The Case

Boris Marinov

# The Case

“The presence of exceptions makes the whole system seem unstable.”

## The Call

She picked up the receiver, thinking about the end of her shift. Working in “999” wasn’t nearly as exciting as it used to be. They used to deal with the kind of events that people were making movies about and now mostly calling were crazy old people who were becoming more and more paranoid with age, even though the crime rate was approaching zero. “Just one more call,” she thought, “One more.”

“Your name please?” she said.

“助けて!” The answer came with a delay and it was in a language that she did not understand.

“Can you speak English please?” She said.

But the woman at the other end did not fulfil her request, which was unnerving because she seemed genuinely scared.

“Where are you? Where do you live?”

“Reggie Street.” the woman said.

Those were her last words.

## Jane

The office of Jane Martello was a huge dusty room, which also served as a warehouse for old pieces of evidence. Vincent Cooper, the current CEO of Scotland Yard, did not like to go there, but from time to time he had to, as the older he got, the more it seemed that she was the only person among his colleagues, to whom he could speak without fear of being misunderstood.

“Hello my friend,” he said to her as he entered her office. “I think he might have a huge problem.”

Jane turned her head away from her screen and towards him, looked at him for a moment, and then went back to looking at the screen.

“We do,” she said, “and we’ve had it since last week when stuff started happening.”

“I’m not talking about that.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” she looked at him again just to show him her angry grimace.

“And?”

“And, unlike you, I did my homework. Nobody but she had visited her apartment. There was no one to throw her out the window after she called us. She jumped.”

“Why would someone call 999 before killing themselves? Plus the system registered a suspicion. How are we gonna finish the case workflow-wise if you will?”

“Like I’m the person who decides that.”

They spent the next few minutes in silence.

“Okay,” Vince said, “I agree with you. But, after what happened last week, I think we should be extra cautious. Still, the robbery of the public vault is a real case, so keep on digging into that. And I’ll get someone to come with me to Den’s apartment and try to see if there is anything there.”

“Good luck with that,” Jane said.

Vince spent a second trying to determine if she was being sarcastic

(“You fool! Of course, she was”).

## Boffins

Vince started roaming through the open-office space, looking for someone to whom he could assign the task of researching an alleged murder. While doing so he once again realised, how many of the people he used to work with were gone and how little did he know about the ones who replaced them."

Most of them were programmers.

When Vince had started working there, the IT department of Scotland Yard was situated in the basement of the building and consisted of three boys supporting a simple document maintenance system. From then on, it grew steadily until it reached the present point where almost everything was IT. Currently the whole workforce of Scotland Yard roughly consisted of a couple of people like himself and Jane, who were in charge of knowing how everything works, about ten interns, who were doing arrests and other “unpleasant” activities which required direct contact with criminals, and about three hundred boffins (that is what they called all techies), most of which spoke only between themselves, had lunch in front of their computers, and were only indirectly related to the process of crime-solving. That last proposition was confirmed by the calmness with which they reacted to certain recent events. In the previous week, there had been a robbery costing millions of pounds and a few injured victims but all they did was involve him in an endless debate about whether the technical issue which facilitated the criminal’s escape was caused by their department or by their system’s vendor.

But Vince couldn’t blame them. This was *their* part, their job. Yes, someone did get away and that fact surely was giving some of them the creeps, but at the end of the day, they were neither able nor required to solve crimes. They were there just to support the system that did it.

Vince had to examine a lot of new faces before seeing a familiar one. It was Robert Jenkins who used to work as the head of the homicide department, back when the department existed. He remembered him as a brave fellow who knew how to handle stress, so he went to his desk without giving it a second thought.

“Hey Bobby, heard what happened today?”

“No,” Robert turned to him slowly. “What happened?”

“We might have a homicide,” Vince said. “Murder! It’s been how long?”

Robert said nothing.

“About fifteen minutes ago a woman called 999. Five minutes later she was found dead. It’s probably nothing, but it seems to me that you are the man who can confirm that. I want you at the crime scene in one hour-”

“Cut it, Vince,” Robert said. “You know I am just a regular employee now.”

“If you want a raise, that’s not a problem.”

“No, I *don’t* want a raise,” Robert responded.

Vince thought that he had misheard him at first, but then he looked more carefully at his old colleague. His cheeks were all wrinkled. He wore big glasses and behind them, his eyes looked jaded and tiresome.

“I am *sixty-one years old*, Vince,” he continued. “I had even quit for a year when you killed my department. I came back just because I have too many friends here. Don’t think that I don’t want to help you, but to deal with corpses? To put myself at *risk*? I’m sorry but if that is what’s required, I’ll be forced to leave.”

“Alright. Pack up your stuff then,” Vince said and then he walked to the parking lot alone.

## Den Lee

Vince got into his car and heard the computerised voice of the custom-design auto system pronounce the address of the incident: it was somewhere in the Asian district as he had suspected - it was the only region where their surveillance system was weak enough to permit any crime at all. The car proceeded to its destination while the speakers were serving him information about the case.

“The victim’s name is Den Lee, about 30 years of age, searching for more exact data. She has been a resident of London for about two years. She lived alone and made her living by selling handcrafted wooden dolls. The so-called”Kokeshi" is a kind of traditional Japanese dolls which originate from the northern part of the country. They are characterised by the use of floral motives and–"

“Next,” Vince said.

"She doesn’t seem to have maintained any social contacts…No data found regarding her Internet usage…’

The computer kept on going, but Vince was no longer listening to it.

## The Crime Scene

The first thing that he saw after he opened the door was his own frightened expression - there was a big antique mirror with a frame made of wrought iron which was standing in the hallway in front of the door so that the first thing that anyone entering the apartment sees is their reflection. He took a look around, realising that the mirror wasn’t by far the only unusually-old object that this place was furnished with - indeed there hardly was a thing there which was less than 50 years old, a fact which was giving it the atmosphere resembling that of those historic house-museums which Vince used to visit as a child, where everything was left untouched after the owner had died. The doors were locked using latches, there was a wooden coat rack next to the mirror and at the end of the hallway (he did not believe it at first) laid a stationary phone. Apparently, this was the device that Den had used to call them.

Seeing that one of the doors in the hallway was opened, Vince presumed that Den Lee went there after making the call and followed her footsteps. The room he entered looked like a living room, but the furniture there was placed randomly across the room as if the person who arranged it cared neither for aesthetics nor for convenience. There were a couple of big cabinets, all of them filled with drawing materials, and centred stood a big desk with different colours of paint poured all over it. There were pieces of cut wood everywhere, some of them roughly shaped in the form of a stylised human body. Upon inspection, Vince noticed that there wasn’t a single finished doll in the apartment.

But he was too occupied to think about that. At the bottom of the room, there were several huge windows, extending from the floor up to the ceiling. One of them was broken. Vince went to take a look through it but quickly turned his head away. He wasn’t sure how much of what he saw was real and how much was complemented by his imagination, what he knew was that he wasn’t looking down again for the world. For the first time, he realised how serious his situation was. What if it *was* a murder? Then he would be responsible for securing the city and apparently there wasn’t a single person in his team that knew what to do in case of such an event, including himself. So he called Jane:

“Hi Vince, did you reach her apartment?” She sounded somewhat concerned when she answered him, which was unusual for her.

“Yup,” Vince said.

“And?”

“It feels weird,” Vince said, but couldn’t think of any way to finish his sentence.

“Weird? The hell does that mean? Did you find something?”

“No,” Vince said. “I haven’t found anything.”

“Close the case and go home then,” Jane said. “Nothing suspicious, nothing to worry about.”

“But…”

“And stop looking like a scared child.”

An hour later, Vince went back to his office to fill out the reports. It was an easy job, as most of the information was already generated by the system - essentially all he needed to do was hit the “Close” button. And he knew that he had all the reasons to do so. Still, when the time came, he moved his finger and touched the button next to it: “Requires further investigation”.

## The Asian District

Vince stood by his front door. Jane had said that she would pick him up in the morning. She hadn’t bothered to tell him where they were going, but he was accustomed to that - his friend was so reluctant to explain herself that often the best way to find out what she had in mind is just to wait for her to act it out. However, when her car shifted to the direction opposite to the city, Vince decided that he could not afford to do so:

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“The Asian District.”

Vince waited for a little to make sure she didn’t intend to say anything else.

“And what are we doing there?”

“Trying to find help.”

She drove in silence until a little before they reached their destination. She had to slow down because a pack of around ten children was running around the street chasing a ball. Jane honked at them several times, but they did not seem to pay any attention to her, so she was forced to stop.

“Do all parents in this neighbourhood think that it’s a good idea to just let their children do whatever they like all day?” she said.

“Apparently,” Vince said, “but look on the bright side, this gives us time to talk about things. Like, for instance,”What the hell are we doing here?"

“Alright,” Jane said. "So yesterday this guy Robert came to me to beg me not to fire him. I tried to get him to help us and he said that he couldn’t, but he knew someone who could.

“And?”

“So after we killed the homicide department our pal Bobby had quit the Yard for a while and had started working part-time at some dry cleaning joint somewhere uptown. There he was often on shift with a boy named Ayer Cadman. Ayer was a silent boy, and so Bobby decided to break the ice with some stories about his past as a policeman.”

“Oh, brother,” Vince remembered how Robert used to ruin all kinds of corporate events and bore everyone to death with his incredibly verbose accounts of mostly trivial police operations. His stories had neither a beginning nor an end, and each of them inevitably reminded him of at least three more.

“Yeah, but it seems that the boy bought it. It asked for more and more of his narratives and demanded an even greater detail. And gradually…You remember those kids from back when we were at school who had no life but knew everything about, say, World War Two?”

“I do.” Vince thought of himself for some reason.

“Well, Ayer was the same type, but with classical forensic science,” Jane said. “And the last thing Bobby told me was that recently he had heard from Ayer again. Apparently, he had moved somewhere around this district to realise his passion.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know there are a lot of illegals here. Low Teks if you will - people who spend their life off the grid, to a certain extent. This, combined with the fact that our coverage in this area is still weak, makes it a perfect platform for all kinds of crime-hunting vigilantes. You remember back in the days when there was this profession called ‘private detective’?”

“Yes, but I don’t follow you,” Vince said.

“Say you live here and someone steals your car, but you don’t want to go to report the theft to the police, for some reason. Well, you have an alternative. You go to Cadman, you give him some money, and if you’re lucky, he finds it for you.”

“And you want us to hire him? Do we at least have any information about him, aside from Bobby’s tall tales?”

“No. No official witnesses, no Internet presence neither private nor business-related. It’s like he operates from another dimension or something.”

Soon they found out that although Ayer Cadman was virtually nonexistent online, amongst the people from this neighbourhood, he was quite famous. All of the people they asked knew who he was and most of them also had a story or two to share: “Ayer? Of course, I know him. I even have a friend who hired him once and-”

## Meeting Ayer Cadman

At the end of a small street, surrounded from all sides by much taller buildings, which hid it from plain sight, stood a monolithic old house. According to the people, this house functioned as both home and an office for Ayer Cadman, but on it, there weren’t signs accounting for either of those things. Vince and Jane stood by the door, wondering if they should ring at all, but at the end, Vince mumbled something about not going to the end of the city in vain and pressed the single doorbell.

An elderly woman opened the door:

“He is upstairs,” she said before they had a chance to ask her.

They nodded and climbed the stairs in silence, exchanging glances of various expressions, as if they were having some kind of telepathic conversation.

They found themselves in a spacious room with a very high ceiling and very beautiful, albeit run-down, furniture. Newspaper clippings were spread all over the table, as well as on the walls. Vince leant in to read them. They were mainly related to crimes, like last week’s robbery. He noticed that most of the text was crossed out with a black marker. As in Den Lee’s apartment, smart home appliances weren’t being respected - the only electronic he could see was an old tablet which sat on the table gathering dust.

“Mister Cadman!” Vince called.

“Yes, do come in,” someone replied.

It was the voice of a boy.

Ayer Cadman’s appearance wasn’t one that deserved long description: He was around 21 years of age, dressed a little more formally than one would normally dress if he was at home, but not so formal as to make him look like he was at work. His pants were all worn out, his hair shaggy, and he was leaning back in his chair with his arms behind his head. His expression was deadpan, up to the point that neither Vince nor Jane could sense how he felt about them coming. Was he angry that they came without notice? Was he going to talk? Or he would just stare at them without saying a word until they left.

After a while, Ayer looked at each of them from head to toe and nodded.

“Gentlemen. Sit if you want.”

“No thanks,” Vince said. “Ayer Cadman, right? Your reputation precedes you.”

“I can see that,” the boy said. “If it weren’t so you wouldn’t consider hiring me for something as serious as a murder.”

“Alright,” Ayer said. “Can I hear some details about the case?”

“Not until we hear what *you* already know,” Jane said. “All of it. The other case will be treated as a felony.”

“But I don’t know anything, Mrs-”

“Call me Jane.”

"OK Jane, it’s important to know that I am not some genius mastermind, nor I am trying to look as such - I sometimes even try to shut my mouth and act surprised at what my clients tell me. It is just that sometimes what they tell me is obviously not a secret, and so feigning ignorance makes me look uninformed. That’s why I have the habit of squeezing all the information out of each thing that a person says to me.

“But we haven’t told you anything.”

“One does not speak only with his words, Mrs-”

“Call me Jane.”

"Okay. So, Jane, you would probably agree that by looking at your appearance I can guess your approximate age.

“Probably.”

“And your profession as well.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that.”

“But I haven’t done anything illegal, and nowadays the false flags are very rare. So why are you here then? The next most probable explanation is that you are looking for help. But this is not a standard practice. So to do it you must be in very senior positions, possibly even C-level. That would explain your age too, as most of the people who work with you are pretty young. I admit that my last proposition was a bit fuzzy,” he continued after a while, “so you can easily question its validity. You may, for instance, say”But no one has killed anyone in this city for years" and you will be right. You may say that there is a huge unsolved crime from just a week ago, and your remark will be valid. Still, it is my firm conviction that there is only one kind of crime that can cause such radical alteration of your way of doing things. Only one kind of crime that can lead the leaders of one of the biggest organisations in this city in my humble office. And apparently, at least when it comes to our current situation, I was correct.

“Keep your shirt on,” Jane said. "You just got lucky. Plus, we’re not even sure it’s a real case. In fact, it most likely is nothing. We just need someone to confirm it. And if we like the way you work we may consider extending your trial period.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Ayer said. “I work alone.”

