Roy knew something was wrong when he was called up to the 436th floor. He sat outside Director Anderson’s office in a leather chair that would have been more comfortable under a different circumstance. Sweat invaded Roy’s armpits. His left leg twitched uncontrollably, pulled by an ethereal puppet master. The secretary opened the large wooden door to Roy’s left. “Roy, Director Anderson will see you now.”

Roy breathed in deeply. “Ok.”

As he stood up, he recalled a memory from middle school when the principal scolded him for supergluing his art teacher to her chair. He got three detentions and was grounded for a month. Ever since then, he had tried to abide by the rules as best he could. It had served him well. He was working at Polygon Capital, one of the most exclusive and successful hedge funds in Nova Demos, one of the world’s leading business hubs. But everything about the 436th floor and Director Anderson’s office reminded him of the middle school incident. Except this time he didn’t know why he was here.

Director Anderson was a trite circle of a man in his early sixties. “Hello, Roy.” His voice had the lively quality of a funeral home director’s. “Please sit.” He gestured to a leather chair on the other side of his immaculate wooden desk.

“Hello, Director Anderson.” Roy felt his throat dry as he sat down.

Anderson nudged his tiny glasses up his nose while glancing at a piece of paper. “Roy, I’ll cut right to the chase. You’re on the brink of termination. Your weekly reports have been lackluster at best. They’ve taken a huge drop in quality since you first started here. You seem to have become more distracted and less productive lately. If you hadn’t put out good work when you first started here, you would already be gone. That’s all. Have anything to say?”

Roy studied the suit and glasses in the chair across from him. *Where is this coming from? I’ve been working just as hard since I started here six years ago*, he thought.

“Less productive? I don’t understand. I would say my weekly reports have more in-depth analysis than ever.”

Anderson shook his head. “Recently we conducted a discrete study on our employees to see who is most distracted by their phone the most by non-work-related matters during the workday. Out of all four departments, you use your phone in the top five percentile of all employees.”

Disbelief and confusion clouded Roy’s mind. “Discrete...study? You were spying on us?”

Anderson chuckled. “Roy, if you’re suggesting what I think you are, you can pack up your things and walk right out onto 33rd St. If not, I’ll give you a week to improve your work ethic. And if we do not see better results, you can kiss this job goodbye. That’s all. You may go.”

Roy found his feet and stood up in a bewildered stupor. “Understood. Thank you, sir,” he muttered.

The elevator ride back down to Roy’s desk was a short one. Rambunctious theories bounced around in his head trying to explain what just happened. The blue numbers on the elevator screen stopped at 7, and the doors opened. Roy walked quickly to his desk and collapsed in his swivel chair, expelling an audible sigh. Geneva’s head popped up over their desk divider.

“How’d it go?” she asked with a sincereness Roy always found refreshing.

Roy attempted a half smile. “Apparently I’m an obsessive phone user, and if I don’t cut back on my use, I’m done.”

Geneva closed her eyes while looking right at him. Roy could never tell if she did that to concentrate or flaunt her eyelashes. “That doesn’t make a whole lot of sense,” she said.

“Apparently they did some ‘study’ to see who was most distracted by their phone during the workday. I don’t like it, no matter how it was done. Very panoptic.”

Geneva nodded sympathetically, her eyes still closed.

Roy continued talking as he pulled out his phone. “I guess I use my phone a lot to check on sports highlights. Let me see actually how much time I’m…” he paused. “7 hours and 35 minutes a day?! What the hell!”

“I used to be in that range. But my therapist really helped me come off it. Now I’m more productive than ever,” Geneva added.

*And it shows*, Roy thought. Geneva had just been promoted above Roy, and she had been here for half the time he had.

“Do you think your therapist would be able to help me too?” Roy asked.

“If you’re really serious about this job, then yes. My therapist signed me up for a treatment that was definitely...experimental. But it worked! I spend less than an hour a day on my phone now. And it was quick! I started noticing changes the first day.”

“How so?” Roy tried his best to conceal his desperation with curiosity.

Geneva opened her eyes and smiled. “It will work best if you go in completely blind. Just keep an open mind about how you see things,” Geneva replied. “My therapist would be able to explain it better than me anyways. Dr. Susan Olsen. She has an office right outside of Nova Demos.” Geneva handed Roy a business card. “She’s really likable. I guess all therapists should be. But Susan is especially down to earth.”

Roy started shaking with relief. “Great! I’ll make an appointment right now. Thanks Geneva!”

