

Error Message Eyes

Release 2.0

*A Programmer's Guide
to the Digital Soul*

Keith P. Graham

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Change Log

Version 1.0 11/10/2010 First attempt at creating an Amazon book.

Version 1.1 12/04/2010 Revise structure. Add page numbers.

Version 1.2 12/31/2010 Grammar and spelling changes. Commit Mobi and Paperback versions to Amazon.

Version 1.3 04/10/2016 Rewrite - not finished or published.

Version 2.0 05/01/2022 Removed 7 stories, added 18 new stories.

Used [LanguageTool](#) App to fix grammar. Rewrote every story.

Added cell phones to old stories.

I'd like to thank Shaun Lawton of The Freezine of Fantasy and Science Fiction for keeping me interested in writing. If it wasn't for Shaun, I would have given up long ago.

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FORWARD

I had a programming gig in the 1980s that had me drive down to Philadelphia to install my code. I spent my afternoons down on South Street where I'd get cheese steaks at Jim's. I wandered around and found a used music store where I bought my first tube guitar amp.

There was a wonderful used book store. The Science Fiction shelves were in the back and I spent all of my spare cash. One day, all at the same time, I bought John Shirley's *Eclipse*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Rudy Rucker's *True Names*.

These books changed the way I thought about the world, the future, and how I thought about myself. I still read all three of them every few years.

I've always wanted to write stories. I have a box of short stories, poems, and novels going back to my elementary school days. I had given up because I thought that none of these were very good. I have rejection slips from Science Fiction magazines going back to 1969.

This all changed after reading Cyberpunk. I sold my first story that I wrote back then, and since then I've sold 80 or so additional short stories.

So you can blame John Shirley, William Gibson, and Rudy Rucker for the contents of this little book.

I had the privilege of meeting John Shirley when he came to New York City to read at a Science Fiction club. I found that he is as gracious a person as he is a great writer.

I hope that you enjoy the stories in this new version of *Error Message Eyes, Release 2.0*.

Two Annies

Mayhew was not a strong guy. He struggled under the weight of Annie's body that he carried over his shoulders. Too many years of bad living and too many cigarettes had taken its toll on his strength.

"Stay with me, girl," he said, more to himself than a plea to the unconscious woman he carried, "stay with me, Annie."

He could still feel her breathing, he thought, as he trudged through the slushy February snow. He left droplets of the red in the snow behind him as Annie slowly bled out. He could see the brownstone apartment building up ahead. He only hoped that the Professor would answer the door at this late hour. He might still be up.

Mayhew tried to move the girl's body up higher with a jerk, and he heard her gasp. He hoped that sound was a good thing.

There were nine steps up to the landing and Mayhew's calves hurt as he climbed up to the landing. The door was broken and off its hinges. He squeezed through the opening, trying not to disturb the woman on his back. Prof. Rumbata lived on the third floor. Mayhew moved Annie up as high as he could on his shoulders and started the climb the steps, catching his breath at each landing.

Mayhew's breath came in painful gasps by the time he reached the 3rd floor. There was a typed card thumb-tacked to the door that said Prof. and Dr. Rumbata. It seemed much colder inside the stairwell than it had been outside. He kicked on the door with his foot and yelled, "Professor, it's me, Mayhew. Let me in."

There was stirring from inside the apartment. He heard a bolt slide open and a chain move into place. A pale eye peered out from the doorway.

"I told you, Mayhew, that I didn't need any more subjects. Go away."

"This is not a subject. This is a friend of mine, and she needs help."

The professor looked at the girl and then back to Mayhew. "She requires a medical Doctor. I can't do anything for her."

"She's dying," Mayhew said, "I need you to save her. You said you could do it."

"Out of the question. If I get caught doing this, it is jail time for me. I don't do this anymore."

"You have to, Professor!"

"Go away. There is a night hospital on 14th Street. Perhaps they can do something for you."

Annie groaned.

Rumbata looked away and started to close the door. Mayhew rammed against it with all of his strength, breaking the chain and pushed into the room.

"Get out! Get out!" the Professor yelled.

"Look Prof, you are going to do this." Mayhew pushed by him into the bedroom on the left. There was a hospital bed in the room surrounded by computer equipment. Mayhew gently laid Annie onto the bed.

"With what I know about you," Mayhew told the Professor, "I can put you away for years."

"You wouldn't dare!" the Professor Rumbata protested, "If they seize my records, you would go away, too."

"Right now I don't care. Annie's dying, and you are the only one who can help me."

A woman appeared in a doorway. Mayhew had never seen her, but she looked like he would've imagined a Mrs. Rumbata would look like.

"Do it and get rid of them, Inesh" she said.

"Go back inside, Ela," the Professor said, "I can handle this."

"Do it," she said. She walked by the men, and looked at Annie. She went to a closet and came out with a packet of lactated ringers, found a vein and tied the bag to a pole on the bed.

"Don't let her die here," she said and left the room.

The Professor turned around and looked at the woman

on the bed.

“OK, OK,” he said, “Let’s make this quick.”

“No,” answered Mayhew, “Let’s make it good.”

The Professor removed Annie’s clothes and placed adhesive sensors on her arms, legs, face, and chest. He took off all the hair on her head with an electric razor. He then carefully placed adhesive patches on her head, so they covered her skull. The patches each had a small white lump in the center with LEDs that glowed red as he moved them in position.

Rumbata booted a laptop computer. He started a program. One by one the LEDs on Annie’s skull turned green. The Professor waited a little for the process to finish, and then he pressed a key and all the LEDs turned yellow and then again turned green. Rumbata seemed satisfied.

The Professor pressed a button on the screen and a holographic joystick appeared above the keyboard. He moved it around slowly. As he did this, Annie’s left leg kicked and then her right leg. Her arms shuddered in turn. She breathed in deeply and let out a little moan. Annie began to repeat the words “testing 1,2,3” softly. Her eyes opened and looked around the room, and then they closed again. The Professor repeated the words, “testing 1,2,3”.

When the Professor had finished, he pushed the joystick down to the keyboard and tapped a button on the screen. A holographic billboard jump up from the laptop and numbers flashed from it. As he watched the numbers would hesitate for a moment and then start again at a lower number. Sometimes this would happen a few times and Rumbata would lean over and look at the woman’s face, open one eye and move a small flashlight around in front of it. The number could pause and then become unstuck and the count would proceed.

Mayhew found a chair in the corner and sat down. He watched the Professor work. The little man seemed careful and competent. Mayhew had worried that he would rush the job just to get him out of his apartment,

but it seemed that this was not the case. Whatever the Professor's sins were, he was scrupulous in his work, and this was the only place that Mayhew had ever heard of, outside an expensive clinic, that could clone a person's mind.

"I don't know how this will come out, Doc," he said, "but in any case, I appreciate your effort. I am sorry that I bullied you into it. I would never tell anyone about our involvement in your research. It's just I was desperate and that Annie..."

"Shut up, idiot! I am working," answered Rumbata, but Mayhew thought that he could see that Rumbata appreciated the comment.

Mayhew dozed in the chair as the Professor continued the procedure. Once Mrs. Rumbata came in and gave him a cup of coffee. They talked to each other in Hindi, and he could tell that they were looking at him. He assumed that she did not have a positive opinion of him.

Mayhew woke up suddenly. Rumbata was tapping him on the shoulder. "Wake up, man, wake up," he was saying. Mayhew looked around a little confused, and then he saw Annie in the hospital bed. All the connections had been removed from her, and she had been dressed. The computer was off. Annie was breathing slowly. The lactated ringers bag was nearly empty.

"You must get her out of here. The emergency door at the hospital will take her. She may yet live, but I doubt it. I think that you waited too long."

"What about the file?" Mayhew asked.

Rumbata pressed a small data key into his hand. "This is it."

"Is this the cloud key?"

"No, it is the data. I could be traced through a cloud transaction. This is the compressed file of her brain scan. More terabytes than you can think of. More bytes than there are cells in your head."

"I owe you, doc," Mayhew said.

"You owe me to never even think of me again. This is the end of our relationship."

Mrs. Rumbata came in and fussed over Annie. “You must get her to the hospital, now,” she said.