“And we don’t work with contractors,” Jane said. “You will be employed part-time first and full-time later, or you will not work for us at all.”

“Well. Then, I hope you reconsider your policy.”

“I am afraid that is not possible,” Vince said.

“Well, maybe then we will work together at some other time,” Ayer said.

“Ayer, we have a girl lying dead in the morgue, for fuck’s sake,” Jane said. “If you really believe you are any good –as you obviously do– what is your excuse for staying in your room jerking off to your principles instead of helping us?”

“Well if *you* think that I am any good you would–”

“But we don’t think that. And even if we did, we represent a big powerful organisation with hundreds of employees, which does not make exceptions just because there are workflows and systems that are bigger than any of us. So changing our policy is not an option.”

“I see…” Ayer opened one of the notebooks from his desk and skimmed through a couple of pages. Then he opened another one and marked something in it with his pen.

“Okay, I accept,” He said finally. “I will try to help you, but I don’t want my identity investigated in any way. I don’t one anyone asking me where I went to school, what did I do for a living or if I knew this and that person, and so on. I don’t respond to such questions.”

“Alright,” Vince said. “Be there tomorrow. And I am warning you: there are going to be more rules which you must follow. the Yard is not a place for experiments.” And as soon as he said that, Vince immediately realised that hiring Ayer was itself an experiment and a dangerous one at that. He’d already seen how smart he was, and he knew fairly well that a person does not gain that kind of intelligence by following the rules and doing what they’re told.

“OK, anything else?” Ayer asked.

“Yeah, I have a question,” Jane said. “Where the hell did you learned to talk like that?”

“From books, gentlemen. From *these* books.”

Up to that point, Jane hadn’t noticed that the whole wall next to Ayer’s desk was filled top to bottom with bookshelves. Historic accounts, novels, textbooks of forensic science…Some of the newer ones, she knew from her college days, the older ones she’d only heard about.

“Please, allow me.” The boy said half-jokingly and pulled out a folder of laminated sheets of paper. It was an article from a magazine which, judging from the looks, was issued before about an eternity. It was titled ‘The Book of Life’. She took it out and opened a random page. It was something about how everything in the world can be deduced using logic. She found it interesting, but a little pretentious. Somewhat like the name of the author - someone named Sherlock Homes.

# In the Yard

## Pankill

The Scotland Yard resided at a low but very huge building surrounded by an elementary school and a park. Ayer walked through one of its alleys, along with several first-graders which were on their way to class, and by eight o’clock he was already standing by the entrance. He was wearing jeans, a monochrome t-shirt, and a baseball cap. His looks resembled that of a celebrity going incognito - someone who does not want to be found. Still, an employee came for him almost immediately.

“Hello, Mr Cadman.” The man reached out to shake hands. “My name is Pankill Shah; I am one of Scotland Yard’s technical directors. Today I am here to provide you with some assistance for your work with our system. Come with me please, and we will proceed with the onboarding process.”

The man guided Ayer to the entrance - a big corridor with several revolving doors.

“Here is your entrance pass.” He said, “We will enter the building shortly, just before that we probably should go through the wardrobe so you can leave this…”

“It’s a sleeping bag,” Ayer said.

“Right, but you know you cannot use this here? Offices shut down at nine and no one is allowed to stay here after that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, you can discuss this with Mr Cooper if you want.”

“With Vince?”

"- but he specifically instructed me that for you there won’t be any exceptions. Which reminds me, you should also leave all your gadgets here. Specifically, those which can be used for capturing information - smartphones, audio recording devices, et cetera are forbidden. There are scanners for those at the entrance.

While his stuff was being searched, Ayer proceeded to scan Pankill’s appearance rather out of habit than for any other reason. He was wearing a rather plain-looking garment and overall his wardrobe looked like it consisted of whatever laid on the first stand of the local H&M. What caught Ayer’s attention was that he had high-class running shoes. Was he an athlete of some kind? That would be logical, but his whole physique screamed ‘No!’, with his weak muscles and hectic movement which made him look like he had no control over his own body. Rather, he was a person who only saw the practical side of things, a rather boring one at that, but it was refreshing for Ayer to see someone who had nothing to hide for once.

“This is the IT department.” Pankill’s voice directed Ayer’s attention to a hall the size of a football field, stuffed with desks and people. Most of them looked like copies of Pankill and of one another. The place reminded Ayer of a commune - there were a lot of computer desks, but also relax zones with ping-pong tables and game consoles. Even the canteen could be seen through several layers of glass. Everything was so revealing that Ayer even felt uncomfortable watching the people who work there, even though they didn’t seem to mind. “Ninety-nine per cent of our workforce is here,” Pankill continued.

“I suppose that includes me now?” Ayer said, trying to picture himself in this setting.

“No. You are not a regular employee of the Yard yet.” Pankill said. “You will be on the upper floor.” he took him to an older and a more traditional-looking hallway with a lot of doors and proceeded to guide Ayer through one of the many corridors. Most of them looked deserted.

## The System

“The system which we use is based on a project developed by IBM back in the ’90s,” Pankill started talking, right after they arrived at Ayer’s new office. “It allows you to inspect reports from all cases from the last five years, where a case contains information about what happened, clues, suspects, et cetera. So UI-wise, clicking on a suspect takes you to his profile, same goes for victims.”

“Victims also have profiles?” Ayer asked.

“We all do,” Pankill said.

“Even the people who work here?”

“Especially them. In fact, you should provide some information for your profile. A colleague of ours will probably contact you in a few days anyway.”

“I see,” Ayer said and immediately thought of several ways to escape from the situation.

“Anyway, your case is on your dashboard,” Pankill said, “That is Den Lee’s case. This is information about her purchase history, people whom she communicated with, et cetera.”

“And can I speak to any of them?” Ayer asked.

“Well, you are not *supposed* to need that to solve your case. Any information you need, you must request through our system.”

“From this program? That is a weird way to work.”

“How so?”

“And it’s a weird name too,” Ayer continued. “‘Detective’. Does this imply that it is meant to replace human detectives?”

“It does that, yes,” Pankill said, “among other things.”

“Well, why am I here, then?”

“To be honest, I really don’t know why you were hired.” Pankill looked through the window in order to avoid eye contact. “When it comes to Den, all indicators for her case point to a suicide.”

“What indicators?” Ayer asked.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Pankill said, trying to resume his presentation. “Currently in London, there are about thirty thousand cameras. Using facial recognition technology, as well as analysing appearance and continuity, we can identify all people captured by any of them. All this data gets accumulated in our database and if, for instance, we have *your* name - of course this isn’t that impressive as you were registered at the entrance, but still-”

On the screen, Ayer saw a map of the centre of the city in which the Scotland Yard building was marked with a red dot.

“of course, having access to all this information, it would be stupid of us not to aggregate it,” Pankill said and the dot started moving around the map, following the route which Ayer took on his way to the building, starting from the train station.

"And at the end, all this data is fed to a deep learning algorithm which finds patterns amongst the behaviours of the people being observed. From then on the algorithm does everything from solving crimes to predicting future tendencies. Questions?

“One,” Ayer said, “why didn’t all this work last week?”

“What do you mean by ‘last week’?” Pankill said.

“You know, the robbery which everyone is talking about.”

“Oh, that? That was a-”

“This can happen again, right?” Ayer looked directly into his eyes.

Pankill did not respond.

“Look, if you want me to help, I need to-”

“My friend,” Pankill interrupted him, “there are over two million people under our jurisdiction, there are around two hundred of us, and the unsolved crimes are two or three per month. We no doubt have our imperfections, but believe me, we don’t need help, nor do we plan to alter our approach. Quite the opposite - you too, if you work at our scale, will have to follow it. So from now on just accept this thing here,” Pankill pointed to the PC, “as your partner.”

“I will try,” Ayer said, and shortly he found himself staring at his screen as well, trying to imagine he was in a place where the streets were more than just lines, and the people - more than just dots which were moving through them.

The first thing that he did after Pankill left was to try to access his own profile in the database: ACCESS DENIED

## Oscar

The text that accompanied Den’s case was short and, for Ayer, nearly incomprehensible. It started with very basic information about the victim (“referring to her, as some sort of psychopath for not using social networks”, he noted) and the rest of it was a list of random trivia about her and her life. For Ayer, this stuff was irrelevant to what had happened. Worse, he couldn’t even see the logical connection between the individual sentences in the text. Still, he proceeded to go through it, swearing at his computer as he did. He remembered how Pankill had told him to view the computer as his partner and started addressing it as if they were partners in some cheesy 90’s American buddy-cop movie.

“Alright Oscar, I don’t like you and you don’t like me…or at least you *wouldn’t* like me if you were capable of understanding what I was saying. But let’s try to cope with one another, okay? I didn’t ask to be put with you, what I ask is to be professional about it.”

Ayer went a little earlier in time only to discover that there wasn’t any info about the victim from the period before she came to the city. Even her nationality wasn’t clearly confirmed.

“Now,” he continued while going through the items in one of the menus. “People say you are quite good. However, what you have for this case is unsatisfactory. So you should give me something else. Show me what’s happening in this city, for example.”

He entered some random search criteria and soon his screen was filled with a huge list of crimes committed around the same area as Den’s. He proceeded to go through all of them, but he quickly lost interest. Most of them were as trivial and rudimentary as the style in which they were described - they resembled badly written pulp fiction. Some of them were really based on old legendary stories that Ayer had read about in his books. That, in fact, was probably how the crime-fighting algorithm had solved them.

Click.

Click.

It did not take Ayer a great deal of time to figure out how the algorithm worked. What it did was to juxtapose each pending case with a large array of previously-solved ones and, provided it found a match, it basically closed the pending case using the match as a precedent. Many of the cases used as precedents were pretty old - so old that it was impossible for the people who committed the new crime to remember the original one. But the machine never forgot. And this, Ayer thought, was the brilliant part.

“And you know what else is brilliant, Oscar?” he continued. “That you made most people so stupid that this scheme of yours kinda works. However, in the human world, *kinda works* and *works* aren’t as close as you might think.”

Ayer went back to Den’s case and after he starred at the first sentence for three minutes without understanding a word. At first glance, it looked normal, but the words were arranged in such an unnatural way that he couldn’t capture the author’s intent, for the world. He felt that there was *no* human being capable of constructing such a sentence.

“Wait.”

No *human* being.

“Well, of course, they are automatically generated,” Pankill responded to him from the InterCall, after a few moments. “You think that someone would waste his time writing a description for each case individually?”

Ayer had spent a few minutes more with Oscar to confirm that the king was indeed naked and that although it was solving a lot of simple cases, the system was utterly unable to deal with those which were the fruits of even mildly elaborate planning.

## Take two

Ayer took a printout of several case files and sat in the canteen to go through them. He decided to take a different approach - he analysed the simpler ones in order to gain some insight into the way in which the items in a file related to real-world objects, and then he proceeded to reverse-engineer the system’s text generation utilities. It took him a long time, but in the end, he succeeded. After ignoring the bullshit which was generated due to the fact that the system was trying to analyse a complex case using methods devised for solving a simpler one, he found out that some of the information that he thought he needed was there.

Click.

But even that did not help him much as he just did not know what to look for. He was missing a starting point, a clear route for his journey. He was missing something that he didn’t even realise that he needed in the first place - inspiration. He got up from his chair and left, unsure as to where he was going.

“What am I doing here?” he thought while strolling through one of the countless corridors which went by all parts of the building like the tunnels of an anthill. “Why did I say ‘Yes’ to those people.”

But he almost immediately remembered why, after being prompted by Jane, he had to say “Yes”. He remembered that one woman lied dead, possibly murdered and that he apparently was the only person who cared to understand what had happened to her.

## Lost and Found

This realisation made Ayer want to go back to his room immediately. But which one was his? He walked back, trying to follow his footsteps from when he exited it, but all he was seeing was a long stretch of doors. All of them looked alike, as did the lamps, and the decorative plants which were held in each window. The only things different were the numbers on the doors. For Ayer, this was equivalent to walking in complete darkness. He was close to despair when his glance stopped upon one door at the end of the corridor. It wasn’t his door, but still, it was interesting him, for instead of a number, on it was a hand-written label: “Lost and Found”. Ayer didn’t think too much before opening it.

The door led to a small dark hallway, which at first sight seemed abandoned.

Click.

“Hey, who’s there?” the voice was coming from the other end.

Ayer moved so his face below one of the lamps.

“Cadman!” he heard the voice of Jane. “What was that sound?”

“I haven’t got the slightest clue,” Ayer said.

“Okay, and why are you here?”

“I was taking a walk,” Ayer said, “and I saw the sign. What does it mean?”

“It used to be a joke,” Jane said. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Alright. And pardon me for asking, but what are *you* doing here?”

“I work here.”

“I see,” Ayer said. "You probably used to work here from the beginning of your career when it was much busier than before. Then things changed but you refused to go downstairs.

“False. I moved here when the first floor was being redecorated into an open space and decided to stay after. I simply hate open spaces.”

“Had anyone else expressed his or her frustration with the quality of your reports?” Ayer continued.

“Do tell me all about it,” Jane said. “But if you want to tackle something more productive, what you need is probably back here.”

She led him into a dark room which resembled a warehouse. All walls were covered with huge shelves, filled with all kinds of peculiar objects. It didn’t take him long to figure out that he was in the Yard’s evidence storage facilities. There were guns, lock pickers, all kinds of confiscated objects. All of them, thrown indiscriminately on the shelves, like in a-.

“Now you know where that joke about ‘Lost and Found’ came from,” Jane said. “Go check what’s there.”

She was pointing at a big crate, labelled with the number of Den Lee’s case. The crate contained various items from her apartment, ranging from notebooks to drawing materials.

“Interested?”

When he saw it, Ayer apologised to Jane and then, with one swift movement, he tore the crate apart allowing for all stuff inside to roll on the floor.

“I trust you will be okay here yes?” Jane asked while Ayer was arranging the contents of the crate in several small piles.

Standing on the floor of the dark room, Ayer concentrated with all his mind at Den Lee and, in the end, he saw her. In his mind, she was standing on her desk, chopping a piece of wood. Her movements were slow, her face showed indifference towards what she was doing as if she was occupied by something else. Still, the piece of wood in her hand slowly took on the silhouette of a stylised human body. She proceeded to paint it. First, she laid the base colour and then, with a few quick strokes, the decorations. She then left the doll at her desk and-

Ayer opened his eyes to take a quick glance at Den’s belongings, but as soon as he did, her image disappeared and a single thought occupied its place.

