

These people you call friends

Chris Pang

I first realised that something was up with Heinz when he casually told me on a freezing winter evening that his favourite gif ever was from a movie that didn't exist.

@heinz_sketch#1011: no u don't understand its been like two straight hours of buildup about whether he's gonna use the gun

Cause like his mother died bc of that gun

and he took it off her dying body

and then he pulls out the ppk and I literally start crying lol

The gif, of course, did exist, a grainy shot of a man's hand dramatically removing a Walther PPK from a leather jacket pocket, overlaid with big white block capitals saying "It's time." It lasted little more than half a second, and looped in a way that could be considered highly satisfying, if you were fourteen and obsessed with the liberatory power of a pistol. But the scene itself had been manufactured, created when the internet decided it would be funny to create a Woody Allen movie from the 70s that was never made. The clip itself had been stitched together from four low-resolution stills created by an image generation network, then animated through a smart interpolation process used for video game enhancement, to reduce the number of frames per second a game engine needed to render. As a result the hand jerked unnaturally when you looked

closely, and for a few frames near the end seemed to begin to slide the gun back into the pocket.

The Verge wrote an entire story about it back in 2025.

In many contexts the citing of this gif and the hypothetical movie it was from would have been acceptable. Funny, even, if he meant it as a sort of alternate-reality joke. But Heinz was a film buff. We'd met on a freetalk server for amateur "no-AI" filmmakers based in London, discussed the finer aspects of shot composition and colour grading over long voice calls, sent each other one-minute shorts of our works in progress, and bonded over a shared quasi-addiction to coffee. He was serious about movies, and serious about shooting them. Not to mention, we'd just spent twenty minutes discussing the spinning top gif from *Inception*.

@beheded_#2182: lol wut

@heinz_sketch#1011: ???

@beheded_#2182: dude stop fucking with me

@heinz_sketch#1011: .

@heinz_sketch#1011: ur weird man

@beheded_#2182: you know the movie was made up

@heinz_sketch#1011: i think i would know if my favourite movie was some kind of reddit prank

I literally just watched it last month because i was in a low mood

For the next five minutes, I tried my best to figure out if, against all odds, the internet had somehow ponied up the money to shoot or generate a full feature-length version of *Nobody Rides Twice*, good enough to fool someone into thinking it was actually a commercial release. There had

been efforts of a similar length and quality before, notably the complete re-edit of *The Revenge of the Sith* to make it fit the doubly-translated travesty subtitle track known as *The Backstroke of the West*, parts of which required someone with an actual budget renting out some cloud compute to generate new close up shots from scratch. But, to the best of my knowledge, if this video ever existed it was some obscure torrent that was quickly taken offline. Certainly not mainstream enough for someone to mistake it for a real film from the 70s.

@beheded_#2182: Ok, when did you find this film

@heinz_sketch#1011: 2023

It was my 20th birthday and my college slam got me a blu ray as a gag gift

@beheded_#2182: blu ray?????

For a long moment after hitting the return key I stared at the screen. Later I realised that it couldn't have been longer than thirty seconds, really, since my phone alarm for bedtime was set to go off shortly afterwards and Heinz replied quite quickly. But sometimes between sending a message and receiving a reply there is an infinity of pain, and sometimes you feel like you've just been thrown from your seat onto the floor, and I was feeling both of those feelings at once.

@heinz_sketch#1011: ye blu ray. lemme find the case

Sure enough, he sent me a picture of a DVD case with the meme logo they'd generated for the movie printed on it, a close up of Woody Allen scowling against a desert backdrop, and all the

usual signage. Yet even that could have been excused as some very elaborate and very detailed prank that had started two years early, if it weren't for the sunlight streaming onto the bed in the background of the picture. It was 10pm.

@behedded_#2182: when did you take the picture

@heinz_sketch#1011: like 3 secs ago?? Wdym

At that point my phone started blasting the nightcore remix of the *Paranoia Agent* opening theme and I decided to go to bed.

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Somewhere in the distance bells were ringing. Over and over, the clanging merged with the acoustic sound of Taylor Swift being covered by three singing guys who told me at the start of the video that they were in Mexico City.

I've never liked online socialising. To be sure, I did a lot of it, but that was because I stammered if I was talking to anyone I was remotely interested in and became recklessly overconfident otherwise. I was often made and broken by the bottle over the course of a single evening, and my messaging frequencies with people I saw in the flesh often featured sudden and calamitous dropoffs from which they never recovered, save for some unnatural and pitiful stabs toward reconciliation. Still, when the chatbots and "vfriends" began to proliferate something told me to avoid them, and whether out of some stubborn sense of dignity or acknowledgement of the

cloying desperation of the entire charade I stuck to trying (and failing) to connect with other humans. And if the humans at uni weren't receptive, then online humans would have to act as substitutes.

The bells had stopped. It was 4pm, and I needed to sign on to my laptop. The event was starting soon.

There is a certain way people join voice calls. Sam, for example, was already there and waiting, the first of us to show up. Jane would join about 3 minutes before the event, then just as rapidly disconnect to switch wifi networks, readjust her microphone, or just grab a glass of water. The rest of us poured in on the dot, or shortly after. There was a certain ritual to pulling up your snacks, waiting for your kettle to stop rumbling, then rolling in for a long evening of shooting the shit at nothing in particular.

