

INDIVIDUTOPIA

by Joss Sheldon



THERE IS NO
SUCH THING
AS SOCIETY

INDIVIDUTOPIA

JOSS SHELDON

10% SAMPLE

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**THIS IS NOT A PROPHECY
THIS IS A WARNING**

WELCOME TO INDIVIDUTOPIA

Perhaps I should start at the beginning.

No, that really wouldn't do. I must start this tale a long, long time before it begins.

You see, between your era and mine, here in the year 2084, the world has changed so much that it would be remiss of me not to bring you up to date. I fear, beloved friend, that the adventures of our hero, Renee Ann Blanca, wouldn't make much sense if I didn't provide a little context.

It may not surprise you to learn that the world will change dramatically over the course of the decades you're about to experience. You live in times of unprecedented change yourself. But to understand the world you'll live in tomorrow, you need to look backwards, not forwards, to 1979, and the election of Margaret Thatcher.

Thatcher's ideology can be summed up by a single, prophetic quote. That short statement, a mere seven words long, would change the world forever.

It's hard for us to imagine Margaret Thatcher as she spoke those seven words. Very few of my contemporaries have ever seen a picture of the *Iron Lady*. People these days are far too occupied with themselves to pay attention to anyone else. I do have an image in my mind of the former PM, although I can't be sure if it's correct. To me, she's a colossus; half-machine, half-human, with a helmet of metallic hair, shoulder pads made of steel and a tongue which could fire off bullets.

I digress. The way Thatcher looked is of no importance. We should be focussing our attention on those seven prophetic words. Those seven, tiny words, which weren't in the slightest bit true, which had never been true, but which would become the only truth there was:

“There”

Thatcher's voice pierced. It was a vinegary screech. It was an autocratic squeal. Poetry without colour. A shadow without light.

“Is”

A static hush buzzed between words.

“No”

A distant footstep failed to echo.

“Such”

A gasp was swallowed.

“Thing”

A camera flashed.

“As”

An eyelash fell.

“Society”

“There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people. And people must look after themselves. It’s our duty to look after ourselves.”

With these seven words, the *Cult of the Individual* was born.

During the decades which followed, everyone would be forced to join.

By the time our hero was born, in the year 2060, Thatcher’s claim had become a reality. There really was no such thing as society. Our Renee was all alone.

I’ve read back through the rest of this chapter, and I’m afraid to say that it does get awfully political. Beloved friend: Please accept my heartfelt apologies. This book is no radical manifesto. I actually quite like this Individutopia of ours. It’s the only world I’ve ever known, and I’m rather attached to it, if the truth be told. No. This is a riveting yarn: The tale of one woman’s path to self-discovery.

Do skip ahead and see for yourself, if you don’t believe me. I’ll understand. Honestly, I will. Perhaps political history isn’t your cup of tea. That’s fine. Totally fine. You must be true to yourself. You must be the unique individual you are!

But first, please do take a moment to consider the four seismic shifts which individualism brought about. These will frame our story:

1) PRIVATISATION. Society’s assets were sold to individuals, who charged fees for everything. And I mean *everything*.

2) COMPETITION REPLACED COOPERATION. Everyone

competed with everyone else, twenty-four seven, in a vain attempt to be the best.

3) PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS DISAPPEARED. People were so focussed on themselves, they ignored everyone else.

4) MENTAL ILLNESS BECAME ENDEMIC. Unable to satisfy their social urges, depression and anxiety became the norm.

Are you still with me?

Good! I'll fill you in.

Let's start with privatisation...

Since there was no such thing as society, it followed that nothing could be owned by society. Everything that *was* owned collectively had to be passed on to individuals.

Hundreds of nationalised industries, such as British Gas and British Rail, were given to individual shareholders, who increased prices to recoup their investments.

Internal markets were introduced to the National Health Service, through which work was outsourced to private firms. Schools were turned into academies, which were also given away.

Vast swathes of the nation became *Publicly Owned Private Spaces*: Land that appeared to be owned by society, but was actually owned by individuals. Council houses, once owned by society, were sold off and never replaced. It became illegal to squat in an abandoned building.