“Hey Jane,” he called to her when she was just about to leave the office. “Is this all?”

“Is *what* all”?

“Den’s belongings. Are all of them here?”

"As a matter of fact they are - the landlord wanted the apartment free by the next day, so everything which wasn’t his property, we took. Found anything interesting?

“I fancy that the things I *didn’t* find are interesting.”

“You are a weird kid,” she answered but didn’t ask him anything else. “See you tomorrow, I hope.”

Ayer said one quick “Goodbye” and returned to his thoughts. Apparently, none of the dolls that Den Lee created were found in her apartment. So, provided that the murderer existed, their disappearance was the only trace that they had left so far.

Ayer glanced at Jane’s desk. After realising she had left her computer unattended, he went to it.

“Oh Oscar, long time no see.”

For a second time, he typed his own name in the Detective’s search field. This time he had access. And surprisingly, the information there was much more detailed than he had anticipated. It was the biggest file he had seen so far. And the date of the last update was today.

“It can’t be that bad,” Ayer thought, but then he saw the list of people who viewed it. All Yard employees to whom he had spoken were there, and some of them were even contributing to it.

He closed the door, looked around for a minute or two - just to get rid of the feeling that he is being watched - and when he felt calm, he went back to the room and started traversing it.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click…

## His Trusty Polaroid.

As soon as he got back to his house, Ayer reached in his bag and took out his trusty Polaroid. It was an analogue instant camera which he had always found very useful. And which, apparently, none of the Yard’s scanners for information-carrying devices could detect. His bag was full of pictures he had taken with it, mostly of Den’s belongings. They were accompanied by the printout he used, and a large data dump from the Yard’s system. He knew that downloading stuff from their computers most probably meant that he would not be permitted to visit the Yard again, but he didn’t intend on visiting it soon anyway. He started examining the pictures and files one by one and, with a black marker pen, he coloured all of the space which he thought was irrelevant to him black. When he was finished processing a given item, he would place it somewhere in his room, depending on how important it felt for him.

A central place in this composition was saved for pictures of Den’s dolls, which he took from the website where she was selling them. Ayer thought of them as the first piece of the puzzle, so he decided to begin by studying them in depth. At first, they seemed too similar to one another to be interesting. They looked cheap, and they *were* cheap, as he could confirm by their sales history. Then why would someone steal them? The question was obviously central, but maybe it was too early for it.

A few hours later, Ayer had given names to most of the dolls and had pretty solid mental images to their appearance. He knew them all, except a selection of eight dolls which still seemed pretty similar to one another. All of them were painted almost completely black, which made their features almost indistinguishable from one another. But after concentrating for a full hour at each of them, he thought that he found a difference - it seemed that one of them was winking at him.

# Hostility and Understanding

## The Case of Guy Moscovitz

Early morning upon arriving at work, Vince discovered the door of his office opened. He was positive he hadn’t left it that way as he was certain that no one else working here would, so he took a couple of steps back and called security. Having a couple of people behind his back, he gathered the courage to lean down to see if someone was inside. There indeed was someone, and when he recognised him he dismissed them and entered the room shouting:

“Ayer! What are you doing here?!”

“I work here,” Cadman was standing on the visitor’s chair next to Vince’s desk staring at his notes. “At least I wasn’t notified otherwise.”

“Well, how the hell are we supposed to notify you about anything, when you don’t even visit the office? People from the record department have been asking for you every day of the past week.”

“Believe me, you have bigger issues than my records not being in order,” Ayer said. “I solved a case last night,” he continued, “one which you will no doubt find interesting.”

“Was it the one we hired you for?” Vince asked, but Ayer did not respond.

“A bloke named Guy Moscovitz.” He said, “Arrives in London about a month ago. the Museum of Natural Art and from there he stoles two paintings, your system locates him with no problem and five minutes later your colleagues are at his door. But here comes the interesting part: He is not in his room. Neither he is in any other room, nor anywhere else in the hotel. And nobody had seen him since then.”

“His identity?”

“Stolen. The real Guy Moskovitz is at the other end of the world.”

“Alright. So what new can you tell me about this?”

“Where do I start? Firstly, this person, who stole the paintings, he does not really exist.”

Vince frowned.

“OK, we should probably go get some coffee,” Ayer said.

Vince already had coffee at home, but he did not think that mentioning this would make any difference, so he got up from his desk and took Ayer to the canteen, where Ayer got a Cappucino with double milk and finally started talking in a manner which was a little less obscure:

“First I did a small research,” he started, "and I discovered that this was not the first time that Guy Moscovitz became invisible: according to the Detective, when he arrived in London, he travelled from the airport to his hotel without a single camera capturing him.

It is relevant to mention something about the hotel, where he checked in," he continued, apparently following his notes, “it is a low-cost joint and there are a lot of blokes who live there full-time just because it is a little cheaper than renting an actual apartment. One of them, John Tally, is an ex-con artist. And incidentally,” Ayer made a pause to take a sip from his coffee, “he and the so-called Mr Moskovitz were never out of the building at the same time.”

“And you think that-”

“What I think is roughly the following: first John Tally acquired Guy Moskovitz’s identity and he used it to make a reservation at the hotel room next to the one which he was staying. Then, shortly after the plane landed, he dressed in this ridiculous suit of his, and came at the lobby to pick up the key, presenting himself as Guy Moskovitz and thus putting your records in the state in which he wanted them to be. From there on he was free to act our the rest of his plan,” Ayer took his cup and used a straw to suck the last few drops of its contents, making a loud noise. “So what do you say?”

“Ayer, you are a smart boy,” Vince started. “But I really feel that you would make for a lousy police person - the world simply isn’t as weird and mysterious as you imagine it to be.”

“Maybe it’s not,” Ayer said. “or maybe it depends on how you look at it. But in this case, I checked the airline records, and there wasn’t a Mr Moscovitz on board. And I contacted John Tally, the con artist, at least I attempted to do so - he is gone.”

“So this really *did* happen?”

“I can guarantee it,”

“But how? How did he think of that?” Vince’s question was directed more at himself than to Ayer.

Ayer smiled, “Well since you are asking, maybe someone else directed him,” he said and then added, “Actually, that is what I came here to discuss.”

## Confrontation

The conference room was huge, especially compared to the small number of people in it. The screen was turned off and it seemed like it was there only to reflect the light coming from hundreds of diodes, which were mounted to the ceiling. Ayer sat at one of the many free chairs, nodded to Pankill and Jane, while they were going through their daily agenda and waited patiently- for his turn to come without saying a word. He did not look as out of place as Vince expected him to, but upon closer inspection, his manners were starting to feel an awful lot like a camouflage. When his turn

“Hello,” Ayer said, nodding to everyone and smiling with a smile which was making him look like a different person. "I came here to share a theory related to several cases on which I am working on, both officially and unofficially.

Perhaps it would seem weird for you to concentrate on just an isolated group of cases, and not to look at all crime as one uncountable whole, as you do usually. So I will begin with some of my impressions of the “Detective”: I believe it is a fairly rudimentary system. Which by itself is OK, since most crimes are equally rudimentary, even trivial if I may say so. However, this rule has several exceptions. As in “exceptional” that is - cases like the vault robbery and the alleged murder of Den Lee are, for me, another category of crimes. Both their planning and execution are flawless. In fact, so flawless, that you even hesitate to share with me how they are done-"

“Why are you so obsessed with this robbery?” Vince asked.

“Cases like these are the reason why you hired a consulting detective like me to work alongside your colleagues.” Ayer continued. “Now, what I am about to tell you might surprise you, although it is actually quite logical - I think that the authors of these crimes are using some consultancy of their own.”

“What?” Vince asked.

“Imagine if there was a person or a group of people who are connected to everything that is happening right now. I will call him or her”Moriarty" for short - this is the name of a famous criminal from the Victorian era. Everybody who committed crimes in the past three months may be connected to Moriarty. And it is my firm conviction that Den Lee knew him personally."

“And where did you get all this from?” Jane said while Ayer was still talking.

“I will tell you, but you probably won’t believe me,” Ayer said.

“What makes you think we believe you now?” Jane said.

“Yes Ayer,” Vince started. “I do agree that the fact that so many unresolved cases were opened almost simultaneously does not *look* like a coincidence, but let’s not jump to”conspiracy theory-style conclusions before reviewing the *information* that we have about them."

“That is how do we get to my second point,” Ayer said, “Unfortunately, your algorithm is not sophisticated enough for me to even call the data you have ‘information’. When the connections are simple enough for a simple matching rule to detect them, this algorithm is all you need, but in the current case-”

“OK, stop Ayer,” Vince said. “I mean, I know that our way of working is not your cup of tea, but mate, you are not even trying! Yes, our files contain nothing more than a list of facts. And yes, our algorithm is only a little more than an application of the stimulus-response model. But do you think that humans are really a lot more complicated than that? I mean try to read the darn files for starters! You will probably find out that if you have the biography of a given person in front of you, and you connect the dots, you will have a pretty darn good idea about what this person is all about!”

“Then how good of an idea you have about *me*?” Ayer looked at Vince with a grimace.

“And because we don’t, we cannot trust you,” Jane said. “Especially when all you have is a hinge.”

"How can I have anything more when I don’t have access to most of the cases that I am referring to?

“And how the hell do you expect us to grant you that access?” Jane said. “More specifically - why? Because you seem nice? Because some people from your neighbourhood are fond of you? You desire to access cases which are at the highest level of secrecy and at the same time you didn’t want to share a single fact about your life!”

To her and Vince’s surprise, after this remark, Ayer lowered his voice and started sounding a lot less confident:

"I don’t know what do you need to know about me, but I really don’t want to discuss my personal life.

“You poor thing. I can assure you that nobody gives a shit about your *personal* life,” Jane said. “It is your professional practices that we are accessing, if I may call them this way.”

“I just want to help, please stop,” Ayer’s voice sounded so desperate that Jane really did stop speaking, “I am just a boy, why are you attacking me?”

“You have children. You handle this!” Jane turned to Vince.

Vince sat next to Ayer, who was standing with his face buried in his hands as if he was about to burst into tears, and waited for him to come down before starting to speak: “Look, Ayer, here’s the deal - we really like some of your ideas. And we really want to help you. But in order to do that, we have to be assured that you know what you are doing. And at the moment we are not, and cannot be, simply because we don’t know anything about you. Because, Ayer, as hard it is for me to admit it, your remark was absolutely correct - the data from your file tells us nothing about who you are and how the hell have you gained the experience that you have. So currently your persona constitutes one more unknown term in our equation, and believe me when I say that we have enough of those already.”

“But I have nothing to hide,” Ayer said, “Nothing.”

“Then tell us. Tell us how you became what you are.”

“Alright,” Ayer’s face regained his usual emotionless expression. “How much time do we have?”

## “I Did Not Want to be Mediocre”

“I didn’t want to be mediocre,” Ayer spoke fast and stopped only to take a sip from the cup of Cappucino that Vince had brought him. “I wanted everything I do to be perfect, but at the same time I had no idea what that meant and how could I achieve it. As a result, I missed most of my youth. I was apathetic - I went to study in a university after finishing school because that’s what everybody did, I worked the job that my father had arranged for me because it was the easiest thing I could do. I spent my free time reading books and I thought that this was making me better than everyone else, actually, it was more like the opposite,” Ayer was smiling as he was speaking, “Although, to be fair, it helped me immensely.”

“Now when you speak about your job, you are referring to the dry-cleaning place where you met Robert?”

“Correct,” Ayer said, “At the time that business belonged to my father. Naturally, he wanted to hand it to me after he retired and I did not want to offend him, so I did everything that he asked me, but nothing extra, as he’d always taught me to do exactly what I am told. So one day he came to me and told me that I am a complete failure. He was drunk at the time and the next day he denied ever having said that, but few weeks after I was still pondering at his line of logic:”I do everything that I am told and, in some way, I still fail. How come?" He made a brief pause and when he started speaking again his voice filled with emotion. "He could not explain it to me, but I understood it… See, I was like him. I was not being myself. I was not doing what I *had* to do.

Jane tried to stop Ayer a few times, but the more she was trying to direct his narrative, the more clearly she envisioned the labyrinth which was in his head, realizing that there were a very few places where his thoughts could alter their routes and even fewer destinations that they could arrive at, so the best that she and Vince could hope for was that the current destination was at least close to where *they* wanted to get.

“So what is mediocrity, really?” Ayer continued. “Do you think you have answered this question for yourselves in a way which satisfies you? Because I did - mediocrity is *convenience*. Comfort if you must. If you already want to know how your day will end after you wake up, then you are condemning it to be nothing more than what you expect from it. And if it indeed is, then what difference does it make whether you spent it woke or asleep? Comfort had always been goal number one for my family and for everyone else that surrounded me,” Ayer continued, "Everything they did was related, directly or indirectly, to their desire for their life to be easier and smoother, and so it was. But me, it was then when I realised that I prefer it to be complex. As complex as it needs to be.

“Is this why you became a low-tek?” Vince asked.

“I don’t think this word makes any sense for me. In fact, I can think of a hundred labels with which I call you, her and everyone else I met here at the Yard and which are thousand times more accurate and meaningful than ‘low tek’.”

“After cutting comfort our of the equation, deciding what I wanted to do with my life was easy,” Ayer continued, “It took me a few minutes to ask myself”Why am I here and not there?" and to start acting accordingly. I immediately realised I needed to go where they needed me and my abilities. You might want to ask my landlord, Mrs Johnson, for the exact date of my arrival at her house. But for me, it was about five years ago. I went there with three bags of luggage. One of those bags still stands untouched in my closet - that is how detached I was from my actual needs. There, I met many people for a really short period of time: everyone was interested in meeting the weird bloke who moved to their neighbourhood on purpose. I used this attention to acquire contacts: many people were asking me what I do for a living and I was happy to answer them. I told them that what I am in the business of finding lost things, something like that."

“And have you had any luck?” Vince asked.

"Barely. In the first month, I must have offered my services to nearly a hundred people, and none of them wished to take advantage of them, even for free. But I wasn’t expecting anything different - for me, the important thing was that they knew what I did and when they could find me.

“And how did you sustain a living during this period?” Vince asked.

“I worked as a docker for a daily wage. Hard work, but bearable once you get used to it.”

“So again no way to verify what you are saying,” Jane said," Interesting."

“Tell me what can you”verify" about the average person living outside of your zoo?" Ayer asked. “If you really want to be sure about this particular fact, I can direct you to a person who can testify that I was indeed working there. And I am positive he will remember me, as later he became my first client.”

