

## Bubble City: Chapter 8

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“Poly?” “Yeah, poly,” she said, hunting for her shirt and putting it back on. No sense in being *that* forward when she answered the door. “You mean like polygamous?” “No, silly, do I look like I have multiple wives? I just have that one...” “You ha—wait, so what does poly mean?” “Polyamorous,” she said, putting her socks back on. Jason saw her heading to the door and realized he better put on some more clothes of his own. Because putting on some more clothes of Sarah’s seemed wrong for the mood. “Multiple loves.” Jason scurried towards his pants. “I don’t instantly assume that just because I’m seeing one person that means I can’t see another.” Jason tried to pull the pants up while avoiding any unsightly bulges. “I just don’t sign on to that arbitrary rule of our culture.”

“But it’s not arbitrary!” Jason insisted. “What about jealousy?” Sarah opened the door as Jason was struggling to put on his shirt. Jonathan was standing there and she grabbed his head, gave him a long faux-passionate kiss, and then closed the door again in his face. “Did that make you jealous, sweetie?” she asked Jason, a tad mockingly he thought. “Oh, I’m sorry, honey,” she said, making out with him and sliding a hand down his pants. “Ohhh,” he said. “Well now I’m suddenly *very* jealous,” he said smiling. She pinched him and ground him against the wall a bit before going to get the door. “Well, when you get over it, you know where to find me,” she said, pulling Jonathan inside. “Uh, who’s that?” Jonathan asked, pointing to Jason. “Oh, he was just going,” she said, before dragging Jonathan into the bedroom.

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Jason tried to get back to work, to figure out the secret code that allowed one to take over the NNA algorithm, but he just couldn’t focus. Every time he tried to sit down to do the math, he felt tired or bored or distracted. All he could think about was Sarah. And all he could think about that was how anathema to productivity it was.

But there wasn’t much he could do. He couldn’t get Sarah out of his mind. And even if he could, there she was, just across the office, smiling as if nothing was wrong, and forcing her way back into his consciousness. So the next night he went back there. Sarah started first.

“Oh, Jason, I’m so sorry. I was incredibly rude. I just got so swept up in the moment, you know?” “Oh, that’s OK. I’m sorry I wasn’t more understanding

of your, um, lifestyle.” “But now?” “I think I can accept it.” “Oh, Jason,” she said, hugging him, “I’m so glad. I really do like you.” “And Jon?” “Well, I guess I like him too. Are you OK with that?” “Yeah, I think so.” “Anything I can do to make it worth your while?” she asked before kissing him, starting with his lips and then working her way down his chest.

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Jason had heard people say that getting laid made them more productive, but he always found it a colossal waste of time. Not only the time wasted with your partner, but also all the time you spent during the day thinking about the time you’d wasted or the time you would waste in the future. It made it hard to focus, worst of all now, when something important was at stake.

He put all thoughts of Sarah out of—Sarah and Jonathan, sitting there, his muscl—anyway, he put all of that out of his mind and focused on the problem at hand. How did this sequence of bookmarks lead to that particular recommendation?

After much procrastination, he cracked the code. There were a series of accounts, call them dummy0 thru dummy15, and a series of pages, call them page0 thru page15. dummy0 linked to page0, dummy1 linked to page0 and page1, dummy2 linked to page0, page1, and page2, and so on. Then dummy15 also linked to an additional page and that was the one that got pushed out in all the recommendations.

Jason figured that the clustering algorithm must have discovered this cluster, noticed the odd behavior, and taken it aside for special processing. Not that anyone could know for sure without untangling all that code.

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Days before, Jason Blakeslee, Google’s head of public relations, and received a visit from Samuel Turnbill, Google’s head of evangelism. The meeting was coordinated over Google Email, it was marked in Google Calendars, it was recorded by Google Video, and held on the Google campus. In that, it was like many other meetings. And yet, somehow, it was very different.