When the *Democracy Reforms* of 2041 introduced a market for votes, a few rich individuals bought as many as they needed, elected themselves, scrapped every labour law, abolished the *Competition Commission* and disbanded parliament. Free from government regulation, they monopolised the nation's wealth, privatised the police force and used it to protect themselves.

An oligarch class was born.

Fees for education and healthcare were introduced, and then increased, until they became too expensive to afford. Common land disappeared, national parks became private gardens and every beach was fenced off. Fees had to be paid to walk down the street, breathe the air and speak to another person.

In 2016, Oxfam found that sixty-two individuals possessed as much

wealth as half the people on the planet. By 2040, these people owned as much as everyone else combined. By 2060, the year our Renee was born, they quite literally owned the world.

Now let's turn our attention to competition...

Since there was no such thing as society, society couldn't be held responsible for our problems. We, alone, were expected to take *Personal Responsibility* and help ourselves. As one of Thatcher's closest allies once put it: "My unemployed father didn't riot. He got on his bike and he looked for work."

That's right: If you didn't have a job, it was up to you to get on your bike and take someone else's! In the age of the individual, we don't cooperate, we compete.

At school, whilst schools lasted, a culture of testing was introduced. Pupils as young as seven were forced to compete against their classmates to achieve the highest grades. Salespeople competed to make the most sales, doctors competed to achieve the shortest waiting lists, and bureaucrats competed to make the biggest cuts. A whole system of mystery shoppers, customer feedback surveys, internet reviews, punctuality assessments and star ratings pitted worker against worker. Everything that could be measured was counted and ranked. Everything else was overlooked.

In the 2050s, the oligarchs created a meta-chart which ranked every individual in the land, and an infinity of minor charts, which measured everything imaginable. These days, there are charts that rank people's appearances, consumption levels, calorie intake, computer game scores, ability to eat, skip and sleep. You name it, there's a chart for it.

Individuals are expected to compete against everyone else, all the time, in every way. And, if they succeed, they expect to be rewarded.

I believe this mentality was born back when you were alive...

Forgetting they'd been helped by society, cared for by nurses and educated by teachers, the early Individualists claimed they were "Self-made": They had competed, had won, and deserved to keep every penny they received. They got their way. Corporation tax was slashed from fifty-two percent in 1979, to just nineteen percent in 2017. The highest rate of income tax fell from eighty-three percent to forty-five percent.

Both taxes were scrapped completely in the *Great Liberty Act* of 2039.

The poor, meanwhile, were blamed for their poverty. It was their fault, so the logic went, for not getting on their bike, moving to find work, taking a second job or working longer hours.

The *Department for Work and Pensions* ran campaigns demonising anyone who claimed welfare. Newspapers called for people “To be patriotic and report any benefit cheats you know”. Neighbours turned against neighbours, the poor turned against the poorest, and everyone turned against the unemployed. The Welfare State was disbanded in 2034, and the last charity closed its doors in 2042. The disabled, elderly and jobless were all left to rot.

The wage gap grew wider by the year.

When Thatcher came to power, the top ten percent of British employees were paid four times as much as the bottom ten percent. By 2010, they were paid thirty-one times as much.

Real wages began to decline. They were lower in 2017 than in 2006.

By 2050, the richest ten percent of workers earned a thousand times more than the poorest ten percent. But even they were paid less than the average employee had earned in 1980.

Still, no one complained. The richest workers were content, happy to know they were being paid more than their peers. The poorest workers, meanwhile, took personal responsibility, pulled up their sleeves and worked harder than ever before.

Rumour had it that some people did try to break free from this *Individutopia*.

Whispers circulated about a rebel clique who, *shock horror*, wanted to live together in a society! Those radicals were derided, called quacks and dangerous extremists. No one knew what had happened to them, if they existed at all, but individual opinions did abound. Some people said they had squatted on an oligarch’s estate. Others claimed they had gone to the North Pole, Atlantis or Mars. Most people believed they had died. There was no common consensus and, as people became more distant, such gossip faded away.

People became more distant by the year.

Rather than play sport with other people, the Individualists played

computer games alone. They drank at home rather than in the pub. They communicated via the internet, instead of talking in person. They stopped saying “Hello” to the people they passed, turned their heads to avoid eye contact, and wore headphones to avoid conversation. They touched their smartphones more often than they touched other people.