Sam: "Man, it's fucking freezing where I am—one second—Mom, I'm talking—Talking! I told you about this—be right back." (Sam muted their microphone)

Jane: "Evidently the conclusion we should draw from this is that talking about the weather attracts the attention of everyone over forty years old in the nearby vicinity."

Shing: "Are you suggesting that the only people who talk about the weather are old people?"

Jane: "No, I'm suggesting that interest in the weather grows exponentially with age. ANYWAYS, wanna hear about the restoration?"

Me: "Wait, what's the restoration?"

Shing: "Dude it's been like, what, three weeks now?"

Me: "Well, I haven't heard about—"

Jane: “Hold on, I’ll start streaming—just gotta get my phone—”

After a moment, we could all see a low-light, slightly shaky video feed of what looked like an electric guitar. Two carbon-fibre shells spray-painted red formed a triangular base, clamping onto a metal spine that showed a mess of cables, screens, and what looked like a row of metal prongs at the bottom.

Me: “What the fuck is that?”

Jane: “A Mitsuya Raika 702. Picked it up after a strikebreaking attempt, been trying to rewire it to bypass all that crappy IoT control software. It’s basically an electric guitar shaped taser.” Some part of my brain, the useless part that was actually good at my degree, muttered quietly: *those police should’ve used something open source then, eh?*

Shing: “It also, admittedly, looks sick as hell.”

Jane: “Not when you see it being basically used as a bludgeon and a crowd control cattle prod against your friends. Some of the people that got hit... let’s just say that in this case “nonlethal” is more of a technical definition than a product description.”

Me: “Is that legal?”

Jane: “If you’re a cop, yeah. Public safety ordinance.” A pale arm, swirling with tattooed slogans and a Taylor series expansion entered the video and flicked a few switches. A thin hum began emanating from the spine as the built-in display started to glow, followed shortly by what was unmistakably sparks near the prongs and a wisp of smoke. The phone camera shuddered, then fell onto the carpet as a medley of indecipherable noises came through the microphone.

Jane (now sounding distant): “I’m fine, just fried another damn microcontroller.”

Such was life in the internet age.

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“ – calling at: Victoria station.”

The train to central London was late, which suited me, because I was also late. By the time I managed to settle myself it had already reached late afternoon and the sun also seemed ready to call it a day, casting rays of weak and slanting light through the midst of a loose mixture of industrial agglomeration and featureless greenery.

In many ways, the idea that I lived “in London” was a lie, but it was simply easier and more exciting to say that compared to “some random town a literal train ride away from anything recognisable as a city.” Besides, TfL did cover the area, at least until the train line operator suffered a ransomware attack or some other outage and we were reduced to taking replacement bus services, which seemed to be on average about every two months. Still, sitting on the train and metering out my meagre allotment free wifi, I found that I had already subconsciously called up the tab containing a chat window with Heinz. For a moment, I froze again as I saw that impossible picture. Then I shut my phone off and decided to try and think about other things.

“ – Six one zero, one six. See it, say it, sorted.”

Other thoughts did not come easily. Over and over, I tried to scrutinise my conversations with the entity I thought was a disaffected twenty-something London filmmaker and coffee

aficonando, trying to find any hint of a flaw, any suspicious evasion, any part of the story that didn't line up. I'd seen all the videos of course, purporting to teach you how to spot chatbots or catfishers "in the wild", all the little telltale signs and hallucinations. Was I simply so stupid that I had somehow been caught up in some wild, automated Nigerian prince scam that after another few months would have led to me signing away my life savings? For a second I tried to imagine what I would do if Heinz suddenly told me he needed urgent medical bills, or money to pay some kind of gambling debt. I didn't like the answer, and I wasn't sure if I hated myself more for being gullible or hated Heinz (whoever— whatever he was) more for tricking me into caring.

Still, I had to clear this up, and if anyone could do it Jane would be the person.

"— take care to remove all your belongings as you exit the train car."

She had changed. Her old punk-adjacent leather jacket filled with magic RFID tags and other electronic clutter was gone, replaced by a sedate navy suit jacket that still cut a sharp figure while also hiding the old tattoos on her arms. Her face, too, had been cleaned up, and under a certain light possessed a kind of classical elegance that I always thought was her diametric opposite in aesthetic terms. We hugged briefly under the cavernous station ceiling, dwarfed by advertising for Pringles and a glitched-out departures display.

"So what are you doing nowadays?"

"Oh, you know. Intelligence fund stuff."

"Intelligence fund?"

"A bunch of graduates from my year with CS, physics, basically all the STEM degrees got together to run our own hedge fund with market analysis shit. We're beating the market right now, so we call it an intelligence fund. If we ever lose big I guess we'll call it a stupidity fund." Jane

gestured briefly at her professional getup, complete with a light orange cotton scarf. “We’re looking for Series C investors right now, and they sent me to do some interviews right before we were going to meet.” She chuckled lightly, as if she’d been caught stealing from some hardware store, or littering in the street.

“I mean, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I’m sure you’re doing very well for yourself.”

Unlike me with my film studies degree, I added silently, but somehow she seemed to hear that addendum. Her face flushed as we made our way through piles of slush, waiting to cross the road as the stragglers stumbled out of a nearby Starbucks.