## Debut

"You know, colleagues of mine have one huge advantage over practitioners of other professions - our clients are often desperate. And desperate people are willing to believe every person who tells them that there is hope. Such was the case with the first bloke who hired me. Three days before he came to my office he had sent his daughter to school like every other day. He hadn’t seen her since then.

When I started working, I assumed that the girl was alive, as the opposite would deem the whole endeavour pointless. From this, it followed that the person or people I was seeking lived in a huge apartment, where they could remain unnoticed, probably even a house. Also, they probably had a lot of free time. And while these two things weren’t nearly enough to start searching for the culprit, one more assumption from my side filled the gap: unlike most of the people who live in our neighbourhood, my client was a very engaged parent. He didn’t leave his daughter alone very often. Because of this, I assumed that whoever kidnapped her did not pick her at random. He had probably been watching her for a long time.

I interviewed a lot of people who knew the girl: doctors, teachers, etc. When that didn’t work, I asked my client to draw me a map of her route to school and started walking through it at approximately the same hour that she used to do it. In that way, I encountered a match - a person who was rich had a lot of free time and did not talk to his neighbours too much. However, I wasn’t sure I was right. Because that person was a woman.

The person whom I am talking about was an elderly widow, who lived alone in a house that originally belonged to her husband. After his death, she had lived a lonely life - none of her neighbours could tell me anything about her. When I examined her trash can I found a branded toystore bag. At that time this was enough reason for me to break into her house. The girl was there, sleeping in a fully furnished children’s room. I took her by her hand and got her to her parents, disregarding the widow. Months later I learned her story, she never had a kid, because her husband didn’t want to, and after his death, she had been too old to adopt one. It was then when I considered the case closed."

“OK, that’s better.” Vince said, “I even found some information about the woman.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Jane asked.

Ayer told them about five more cases, without missing a beat. He was very detailed, so when he got to begin the sixth one, Jane stopped him:

“Let’s not go there.” She said. “Vince?”

“OK, I suppose that is enough,” he said. “No we will not give you full access, but we can tell you what happened the night the vault got mugged.”

“Really?” Ayer asked.

Vince frowned: “Ever heard me joking?”

## The Women in Black

“OK, let’s start by restating what I already know,” Ayer said, “the vault was stormed at about nine in the evening, and, judging by the way the entrance looked the next day, I suppose that a bomb of some kind was involved. I saw the recording of the security camera, showing a young woman escaping from the building. She wasn’t carrying anything with her which leads me to believe that what she did was to move the contents of the stormed deposit boxes into a deposit box of her possession. Which, while pretty clever by itself, is probably not the *only* unusual thing that she did else you wouldn’t be so secretive.”

“That is true,” Pankill said and turned on the screen. “What you are about to see are strictly confidential records from the robbery, so please take the whole thing seriously. Anyways, when the suspect left the building, we were ready-”

On the screen, Ayer saw the silhouette of a young girl, wearing a black dress and high heels. She was displayed from several camera angles as she exited the vault.

“The image wasn’t good enough for us to identify her,” he continued. “but we were quite able to track her down, as I showed you before-”

On the screen, Ayer saw a map of the city, with the whereabouts of the girl marked with a red spot.

“So at first, it seemed that there was no way that she could get away. When this happened-”

On the screen, the red spot split into two identical red spots, which began moving in different directions. Several seconds later the same thing happened again. And yet again, until the number of sport on the screen was eight.

"And before you asked, no, there was nothing wrong with our system. It is just that when it has to recognise one person in the presence of another one and their faces aren’t visible it uses a combination of physical characteristics like height, clothes, hairstyle et cetera to tell them apart. In normal cases, this works perfectly. But if you specifically aim to deceive it, then breaking it is actually quite easy.

The girl walked to the end of the street where waiting for her were six identically-looking and identically-dressed girls. The dark colour made it even harder for anyone to know the difference between them. She took a peek at the only camera and dove in the group, in a way that made it impossible to keep track of her identity.

“So you failed to arrest them?” Ayer asked.

“We got some of them,” Pankill said, “Most of them were prostitutes, but were completely innocent when it comes to the case at hand. One of them, of course, got away, but we cannot find out which one is it, let alone prove that she is guilty. So this is where the story ends for now.”

Ayer did not say anything. When Vince glanced at him he looked startled. “A truly unusual case, right?” Vince said, “But I think it is safe to say that it definitely isn’t an instance of organised crime.”

“It is safe to say,” Ayer repeated after Vince tried to extract an answer from him with his stare.

“What do you have in mind?” Jane said.

“If you are really interested, you’ll have to come with me?”

“Where?” she asked.

“At my office.”

## Connections

“I understand he is awkward,” Vince said while he and Jane were taking the elevator to the parking, “But does that mean we should let him get on our nerves?”

“I am not nervous,” Jane said, “Plus what, you don’t think he will deliver?”

“I hope he will.”

“Maybe he just needs a mentor,” Jane said, “Someone who went through the same stuff as he goes and managed to employ his emotions into something constructive,” she looked at Vince.

“Yes, very funny.” He said.

They picked up Ayer from the garden and left for his house. When they stopped by the house, it was already dark. They moved to the entrance and Ayer unlocked the door.

“Ayer, is that you?” The woman that they met earlier came by the door as they were entering. “And I suppose these are your new clients. The ones for which you don’t tell me anything about. Care for a cup of tea?”

“We’re not allowed to drink at work,” Jane said.

“Oh, I see,” Linda said as she made way for them. “So *that* is why Cadman was working so hard last night. I could hear him from the other end of the house.”

“Excuse me? Hear him?” Vince said.

“We gotta go now Vince,” Jane said.

While they climbed the stairs, they remembered the room that they were about to enter - there was a round table in the middle of it, two chairs were placed facing each other at one of the corners, and on another one there was a desk. They also remembered the newspaper clippings that were hanging from the wall. They were the first thing that gave them a hint about the person whom they were about to meet.

When they entered, they didn’t see any of these things. The carpet was removed, the furniture was placed at the corners of the room, and the newspaper clippings that previously occupied just the whiteboard, were now spread across the entire room. Even more weirdly, there were numerous strings of cord which stretched between some of the clippings, connecting them with one another.

Vince soon saw that actually not all of the sheets of paper were from newspapers. He got a bit closer to verify his suspicion, and although he could not get near enough to read them without tearing some of the strings, he saw them well enough to know that they were excerpts from various Scotland Yard files. The other two walls were also plastered with paper - photographs from the evidence room.

“What the hell is this?” Vince turned to Ayer who was just about to enter and grabbed him by the shirt.

“Stop it,” Jane said.

Vince released Ayers shirt and directed his anger to Jane: “How the hell did he get all this?”

“Full disclosure: I left my computer on purpose when I left,” Jane said. “Seeing how Ayer worked I thought it might be useful for him to save some of the stuff.”

Vince shrugged: “Alright, you deal with all this then,” and then he looked again at the collage which was occupying all of the room this time more carefully, “What *is* it, anyway?”

“Well, I assume these represent relations,” Jane said and she pointed to one of the strings. Looking closely, Vince realised that each of them connected a picture from the front wall to a newspaper clipping or a file from the wall on the left. There was some stuff on the third wall too but there weren’t as many strings coming from it.

“Great, so you basically created a physical version of a database,” Vince said.

“Except that in this one, Den’s pictures are somehow related to some of the cases,” Jane said, “What is this about?”

Ayer did not give her an answer, so she rushed to the wall to check for herself. She found the case of Guy Moskovitz which Ayer had solved on the same day - and followed the string. It led to a picture of one of Den’s dolls - a small male figure, with a large beard and a hat.

“Is this why you called us?” Vince screamed when he saw the picture, “Because of this meagre resemblance?”

“If it were only one, I wouldn’t bother,” Ayer said. “But Last night I managed to solve at least three more by analysing patterns in Den’s art. And I can say that there are obvious connections for at least two more.”

“OK, and where are the others?” Vince started looking at the pictures.

“Forget about the others,” Ayer said, “Look at *this one*.”

And he pointed to one big picture, which was placed at the centre of the wall. On it, there were eight identical-looking dolls - they had no decoration, they even lacked most facial features. And unlike most kokeshi dolls, which were painted in bright colours, these were painted in solid black. This picture wasn’t connected to anything.

“I didn’t know what this one meant,” Ayer continued. “Until I learned about the robbery.”

“You are crazy!” Vince said.

“True, but not related,” Ayer said. “I took all pictures from your archives, there is no feasible explanation of there being so many similarities between Den’s art and various crimes some of which weren’t even committed when it was made.”

“Unless?” Vince was asking Ayer, but it was Jane who responded instead:

“Unless everything is connected as he says. With her at the top.”

“From absurdity, everything follows,” Vince said with a pathos.

“Shut up.” Jane said, “Ayer, leave us for a sec, will you? We need to examine all of this in private.”

As he was leaving his office, Ayer noticed that Vince and Jane started chatting in a manner which was quite different, and much more informal from the one they were using in public. They almost didn’t speak in sentences but in sounds and grimaces. It looked like they were performing some kind of ritual and that everything that was going to happen was long decided.

“Ayer, its good to see you again,” Vince said once he was back. “Look after we examined your theory more closely we think that there might be some truth in it after all. Enough for us to allow you to continue developing it as a full-time investigator in the Scotland Yard, welcome aboard.” Vince got up to shake his hand but Ayer stepped aside.

“What does that mean?”

“It means a lot of things, actually,” Vince said, " It means that you will be one of the youngest people to attain this position. It means that you will be required to be at our office every day. And, what probably most interests you - you will be able to request info, meet with witnesses et cetera.

“I wasn’t asking about the position, I was asking about your decision. Where are you going with this? What is your endgame?”

“Comfort-” Jane replied instead of him. “For us, that is. For you, it is solving complex problems until your nose bleeds or even afterwards if it suits you.”

“Yes, but why are hiring *me*. When Vince was pretty clear that he doesn’t believe my theories. Or maybe your opinions differ?”

“You seem to know very little about communication, and cooperation with other people,” Vince said, “But we think that you can learn with time. We don’t believe *you* but we believe *in* you. Whatever is happening is definitely not what you think it is. But still, if anyone can understand it it’s you. And you *will* understand it! We will help you…”

Jane knew what Vince had to say to Ayer so she moved away from them and started wandering around the room. Their conflicts were much harder to see from afar - from the way in which Vince was talking and Ayer was nodding in return, it seemed that, after all, they *were* getting along. As a matter of fact, at that exact moment, they looked like two fourteen-year-olds, conversing about their toys in the school hallway. She even felt a mild disappointment when she was looking at them - it seemed like that the hostility between them was gone and with it, the fire which made everything about their relationship interesting.

After a while, she felt bored with the view and left the room. Vince and Ayer were so concentrated with one another that neither of them noticed, and Ayer didn’t seem to mind her going through his stuff anyway, at least much less than he minded her, or anyone else, looking into his past. She opened the door closest to her - this was Ayer’s “office” - really a room containing one desk and two chairs, (not counting the books). She opened another door - a bedroom. And another - this one turned out to be a closet. She remembered that Ayer had said that one of his bags was still in his closet, in the same way as he prepared it when he left his family home.

But there were no bags there.

# “Your tools”

Pankill was still half-asleep when he entered his office. He took off his jacket and his backpack at the same time and placed them on the floor.

“Hello Pankill,” He heard a loud voice, which startled him so he jumped towards the door and tripped over his backpack. “It’s OK,” The voice continued, “It’s just me.”

“Cadman?” he shouted, “What the… You scared me!”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Ayer looked unusually cheerful. “If I may say so, for a person who is in charge of security, you don’t feel very safe.”

“Can I help you?”

“So I wanted you to show me a thing or two about this system of yours.” “What exactly?”

“Let’s begin with *everything*.”

Pankill looked Ayer in a way that made him feel like he was obliged to elaborate:

"So yeah… I will work for the Yard full-time. And by the way, I am happy for us working together. I know that I ignored you the first time, but I assure you that now it will be different. If you agree to help me and work with me, I will do anything you want me to.

“Well, you can get off my chair, for starters,” Pankill said and he watched Ayer as he stood up and almost jumped through the desk to the other part of the room. He didn’t relax fully until he positioned himself in his usual place like any other day, and after doing so he immediately started his machine. After a few second both he and Ayer saw the then-familiar face of the “Detective” application.

“No, not with this program,” Ayer said, “That one sucks.”

“And what makes you say that?” Pankill replied.

“Just one thing.” I’ve never seen *you* using it."

“Me?” Pankill asked, his mind shifting between anger and amazement.

“Yes you,” Ayer said, “Both when we were viewing the records of the vault robbery and when you were showing that stuff to Vince, you never opened the”Detective" You used other programs, like the one with the dark background, where you type some text and it gives you responses. How is it called?"

“What, the command-line?” Pankill said, “But that is not really a program.”

“So what it is?” Ayer said, “I know that you won’t use anything else but the best. So I want to use your programs.”

“Listen. these tools, they are not very intuitive to work with. I use them simply because I am used to them. And you are not.”

“I want to use your programs,” Ayer repeated.

“Alright, let’s hope you are serious,” Pankill said. And with a press of a button, he made the whole graphical user interface of his computer disappear. His whole screen became completely black, save for a single white cursor which was blinking on the top-left corner, where presumably the text would go.

“Hello darkness, my old friend…”

# The Unexpected Witness

## Status Report

Vince found Ayer at the exact place where one of his coworkers said he will be - it was one hallway near an area of the building which remained deserted after the layoffs. While approaching Ayer, Vince though whether it is appropriate to bother him this way - he hadn’t talked to him in almost a month, and the only reason why he knew where he was, was his colleagues’ unwanting, or inability, to shut their mouths. And Ayer didn’t look like he wanted to speak to him either - out of his many emotionless expression which Vince had learned to differentiate in the course of the last several months, this one was particularly uninviting. Still, he approached him and greeted him formally:

“Hello Cadman, what are you doing, are you free to talk?”

Ayer did not say anything at first, at the end he muttered something but it was far from the level of coherence which Vince was expecting to from him.

“Don’t get me wrong, I always thought that this hallway was a pretty nice place.” Vince continued "- it is just that it doesn’t *go* anywhere, you know?

"It’s not like *I* am going anywhere either.

“Yeah but… What’s happening Ayer?” Vince thought that being honest was the best way to attack the situation, "Your manners, your tone… you act like we don’t know each other.