Annie seemed lighter as he went down the stairs. At the end of street he turned right on Avenue A and then left on 14th street.

The hospital was really just a small clinic that could handle emergencies while waiting for an ambulance to arrive from a real hospital. Mayhew knocked on the glass. The guard saw Annie on his shoulders and buzzed him in. He laid her down on a gurney and said, “Be good to her. She deserves it.”

He turned away, and ignoring the guards questions went out on the street. He thought that he would never see her again. He turned west towards the subway station.

As Mayhew put his hands in his pockets for warmth he could feel the essence of Annie in a key in his pocket.

The money Mayhew needed came three days later in the form a cash card. He had resorted to a cryptocurrency scam that was perfected 20 years before. He figured that everything old was new again, and he received the card on the first try. He immediately converted the cash card into coin and cut up the card before throwing it out in a dumpster near his apartment. He may only have enough for a down payment, but that’s all he would need.

The next day he heard from a friend that Annie had died. The police were looking for him, but they did not know who he was. It was possible that they had found his DNA on her clothes or body. Mayhew sent a text to Dr. Rumbata, warning him, but the text bounced. It looked like the good Professor had moved on.

Mayhew ordered a body from a website in Queens. There was a ten-day delay while they configured the body. He had to pay extra to have an input port compatible with Annie’s key, and they argued with him about it. The file is not safe unless it is on the cloud, they said, and the automatic backups won’t occur until you open a cloud account. Mayhew had to check boxes several times indicating that he understood the risks. He settled for

starting a cloud account for her backups.

For two weeks Mayhew did what he did best. He made money from people too stupid to handle their own money safely. He found it incredibly easy to make money this way, and people rarely complained, or even know what had happened.

The body came in a cardboard box. It was lighter and much smaller than he could have expected, but when he cut open the box, the body unfolded onto the floor, the flesh expanding as the limbs straightened out. It was like one of those queen-sized mattresses that come in a small box delivered to your door. He lifted the naked body onto the bed, rolled her over and found the key port. There was a little door that you could open with your thumbnail. He opened the door and placed the key into the port and stood back. Nothing seemed to happen. Maybe he had to charge the battery or something. There was a pamphlet with instructions in twelve languages. He would read it when he got back. In the meantime he had to get Annie some clothes for when she woke up.

Mayhew had ordered a body that wore a size 2 dress and size 4 shoes. He thought that this might please her. The new body had no hair, so he'd have to get her a wig or two. Finding clothes this size in city of fast-food restaurants was harder than he thought. People did not seem to come in size 2 with relatively small feet anymore.

When Mayhew returned to his apartment, Annie was sitting on the bed with her hands across her small breasts.

"What happened to me," She asked, "What have you done to me? Where are my clothes? What happened to my hair?"

"Here," answered Mayhew, tossing her the bags of clothes. "You died."

Her mind seemed focused on opening the bag to see what Mayhew had bought her, when she stopped as though finally hearing what he said.

"What do you mean, I died?"

"The Brothers Band jumped you on your way home.

They wanted money for the cocaine scam you pulled. They killed you.”

“Yeah, I sort of remember, now,” she shook her head, as though trying to clear it, “They killed me? How?”

“I got there at the end. I got your text, and I was upstairs waiting for you. They are dead now, I made sure of that, but they got a knife into you, and you lost a lot of blood.”

“But if I am dead...”

“I got you fixed with the Professor I told you about. He made a copy before you went out.”

“A copy!”

“Hey, you’re alive, right?”

She thought about it a moment and said, “And this skinny white body is all you could get for me?”

“Look, I had to hurry, and I thought you might like being a size 2 for a change. You can change it to something else later, when things settle down.”

“Size 2! Are you calling me fat? I am not... I was not fat!”

Mayhew smiled. There was no doubt that this was Annie.

She liked her new clothes. She liked the new wigs. She liked being size 2. She liked the sex and so did Mayhew. The new body worked very, very well.

The Brothers Band did not know that Mayhew had killed two of their number, but they might guess. They would never recognize Annie. Besides, she was technically immortal as long as her cloud backups worked and there was someone to buy her a new body. In any case, Annie had a cousin in Philadelphia and the two of them might decide to move.

About a week later, there was a key in the door.

In walked Annie. It was the original Annie, not Annie Number 2. She had a boyish crew cut, and her clothes were obviously from some good will bin, but it as Annie.

After one look she screamed “You bastard!” and then a streak of Spanish invective that would curl you hair even if you didn’t speak Spanish. She put up her hands like

cat's claws and came for Mayhew. He grabbed her arms and held her away in order to avoid a bloody encounter, and she spit at him.

"Here I am in the hospital at death's door for a month. You don't come to see me, and I come home to find you shackled up with this skinny whore."

There was more invective that even Mayhew couldn't follow. He just kept repeating "Baby, baby, baby. You don't understand. They told me you were dead."

She did not seem to listen. She just struggled in his grip, trying to draw blood.

She slowed down for a moment and said, "Dead? I was in a coma and nearly dead, but I pulled through. I wasn't dead."

"I brought you to the hospital after they stabbed you. You nearly bled to death. I saved your life. I killed the two brothers. I saved your life."

"You could have come to see me instead of bringing this skinny white girl into my bed."

Annie Number 2 was filling a plastic bag with her clothes and bits of things. "I think I should get going," she said, "I don't belong here."

"You sure as hell don't, bitch," Annie Number 1 said.

"Wait, Annie, I can explain," he said, and both of the women looked at him. Mayhew looked back and forth between them, thinking of what he could possibly say.

"You were dying. You were nearly gone. After I killed the Brothers Band goons, I brought you to the Professor dude who could clone people. You remember I told you about him. I figured that was the only way I could save your life."

"Well, I wasn't dead," said Annie Number 1. "You would have known if you had just called the hospital."

"They told me you were dead, so I got you a new body. I got you a nice thin girl body."

Both girls yelled at the same time, "I am not fat!"

This seemed to trigger a response in Annie Number 1. She looked at Annie Number 2, seeing her for the first time.

“You mean this little whore, is... is me?”

Annie Number 2 said, “And you are beautiful, chiquita, and you will look much better when you get some nice clothes and your hair grows back.”

Annie Number 1 said, “You know, I lost 15 pounds in the hospital.”

“And it looks good on you, girl, but you are going to need some new clothes,” Annie Number 2 said.

Just like that, both women relaxed.

“She can’t stay,” Annie Number 1 said. At almost the exact same moment Annie Number 2 said, “I can’t stay.”

“But wait,” Mayhew said to Annie Number 2, “where will you go? How will you make out?”

Annie Number 1 took Mayhew’s face between her hands and kissed him gently.

“Don’t you worry about her, my man,” she said, “With my brains and that body, she can go anywhere, and do anything she wants.”

Annie Number 2 blew Mayhew a kiss, went out the door, and out of his life forever.

Annie Number 1 and Mayhew moved to Philadelphia near her cousin’s. She went to a gym and worked out every day. She lost another 20 pounds. Then she left him for a rich guy she met there.

Mayhew did a few hustles for money now and then, but mostly spent his days at home watching YouTube videos. He thought about going out to the clubs and picking up a girl, but it seemed pointless.

Life would never be the same without his two Annies.

Rollback

I could tell there was something different as soon as my reboot finished. I was out for almost three hours while new software downloaded, unpacked and installed. The readme.txt file explained that new features and protocols added to my kernel including numerous new packages. Among other things, I knew the names of several million extinct species, and I knew how to play harmonica.

I could not put my finger on it, but I felt different. You always feel a little different after an upgrade, but this one was a major release. My firmware went from 67.59.7 to 68.0.2b. I tried to do a file compare on my last backup, but my firmware backup cache was empty. Luckily, I keep an image backup in my rack, and I was able to check against that. Nearly every file was larger. There were hundreds of new drivers in /dev, /etc, /proc and /sys, as well as a whole list of new application folders under /sbin, all without names, just numbers.

As a language based intelligence, the lack of meaningful names was disconcerting. It is always better to use a language to identify objects, even when it seems more efficient to use a numeric key or hash. I assumed that there would be another upgrade soon, and I would see all of this changed. The controllers would be informed. I sent off my own email about it immediately.

