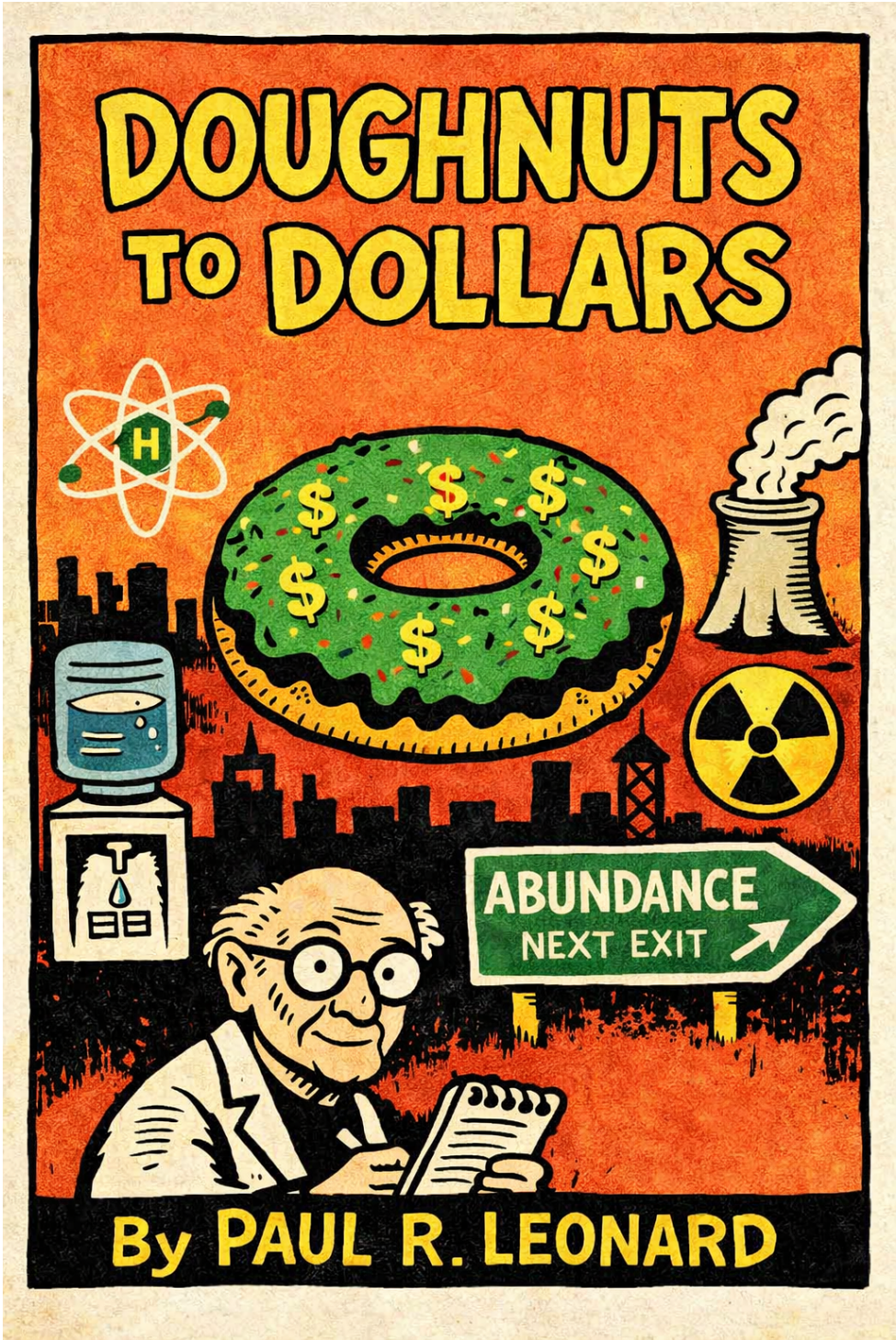


Part I — April Wakes Up to Victory

April woke before her alarm, already smiling, which was rare enough that she lay there for a moment and let it happen without questioning it.