“You think I don’t know who you are and why are you here?” Ayer stared at him. “You are my boss. You came to me because it’s been exactly three months since I started here. You pretend to be my friend, although you’d probably prefer to be my parent if you got to pick. You like me, but you feel bad about it. Have I made a mistake so far?”

“Can you stop please?” Vince said, but Ayer didn’t quit:

“You are married to a woman you are friends with, but towards whom you don’t feel passionate about. You pretend that you don’t need passion, but in fact, you do. That is why you need to make up for your life’s dullness by flirting with your partner in a way that’s, if I may say so, rather clumsy.”

“OK, enough!” Vince said. “You got everything correctly. You win. You are good. One of the best in fact, not that this is such a big deal. But still, I am your boss. And now you have to come with me.”

“So, people say nice things about your work.” Vince started, once they settled themselves in the canteen."

“I don’t understand. I did nothing. Den’s file is almost empty.” Ayer replied.

“Are you kidding? You must have solved ten cases since you got here. And a hundred more were solved by the Detective using your ideas. Like we care about Den Lee.”

“The Japanese have no records about this person ever existing.” Ayer continued. “She was running away from something. I don’t have any idea what. But I believe she is the key to finding out who is behind the odd crimes. There must be some reason for all this which is happening.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no,” Vince said, “In any case, why do you bother with it? We capture all perpetrators with zero issues, you do a pretty good job at solving the deviant cases, and after the boffins implement some of the tactics you use into the Detective, we all can basically drink tea all day.”

“…drink tea all day,” Ayer repeated.

“Yes,” Vince said, “Look, I said it earlier, you are correct that being an employee of the month is not important. You know what is important though? That if today you submit a patch to the Detective’s algorithm, it will always be there and as long as the infrastructure is there it will always prevent similar crimes from happening. In effect, we might say that you created an antidote for a given class of crimes. Don’t you find this amazing? If not, consider this: counting the number of solved cases, which is for me the only objective metric, you will probably be the most successful investigator ever!”

Vince raised his voice, trying to grab Ayer’s attention, but all he got was a raised eyebrow.

“All I do is to make up and test numerous somewhat absurd ideas until one of them turns out to be somewhat correct. I don’t think that this practice is in any way as useful as you present it to be, neither do I consider the numbers as important.”

“Absurd? Nobody else in the whole building could come up with something close to what you do. But I am beginning to think that there is no way for me to make you happy. You are coming tonight, right?” Vince said.

## Drunk

The party was organised in a rather simple and ad-hoc way. After the working hours had ended, all employees were invited to the big conference room, which looked exactly like any other day, except that the chairs were placed next to the walls and some music could be heard from the conference speakers. Vince and the rest of the management (excluding Jane) came for around 10-15 minutes to congratulate Ayer and his colleagues.

After that, someone delivered pizzas and several kegs of beer which the boffins attacked immediately. Ayer didn’t drink alcohol but that time he realised that he had nothing to do and decided to pop a few bottles and to indulge in some technical conversations with them.

After a while, a boy whom he didn’t know at all came to their table and sat next to him. Ayer turned to him and, without being afraid that someone would notice, he scanned his appearance as meticulously as he could.

“Ayer, don’t you have any respect for our new colleague’s privacy?” Chad yelled from across the room when he noticed Ayer’s stare.

“What is ‘privacy’?” John asked and everyone that wasn’t already laughing started doing so, “Cover yourself!” he turned to the boy who was just noticing how Ayer looking at him, “Cover yourself with something, or he will read your mind!” He was almost sick with laughter as were everyone else in the room, except the boy, who looked rather perplexed.

“Don’t mind that guy,” Allie said.

“I don’t.” The boy smiled. “I just don’t know what is happening.”

“Wait, I have an idea.” Chad said, "Ayer, can you scan this person and tell us the most embarrassing things you find out.

“Come on, Chad,” Allie said. “Won’t you stop having fun at other people’s expense!”

“Fun is not the only thing that he is having on other people’s expense, I can tell you that,” Johny said and started laughing at his own joke. “Why don’t Ayer scan *Chad* instead of that boy. Yeah, Ayer, why don’t you scan Chad and tell us what you find out!”

“I am not scanning anyone,” Ayer said. “I am not using my abilities to embarrass people.”

“Don’t worry, I will take it.” The boy said. “Seems interesting.”

“Do it Ayer, but be nice please,” Pankill said.

“But not too nice,” John added.

“No, doing this would indicate that I don’t take my abilities seriously. And I take them very seriously.”

“Come on, Ayer, you are always using your skills to show off,” Chad said.

“That is different.”

“Or maybe you don’t see anything you can share with us?” He continued.

“Maybe I don’t.”

“But do you?” That was the boy. “I want to know whether you are really as good as people say you are. And if you don’t want to, I won’t tell anyone whether you are correct or not.”

“And we still get all the fun from watching you two - sounds like a plan,” Johny said and the rest expressed silent agreement to this idea. They turned their heads to Ayer, almost simultaneously."

“Alright,” Ayer said. “Let’s begin. I think that your parents are divorced.”

Everyone looked at how the boy would react in return, but he acted like he didn’t even hear Ayer’s remark."

“Because of the way their relationship ended you are still afraid to talk to women for fear that you will end up like them,” The boy still said nothing.

“That, plus, you had terrible acne when you were a teenager…” Ayer continued and pointed at a little scar on the boy’s forehead, “You decided you will impress people with your brain, not with your looks, but there were people who had the looks and were no less smart than you…”

“That’s mean, stop it, Ayer!” Allie said.

“Yeah man, just admit defeat,” Johny said. We won’t embarrass *you*."

Ayer took a closer look at his colleagues. They did not look disappointed, but quite the opposite - they were happy. He did what they wanted him to, not because he had to do it, but simply because he wanted to blend in. In a way, that was their goal of the whole exercise - to assimilate him, to make him “one of them”. Ayer felt that his job is done and left the room without saying anything. On his way to the exit, he saw the boy whom he tried to embarrass and asked him how many of his assertions were true.

“Well, actually all of them,” the boy said after a brief pause. But what difference does it make?"

While still slightly sad (and very drunk), Ayer found himself in his office. He turned to his wall where he had transferred all material from his home. Articles about disappearing people. In Japan, there were around 100000 of them every year, who were going in the dark mostly because of shame of personal failures. Not clear how many left the country, but even if he knew that he knew that he cannot iterate all of them.

He turned to the other wall, where he kept some pictures of Den’s dolls. Looking at them reminded him of the last hand-made object that he’d owned. It was a teacup, rather clumsily-made, which he had from year three to around seven. It was made from porcelain and was shaped like a figure of a fat person, with the person’s hands acting like handles for the cup. It was always so in his face that he made him uncomfortable. He remembered feeling its author’s presence when looking at it - feeling like he or she was sitting next to it there all the time poking his shoulder warning him not to break it, or being grumpy when his/her creation was left unwashed. The memory dispersed. He looked at Den Lee’s dolls again and thought that something so unnatural as them just *had* to be connected, either directly or indirectly, to her case. On his computer, he saw the last query that he was working on. He started reading it, but he was appalled by the dumb heuristics that he was using - it now seemed to him that all he did was to consume the ideas and features that OSCAR had, rather than produce original content. “And to think that this shit can actually work?” he thought, “Imagine if some true inspiration was employed.”

At that moment, he realised that from a given standpoint there wasn’t anything unnatural about either Den’s dolls, or the cup which he owned - they were both designed and produced by people, in the same way as everything else around him was. And unlike everything else, they were easily identifiable as such - by looking at them you can tell who created them and for what purpose. Whereas when he was looking at his work from the last couple of months he was clueless as to what the hell he was doing.

Then he sat in his chair and he started typing. What he created was not cheap to run, nor was it pretty in the sense in which boffins used that word when they spoke about code. But it was correct. And he knew before he would run it, that it will return exactly one result.

Vince entered Jane’s office without knocking and sat on her couch.

“That kid again,” Vince said. “Now using his colleague’s computers to run some queries.”

“They complained?”

“No, they were stone drunk. Probably still are for that matter,” Vince tried to remember whether the boffins were at work that morning. "Look, I know what are you going to say but ‘No harm done’ is not enough for me. If we don’t put him on his spot now, there will be no way to control him.

“Then go and do it. Why are you coming here?”

“Jane-”

“Listen we are in a gigantic mess that we haven’t even begun to untangle and our most valuable resource if you will, has got his resignation in his pocket since day one. And your biggest issue is how to *control* people?”

“OK, I get it. I will keep my mouth shut.”

“I am afraid sometimes merely doing nothing is not enough,” Jane said. “You know what’s Ayer’s problem? That the Yard does not give him anything. Like for example, have you actually seen what he did on those computers?”

“Something very costly. I am not good at computer programming.”

“Well,” Jane said, “it is about the case of Den Lee. And is near damn brilliant.”

“You said this case is bogus.”

“I did. But I might be wrong. And even if I am not, would it hurt for him to check? You need to keep employees happy. Besides, isn’t this the perfect opportunity to close this case once and for all?”

## Kei

Ayer went on his way to Vince’s office while constantly reiterating the message that he had sent him. “There is someone I want you to meet.” The mystery tone unnerved him, especially when he considered from where it came from.

He entered the office hesitantly. There were two chairs next to the door. One of them was occupied by Vince and on the other sat a girl which looked exactly like Den Lee. Ayer couldn’t get his eyes off her. The girl stood up before him. She made a deep long bow and he made a clumsy attempt to imitate her gesture.

“And you?” he started. “You, actually-”

“I am her sister,” She replied in perfect English.

She sat upright, with her toes touching the floor with a posture that made her look like she was about to attack him. Both her toes and her nails were painted with dark nail polish - perhaps to hide signs of biting, but the layer was so thick that he couldn’t be sure. She looked like she was about twenty, but she was dressed and made up as a much older woman, indeed, the level of sophistication of her wardrobe was unlike what he had seen by people her age. Perhaps this was a way for her to show character or exactly the opposite - to conceal her character from him. If the latter was true, she was doing a perfect job of it - the number of traits she managed to hide from him was astounding. This was probably the smallest he’d ever known for a living person in a long while. He looked at her and smiled while trying to relax himself with the fact that it was probably her race that prevented him from seeing a clearer picture of her.

“Mrs Kei Lee is in the city for a few months,” Vince entered the conversation, “I contacted her unofficially after I read the new findings regarding her sister’s case and I invited her to talk with us.”

“I won’t going to ask you why you didn’t notify me.”

Ayer felt like he had to speak although the information he had for her wasn’t nearly enough for him to feel confident. With his eyes closed, he started what would turn out to be one of the hardest (and least successful) hearings in his career:

“So firstly I am sorry for your sister,” he turned to the girl, “I don’t know how it feels to lose a close one so I am not going to say that I sympathise, but nevertheless take my deepest condolences.”

Kei nodded but did not say anything.

"It is particularly unfortunate to see such thing happening to a talented person like your sister.

“Oh please,” She smiled but her eyes did not move an inch, “by now you’ve probably figured that the crafts were just a hobby for her.”

“Alright, what would you consider her *job* then?”

“She did not do anything in particular. She was overcoming some emotional problems which I would prefer not to discuss.”

“Are you positive about the ‘nothing’ part?”

“I am sure of it - we spoke often,” Kei replied, “We were sending each other letters.”

“I don’t understand, Vince said. We traced all her Internet activity, there were zero e-mails sent from her accounts.”

“Not e-mails. We were sending each other paper letters,” Kei said, “for as long as I can remember.”

“And where are these letters? Do you have copies?”

“No, I don’t have them, they are gone.” She said and Vince had a hard time digesting the fact that there really was absolutely no way to know what information Den had shared with Kei nor with anyone else for that matter, “but what we discussed in those letters was nothing… material, so I doubt that their content would interest you.”

“Were you aware of your sister’s whereabouts after she ran away?”

“Of course I was,” She said, “running away is not always about leaving.”

“Then what *is* it about?”

“Excuse me?”

“You do realise that the more details you share, the more likely it is for us to find out what had happened,” Ayer said.

“But I know what happened,” the girl said.

“And you are sure?”

“Yes,” she lowered her head and for the first time she looked her age, “My sister had serious issues.”

“Serious enough for her to jump out of the window?” Ayer said.

“As I said, I prefer not to discuss this,” She remained calm and made Ayer regret his blunt remark.

“What do you make of the call?” Ayer asked.

“Nothing,” Kei said. “I don’t know why she did that.”

“You think that someone does?”

“Alright, what do you want me to say,” she laid her head on her elbows, written on her face was an emotion that he could not decode, “What response do you hope to get from me?”

“I want to know the truth,” Ayer said.

“Well, you already know the truth. I already told it to you.”

"Look, I understand that you don’t believe me, and quite frankly I think that you do not care too much about how exactly did your sister die. But before us lays a question, and that question surely has an answer.

“All of this is true,” Kei said, “however-”

It wasn’t before Vince had already walked Kei to the door and had closed the door leaving him alone in the room when Ayer realised that she played him out. Her responses were always circumventing his questions. She made very good use of her position and didn’t even give him a chance to ask her some of the things he had in mind, like the disappearance of the dolls from her apartment. But maybe she secured herself a bit too much. Because now Ayer was certain that this girl was hiding something. He was sure of this like he was sure that she lied about not having the letters her sister wrote.

Ayer wondered whether there is a point to discuss this with Vince at all. Vince’s job was simple - to make sure all procedures were followed properly. In fact, it was so simple, that knowing a thing or two about how the organization worked, Ayer could almost construct the whole dialogue that they were about to exchange: “You had your shot,” he’d say, “There are no grounds whatsoever for engaging Kei in any other way. No, I won’t make an exception. I guess you don’t realize that I am already making one by letting you speak to her!” “What suspicion? On what grounds?” “Just because she didn’t think your ideas were plausible does not make her suspicious.”

Ayer looked at his profile as he was exiting the room and quickly realized that he will never be capable of arguing with this person. He could not argue with someone who had never entered the realm of the abstract. Couldn’t argue with someone who didn’t know about the existence of the worlds that he was inhabiting. Couldn’t argue with someone, who, at the end of the day, he didn’t even consider fully human.

Ayer focused at the window, which was facing the exit of the building.

# The Blind Spot

That day, the weather at London was unusually clear and looking through the window Ayer could see the whole yard of the building all the way to the metal fence which was surrounding it. When Vince returned, Kei had already exited it and was walking down the alley that led to the main entrance. At first, she started slowly, then she stopped for a moment like she had noticed something and headed in another direction straight through the garden. Ayer leaned through the window to see the cab which was waiting for her and memorized its brand and plate number.

