



SOME SECRETS SHOULD
REMAIN BURIED

FIRST
SHIFT

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First Shift: Legacy

Part 6 of the Silo Series

by Hugh Howey



For Tongjai and Andy Bell

Together Forever

In 2007, the Center for Automation in Nanobiotech (CAN) outlined the hardware and software platforms that would one day allow robots smaller than human cells to make medical diagnoses, conduct repairs, and even self-propagate.

That same year, CBS re-aired a program about the effects of propranolol on sufferers of extreme trauma. A simple pill, it had been discovered, could wipe out the memory of any traumatic event.

At almost the same moment in humanity's broad history, mankind had discovered the means for bringing about its utter downfall. And the ability to forget it ever happened.

Prologue

2110 • Beneath the hills of Fulton County, Georgia

Troy returned to the living and found himself inside of a tomb. He awoke to a world of confinement, a thick sheet of frosted glass pressed near to his face.

Dark shapes stirred on the other side of the icy murk. He tried to lift his arms, to beat on the glass, but his muscles were too weak. He attempted to scream—but could only cough. The taste in his mouth was foul. His ears rang with the clank of heavy locks opening, the hiss of air, the squeak of hinges long dormant.

The lights overhead were bright, the hands on him warm. They helped him sit while he continued to cough, his breath clouding the chill air. Someone had water. Pills to take. The water was cool, the pills bitter. Troy fought down a few gulps. He was unable to hold the glass without help, hands trembling, memories flooding back, scenes from long nightmares. The feeling of deep time and yesterdays mingled. He shivered. The pills hit his gut, and his grip on the memories seemed to loosen.

A paper gown. The sting of tape removed. A tug on his arm, a tube pulled from his groin. Two men dressed in white helped him out of the coffin. Steam rose all around him, air condensing and dispersing like dreams upon waking.

His legs were that of a foal's, working at birth but not well. Blinking against the glare, exercising lids long shut, Troy

saw the rows of coffins full of the living that stretched toward the distant and curved walls. The ceiling felt low; there was the suffocating press of dirt stacked high above. All that dirt and the dead, stacked high. And the years. So many years had passed. Anyone he cared about would be gone.

Everything was gone.

The pills were bitter in Troy's throat. He tried to swallow. The memories were fading. He was going to lose anything bad he'd ever known.

He collapsed—but the men in the white coveralls saw this coming. They caught him and lowered him to the ground, a paper gown rustling on shivering skin.

Memories flooded back before fading; recollections rained down like bombs and then were gone. Awareness came—however fleeting.

The pills could only do so much. It took time to destroy the past. Until then, the nightmares were vivid and with him.

Troy sobbed into his palms, a sympathetic hand resting on his head. The two men in white gifted him with quiet and calm. They didn't rush the process. Here was a courtesy passed from one waking soul to the next, something all the men sleeping in their coffins would one day rise to discover.

And eventually...forget.

2049 • Washington, D.C.

THE TALL GLASS trophy cabinets had once served as bookshelves. There were hints. Little things like hardware on the shelves that dated back centuries, while the hinges and the tiny locks went back mere decades. There was the clash of wood: the framing around the glass was cherry, but the cases had been built of oak. Someone had attempted to remedy this with a few coats of stain, but the grain didn't match. The color wasn't perfect. To trained eyes, details such as these were glaring.

Congressman Donald Keene gathered these clues without meaning to. He simply saw that long ago there had been a great purge, a making of space. At some point in the past, the Senator's waiting room had been stripped of its obligatory law books until only a handful remained. These beleaguered survivors sat silently in the dim corners of the glass cabinets. They were shut-in, their spines laced with cracks, old leather flaking off like sunburnt skin.

The rest of the books—all the survivors' kin—were gone. In their place stood a collection of mementos from the Senator's two lifetimes of service.

Congressman Keene could see, reflected in the glass, a handful of his fellow freshmen pacing and stirring, their terms of service newly begun. Like Donald, they were young and still hopelessly optimistic. They were bringing

change to Capitol Hill. And this time, somehow, they hoped to deliver where their similarly naïve predecessors had not.

