Chimera

It is time to choose a new self. As usual, I have no one to impress but myself, my present personality being unable to form meaningful attachments. For reasons unnameable, I find it very difficult to imagine changing my core attributes. Really, I don’t know why I should — I would probably be much happier with a companion, or at least a best friend, but I would no longer be me. I would be dead, even if I was happier. Soon I will change my mind.

I have this strange habit of recording my self wherever I go. I imagine that one day, when I am famous and widely read, the details of what I had for lunch on day 21,000 will be significant to someone. I have, for instance, said this exact sentence hundreds of times. This time, however, it is different. My book is on the verge of publication, nothing remaining but the actual printing/uploading and distribution. I am sure there will be a book tour. My agent at Highbrow and Rolls assures me that I will have to sacrifice a great deal of my writing time for it. Since I am not, at present, writing, it is no sacrifice.

In fact, I have to admit that I have not written since the last book was finished. Before I began the project, I was on the verge of giving up, going back to the small town I came from, and removing the creative elements of my personality. That’s a very hard thing to do, but you’d be surprised if I quoted you the statistics on how many people have the operation done. In a world where creativity is a commodity, it’s hard to get noticed, and few people are willing to suffer through the piles of rejections that mount up higher every time you have an interesting dream. Most people just have the thing whipped out and replace it with a more sellable trait, like the ability to tolerate boredom, or the ability to fit into a hierarchy without complaint. You can buy packages. When they first came out, everyone wanted a rock-star package. Now they can’t stock enough suits and ties.

An aside: who are you? Why are you reading this? There is nothing in this document that you don’t already know. There is nothing in any document that you don’t already know. My book, my soon-to-make-me-rich-again book, is nothing but a new arrangement of the same old stuff that has typified novels since the end of the Middle Ages. The guy will save the world, the guy will get the girl, the girl will turn out to have been in control the whole time. Standard fare, but very commercially written, market-tested (literally — we did focus groups on it), and we hope, very well-adapted to the niche market. But that’s about me again. I want to know, although I never will, who the hell you are, and why you are still reading. You are wasting your time. Or equally, you are wasting your time with my help.

Alright, enough moaning. I’m out the door.

I have my new me, and I like it. I went for an elegant professor kind of look this time. The exposed areas are very fine quality, almost like human skin. I have a beard, an impressive but not ostentatious physique (out of style, I know), and I look what they used to call middle-aged. Most writers adopt an older perspective, even the females. There is a certain gravitas associated with the profession. Never mind that I’ve never actually sold a book, but I am a published author (*The New Canada Orbital*, among others) and I am entitled to look it.

I did opt for one small personality change, but I didn’t touch the core. I am somewhat more patient now. Not good for the actual writing, I know, which in me requires a sense of urgency, but it should help me on the tour. My agent anticipates lines of boring people waiting to get my imprint on the book. When the tour is over, and I have thought of what my next project will be, I will have my sense of urgency restored.

The change was quick this time. My advance allows me to shop in a slightly more exclusive type of establishment than I used to. I didn’t have to wait behind a row of WannaBe Barbies and Kens. No cookie-cutter rock-talkers or corporate droids. I selected from the mix-and-match stuff, rather than buying a package. I have to look prosperous for the masses.

Unfortunately, I’m blowing through the advance at a pretty good rate. After decades of poverty and untouchability, I have been a little too anxious to join the successful classes. I bought new toys that I haven’t really earned yet, an iCar, an iHome, all that stuff. I have been eating in a classier food court. I have been escorting fancier escorts, ones who actually have the interchangeable parts they advertise. I take them to hotels with private togetherness crèches. I estimate that all this will come to a halt about the same time that I begin my book tour.