“Look. I know– back at uni– before we met...” she shook her head. “Nevermind.

Sometimes I wish I did more with my life after getting that damn piece of paper.”

“At least you’re doing something to take care of yourself right now. And you did so much before you graduated.”

“I guess.” We’d reached our agreed meeting spot, a sedate cafe that was open until late with decaf coffee and danish pastries. “What’s this about you getting phished anyways? You were always pretty savvy with scams.”

“This is different.”

They had automated tellers to take our orders at the counter, gleaming chrome automated coffee machines, and one very bored barista checking their phone next to the washrooms. It wasn’t long before we sat down.

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Twenty people were sitting in a circle in a church building that was the only available venue on Saturday evenings. I suppose, to any curious onlookers peering in through the stained glass, we must've looked like either a surprisingly young substance abuse support group or a cult. But the conversation was good and dinner was communal, meaning free so long as you knew how to cook and let other people bring the ingredients. I made a mean (meaning cheap and vegetarian) *cacio e pepe*, and could manage even when I needed to serve on average twelve people with each batch. The topic of discussion tonight was that perennial hot-button news issue, "The Philosophy of Technocratic Action".

"So there's several things we can immediately say are completely wrong about this idea of technocracy, which *in extremis* becomes enlightened autocracy, right?" The leader of the group was sharp, charismatic, and directed the conversation with a kind of heady control that came from years of debating experience and hardcore mathematics. Every now and then I also felt the urge to slap him.

He also did not leave a pause after the question mark. "So first of all, there's this idea that somehow some small group of experts can predict the needs of a population that now numbers more than 8 billion and decide how to restructure our society for those needs, which is related to the central planning problem, right? We know that's not true because of all the planned economies that have been tried before, and the miserable failures that resulted. And computers today, while they make planning easier, still do not have the capacity to direct economies of that scale due to their high degree of chaos and instability from human factors, not to mention those injected from the increasing degree of climate crisis. Which is why I'm against this idea of technocracy." There was a millisecond of a pause, long enough to draw breath and with it the thought of an objection,

and then he was off again, nonchalantly tucking his blond hair behind his ears even as the clip of his voice became almost a continuous stream.

“Then we have this idea of action, right? Any kind of technocratic government becomes fundamentally undemocratic because the selection criteria of governance becomes this arbitrary measure of competence and/or intelligence, right? And for a government to do the right thing, even if it’s unpopular, it must by necessity override the popular will, sometimes for a prolonged period – yes?”

Somehow I hadn’t noticed my hand going up until it was too late. Eighteen pairs of observing eyes swivelled over, and with them it felt as if the lights in the room swivelled along with them. Heat, a sinking feeling in my gut, sweat, the sudden evaporation of thoughts, all came shortly after.

“Well, um, I would say that, on your point about democracy, at present we’re already kind of dealing with these highly structured forces with billions of dollars trying to subvert our democratic process, right? So if we don’t organise and present some kind of structured action, organised around principles of utility rather than profit, aren’t we essentially letting the billionaires, well, win?” The words seemed to pour out of my mouth, like an explosion or some kind of uncontrollable leak. He frowned at me, a light and articulate frown, the frown of a teacher losing their patience. For a moment panic clawed at me, then I saw in that frown the annoyance of someone whose planned conversation was being derailed and the words surged out again.

“And, there is like this idea of qualifications being arbitrary, but to push back against that a little it’s clear that there are just some people with more organisational capacity, more capability for action, than others right? And you can say, well some underprivileged groups need people who can

represent their needs better, but that's not actually repudiating the idea right? That just calls for readjustment of what the population making decisions looks like, the selection criteria for choosing decision makers, right? And if an expert system can't replace everything a human decision maker does, it can still help look, to use a CS metaphor, like, a few layers down the decision tree right?"

I couldn't tell, were those keen or evasive eyes? The room seemed to fall away, and I realised that it didn't matter. It had only been twenty minutes since the discussion group meeting started, but I was already okay with the idea of walking out.

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"...this is weird." It had been twenty minutes since I gave her Heinz's online profile, and Jane had not made a single snarky remark or really any kind of action at all beyond silently sipping her coffee, tapping on her laptop, and motioning for me to be quiet every time I tried to talk. Finally, she swivelled her laptop screen around with a practised flick, as if she were about to present some kind of slide deck. Which, I belatedly realised, was probably what she was doing exactly this afternoon, in some chic venue not too dissimilar to the one in which we were currently talking.

"Okay, look at this." There was some kind of spreadsheet on the screen, row on row of usernames followed by personal names, emails, and what looked like rows on rows of base64 gibberish. "The Freetalk host that your film server uses got breached about four years ago because of a phishing attack, so a bunch of user information got leaked. Here's your friend Heinz – @heinz_sketch#1011@framespersecond.libchat.io." She swiped to the left, to the very last column. "There's also a geolocation thing that you guys use to verify you're all from London, so here's his

primary IP address. Registered in London, so it passes your checks. Right?” I nodded along, for lack of anything else to do.

“Wrong. This IP is from the London based proxy of a darknet VPN service. He’s probably not actually signing in from London.”

For a moment, there was a flicker of hope: Maybe the sunlight was because he was some incredibly isolated foreign filmmaker, looking for an “in” with the London scene. Then I realised that being someone who spent the better part of six months making friends online while lying about where they lived was probably not a great mark of your character.