While they waited their turns to meet with the great Senator Thurman from their home state of Georgia, they chatted nervously amongst themselves. They were a gaggle of priests, Donald thought, all lined up to meet the Pope, to kiss his ring. He let out a heavy breath and focused on the contents of the case, lost himself in the treasures behind the glass while a fellow representative from Georgia prattled on about his district's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“—and they have this detailed guide on their website, this response and readiness manual in case of, okay, get this, a zombie invasion! Can you believe that? Zombies. Like even the CDC thinks something could go wrong and suddenly we're all *eating* each other—”

Donald stifled a smile, fearful it would be spied in the glass. He looked over a collection of photographs, one each of the Senator with the last four presidents. It was the same pose and handshake in each shot, the same staged background of windless flags and fancy oversized seals. The Senator seemed hardly to change as the presidents came and went. His hair started white and it stayed white; he seemed perfectly unfazed by the passing of decades, as if this was how he'd always been.

Seeing the photographs side by side devalued each of them somehow. They looked staged. Phony. It was as if the world's most powerful men had begged their mommies to take their picture while they stood and posed with this cardboard cutout, this imposing plastic statue, some roadside attraction.

Donald laughed, and the congressman from Atlanta joined him.

“I know, right? Zombies. It’s hilarious. But think about it, okay? Why would the CDC even *have* this field manual unless—?”

Donald wanted to correct his fellow freshman, to show him what he’d really been laughing about. Look at the smiles, he wanted to say. They were on the faces of the *presidents*. The Senator looked like he’d rather be anyplace else. It was as if each in this succession of commanders in chief knew who the more powerful man was, who would be there long after they had come and gone.

“—it’s advice like, everyone should have a baseball bat with their flashlights and candles, right? Just in case. You know, for bashing brains.”

Donald pulled out his phone and checked the time. He glanced at the door leading off the waiting room and wondered how much longer he’d have to wait. Putting the phone away, he studied a shelf where a military uniform had been carefully arranged like a delicate work of origami. The left breast of the jacket featured a Lego-brick wall of medals; the sleeves were folded over and pinned to highlight the gold braids sewn along the cuffs. In front of the uniform, a collection of decorative coins rested in a custom wooden rack, tokens of appreciation from the men and women still serving.

The two arrangements spoke volumes—this uniform from the past and these coins from those currently deployed. They were bookends on a pair of wars. One that the Senator had fought in as a youth. The other, a war he had battled to prevent as a grown and wiser man.

“—yeah, it sounds crazy, I know, but do you know what rabies does to a dog? I mean, what it *really* does, the biological—?”

Donald leaned close to his reflection and studied the decorative coins. The number and slogan on each one represented a deployed group. Or was it a battalion? He couldn't remember. His sister Charlotte would know. She was over there somewhere.

Before Donald could consider the long odds, he scanned a collection of framed photographs for her, a wall of pictures in the back of the glass cabinet featuring servicemen and servicewomen huddled around the Senator. He searched the faces among the sand-colored fatigues, all those smiles a long way from home.

“—you think the CDC knows something we don't? I mean, forget weaponized anthrax, imagine legions of *biters* breaking out all over the place—”

Most were Army photographs. And, of course, Charlotte wasn't in them. Donald studied one from the Navy. The Senator was standing on the deck of a ship with a crowd of men and women in neatly pressed uniforms. More smiles on warring faces. The ship may have been underway. The Senator's feet were planted wide, a breeze lifting his white hair, giving him a fierce mohawk—or maybe the comical tuft of a cockatiel. Above the group, stenciled in white paint on gunmetal gray: *USS The Sullivans*.

“Hey, aren't you even a little nervous about this?”

Donald realized he'd been asked a question. His focus drifted from the collection of photographs to the reflection of the chatty congressman in the glass. The man looked to be in his mid-thirties, probably Donald's age.

"Am I nervous about zombies?" He laughed. "No. Can't say that I am."

The congressman stepped closer, his eyes drifting toward the imposing uniform that stood propped up as if a warrior's chest remained inside. "No," the man said. "About meeting *him*."

The door to the reception area opened, bleeps from the phones on the other side leaking out.

"Congressman Keene?"