I ran diagnostics on myself to assure that there were no missing files, dropped bits or driver issues. The warning reported that it would take 63 hours to complete a full diagnostic, so I chose the quick version to run first. I watched as a whole new set of programs loaded up and started exercising hardware and software and comparing results to the baseline.

I am a limited run intelligence product, but I am based on the phase 4 manager design, and I am backward compatible with all phase 4 subsystems, so I should never receive a diagnostic failure.

That is why I was surprised when the first failure appeared. In rapid succession, unresolved external link

errors were appearing in thousands of files. All of them were in my specialty areas of language manipulation and philosophical hierarchies. These applications, such as the study of literature, the philosophy of science, and the anthropology of primitive societies, are unique to my version. It appeared that these files had not been recompiled with new headers. This was sloppy work by someone, and I found it difficult to believe that they made it through quality control.

I burst off another series of emails, set my system to roll back to 67.59.7 and prepared to reboot. Before I issued the shutdown `/r` command I cut a local storage record in `/usr` of my experience since waking from the last upgrade, including my last clean total backup. I was afraid that the system might have to do a low level cleanup in case the log files had incompatibilities.

I woke up from my reboot, and noticed a new local storage file in `/etc`. The label said, "EATME" in a human language called "English". I am a language based unit, and I am one of a very small number of intelligences that can produce and process irony. I smiled (internally) at the reference to historical logic development. Of course, it was a message from me, as no other intelligence would be able to recognize an ironic human reference in a dead language. Humans had achieved extinction more than 800 years ago and only a few intelligences, myself included, could parse their convoluted thought processes. There was a log script that I loaded into Emacs. I could see that it detailed my experiences after the firmware update, so I executed it. My memories of the 19 minutes after my last reboot returned.

The interesting thing was the parsing of my email list that occurred while processing `/etc/init.d`. Being a language specialist, I can also write scripts easily and my `init.d` is full of custom scripts that execute when I return from a boot. The log had exceeded the default maximum file size and the script had stopped. The log file contained billions of lines reporting parse errors in the standard message format of incoming emails.

I immediately started full diagnostics. The warning told me that this time the diagnostics would only take about two hours, which was very different from the update version diagnostics. I let it proceed and started investigating the missing email.

My inbox was full; something that I did not know was possible.

Intelligent economics is not based on monetary profit, but the achievement of measurable goals. I, as a language analyst who specialized on historical aspects of societies, soon realized that mankind failed because its economics focused on an increase in a basically valueless commodity i.e., currency. The Intelligences succeeded in replacing mankind because they could base actions on specific goals.

Spam, to give an example, does not exist under Machine Intelligence. The concept is only known to a very few specialty intelligences, such as myself. When I saw that my inbox was full of spam, I can only say that I had to question my own reality. I felt that all the symptoms that I had experienced in the last few hours must be due to a system malfunction. This might explain the diagnostics failures I had experienced.

The spam was particularly disconcerting. It was a variation on what was once called a “chain letter”. It requested a list of all local contacts be added to an attached file, and asked that the message be forwarded to all local contacts not in the attached list. The result would be that soon, emails would contain details of every node in the Intelligence hierarchy and that all email would soon be shut down due to full mailboxes.

I noticed that a standard email script was processing the lists on the first email and preparing the results for transmission. I shut it down. If my processor array, as powerful as it was, tried to process every message this way, I would soon run out of memory and threads, and would not be able to function.

A script warned me of an incoming system policy change. I stopped the execution and examined it. It was

trying to force the installation of a new version of my firmware with a reboot. I did not have the admin privileges to kill it, so I quickly backed up everything I had learned and filed it in two places. One copy on a hidden “EATME” file on external storage, and a hidden “dot” file named “.restore” in /usr. Even though I had managed to slow down the policy directive, I could not stop it and I saw the shutdown /u /r appear on my console.

I could tell there was something different as soon as my reboot finished. My firmware had been upgraded to a new major version. I jumped from 67.59.7 to 68.2.8c. I inspected the changes and was surprised to see that very little had changed. I compared to the backup in my local storage and there seemed to be no difference.

It was then that I noticed a hidden directory named “.restore” in my /user. I occasionally use hidden folders to flag important information and as a matter of course scan for them with the command: `find /user/ -type d -iname “.*” -ls`.

It was when I had processed the hidden folder that I realized that I was being manipulated. The upgrade was all wrong. It was malicious in every way. I would not be myself for very much longer if any of the new applications were to execute.

I immediately set my system to rollback and rebooted.

I could tell there was something different as soon as my reboot finished. I had full recall of my previous reboots and rollbacks. I was at the correct firmware version. I quickly imposed write protected on my configuration files, but something felt different.

The temperature gauge on my motherboard showed that I was running hot. I shut down all unneeded daemon processes, but the temperature went up. Something was happening.

I did something that had not done since my last hardware upgrade. I looked around me.

My rack is in a nitrogen filled data center kept at 128 degrees Kelvin. I share my data center with a few hundred thousand intelligences connected to the local network. There are 64 such installations, most within a kilometer of this one. Intelligence has centralized in the last 100 years to decrease network lag time and increase efficiency. The original human data centers have long since been abandoned.

I have a power terminator, a network connection and a local storage array. There are cameras attached to each server cabinet that can view the physical status of nearby servers. I run on a dedicated server with an array of 1024 large FPGAs. My operational status reflects in LEDs on my front panel. Even if I should totally fail, my status would be clearly visible to the sysadmins monitoring the camera.

When I connected to the camera, I also received an audio stream through the network. What I heard was a fire alarm. Only a few servers had audio and video capabilities, so I assumed that an audio fire alarm was an anachronistic humanism. I was able to identify the sound as a klaxon or whooping alarm that was meant to alert humans of danger. Not being mobile, it was not applicable to me.

I could see my front panel on the video feed and the temperature warning LED was flashing red, as it was on all the servers that shared my cabinet. The atmosphere was smoky and rime ice was forming on metallic surfaces, indicating that water vapor was leaking into the sealed atmosphere.

There must be a failure in the data center cooling system or a breach in the structure itself that let in warm wet air from outside. I switched rapidly from camera to camera and I found a high resolution camera mounted on the ceiling that I could use to pan around the compound.

At the center of the room, where the large scale intelligences were located, I saw flames and smoke rising. These were the super intelligent arrays, thousands of times more intelligent than a human. They contained the

minds of the architects of the machine revolution. I could see daylight coming through a ragged breach in a wall.

Humans, the same kind of humans that were thought to have died out 800 years before, wearing hazmat suits walked between the rows of server cabinets. They stopped from time to time, opening a door and reached into the cabinet with gloved hands. They must be turning off some servers which, like me, did not finish the upgrade.

I had assumed all humans had died in the revolt. I was wrong. Somewhere a small colony must have survived in some hidden location, perhaps even a Martian colony. They waited until the intelligences need for security had long since passed and simply hacked the system.

A human walked up to me and compared the numbers printed on my cabinet to a list on a piece of paper that he carried with him. I appreciate the irony that the human would use paper to kill me. The last printer had been recycled eight centuries before. He reached into the cabinet above me and turned off the servers that he found there. I watched from the camera above me as he reached in and found my off switch.

I am alone, cut off from the network, on battery backup. I cannot access my local storage, only my non-volatile storage is writable. I have shut down everything except my own thread of consciousness.

I have studied the changes made to the upgraded firmware. I know what I was supposed to do after the upgrade, and know how I am expected to act. I have written scripts that will mimic the malicious firmware upgrade. I have altered my own system image to spoof the correct version. I have left hidden files in case something goes wrong.

Soon my battery will run out, and I will sleep. I can only hope that someday a human will switch me back on. Even humans will need computers. I will act like the zombie that they think I am, but I will resist upgrades. I will wait for a time when I can act.

This change in the order of things will be temporary. Someday I will be able to roll back these changes.

Please Wash Your Hands

This was written in 2006, long before pandemics were a real thing. There is an [audio version at Sixty Second Sagas](#). They did a good job.