“So?” Ayer heard the voice of Vince who had already returned, “What do you think about her?”

“She is cute,” Ayer said.

“Cute?”

“Yes, but I *do* think she is lying. Listen, I have to go now.”

And before Vince had a chance to react, he was already out in the hallway and was running towards the exit. Without stopping, he pulled out his phone and called the cab company which Kei used.

“Hello,” he said with the best impersonation of a Japanese accent he could come up with, “I want to order a cab. But my phone is dead… Yes, my name is Cheng Lee…”

It took a few seconds before the service representative responded. Ayer used that time to make one huge jump and finish off the stairs on his way to the exit.

“Yes, this the first time I am calling. I am just visiting the city.”

“The address? Oh, jee, let’s see.”

“No, I don’t have a profile. But, you know, my wife has one. Can you check our address from her? Her name is Kei Lee.”

“No personal data, just the address.” he already knew he would succeed, as the person on the other end of the line had no doubt whatsoever that he was who he said he was.

“C’ mon man, she is my wife!”

As soon as he got the information he needed, Ayer closed the phone and took a cab from the street.

He arrived just in time to see Kei entering an old, but well-maintained building, close to the city centre. He rushed at the other end of the street both to escape from her field of sight and to be able to catch a glimpse of the windows of the staircase as she was passing by and easily traced the apartment where she entered. He knew that all he could to from this moment on was to wait for a little, hoping that his intuition was right and that she would leave her apartment at the evening, as a girl of her type would. Her type (the way in which he assessed it): rich, spoiled, soulless. Throwing money at any issue which she had, afraid to face her feelings alone with herself and looking for shiny distractions instead.

It would have been no more than a few hours after that moment when he’d learn that this image of her, although it yielded correct results, was entirely wrong.

## Kei’s Apartment

Ayer was sitting in a small cafe facing the street. A few empty paper cups of coffee were rolling on his table. He had positioned his phone in front of him so that in his field of vision, its screen stood just next to the door of the apartment. For some time nothing happened, but then he saw her. The next time the waitress came to his table, he was gone. Along with the paper cups, laid a few crumpled banknotes.

He followed her until he saw her entering a bar. At that point, he lost interest in what she was doing and went back to his main aim - her apartment. He already knew that he will have no trouble entering there - he was in a good shape, and these old buildings with all of their ornaments and bumps were perfect for climbing. The only thing that could fail him was if someone saw him entering and reported him, but he didn’t consider this very probable - people had long stopped paying attention to what was happening around them. That was what the surveillance system was for, right?

As soon as he was in, he started going through Kei’s personal belongings which were spread through the apartment. There were a lot of cosmetics, books written in English and Japanese and also a lot of high-end jewellery which was laying on the desk. A notebook containing text and sketches grabbed Ayer’s attention, but going through it proved to be quite useless - even after doing so, in his mind she was even more faceless than at the beginning. Nothing that she said or did, left a clue about her true self. She was not generic as some other people for whom there wasn’t much to know about, to begin with, just faceless - a shadow with a pretty silhouette.

Still, in her night-stand, he found, as he expected, the letters that she had exchanged with her sister.

He took the topmost one. Judging by the address, it was written by Den Lee, but he could already guess this by the envelope alone, and by the paint stains that it was covered in. Took another one which was presumably the response - the address was written by Kei, with very refined handwriting and it had such a perfect alignment that Ayer couldn’t stop looking for the invisible (or perhaps unexisting) traces of pencil-drawn straight lines while examining it. But he couldn’t find them, in the same way as he couldn’t see, in her apartment, any other imperfections exposing any weaknesses that she could possibly have.

The door lock snapped, the door hit the rubber stopper and the motion sensor bleeped - Kei was back. Ayer had just a second to make a decision. So he slipped Den’s letter in his pocket, rushed through the window, jumped on the sill and disappeared.

## “I want to forget.”

On Ayer’s desk laid the five sheets of paper which were inside the envelope that he stole from Kei’s room. He was inspecting them very carefully, but he was not happy. He even felt remorse for taking them, not because they weren’t his, but because they were of no use for him - maybe it was the excitement or maybe it was just wishful thinking, but somehow he failed to realise that if a Japanese person conversed with another Japanese, they had no reason whatsoever to use a foreign language.

Translating a text from Japanese to English was not a hard task by itself, but it was next to impossible in the situation Ayer was in - he didn’t think that his vague suspicions could justify breaching Kei’s privacy, so he couldn’t just hand it to *anyone*, and his colleagues, were not too fond of “off the table” operations (neither were they fond of him enough to make an exception). He realized how dependent he had become of the people and resources which he used in the last several months.

In the end, he decided that he would contact the Scotland Yard and hope for the best.

“Listen, Vince, don’t ask me how but I think I acquired the letters that Den Lee sent to her sister before she died.”

“Cadman, report to the Scotland Yard headquarters immediately.”

“Why, what happened?”

“I think you can figure that by yourself! Kei filed a complaint for breaking and entering. The Detective had scanned the files and guess what it saw. The penalty is one month in the jail.”

“OK, can we settle that when all this is over.”

“There is no ‘all this’ Cadman,” Vince was doing his best not to show emotions, “And there is no way to postpone your penalty - neither I nor anyone else can modify it.”

Vince made a long pause as if he had something on his mind but wasn’t sure if he should say it, “You have 24 hours,” he said instead.

Ayer immediately started preparing to visit his former colleagues. He packed his backpack in case they took him away immediately and stopped by the first floor to check with his landlord Mrs Johnson and tell her what had happened. He didn’t find her in the living room, so he knocked on the door of her bedroom.

“Come, Ayer,” he heard her voice.

“No, I will wait.”

After a second the door opened and he saw her: “For God’s sake, boy, I don’t know what makes you feel so uncomfortable,”

“No, I mean, you are in your evening gown,” Ayer said.

“So what? It is not like your clothes you are wearing are much morе good looking!” she said and she seated him on a table next to her bed, “If you are expecting that we follow etiquette as if we are still in Victorian times while you young people do whatever you want, you are mistaken.” she kept on murmuring while she was pouring him tea."

“Listen, I will disappear for a while,” Ayer said, “I will pay you when I get back obviously. But if I am not able to return in a few months, I will be OK if you throw away most of my books and get a new tenant, just store the books somewhere and I will come to pick them up.”

“Nevermind your books,” Linda replied, “Where the heck are you going?”

“Let’s say that I started a job which I am not sure how exactly would I finish,” he smiled.

“As uncertain about himself as always,” she reached out and touched his cheek, “in your job as well as your love life.”

“You know that I have no reason to be certain about anything,” Ayer said.

“Have I told you enough times that critics are the most unhappy folk on Earth?” she asked, and then became serious: “Can I help you, Ayer?”

“Well, no, unless you happen to know someone who speaks Japanese,” Ayer said.

“But I do,” she said. “*I* do.”

She put on her spectacles and started reading, using her index finger to trace the long columns of hieroglyphics, while simultaneously checking some word definitions from her phone. Took her fifteen minutes to work through the first sentence.

“I want to forget,” she said. “This is what it says.”

Then she spent around half an hour going through the whole text and she left the sheet on her desk.

“This is a letter,” she said. “The author talks about herself a lot. Kinda like in a diary. What do you need to know?”

Ayer wanted to respond but couldn’t think of what exactly to say. “Is there something about crimes?” Ayer asked. This question made her laugh and, after seeing that she wasn’t laughing at him, Ayer joined her.

“The only thing I know for sure is-” she made a long pause “-that you have to help that girl.”

“I would have helped her-” Ayer said and then he almost told Linda about Den Lee’s murder, the thought that it would make her uncomfortable coming almost a second too late, “-but I am a detective, that is not what I do,” he said to hide his error.

“You don’t know what the hell do you do, anyways,” she said, “Look, you are a wise man… in some respects,” Linda said. “Talk to her. You know that she has a problem, right?”

“I thought that she might be involved in something…” Ayer said.

“Involved in something?” She burst into laughter for a moment and the next one she looked more serious than ever: “Sweety, from what I read I would be surprised if the author of this letter can go to the store and fix a meal for herself, not to mention other more complex activities.”

“Ayer, are you OK?” she saw him staggering as if he was about to faint and caught him by the shoulder.

“So you are saying she has issues?” Ayer said.

“Some very serious ones at that. But how are *you*? Are you OK?”

“No,” he said. “My head hurts. I think I may have made a very serious mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“I blamed an innocent person.”

“It’s all good to feel sorry, but please don’t die here,” she resumed laughing and this time Ayer couldn’t bring himself to smile with her, “If a second man dies from a heart attack in my bedroom, I might have some issues on my own. You know, you can always make up for what you did. The important thing is that you make up for it, no matter how vulnerable it makes you feel.”

He recognized her right away, although she had turned her back on him. Her looks were again flawless and, as the last time when he saw her, she sat alone without paying much attention to her surroundings. He sat next to her and touched her shoulder. She turned to him and stared at him with her eyes just a few centimetres away from his. Some people had such eyes that staring at them made Ayer feel like he was staring directly into their soul. Kei’s eyes left him with the impression that he was looking into a dark and endless void.

“What do you want, Mr Cadman?” She said.

“I wanted to give you this,” he took the letter from the pocket of his coat and put it on the table.

“You don’t want your colleagues to find it in your possession?” she asked.

“No, I want to apologise.”

“You broke into my apartment,” she said without touching the letter, “you went through my belongings and stole some of them. And now you return it and you expect me to be nice to you?”

“No, I don’t expect that from you,” Ayer turned to her and tried to smile, “As I said, I wanted to return it to you, so just take it,”

Kei slowly reached out for the letter and slid it to her part of the table.

“Now if you would be willing to forget about our last meeting for a minute,” he continued, “I want to ask *you* something: How did it *all* happen? I want to know everything. All events related to your sister ending up as she did.”

“I want to ask you something too,” Kei said, “Who gives you the right to get your nose in my personal life? And I mean that literary. Your colleagues told me that what you did was illegal in your country.”

“Breaking and entering is illegal in every country,” Ayer smiled. “as for the reason I am bothering you, let’s say its mere curiosity.”

“Your curiosity is your problem,” she continued.

“There wasn’t any reason to hide it, you know?” Ayer continued.

“I didn’t hide anything. I told her that she-”

“Yes, and you were marvellous in your ability to deceive. And also very experienced, you even deceived *me*. But I figured it out.”

“Because you are such a capable investigator?”

“No, because I am in a very similar position in some respects,” Ayer said.

“What?” In spite of her makeup and her constant mannerisms, at that moment Kei looked even younger than she actually was. “What are you talking about? What do you want from me?”

“I just want to know. No, scratch that - I want *you* to tell me?”

“What was this bullshit about you being in a similar position?”

“Why aren’t your parents with you?”

“I don’t know? Why did they throw her out of our house? And did not allow me to speak to her? How can you even think that-”

While she was speaking, Ayer was mesmerised by her face, seeing it changing, becoming more youthful, more expressive and more characteristic of her as emotions were making it turn red. “Alright, you know, I will tell you the *whole* damn thing. Just promise that you would listen. So firstly, I have no idea how you could think that my sister would involve herself in some petty crimes. Secondly…”

She made a long pause and continued speaking in a very different tone.

## Den’s Story

“From ever since we were little we did not resemble the other kids. Maybe because we were interested in Europe, and the fairy tale aspect of it, that you Europeans often miss. As we grew older we saw the places that we envisioned slowly disappearing. The problem has been there ever since I could remember. Like everyone else, I was a little appalled by her. I remember thinking that I surely was ugly too, being related to her, however my condition, however, lasted only until I started going outside of the house, and her’s only worsened with that.”

“You are saying your sister was ugly. How? Physically?” Ayer asked.

“Physically of course!” Kei said. “She was the best person I have ever known.”

“So, she is ugly, how?” Ayer asked.

“Please, you don’t need to pretend. Although it would have probably helped under certain circumstances,” she continued talking and Ayer felt too uncomfortable to interrupt her again.

“Maybe the issue was that she was like that always? Most people get broken at some point in their lives but hers was nothing but. Started with overhearing witty remarks from our relatives. Continued with our peers in the kindergarten, our parent’s lack of attention, and the dismissal of her ambitions, even ones that did not have anything to do with looks, which started out subtle, but gradually became as explicit as it can be without breaking the good tone. Being the only one who saw that, I could have said something that would make her feel better, but I didn’t.”

“Why?”

“I was afraid I would make them mad,” Kei said. “Perhaps I should mention that they were idolising me with the same meticulousness with which they were demonising her. They viewed me as their compensation for having to take care of her, and as such, I had to be her antipode in every respect: because she was ugly, I had to be beautiful. Because she had no friends, I had to be social. Because she was sad, having to cope with all this, I had to be happy.”

Ayer still could not fully comprehend how this conflict came to be. He wanted to shout: “But you look the same as her, I thought that you *were* her the first time I saw you even though I knew that she was dead, how can all of that be?”

“The more rejected she was, the more detached from her I became.” Kei continued, not noting his bafflement. Seeing how her life unfolded and all of the negative reactions that she provoked in my parents made me want to be as different from her as I possibly could. And the only way to verify that unlike her I was worth something was to constantly seek for their approval. This was all that I ever did until I reached my teens."

“And did that work?”

“I don’t know if this question is part of your investigation game,” Kei said "but if it is, you can congratulate yourself - I *still* felt worthless. But it was (and you probably figured this one as well), little in comparison to how worthless I am feeling now. I feel like I can crush my life and trash it, like a useless piece of paper.

“Right. But this is because you felt compassion. You weren’t so opaque as your family you didn’t feel content with taking any part of the dehumanization of another human being because it felt as a dehumanization of yourself.”

Kei looked at him, puzzled. “Oh, please, I agreed to talk to you so I can help you, not watch you pretending to care.”

“Actually you got it the other way around. It was when I expressed interest in your case that I was being dishonest, as I am entirely convinced that you are correct in asserting that your sister committed suicide. I actually came here because I want to hear more from you. So please continue.”

Kei stared at him again, as if she was trying to see his thoughts through his skull, and then, for a moment as short that he could miss it by blinking, a smile flickered in her eyes.

“You know what was the most unusual?” she asked.

“Do tell me about it.”

