me. Do you know that?” her Mother asked with characteristic dryness. Amalia had not known that, but now that she thought of it, her jaw felt a little stiff and her mouth was as dry as her mother’s wit. “Here” her mother said, passing a cup to her daughter as if reading her mind, “this will help to relax you”. Jane Bailey’s door closed with a satisfying click, and after a few moments the carriage started to move towards its destination; a 35 minute autonomous drive to the headquarters of the Federated United States of Europe, or FUSE for short. “Don’t tell me to calm down – I know you’re going to, don’t – it’s not- I...”. Amalia surprised herself with her own nervous eruption, and she fell silent again, reddening in embarrassment. Her Mother said nothing, but looked at her daughter with unmistakable fondness. Amalia punctuated the silence with an apology of sorts, “It’s just.. you can’t know what this feels like. You’ve never been here. It was different for you...”. She was right, of course. “Yes”, Jane said softly. “It was so, so different for me”.

The carriage moved steadily and swiftly through the leafy suburbs of an area that used to be called Hertfordshire. It still was called Hertfordshire by most, but it’s official name was CL District 7, or CL7 for short. Amalia had always strongly doubted that the new nomenclature would ever fall into common usage, but

she also knew that it didn't matter – the new naming conventions were just for ease of administration, and everyone knew that the FUSE lived and breathed for ease of administration. Jane and Amalia both knew that a conversation was hanging in the air between them, completely unspoken, and that one of them sooner or later would have to pluck it out of the air and get it started. But it wouldn't be Jane to start this one off. The carriage passed a vast field to the left and the sunshine in the clear October sky seemed to dance through branches in the trees in the mid-distance, splashing brilliant colours of red and amber and gold, in such a way that would usually mesmerise Amalia and send her into a spiral of memories; Canada, the Highlands, a traditional souk in the Federated United States of Northern Africa... But today she sensed that lingering, reluctant conversation in the carriage far too vividly for her mind to wander too far. "It just feels like the end of my life..." Amalia said with real sadness, "and I know how awfully self-indulgent that probably seems... But that's how it feels." Jane took her daughter's hand in hers. "You were right with what you started saying earlier, Amalia. I can't know what it feels like for you to be going through this now. It was so different for us. But life is different now, and we're all learning how to adapt." A soft chime sounded from the central console in the carriage which was followed by a voice stating that they were 20 minutes

from their destination. “Amalia, when I was your age, I’d been working for half my life already. How do you think I feel knowing that you’re only just taking the first step in your professional life at 40? I didn’t have the opportunity to travel the world, to learn from such brilliant minds, to paint, to play the Piano like you do... I *had* to work, and that was before the Terrible War even began...” Jane paused; Amalia was avoiding her gaze. “Amalia, look at me... I’m 76 years old, and as it stands I’ll be travelling to work with you for maybe another quarter of a century or more, if I’m... *Lucky*”. Jane emphasised her final word with a scoff. Jane feigned reluctance and continued, “and if truth be told, *you* can’t possibly begin to imagine how fortunate you are.” Amalia was now looking at her mother, refusing to shy away when she saw a tear glisten in the corner of her eye. “You can’t *possibly* imagine what it was like to live in a world before we had Avula”.

Amalia knew this to be true. Avula had revolutionised the world (well, most of it...) in a way that no other substance ever had in the history of human-kind. Flemming’s discovery of penicillin, to her mind, came a very distant second. “You just can’t *imagine* what it felt like to lose someone, without them physically going anywhere. You can’t *imagine* what it felt like for the first man you ever loved to forget your name, your own *Father* to forget where he lived, or what he liked to eat,

or when he was born, or where... Or who his wife was. Or why he loved her. Or maybe even what love was at all." Amalia could not imagine, and not for lack of trying. This was undoubtedly true. She admitted as much, "Of course I can't... And of course I know how outrageously fortunate I am to have grown up after the Terrible War ended and we made peace with the Malguts, but—" Jane interrupted, "—after your namesake, Amalia Khoury, made peace with the Malguts, you mean." Jane always insisted that Amalia Khoury be properly credited for her work in brokering peace with the Malguts in a way that sometimes infuriated, but more often humbled Amalia Bailey. "Of course, Mother, after *Amalia Khoury* brokered the peace... But... when we discovered Avula we had no *idea*, I mean, not really, what implications it would have... and do we now?" "No" Jane said, leaning her head back and looking out of the window above her head "we don't. But *now* we are always learning, and that is a blessing, no, a *development* that you must never take for granted".