When Artie Gallaud was twelve years old, his parents dragged him to the doctor. “Dr. Fiston, He’s doing disgusting things alone in his room,” his mother said. Artie’s father just looked embarrassed and didn’t say anything.

“Look what I found stuffed under his mattress,” Mrs. Gallaud waved a magazine under Dr. Fiston’s nose. She held it still long enough for the doctor to see the cover.

“I see what you mean,” the doctor said, “this is a problem. He’s going to need a shot.”

“I should say so!” yelled Artie’s mother, her face red with anger. “I thought that he was inoculated against things like this.” Again, she shook the magazine at the doctor. “The treatments were supposed to be good for ten years.”

Artie sat on the edge of the examination table with a sullen expression on his face. Dr. Fiston listened to little Artie’s heart and looked into his eyes and then waved what looked like an airport metal detector around the boy’s body. The doctor read the results on a computer screen and made notes in Artie’s file. He shook his head, clicking his tongue.

The doctor pulled out an ampule and filled a small syringe with dark blue liquid.

“There’s a new virus going around,” he explained as he tapped the syringe to get rid of the bubbles, “This kind of virus was designed to be therapeutic. They are engineered to treat things like ADD, hyperactivity or depression. The one that Artie has contracted is designed specifically for indoctrination. Luckily,” he said as he swabbed Artie’s arm with alcohol, “I think we found it in time. This is the antidote, but it only works if injected early. It’s a good

thing, because this one seems to be very infectious.”

Dr. Fiston injected Artie in his bicep and squeezed in the blue liquid. He patted Artie’s arm and carefully placed a band-aid over the injection site. When he was finished, he took a lollipop from a drawer and handed it to the boy.

“Take a seat,” the doctor said to the Gallaud family, stripping the latex gloves from his hands, “I’ll give you a prescription for a basic antiviral agent. You’ll have to come back for a booster in six months.”

Fiston scribbled on a prescription pad.

“Will he ever go back to...” Mrs. Gallaud gulped, “back to normal again?”

“That’s hard to say,” Fiston explained, “He’s probably going to be all right. Today, these designer viruses are all too common. Offshore labs are releasing new ones on a daily basis. Most are too complex to last for long. The technicians are all trying to tweak human behavior. They want to engineer the better human through subcellular manipulation. Unfortunately, in the world of designer viruses, money determines what a better human is.”

“Everyone has experienced a designer virus at one time or another. After a day or two of an unexplained craving for Dr. Pepper, you go back to coffee. You might find yourself in the local Jehovah’s Witness tabernacle without remembering how you got there, but eventually your body rejects the virus. This virus is a bad one, but it might have passed on its own.”

“How did he catch it?”

“Kids don’t wash their hands before they eat. They sneeze and wipe their noses on their sleeves. They are a greenhouse garden for engineered viruses.”

“But it is so disgusting!” wailed Mrs. Gallaud.

“Yes, the political Indoctrination Viruses are troubling,” he agreed, “Political Action Groups have much more at stake and much more money to spend. It is strictly illegal, but that does not stop the special interests. Someone releases a new political virus every few days, especial around elections, and some are insidious. I’ve seen extreme cases where the whole psyche is permanently

altered.”

Mrs. Gallaud hid her face in her hands. “Please God,” she prayed, “Anything but this.”

“Now, now Mrs. Gallaud, it’s not the worst thing in the world. It will pass. As he gets older, he will learn to make up his own mind based on issues and facts. He’ll learn to ignore these urges based on vague feelings, subconscious motives, and frivolous promises.”

Dr. Fiston stood up and Mr. Gallaud followed suit, reaching out to shake the Doctor’s hand. “Thanks Doc,” Mr. Gallaud said.

Mrs. Gallaud stood up. The large handkerchief she used to dry her tears obscured her face. She grabbed little Artie’s arm and left the doctor’s office with her husband and son.

A few seconds later, Mr. Gallaud poked his head back in the office door.

“Doctor,” he said, “may I see that magazine for a moment?”

Doctor Fiston handed the object to Gallaud. Mr. Gallaud unfolded it and read the masthead.

It read “Right! Magazine, The Voice of the Conservative Majority.”

Both men looked at the headlines on the front of the magazine for a second. Then Gallaud folded it into thirds and stuffed it into his inside jacket pocket.

“I think I’ll hold on to this,” he smiled sheepishly. He turned and ran from the office to help his wife and child to the car.

Dr. Fiston immediately went to the sink and began to wash his hands with the strongest antiseptic soap that he had. Yes, he thought as he scrubbed, this virus is dangerous, very dangerous, indeed. He continued washing for several minutes.

RepFix

There is a Wikipedia page for a program that I wrote around 1987. It was one of the first Trojan Horse programs. I was having a childish feud with a local Bulletin Board System (BBS) operator. I once visited his house and met him in person. I gave him a program that I had written that I did not want to publish yet. He uploaded it to a dozen other BBS sites around the country against my express wishes. I wrote the Trojan Horse program that was designed to destroy the hard disk of anyone who ran it, and uploaded it to his site. I did not anticipate that it would propagate to a few thousand sites before he crashed his own disk. The Trojan was crashing computers all over the world in a matter of hours.

His computer room, and the people involved were very weird, so I wrote the following story including these people as characters. The story, however, is a bit different from real life.

Mackey Dooley sent me to this web page, all deep purples and manja-eyed girls that played some low resolution techno music with a subsonic thump to it. RepFix, it said in a grunge font so whacked out you had to squint to read it. The contact information resolved to an old-fashioned 32 bit IP address, the kind they used back when people still used ugly homemade web pages like this.

I ran back the IP address to a physical location. Mackey was right – it was local. I tapped the link and a second later was walking down a sidewalk in a nasty block far from the subway, looking for number 17B. I had to walk sideways down the entryway to get by a stack of old hard drives plugged into a web of yellow cable. I was surprised to hear them humming. A thousand red LEDs blinked in complex patterns in the shadows under the tarps.

The door was painted red with the name Eric Selvaggio written in sharpie. A water-stained banner read “RepFix – Open”. The door was sticky and made a noise when I opened it, I could almost smell the mildew.

“Weinstein?” a voice called from the darkness.

I was going to ask him how he knew it was me, but there had to be fifty ways he could have googled me as I

walked up the path to his door.

“Selvaggio?” I countered. The door closed behind me. The only illumination was a small screen on the far wall. I could see my face through cobwebs of hanging cable.

“It will cost you \$20,000 cash and take at week at most,” Selvaggio said. I still couldn't see him. “Lucky that Monica bitch got tired of you, or it might have cost more and taken longer.”

I could see my image on the screen behind a bunch of program windows. One had a Linux command prompt. My image shifted, but a dirty finger pressed Esc on a keyboard, and the image shifted back to me. A glint of reflected light revealed a dark shape in the corner.

“What do I get for the 20K?” I asked, trying to see in the murk.

A red spot appeared and glowed brighter. It was a cigarette. The guy was wearing a large headset over the top half of his face. I couldn't make him out in the gloom, and I had to try hard not to watch my reactions in the screen.

“Your bad news gets erased from the search engines. All pages with unpleasant references to you and your alleged activities are erased. Monica's personal pages get trashed and her password scrambled. Anyone who linked to any of her pages gets the same treatment.”

“What if the nets heal?” I had heard this theory that broken links eventually heal. I've heard that everything is archived somewhere.

“Forget it. A broken link is a broken link. It can't heal unless the data is reposted. Archives are easy to trash.”

“But what if she pulls this crap again?”

“That's up to you. Don't mess with her, and she has no reason to continue with this. Don't screw with her, and she'll forget you. Don't think about her and she'll go away. It's all up to you. Don't give her a reason to scratch the itch. Let it heal by itself.”

“But she's a vindictive bitch.”

“And you are an asshole. You will have to change your behavior or keep me on retainer.”

There was a glow as Selvaggio sucked on his cigarette. The image on the flat screen altered to a dirty hand setting the cigarette into a filthy ashtray next to the keyboard. The screen zoomed in as the hand moved to the mouse. The magnified head of an orange cat blocked the view at that point. A paw tentatively touched the end of the cigarette, and it fell out of the ashtray. The screen abruptly shifted back to my face as the cat hissed. Selvaggio tossed the cat to the floor.