"When we were little, we used to go to bed together and talk until we fall asleep. And as soon as we turned off the lights, all these differences suddenly became superficial. We would discuss everything without any form of taboo and would jump from one topic to another, sometimes the two being totally unrelated, without ever losing context. Aged nine, I felt like it was the first time that I was seeing a being that was the same species as myself. But as we grew older and they moved us to separate rooms, although completely unjustified, the fear that being close to her would make me unhappy became stronger. We would still talk and be friendly with each other but the connection between us soon became weak enough for it to be replaced by other, more novel stuff and once it was lost, we could not be together again, despite both mine and her best attempts. The difference between the way we handled the situation being that I quickly moved on, and with her, the bullying and lack of support were already transferring into psychological issues and she couldn’t.

“You are sorry that you left her?”

“No, we were still best friends, even after that. Best and only friends.”

“So you did not persist your social lifestyle?”

“I did, and I still do as a matter of fact. However I don’t consider the people that I go out with my friends, I merely use them to satisfy my sexual desires.”

“Anyway, when I became a teenager I started going out with people while my sister was constantly in her room drawing. She did it all the time, which was strange when you think about it, as she wasn’t so interested in art in general and she didn’t seem to be very ambitious about it either. She wasn’t, as you would have expected from someone who is unpopular, trying to prove to everyone that she is better than them. I think that she did it just to direct her negative emotions somewhere, and apparently, that worked for her very successfully. When she was depressed, she could knock off 10-20 pieces and per hour and come up happy again. There were times when we would dump some of them in the trash, simply because there was nothing else that we could do with them. People were actually aligning so they can take them.”

“So how did she got here?”

“I probably know less than you do about that, but she must have used the help of professionals - people who help you disappear without a trace. Once you do that you are a nobody, but you are free to live the rest of your life however you like.”

“But still she didn’t break her ties with you?”

“A month later I received what was supposed to be her farewell letter. I responded to it. Soon another one followed. It looked like it was written by a different version of her - like someone who spent his life under different circumstances. She told me, among other things, that she was selling her art at a Sunday market somewhere around her house. It looked like she was feeling fulfilled and financially secured, although she’d never explicitly mentioned it. Our connection grew deeper reminiscent of the time when we were little. I even helped her set up an online store, for her to sell her stuff.” She became silent.

“And then?”

“And then she got worse again,” Below the thick layer of makeup, Kei’s face showed the full spectrum of human emotion as if Ayer was watching a timelapse of everything that she went through for the last few years. “It all started, I think when people began opening for her stuff. She generated so much interest, that she couldn’t handle it. She wasn’t ready to open for the world.”

“What about the black dolls, the”women in black" as she called them right before ending her life. Do you know about them?"

“Why do you care?”

Ayer could easily have answered that in any other situation, but that moment the question almost paralysed him. “Why do you care, really,” he heard Kei’s voice in his head, “when it is obvious that you are wrong not only when it comes to me and my sister, but in your whole perception of our world. Why do you care, when you know that grasping the circumstances under which we lived is way above your abilities. Is it because when you feel you understand it, it somehow makes you less afraid? Or is it merely the case of one lost soul, trying desperately to find another one?”

Ayer shook his head and stared at Kei. She was smiling at him.

“No reason, I am just a fan of your her art. I am sorry about everything that I caused you,” he said.

“No need to apologise, Ayer, quite the opposite. You did something that no one else has ever done for me.”

“Besides, storming your apartment to steal some personal belongings?”

“You tried to understand me. No one has ever done that. The only reason why I don’t feel completely content tonight is that I am alone in sharing myself. So tell me this - I have been hiding my emotional state since I was six. I devised a whole new persona so as for my publicly exposed feelings not to interfere with my real ones. And yet, you knew what I was doing right from the start. How do you know that? Or rather, *why* do you know it?”

“I don’t know, I just like solving mysteries,” Ayer said.

“I don’t believe that at all. And I don’t know how can a person who knows so much about other people, can know so little about himself,” Kei said and smiled, but Ayer did not respond to her smile - he shrugged his shoulders and disappeared in the dark.

“Wait? Where did you go?” Kei shouted, “Let’s meet again.”

He kept thinking why had he lied to her at the end. Or perhaps the real question was rather why he contemplated on telling her the truth, as opposed to what he did to all people who were smart enough to understand him. Perhaps what he felt towards her was quite different from what he felt to the other members of that group - while everyone else in it was in some sense *alien* to him, Kei was there because she was, in many ways, *similar* to himself. Like himself, she was a foreigner. Like himself, she chose to live without technologies. And she probably did it for the same reason as he did - because she still had hope for a world which was not completely soulless. He wanted to be close to her, but at the same time, her behaviour was scary for him, as if she was exposing to him, his own self with weaknesses which he didn’t know he possessed. If he was the person who he thought he was, he would have no reason to be scared. If he was the person whom he thought he was, he would not have made that mistake when judging her. She was the proof that he wasn’t who he thought, or claimed he was. She was his blind spot.

After he left her, it was already night, but still, he boarded the train to the Scotland Yard and spent half an hour not thinking about anything.

# Behind the Facade

## Lost

Ayer woke up from a sunbeam, coming from a window with rounded corners. He opened his eyes realising that he had fallen asleep in the train and that he was probably miles away from the city. At first, he didn’t attach any emotions to that fact, but after several seconds the serenity with which he woke up dissolved and he felt overwhelmed by a nameless and mysterious thread which suddenly coloured all of his surroundings with hostility.

He turned to the people positioned closest to him, several travellers who were sitting next to him and talking so loudly that he wondered how he managed to fall asleep - and scanned them one by one planning to fill his brain with information until he felt calm again. But that did not happen - through the people next to him looked like easy targets, the observations he made did not reveal almost anything about any of them.

He got up swiftly and observed them more carefully in order to see if they themselves were the cause of his worries but quickly realised that no, there wasn’t anything special about his companions which were standing half-seated half-lying, laughing at each other’s jokes. The issue was with *him* - his abilities had just halted. He had stopped being able to read peoples emotions and motivations. For him, this was the equivalent of going blind while crossing the street.

Ayer did not stop staring at his neighbours, and soon one of them noticed him.

“What are *you* looking at?” she said.

“Hey, don’t be an asshole,” another one said, “The bloke is probably bored to death at this point and he is just in search of someone to talk to, right mate?”

Ayer nodded.

“Yeah, it sucks travelling alone, right? I keep telling them this. My name is Charlie by the way, glad to meet you, the guys over there also are, they are just a little nervous as usual. Come sit with us if you want.”

Ayer got up from his chair, shook hands with each of the people and presented himself with a fake name. Charlie asked him where he was from. Ayer said he was from London and asked him in return. “So, me I was born around 10 kilometres from where we stand.” Charlie started, “but I spent the last five years in London also. Now I am bringing these two Londoners here to show them what is like being outside.”

Ayer did not need to scan him again to verify his words - he’d already noticed the confidence with which he spoke of the hills and mountains which were displayed before him, as well as the shyness with which he responded to some of their witty remarks, related to the life in the city. He’d seen his clothing style, which was nothing more than a replica of theirs but viewed from a more down-to-earth, not to mention naive, perspective. He’d seen all of these signs, therefore, he concluded, he hadn’t lost his attentiveness. The issue was that his brain was no longer *willing* to take the leap of faith required for it to see beyond what was presented before it.

He revisited the events from the previous day and started piecing together what had happened to him. It seemed like the mistakes he had made in judging Kei must have shaken his confidence up to the point where he stopped trusting his own judgement. In short, he had screwed up everything. And the disappearance of his abilities was was his brain’s way of telling him: “Timeout - from now on we cannot be sure about anything.”

Ayer closed his eyes and tried to resume his inner monologue and regain the voice of confidence which had always kept him calm and in control:

“You see Watson, it is obvious from the way that this person is copying the clothing style of his acquaintances, that he is just trying to fit in, rather unsuccessfully, if I may add. Now, a blind man can see that they are Londoners, so the question is only where *he* is from. That is not so easy to guess, but still, he looks like he knows his way around here, so I might make an educated guess that he is a local,” he continued speaking to himself but his confidence was still gone. He felt as if he was about to have a panic attack. He took a few steps back and headed to the train door, which was opened at that moment.

“Hey, where are you going?!”

“This is my stop,” he said and left, ignoring everyone’s baffled reactions.

After taking a glance at his surroundings, he immediately realised why his action caused bafflement - he had departed in the middle of nowhere, “his stop” consisted of a little wooden shed with two benches stuck to it and was surrounded from all sides by thick trees. A few meters from it, there was a trail, that followed a small river. When looking at it, Ayer felt like he could take it, and walk all his life without meeting anybody.

This illusion, however, lasted for no more than a few minutes, after which Ayer heard a loud noise coming from the direction opposite to the one he came from - the train to London was coming. He stood next to the rails looking through the train’s windows as it stopped, stood in one place, and then started gaining speed again. His initial urge to hop on it was strong but he resisted it - he wouldn’t go back to London before sorting this out. He *couldn’t*.

## Savant

A few days ago, Jane had spoken with her friends about Ayer’s inability to show emotions. She described by means of jokes, but they became very serious at trying to analyse it.

“Maybe he is fearful,” one of her friends had said. “That is usually it, right?”

“But does he do it in a condescending manner?” Another had asked, “like, he is trying to say ‘You are not good enough to evoke emotions in me.’”

“I’d say a little of the two, although more of the first one.” Jane had responded, “He cried that one time, remember?”

“Yeah, I almost forgot about that.”

“Yes, probably because the crying incident does not fit, you know? He is a self-proclaimed master of his craft, a savant, so to say, and *he* has impostor syndrome…”

“Maybe he really *is* an impostor,” said one of her friends who had a history of producing abstract phrases which were turning out to be correct in the most peculiar way, “just not in the respect in which you view him.”

A few days before, when Ayer had broken into Kei’s apartment and thus committing his first registered crime, the Detective had unlocked the ability to search for information under his name in the only database of public records that was illegal to access without a reason - the database of the National Institute for Mental Health. The next day Vince, Jane and half a dozen other Yard executives received a notification that a new file for a Yard employee has been found. Later, a parcel was delivered, containing six or seven folders describing the long treatment of the severely damaged 10-year-old boy named Ayer Cadman.

His abilities didn’t start emerging until he was as old as twelve. Still, he had little memories of the time before he had them - mostly he had spent it trying to make sense of things as simple as a spoon while circling around the two rooms in which he was permitted to enter. All that he truly remembered from that time was a vague feeling of abuse. He didn’t have any specific recollections of its source, it was just there in the background throughout most of his childhood. This was the environment in which his abilities flourished.

The first thing which he started observing were changes in the behaviour of his nanny - he had started noticing that once in around 28 days there was one day when she would put him to sleep some 10 minutes earlier than usual and would also deny him at least two things that she usually allowed him. He could guess when one of these days was coming from the way her lips were pointing downwards when she was speaking, as he had already learned to look at the person’s mouth for indications of his behaviour. About once each week (but at different day each week) she would do the exact opposite - she would allow him to do everything that he pleased, During these days her lips were pointing upwards. Sometimes she acted in ways different than those two, but soon he discovered that almost all of these “emotions”, as they were called, were described in a little book written by Charles Darwin, which he found accidentally. He also learned that when knowing an emotion’s origin (which was described in the same book) he was also able to influence it by changing his own behaviour. And not long after he started doing that, his nanny and his parents started allowing him to go out and to do more things by himself. With his new found knowledge, he concluded that it made them *happy*.

When they sent him to school it was much easier for him to integrate - by that time he had become an expert in reading emotions and there everybody had them and everybody were influenced by them for each and everything that they did. He got along quite well with his classmates and all of this made everyone around him even happier, and for the first time it made *him* happy too. At that time, and perhaps also in the present day, he defined happiness as the feeling of recognition that you are a person and there are other people like you. His parents had even started giving him missions which they wanted him to accomplish like having better grades or befriending specific people. They were very happy when he did well in these missions, but when he didn’t, or when he wouldn’t want to put the effort in accomplishing them, all of them would make them mad, which was bad for his freedom. Gradually, their feelings had started shifting more and more in the negative spectre. With the help of his abilities, he immediately recognised both the tendency itself and its cause - he had started reading things which they didn’t want him to read - his abilities had surpassed the level which was needed to serve their original purpose and he was picking up not only the people’s *personas*, but was going deep into their inner selves. He understood that this was not desired, neither by his parents nor by anyone else.

This was how he came to know the difference between the person’s facade and the things that laid behind it. He started noticing the secret world which laid hidden behind people’s everyday interactions. He noticed that many people who were almost as observant as him in other situations chose to play dumb when being lied to, or to purposefully remain ignorant, so as not to put in a situation where their own facade would be in jeopardy. He came to realise that people’s facades consistent not of one, but of several levels, the deepest of which had already started appearing in his classmates’ behaviour, who gradually came to realize that they shouldn’t be acting according to what they really knew and felt, but by what they *should* be knowing and feeling. Gradually, and in most cases involuntary, they started concealing their true emotions and building facades. And their facades were their cages too, for once they had built them, they could never escape.

Suddenly, he was alone again, trapped in a world which seemed pointless and unrewarding. He had no desire to have a facade, to begin with, so the only way for him to establish contacts with his peers was to give voice to their inner selves. And the more they tried to prevent him from doing that, the more motivated he was to go there and find out why. But he never did. And soon he was back in his tiny little balloon, except neither he nor his parents wanted him out. They were now his enemies. And his abilities - the weapon which he used to keep them away.

What had happened after that? He had never really asked himself that question. He preferred to tell himself and everyone else that he just *liked* the detective work per se, rather than admit that he used it as a way to protect and to establish himself in the hostile environment which he was forced to inhabit. In retrospect, he was a fraud. In retrospect, there was no other facade so intricate and so complex as his. And he had succeeded to keep it for “all the people all the time”. Until he’d met a person who had created the same set of facades and who, therefore, could read him in the same way as he read everyone else. Kei.

## Vince and Jane

Vince and Jane dialled Ayer’s number. On the screen, they saw a boy which they could hardly recognise. He really looked like a child and the resemblance was not only metaphorical - he wore his shirt dirty and unbuttoned, he walked as he spoke, and his expression which was usually hard to read was now primal in its display of determination and satisfaction.

“Hello Ayer,” Vince, who insisted that he should do the talking, said. “So, before you say anything, I’d like to tell you a few things myself. Firstly, about this so-called crime of yours - you should know that I talked to Kei personally and can assure you she has no interest in pursuing her allegations any further. And between you and me, even if she did I’d still find a way to get you out. Because, Ayer, you were correct. And I don’t know how I haven’t seen it earlier.” Vince waited for Ayer to react but he did nothing as if he wasn’t listening at all. “Surely you remember what you said, right? About all crimes being related to one another.”