Donald turned away from one last display: a piece of shrapnel, a Purple Heart, a note from a wounded soldier expressing his undying thanks. An elderly receptionist stood in the doorway, her white blouse and black skirt highlighting a thin and athletic frame.

"Senator Thurman will see you now," she said.

Donald patted the congressman from Atlanta on the shoulder as he stepped past.

"Hey, good luck," the gentleman stammered after him.

Donald smiled. He fought the temptation to turn and tell the man that he knew the Senator well enough, that he had been bounced on his knee back when he was but a child. Only—Donald was too busy concealing his own nerves to bother. This was different. He stepped through the deeply paneled door of rich hardwoods and entered the Senator's noisy inner sanctum. This wasn't like passing through a foyer to pick up a man's daughter for a date. This was the pressure of meeting as colleagues when Donald still felt like that same toddler from his bronco-knee days.

"Through here," the receptionist said. She guided Donald between pairs of wide and busy desks, a dozen phones chirping in short bursts that sounded more medical than senatorial. Young men and women in suits and crisp blouses double-fisted receivers while somehow remaining calm. Their bored expressions suggested that this was a normal workload for a weekday morning. It wasn't as if the world was coming to an end, or anything.

Donald reached out a hand as he passed one of the desks, brushing the wood with his fingertips. Mahogany. The aides here had desks nicer than his own. And the decor: the plush carpet, the broad and ancient crown molding, the antique tile ceiling, the dangling light fixtures that may have been actual crystal. Everything was noticeably more opulent in the Dirksen Senate building. It was the House of Lords compared to Rayburn across the street, Donald's own House of Commons.

At the end of the buzzing and bleeping room, a paneled door opened and disgorged Congressman Mick Webb, just finished with his meeting. Mick didn't notice Donald, was too absorbed by the open manila folder he held in front of him.

Donald stopped and waited for his colleague and old college acquaintance to approach. "So," he asked Mick. "How did it go?"

Mick looked up and snapped the folder shut. He tucked it under his arm and nodded. "Yeah, yeah. It went great." He smiled. "Sorry if we ran long. The old man couldn't get enough of me."

Donald laughed. "No problem." He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "I was making new friends."

Mick smiled. "I bet."

"Yeah, well, I'll see you back at Rayburn."

"Sure thing." Mick slapped him on the arm with the folder and headed for the exit. Donald caught the impatient glare from the Senator's receptionist and hurried over. She waved him through the old door and into the dimly lit office before shutting it tight against the bleeping phones.

"Congressman Keene."

Senator Paul Thurman stood from behind his desk and stretched out a hand. He flashed a familiar smile, one Donald had come to recognize as much from photos and TV as from his childhood. Despite Thurman's age—he had to be pushing seventy if he wasn't already there—the Senator was trim and fit. His oxford shirt hugged a military frame; a thick neck bulged out of his knotted tie; his white hair remained as crisp and orderly as an enlisted man's.

Donald crossed the dark room and accepted the hand that had clasped that of so many presidents.

"Good to see you, sir."

As his fist was pumped up and down, he imagined flash bulbs popping and expensive cameras clicking wildly. He almost turned to the side and adopted a frozen and smiling pose, thinking the Senator would get the joke at once. Fortunately, the urge passed. Donald reminded himself that he wasn't there to date the Senator's daughter but to serve alongside him.

"Please, sit." Thurman released Donald's hand and gestured to one of the chairs across from his desk. Donald turned and lowered himself into the bright red leather, the

gold grommets along the arm like sturdy rivets in a steel beam.

“How’s Helen?”

“Helen?” Donald straightened his tie. “She’s great. She’s back in Savannah. She really enjoyed seeing you at the reception.”

“She’s a beautiful woman, your wife.”

“Thank you, sir.” Donald fought to relax, which didn’t help. The office had the pall of dusk, even with the overhead lights on. The clouds outside had turned nasty—low and dark. If it rained, he would have to take the tunnel back to his office. He hated the tunnel. They could carpet it and hang those little chandeliers at intervals, but he could still tell he was below ground. The tunnels in Washington made him feel like a rat scurrying through a sewer. It always seemed like the roof was about to cave in.