“I’m sure you’ll recall NNA,” Samuel began, getting down to business. “Of course,” Blakeslee said. “Well, it appears someone found a piece of it that we were hoping to keep hidden.” “Jesus, Sam, would it kill you to speak clearly? I’m head of public relations, not the public.” “OK, OK. So here’s how it is: there’s a special control system in NNA that allows us to exercise some influence over the workings of the algorithm, for administrative purposes and that sort of thing. Someone else appears to have discovered the control structure. If this gets out, it could be incredibly damaging. It *must* be stopped.” “I understand,” Blakeslee explained. “I’ll put our team on it.” “Thank you,” Samuel

said handing Blakeslee a USB thumb drive. “Here’s a quick explanation and all the relevant logs.”

And thus the head of evangelism handed the drive to the head of public relations who handed it to head of sensitive operations who handed it to his tech lead who handed it to Mike. “Piece of cake,” Mike said.

The logs showed the IP address and time the perp had contacted Google’s servers with his bookmark request. The IP address was a cable modem used mainly by one man: a Mr. Jason Barsto. Barsto had a Google account, which allowed Mike to pull up a pretty decent summary of his entire life: his email, his calendar, his search history, what news stories he liked, where he lived, surveillance photos of his house, the top people he chatted with, and on and on.

Now came the fun part: compiling a dossier. Mike skimmed through Barsto’s life, with the aid of Google technology that helped highlight key concepts and messages, getting inside Barsto’s head and trying to understand who he was.

He started with search. Barsto was a geek, the kind of person who searched Google every time a thought passed through his head. Within minutes, he knew everything from what kind of error messages Barsto’s computer was showing that day to what kind of porn he enjoyed. it was like a raw feed into his stream-of-consciousness.

Just in the past few hours Barsto had searched for:

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big daddy
galaxy halos
guitar hero four
san francisco library
arguments against evolution
stomach cancer
site:mayoclinic.org stomach cancer
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Next came email. Using Google technology developed for targetting ads and improving search, his system pulled out the key concepts and emails in Barsto’s mailbox. Pretty quickly he learned who Barsto’s friends are, who his crushes were, who his boss was, and what he did with his free time. Using his Google Chat logs, he found what Barsto liked to gossip about and what crazy links he shared with his friends. (Luckily for Mike, Barsto appeared to be the kind of startup geek who never saw a Google app he didn’t use.)

Using the calendar, he discovered when Barsto went to the gym, when he went to see his girlfriend, and so on. Connecting this with the Google friend-tracking app Barsto had installed on his GPS-enabled phone, Barsto was able to get solid GPS coordinates for all of these places on a Google Map as well as see where Barsto was right now. They could probably ask his phone to record all of his phone calls for them, although Barsto didn’t have that kind of clearance.

Since Barsto used Google News and YouTube, he got a fairly good sense of what kinds of things Barsto was interested in and, thanks to Google Checkout, he was able to see all the recent purchases Barsto had made. But — and here was the motherload — Barsto ran Google Desktop Search, which allowed Mike to access any file on Barsto’s computer. He quickly pulled up Barsto’s full browsing history and got to see what kind of porn he liked, what blogs he visited, what he was reading about today, which non-Google apps he used, etc. (For people who didn’t have Google Desktop Search installed, he got the same data thru Google Web Accelerator.)

By the end of the day he felt he knew Barsto better than he knew some of his own best friends. He put the highlights of what he’d learned into a report for his superiors: Barsto’s name and address, his occupation and skill-level, his interests and hobbies, his friends and girlfriends, and (his favorite part) a series of embarrassing or otherwise fun facts that could be used for blackmail or simply amusement. (You wouldn’t believe how many people kept naked photos of themselves or loved ones on their hard drives!)

He sent the report to his superior and wandered off for a bit to dwell on the power he had as a faceless person deep inside an office park in Mountain View to know every detail of another person’s life; a person living just miles north in San Francisco. He wondered what it would be like if he came across him on the street — here, he would know every detail of Barsto’s life, from the secrets he confided over IM with his friends to what he looked like naked, while Barsto would see Mike as just another random face in the crowd.

Mike loved his job.

*Tomorrow:* [Chapter Nine](#)