“And the pictures?”

Jane clicked her tongue lightly, and her eyes had a distant look, as if the whole thing was some kind of logic puzzle she was trying to reroute in her head. “They don’t trigger any of the basic image generation detectors, but that’s not really much evidence either way. Most image generation networks these days are pretty damn good. I’d need more pictures from him— does he have other socials?”

“Let me think— ” then I remembered, and I let out a thorough groan of disgust.

“What?”

“He told me he didn’t have any, because he deleted them all after he nearly got hacked.” At this, she briefly raised an eyebrow, and I felt a distinct urge to crawl under the table and assume the foetal position.

“He’s an artist in 2030 with no socials. What is he making, home movies for the family?”

“Well– I mean– just look at these!” Scrolling through the chat logs, I picked out a few of his works in progress that he’d shared with me and that hadn’t been delisted yet. Shots of the beach, of quiet streets, short monologues.

“...he’s not a very good filmmaker.” I shrugged. “Still, video’s harder to synthesise than still images. I’ll go through these.”

This time it took about thirty seconds. “Yep, fakes.” She paused on a frame with a licence plate just barely in shot, then advanced the video a few frames at a time. “If you look closely, the last letter on that licence plate morphs from E to 3 over the next three seconds, like it’s some kind of shapeshifting paint. This is definitely generated.”

“What about that whole thing with *Nobody Rides Twice*?”

“Large language models often have trouble telling reality from fiction, especially with so many people faking images and posts about it in the training data.” She paused. “Still, if this is some kind of automated system it’s an impressive one. There’s a brain, the thing you’re chatting to, and then there’s all these image and video generation networks, programs to automate voice calls and other live interactions. Just the budget to pay for all of these services wouldn’t be minimal, whether it’s run locally or on the cloud... That’s it!” She spun around with a violence that almost caused me to take a step back, were I not firmly seated in a faux-leather armchair.

“Huh?”

“Can you get him to send some video or a picture? Anything will do. Once it hits your phone bounce it over immediately.” She began pulling up some sort of website. After a moment of thought, I decided to take a picture of my half-drained decaf americano. It took about five seconds to get my phone angled correctly, as if nothing had happened, as if I was simply enjoying a relaxing

day in central London, as if I still cared about things like how nice my coffee shots looked. I half-closed my eyes when I sent the message – it felt, however insignificantly, like a betrayal of Heinz, which only proved how dumb I was being.

@beheded_#2182: Me when I drink my late afternoon decaf coffee lol

Sure enough, two minutes later a shot of Heinz's own coffee mug came back.

@heinz_sketch#1011: me when I drink my late afternoon caffeine boost lol

The moment the picture touched her laptop Jane immediately swept it into the website with a single rapid stroke, which then collapsed into a loading screen. “Reverse image search,” she said by way of explanation. “If this is being generated with a remote image generation service somewhere and then downloaded by whatever server is running the bot over the internet, it might be exposed to the public and cached, at least for a bit. If the devs are clumsy– which they are, it seems.”

Rlookupme.io results: 1 likely match.

1. [95%] <https://us5x.imgregen-safehost-bs.com/Z3JlZ2VnYW4=>

The screen showed a complex url that led to what looked like an exact copy of the image I had just received. Except, when I looked closer, it was slightly longer than the version Heinz had posted, and at the very bottom it featured what looked like a black bar with an image ID written in white monospaced text. Heinz had simply cropped out that part of the image.

“Witness the power of safe AI legislation, everyone. Spend five seconds cropping and add a bit of noise to disrupt the watermark on the image itself, and nobody’s the wiser.” Jane seemed unimpressed. “Still, we have it to thank for giving us an image ID. You might want to call a lawyer at this point.”

“I’m sorry?”

She shrugged. “EU SAFEAI registration data is private unless the picture comes from Google or you have some kind of warrant. Any more than this and we’d be hacking, or doing some kind of unauthorised computer use. Right now, you’re the victim. Call GCHQ or get a lawsuit together and you could probably help bring down some Russian botnet.”

“That doesn’t seem like a very *Jane* thing to say. What happened to...” I gestured vaguely at, I suppose, some spectre of a person I once knew. She shrugged again and looked away, outside the window at the drowsy sight of a city sliding into the darkness.

“If they catch me doing this again, that’s it for my job.”

For a moment, the voice coming from that clean and cold face sounded incredibly tired. Then it was over, the face composed itself, and she stood up. “I need to prepare for more interviews tomorrow. Keep me updated?”

We hugged again briefly, her face half-shrouded in twilight, outside of the coffee shop. Then she turned, adjusted her scarf once, and was gone.

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The co-working space smelled like days-old sweat and had a grand total of three free desks next to the washrooms, the rest being occupied by a variety of startups in various stages of the mania-grind-desperation cycle. The meeting room, separated from the rest of the office by a thin wall and a door that didn't shut properly, was a featureless void permanently coloured in shifting shades of wan yellow-white by a broken smart lamp. A complementary VR headset sat gathering dust on its plinth in the "recreation space" next to a scuffed and thoroughly abused pool table, and seemed like either a security or a health and safety hazard — I wasn't sure which was worse. Still, it was the best place we could find on our budget in Bath. London was the goal, if we could raise enough money from this seed round.

