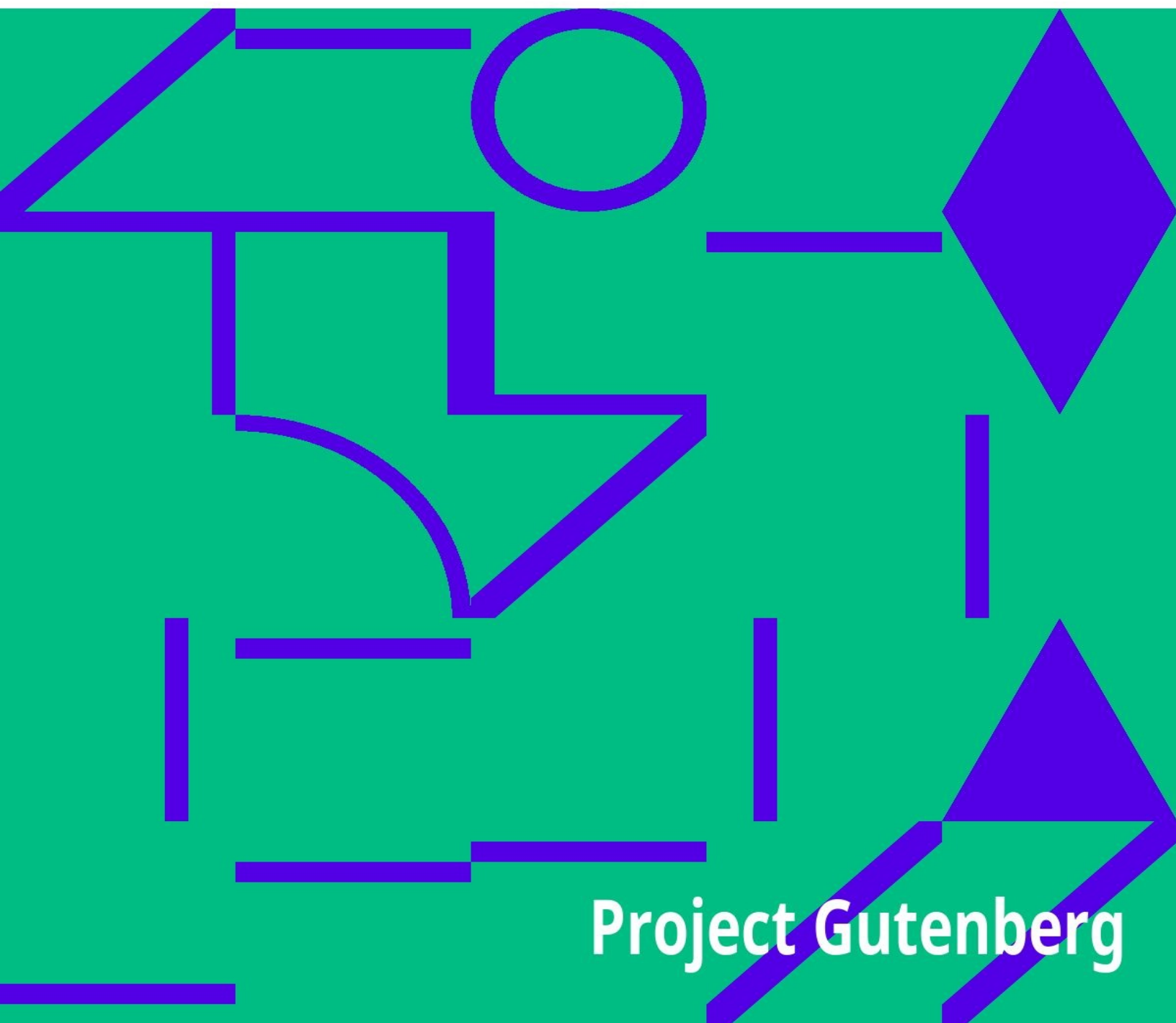


New Apples in the Garden

Kris Neville



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Author: Kris Ottman Neville

Illustrator: George Schelling

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NEW APPLES IN THE GARDEN

Some problems are
perfectly predictable—yet not
in the sense that allows a
preprogrammed machine to handle them—

BY KRIS NEVILLE

Illustrated by George Schelling

Eddie Hibbs reported for work and was almost immediately called out on an emergency. It was the third morning in succession for emergencies.

