part 1

TAPPING

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Delicate neon signage snaked a parabolic path over the archway entrance. The fluorescent blue script read: *The Arcades Project*. Once through the Romanesque passage-way, the interior sphere of the brick and mortar high-rise was straight out of *Blade Runner*. The cavernous central vestibule had the excavated feeling of a gaping hole. Seventy vertiginous meters overhead, a filthy skylight dribbled patches of bright to the atrium below. Like other vertical shopping complexes of this type, boutiques, service centers, and dining establishments lined the stacked walkways of browsing floors. Unlike other malls, this place was un-littered with potted palms, fast food kiosks, and inflatable kiddie castles. Bob craned his neck to see a riot of drab looming up, down, and sideways.

A gaudy arabesque of rusting iron railing decorated the perimeter of each floor. The only means of transport between floors required scrambling. Huge sways of gritty cargo netting draped from the balustrades of each landing. Rope ladders of various widths dangled between the bannisters. An entrepreneurial climbing center had scattered colorful bolt-on handholds along the large structural pillars and southwest wall for patrons preferring even more precarious ascents and descents. Rappelling from the top floor for a speedy departure was an option.
Gazing upwards from the central commons tended to upset Bob’s gastric juices. The pukey sensation only lasted a few seconds. He closed his eyes momentarily to regain his equilibrium.

Shopping or dining in The Arcades Project or TAP, as it was called by patrons and critics alike, required guts, patience, agility and, most importantly, commitment. All emphasis was on the “getting there” rather than the “got.” The effect of all that hemp netting was unnerving. It stifled the air. Coagulated fluidity.

During the 90° “netting” transits, visitors carried personals and purchases on their backs, tied around their waists or in small bags held between their molars. A single industrial elevator, reserved for the transportation of commodities only, purred and clanked as the building’s ubiquitous soundtrack. The monotony of its rattle as products moved with little effort from supplier to vendor amidst the stench of human sweat was reminiscent of assembly line reek in ancient Fordist factories. In the four corners of this formidable deco-cum-gothic interior shaft, Bob watched with mantra-like concentration the mechanical transport of heavy boxes and crates of consumables as his fellow bipeds enacted a sardonic politics of verticality.

This was TAP’s wacko marketing plan.

 advertised as the antidote to online shopping and accelerated lifestyles, “netting” at TAP had become a spectacular symbol of resistance to mindless consumerism, a bio-friendly alternative to heedless consumption. TAP was a flâneur mecca, flaunting perusal and barter over buying and selling; soft voyeurism over hard commerce. The retailers assembled here were necessarily quirky. Mom and pop establishments, antique stores, craft boutiques,
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tailoring services, shoe repair shops, and soda fountains found their place among the bespoke app makers, solar cell service centers, and kinky lingerie shops. Franchise establishments were prohibited. Curiosity cabinets had been the rage for the past six months. Entrepreneurial merchants enthusiastically hoofed one-off a.k.a. “unique” items as a balm for a surplus saturated public. Vision enhancing devices such as magnifying lenses, kaleidoscopes, diffractive pince-nez, scalable (1×200) monocles, night vision goggles, were peddled as must-have Idler Implements for the window watcher’s toolbox.

For a tide had turned. Even outside TAP’s fortress exterior, on chic-encrusted high street, value and its objects were in a far from equilibrium state.