Amalia spoke 7 languages, each one of them as perfectly as her mother-tongue. She played Piano to such a high level that she could have made a career as a concert pianist 100 years ago, but these days she was one of millions; her skill was a pleasure enjoyed by herself and her family, but she never performed in concert. She had an astonishing knowledge

of European History, unquestionably her area of expertise, but by historical standards, she could have easily become a lecturer at Harvard University in Quantum Theory, Human Geography or Creative Writing, so exceptional was her level of understanding in each topic, not to mention her charisma and presentation skills. She had outstanding practical knowledge, having studied brickwork, plumbing and carpentry in her thirties. None of this marked Amalia out from her peers, however, all of whom, like Amalia, had had the first 40 years of their lives to dedicate to continuous extensive and immersive education. There had never been a generation on earth like Amalia's generation, and they had Avula to thank for that. "It was quite a token of appreciation, when you think about it" Jane said through misty eyes after a few moments silence between mother and daughter. "They had taken Avula, and therefore constant mental acuity, for granted. Much like we had taken the calcium that they so desperately needed for granted too... If humanity can be said to have learnt anything this century, it must surely be to never take anything for granted ever again... But then I suppose the same goes for the Malgut's! Lightyears might well separate us, but..." Jane lingered on her last word, allowing her daughter to fill in the blank, "but we're all just stardust, all the same", Amalia obliged. "Mama," Amalia continued, "I don't think anyone my generation,

or anyone at all could argue that the gift of Avula and the death of dementia was a bad thing. It might be the greatest thing ever. I don't want you to think that I don't see that." Jane raised her eyebrows. This conversation had reared its head before, both between mother and daughter and among friends, but there was something very discomfoting about it to Jane. The suggestion that there even could be any doubt was baffling enough, but then she supposed that Amalia and her lot knew no different. They knew not of a world where dementia and the inevitable decline of mental faculty was a necessary and immensely painful part of life.

Amalia Khoury had saved *humanity* 42 years previously, of that there was no doubt. Pedants among society rebuffed those that said that she had saved the *world* – “the *world* would have continued just fine without humans” they’d chime, but Amalia Khoury saved the planet as far as human beings were concerned – and so for Jane Bailey she had saved the *world*, too. Given the ferocious war that had preceded Amalia Khoury’s immense discovery, you could be forgiven for thinking that the Malguts were an aggressive, greedy and barbaric species, but the people of Earth knew differently today. The Malguts were grateful, possibly as much as humans were, that the war was brought to an end, even though they possessed the means to extinguish

human life forever. They were driven by a need they believed to be absolute; there was no comprehension of an alternative to their invasion and destruction. But they were an inherently philosophical and peaceful species, and so finding an alternative to the destruction that was keeping them alive was an unspeakable relief. The Malguts' sorrow and gratitude towards the humans following Amalia Khoury's work was at the time expressed by way of sharing information and technology. After the Terrible War, humans were able to repair and rebuild their communities with hitherto unimaginable speed and precision, not to mention incorporating technologies that vastly improved infrastructure between communities, and crucially, left monotonous and physical labour to exceptionally capable automatons. Such advancement around the world, coupled with an awareness that we as a species were not alone in the universe had bred a peace around planet that had never existed in the history of mankind. Out of the bleakest darkness, a brilliant dawn had broken. The discovery, or *gift*, of the Malgut substance Avula had been nothing more than an afterthought. A particularly integrated Malgut observed some years after the end of the War that Malguts didn't suffer from what Human's referred to as Dementia. Indeed, Malguts gained intelligence, sharpness and wisdom the older they got, and the very oldest of society were

the most powerful and respected. The Malguts knew precisely why this was too; it was simply a matter of diet. On their home planet, *Avula* grew readily. In simple terms as far as human biology was concerned, *Avula* prevented the buildup of protein in the brain. In the early years of experimenting with the plant, Neurologists found spectacular results when treating existing dementia patients. Concurrently, scientists discovered that consuming the plant regularly also resulted in an increase in neural activity. Not only was dementia being stopped, reversed and prevented, but by consuming *Avula*, humans became more intelligent within a single generation. It would have been heralded as a miracle, were it not for the increased propensity to reason that accompanied its consumption; it was an unprecedented scientific breakthrough brought about through intergalactic diplomacy; a miracle it decisively was not.