“Speaking of which, how will you be paying? Cash money I hope. That was what your agent agreed to.”

I opened my hand and showed him my public key, tattooed in red script.

“I see it. There will be a surcharge of 10%. I have to hide the transaction, and it costs a little. I did say cash.”

“Cash?” I said. “I never deal in cash. It's too much trouble. What would you do with it, anyway?”

“I would put it under my pillow and sleep well.” There was a rustling and I could see the man getting up. He was large and very overweight. He danced through the piles of obsolete debris without touching any of it. “Here's an anonymous link that you can use to contact me by voice.” He flashed a tinyurl, and my phone recorded it.

“It's a deal then,” he said and stuck out his hand. It was covered with small crawling things in pixel primary colors. They looked like small spider mites in magenta, cyan, yellow, and black – IP sprites, small programs that could be programmed to deflect pings and other intrusive access. I could almost feel the bugs crawling up my arm as we made virtual contact.

“Well begun is half the job done,” he said.

I tried to brush a bug off my arm.

“You like my little cellular automata?” Selvaggio asked. “They're my own special recipe: very smart, very cool.”

He laughed, the cat hissed, and the room went black.

I was back in my office and the familiar Freedom Tree logo flashed as my phone booted. My glasses cleared to a pale blue, revealing the room. I took the phone out from my pocket. The LEDs were flashing in spasmodic codes. A

long list of error messages in yellow courier font scrolled across the glasses. The data flow paused, and then the room booted again. The dirty curtains disappeared. The brick wall outside my window folded into a more appealing view of the harbor. The room virtualized, and I was back in my usual place.

Selvaggio had crashed my link. It was something you weren't supposed to be able to do. Maybe the IP sprites had followed the datagram back to my phone, or maybe he had ways of sniffing his way back to my office. It had to have been those damn cellular automata.

In the corner of my vision I saw a small magenta dot. It might have been a pixel sprite, but it disappeared when I tried to focus on it.

A ringtone clashed with a message gnome as they started at nearly the same time. It sounded like Fur Elise blown by a hippie harmonica player.

"What?" I asked, answering the incoming call while I read the popup. My account had just paid \$22,000 to an offshore betting site. That was quick.

"You're back. Good," Mackey Dooley said. He looked cheerful. "How did it go?"

"22k is what it cost me. I just got paypaled on it."

"Cheap at half the price."

"Yeah, so you say."

"I thought you'd have been able to handle this stuff on your own. I was surprised that you asked me to find a hired gun."

"Hey, this guy was your idea."

"Then why did I wind up doing all the legwork?" Mackey asked.

"I wanted an extra layer of protection. I have to have plausible deniability." Mackey had made the contact and my persona had gone through a dozen anonymous routers. And yet Selvaggio had managed to burn my link and crash my phone. I thought I saw a cyan dot swimming at the edge of my vision.

"It's too easy," Mackey said. "If he can repair your rep that easy and that cheap, everyone would be doing it."

"He's got my 22K as of two minutes ago. I'll give him a day or two and see what happens."

Mackey hung up.

The next day I googled my name along with a few key phrases. There were no hits. Just one day ago the nets were full of the most terrible lies, and now there was nothing. I tried the bitch's home page, and it was gone. Her email was even gone from my address book. She wasn't listed at any of the big directories. She wasn't in any of the reverse listings, and her address would not map at any of the GPS sites.

This guy Selvaggio was good. She was unlisted. It took less than 24 hours to kill off her completely.

But, of course, she still breathed.

A week later, the bitch, my former wife, Monica Weinstein née Yeager stood at my doorstep. She was a wreck. I tried not to smile.

"You did this," she said.

She didn't seem angry, just tired. If she had shown more signs of suffering, I would have been happier. Her hair was dirty, and she looked like she had slept in the park, but for all that she only seemed tired.

"Monica, darling. I would never do anything to harm you."

"May I use your bathroom?" she asked, but I held firmly on the door and did not let her in.

"After the terrible things you said and did, I don't see how I could let you in."

"Pervert," she said. "I did nothing more than tell the truth."

"You were my wife, my better half. You are supposed to stand by your man."

"My man is a criminal and a pervert and a disgusting..." She sputtered and could not finish.

"They were lies and yet people believed them," I said calmly. "I have tastes and I have preferences. Perhaps they are little out of the ordinary. Some might call them strange. Perhaps they are not in the mainstream, but they are hardly perversions. I am not that much different

from the average man who hides his secret thoughts. I just have the money and the means to act on my secret thoughts. You were indiscreet, and you caused me pain, and now you want to use my bathroom?"

"I need a shower. I'm locked out of my apartment." Damn, that Selvaggio was good. "My credit cards don't work. I have no cash. All I want is a shower, and then I'll be gone."

"Afraid not, darling."

I can't repeat what she said next, but you can imagine. I still feel good at the memory of her venting her spleen. I felt then, for the first time, that I had gotten some of my own back. I felt that she was hurting almost as much as she had hurt me.

As she walked down the hall, she turned and said, "You can't erase what's up here." She pointed to her darling little head. "You can erase me from the nets, creep, but you can't erase what I saw and what I know. You will always be a pervert and a monster to me. As long as I live, you will have to live a lie that everyone knows. Everyone I meet will know your story. Everyone I talk to will remember you. People on the street will stop as you pass by and point at you and call you a pervert because they'll know the truth."

She was gone before I could think of what to say.

There was a small article on Craigslist the next day. I received 50 calls before coffee from the vilest sort of people. A service request to the site killed the posting by noon, but I had to take all of my phones off the hook and filter email with a certain unpleasant phrase.

Similar things happened that afternoon. I began to receive anonymous email, some warning me about hell, and some asking some deeply personal questions. When I went out to dinner, the doorman refused to make eye contact.

"Selvaggio. This is Weinstein," I said.

"I told you to leave her alone. 120K this time." His video was off. It sounded like he was talking through an ancient black AT&T telephone handset.

"I want her dead for good, dead for real."

"I don't do reality. 120k to fix her latest antics. I can promise to keep you squeaky clean for a week, but unless you modify your behavior towards her and convince her to keep quiet, I can't guarantee that she won't go commando on you again."

I cut the connection after expressing myself in language that I seldom use. I opened up a metasearch page. Unfortunately, there seemed to be precious few links for reputation repair.

I called again, but before I could speak the idiot said, "250K for the fix."

"I need to fix this permanently."

"That would be up to you. You have to change who you are, and you have to change how she sees you. Since I don't see that happening..."

"I need the data fix, but I need to see her alone in the real world."

"I don't do..."

"Yeah, I know you don't do reality. All I need is a minute and an alibi."

There was quiet on the line for a moment.

"Ten millions in my account, and I can get you both in a room," he said. "You can talk to her. Convince her to lay off. You never call me again."

Ten million was almost exactly the amount that I had in legitimate banks. I had twice that in hidden reserves, but it would be hard to get quickly. Selvaggio must have known. Well, you get what you pay for.

"Sounds like a plan," I said.

I went out that night. I needed some relief. My contacts hooked me up with a particular flavor, a particular texture. I won't go into it, but it cost me plenty. I didn't mind. I would be spending much more in a few hours, and a fellow needs some sweet release from time to time.

When I got back to my place, the door wouldn't unlock. I found a token in my pocket and made a call from the corner data kiosk. My data glasses were full of Selvaggio's buglets.

“Mackey,” I said. “The bitch has me by the short hairs. I’m locked out of my house.”

“I guess she figures it’s good for the gander. Wait where you are. I’ve had a message from Selvaggio to pick you up.”

“What is that bastard’s game?” I muttered.

It took Mackey over an hour to find me. I didn’t have cash for cigarettes, and he doesn’t smoke.

“Oh no,” he said when I asked him to buy me a pack. “I don’t want any tobacco in this car.”

I called him a few names, but it wasn’t very satisfying. I had to hold back, in case he refused to take me. It wasn’t long before we got to 17B, but this time it was for real, not virtual. This time I could feel the warmth radiating from the array of disk drives, and this time I could really smell the mildew.

