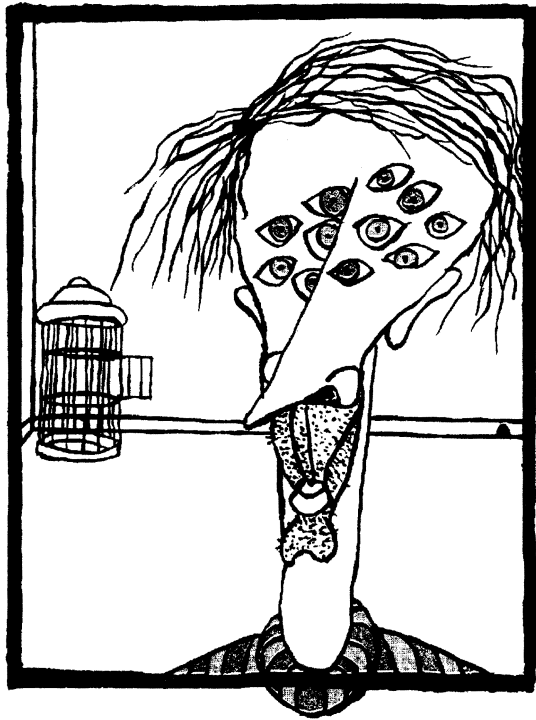


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GALÁPAGOS  
BLUEBEARD  
HOCUS POCUS  
FATES WORSE THAN DEATH  
TIMEQUAKE  
BAGOMBO SNUFF BOX



*Out-of-print science fiction writer Kilgore Trout in Cohoes, New York, in 1975, having learned of the death of his estranged son, Leon, in a Swedish shipyard, having given his parakeet, "Cyclone Bill," his freedom, and about to become a vagabond.*

# TIMEQUAKE



KURT VONNEGUT



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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**TIMEQUAKE**

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**PRINTING HISTORY**

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*In memory of Seymour Lawrence,  
a romantic and great publisher  
of curious tales told with ink  
on bleached and flattened wood pulp*

All persons, living and dead, are purely coincidental.

# PROLOGUE

Ernest Hemingway in 1952 published in *Life* magazine a long short story called *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was about a Cuban fisherman who hadn't caught anything for eighty-four days. The Cuban hooked an enormous marlin. He killed it and lashed it alongside his little boat. Before he could get it to shore, though, sharks bit off all the meat on the skeleton.

I was living in Barnstable Village on Cape Cod when the story appeared. I asked a neighboring commercial fisherman what he thought of it. He said the hero was an idiot. He should have hacked off the best chunks of meat and put them in the bottom of the boat, and left the rest of the carcass for the sharks.

It could be that the sharks Hemingway had in mind were critics who hadn't much liked his first novel in ten years, *Across the River and into the Trees*, published two years earlier. As far as I know, he never said so. But the marlin could have been that novel.

And then I found myself in the winter of 1996 the creator of a novel which did not work, which had no

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point, which had never wanted to be written in the first place. *Merde!* I had spent nearly a decade on that ungrateful fish, if you will. It wasn't even fit for shark chum.

I had recently turned seventy-three. My mother made it to fifty-two, my father to seventy-two. Hemingway almost made it to sixty-two. I had lived too long! What was I to do?

Answer: Fillet the fish. Throw the rest away.

This I did in the summer and autumn of 1996. Yesterday, November 11th of that year, I turned seventy-four. Seventy-four!

Johannes Brahms quit composing symphonies when he was fifty-five. Enough! My architect father was sick and tired of architecture when he was fifty-five. Enough! American male novelists have done their best work by then. Enough! Fifty-five is a long time ago for me now. Have pity!

My great big fish, which stunk so, was entitled *Timequake*. Let us think of it as *Timequake One*. And let us think of this one, a stew made from its best parts mixed with thoughts and experiences during the past seven months or so, as *Timequake Two*.

Hokay?

The premise of *Timequake One* was that a timequake, a sudden glitch in the space-time continuum, made every-

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body and everything do exactly what they'd done during a past decade, for good or ill, a second time. It was déjà vu that wouldn't quit for ten long years. You couldn't complain about life's being nothing but old stuff, or ask if just you were going nuts or if *everybody* was going nuts.