This time a section of distribution cable had blown in West Los Angeles. Blown cable was routine, but each instance merited the attention of an assistant underground supervisor.

Eddie climbed down the manhole with the foreman of the maintenance crew. There were deep pull marks on the lead sheath above where the cable had blown.

"Where'd they get it?" he asked.

"It came in from a job on the East Side."

"Sloppy work," Eddie said. "Water got in the splice?"

"These new guys...." the foreman said.

Eddie fingered the pull marks. "I think she's about shot anyway. How much is like this?"

"A couple of hundred feet."

"All this bad?"

"Yep."

Eddie whistled. "About fifteen thousand dollars worth. Well. Cut her back to here and make splices. Stand over them while they do it."

"I'll need two men for a week."

"I'll try to find them for you. Send through the paper."

"I can probably find maybe another thousand miles or so that's about this bad."

"Don't bother," Eddie said.

That was Eddie's productive work during the morning. With traffic and two sections of street torn up by the water people, he did not get back to his office until just before lunch. He listened to the Stock Market reports while he drove.

He learned that spiraling costs had retarded the modernization program of General Electronics and much of their present equipment was obsolete in terms of current price factors. He was also told to anticipate that declining sales would lead to declining production, thereby perpetuating an unfortunate cycle. And finally he was warned that General Electronics was an example of the pitfalls involved in investing in the so-called High Growth stocks.

Eddie turned off the radio in the parking lot as the closing Dow-Jones' report was starting.

During lunch, he succeeded in reading two articles in a six-week-old issue of *Electrical World*, the only one of the dozen technical journals he found time for now.

At 12:35 word filtered into the department that one of the maintenance crew, Ramon Lopez, had been killed. A forty-foot ladder broke while atop it Lopez was hosing down a pothead, and he was driven backward into the concrete pavement by the high-pressure water.

Eddie tried to identify the man. The name was distantly familiar but there was no face to go with it. Finally the face came. He smoked two cigarettes in succession. He stubbed the last one out angrily.

"That was a tough one," his supervisor, Forester, said, sitting on the side of Eddie's desk. Normally exuberant, he was left melancholy and distracted by the accident. "You know the guy?"

"To speak to."

"Good man."

"After I thought about it a little bit," Eddie said, "I remembered he was transferring tomorrow. Something like this brings a man up short, doesn't it?"

"A hell of a shame. Just a hell of a shame."

They were silent for a minute.

"How was the market this morning?" Forester asked.

"Up again. I didn't catch the closing averages."

"I guess that makes a new high."

"Third straight day," Eddie said.

"Hell of a shame," Forester said.

"Yeah, Lopez was a nice guy."

"Well...." Forester's voice trailed off in embarrassment.

"Yeah, well...."

"I wanted to remind you about the budget meeting."

Eddie glanced at his watch. "Hour and a half?"

"Yeah. You know, I feel like ... never mind. What about the burial transformers, you get on it yet?"

"The ones we're running in the water mains for cooling? They're out of warranty. None of the local shops can rewind them until the manufacturer sends out a field engineer to set them up for the encapsulation process."

"How long is that going to take?" Forester asked.

"They tell me several months. Still doesn't leave us with anything. The plant says they've fixed the trouble, but between them and the rewind shop, they can buck it back and forth forever."

"I guess we'll have to go back to the pad-mounted type."

"People with the Gold Medallion Homes aren't going to like the pads by their barbecues."

Forester uncoiled a leg. "Draw up a memorandum on it, will you, Eddie?" He stood up. "That thing sure got me today. There's just entirely too many of these accidents. A ladder breaking. I don't know."

Eddie tried to find something intelligent to say. Finally he said, "It was a rough one, all right."



After Forester left, Eddie picked up, listlessly from the top of the stack one of the preliminary reports submitted for his approval.

The report dealt with three thousand capacitors purchased last year from an Eastern firm, now bankrupt. The capacitors were beginning to leak. Eddie called the electrical laboratory to see what progress was being made on the problem.