Schools told their pupils: “Don’t talk to strangers”. Insurance companies told their customers: “Always lock your door”. Announcements cried: “Keep your possessions close”.

By 2030, everyone had unique jobs, with unique hours, and nothing in common with their colleagues. By 2040, every trade union had been disbanded. By 2050, every working man’s club, community centre, library, allotment and playing field had been sold off to the oligarch class.

Forced to relocate, in order to find work, the generations split and the family unit crumbled. Fewer people got married, more people got divorced and fewer babies were born. People focussed on themselves. They chased fame, fortune and beauty. They joined gyms, gorged on makeup and became addicted to cosmetic surgery. They only posted their most flattering pictures to social media, and often edited them to make themselves appear more attractive.

By the early 2040s, everyone was a mixture of plastic and flesh, and everyone owned a screen that augmented their image in real time. Everyone believed they were the most beautiful person alive.

People stopped hugging each other. Then they stopped touching each other completely. They wore *Plenses*; computerised contact lenses, which edited a user’s vision so they didn’t have to look at anyone else. They spoke to their electronic devices instead of speaking to real people. Words such as “You”, “We” and “They” fell out of use. There was only “It” and “I”.

Thatcher’s dream had become a reality. There really was no such thing as society.

The last human-to-human conversation took place between our hero’s two parents, just moments before she was conceived. That act of copulation was the last time two adults came into physical contact.

Renee Ann Blanca, in case you were wondering, wasn’t raised by her parents. She was raised by the *Babytron* robot which found her in front of the Nestle Tower. Renee’s mother believed baby Renee should

take personal responsibility and raise herself, so had left her there to apply for a job.

Phew! We're almost ready to begin.

But before we do, let's just take a couple of minutes to consider the nation's mental health...

Isolated, forced to do jobs that offered little meaning, hyper-perceptive to corporate expectations, and often owned by the very possessions they'd worked so hard to own, the Individualists were far from happy. By 2016, a quarter of British people were suffering from stress, depression, anxiety or paranoia.

These mental illnesses had physical effects. They raised people's blood pressure, impaired their immune systems and increased the chances of them suffering from viral infections, dementia, diabetes, heart disease, strokes, addiction and obesity.

By 2016, over twenty percent of Brits had suffered from suicidal thoughts, and over six percent had attempted suicide. Suicide was the most common cause of death for men under forty-five. By 2052, it was the most common cause of death in the nation.

Testosterone levels reduced in men. Women stopped menstruating.

Still, the Individualists refused to look outwards, at the social causes of their mental illness. There was no such thing as society, and so society could not be to blame!

The Individualists looked inwards and blamed themselves. They took personal responsibility, tried psychotherapy, neurosurgery and meditation. Then they took drugs. Antidepressant use doubled in the ten years leading up to 2016, and continued to rise thereafter. People became addicted to sleeping pills, mood stabilisers, tranquillisers and antipsychotics.

When the atmosphere became too polluted to breathe, people were forced to buy their own supply of clean air. Vaporised antidepressants were added to the mix. Our hero, therefore, was born in a druggy haze; high on a mixture of whatever Valium and chemical serotonin her Babytron robot could supply. It was a haze from which she had never escaped.

Over the course of her life, Renee Ann Blanca concocted her own

individual mixture of drugs, replete with her own individual flavour: Sour cherry and toffee. Although she reduced her dosage at night, not a single minute passed in which she wasn't medicated. This was probably for the best. These days, individuals usually kill themselves as soon as their gas runs dry.

It all sounds rather morbid, does it not?

Please bear with me. There's a reason I've decided to recount the story of Renee Ann Blanca. It's not nearly as bleak as you might think. But to explain why, at such an early juncture, would surely ruin the tale!

Speaking of which, I suppose we're just about ready to begin.

And here is Renee herself. Yes, I can just about make her out. She appears to be waking, coughing on the drug-filled air which is swirling around her pod.

AND SO WE MEET OUR HERO

“(Slavery) is to work and have such pay, as
just keeps life from day to day.”

PERCY SHELLEY

“Renee! Renee! Renee!”

I’m listening to our hero’s personalised alarm. Her own voice, recorded many years ago, is calling her into the day.

I’m watching on, transfixed.