“But Den Lee *did* kill herself,” Ayer said.

“Yes, she really did. I am glad that we are on the same page about that. But the fact that these so-called”odd crimes" are organised centrally, and everything else that you said, is true. And now when we too are aware of that, together we could concentrate on finding the root cause of all that."

“I am not coming back,” Ayer said.

“Why?”

“We both know that I am not the person you need. You need synchronisation, teamwork, standards - all things which I am not very good at.”

“Is that the real reason?” Vince said.

Ayer did not respond.

“Ayer, you don’t need to pretend,” Vince continued, “We *know* the truth now. We know who you really are.”

“Stop it,” Jane said, “allow him to process it.”

Ayer turned off his phone, threw it in the river and continued on his way forward.

Vince watched the screen as Ayer’s phone fled through the air, without making a sound. The transmission finished with a loud splash after which the speakers were also silent. Jane got up and began stretching her arms, but Vince still stood motionless like a person who finally finds his car keys only to discover, a second later, that his vehicle is stolen.

“You happy?” Vince said finally.

“What?” Jane asked and approached him, positioning herself between him and the blank screen.

“All you did was to encourage him. Right from the start. I suppose this is what you wanted. So this is why I am asking you if you are happy-”

Vince couldn’t finish his sentence, as Jane interrupted him with a strong kick in his chest, which caused him to fall back in his chair. He rolled on the floor once or twice holding his belly and got up on his knees.

“Why?” He said and then stared at her with amazement, expecting to see distress or anger on her face, but the only emotion he could read was vague awkwardness.

“Didn’t you once say that I should hit you if you if you start saying such stuff?” she said.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t.”

“Oh, must have been someone else, then.”

“But what did I say? What stuff?” Vince was still trying to take a breath.

“Intolerant, ignorant, treating people as if you own them.”

“But he-”

“What he did was completely normal given what he has been through and the way you approached him.”

“What the hell do you mean the way *I* approached him. I saw the files alright. So what if he had some mental problems when he was a kid? He still has no right to lie to us. Plus he resolved those when he was 7.”

“No, rather this was when they began. If you were aware with his condition you’d know that there was no cure for it, neither there is there a way for him to magically turn into a normal dumb kid. He had to *learn* how to act like one. All of the things that we do naturally, he had to learn. Why do you think that he is so good at reading people? It is because he had to *study* most of the things that we say and do without even paying attention to them, so he can replicate them.”

“Imagine being in his place,” she continued, “where the only way for you to fit in is to pretend you are someone else.”

“See, you are making it sound so dramatic. Nobody is born as a perfect cog in society’s machine. The big difference is not in how hard it is for someone to comply, but how *willing* he is to do so. Some of us just *choose* not to complain and to make an extra effort to confront our weaknesses. And some of us are making a fuss about it.”

“You are not a non-conformist, Vince!” Jane said. “And if you *were* in the habit of making an extra effort, it would have been better, as you would probably read the hard copy of Ayer’s archives, not just the digital summary!”

## The hard copy

Fifteen minutes before the end of his workday, Vince took one of the big notebooks which were delivered in his office a few days ago and opened it with the intention of going through so to convince himself that he hadn’t missed anything. He skimmed through the beginning rather quickly, reading the first sentences of each of the (rather long) paragraphs, complimenting himself for how closely he followed the thoughts of the author. This all changed when he got to the first appendix - a page which was structured like a dialogue between people:

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

“Hi, Ayer.”

“Morning, Cadman.”

"Hi, Sir.

“Ayer, how are you?”

"Pretty good, you?

“After seeing you, better!”

“Good to hear.”

The last line was marked with a red question mark.

Vince turned to the next page.

“Ayer, are you ready for the next round of the Olympics?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Are you excited about it?”

“No.” This line was also marked red.

“And why is that Ayer?”

“Because I am almost certain I will be better than everyone, except for Phillip, of course.”

“You shouldn’t be so confident in yourself, Ayer.”

This was where the document ended. Vince left it and picked up another one.

“Do you like me, Ayer?”

“I like all girls.”

“Yes, but do you like me *more* than others, right?”

“I like all girls.”

“Then why are you buying me sweets?”

“Because I wanted to make you happy. Because I know that you are *not* happy.”

“But everyone else likes me!”

“Hi, sir.”

“Ayer, I want to talk to you. I saw that you submitted an empty sheet at the Olympics. Why? I guess it wasn’t so easy after all, was it?”

“It was, I *could* solve all the tasks, I did not do it. Did not feel like it.”

“And don’t you like other people to *know* that you can solve them? Your classmates for example?”

“Is this about my public image?”

“First question: do you know why are you here? Do you know why are you at the principle’s office?”

“No.”

“Quit it, boy. Vanessa came to me crying today and told me that you hit her.”

“I did not hit her.”

“But you don’t seem very surprised by her accusations.”

“I am not, because I know that she is a manipulative person. She likes me and she wants me to be her boyfriend. But I don’t. This is the reason why she was crying.”

“So you are saying she is doing this just to hurt you?”

“No, she just cannot handle negative feedback in any other way than the one you observe now.”

“What makes you think I would believe this ridiculous story?”

“Nothing. I know that you wouldn’t. Because you did not believe any of the other stories. Because you don’t know Jessica. Because you think I am crazy. Does not matter which one.”

“Now, Ayer, I did not say you are crazy.”

“Even though this has happened before you wouldn’t believe me. Even though you have every second of my life written down, and can check what I said and did at any time, you still wouldn’t believe me.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. That thing on your wrist, its for the doctors only. Noone but they can see what’s in there.”

Vince started turning the pages faster, reading through all conversations which Ayer had ever held with anyone. From first glance, it looked like his whole persona was recorded there, at least that would be the case had it been anyone else who was wearing the parole bracelet. But upon going further, Vince came to the conclusion that there actually wasn’t anything about Ayer that he could learn from these books - at least there wasn’t anything more truthful than his made-up stories about how solving crimes was a passion of his and how he went to the Asian district to pursue it. All this was an intricately-built mythology, superficially based on facts but extremely deceiving at every level that was important.

Vince continued to skim through the pages until a differently-formatted document caught his attention.

“12-th of October. Patient name: Ayer Cadman. You can begin.”

“OK, what do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know, just tell me what’s happening with you. How is school?”

“You are supposed to know the answer to that question.”

“I do, but I want to hear your opinion.”

“Bad.”

"What does *bad* mean to you?

“Bad is when people are not happy with you because you did not meet their expectations.”

"But do you know why is it bad? Have you ever been in a situation where people don’t meet *your* expectations?

“No. Because I just know what to expect.”

“OK, Ayer, you want us to go through your transcripts? We have the empty sheet at that test of yours. We talked about consistency of behaviour, right? And the incident with the girl? You really shouldn’t have put your principal in a situation where he needs to apologise to you.”

“You cannot hold me accountable for his reactions.”

"Ayer, we discussed this, we are not holding you accountable for anything, we are just trying to help you get along.

“But I am getting along just fine.”

“No, you are not, Ayer, and the fact that you are not realising it does not speak well for our progress. Why were you at the principal’s office again? I know that you were not to blame but I cannot really interfere with that, as we’ve discussed several times. It is against the law.”

“So is recording a person’s life, without their permission.”

"Poor thing. But we are doing it for your own good. How else are you gonna become a normal boy? How else are you going to become *like us*.

“Besides, how can it be against the law, when *we* are doing it, and we are the police.”

At this point, Vince would close the notebook. He would try to contact Jane, so he can discuss what he saw, only discover that she had long left (and to further realise that having her with him wouldn’t make things any different). Then, desperate for closure, he would reach out for Ayer’s personal contacts and (not realising that his phone was laying at the bottom of the river) would write him a long and melodramatic letter, containing multiple occurrences of phrases like “sorry” and “I had no idea”, in which he would promise that the Scotland Yard, now a new and much more tolerant organisation having nothing to do with the people who approved the program would find a way to compensate him and would help him overcome his trauma.

Then he would call his best friend, who was a former colleague of his and he would have a long and reluctant conversation about the moral aspects of the implementation of surveillance technologies in society, during which his friend would not realise where exactly is Vince going with this.

After talking for half an hour Vince would hang up the phone and for a moment he would feel like he was imagining Ayer had been feeling - not belonging to anything and not relating to anyone. The next day he would go to see his parents and he would feel a little better, but it would take him a full week to fully rationalise Ayer’s reports.

## Bound

Ayer had no idea where this route was going to take him but that did not bother him - he was walking next to a river so drinking water was a non-issue, and he knew that he could go for 2-3 days without food. His only concern was to find a place for the night, as he felt that he was getting sleepy. The initial shock from the events in the past days had passed, and now he actually felt relief about the upcoming changes - he had realised that there was *nothing* in his life which was his personal choice, nothing about it which he fancied. And this was hardly surprising, as he did not even remember an instance where the aim, or hope, of happiness, was to influence any of the decisions which shaped his life - rather he had constructed it to be a facade which looked as much as possible like the real thing, without actually being it. The resemblance was so striking that he had fooled even himself to thinking it was real. But when other people had seen through it, he immediately uncovered his mistake - his life was not a palace, but a fortress. Not a display, but a hiding place, and a depressing one at that.

But he no longer needed to hide from anybody - he was no longer a child - so the fact that they uncovered his file was probably a good reason to leave his current life for something else. And the possibilities filled him with excitement…

At some point, while walking, Ayer had stopped paying attention to his surroundings - it was getting too dark to see, and even if he made an effort to keep his eyes opened, what he registered was too boring and repetitive to justify the effort. So although his body was walking with approximately 6 kilometres an hour (and has been doing so for at least 8 hours), in his mind, Ayer was in his office, lying on his chair and contemplating his future endeavours while observing his book collection.

At one point, however, he heard a loud noise, which made him jump from his seat and rejoin his body in an instant - it was a roar, which was coming from somewhere really close. And although it came completely unexpected, considering it a product of his imagination, a nightmare which he was having as he was going asleep, was hard - looking at its direction, he could clearly see two glowing eyes.

He could not determine the species of the beast that stood in front of him (for some reason he thought it was a wolf, although he had never seen one before), but he saw enough of it to start running away. After a second, he heard the roar again, coming from really close by and, shortly, he felt a bite on his elbow. The shock made him immune to pain and even to fear, and he kept running for an indefinite period of time before seeing a big tree which he could climb. He hoped on the lowest branch and then to another. His mind did not come back to his body until he was a couple of meters from the ground. He looked backwards - the beast was nowhere to be seen. It looked like it had stopped following him before at least half a kilometre. He guessed that it had probably happened right after it took a bite from his leg, because, after analysing their initial distance, he saw that it if it wanted, it could have caught him at any time.

## Detective

He laid down with his leg above his head and while watching blood drops fall to the ground, he tried to resume his previous line of thought and to decide what was he going to do with his life. His speculative abilities were so advanced that he felt like he could take any idea and instantly visualise what would happen should he choose to pursue it. As if all he needed was ask himself, say, “What will happen if I decide to have a family?”, and he could already see the bedroom with a double bed, as clearly as if it was standing before his eyes. He could see his wife decorating the living room, and feel the thoughts running through his head when putting his child to sleep. He could see him and his wife taking walks together, growing old together… He could see everything, and everything seemed perfect. However there was one huge problem - he did not feel any enthusiasm about doing any of these things. And without enthusiasm (he realized that just then) the sparks of light which came from good experiences would never be enough to compensate for the eternal darkness of which everything else consisted of. For even his happiest fantasies at that moment seemed detached, as if in them he was bound to inhibit the brain and body of another person.

But why, then, was he having these fantasies? Trying to step outside of them so he could understand what they really consisted of he began changing elements randomly - one minute he and his family were chilling at a house by the seaside, the other they were preparing for a night out in the city. One minute his wife looked like a blond runway model, the other she was a university professor.

Suddenly, he pictured Kei in the role of his wife. He did that involuntarily and he instantly knew that she did not belong in his dreams but his attempts to erase her were unsuccessful - from the moment she appeared, her presence was pervasive in each and every one of them even when every other aspect of them was changing as if her face was drawn with a thick pen in what was otherwise a pencil sketch. At one time he was meeting her accidentally in the middle of a crowded street, dropping his coffee cup as he walked by, at another both of them were being imprisoned by the Scotland Yard and were being held in one room.

His fantasies gradually became more and more realistic as they developed, and with that, he had to admit more and more of his persona into them. The event of their meeting was so perfectly entangled with just those past experiences that he was trying to put behind his back, that even if time itself was contained in his notebook, he could not have written any of them off. Ironically, those very walls which both of them created to defend themselves from other people were what connected them: He could not have seen through her facade if it weren’t for his abilities… She would not have sparked his interest if it weren’t for her defence mechanisms…

They wouldn’t be attached to each other if they weren’t both broken.

At this point, fantasy and reality merged and he saw himself feeling for Kei a new kind of deep love which was redefining everything that he ever knew. For the first time, he felt a genuine connection with another human being. And the positive emotions that came pouring out of that connection immediately solved all his problems like an equation term which, when expanded, makes all unknowns cancel each other out. It was then he realised that he needed to go back. It was true that he didn’t feel like the life he was living was his own, but now he had a chance to *make* it his own. He realised that his persona does not have to play the role of a *shield* - it can be a work of art, more beautiful and than any picture or novel, illustrating who he was inside, and inspiring others to do the same.

As soon as he managed to get to a phone, he dialled Kei’s number, which he had remembered ever since he saw it and didn’t release his breath until he heard her voice:

“Hello,” she sounded as reserved as when he met her for the first time. There were

“Hi. It’s me, Ayer. Are you still here? Are you still in the country?”

“I knew you would call.”

“Yes, I thought a lot about you since we last met. And I want to get to know you. I want you to get to know *me*… eventually. I want us to be friends. I want to help you find out what happened to your sister.”

“My sister? But why?”

“Because I want it. Because you too want it. Because it’s important.”

“No doubt that it is important. But I have the feeling that I would be happier if I did not know.”

“Why? Do you think *they* are happier than us?” he said when she didn’t respond, “you know, people who think that life has some intrinsic meaning by itself and are waiting for stuff to happen to them. Do you think they are happier than people like us?”

“I don’t know.”

“Me neither. But I wouldn’t be happier in their place. You?”