Roy called Dr. Olsen’s office and was ecstatic to find she had an opening for this afternoon. He left the Polygon office early and drove to the office: a cozy, modern single-floor building nestled in a secluded plaza, the cloud-piercing spires of Nova Demos looming in the distance. The interior of the office was a professional white, not sterile as a hospital would be but more akin to the lobby of an upscale hotel. Roy approached the receptionist’s window. A young man gazed at him intently on the other side of the green-tinted glass, which started to slowly slide open. “Roy Quinlan?”

Roy’s surprised expression answered for him.

“You’re Dr. Olsen’s last patient today,” the receptionist said, as if Roy should have known. “Here are some forms we’re going to have you fill out. Have a seat and Dr. Olsen will be with you momentarily.”

Roy skimmed the forms, his mind still focused on Anderson’s ultimatum. *Could it be that I’ve been doing my job exceptionally this whole time? And this is a fake threat to push me past my current limit? A test to see how I would respond?* he wondered. *Sure, my screen time is a bit above average, but I seriously don’t think it’s been affecting my performance*.

“Hello, Roy. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Dr. Olsen, but please, call me Susan.”

“It’s fantastic to meet you, Susan. Thank you for taking me on such short notice,” Roy said.

“Of course. Please follow me.”

Roy felt immediately more relaxed as he entered Susan’s office. Hanging plants cascaded from the high ceiling, and the entire left wall was a tantalizing nexus of vines. A small mural of a rainforest adorned the right wall, the canopies of the immense trees disappearing into the ceiling.

“Geneva told me you were really down to earth, but I didn’t think she meant literally,” Roy joked.

Susan’s warm laugh was an oasis of comfort for Roy. “I used to be quite the hippie. And I still...kinda am,” she replied casually, completely disarming her patient.

“Anyways, Roy, I know we talked briefly on the phone. But I want to start at square one. If you don’t feel comfortable answering every question, that is more than alright. Allow thoughts to come and go from your mind. Take all the time you need when answering.”

Roy nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Ok. Have you ever been to a therapist in your life?”

“No, this is my first time.”

“Does Polygon Capital offer any sort of on-site counseling? Not a therapist per se, but more of a life coach.”

“Yes, but only the higher ups really get access to them.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, it does.”

“Ok. Who would you voice that concern to, if you wanted to?”

Roy paused to think. “Probably someone in HR.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

Roy paused again. “No.”

Dr. Olsen leaned forward slightly. “So, would it be fair to say that it would be difficult to find someone to explain your problems to at Polygon? Other than your immediate coworkers, like Geneva?”

“Yeah...that’s very accurate, actually. I feel self-sufficient, but in the sense that I’m stranded on a life raft in a vast ocean. I take care of myself because I *have* to, not because I *want* to.”

“That makes sense. So now, when you’re confronted with an ultimatum - improve your work by reducing your screen time or get fired - that life raft starts floating out into some pretty deep waters. Shark-infested waters.”

Roy almost leapt out of his chair. “That’s exactly how I feel!” he exclaimed.

Susan returned a soft smile of understanding. “Then, to extend this metaphor one last bit, if there was a rescue boat twenty kilometers away, would you be willing to swim towards it? Or would it not be worth it at that point?”

“Twenty kilometers is pretty far,” Roy muttered. Suddenly, a fiery determination welled inside of him. Something he hadn’t felt since his junior days. “Susan, I am getting on that rescue boat.”

“Excellent. I’m glad to hear it, Roy. I’m here to help you every step of the way. But this is a long swim. Don’t underestimate it. Are you prepared?”

“Absolutely,” Roy stated. “Geneva mentioned an experimental treatment that helped reduce her screen time in a matter of days. Could you talk a little bit more about that?”

“Are you sure you want to jump right to that? There are other, less extreme methods.”

“I need something extreme if I want to curb my habit as soon as possible. Or else…” Roy wiped his sweaty palms on his pants. “I’m done for.”

“Ok. This treatment is fairly straightforward.” Susan opened one of her desk drawers and pulled out a sleeve of what looked like tiny, clear circular bandages. She tore off one of the bandages and handed it to Roy. “Place this over the front camera of your phone.”

Roy did as instructed. The bandage had a detailed hexagonal pattern sewn into it.

“That little bandage is called an ONI, or Optical Nerve Inhibitor. It’s a new device from Alucard Laboratories. Essentially, whenever you want to look at your phone, ONI makes it blurred. Censored, if you will. The only way to see what you’re doing is by removing the ONI. But of course, doing that would defeat the point of the treatment. You are still able to answer texts and calls via your lock screen, but as soon as you get past that...well, try it.”