There was absolutely nothing you could say during the rerun, if you hadn't said it the first time through the decade. You couldn't even save your own life or that of a loved one, if you had failed to do that the first time through.

I had the timequake zap everybody and everything in an instant from February 13th, 2001, back to February 17th, 1991. Then we all had to get back to 2001 the hard way, minute by minute, hour by hour, year by year, betting on the wrong horse again, marrying the wrong person again, getting the clap again. You name it!

Only when people got back to when the timequake hit did they stop being robots of their pasts. As the old science fiction writer Kilgore Trout said, "Only when free will kicked in again could they stop running obstacle courses of their own construction."

Trout doesn't really exist. He has been my alter ego in several of my other novels. But most of what I have chosen to preserve from *Timequake One* has to do with his adventures and opinions. I have salvaged a few of the

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thousands of stories he wrote between 1931, when he was fourteen, and 2001, when he died at the age of eighty-four. A hobo for much of his life, he died in luxury in the Ernest Hemingway Suite of the writers' retreat Xanadu in the summer resort village of Point Zion, Rhode Island. That's nice to know.

His very first story, he told me as he was dying, was set in Camelot, the court of King Arthur in Britain: Merlin the Court Magician casts a spell that allows him to equip the Knights of the Round Table with Thompson submachine guns and drums of .45-caliber dummdums.

Sir Galahad, the purest in heart and mind, familiarizes himself with this new virtue-compelling appliance. While doing so, he puts a slug through the Holy Grail and makes a Swiss cheese of Queen Guinevere.

Here is what Trout said when he realized that the ten-year rerun was over, that he and everybody else were suddenly obligated to think of new stuff to do, to be creative again: "Oh, Lordy! I am much too old and experienced to start playing Russian roulette with free will again."

Yes, and I myself was a character in *Timequake One*, making a cameo appearance at a clambake on the beach at the writers' retreat Xanadu in the summer of 2001, six months after the end of the rerun, six months after free will kicked in again.

I was there with several fictitious persons from the

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book, including Kilgore Trout. I was privileged to hear the old, long-out-of-print science fiction writer describe for us, and then demonstrate, the special place of Earthlings in the cosmic scheme of things.

So now my last book is done, with the exception of this preface. Today is November 12th, 1996, about nine months, I would guess, from its publication date, from its emergence from the birth canal of a printing press. There is no rush. The gestation period for a baby Indian elephant is more than twice that long.

The gestation period for a baby opossum, friends and neighbors, is twelve days.

I have pretended in this book that I will still be alive for the clambake in 2001. In chapter 46, I imagine myself as still alive in 2010. Sometimes I say I'm in 1996, where I really am, and sometimes I say I am in the midst of a rerun following a timequake, without making clear distinctions between the two situations.

I must be nuts.



# TIMEQUAKE

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'K. G. G.' or similar, with a large, sweeping initial 'K' and a vertical line extending downwards from the bottom of the signature.

# 1

Call me Junior. My six grown kids do. Three are adopted nephews, three are my own. They call me Junior behind my back. They think I don't know that.

I say in speeches that a plausible mission of artists is to make people appreciate being alive at least a little bit. I am then asked if I know of any artists who pulled that off. I reply, "The Beatles did."

It appears to me that the most highly evolved Earthling creatures find being alive embarrassing or much worse. Never mind cases of extreme discomfort, such as idealists' being crucified. Two important women in my life, my mother and my only sister, Alice, or Allie, in Heaven now, hated life and said so. Allie would cry out, "I give up! I give up!"

The funniest American of his time, Mark Twain, found life for himself and everybody else so stressful when he was in his seventies, like me, that he wrote as follows: "I have never wanted any released friend of mine restored

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to life since I reached manhood.” That is in an essay on the sudden death of his daughter Jean a few days earlier. Among those he wouldn’t have resurrected were Jean, and another daughter, Susy, and his beloved wife, and his best friend, Henry Rogers.

Twain didn’t live to see World War One, but still he felt that way.

Jesus said how awful life was, in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are they that mourn,” and “Blessed are the meek,” and “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.”

