

PRAISE FOR *THE FUTURE WON'T BE LONG*

“Set primarily in Manhattan in the tumultuous decade spanning the years 1986 to 1996, this picaresque novel refracts the coming of age of its two main characters through their alternating narrative viewpoints and the events and personalities that defined the city at that time ... Kobek has a great eye for detail, and his descriptions of his characters’ peregrinations through New York’s neighborhoods and nightlife read with the authenticity of genuine experience. Punctuated with gentle humor and awash with genuine fondness for its characters, this novel breezes giddily through the disorder and shifting landscape of their lives, bearing out Baby’s contention that ‘Good or ill, there’s always change coming’” *Publishers Weekly*

“One of the best New York City novels I have read, a wise and funny book that captures the city from the mid-’80s to mid-’90s” *Largehearted Boy*

“Kobek crafts an electric tale, and the wilds of New York City during this intense time period provide a magnetic context” *Booklist*

“Hard not to recommend ... Full of delightfully cynical aphorisms ... At the heart of *The Future Won’t Be Long* is the friendship between Baby and Adeline—at once loving and destructive and convincingly drawn by Kobek” *GQ*

“Kobek follows his brilliant 2016 book *I Hate the Internet* with a hilarious novel set in the 1980s and ’90s New York City art scene. It follows Adeline (a rich art student) and Baby (a Midwest expat) over their decade of friendship. Kobek’s writing is a dryly ironic cocktail of observations about sex, tech, friendship and other absurdities of modern life ... If he is for you, he’ll be one of your favourite authors” *Omaha World-Herald*

PRAISE FOR *I HATE THE INTERNET*

“Hilariously caustic ... his genius in this relentlessly quotable tirade is to hector you about the shady workings of money and power while making you laugh on every page” *Metro*

“Extremely funny ... he’s fast and furious but his prose also has elegance, rhythm and wit. Bill Hicks would have loved this book” *Big Issue*

“Jagged and quotable ... one can open it on almost any page for pithy, scathing take-downs of life, the universe and everything” *Times Literary Supplement*

“Wildly entertaining ... inspired ... he leaves you inspecting the carnage with a grin on your face” *Spectator*

“Could we have an American Houellebecq? Jarett Kobek might come close, in the fervor of his assault on sacred cows of our own secretly-Victorian era, even if some of his implicit politics may be the exact reverse of the Frenchman’s. He’s as riotous as Houellebecq, and you don’t need a translator, only fireproof gloves for turning the pages” Jonathan Lethem

“[A] thrillingly funny and vicious anatomy of hi-tech culture and the modern world in general ... this book’s cleverly casual style, apparently eschewing literary artifice, reminded me [...] of Kurt Vonnegut. But it’s the enraged comedy of its cultural diagnosis that really drives the reader onwards. There are so many brilliant one-liner definitions that it’s hard not to keep quoting them” *Guardian*

“The Kurt Vonnegut, hell, the Swift and Voltaire of the Twitter age too, why not? He has come up with a satirical novel that, at least while you’re immersed in it, makes everyone else’s novels look like the blinkered artefacts of the bloated, tech-addled, smilingly exploitative western culture that he so nimbly takes to bits. It’s vicious. It’s a hoot” *The Times*

“A grainy political and cultural rant, a sustained shriek about power and morality in a new global era. It’s a glimpse at a lively mind at full boil ... This book has soul as well as nerve ... My advice? Log off Twitter for a day. Pick this up instead” *The New York Times*

“A brilliant, laugh-out-loud screed against the ‘overlapping global evils’ that the internet represents, a furious manifesto dressed in the guise of fiction, about a San Francisco artist whose life is upended when a recording surfaces online of her doing the unthinkable. It’s an eye-opening look at the world we live in, where our lives revolve around devices made by enslaved children in China, and where the only thing we feel empowered to do about it is complain ... via said devices” *Chicago Review of Books*

“This is a relentless, cruel, hilariously inflamed satire of a loop of economic mystification and the re-emergence of the credibility of the notion of Original Sin in the technological utopia of the present-day Bay Area and the world being remade in its image” Greil Marcus, *Pitchfork*