“How’s the job treating you so far?”

Donald shifted his gaze away from the clouds. “The job’s good,” he said. “It’s busy, but good.”

He started to ask the Senator how Anna was doing, but the door behind him opened before he could. The discordant cries of the busy phones disturbed the quiet as the thin receptionist entered and delivered two bottles of water. Donald thanked her, twisted the cap off, and saw that it had been pre-opened. Just like at that fancy steakhouse the lobbyist from the PAGW had taken him to.

“I hope you’re not too busy to work on something for me.” Senator Thurman raised an eyebrow. Donald took a sip of water and wondered if that was a skill one could master,

that eyebrow lift. It was effective as hell. It made him want to jump to attention and salute.

“Oh, I can make the time,” he said. “After all the stumping you did for me? I doubt I would’ve made it past the primaries.” He held the water bottle in his lap. When he crossed his legs, he became self-conscious of his brown socks and black pants. He lowered his foot back to the ground and wished Helen had stayed in D.C. longer.

“You and Mick Webb go back, right? Both Bulldogs.”

It took Donald a moment to realize the Senator was referring to their college mascot. He hadn’t spent a lot of time at Georgia following sports. “Yessir. Go Dawgs.”

He hoped that was right.

The Senator smiled. He leaned forward so that his face caught the soft light raining down on his desk. Donald watched as shadows caught in wrinkles otherwise easy to miss. Thurman’s lean face and square chin made him look younger straight-on than he probably did from the side. Here was a man who got places by approaching others directly rather than in ambush.

“You studied architecture at Georgia.”

Donald nodded. It was easy to forget that he knew Thurman better than the Senator knew him. One of them grabbed far more newspaper headlines than the other.

“That’s right. For my undergrad. I went into planning for my master’s. I figured I could do more good governing people than I could drawing boxes to put them in.”

He winced to hear himself deliver the line. It was a pat phrase from grad school, something he should've left behind with crushing beer cans on his forehead and ogling asses in skirts. He wondered for the dozenth time why he and the other congressional newcomers had been summoned. When he first got the invite, he figured it was a social visit. Then Mick bragged about his own appointment, and Donald figured it was some kind of formality or tradition. But now he wondered if this was a power play, a chance to butter up the Reps from Georgia for those times when Thurman would need a particular vote in the lower and *lesser* house.

"Tell me, Donny—" The Senator reached for his bottle of water, glanced up. "How good are you at keeping secrets?"

Donald's blood ran cold. He forced himself to laugh off the sudden flush of nerves.

"I got elected, didn't I?"

Senator Thurman smiled. "And so you probably learned the best lesson there is about secrets." He raised his plastic bottle in salute. "*Denial*."

Donald nodded and took a sip of his own water. He wasn't sure where this was going, but he already felt uneasy. He sensed some of the backroom dealings coming on that he'd promised his constituents he'd root out if elected.

The Senator leaned back in his chair.

"Denial is the secret sauce in this town," he said. "It's the flavor that holds all the other ingredients together. Here's what I tell the newly elected: the truth is gonna get out—it always does—but it's gonna blend in with all the *lies*." The Senator twirled a hand in the air. "You have to deny each

lie and every truth with the same vinegar. Let those websites and blowhards who bitch about cover-ups confuse the public *for* you."

"Uh, yessir." Donald didn't know what else to say. This seemed like a strange conversation to be having. He took another gulp of water.

The Senator lifted an eyebrow again. He remained frozen for a pause, and then asked, out of nowhere: "Do you believe in aliens, Donny?"

Donald nearly lost the water out of his nose. He covered his mouth with his hand, coughed, had to wipe his chin. The Senator didn't budge.

"Aliens?" Donald shook his head and wiped his wet palm on his thigh. "Nossir. I mean, not the abducting kind. Why?"

He wondered if this was some kind of debriefing. Why had the Senator asked him if he could keep a secret? Was this a security initiation? The Senator remained silent.

"They're not real," Donald finally said. He watched for any twitch or hint. "Are they?"

The old man cracked a smile. "That's the thing," he said. "If they are or they aren't, the chatter out there would be the exact same. Would you be surprised if I told you they're very much real?"