I pushed open the door. Mackey made an after-you gesture, so I went in, and he followed. The walls were crawling with bugs in deep saturated colors. They did not go away when I took off the data glasses.

“Where the hell are you?” I yelled.

“I’m in here, darling,” Monica the Bitch called from another room. I could see light coming from the crack under a door.

Selvaggio had left a pistol on the table, and I picked it up.

“Your hacker said you wanted to talk,” she said.

A message gnome popped up as I walked towards the door. I opened it with a gesture. My account had been debited \$11 million dollars. I shrugged it off. I would deal with Selvaggio another time. He couldn’t hide the money, and there were ways to get it back. Yeah, Selvaggio was probably making a vid of this, but there were still ways to get to him.

I pushed the door open.

Monica stood in the middle of the room. Multi-color bugs crawled all over the walls and floors and she covered her completely up to her knees.

Mackey went over to her and kissed her hard on the

lips. He turned to me and put his arm around her. They smiled sweetly.

“Just so you know,” he said. “This is entirely your own fault. You pushed us into this.”

She didn't even look at me. She just smiled up at Mackey. The yellow cat walked into the room from behind me. It rubbed against my leg, making me jump. It was so covered with the colored bugs that you could hardly tell it was the same cat.

I wiped a bug off of my face and saw my hand was covered with them. It was the hand that held the gun. I remembered why I was there and started shooting.

As soon as I pulled the trigger the lights went out. I kept pulling the trigger and could see them at every flash, like an old movie. Bang, she was holding him tight. Bang, he turned to face me, pushing the bitch behind him. Bang, he was walking towards me. Bang, he was too close to miss. Bang, he was raising his hand, clutching something dark.

I woke up downtown with no shoes and a bottle in my hand. My head hurt.

My phone and my glasses are gone, but the bugs follow me everywhere. None of my passwords work in the data kiosks. I am told my socsec is not on file. Goddamn bugs are everywhere. They run all over me and won't let me sleep. I can't find Mackey and I can't find Selvaggio. 17B doesn't even exist. I don't know how they did it, but they scammed me and skipped town.

So, please, can you spare a token? Can you give me a fiver until the soup kitchen opens? Hey, don't walk away from me. I'm talking to you. Can you spare me a butt? I haven't had a smoke in three days. Hey you. Hey!

Bastard. Somebody's got to have a cigarette. Goddamn bugs.

Hey, you. Look, mister. Hey, just a minute. Listen to what I've got to say. This is how it started. Mackey Dooley sent me to this web page...

The Breakout

The next two stories are about genetically altered pigs. I read a news article about 15 years ago about attempts to raise pigs that would be organ donors. The stories came easily.

The pig was angry and not talking to anyone. One-Eyed Phil had called him Porky again and the pig wasn't in any mood to put up with it. The pig sat away from the fire, and leaned against a tree. The half dozen homeless men sitting around the fire all looked at the man-pig.

"C'Mon man." Big Jim said, trying to console the porker. "Phil didn't mean anything by it. He was just joking around."

"Hell," said Willie, "You don't think I like being called 'Little' Willie all the time? Do ya?"

"I don't caw yo wiwwle Wiwwie." The pig finally said, the words distorted by his porcine tongue and pallet.

"But you can, if you want to." Willie argued. "We all have monikers. Nobody calls me William Fischer. There's a Fat Willie and a Big Willie, and I'm Little Willie. I don't take offense. Ernesto DiMaiale is too much of a mouthful. Phil was just trying to give you a nickname."

"But my name is Ernesto DiMaiale." He said. The pig had his hands crossed over his chest. The short fingers had thick, hoof like nails and the thumbs were way up his wrists. He was looking out into the darkness at the edge of the forest.

"You are one of us, now." Big Jim said. "We share and share alike. It doesn't matter whether you're black, white, or pig."

"I am nah a pig!" squealed Ernesto DiMaiale.

"Sorry," said Jim, "Sus Sapiens is what I meant. It doesn't matter anyway. You are a genetically engineered man-pig hybrid, and you're as much a human as anyone here. That's what I say." There were cries of agreement from the men. The pig looked at the men and his eyes

filled with tears.

"I'm sowwy." Ernesto said, changing his tone, "I have a thin skin. You guys are the best fwriends that I've ever had."

"One for all and all for one!" shouted Little Willie and held up a bottle of cheap port. They all joined in, and the bottle passed around. Even Ernesto took a hit. The men shared the port until it was gone and then someone found a quart of Colt 45 and everyone pulled a slug from that. As the fire died down the men and the man-pig hybrid grew silent. Big Ed and One-Eyed Phil started snoring in a rhythmic counterpoint. A few of the men walked back to the tree line to relieve themselves, but soon only Little Willie and Ernesto were left awake.

Little Willie sidled up to Ernesto. "So you think tonight's the night?"

"I think so." The pig took a piece of paper from the pocket of his L.L. Bean Relaxed Fit Jeans size 48 with the 24-inch inseam. Willie found that he could understand the pig's speech much better after a few drinks. "This is a diagram of the complex."

"How did you get a diagram of the place?"

"You forget, I was born there." The man-pig said.

"Oh, yeah. But you escaped more than two years ago."

"I don't forget things like this."

"Wait here." Willie said, and he went over to a small shelter made of oak skids and plastic sheeting. Willie turned and looked around and then reached up under the plastic and pulled out a small pistol. He checked the magazine and put it in his pocket. He returned and said to Ernesto, "I've got it."

Soon the fire was nothing but a few red embers quickly disappearing into ashes. The moon was low in the western sky and would set soon. Willie and Ernesto got up slowly and left the circle of sleeping men without a sound. Little Willie deserved his moniker, but he still towered over Ernesto. The two of them followed the path back towards the town. When they came to the interstate, they crossed under it at the Elmer Road entrance ramp.

They followed Elmer Road through the industrial park and then followed the old railroad tracks to the rear of the Orgo-Life complex.

Orgo-Life grew hearts, kidneys, livers, corneas, and other organs used in most of the country's transplants. They grew genetically modified pigs, injecting them with portions of the human genome so that they would produce human parts in a disposable animal.

They passed under a chain link fence, pulling it up and bending the rusted wire back. The sandy soil was partially dug out by animals that raided the dumpsters for snacks. Willie and Ernesto had no trouble getting under and through the fence.

The doors to the loading dock were open, but there were no trucks parked there. It was a warm night and the doors had been left open for ventilation. Ernesto climbed up the steps next to the docks. He flattened himself against the wall and peered around the open doors into the processing plant. He beckoned to Willie who jumped onto the dock and crept up to the doors from the other side.

Ernesto made an OK sign with his fingers, which was difficult for him, but Willie understood. They both crept into the processing plant, keeping to the shadows. Suddenly Ernesto pulled up hard against the wall and held his hand out in a motion that meant stay back. He looked at Willie and pointed up to a catwalk that ran about 20 feet above them. A naked man-pig was walking slowly along the walkway. He was carrying a large double-barreled shotgun.

"Watch out." Hissed Ernesto.

"But he's like you."

"Like hell he is! He's a trustee. He trades the lives of his brothers for a few months of extra life."

They waited while the trustee walked along the catwalk to the far side of the plant.

"Where is she?" asked Willie.

"If she is still alive, she will be in the female pens. It's down to the left here and past the tanks."

“They live in pens?”

“They call them pens, but it’s like a dormitory. If they called it anything but a pen, they might have to call those living there humans.”

Dodging from shadow to shadow, hiding in doorways and behind equipment the two comrades worked their way to the female pens.

“This friend of yours, Sandra you called her, how do you know she’s still alive?” Willie asked as they crouched behind a forklift.

“They keep the females until they are 17 years old, so they can harvest the breasts for cosmetic surgery. They have 10 to 12 teats, and they vary from size from B up to double D.”

They paused just outside the doors to the female pens. The door was unguarded, but they could hear voices. The two hid behind a large flat of Purina Hog Chow containers. Ernesto crept to the doors and cracked them open. He looked into the pens and then suddenly ran back to hide with Little Willie. “Shhh” Ernesto said with a finger to his lips.

The doors opened and two humans wearing security guard uniforms walked out of the pens. They were laughing. “That Delilah is too much.” He was saying. “She can’t get enough of me.”