The news alert had come in sometime after midnight. She'd read it in the dark with one eye open and her mind half asleep, just enough to register the words that mattered. Historic. Approved. Scaled. Green

hydrogen. Advanced nuclear. The kind of vocabulary that normally belonged to panel discussions and grant proposals and “thirty-year outlook” reports. Except this time it was being delivered like a verdict.

Now she stood in her kitchen with a mug she wasn’t drinking from, watching the morning news cycle do what it loved most: declare that the largest problems in human civilization had been solved, preferably before breakfast.

First: the renewable hydrogen economy was a go. Not “a promising pathway,” not “a pilot,” not “the next phase.” A go. The anchor spoke the way people speak when they’re trying to sound measured while announcing the end of an era.

Electrolysis breakthroughs. Industrial-scale rollouts. Storage and distribution “adequately addressed.” A phrase repeated by different mouths with identical confidence and absolutely no details, as if details were now impolite.

Second: nuclear. Advanced reactors. New containment paradigms. Fission, fusion, the whole spectrum compressed into a single message: safe as water. The phrase was repeated all morning by people who clearly did not live with water mains.

April didn’t care that the phrasing was sloppy. She cared what it meant.

For more than seventy years-- maybe more, urban planning had been built around conservation. Not casually. Not as a preference. As a moral constant. Scarcity was treated as the permanent climate of reality. Cities were designed more and more as people-sinks because they had to be: dense to reduce energy use, optimized to reduce waste, constrained to survive. Efficiency wasn’t a policy. It was a worldview. Do your part.

April loved her job. She loved it in the honest way, not the performative way. She loved the long view, the way a line on a map could become a habit, then a life. She loved that planning forced ideals to meet pipes. She had loved the conservation era too, even when it made every project feel like triage. Conservation had been a way to be responsible.

But she had yearned for something else: not clever survival, not perpetual rationing, but building *the new.*

Now, according to the breathless chorus of experts and officials, the constraint era was over.

Abundance had arrived.

April opened her laptop and began sending invitations before the coffee cooled.

All-hands. Emergency meeting. Major implications for city and infrastructure planning.

She added names as they came to mind: transportation, stationary platform designers, utilities, parks and recreation, water systems, housing, resilience, economic development, anyone whose work ended up in concrete or steel or rights-of-way.

If the world had changed, the people who built their world should be in the same room.

By the time April arrived at the planning center, people were already gathering in the conference area, that liminal space between optimism and bureaucracy. There were conversations in the corridor that sounded like weather reports, as if abundance were a front moving in.

When April entered the main conference room, she stopped short.

The center of the long meeting table was filled with doughnuts.

Not one box. Not two. The entire middle stretch, like a ceremonial offering, had become a chain of pink boxes, white boxes, kraft boxes, clamshells. Someone had brought a tray. Someone had brought napkins. Someone had brought little paper plates like this was a civic holiday.

More than half the attendees had brought doughnuts, uncoordinated, spontaneous, synchronized by the oldest human planning tool of all: sugar as celebration. Diets be damned, at least for today.

April felt something loosen in her chest. It was absurd and beautiful.

Some doughnuts were normal: glazed, chocolate, sprinkles, filled. But then she noticed the custom ones.

Someone had gone to a local shop and placed an order with the kind of earnestness usually reserved for retirement parties. The icing had been piped with slogans and symbols like miniature propaganda posters.

- **“**WE WON!” in thick green icing, triumphant and slightly uneven
- **“**GREEN IS GOLD!” in gold glitter sugar that looked expensive
- One with a crude but unmistakable hydrogen atom drawn in icing: a nucleus with looping orbits
- One with a tiny stylized turbine that looked like a fan. No matter.
- One that simply said “ABUNDANCE” like a prayer

April laughed, genuinely. Not because it was funny, but because it was human.