The supervisor refreshed his memory from the records. He reported: "I don't have any adhesive man to work on it. Purchasing has half a dozen suppliers lined up—but none have any test data. I don't know when we'll get the time. We're on a priority program checking out these new, low-cost terminations."

"Can't we certify the adhesive to some AIEE spec or something?" Eddie asked.

"I don't know of any for sealing capacitors, Eddie. Not on the maintenance end, at least."

"Maybe Purchasing can get a guarantee from one of the suppliers?"

"For the hundred dollars of compound that's involved? What good would that do us?"

Eddie thanked him and hung up. He signed the preliminary report.

He turned to the next one.

At 2:30 Forester came by and the two of them made their way between the jig-saw projections of maple and mahogany to the Conference Room.

Fourteen men were involved in the conference, all from operating departments. They shuffled in over a five minute period, found seats, lit cigarettes, talked and joked with one another.

When one of the assistants to the manager came in, they fell silent.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I think I'd better get right to the point today. The Construction Program in the Valley has now used up two bond issues. The voters

aren't going to approve a third one."

He paused for effect then continued briskly:

"I see by the morning's *Times* that the mayor is appointing a watch-dog commission. I guess you all saw it, too. The Department of Water and Power of the City of Los Angeles is going to be badly—and I mean badly—in the red at the end of the fiscal year.

"We're in hot water.

"We do not seem to be getting through to the operating departments regarding the necessity for cost reduction. I have here last month's breakdown on the Bunker Hill substation 115 KV installation. Most of you have seen it already, I think. I had it sent around. Now—"

The analysis continued for some ten minutes to conclude with an explosion:

"We've got to impose a ten per cent across the board cut on operating expenses."

One of the listeners, more alert than the rest, asked, "That go for salaries?"

"For personnel making more than eight hundred dollars a month it does."

There was a moment of shocked silence.

"You can't make that stick," one of the supervisors said. "Half my best men will be out tomorrow looking for better offers—and finding them, too."

"I'm just passing on what I was told."

The men in the room shuffled and muttered under their breaths.

"O.K., that's the way they want it," one of the supervisors said.

"I've brought along the notices for the affected personnel. Please see they're distributed when you leave."

After the meeting, Forester walked with Eddie back to his desk.

"You be in tomorrow, Eddie?"

"I guess I will, Les. I really don't know, yet."

"I'd hate to lose you."

"It's going to make it pretty rough. A man's fixed expenses don't come down."

"I'll see what I can do for you, maybe upgrade the classification—"

"Thanks, Les."

Back at his desk, Eddie looked at his watch. Nearly time for the Safety Meeting. Lost-time injuries had been climbing for the last four months.

While waiting, he signed a sixty-three page preliminary report recommending a program for the orderly replacement of all transmission and distribution cable installed prior to 1946. It was estimated that the savings, in the long run, would total some quarter of a billion dollars. The initial expense, however, was astronomical.

After the Safety Meeting, Eddie prepared another memorandum indicating the acute need for a better training program and an increase in maintenance personnel. Shortage of qualified technicians was chronic.

At four twenty-five, the night supervisor phoned in to say he was having engine trouble with his new car and would be delayed until about six o'clock. Eddie agreed to wait for him.

Eddie dialed home to let his wife, Lois, know he would be late again. A modulated low-frequency note told him the home phone was out of order.

Ray Morely, one of the night-shift engineers, came in with coffee. "You still here, Eddie?"

"Yeah, until Wheeler makes it. His car's down."

"Market hit a new high."

"Yeah. I guess you heard about the meeting today?"

Ray sipped coffee. "Budget again? I missed the day crew. I got hung up in traffic and was a little late."

"A pay cut goes with it, this time."

"You're kidding?"

"Been by your desk yet?"

"No."

"I'm not kidding. Ten per cent for those making above eight hundred."

"Nobody's going to put up with that," Ray said. "We're in an engineering shortage. We've got ICBMs rusting in their silos all over the country because we can't afford the engineering maintenance—that's how bad it is. Everybody'll quit."

"I don't think they'll make it stick. Ramon Lopez, one of the truck crew, was killed today hosing down a high-voltage pothead."

"No kidding?"

Eddie told him about the accident.

"That was a rough one to lose, wasn't it?"

The phone rang.

Ray said, "I'll get it."