The carriage moved silently along the road; 5 minutes until arrival, the same androgynous voice confirmed. The buildings outside the window had for some time been getting larger and more numerous as CL1 took shape around them. Amalia took her mother's hand again. "This is uncharted territory, Ma. The average age of the workforce at the FUSE HQ is now over 65. That was retirement age back in Grannie Norma's time. At the same time, my generation, the first generation to

have Avula in their lives from birth are joining the ranks. Of course we're lucky – I've traveled the world and learnt and loved and laughed – I've lived an entire life in 40 years without ever having to contribute a day's work, but what happens when I reach the President's age? She's 115 years old this year, and she might still have another term in her, yet..." Amalia's eyes pleaded for her mother to understand. "She uses a mech-suit to get about, sure, but her mind is sharper than anyone's. She could be President in 15 years still if she's re-elected, and after that she could maintain a career in Policy for another 20 years or more, who knows when her body will finally give out?" Amalia continued. Jane gave her daughter's hand a squeeze. These conversations always made her confront her own mortality; living longer made that task no easier or more pleasurable, perhaps even the opposite was true. Perhaps more time to confront that reality was the last thing that human beings really needed. Laced between Amalia's words was a message directly to her, Jane knew that. Her daughter had a way with words. An effortless ease with which she could weave complex ideas, anecdotes and poignancy. She could at once delight and despair. "We lost hundreds of millions of lives during the Terrible War, but with our population aging like never before, we're making up the shortfall pretty bloody quickly. Where will we be as a society when I'm ... the President's age..." Amalia ventured, "Will people start contributing

at 50, instead? 60 maybe?” Jane laughed softly, kindly; “Darling, you worry far too much. Yes our population will be much older, but an old mind is a capable mind. You know this! You fear the unknown, and that is natural enough, but by the time you’ve seen the other side of 100, we won’t know ourselves! We’ll be in a better place collectively than ever before... just a little wrinklier”.

The carriage pulled in to its destination. The FUSE HQ stood in front of them, a tall, broad and spiralling structure that paid respect both to the great architectural ages of European history and the revolutionary technologies of the Malguts; a perfect symbol of the synergy and cooperation between the two species. For a while Jane and Amalia sat silently next to one another as the central console pulsed with a soft purple light that indicated their respective meetings for the day – Amalia’s induction was to begin in 15 minutes. “You’re right.” Amalia said. “I’m nervous and that’s all there is to it. I’m deflecting. You know how I get when I’m nervous.” Jane did. Jane gestured towards the door on Amalia’s side and it began to lift open. “You’re going to be fine. You’re going to *love* it, Amalia. I know you will”. Amalia nodded once, pursed her lips and furrowed her brow before breaking into a smile. “Here goes” she said, climbing from the carriage and taking her first steps as a working adult, nervous but exuberant at 40 years young.

## **About the author**

Born in Italy to British parents, I spent the first 11 years of my carefree European life being schooled in in Germany and Switzerland before moving to the UK for secondary school. I now find myself a civil servant enacting the apparent will of the people and making Brexit happen, and yes, I spend a lot of time in the ornate fantasy universes lovingly crafted by my favourite writers. Go figure. Writing is an occasional hobby of mine, which I would love to develop into something more substantial - I have an inkling that there will be an ever-growing market for people who can provide escapism.

## **Inspiration**

I wrote the story because I am interested in the concept of unintended consequences. Humanity's time on this planet will be improved by us collectively banishing diseases such as cancer and dementia to the history books, but how will society adjust to people living better for longer?

**Writing the future**

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