Roy unlocked his phone by speaking his vocal password, “Mondays are the worst.” His screen became a murky sea, as if he had opened his eyes underwater. He glanced back at Dr. Olsen, dumbfounded. “Wha...I had no idea technology like this had even been created yet!” Roy blurted.

“You’re at the forefront of something incredible. Think about it. Parents want to limit what their kids see online. Done. Teachers want students to stop cheating on their online exams. Done.”

“This is exactly what I was looking for. Out of sight, out of mind. Literally!”

“I’m glad you think so. But you’re not over the hump yet. You’re going to start getting dopamine hits when you get back to the office. It’s your brain expecting the pleasure you get from surfing social media and the like. Keep a steady head and remember why you’re doing this.”

“You’re right. I can’t get ahead of myself. Susan. I cannot thank you enough.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said.

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Feeling like he had shed old skin, Roy took the stairs up to his desk the next day. “Good morning, Geneva,” he said as he placed his things at his desk. Ironically, she was looking down at her phone.

“Huh? That you, Roy?” Geneva lifted her head up.

“...Yeah. I went to see Dr. Olsen yesterday. She was fantastic and explained everything about the treatment to me.”

“She gave you an ONI?”

“Yep!” He flashed his phone towards Geneva.

“Guess you must have really been desperate if you went right to that,” Geneva said in an uncharacteristically disparaging tone.

Still buzzing, Roy did not pick up on Geneva’s remark. *Out of sight, out of mind*, he kept repeating in the back of his head. But after an hour, the familiar itch returned like a wet dog on a doorstep. Roy felt his pockets fervently, then remembered he had put his phone in his desk drawer. *Maybe if I just check my lock screen, then put it back*, he decided. He slid open his drawer and glanced quickly at his phone. Its screen responded by lighting up. All the notifications he was expecting were missing. Sports. News. Social media. Roy remembered back to the conversation he had with Susan. *I have to start swimming.* He dropped his phone back in his drawer and went back to work.

Another hour came and went. The puppet master had returned from Director Anderson’s office, vigorously tugging his leg. *Ok, I’ll allow myself one peek. After all, Geneva was looking at her phone earlier! I’m allowed some sort of reprieve*.

Roy rapidly opened the drawer, grabbed the device, and bolted to the bathroom. After kicking the bottom of the swinging door ajar, he picked the farthest stall on the right side, his subconscious favorite because its seat never seemed to get dirty. Roy got comfortable and pulled out his phone, his breathing accelerating. Once again, he was greeted by a murky, blurred screen. He gulped and removed the ONI from his phone’s front camera. Roy did not even bother repressing the massive smile crawling across his face. He reached over for some toilet paper, but never got to the roll.

He couldn’t see his hand. He couldn’t see the toilet paper. They had all become out of focus in the same way his phone had just been. But now...the only thing that was clear *was* his phone. Roy frantically stuck the ONI back on his camera. Nothing happened. He removed it and tried again. Nothing.

Roy staggered out of the stall and bumped into the door on his way out of the bathroom. He made his way over to his desk in a mix of delirium and frustration. Geneva would have some answers. He was sure of it.

“Geneva! What...is going on? Everything. The whole world. Is blurred! I can’t live my life like this. I can’t process information like this. I can’t do my job like this.” Roy was trying to keep his voice down, but a few other coworkers started looking over in his direction.

“Roy, calm down. Stop bitching. It won’t get you anywhere,” Geneva snapped in a callous tone Roy would never have thought she was capable of.

“Wha...Geneva? You’ve been dealing with all of this...haven’t you? Isn’t your world blurred too?”

“Yep. For three weeks. I had no one to talk to about it. I was too embarrassed because I had brought it all on myself. Dr. Olsen gave me another ONI for my computer so I could still do my job. It works in the same way, you just place it on your webcam instead. You should go back and see her for one.”

“How can I even get there? I can’t drive like this!”

“You’ll find a way,” Geneva said matter-of-factly. “That’s besides the point. You have to decide for yourself if you can go living the rest of your life with your only vivid experiences being on screens.”

“You’re ok with it?” Roy asked apprehensively.

“You get used to it,” Geneva replied. “There are workarounds. If you ever really need to see something, you can just turn on your camera and hold your phone up to it. Like a magnifying glass.”

“That’s true,” Roy noted on the back end of a sigh. Reluctantly, he walked over to a large window where he knew there was a pleasant view of the park below. He held up his phone as if he was taking a picture. The park sprung to life on his screen. Roy let out a startled laugh. *I can make this work*, he told himself.

Suddenly, a “low battery” notification appeared on his screen, stealing away his view. Roy slumped his shoulders and slammed his forehead against the window. He had completely forgotten what it had felt like to cry.