He listened for a minute and hung up. "There's an outage in the Silver Lake Area. The brakes on a bus failed and took out an overhead section."

Eddie sat back. "No sense in you going. With work traffic on the surface streets until the freeway gets fixed, they won't get the truck there until 6:30 or so."

"Right." Ray drank coffee reflectively. "You going looking?"

"I'm an old-timer. I got a lot of seniority. How about you?"

"I got bills. It's going to cost me near a hundred a month—that's a steep bite."

"I still think they'll back off."

"They'll have to," Ray said. "If not right now, when the pressure gets on. You ask me, we've got them by the short hair." He settled into the chair. "I see it as an organic phenomenon. When society gets as complex as ours, it has to grow more and more engineers. But there's a feedback circuit in effect. The more engineers we grow, the more complex society becomes. Each new one creates the need for two more. I get a sort of feeling of—I don't know—vitality, I guess, when I walk into, say, an automated factory. All that machinery and all that electronic gear is like a single cell in a living organism—an organism that's growing every day,

multiplying like bacteria. And it's always sick, and we're the doctors. That's job security. We're riding the wave of the future. I don't think they'll make a salary cut stick."

"I hope you're right," Eddie said.



Eddie checked out at 7:15, when the night supervisor finally arrived. As he left the building, he noted that a burglar alarm down the street had gone off; probably because of a short circuit. The clanking set his nerves on edge. Apprehensively he felt a rising wind against his cheeks.

At home, he was greeted with a perfunctory kiss at the door.

"Honey," Lois told him, "you took the check book, and I didn't have any money."

"Something come up? I'm sorry."

"We're all out of milk. The milk man didn't come today. Their homogenizing machinery broke down. I phoned the dairy about nine; and then, of course, the phone has been on the blink since about eleven or a little before, so I couldn't ask you to bring some home."

"I kept trying to get you."

"I figured you had to work late again, when you weren't here at six, and I knew you'd be here when you got here."

Eddie sat down and she sat on the chair arm beside him. "How did it go today?"

He started to tell her about the wage cut and Ramon Lopez; but then he didn't want to talk about it. "So-so," he said. "There was an outage over in the Silver Lake Area just before I left."

"Fixed yet?"

"I doubt it," he said. "Probably a couple of more hours."

"Gee," she said, "when I think of all that meat in the deep freezer...."

"I wouldn't stock so much," he said. "I really wouldn't."

She twisted away from him. "Honey. I'm jittery. Something's ... I don't know. In the air, I guess."

The wind rattled the windows.

While Lois was warming dinner, his son came in.

"Hi, Eddie."

"Hi, Larry."

"Eddie, when we gonna get the TV fixed?"

Eddie put down the newspaper. "We just don't have a hundred dollars or so right now." He searched for matches on the table by the chair. "Lois, oh, Lois, where're the matches?"

She came in. "They were all out Friday at the store, and I keep forgetting to lay in a supply. Use my lighter over there."

"About the TV—"

Lois was wiping her hands on the paper towel she had brought with her. "Replacement parts are hard to find for the older sets," she said. "Anyway. I read today Channel Three finally went off the air. That leaves only Two and Seven. And the programs aren't any good, now, are they? All those commercials and all?"

"They do use a lot of old stuff I've already seen," the son admitted, "but every once in a while there's something new."

"Let's talk about it some other time, Larry, O.K.?" Eddie said. "How's that? It's almost your bed-time. Studies done?"

"All but the Library report."

"Well, finish it, and—"

"I got to read the book down there. Two classes assigned it and they don't have the copies to let us check out. And I want to ask you about something, Eddie."

"Daddy's tired. His dinner's on. Come on, Eddie. I'll set it right now. And Larry, you've already eaten...."



After dinner, Eddie got back to the paper, the evening *Times*. It was down to eight pages, mostly advertising. There was a front-page editorial reluctantly announcing a price increase.

"They raise the price once more, and we'll just quit taking it," Lois said. "You read about the airplane crash in Florida? Wasn't that terrible? What do you think caused it?"

"Metal fatigue, probably," Eddie said. "It was a twenty-year-old jet."

"The company said it wasn't that at all."

"They always do," Eddie said.

"I don't guess the payroll check came today or you'd have mentioned it."