I don’t know what to do. My publisher has asked for some last-minute changes after re-reviewing the results of the last focus group. They aren’t small changes either. The approval rating for my lead female isn’t high enough, and Highbrow want her rewritten. They are after movie rights ultimately, and since the females make up the majority of the population, it’s them I have to impress. I had hoped that the strength of my manly man would make up for it in the eyes of the lustful and lonely sectors of the book-buying public, but it didn’t fly. I admit that I don’t do females that well, at least, not as well as I do males and others. I have never opted to be female, preferring to stay, as noted elsewhere, stable in my core attributes.

The problem is that without a sense of urgency to propel me forward, I’m having trouble caring enough to rewrite. I will have to have that changed again. More expenses.

Ok, my drive is back and I can concentrate again. But I just don’t see what it is that they want here. When I read my female, she seems strong, intelligent and vivacious. She isn’t overly voluptuous or plastic. She enjoys both adventure and a good romp in the Astroturf. She is the real driver of the plot, even if the male does all the pumping and punching. What else can they ask for? Besides, I have a contract, and they have to honour it.

Not that there’s anything I can do about it if they don’t. The threat of the Blacklist is just too great. In a world full of carefully programmed authorly personalities, the publishers wouldn’t be losing much by putting me on the DoNotTalkTo list for the next twenty changes. The more I threaten them with an lawsuit, the less likely it is that I’ll ever be published again.

So it begins. I’m hooked-in and shuffling through pages. I still have the speed-reader implant, so it never takes long to reread my work. Those speed-readers are the ruin and saviour of the publishing industry — people can buy and absorb a book in an hour or two, and the fanatics buy a new one (or subscribe to a service, if they aren’t too picky) every day. As a result, the publishing industry is racking up sales they haven’t seen since before electronic media. The problem is that the average quality has nosedived. Some of the romances and sci-fi novels are actually mostly written by machine, and the subscribers don’t even notice. Of course, the algorithms aren’t good enough yet to fool a discerning reader, so there are plenty of publishers, like mine, who cater to a more upscale clientele. Which is not to say that these books aren’t more like applied psychology than trad novels. I know that one day even a writer with as much experience (and history of failure) as me will be replaced with a program, and I will have to change my core attributes and get a real job. I have made many sacrifices for creativity, and in the end, it will all turn out to have been futile.

I have reviewed the book four times now, without any idea what Highbrow wants of me. The character is perfect. I’ve examined the results of the focus group, and they don’t make any sense. They’re all females, from a lot of different personality groups, and they all are carefully selected (“You have won a chance to receive free downloads for *insert timespan here*”), but their answers to the survey questions are so varied that I can’t make sense of them. Ultimately, they all come down to the same nebulous responses: I like the hero, but the author doesn’t understand females; they wouldn’t do Y, they’d do X. The problem is that they all have a different vision of what X is.

I’ve talked to my agent. I had to call him three times before he returned my call. The book tour has been put off for now, and he’s given me a deadline. The “new” publishing season starts on the equinox, and he wants me ready before that, to give them time to print. Printing is more important than you’d ever believe it should be: a printed book is a much better solstice gift than a voucher, which always looks like you didn’t care that much. Most printed books never get read, I know, but there remains a certain cachet in saying you have a Print Book coming out next season.

The agent, useful soul that he is, suggested a few changes, but I don’t see how they’ll improve anything. I told him so. He got testy, and implied that I could use a personality change or two. I hear threats in the background.

Nothing. I’ve been hooked up for hours and I can’t see it anymore. I’ve come to doubt everything in the book: plot, setting, characters, moral. It all just seems like crap now. Ok, calm down, I tell myself, but the panic is rising. Maybe my sense of urgency is too strong now. I’m going back to the shop. There must be some tweak I can make that will help me get through this.

I got a note from my agent. He wants to see some sign of progress. When they start to remind you about your advance, it’s a bad sign. What’ll he do next?

I went to the shop. It seems that there’s no chance of calm and urgency co-existing. They use the same parameters in different ways, and they’re not compatible, at least not with my core attributes. The only way to make a change now is by a true personality makeover, like they do on Oprah IX. I never understand those things — the person who emerges is so different that they’re likely to lose all their friends. Not that friends are much in demand in a world where it’s easy to tolerate solitude and unconnectedness.