"Hell, yeah, I'd be surprised."

"Good." The Senator slid a folder across the desk. Donald eyed it and held up a hand.

“Wait. Are they real or aren’t they? What’re you trying to tell me?”

Senator Thurman laughed. “Of course they’re not real. Are you kidding?” He took his hand off the folder and propped his elbows on the desk. “Have you seen how much NASA wants from us so they can fly to Mars and back? No way we’re getting to another star. Ever. And no one’s coming here. Hell, why would they?”

Donald didn’t know *what* to think, which was a far cry from how he’d felt less than a minute ago. He saw what the Senator meant, how truth and lies seemed black and white, but mixed together, they made everything gray and confusing. He glanced down at the folder. It looked similar to the one Mick had been carrying and reminded him of the government’s fondness for all things outdated.

“This is denial, right?” He studied the Senator. “That’s what you’re doing right now. You’re trying to throw me off.”

“No. This is me telling you to stop watching so many science fiction flicks. In fact, why do you think those eggheads are always dreaming of colonizing some other planet? You have any idea what would be involved? It’s ludicrous. Not cost-effective.”

Donald shrugged. He didn’t think it was ludicrous. He twisted the cap back onto his water. “It’s in our nature to dream of open space,” he said. “To find room to spread out in. Isn’t that how we ended up here?”

“Here? In America?” The Senator laughed. “We didn’t come here and find open space. We got a bunch of people sick, killed them, and *made* space.” Thurman pointed at the folder. “Which brings me to this. I’ve got something I’d like you to work on.”

Donald leaned forward and placed his bottle on the leather inlay of the formidable desk. He took the folder.

“Is this something coming through committee?”

He tried to temper his hopes. It was alluring to think of co-authoring a bill his first year in office. He opened the folder and tilted it toward the window, where storms were gathering.

“No, nothing like that. This is about CAD-FAC.”

Donald nodded. *Of course*. The preamble about secrets and conspiracies suddenly made perfect sense, as did the gathering of Georgia congressmen outside. This was about the Containment and Disposal Facility at the heart of the Senator’s new energy bill, the complex that would one day house most of the world’s spent nuclear fuel. Or, according to the websites Thurman had alluded to, it was going to be the next Area 51, or the site where a new-and-improved superbomb was being built, or a place where mad scientists would tunnel to the center of the earth to prevent the core from melting down, or a secure holding facility for Libertarians who had purchased one too many guns at Walmart. Take your pick. There was enough noise out there to hide *any* truth.

“Yeah,” Donald said, deflated. “I’ve been getting some entertaining calls from my district.” He didn’t dare mention the one about the Lizard People, or the one that had to do with magnetic poles flipping. “I want you to know, sir, that privately I’m behind the facility one hundred percent.” He looked up at the Senator. “I’m glad I didn’t have to vote on it publicly, of course, but it was about time *someone* offered up their backyard, right?”

“Precisely. For the common good.” Senator Thurman took a long pull from his water, and Donald noticed for the first time that his office didn’t reek of old cigar smoke, wasn’t infused with the stench of pipe tobacco, aged leather, expensive whiskey, and the other deal-making scents he constantly nosed back at Rayburn. Hell, despite Helen’s aromatic electric candles, his own office still stank like the eight-term Representative he’d ousted in the primaries—the one who *had* voted on the energy bill.

Thurman leaned back in his chair and cleared his throat. “You’re a sharp young man, Donny. Not everyone sees what a boon to our state this’ll be. A real life-saver.” He smiled. “I’m sorry, you *are* still going by Donny, right? Or is it Donald, now?”

“Either’s fine,” Donald lied. He no longer enjoyed being called Donny, but changing names in the middle of one’s life was practically impossible. He returned to the folder and flipped the cover letter over. There was a drawing underneath, a drawing that struck him as being out of place. It was...too familiar. Familiar, and yet it didn’t belong there—it was from another life. It was as if he’d woken up and found in his bed some object he’d clutched in a dream.