Renee’s hair is lapping against her pillow as she turns, throwing golden-brown locks against pink cotton. Some crystallised mucus is dangling from an eye which has been disfigured by an excess of self-applied Botox. Her left cheek, the one she hasn’t embellished with plastic, is beginning to morph; turning from salmon to puce to beige. Her bandy legs are crisscrossing beneath the duvet, like a pair of industrious scissors.

Here is a star-shaped birthmark on her lower lip. Here is a bean-shaped scar. Here is an eyebrow which has been over-plucked, patched up with artificial hair, volumized with gel and highlighted with pink eyeliner.

Perhaps you can see her too. Perhaps you can see the way she flaps at a screen to stop that alarm. Perhaps you can hear her cough, as her pharynx does battle with this cheap air. Renee can’t afford soft mountain air from the Alps, or blossomy air from the New Forest. She must make do with this hard, recycled air, which has been filtered from the London atmosphere itself.

A holographic screen floats fifty centimetres in front of Renee’s right shoulder. It’s made of translucent pink light, with an opaque orange border, but it doesn’t have any sort of substance or weight. Renee can see through it, but can’t escape the information it displays at all times.

On the first line, Renee’s debt is flashing in a large, red font: £113,410 and twelve pence. And now, thirteen pence. It grows by a penny for every twenty breaths she takes.

On the second line, in a smaller font, is Renee's position in the *London Workers' Chart*:

OVERALL RANKING: 87,382nd (Down 36,261)

And on the third line, in an even smaller font, a series of minor charts are appearing one after the other. Renee has just climbed twenty thousand places in the Sleeping Chart, leapfrogging Paul Podell. She has an imaginary rivalry with that man, even though she's never met him. She's never met anyone, in the flesh, but this make-believe rivalry gives Renee a reason to live.

She falls below Podell in the Waking Up Chart:

"Me damn it!"

Her charts rotate:

Snoring Ranking: 1,527,361st (Down 371,873)

*** 231 places below Jane Smith ***

Twisting & Turning Ranking: 32,153rd (Up 716)

*** 5,253 places below Sue Wright ***

Saliva Control Ranking: 2,341,568th (Up 62,462)

*** 17 places above Paul Podell ***

"Yes! I did it!"

The speaker hummed:

"I'm the only I, better than all I-Others."

Hearing herself recite this mantra always put Renee in a great frame of mind.

Of course, it was a brazen lie. Renee wasn't "Better than all I-Others". Over eighty-seven thousand people were ranked above her in the London Workers' Chart. But Renee wasn't the sort of person to let an inconvenient fact get in the way of a much-loved fiction.

She justified her belief in her own way: Telling herself that eighty million people lived in London, putting her well within the first percentile, which was the best percentile, which meant she was the best. She had topped the Head Tapping Charts for a full three seconds, back in 2072: She would be a chart topper for the rest of her life. And anyway, she was always top of the "Great Renee Rankings"; a chart she created herself.

Her mantras played on:

"I must dress, think and act in a unique fashion."

“I can’t have something for nothing.”

“I am what I own.”

“Too much of a good thing can be wonderful.”

“I shall be happy at all times.”

I think Renee must have been listening to one of her hypnopaedia recordings during this particular night, because she suddenly jolted upwards and said:

“Ah yes, grass is blue.”

Renee had made a collection of recordings, covering everything from astrology to horticulture, music and dance. Their content tended to be quite untrue. Grass isn’t blue. It never has been and probably never will be. But Renee believed it wholeheartedly. Since she’d never spoken to anyone else, her views had never been challenged or corrected.

This isn’t to say Renee didn’t receive new information from external sources. From the moment she awoke, her avatars bombarded her with a constant stream of facts and figures. Some of these were extracted from the internet. Some were true. But this information was personalised; gathered from the sources Renee chose, edited to fit her individual preferences, and supplemented by her own propaganda. It confirmed everything she already believed.

Her favourite avatar, I-Green, spoke in a voice identical to Renee’s; bodacious, with an undercurrent of smugness and a hint of girlish frivolity:

“The Great Renee Rankings are in, fresh off the press, and it seems that I, Renee Ann Blanca, am the greatest being alive. Go me! I’m a superstar.”

Renee flicked the mucus from her eye.