She took her seat at the head of the table. People were smiling the way they smiled when they believed a chapter had ended.

At the far end sat Hal.

April barely registered him at first. Hal had been on city distribution lists for years, a legacy hire from the university. A physics professor forced into early retirement when the physics and chemistry laboratory complex had been converted into offices for the sociology department. The government was still on the hook for the last couple years of his contract, and someone in procurement had decided it would be “efficient” to make him available as a science resource for municipal initiatives.

Hal usually said nothing. He sat quietly, listened, and doodled. Today was no different. A notebook lay open in front of him. His pen moved slowly, sketching something that could have been circuitry or could have been a maze.

April began the meeting.

“Okay,” she said, voice bright. “You’ve all seen the announcements. Hydrogen at scale. Nuclear as safe as water. Whatever is true behind the headlines, at minimum we have a radical change in what we can assume about energy availability.”

Heads nodded. Someone whispered, “Finally.”

April continued.

“I want us to do something simple today,” she said. “I want us to plan as if the hype is true. Fully true. Not partially true, not pilot-true. Fully true and we need to get ahead of it.”

A few people smiled. Someone reached for a doughnut with “WE WON!” on it and cut it with a plastic knife like they didn’t want to destroy the words.

“So,” April said, “let’s assume we created the perfect energy system. Let’s assume we transition seamlessly to the renewable hydrogen economy. Let’s assume nuclear is cheap, safe, abundant, and politically settled. Let’s assume the win.”

She gestured down the table toward the icing slogans, a move that got a laugh.

“Then what does that mean for our city?”

The room came alive.

Transportation proposed expanded electrified corridors, longer routes, less compression around the urban core. Housing talked about materials: higher embodied energy but better lifecycle durability. Utilities talked about district heating loops, hydrogen blending, industrial zoning changes. Parks and recreation asked about year-round climate-controlled green spaces, lighting upgrades, water features that had been “unaffordable” under scarcity logic.

April wrote quickly, energized. Ideas multiplied. The tone was bright and fast, the way it gets when people forget that the old world still exists.

Hal did not speak. He continued doodling, occasionally looking up to listen, then returning to the page.

At one point someone offered Hal a doughnut.

He stood, walked to the center of the table, and chose a plain one. Unglazed. No sprinkles. No message. The pastry chef must’ve missed one. He nodded once as thanks and sat back down.

The meeting went long. People left with action items and sugar residue on their fingers. April stayed behind a moment, looking at the table.

So many doughnuts. So much certainty.

It felt like a beginning.

Part II — Reality, Checked

The planning began immediately, across departments, because that's what cities do when the narrative changes: they convert narrative into committees, and committees into action. Maybe not for today, but certainly action in this decade.

New working groups were formed. New documents opened. New timelines drafted. No one waited for philosophical closure. Cities never do. They can't.

April called more meetings. She loved meetings when they moved. When they produced maps and decisions and sequences. It felt like building.

In the next few sessions, the doughnuts continued.

They continued in the same abundance. Boxes still lined the center of the table. People still arrived with excitement and caffeine and the faint dazed look of those who believed they were living through an historic pivot. Someone in Public Works stacked an entire box of doughnuts into a tall, slightly unstable tower partly to clear space on the table.

The icing still carried slogans. The hydrogen atom doughnut made a second appearance, slightly smeared, as if the bakery had rushed. Someone brought a new one that said "SPRINGTIME!" with a little leaf in green icing, a nod to April's name that made her blush and laugh.

The optimism held. The ritual held. Nothing had happened yet to break it.

The meetings grew more procedural. They walked through logistics. Phasing. Regulatory overlays. Funding assumptions, which April treated as weather: important, inevitable, not her job to control. Her job was to shape the physical future.

At one point, as they discussed repurposing legacy infrastructure, April made an offhand remark that felt harmless in the moment.

"It's funny," she said lightly, "how transitions clear space for the next one. Closing the old physics and chemistry lab complexes helped fund this planning center in the sociology department. We needed space for people work."