"Payroll's still all balled up. Somebody pressed a wrong button on the new machine and some fifty thousand uncoded cards got scattered all over the office."

"Oh, no! What do the poor people, who don't have bank accounts, do?"

"Just wait, like we wait."

"You had a bad day," Lois said. "I can tell."

"No...." Eddie said. "Not really, I guess."

"Still working on Saturday?"

"I guess so. Nothing was said. Maybe it'll get easier after the end of the month."

"You said it was all that new construction work in the Valley that's making you so shorthanded."

"That's part of it."

"They're not scheduled to finish until ... when, sometime next year, isn't it?"

"The end of '81 right now."

"Eddie! Listen to me! I hardly ever see you any more. You're not going to have to put in all this overtime for the next two years!"

"Of course not," Eddie said. "Maybe after this month, that's all, and the work load will level off."



Larry, dressed for bed, came in. "Eddie?"

"Your father's tired."

"I want to ask him something."

"What is it, Larry?" Eddie asked.

"Eddie, you know the little culture I was running for science class? Something's wrong. Will you look at it?"

"Daddy's...."

"I'll look at it, Lois." Eddie accompanied his son to his son's room.

"What do you think is wrong, Dad?"

"Well, let's see...."

"What is it?" Larry asked. "What made it stop growing?"

Eddie did not answer for a minute. Then: "You start with one or two ... well, it's like this, Larry. I'm afraid it's dead. They grow exponentially. Figure out how much money you'd have at the end of a month if you started with just a penny and doubled your money every day. In just a little while, you'd have all the money in the world. Figure it out sometime. Things that grow exponentially, they just don't know when to quit. And your culture, here, it grew until the environment could no longer support it and all at once the food was eaten up and it died."

"I ... see.... Something like that could just grow until it took over the whole world, couldn't it?"

Again Eddie was silent for a moment. Then he rumbled his son's hair. "That's science fiction, Larry."

Later, while they were listening to FM, there was a news break reporting a fire out of control in South Los Angeles.

"That's near Becky's, I'll bet," she said. "I better phone."

The phone was still out of order.

"I sure feel cut off without a phone."

After an interlude of music, Lois said, "Larry wants to be an engineer, now. I guess after what you said, maybe that's a pretty good thing."

Eddie looked up from his cigarette. "Why this all of a sudden?"

"One of his teachers told him what you said—there's a growing engineering shortage."

"I thought he wanted to be an astronaut."

"You know Larry. That was last week. His teacher said we're not going to start up the space program again. It's too expensive. We just don't have the technical man-power and materials to spare."

"We are in.... But these kids, young kids they're turning out—they aren't getting the education today. And if anything, I sometimes think it almost makes our jobs even worse, correcting their mistakes. I sometimes wonder where it's all going to stop."

There was more news from the fire front.

Fire fighters were having a very difficult time. Two water mains had broken and the pressure was dropping. The fire was reported to have been caused by the explosion of a gas main. Rising winds did not promise to abate until dawn.

"I sure wish I could get through to Beck," Lois said. "Oh, I guess I told you, did I? Her sister has hypoglycemia, they found out. That's why she's been tired all the time."

"Never heard of it."

"Low blood sugar. It's caused by an overactive gland on the pancreas. And treatment is just the opposite of what you'd think, too. I'll bet you'd never guess. If you increase the amount of sugar in the diet, the gland becomes just that much more active to get rid of it and the hypoglycemia gets worse. It's what I'll bet you engineers call a feedback. Isn't that what you call it? Well ... the way doctors treat it is to *reduce* the amount of sugar you eat. And after a little bit, the pancreas gets back its normal function, and the patient gets well. I told you you'd never guess!"

After a long time, Eddie said, very softly, "Oh."

Just after midnight, they went to bed.

"I've been ..." Lois began and then stopped. "I don't know. Jumpy. The market was up again today. Another all-time high. Do you think there'll be another Crash? Like 'way back in 1929."

She could feel him lying tense beside her in the darkness. "No," he said slowly, "I don't think so. I don't think there'll be a Crash."

In spite of the warmth of the room, she could not suppress an involuntary shudder whose cause was nameless. Suddenly, she did not want to ask any more questions.

The wind was rattling the windows.

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