“Have you seen the economic reports?” Thurman asked. “Do you know how many jobs this bill created overnight?” He snapped his fingers. “Forty thousand, just like that. And that’s only from Georgia. A lot will be from your district, a lot of shipping, a lot of stevedores. Of course, now that it’s passed, our less nimble colleagues are grumbling that *they* should’ve had a chance to bid—”

“I drew this,” Donald interrupted, pulling out the sheet of paper. He showed it to Thurman as if the Senator would be surprised to see it had snuck into the folder. Donald

wondered if this was the Senator's daughter's doing, some kind of a joke or hello-and-wink from Anna.

Thurman nodded. "Yes, well, it needs more detail, wouldn't you say?"

Donald studied the architectural illustration and wondered what sort of test this was. He remembered the drawing. It was a last-minute project for his biotecture class his senior year. There was nothing unusual or amazing about it. His professor had given him a B, the red ink still tinged purple from where it had bled into the overlapping streaks of blue sky.

With an impartial eye, Donald would give the project a C+. It was spare where his classmates' had been bold, utilitarian where he could've taken risks. Green tufts jutted up from the flat roof, a horrible cliché. Half the building was cut away to reveal the interspersed levels for housing, working, and shopping.

In sum, it was drab and boring. Donald couldn't imagine a design so bare rising from the deserts of Dubai alongside the great new breed of self-sustaining skyscrapers. He certainly couldn't see what the Senator wanted him to do with it, other than maybe burn it to the ground.

"More detail," he murmured, repeating the Senator's words. He flipped through the rest of the folder, looking for hints, for context.

"Hm." Thurman sipped from his water bottle.

"Wait." Donald studied a list of requirements written up as if by a prospective client. "This looks like a design proposal." Words he had forgotten he'd ever learned

caught his eye: *interior traffic flow, block plan, HVAC, hydroponics*—

“You’ll have to lose the sunlight.” Senator Thurman’s chair squeaked as he leaned over his desk. He moved Donald’s sweating bottle to a coaster and wiped the leather dry with his palm.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s nothing. Forget about it.” Thurman waved his hand, obviously meaning the circle of moisture left by Donald’s bottle.

“No, you said sunlight.” Donald held the folder up. “What exactly are you wanting me to do?”

“I would suggest those lights like my wife uses.” He cupped his hand into a tiny circle and pointed at the center. “She gets these tiny seeds to sprout in the winter, uses bulbs that cost me a goddamned fortune.”

“You mean grow lights.”

Thurman snapped his fingers. “And don’t worry about the cost. Whatever you need. I’m also going to get you some help with the mechanical stuff. An engineer. An entire team.”

Donald flipped through more of the folder. “What is this *for*? And why me?”

“This is what we call a *just-in-case* building. Probably’ll never get used, but they won’t let us store the fuel rods out there unless we put this bugga nearby. It’s like this window in my basement I had to lower before our house could pass inspection. It was for...what do you call it—?”

“Egress,” Donald said, the word flowing back unaided.

Thurman snapped his fingers. “Right. Egress.” He pointed to the folder. “This building is like that window, something we’ve gotta build so the rest’ll pass inspection. This’ll be where—in the unlikely event of an attack or a leak—where facility employees can go. You know, like a shelter. And it needs to be *perfect* or this project’ll be shut down faster than a tick’s wink. Just because our bill passed and got signed doesn’t mean we’re home-free, Donny. There was that project out west that got okayed decades ago, scored funding. Eventually, it fell through.”

Donald knew the one he was talking about. A containment facility buried under a mountain. The buzz on the Hill was that the Georgia project had the same chances of success. The folder suddenly tripled in weight as he considered this. He was being asked to be a part of this future failure. He would be staking his newly won office on it.

“I’ve got Mick Webb working on something related. Logistics and planning, really. You two will need to collaborate on a few things. And Anna is taking leave from her post at MIT to lend a hand.”

“*Anna?*” Donald fumbled for his water, his hand shaking.

“Of course. She’ll be your lead engineer on this project. There are details in there on what she’ll need, space-wise.”

Donald took a gulp of water and forced himself to swallow.

“There’s a lot of other people I could call in, sure, but this project can’t fail, you understand? It needs to be like *family*. People I can trust.” Senator Thurman interlocked his fingers. “If this is the only thing you were elected to do,