“With the nasty-eyed sharpness of Swift, Burroughs or Houellebecq, Kobek writes a tripwire just above the level for walking. Everyone falls down. It’s a satire about losing track of the world. How? It takes a swipe at those that suppose we’re tracking the world we’re in, rather than just the world. The result of that first-person engorgement is a fetishised digitalised idiocy exposed as a blank hate state, a bleak panorama of digitised repression balanced on the corrosive manipulative belief in a centred world. If Donald Trump is the personification of the centred world, then Kobek’s satire can be directed towards him and all he stands for” *3:AM Magazine*

THE
FUTURE

WON'T
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⚡ JARETT KOBEK ⚡



First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.serpentstail.com

First published in the USA in 2017 by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House

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Hand lettering on page 132 by Sarina Rahman

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 78125 855 2
eISBN 978 1 78283 359 8



SEPTEMBER 1986

Baby's Parents Murder Each Other So Baby Goes to New York

I moved to New York not long after my mother killed my father, or was it my father who murdered my mother? Anyhoo, in a red haze of blood and broken bone, one did in the other. Several weeks were spent filling out paperwork and cleaning up the gore.

After I finished with these burdens, I abandoned my siblings and boarded a Greyhound bus in the parking lot of a corner store on the outskirts of my Podunk little Wisconsin town. Thirty-six hours later, I was in the city.

When I came out of the Port Authority, a building that scared me shitless, I couldn't see the Empire State Building, so I asked a cop how to get to the river. He looked at me and laughed, hard, because of how countrified I was, a real corn poke, and showed me which direction was west.

I walked on 42nd in daylight. No one mugged me. At the end of the street, I made my way across the highway and onto a pier. I looked out at the Hudson River. I looked out at New Jersey. I watched boats on the river. I saw the distant Statue of Liberty and believed in her gaudy symbolism.

People in New York would never understand about my Podunk little Wisconsin town. It was an issue of size. Even in Jerkwater, Ohio, or Backstabbing, Pennsylvania, you still had neighborhoods and streets and thousands of citizens. My Podunk little town was seven hundred people, mostly farmers.

In a place like that, what you do for fun, for amusement, is drive, day in, day out, day in, day out. You cruise the three blocks of Main Street in your car, seeing boys you knew from school, pretending that you want to fuck the girls.

So with the possibility of NYC, I was like, *okay, please*. I am yours. You may conquer me. I submit to your underground system of the soul. Bring me to 241st Street and White Plains Road. Bring me to Coney Island. Bring me to Midtown. Bring me to Morningside Heights. Bring me

to Flushing, Gowanus, Wall Street. I am yours. I am yours. Free me from the tyranny of the automobile!

I could walk, at last, I could walk. Back in Wisconsin, you'd drive for three solid hours to buy an album, or a book, or pants, or anything. And that would only bring you to what people back home call a city, a place of maybe ten thousand people.

Oh people, oh the people, oh New York, oh your glorious people. Your Puerto Ricans, your Hebrews, your Muslims, your Chinese, your Eurotrash, that fat little fuck Norman Mailer, your uptown rich socialites, your downtown scum, your Black Americans, your Koreans, your Haitians, your Jamaicans, your Italians, your kitchen Irish, Julian Schnabel, your Far Rockaway and Staten Island white trash. Oh New York, I loved your people. They were all so beautiful! Many of them were hideous, really ugly with terrible teeth, but even the ugly ones were beautiful too! Oh I was in heaven.

And your fags, New York, oh god, your fags. All I hoped was that they would love me.

I was as queer as a wooden nickel, but Wisconsin hadn't offered this yokel much opportunity for erotic love, so what common language could I even speak with the cocksmen and leatherboys?

One day in ninth grade, I made the mistake of blowing my best friend, Abraham. I was afraid to let Abe come in my mouth, so I got him to the edge and made him spasm into his blanket. As punishment, he refused to reciprocate, which was a real downer, but he did give me a handjob, which was okay.

I went home and thought about it. I decided that I'd let my best friend come in my mouth.

The next day, as I received the first blowjob of my life, I walked his mother. She saw everything. Her son, naked, me, naked, my cock in his mouth, my hands on the light down of his stomach. I ran out of their house and drove home. Neither Abe nor his mother ever said a word, but it ruined the friendship and I spent my high school years clutched by fear, worried that I'd need to leave our town in shame.

I never did anything else, not with anyone other than a few girls who were kissed to keep up appearances. Their tongues in my mouth like soft robots, offering abstract interest but no sexual desire, no longing, no need.