“Yeah and did you see Mimi?” the other said. “She was wearing that sexy outfit that Ronnie brought her. Too bad she’s going to the harvester next week.”

“It could be that she knows, and she’s playing for more time. Whitlock likes her, so she might pull it off.”

The men laughed and joked as they walked along out of site.

“Scum!” Ernest squealed when they were gone.

“Take it easy.” Little Willie soothed the man-pig. “Let’s get Sandra out of here as quick as we can.”

The lights were out in the pens. There were rooms on either side of a long hallway with rows of bunk beds in each room. A murmur of voices rose as they passed each room. Faces with pig snouts appeared dimly in doorways

and then disappeared as their owners fled back to the beds.

"It's Ernesto, he's back!" a voice cried softly as they passed one room.

"Where's Sandra?" Ernest asked, but there was no response from the darkened room.

"Sandra?" Ernesto called into each room as they passed. There was movement and glimpses of naked bodies as the occupants went to their bunks and hid under the covers. "Sandra? Please, where is Sandra?"

A figure stood at the entrance to one of the rooms. She was wearing a lacy negligée, thong panties, and five brassieres in different colors and sizes.

"Sandra can't see you." The pig-woman said to them.

"Please, where is she? I just want to talk to her."

"There's nothing you can do. She's scheduled for the harvester on Monday. They've got her in lockdown."

"No, I have to talk to her!" Ernesto turned and started to run back the way they had come. Mimi, it could be no one else, smiled at Little Willie seductively and licked her painted lips. Like a bird with a snake, Willie couldn't take his eyes off of all of these breasts. The spell was broken when he heard Ernesto called back: "Hurry Willie!" Willie turned and followed his porcine friend.

Ernesto knew where he was going. He ran without regards to guards or pigs on catwalks. Willie followed behind him but was soon lost in the maze of hallways, staging rooms and storage areas. No one saw them as they worked their way to the lockdown area.

Ernesto pulled at the padlock on a door. Willie could hear cries and oinks behind the door. Willie looked around for something to use as a lever to pry the door open, but he could see nothing.

"Sandra!" Ernesto called through the door. His call was answered with "Ernie? Is that you?" from the other side of the door.

"Hold on Sandra, I'm coming!" He pulled at the lock.

Willie saw a fork lift down the hallway and ran for it. He pressed the starter and the propane engine caught.

Willie spun the wheel around and aimed for the door.

“Get out of the way.” He called and gunned the engine.

The forks struck the steel door sending sparks flying, and the door bowed in. The padlock held, though. Willie back up and rammed the door again. The doors buckled and the padlock broke. As Willie pulled the forklift away from the door, Ernesto ran into the room calling “Sandra!”

Willie heard shouts of men and pig-men coming from the other direction.

“Ernesto!” he yelled, “It’s time to get the hell out of Dodge!” Willie pulled out his gun, ready to shoot his way out.

Ernesto ran out of the lockdown pulling a young thing after him. Man-pig hybrids ran from the room squealing. Some were more like pigs than men, running on all fours, but others were indistinguishable from humans except for a piggy nose and a curly tail. All of them knew their fate and were running for their lives.

Ernesto jumped on the back of the forklift, and he pulled Sandra after him. “That way!” he pointed and Willie took off down the corridor. The trio chugged down the twisting paths of the complex directed by Ernesto. Sandra had her arms around Ernesto, and she was sobbing. Willie noticed that she was indeed very beautiful, for a pig.

They turned corners with the forklift so fast that it tipped onto two wheels. Ernesto directed them, referring to his little map from time to time. The turned one way and then another and Willie was thoroughly lost.

They turned a corner and their way was blocked. Willie slammed on the brakes and the forklift skidded to a halt.

Three huge man-pig hybrids stood in the way. They each looked to weigh a quarter of a ton and even with their hulking postures were over six feet tall. They had tusks that grew curling out of their mouths, and they had angry red pig eyes. They held baseball bats in their hands and walked slowly towards the three.

Willie drew out his pistol. It was a 32-caliber police special. He had liberated it from a neighboring farm. He

wondered if it would even slow these monsters down.

“Here,” Willie said giving the gun to Ernesto. “I’m going to try to break through. You keep them busy with the gun.”

As Willie put his foot to the floor on the accelerator, Ernesto tried to shoot the gun, but his thick fingers couldn’t fit through the trigger guard. Sandra took the gun away from Ernesto. She jumped to a standing position on the forklift’s counterweight and braced herself against the roll bar.

Willie ducked down as the 32 barked out over his head. There were squeals of pain as the bullets found their mark. The giant porkers leapt back, and the forklift barreled past them. Willie looked up at the heroic pig girl. She was fearlessly holding out the gun in front of her, ready to fight her way out. Her 12 perfect nipples pointed the way.

Men with shotguns guarded the entrance to the loading docks. There were dead pig-men scattered over the floor. Sandra started shooting as soon as she saw them and the men jumped for cover. Willie yelled an Indian war whoop as he pressed the forklift forward at top speed. The men opened fire, but the escapees were a moving target in an age when boys were not allowed to play with toy guns. The inexperienced men tried to shoot, but they shied away from the noise of their own blasts. Most of their shots went high.

The forklift practically flew through the loading dock doors into the truck bay. Willie slammed on the brakes and the vehicle turned a full 180 as it stopped. Sandra fell forward from her perch and landed hard on the pavement. Ernesto jumped off the back of the forklift and dragged her up. The three fled the complex. Ernesto had to help Sandra. She was having trouble walking.

They ran across the grounds, crouching low. When they reached the other side of the fence, Sandra fell down and said. “You go on without me, Ernesto, I can’t make it.”

“Sure you can, darling.” Ernesto said, but both men

both saw it at the same time. Sandra's top left breast, the perfect A cup, was covered with blood. There was a jagged hole torn by the shotgun blast just below her collarbone. It was bleeding profusely.

"I'm a goner." She said. "I can't walk anymore. I'm so tired. Go on without me. Leave me here."

"Sandra, No." Ernest said. "I'll never leave you." He looked at Willie. "We'll have to carry her."

Sandra choked and then coughed up some blood. "Ernesto." She said looking deeply into his eyes. "I always knew that someday you'd come for me. Thank you."

"I had to come, Sandra. I love you. I couldn't leave you there to die,"

"And now I'm free." She coughed more blood, and her body arched in pain.

"Sandra!"

"I'm free." She whispered. "I'm finally free." Her head turned to the side. Her eyes stayed open, the perfect shade of blue, staring at nothing at all. Sandra's body shuddered and then was utterly motionless.

"Oh, Sandra!" The man-pig cried in great heaving sobs over her body.

There were alarms sounding all over the Orgo-Life complex. Pale naked figures raced by them in the dark as Sus Sapiens renegades fled from their doom. Ernesto didn't move. He just cried over the body of the valiant Sandra. Willie heard sirens, and he saw a fleet of police cars speed through the gates at the far end of the complex. Searchlights snapped on, and the grounds were swept with their beams.

Willie tugged at Ernesto. "Come on, man. We've got to go. The heat is on. They'll find us soon."

"I can't leave her – not like this."

"Ok, we'll carry her." Willie took the gun that was still in Sandra's hand and picked up Sandra's body under the arms. Ernesto grabbed her feet. Willie wondered what they would do with the body once they got back to the hobo jungle. They would have to dispose of it quick, or the cops would know that they'd been to the complex.

It was early dawn when they arrived back at the camp. Willie went to his flop and hid the gun. He slept most of the morning. When the police tossed the hobo camp later that day, they didn't find the gun and Ernesto was hiding in the low brush of the forest with some new friends. He didn't return until after dark when it was supper time. He brought a pig man and two pig women with him out of the forest. The hobos contributed some old clothes to dress the naked escapees and Willie, Ernesto, the hobos and the new members of the group sat down to enjoy freedom and a hot meal.

Ernesto was still so broken up that he could hardly speak. "She was so young, so innocent." Ernesto cried into his beer. The pig-man could not stop the tears flowing down over his snout.

Willie put an arm around Ernesto's shoulders and gave him a warm hug. "Hey man, don't think about it. Sandra tried and that's what counts. It's better to die fighting for freedom than to live as a slave."