I had several attributes tweaked: determination up, sex drives down to nothing, new energy implant so that I can work nonstop, but it isn’t going to help. There is no such thing as an iDea implant. The technician told me he could help, but he has to go into the core, and I balked, as usual.

It’s not helping. I’ve had no luck penetrating the female personality. Bad joke, sorry — who am I apologizing to anyway? Now that I know the chance of me being famous is falling rapidly, so is the chance of this recording ever being read.

I am coming to the realization that only a core change will help. I hate that idea, but of course, I can figure out which personality aspect hates the idea, and have it changed first. Then any subsequent changes will seem easy.

The problem is money. The advance is almost gone, and I know I can’t afford major changes. Now that I’ve accepted them as a reality, I got up the nerve to phone my agent. I told his bot that it was urgent, and he actually phoned me back. I hit him up for more money, and he almost lost it completely. He actually yelled at me loudly enough that I had to turn the phone down. He’s never done that before. He told me that his own job was on the line because of me, and that if the company couldn’t get their investment in me back that they would take it out of me sooner or later, one way or another. I held my ground though, and he agreed to a second advance, which I will have to pay back out of sales at a very usurious rate. I promised him no more high life, and that it would go to a personality change. That calmed him down. He put the money in my account and hung up after a final warning. I’m kind of glad that the threat is explicit now. Off to the shop. They should name a bed after me.

Well, here I am, rebuilt and rewired! I had my old core downloaded so I could change back later, but now that I’ve got a new one, I don’t see why I would want that old one back. He was so depressed all the time, and he hated things. I couldn’t afford to make exterior changes, so I still look the same, and when I look in the mirror I say, “Who the hell is that?” He looks so down, so serious. I don’t know him anymore.

I’ve been working for the past few hours. I’ve rewritten the female without touching the plot. With the new personality, it’s been like reading the book for the first time. Now I see all sorts of things wrong with it. The female was all wrong; the way she talked, the way she reacted emotionally. I see it now. I understand what the focus group was saying. Sure, they all picked on different things, and weren’t seeing the big picture, but they were right. My female wasn’t female; she was male without the attachments.

I had a new speed unit put in. I’m working amazingly fast. I’ll be done in a couple of days. And my new personality is loving it. My new me!

It’s done! I’ve sent it to my agent, who will speed-read it and get back to me. I’m going to celebrate with some more changes. I want my body to match my new me. The aging professor has got to go. I’m out of advance money, so I’ll put it on my last card. Oh well, better to be happy than rich!

Wow! I can’t believe what I’ve done! I went nuts! This time, I left it up to the technician, told him I wanted a full integration and let him pick the parts. My second advance is used up. I look in the mirror, and it’s so unfamiliar, but I have to say that from a male’s point-of-view, I look great. I’m so sexy it hurts. Wait until my agent sees me. Oh, phone!

He hates it. I’ve been crying for hours now. He gave me two days to do a complete rewrite, and I couldn’t do it. He says I changed the female so much that the male character and the plot don’t make sense anymore. And he’s right. I read it again, and I screwed it up completely.

He wants the money back. The book tour is cancelled. I’ve missed my chance for the fall season, and Highbrow is tired of me. They’ve given me the rights back, and wished me luck in a cynical kind of way, and now they won’t answer my calls. I can try selling it to someone else, but that will take months, or even years, and I’m broke. This is the worst day of my life.

My card has been called in, and I can’t pay it. But I anticipated that, and I took steps beforehand. I went back to the shop, and had two changes made. The first one just makes sense. If I have to be relying in the future on public power sources, I’d better have a better battery. And I had an I-don’t-care put in. So I don’t care! It’s a great feeling!! I still will write, somehow, but whoever you are, I don’t care if you ever read this!!!!!