And then, New York, there you were, like a homo homecoming queen standing before me, hands on your hips, regarding this shy wallflower.

With your Meatpacking District, your West Village piers and Fire Island.
I was yours, crying out, *Oh, take me, take me, take me!*

But before anything could happen, I needed a place to stay.

A guy from my Podunk little town had moved to the city. This guy from my Podunk little town was about three years older than me. I asked the guy's brother for the guy's phone number.

—Watch out, his brother said, we don't talk much with him and I heard he's living in squalor.

Squalor sounded fabulous. I didn't care about the phone bill, so I called New York. His name was David.

A girl answered. I asked for David.

—Okay, dude, she said, hold on.

I waited for about ten minutes. When he came to the phone, he spoke with this high, nasal voice.

—Hey, he whined, is this El Gato?

—It's me, I said, you know me, remember?

But he didn't.

—I'm the one, I said, remember, I'm that guy who set the school record for both the fifty- and hundred-yard dashes in the same day?

—Oh, yeah, he said, you, that guy, why are you calling?

I begged and groveled until he said that if I made it out east, I could stay with him, giving me his address on 12th Street. David explained the crude navigational tools of New York life, telling me to look for the Empire State Building and then head in that direction. Once I was past that giant, north and south could be discerned by looking for the Twin Towers, the relative position of which also indicated east from west. This method was useless for people who went above 30th Street, but come on, David said, who goes above 30th Street? Maybe some assholes for drugs.

I walked from the highway to Times Square. That was some hell of a place. You know all about it. Who doesn't? The sex and sleaze that made its butterfly transformation into a tourist trap, a Walt Disney wonderland. I saw it happen, or, well, I was in the city while it happened, because, really, it was going above 30th Street. Who went to Times Square? Maybe for Club USA. But otherwise?

Moving along Broadway, I took in the stores and buildings. As I was a country bumpkin, I couldn't control my personal space. I stumbled into

people with an alarming frequency. Most brushed past without a look back. A few cursed me to the high heavens.

When I got to Union Square, it was a ruin, a park surrounded by hookers and pimps and filled with drug dealers. I didn't know why men kept saying, *Works, works, works, you need some works?*

—Sorry, sir, but I'm not seeking employment.

—What the fuck is wrong with you?

I shut up and walked until I got to 12th Street. Then I headed through the East Village and into Alphabet City. David'd said his place was in an old brownstone between B and C. It took a minute to find because the address wasn't on the building. I knocked and knocked but there was no answer. I tried the door. The knob gave way. I went inside.

The place was burned out and dirty, the color of charred wood, trash everywhere, graffiti on the walls. Exposed wiring, exposed plumbing, exposed insulation. I didn't see anyone.

—Hello, David?

I walked in a little farther and repeated myself. A punk rock-looking guy came out from behind the staircase. Other than album covers and television and pictures in magazines, this was the first time I had ever seen a punk rock-looking guy.

—What do you want? asked the punk rock-looking guy.

—I'm looking for David?

—Who's fucking David?

—David, he's from my hometown. Back in Wisconsin? We talked last week, he gave me this address.

—Try upstairs, said the punk rock-looking guy, but don't steal nothing.

I climbed a flight of stairs to the second floor. Things crunched and broke beneath my feet. I peered inside one of the bedrooms. I couldn't see a thing. I flipped a light switch. There wasn't any power.

—David, David, where are you, David?

Then I heard a weak voice.

—Come here, said the voice from a room across the hall.

I went in.

—David? I asked of the darkness.

—Over here, someone said.

I went toward the voice. A young man lay atop a pile of old rags.

Back home, he'd been beautiful. I remembered his skin with its network of blue arteries. Now, several compacted layers of dirt darkened his

acne-strewn flesh, dimming its grim tattoos. Grease matted down his brown hair.

—Who are you? he asked.

—David, it's me, remember? I'm that kid who set the records for the fifty- and hundred-yard dashes?

—Hey, man, you're in New York?

I sat beside David on another pile of dirty clothes. I didn't say much. I hadn't thought this far ahead. Even if he hadn't been living in squalor, what could we talk about? The only thing I knew about David was how hard I'd crushed on him in tenth grade. For two solid weeks, I'd masturbated thinking about his cock in my mouth. It was a cavalcade of semen, real and imagined.

David slumped over, his chin down on his chest. I'd never seen a junky before, so I thought he was tired. Twenty minutes passed. I couldn't take it anymore.