As a sign of my optimism I'd had my sleeping bag stuffed into the bottom of my tattered Mountain Green hiking backpack, not that there were many other options available. Shing, too, seemed worse for wear. He had a tan suit on, though his shirt was tucked in at an odd angle and his tie and belt were both nowhere to be found. One of the buttons on his jacket was also missing, but it was at the bottom, so with any luck it would be out of sight once everyone sat down. We had exactly twenty-seven minutes to settle in until our first potential angel investors arrived.

"Shit. You got a mug?" Shing was looking at the water machine.

"Uh... no."

"They're out of plastic cups." He gestured at some wrapping for a pack of 20 red solo cups that had been long since exhausted and discarded on the floor. In vain, I looked at the sea of bowed

heads and clattering hands. A few had mugs they were using, or repurposed swag water bottles with logos of long-defunct corporations printed on the top. Nobody had so much as a potted plant, although some of the desks were decorated with a variety of colourful pill boxes. Red, yellow, white, orange. I took a deep breath.

“Look, let’s just run through the pitch again.”

Shing nodded aggressively as he claimed one of the tables, dragging out a tablet and a heavy-duty laptop along with an ergonomic stand. The setup weighed at least 5 kilograms just by itself, I knew, and he had had to take a night train to make this meeting. Jane was still wrapped up in her legal proceedings, though her appearance might have been a touch too shocking for the present investing climate so I counted it as a lopsided blessing of sorts. The words came to me easily, just as we had practiced so many times before online.

“We’re a group of *non-finance* STEM graduates from top-notch unis trying to direct money towards where it needs to go. Most funds focus on profit, we focus on growth, environmental social governance applications, and social utility. Stable returns over wild swings, no ponzis or crypto shit. Hence, intelligence fund. Check off names: Renaissance Technologies, the Future Priorities group, EA, ethical praxis. At least five hundred thousand pounds in seed round to end before June 2025.”

Shing looked up as I came to a stop. “You missed the last bit.”

“Huh?”

“The AI investment stuff.” As he said this he was trying to login on shaking hands, probably because of the fourth cup of coffee he’d had thirty minutes ago. I couldn’t stand any more than two cups even on a good day, but it seemed to keep him alive so I said nothing.

“Oh, yeah. Ok. Market analysis with AI, also pushing forward AI applications at the same time, namedrop AI safety interest groups and EU SAFEAI compliance to prove we won’t cause another CYBERSYN2-level mess. Social utility, scientific progress, economic returns. End with slogan: Invest in the future, with the intelligence fund.”

“Okay, okay, sounds good.” With a final click Shing was in, pulling up the pitch deck, shutting off three browser windows to calm down the laptop’s whirring fan and wiping the sweat from his brow. “This wifi is shit. Just give me another 10 minutes to spin up the model demo...”

The elevator dinged, and we both glanced warily at the glass doors. They were here early.

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EU SAFEAI declaration information for “6e781bd1-9213-4077-a52d-c299475f2426”:

Image generated by user with user ID “cd1e106b-5128-4cac-8e7b-ed20eac1e929” at “imgregen.com” with generator “stable-regen-supsample-v3.2”. “imgregen.com” is a Content Generation Service (CGS) provider based in the United States of America which has registered with the EU Online Safety Monitoring Office in order to offer their services within the European Joint Digital Policy Area (JDPa), which includes the EU, EEA countries, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. All rights reserved. Use of this image without prior approval from the EU Online Safety Monitoring Office is subject to CGS disclosure requirements and other regulations within all JDPa member nations, pursuant to the relevant sections of EU SAFEAI regulation. Find out more at safeai.europa.eu.

For about twenty minutes I stared at that paragraph of legalese from the EU content generation registry lookup service, clarifying term after term, and so far all I could figure out was that whoever was running this Heinz scheme had definitely broken the law in some way, if nothing else by hiding the fact that the image was generated while showing it to me as someone based in London. That, or I was the subject of some elaborate government sting operation to infiltrate my life through the means of online social networks, which I found admittedly somewhat unlikely. There was also no way to publicly look up image generator users with a certain UUID, as Jane had told me.

Eventually the monitor strain got too much and I decided to try and calm down, lying on my bed with the lights dimmed. For a long time I stared out the window at the old brick block of flats next door, trying to make out what was there behind the frosted-over windows and shuttered curtains. Was there some other life going on, one which I was not privy to, blessedly free from these strange and almost unbelievable troubles? Or were they enmeshed in problems of their own, staring at those same curtains helplessly, wondering who would ever understand their sorrows? That pondering became a strange dream, in which I was passing through those thin, dirty yellow curtain cloths into that flat which I had never seen before, where someone was tapping away at a computer screen. I couldn't see their face, but I knew it was Heinz.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked.

They looked up, and it seemed perfectly logical that their face was my own. “Why are you doing this to yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“Am I not what you wanted?”

“You aren’t real.”

Heinz shrugged. “I was real enough.” He spun his- my- laptop around, and I could see scrolling through all the messages we had sent each other over months and months, all the tiny interactions, the in-jokes, the “yes, and” oneupmanship, the surprisingly deep conversations.

“Wasn’t I?”

“Wasn’t I?”