“Today’s job-forecast: Competitive with a chance of hourly work. A low-pressure front is due to creep across the west of town in the early afternoon, so be sure to pack some overalls, and be aware that there’s a ten percent chance of a sacking storm at dusk.”

A fine mist of Prozac atomized above Renee’s head. She sucked it down and smiled. Ten pence was added to her debt.

“Sale! Are my avatars old, ugly or tired? Am I ready to upgrade to the latest, most super-duper model? Well, come on down and visit www.AvatarsAreRenee.me to get myself a brand new avatar today. What am I waiting for?”

Renee turned to I-Green and grinned. The corners of her mouth reached

upwards, dragging her chin towards her nose, and revealing a set of teeth which had been cleaned, bleached, polished, buffed and whitened.

Like all her avatars, I-Green was a digital copy of Renee herself.

Renee's avatars were made of *Solid Light*. You could walk through them, but you couldn't see through them. They didn't glow, like normal holograms. They were perfectly lifelike, with contoured skin and flowing hair.

Renee's avatars all looked like Renee, acted like Renee, sounded like Renee, and said the things which Renee wanted to say or hear. Between them, they satisfied her need for companionship; helping her to take personal responsibility for her social urges, without coming into contact with anyone else.

I-Green was Renee's favourite avatar. It was created on one of those sunny days when everything turns to gold. A good hair day, when Renee earned more than she spent, was promised three whole days of work, got the top score on her favourite computer game and had cheese on toast for dinner. The very sight of I-Green reminded Renee of that happy day. It looked just like Renee had looked back then, wearing a green dress, covered in sequins and pearls. Its cheeks weren't damaged by plastic surgery and its eyes weren't damaged by Botox.

“Special Offer! If I walk down the Old Kent Road today, I'll only be charged three pence per hundred steps. There's never been a better time for me to visit the statue of my dear oligarch, Sheikh Mansour the Fourth.”

Wishing to clear some space in her pod, Renee tapped a button and I-Green disappeared.

Almost everyone lives in pods. They're all slightly different, to reflect the fact that their tenants are all slightly different, but they all have one thing in common: They're all incredibly small. House prices rose so much over the last hundred years, that successive generations were forced to move into smaller homes than their parents had lived in. Houses were split into flats. Flats were split into single-room abodes. These abodes were divided, subdivided and partitioned.

Renee's pod was just over two metres long, one metre wide and one metre tall. It was coated with imitation metal and illuminated by hundreds of LED bulbs. A plastic mattress took up three-quarters of the floor, covering a hole which served as a toilet, drain and sink. On the ceiling was

a tap which could be used as a shower, although water was so expensive that Renee seldom used it. Showering sitting down seemed like more effort than it was worth.

Along one side of the pod ran a digital screen. Along the other side ran a shelf, where I-Green had been lying. At one end of this shelf were Renee's clothes, shoes and hairclip; a small device which amassed data, took photos and generated Renee's holograms; her display, avatars and virtual possessions. Renee defined herself in terms of what she owned, but couldn't afford many real things, and so collected virtual possessions instead. The only other physical items on that shelf were a small quantity of food, a large quantity of cosmetics, a toaster, a knife, a kettle, and a microwave which Renee had repaired using a fuse from her Babytron robot.

Oh no! Please don't judge our Renee harshly! It's true she dismantled that robot just as soon as she could survive without it. I suppose you might find that a little ungrateful. But Renee had no concept of gratitude. She had never experienced it herself. Her robot was malfunctioning. It seemed to Renee that it was in her best interests to keep its useful parts and discard the rest.

Renee tapped her screen.

I-Sex appeared.

I-Sex looked like a boyish version of Renee. To make it, Renee had cropped her hair, undressed, and used makeup to shade her cheekbones, eyebrows and nose.

Renee activated her virtual penis, beard and flat chest. She swiped these holograms into position, with a nonchalant flick of her wrist, and commanded I-Sex to lie down.

She removed her knickers, placed a pillow between I-Sex's legs and began to grind away.

I-Sex played along.

"Oh yeah!" it squealed. *"Give it to me Renee. Oh yeah! That's the way I like it. I know me girl. Oh yeah! I da best. Wahoo!"*

An ever-thickening mist of sex hormones filled the pod.

Renee panted, sucking down a sharp rush of chemical oxytocin, which went straight to her hypothalamus.