—David, I said, David, wake up.

—Oh man, you're still here? How'd you get here?

—Remember when we talked on the phone?

—No?

—You said I could stay with you.

—I did?

—Yeah.

—Rent's fifty dollars a week.

—Fifty dollars a week?

—City's expensive. Everyone pays. You give it to me, I give it to the boss.

—You didn't mention rent on the phone.

But talking was pointless. He'd fallen back asleep.

I looked for a safe place to put my bag. The room's main features were two separate stacks of old mattresses, around which were scattered several broken tables.

Someone had taped black construction paper over the windows. Dirty garments and plastic food wrappers. I pushed some clothes into the far corner and stashed my bag under the pile. I scattered old cupcake wrappers on top of the clothes.

Back in the hallway, a voice boomed down through the wooden floorboards of the third story. I started toward the first floor but stopped because the shadows moved.

—You do realize that you needn't pay him, don't you? David is as full of

it as an overflowing latrine. There is no rent. There is no landlord. This is a squat, darling.

The shadows walked forward. A girl, a year or so older than me, nineteen or twenty, dressed in a checkered gray skirt, wearing ugly yellow sneakers and torn up black tights. Her red hair was crazy, spiky. She'd dyed in a few black streaks.

—No soul in this house of ill repute pays rent, she said. David wants to score. You look like an easy mark.

I blushed. An easy mark?

—My name is Adeline, she said. On occasion, I stay here.

I started telling her my real name, but then I thought, why should anyone know my real name? I moved to New York for the same reasons as anyone else. To escape myself, escape the past, escape all previous knowledge.

—Call me Baby Baby Baby, I said.

—May I call you simply Baby?

I thought for a second.

—Okay, I said, but only as a nickname.

—Baby, then.

Footsteps echoed downstairs, coming toward the front of the building. Two people, a boy and a girl, both very drunk, stumbled through the hallway beneath us. We couldn't see their faces. The boy started shouting:

BROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO KLLLLLLLLLYNN
NNNNNN. BROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO KLLLL
LLLLLYNNNNNNNN. BROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OKLLLLLLLLLYNNNNNNNN. BROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOO KLLLLLLLLLYNNNNNNNN. BROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
OOOOOOOOO KLLLLLLLLLYNNNNNNNN.

BROOOOoooOOOOOOOoookklyn.

—I'm going outside, I said to Adeline. I only came into town a few hours ago.

—Walk to Avenue A and then head two blocks south. You simply must see Tompkins Square. It's one of the eight wonders, darling.

—I hope we'll talk later, I said.

—Perhaps we will, said Adeline. You know where I may be found.

Back in Wisconsin, I'd studied maps of Manhattan. I knew if I was over by Avenue C, then the river was the eastern border, making navigation

easy. But I panicked and forgot what I'd memorized. With neither the Empire State Building nor the Twin Towers visible, I got lost.

I hadn't paid any attention on the way in, not with my tunnel vision. Moving now in what seemed like all directions, I really saw the area and oh god, this was not the New York of my dreams. David's neighborhood was more like the television news footage of Beirut. About a fourth of the buildings were demolished, empty lots filled with rubble and long grass growing high. Another fourth were abandoned, boarded or bricked up and left to rot. Even the pavement was broken and destroyed, the sidewalks crumbling. Dogshit was everywhere.

One empty lot looked as if its building had exploded, obliterating the walls and ceilings while leaving the interior contents unscathed. Piles of doors and furniture and bathtubs and the scattered plastic of people's lives, trash all mashed together. There was no fence, no barrier between the street and the remains.

My family had been poor, but we were the working poor, people who lived off our land. The citizens of Alphabet City were something below that, living on the streets, in abandoned buildings, in empty lots, in burned-out cars. There was a ghost town quality that would be hard to believe today when every block is crammed with hundreds of people no matter what hour. In those days, the streets were empty. And the few who were there? Well.

I forced my face into a blank, not wanting to betray my shock, letting some of my hair fall down past my forehead. The homeless wouldn't scare me. The punks wouldn't scare me. Neither would the people that my relatives would have called Spanish. Nor the Blacks. I kept my honky blue eyes forward, straight ahead, hoping no one would sniff me out.