Henry David Thoreau said most famously, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

So it is not one whit mysterious that we poison the water and air and topsoil, and construct ever more cunning doomsday devices, both industrial and military. Let us be perfectly frank for a change. For practically everybody, the end of the world can’t come soon enough.

My father, Kurt Senior, an Indianapolis architect who had cancer, and whose wife had committed suicide some fifteen years earlier, was arrested for running a red light in his hometown. It turned out that he hadn’t had a driver’s license for twenty years!

You know what he told the arresting officer? “So shoot me,” he said.

. . . . .

## TIMEQUAKE

The African-American jazz pianist Fats Waller had a sentence he used to shout when his playing was absolutely brilliant and hilarious. This was it: “Somebody shoot me while I’m happy!”

That there are such devices as firearms, as easy to operate as cigarette lighters and as cheap as toasters, capable at anybody’s whim of killing Father or Fats or Abraham Lincoln or John Lennon or Martin Luther King, Jr., or a woman pushing a baby carriage, should be proof enough for anybody that, to quote the old science fiction writer Kilgore Trout, “being alive is a crock of shit.”

## 2

**I**magine this: A great American university gives up football in the name of sanity. It turns its vacant stadium into a bomb factory. So much for sanity. Shades of Kilgore Trout.

I am speaking of my alma mater, the University of Chicago. In December of 1942, long before I got there, the first chain reaction of uranium on Earth was compelled by scientists underneath the stands of Stagg Field. Their intent was to demonstrate the feasibility of an atomic bomb. We were at war with Germany and Japan.

Fifty-three years later, on August 6th, 1995, there was a gathering in the chapel of my university to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the detonation of the first atomic bomb, over the city of Hiroshima, Japan. I was there.

One of the speakers was the physicist Leo Seren. He had participated in the successful experiment under the lifeless sports facility so long ago. Get this: He *apologized* for having done that!

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Somebody should have told him that being a physicist, on a planet where the smartest animals hate being alive so much, means never having to say you're sorry.

Now imagine this: A man creates a hydrogen bomb for a paranoid Soviet Union, makes sure it will work, and then wins a Nobel Peace Prize! This real-life character, worthy of a story by Kilgore Trout, was the late physicist Andrei Sakharov.

He won his Nobel in 1975 for demanding a halt to the testing of nuclear weapons. He, of course, had already tested *his*. His wife was a pediatrician! What sort of person could perfect a hydrogen bomb while married to a child-care specialist? What sort of physician would stay with a mate that cracked?

“Anything interesting happen at work today, Honey-bunch?”

“Yes. My bomb is going to work just great. And how are you doing with that kid with chicken pox?”

Andrei Sakharov was a sort of saint in 1975, a sort that is no longer celebrated, now that the Cold War is over. He was a *dissident* in the Soviet Union. He called for an end to the development and testing of nuclear weapons, and also for more freedoms for his people. He was kicked out of the USSR's Academy of Sciences. He was exiled from Moscow to a whistlestop on the permafrost.

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He was not allowed to go to Oslo to receive his Peace Prize. His pediatrician wife, Elena Bonner, accepted it for him there. But isn't it time for us to ask now if she, or any pediatrician or healer, wasn't more deserving of a Peace Prize than anyone who had a hand in creating an H-bomb for any kind of government anywhere?

Human rights? What could be more indifferent to the rights of any form of life than an H-bomb?

Sakharov was in June of 1987 awarded an honorary doctorate by Staten Island College in New York City. Once again his government wouldn't let him accept in person. So I was asked to do that for him.

All I had to do was deliver a message he had sent. This was it: "Don't give up on nuclear energy." I spoke it like a robot.

I was so polite! But this was one year after this crazy planet's most deadly nuclear calamity so far, at Chernobyl, Ukraine. Children all over northern Europe will be sickened or worse for years to come by that release of radiation. Plenty of work for pediatricians!

More heartening to me than Sakharov's cockamamie exhortation was the behavior of firemen in Schenectady, New York, after Chernobyl. I used to work in Schenectady. The firemen sent a letter to their brother firemen over there, congratulating them on their courage and selflessness while trying to save lives and property.

TIMEQUAKE

Hooray for firemen!

Scum of the Earth as some may be in their daily ives,  
they can all be saints in emergencies.

Hooray for firemen.