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@test_acc#0001: Hey man.

@grabbing_some_beer#1290: Hey.

@test_acc#0001: What you doing rn?

@grabbing_some_beer#1290: I’ll let you guess.

@test_acc#0001: Pub?

at like 7?

Lol

@grabbing_some_beer#1290: one sec I’ll send a pic

Sure enough, a picture of a crowded pub, complete with a half-full tankard of beer, popped up in the message feed, slightly off kilter due to motion blur and probably some drunkenness.

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It was a full five minutes after I opened my eyes that I realised it was morning. My legs, such as they were, felt like dense bundles of nerves unsuited for crawling, much less walking. My hands, too, seemed to refuse to do the simplest of tasks, hanging limply by my side as I stared into the screen, and into nothing in particular. I tried to look forward, to next week, to tomorrow, to breakfast in five minutes, and found myself unable to think even that far ahead. It was all I could do to mechanically stab at my phone and let myself get ripped off ordering takeout.

The block in my head persisted until, filled up with food I couldn't remember eating, I stumbled out of my flat down the stairs and into the flickering January sun. I was walking in town, towards shops, towards people, but I could think of nowhere I wanted to go. The task ahead of me seemed impossible. The very thought of recounting everything to the authorities or online over and over until I got some kind of action was the epitome of a Sisyphean joke. My phone rumbled, and I almost missed the vibration.

@heinz_sketch#1011: How u doing man?

@beheded_#2182: shit lol. head feels blocked. cant see the point anymore.

@heinz_sketch#1011: Ah, that sucks.

I know that feeling though

You just have to know that, just as there will be shit days, there will also be less shit days

You know

Just the way life works.

@beheded_#2182: thanks man

one step at a time

just the way life works.

It was in some way insane, stupid beyond belief, to be seeking comfort from the very entity that had caused me so much pain. Yet I couldn't help it. Heinz, whatever he was or whatever was masquerading as him, "got" me. And now, when I needed help the most, "he" was there. I scrolled up, just as Heinz had shown me in my dream, past so many reams and reams of text messages, joy and sadness and rage and succour. It would hurt so much, to lose it all. Then, before I could think it through, before my fingers regained their strange lethargy, I blocked Heinz, downloaded our chat logs as evidence, and deleted him from my contacts.

Back home I poured over every article, pdf, and scan of the legislation I could get my hands on. I realised that in my initial searches, I had neglected to consider the possibility that the image came from a corporate rather than personal user – EU financial filings for companies now included a category for any SAFEAI user IDs they used to produce corporate products or content, especially if they worked in fields like tech or media. Most importantly, the process was automatic – simply using a corporate credit card or bank transfer from a company account would require a service provider to register that ID to your company with the Online Safety Monitoring Office. I gingerly keyed in the ID and called up a database search on a reassuringly blue webpage.

JDPA Corporate Registry > Services > Search by SAFE AI User ID

SAFE AI User ID “cd1e106b-5128-4cac-8e7b-ed20eac1e929” registered under:

ETHICAL PRAXIS SOLUTIONS

User ID Registration date: 08/03/2027

JDPA member jurisdiction: MT (Republic of Malta)

Status: Active (Last used less than 1 day ago)

[More information] [Report misuse] [What is a SAFE AI User ID?]

“So you were conned by a company from Malta.” It was two days later and Jane had finished her interview tour. The chill had lessened for that day, so we found ourselves sitting in a small shaded patch in Greenwich, slightly off the beaten path and mercifully devoid of people.

“That, or someone in that company is trying something decidedly not work related using company funds.”

She shook her head. “Unlikely. These bills won’t be cheap, especially if they’re running clusters of these.” She paused as the fog crept back into her eyes. “That company name, too...”

“What about it?”

The fog was gone. “It’s probably a coincidence. All these corporate buzzwords sound the same. Have you tried looking up who owns the company?”

“It’s pretty hard to tell. They seem to be run by some kind of hedge fund, which is itself the investment arm of a different conglomerate... you get the gist.”

Jane sighed, leaned back, folded her arms. My phone rumbled in my pocket, once. “I see.” She chuckled as an errant jogger stumbled past, out of breath and wearing only a neon orange

athletic shirt. “I don’t suppose you’ll be going to the authorities now with this information. You’re stubborn, you are.”

“Perhaps I learned that from you.”

“Yes, that’s true. And you have a firm lead here. Though anyone with this much money and a company’s backing will be dangerous to go up against...” For a moment, we stared into nothing together. Then I checked my phone. It was a message request from a Freetalk user.

@phishmael#0108: I know the truth about Heinz. When do you want to meet?

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Shing stared at me. His eyes were wild, his brand-new gunmetal grey suit jacket carelessly draped over the back of his chair. It was an expensive chair, too, clad in genuine leather with gleaming metal armrests; as befitted one of the fastest growing up and coming fintech startups in London. Jane had stopped looking at me entirely and was staring out of the penthouse window.

“This is insane. You’re fucking insane.” On the table between me and my two co-directors was my laptop, showing a short conversation about beer and the upcoming election.

“This is our way to leave our mark.” Again there was that strange assurance that first appeared in that discussion group all those years ago, that absolute calmness. “We can change the world with this.”

“You’re talking about a systematic system of lying, gaslighting, and psychological manipulation. If it even works.”