"Right there. Yeah, that's the spot. Yeah, Renee, yeah!"

The chemical dopamine in the air mingled with the natural dopamine

in Renee's blood. Trillions of intoxicating molecules surged towards her brain. A cascade of chemical and electrical reactions sent sparks ricocheting around her skull, rearranging the interior reality of her mind.

£113,411.43

£113,411.73

£113,412.03

Renee's heartbeat accelerated. Her breathing deepened. Her uterus contracted, convulsed, and flushed with waves of orgasmic delight. Vaginal juices trickled down the inside of her thigh.

She collapsed through I-Sex and landed with a thud.

"A dastardly virus is coming after my avatars. It's the terrorists! The terrorists! The Obliteration Virus threatens my very existence. Oh, how could I live without my lovely avatars? What would be the point of going on?"

Renee pressed a button on her screen and I-Sex disappeared.

She hated it when I-Sex transmitted information immediately after intercourse, it ruined her high, but she couldn't afford an advert-free model.

She jabbed at her screen, navigated to the Amazon store and bought some virus protection. Five pounds was added to her debt.

She tapped her screen again.

Renee's unique, personalised blend of perfume filled the pod. It was a perfectly vile blend of cinnamon and camphor, adulterated by a whiff of manure and a hint of rotting ham. No one had ever told Renee that she smelled disgusting, and so she believed she smelled divine. Ignorance, as they say, is bliss:

"Smelling good! Now let's dress to impress."

Renee's clothes were all made by Nike. *Everyone's* clothes were all made by Nike, who bought the competition and established a monopoly back in 2052. This is the thing with individualism, please understand: Everyone has to be different, of course, but their differences must conform. Everyone must wear different clothes, to be an individual, and everyone must personalise their clothes, to outdo everyone else. But those clothes must all be made by Nike. There's simply no choice in the matter, and no one can conceive of a world in which an alternative might exist.

Renee owned two of everything: Two pairs of underwear, two dresses and two bras. She'd added sparkles to her shoes, which had different

coloured laces. She'd torn her shirts, added patches to her trousers and invented a stick-woman logo, her own personal brand, which she drew on everything she owned.

She looked down at a Nike swoosh:

“Just do it. I'm going to do it!”

She applied polish to her nails, foundation to her face, gloss to her lips and mascara to her eyes. She tied her hair in a braid, attached her hairclip and tapped the screen. A holographic bowtie, golden necklace and floral brooch appeared in mid-air. Renee swiped them into position:

“Well, one really must create a new, individual look each day. I'll never wear the same accessory twice!”

A sudden surge of duty rushed through Renee's veins:

“I must work, work, work. I mustn't shirk, shirk, shirk!”

She was about to leave home on an empty stomach, restrained herself, and gobbled down some vitaminised toast-substitute; a rather carbohydrate affair, which contained all the goodness of toast, but little of its flavour.

She ate a spoonful of foetal jam.

This food was disgusting and Renee knew it, but she just had to have it.

When Nestle monopolised the food supply, back in 2045, they began to use a form of advertising known as *Perception Without Awareness*. Let me explain: Imagine you pass someone who's whistling. You're not *aware* of their whistling, but you soon find yourself whistling the same song. Your subconscious had *perceived* that tune and inspired you to act.

The logo for Nestle's vitaminised toast-substitute consisted of two purple ribbons. The previous day, Renee had viewed several purple ribbons whilst playing a virtual-reality game. She completed a crossword which included all the letters in the words “Vitaminised toast-substitute”. Her virtual accessories included a yellow ribbon and a purple sash.

Renee wasn't *aware* of these things, but her subconscious had *perceived* them, and now she felt compelled to eat that toast. Even though it gave her little pleasure, it just felt right.

She rocked as she ate. Renee always rocked as she ate. She believed it was her own individual quirk.

Her stomach rumbled.

Taking personal responsibility for her hunger, she tapped the screen,

opened her mouth to the air vent and swallowed down a vaporised hunger-represent. She put on her Plenses and gas mask; a transparent device, which covered her entire head. It contained a microphone, a set of speakers, a drawer-like slot for food, and two tubes. One tube filtered the noxious air, for a price, making it possible to breathe outside. The other supplied a steady stream of antidepressants.

She was ready to face the day.