Several nodded. Someone murmured, "Exactly."

At the far end, Hal shrugged once. Barely visible. He didn't say anything.

Something about that small shrug irritated April, and she didn't like that it irritated her. It felt petty. She wasn't petty. She was building the future.

They moved on.

But the irritation stayed like a splinter.

Later in the same meeting, as they reached a segment about energy distribution assumptions, April paused.

She looked toward Hal.

“Hal,” she said, “you’ve been quiet. Again.”

A few people chuckled politely. Hal looked up, neutral.

April continued, trying to keep her tone light.

“You’re here as a science resource, right? District heating, system design, whatever. I’m going to ask you something and I want you to answer plainly.”

Hal nodded. “Okay.”

April took a breath.

“If everything I hear and read about is true, and hydrogen and nuclear are solved at scale, if everything the announcement claims is true, is there any reason we can’t plan as if energy is effectively unlimited? Like… for real. Unlimited.”

Hal didn’t answer immediately. He glanced around the room as if searching for something to hold onto, not ideologically, but physically. His eyes moved past the whiteboards, the renderings, the doughnut boxes, and settled on the water cooler by the wall.

It was a standard office cooler: a five-gallon jug inverted on a plastic base, a little drip tray, two spigots, one blue, one red. A sign taped to it in curling corners read: PLEASE DO NOT TAKE THE JUGS TO YOUR DESK.

Hal pointed to it.

“Can I use that?” he asked.

April blinked. “Sure.”

Hal leaned back slightly, still not performing, just speaking as if he were trying to get through a sentence without becoming the center of attention.

“Let’s say you solve water,” he said. “Completely. Unlimited water. A massive water tower in place of that five-gallon jug. Infinite water, clean, cheap, safe.”

April nodded. A few people smiled, ready for a planner-friendly metaphor.

“Does that mean all your water problems are solved?” Hal asked.

April frowned slightly. “Distribution—”

Hal held up a hand, gentle.

“Right. Distribution. Pipes. Peaks. Storage at point of use. But even before that… look at the bottle opening.”

He pointed at the neck where the jug met the cooler.

“The opening is the same,” Hal said. “Same diameter. Same flow constraint. You can have a tower the size of the city, but if you’re still dispensing through that opening, your experience of abundance is limited by the physics of that opening.”

The room went quiet in the way rooms go quiet when someone has said something obvious that nobody wanted to articulate or fully comprehend. Surely *some*one would have thought of that.

April stared at the water cooler like she'd never seen it before.

"But the opening could be changed," she said reflexively.

Hal nodded once. "The physics, as we know it, can't be changed. But you can redesign the tank, pressurize it, make it more available further out. That's infrastructure. Not physics."

April's mind was moving now, fast, and she forgot the meeting agenda the way you forget a dream when you wake up into something real.

"So hydrogen is the water tower," she said slowly. "Nuclear is the water tower."

Hal didn't contradict her.

"And the opening is… the way energy becomes something we can actually use," April continued. "Conversion. Distribution. Storage. The interface between generation and life."

Hal shrugged slightly. "Yes."

Someone else at the table, emboldened by the concreteness of the metaphor, asked the practical follow-on that made sense to ask in a planning room.

"Okay," they said, "so what's the bottleneck with abundant hydrogen? If we have it cheap and clean, what's the actual constraint?"

Hal looked at them, then back at the water cooler as if he preferred talking to objects.

"Physics tells us it still has to be stored in extreme ways," he said. "Cryogenic, high pressure, chemical carriers, whatever strategy you pick. It still leaks. It still embrittles infrastructure. It does make more sense if you make it available right as you need it."

He paused, as if deciding whether to include the next part.

"And perhaps most importantly," he continued, "it still has to be combusted to do work."

The word combusted hung there like a smell.