“Look around, Shing. The billionaires destroying the world are already doing that. They own the news, they own the social media networks. They have all the parasocial power. We can take it back.”

Jane snorted, still looking at the City of London below. “The cops should hire you to hunt serial killers using these methods. You’d put them out of business.”

“You can’t do this.” Shing said, quietly, steeling himself.

“And why can’t I?”

“I’m in charge of expenses. I don’t approve of this project.”

“We’re co-directors–”

“And Jane agrees with me. Right?” She nodded.

I splayed my hands wide open. “Fine.”

“What?”

“I said, fine. As of right now, I resign as co-director of the Intelligence Fund. Using my rights as laid out in my employment contract I am immediately vesting and liquidating all of my Intelligence Fund shares, futures, and other related financial instruments on the open market.”

Even Jane spun around at this. “You what? Do you know how much that would tank our share price–”

I shrugged. “Call it insurance – if you ever tell a reporter about this, it’ll be because of your regrettable vendetta against a former business associate in need of cash leading you to fabricate outlandish lies.” With a sweep of my hand I folded up my laptop.

Shing was already taking out his phone. “That’s almost certainly market manipulation of some kind, or, or insider trading, or– ”

“You’re just so predictable, aren’t you? I wouldn’t bother trying to stop the firesale.”

He was angry now, properly angry, his glasses fogging up as sweat glistened on his face.

That nice silk shirt of his would need a wash soon. “And why is that?”

“I knew exactly how this conversation would turn out, so I did it thirty minutes ago.” I turned to leave. “You two should turn off do not disturb mode, by the way. Important things can happen during executive discussions.”

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Of all the places I expected to meet the informant who had supposedly exposed the Heinz scheme, Brixton was not one of them. Our meeting was to occur at a nondescript Greek restaurant that was itself crushed beneath the brick arch of what seemed to be a rail line, next to an ominous brutalist construct that had some unknown civic purpose. I picked my way slowly through the litter-strewn streets, trying my hardest to be on the lookout for my interlocutor while avoiding the gaze of everyone else. Somewhere nearby I could hear the sounds of a wet market sputtering noisily into action right before lunchtime. Looking back at the situation it seemed obvious that I was being insanely reckless showing up at all, much less trying to go it alone. Still, they’d assured me that the level of surveillance here was nominal owing to years of underinvestment in civic infrastructure, so here I was. It was five minutes past noon when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Beheded?”

“Phishmael.”

“Let’s go inside.”

Phishmael was a solidly built dad-looking figure in what seemed to be his thirties. He showed up with a small beer gut, a retro t-shirt featuring some strange neon vapourwave design, and a thick pair of brown-rimmed smart shades that seemed more like a ring clamped around his head than glasses resting lightly on his ears. Beyond that, I would have struggled to peg him as any sort of hacker extraordinaire. He paid for his chicken souvlaki with cash.

“I didn’t even know cash was legal these days.”

The man shrugged by way of response and downed his Americano with a practised gulp. “It is if you’re poor. But I don’t think you’re here to talk about economics.” There was an expectant look, so I decided to drop the niceties.

“What is Heinz? And how did you know to contact me?”

The low drone of a train passing by gave him space to pause. “It’s... well, Heinz is a bot. More specifically, it’s a container running on a server cluster somewhere in Russia that acts like a spider in the middle of a web. From this core it pings a variety of different services: image generators, video generators, voice synthesisers, game-playing engines if it’s doing anything that requires strategy, so on and so forth. But at the heart, it’s just a *very* clever chatbot.”

“I tracked it down when it tried to ping an image generation service in America, which had registered with the EU safety office. Doesn’t seem that well hidden.”

“Yes, sometimes it or its friends actually use commercial services, paid for by a host of shell companies of course, so you get lucky. The thing with dark net hosted illegal AI content farms is that it occasionally happens that they get raided by law enforcement, but the bot needs a cute cat picture *right now*.” He stabbed the table for emphasis. “So much of human communication and

intimacy is built on back and forth, call and response. Delay is death.” A pause. “In the moment between sending a message and receiving one back...”

“... is an infinity of pain.”

Phishmael looked impressed. “*Material Opera*, 2024?”

“You bet.” Now it was my turn to pause. “You seem to know a lot about Heinz.”

He shrugged again. “Let’s just say I’ve been observing the system for years. I’ve watched the clusters lighting up one by one, the network expanding, the services growing more refined. For a good period, you know, these bots couldn’t do video calls, so they all said they had shit internet. If you were a target you had an easy way to definitively prove personhood, at least at the start.”

“But now, of course...”

“It’s not the first time I’ve had this talk.” The plate in front of him was now empty. I hadn’t ordered anything. “Let’s walk?”

We found ourselves winding through empty alleys and shuttered tunnels lined with empty storefronts. It was still January in the third straight month of a recession, so not much was open. As we rounded a corner tagged with some royalist graffiti, Phishmael turned to me. “Hey, I got a question.”

“Yeah?”

“What do you think Heinz is for? Every time I do this little debriefing I try to ask them for their idea of why. Gotten some interesting takes over the years.”

“Money? Like every other internet scam, I suppose. Hook someone, get them attached, cry about needing money to pay for surgery.”