After an hour of wandering, I came upon what I assumed was Tompkins Square. Anyway, it was square. What other park could be in the area? I checked the signs and, yeah, it was Tompkins Square. The park was a city of homelessness, a sea of tents and makeshift shelters, with as large a population as my Podunk little town.

People lived up against the fences, sleeping on the benches and its pathetic grass. A large group camped inside a giant concrete structure alongside the 7th Street perimeter. On the side of this structure was a mural of a woman in red surrounded by arcane symbols, but I didn't understand their significance. Months later, someone told me that this rectangle was a

band shell. The mural, they said, was called “Billie Holiday and Family Planning.”

A teenage girl, kind of heavysset with dirty hair, wearing denim clothes covered in patches, walked over right in front of me. She stopped at a leafless tree, squatted down, and started pissing.

This was no delicate release of urine, not like my own modest streams or the soft tinkling that the patriarchy would imagine for a lady, but rather a deluge, a torrent that dropped from her body like bombs from the bay of a B-29 bomber over a nameless German city.

Gazing into her vacant eyes, with her sodden puddling in my ears, it came to me that, at long last, I had escaped the American Middle West.

I walked back to David’s place, my body shaking on wobbling legs, wracked with the dead awful sense of freedom, of absolute and unregulated liberation. Not America’s bullshit foundational principles, but a freedom more primal, the freedom to live beyond the margins. A great tug pulling off the scab. The blood flows and reveals daily life as a collection of lies, reveals the bruised, bleeding flesh, the meaningless of human endeavor. You could die, it would be a shame, but your death will not matter. Nothing matters. Nothing ever matters. You cannot achieve a single thing of consequence. No one you know will ever achieve consequence. Your family is as meaningless as empty air. And so are you. That’s freedom. That’s a teenage girl in rotten denim, squatting beside a tree, making water like a giraffe.

The sun set into blue light. A cold rose up. People were bundled, rushing down the street. *Wimps! Cowards!* I thought. Try wind blowing off Lake Superior on a January morning, an ice chill running through your body at 6 am while you handle the livestock.

Back at David’s place, the front door was still unlocked. I went upstairs. The building’s power had returned, offering illumination from a few exposed lightbulbs.

David’s room looked the same as before, but now I could see the stains. The pile I’d put over my bag had shifted, become formless. The cupcake wrappers were gone. I dug through the clothes, trying not to smell them. My bag was missing. So was David.

I waited.

Every detail of those low hours burned into my brain. People came in and out of the house. Some yelling, some crying, some storming around in rage. One girl wandered through the front door singing. Her slurring words

stuck with me, I remember their sound to this day: *Something told me it was over / when I saw you and her talking / something deep down in my soul said cry girl cry / when I saw you and her walking by.*

Laughter, a sick laughter, erupted from upstairs. I thought about seeing who was laughing and why, but I didn't want to miss David. A girl popped her head into the room. —Bobby? she asked before she caught sight of me and turned away.

I have no idea how much time passed before David came back. When he did, his stagger told me everything. I wasn't angry, exactly, because I'd been smart enough to keep my money on my person. But there were some good clothes in that bag. The bag itself was a gift from my mother.

—Where's my bag? I asked.

—Who are you? asked David.

—You know who I am, you rotten thieving son of a bitch, I said. I'm from our Podunk little town. I set our school's records for the fifty- and hundred-yard dashes.

—Right, right, right, he said. You. Yeah, when'd you get in?

—Where's my bag, David?

—What bag? he asked.

David flopped on a pile of mattresses. The springs coiled beneath him, a squeaky sound like mice trapped within a wall.

—I want my bag, I said.

—What bag? he asked.

—You know perfectly well what goddamned bag, I said.

He rolled to his side and rested his head in his hand, his watery eyes shining from the forty-watt bulb.

—Look, man, he said, fuck your bag. If it ain't here, it ain't here. You can't moan about something that's gone. That won't get you anywhere in this life.

I walked to the bed. His pants clung to his legs, loose from sheer wasting skinniness. Tiny scabs dotted the webbed skin between his fingers.

—There were some good clothes in that bag, I said.

—Yeah, he said, well, they're gone. If you need clothes, there's plenty here.

I balled up my fists. I was going to hit him.

A >click< sound. I looked down. David had a little knife, its blade extended. He wanted to menace me, but his motor control was so unsteady that the weapon bobbed up and down like breadcrumbs on water. I could have taken it from him, but why bother?