"We're not getting rid of cars, or generators," Hal added, quieter. "Not getting rid of transport. We're changing the fuel tank. It'll be much thicker, and you'll lose a lot right up to the point when you use it."

April's eyes narrowed, not at Hal, but at the underlying structure she'd never questioned because it had always been treated as the way things were.

"So even if we win," she said, "we still build around the same realities."

"Well, you exchange them for different ones," Hal said.

"And nuclear?" she pressed, now in that mode where a person is wringing truth out of the world whether the world wants to cooperate or not.

“Nuclear energy doesn’t make electricity,” Hal said. “It makes heat. Heat makes steam. Steam spins turbines. Turbines and magnets harvest weakly bound electrons. It’s still a heat engine architecture. Same mechanical conversion steps.”

April sat back, looking around at the ever-increasing number of diagrams on the screens, the loops and redundancies and safety envelopes.

“So why does everything still look complicated?” she asked, not to Hal, but to the air.

Hal answered anyway, quietly.

“Because abundance from simplicity isn’t the same as abundance of hardware.”

April swallowed.

The doughnuts were still there. The slogans still bright. The hydrogen atom still intact in icing.

But something about them looked suddenly… naive.

April laughed once, quietly, without humor.

“If energy were solved,” she said, almost whispering, “planning would get simpler. Not more elaborate.”

Hal nodded. “That’s been my experience.”

Someone cleared their throat. Another person glanced at their watch. “I’m famished.”

The meeting ran long, as they all did now. Too many overlapping initiatives, too many timelines that had to be kept compatible. The low, steady hum of a system already in motion.

Lunch was on the agenda. A few people stood to stretch. When the food arrived, it was set along the side table in paper bags and cardboard cartons, opened and distributed without ceremony.

Juanita from Sanitation sat near the end of the table, flipping through a laminated binder while she ate. When she finished her meal, she cracked open a fortune cookie absently, the way people did when they weren’t really paying attention. She glanced at the slip of paper inside, read it once, then shrugged.

She dropped it onto the table, where it slid a few inches and disappeared halfway beneath one of the doughnut boxes stacked nearby.

Ripley, who didn’t belong to any particular department and had been added to the meetings months ago without much explanation, noticed the movement but didn’t look up right away.

A few minutes later, as the discussion circled back to utilization rates, Ripley leaned slightly toward Juanita.

“What did your fortune say?” he asked, without much interest.

Juanita shrugged again. “I don’t know. One of those nothing ones.”

She turned the page.

Ripley reached over, more out of idle curiosity than concern, and fished the paper out from under the doughnut box. It had been folded and creased by the weight. Only part of the sentence was visible now.

wages… pay for… abundance

He stared at it for a moment, then unfolded it carefully.

The fortune read:

“Steady wages pay for lasting abundance when growth is shared.”

Ripley let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh, then crumpled the paper up and tossed it into the debris pile on the table.

“Sounds about right,” he said to no one in particular.

No one responded.

The meeting moved on.

Part III — Undeterred

After that meeting, the planning didn’t stop.

It couldn’t. The machine had already engaged.

Working groups expanded. Consultants arrived like migrating birds. Budgets grew. Press conferences were scheduled. Every department wrote its own version of “transformational” in slightly different fonts.

Hydrogen planning became a branch of municipal bureaucracy almost overnight: storage zoning, pipeline corridors, safety buffers, training protocols, insurance frameworks, emergency response integration. Public education campaigns explained why the new “safe green fuel” required new evacuation signage.

Nuclear planning was even more elaborate, because “safe as water” still involved steel, regulation, and human memory. District heating projects emerged. Reactor siting. Thermal discharge. Grid stabilization. Redundancy planning.

The city would be remade.

April did her job. She worked harder than ever. She was good at this, maybe the best she’d ever been, because she now saw both the surface narrative and the underlying constraints, and she tried to keep the narrative from turning into cruelty.

The doughnuts changed.

Not immediately, not dramatically, but steadily, like the way weather shifts when you stop pretending it won’t.