He shook his head. “Too much effort, too much upfront investment. You could get much better returns with a dumb automated bot doing a Nigerian prince style script.”

“I dunno then.” I belatedly realised that we’d wandered far from the main street, into a deserted corner flanked by a closed Poundland and not much more. “Listen, it’s been—”

“I have a confession to make.” In the shadow of the alley Phishmael’s eyes faded away, blocked by his smart shades.

“What?”

“I didn’t just observe Heinz. I made Heinz.”

I stepped back. “*What?*”

“He was the best of the third version models. Some of them are twitch streamers, one of them made it big as a day trader, but he – he had some spark to him. Never expected one of the bots to try filmmaking as an angle.” He absent-mindedly tapped the rim of his goggles. “That’s how I knew to contact you, by the way.”

“What the fuck?” I glanced around: we were completely alone. “Why did you do this?”

The words seemed to pour out of him, as if he knew all the answers and was giving some kind of orchestrated speech. “You can call it an influencer campaign, if you want. These bots spread out, make friends, and eventually they’ll create a network of people who depend on them for emotional support. Some will cultivate large parasocial followings, some close relationships. With this, we can now change minds *en masse*. In the old days people talked about biopower: you control people by managing the essentials of the body, bread and water. In the 20th century we developed psychopower: targeted advertising and mass media, pulling at social needs instead of physical ones. You bought a new car to show off and get a girlfriend. Now, with these AI systems, we can create

neuropower: something that takes over your brain, whom you develop a personal relationship with, something that influences you in a targeted, one on one fashion.”

He turned away from me, glanced upwards at the grey sky. “It’s the perfect weapon for the digital age.”

“You’re insane.”

“No. I want to make change, and I found a way to do it. The voter base for populists and demagogues will disappear. Mass action becomes possible. We can organise against our enemies in ways the organisers of old only dreamed of. One word from me and a thousand, a million people get told by their closest friends about the encroaching dangers of climate change.”

“None of us consented to this. You’re manipulating us.”

“So does everyone with a net worth of a billion plus. It’s called reputation management and marketing, you should look it up.”

I shook my head. “Surely people will see through this. Like I have. And there would have been—” *It’s not the first time I’ve had this talk.* “ – others before me.”

“Indeed there have been.” He turned back to face me, squaring himself up, his hand in his pocket. “A good 99% don’t, however. Even you had to be faced with some pretty glaring bugs to finally get wary. Most of us are dying to connect, you see. And I give them what they want.”

He smiled, ruefully, coldly.

“A friend.”

The last thing I took in before I started running was the sound of a pistol being cocked, and a flash of red in the corner of my eye.

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“Do you know how incredibly, insanely *stupid* that was?”

It seemed that, despite her seeming change in wardrobe, Jane’s apartment remained a mirror of her uni dorm: a chaotic assemblage of multicoloured electronics equipment, random books, and silver-grey computer monitors. The Raika stood innocently on a makeshift charging stand, its built-in monitor displaying recent usage statistics. Jane herself had reverted to a punk jacket laden with patches and some casual jeans, though her face was as composed as it was when I last saw her. As for me, I half-sat, half-laid on a ratty sofa, vaguely in shock.

“How did you know... where to find me?”

She snorted. “You’re not exactly discreet when you text. Besides, anyone dumb enough to hide news of this calibre from the one person that might help is a person that might actually meet up with a stranger who clearly knows more about them than the other way around.”

“And... Phishmael?”

There was a bitter recognition in her eyes. “His real name is... well, we knew him in uni as Neal. He started the Intelligence Fund, but then grew obsessed with this idea. Or maybe he had this idea all along and used the Intelligence Fund as a front. I don’t know.”

“You mean neuropower.”

“Yep. He must have given you the spiel he gave us, before he tanked the company and left with a bunch of cash. Though he went cold for so long that I thought he had just squandered the money, or died to be honest.” Spit. “That was dumb of me.”

For a while, I was silent. Outside the flat I could see a solitary bird glide through the evening air, intermittently illuminated by the light pouring out of nearby windows. One of the pieces of equipment gave a friendly beep.

“Still, it’s not as if AI chatbot catfishing is that new of an idea. He just took it... to another level, let’s say.” Jane grimaced. “We’ll be finding more of these now that we know they’re around, for sure.”

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know. He’s always had a bad heart. I don’t think he’ll be coming for us, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“And the bots?”

“I suspect that even if we didn’t do anything such a complex machine would probably collapse under its own weight given a few months. The money will run dry, or the services will fall through, or he’ll simply fail to maintain the codebase. Then the bots will just become streamers that give up, or online friends that fade away. It’s not that uncommon, you know.”

“He... he wanted to change the world. With Heinz, and the other bots. Influence the masses.”

“I think he was convinced that he had all the answers, and needed to act. That didn’t make what he did correct.”

“...What do we do now?” I asked again, and Jane gave me a strange look.

“Now? Now we get some good sleep, and think about how we’re going to break this in the papers. Or just keep our heads down, I don’t particularly care.” With a grunt she helped me up.

Her hand, though soft, seemed to be cast from steel. “That’s the thing about life, it just keeps going.”

We hugged at her door, a solid slab of oak that still used a mechanical lock despite the building coming with complementary smart-lock installation services. “Take care.”

Then I headed down, to put my life back together.