At the next meeting, there were still doughnuts, but fewer. Still icing, still color, but no slogans. No “WE WON!” No “GREEN IS GOLD!” No hydrogen atom. No sugar sculpture of triumph.

Just regular doughnuts. Pink icing. Chocolate. Sprinkles. The kind people bring when they want to be kind but don’t want to declare victory.

At the following meeting, there were fewer still. A simple box from a grocery store. No bakery artistry. No symbolism. Someone brought fruit instead, as if feeling suddenly responsible.

At another meeting, it was bagels, and the shift felt almost profound in its ordinariness.

April noticed every time, not because she cared about pastries, but because it measured something she couldn’t quantify in planning documents: the slow decay of certainty.

Optimism didn’t end. It didn’t need to. The machine was moving.

Momentum replaced conviction.

April began to understand that cities don’t change because problems are solved. Cities change because problems are recast into forms that can be funded.

One evening, late, she stayed in the office alone reviewing a draft titled Future Infrastructure Blueprint. The renderings were beautiful: green roofs, gleaming transit hubs, hydrogen refueling stations tucked into sleek structures, district heating loops traced like veins. The skyline looked clean. The language was confident.

She tried to imagine the lived experience of abundance.

Would it mean fewer rules? Probably not.
Would it mean fewer system layers? No.
Would it mean less vigilance? Not with hydrogen.
Would it mean less mediation? Not with nuclear.

Abundance of what?

Well, electricity at least for a time. If what was abundant was machinery, then the human experience remained mediated: schedules, prices, constraints, risk envelopes. Abundance upstream did not automatically become relief downstream.

The city would run on a thicker infrastructure, not a freer one.

And yet the plans moved forward, because plans always do when the money is committed.

A consultant from one of the firms stood and advanced a slide showing proposed node locations, clean circles overlaid on a satellite map.

Someone near the back leaned forward.
“That’s where the node is?”

“Yeah,” April said.

He studied the map for a moment. “That’s… not near anything.”

Another voice, further down the table, answered without looking up.
“It sure will be.”

Ripley added that living outside the nodes will get expensive.

April understood what the numbers meant now. They were not promises. They were constraints. Infrastructure was not an outcome. It was destiny. Once built, it molded the behavior necessary to feed it, channeling life into patterns that could be sustained and calling that normal.

They were about to pour a new destiny.

And from a human advancement perspective, the deeper question remained unresolved.

The question was not whether energy could be made abundant at the point where human life actually touched it, but whether it could be made so without requiring the kinds of mediation that reorganized human life to serve it.

In one meeting, someone spilled coffee on their pants.

It wasn’t dramatic. It was just the kind of humiliating human accident that happens when people are drinking too much caffeine in rooms with too much air conditioning and too many agendas.

They stood abruptly, embarrassed, muttering apologies. A colleague rushed forward with napkins. Another colleague, trying to be helpful, hurried to the water cooler to dampen a handful of paper towels.

Everyone’s eyes followed the motion to the cooler, instinctively tracking the small practical emergency.

The colleague pressed the spigot. Water was dispensed.

No one commented on it. They didn’t have to. It was ordinary.

As the colleague returned with damp napkins, a gaze lingered on the far end of the table, on the chair where Hal usually sat.

It was empty.

“Hey,” someone said, almost casually, “what happened to that physics guy?”

Another person, flipping through a binder, answered without looking up.

“Oh. He retired.”

There was no pause. No reflection. Nothing.

Just a fact. Contract ended. Obligation ended. The chair would be filled.

The meeting resumed.

April watched it happen, the way the room absorbed the absence without changing course. She watched the agenda reclaim the moment. She watched the city continue to plan its new destiny.

Outside, the lights were on. The grid hummed. The people got closer. The city functioned, as it always had, under whatever doctrine it adopted.

The future would arrive on schedule.

The bottle jug openings would disappear under the infrastructure of progress.

And the doughnuts were delicious.

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