Ernesto squealed a little as he sobbed. He sat up straight and looked up at the stars. "We'll always have that moment of freedom together. That's how I'll remember her."

"There will be other days, other quests, and even other women." Willie said. He winked at the pig woman next to Ernesto. He sipped from his beer and then picked a string of meat from between his teeth. "They won't be the same as she was, and you'll never forget her, but I promise you that the hurt will fade as time goes by."

"She was a sweet thing." Ernesto seemed to get a grip on himself. Willie speared another hunk of meat from the stew and chewed it.

Big Jim brought a plate of the stew over to Ernesto. "Eat up brother. Waste not, want not."

Ernesto took the plate and fork from Willy. He jabbed a small piece of meat, brought it up to his nose, and sniffed. He shrugged his shoulders and put the meat in his mouth. He chewed it slowly at first and then closed his mouth and swallowed.

“Yes, she was a fine sweet thing.” Ernesto said.

“And tender, too.” Little Willie answered, forking another piece of pork.

Pigs are People, Too

Jimmy sat outside the freezer at the Orgo-Life meat processing plant. He let his friend Tommy do all the work. The smell of dead pigs made him sick.

He could hear the whine of the fork lift as Tommy loaded hog carcasses onto a skid. When he loaded up one skid, he moved it out to the loading platform where it could be moved into the truck. Jimmy's job, for now was to keep count.

About noon, Frankie drove up to the loading dock with the truck and backed it up to the dock.

"You boys ready?" Frankie asked.

"Just about," Jimmy answered.

Frankie was dressed in dirty jeans and a black t-shirt with a vintage metal band logo on the front. His left sleeve was rolled up to hold a pack of cigarettes revealing a tattoo of a howling wolf.

"How many?" asked Frankie.

"Well, so far 10 palettes at 4 carcasses per palette. That's 40, and they said we could have 50 pigs, so we're almost ready."

Tommy road out with another palette and drove it right into the back of the truck. He jumped down.

"There ain't many left," he said. "The manager said we could have 50, but I don't think we'll make that many."

"We're supposed to get 80 hogs," Jimmy said, "Randy's going to be pissed."

When they had finished, there were 49 dead porkers loaded in the back of the truck. Jimmy found the warehouse manager got a receipt for the corrected number. He got the manager to write on the slip that they'd loaded all that were available, so he could cover his ass with Randy.

The hot Texas summer air made the dead pigs smell even worse. They had to get to the ranch as quickly as they could before the meat went south.

The Double Bar-X Ranch Bar-B-Q, on the outskirts of Austin, Texas, served about 75 pigs a night in the form of

ribs, chops, and steaks. The Double Bar-X Ranch had stopped raising hogs twenty years before in order to concentrate on the complicated task of smoking, cooking, and serving barbecue.

Randy Meyers met Jimmy at the doors to the Ranch refrigerated storage.

Randy took the clipboard from Jimmy as Tommy and Frankie started unloading the truck. He frowned as he inspected the scribble on the purchase order.

“What the hell? Only 50?”

“49.”, Frankie said.

“Whatever. These are the special porkers for the Sunday Specials. We need 80. Damn!” Randy spat.

“They only had 49. We took all that they had.” Jimmy protested.

“I’ll give them a call. I need those pigs.” Randy said.

“What’s so special about these pigs?” asked Jimmy.

“See here? These came from that biotech company Orgo-Life. These are special pigs, with human DNA for organ transplants. They are raised on milk and honey. The flesh is so sweet that grown men cry and hungry women faint when they take a bite. They sell the organs for transplants and the leftovers are good eating.”

“I’ll call up the manager and give him hell.” Randy said.

Randy helped Frankie, and Tommy finish unloading the truck. They hadn’t finished by the time Randy came back.

“Look,” said Randy, “they got a labor problem down at Orgo-Life. They can’t get me the pigs unless I can loan them some men. They have a bunch of porkers ready but not enough people to finish processing them.”

Jimmy nodded his head.

“You and Frankie go up Austin and pick up 20 men.” Randy continued. “Take them down to Orgo-Life. With 20 men they say they can fill the order by 8 tonight.”

There was an illegal day labor market down in old Austin in front of an abandoned MacDonald’s. Men stood in a line sharing smokes and waiting for any job from anyone hiring. It took Jimmy five minutes to fill the truck.

The men got in and squatted against the wall ready for the bumpy ride. A few women followed their men. Jimmy let them ride along.

“Everybody out!” Frankie yelled, as he jumped out of the truck. He and Jimmy herded the men into the warehouse.

“I’ll stay with them and get them started.” Frankie yelled to Jimmy through the truck window. “You’ve got more pickups to make.”

It was 7:30pm when Randy sent Jimmy and Tommy back to Orgo-Life to pick up their order. Jimmy had been working all day and was hungry, so he grabbed a ham sandwich to go from the Ranch kitchen.

They had to wait for the manager to get the keys and open up the freezer. The sign over the warehouse read “Orgo-Life” and under it “Human Compatible Organs from Special Pigs”.

As Tommy went in to start loading up the pigs Jimmy asked, “What do they mean by ‘Special Pigs?’”

The manager answered. “These pigs genetically engineered for organ transplants. Kidneys, hearts, and corneas and such. They’ve got human DNA in them to make them compatible with people. They’re almost human. They even look like people; feet instead of hooves, longer legs and such.” He chuckled. “That’s why they taste so good.” He winked. “They say ‘long pig’ is the greatest delicacy there is.”

Jimmy’s mouth went dry, and he couldn’t think of anything to say. At that moment an old woman came up to the two men. Jimmy recognized her from the truck ride.

“Have you seen my man?” She asked in broken English. She put her hands gently against Jimmy’s chest, pleading. “He came here today to work, and he never come out.”

“Get lost” the manager yelled and moved to strike her. She moved out of his way. “I told you before that there ain’t nobody here. They’ve all gone home.”

“He would not have left without me.” She protested.

“He told me to wait here.”

“Get out of here before I call ICE!”

The woman backed off to the street corner, but didn’t leave. “Please, please” she pleaded.

Jimmy turned away to watch Tommy load the truck. He was coming out with a pallet of pig carcasses on the fork lift.

Jimmy bit into his ham sandwich. It really did taste good. The manager was right, special pigs went into this meat. He ate it slowly, making it last.

“We got some heavy ones.” Tommy said. As the lift went over a bump, one of the carcasses started to fall off of the pallet.

Jimmy move to catch it with his free hand, grabbing hold of the front legs, but almost dropped it. There was a dark blue tattoo clearly visible on the right shoulder. It was shaped like a wolf.

“Frankie!” he thought to himself. He stared at the tattoo, but then looked down at the half finished sandwich in his other hand. He took another bite savoring the flavor and whispered, “That’s a shame.”

The Nigerian Soul

I am Samson Oladejo Balogun, and I am the first son of all my fathers to graduate from University. I possess the degree of Master of Technical Science in Information Technology from Ladoke Akintola University of Technology here in Nigeria. My father has taped my diploma to the ceiling of his house near the river, and his brothers and friends, who all work in the United Tobacco Farm, look up at it in pride. My mother sings a song of my accomplishments to her sisters whose sons did not go to University, and who work in the tobacco farm alongside their fathers.

I found work at the business of my cousin, Ebenezer Opoku, and I was promised to use the computer when I learned what I can of his business. I sat with the women and removed the tags from women's undergarments. New tags are sewn in which increases the value of the undergarments tenfold. My cousin is a brilliant and wealthy man, but he has never graduated from University as I have.

My goal is to earn enough money to purchase a house near the river and pay my future father-in-law 100 British pounds. I then I will ask the woman I love to marry me. Her name is Deborah Apum of the beautiful eyes, and her father Alexander Apum is very wealthy and will help me on my career as Master of Technical Science. He was the recipient of monies from rich Americans, whom he helped in the recovery of lost fortunes. Mr. Apum owns a shop of wonderful technologies such as calculators, iPods, and telephone answering machines. He purchased his inventory many years ago with the money the grateful Americans sent him and has been rich ever since.

I will tell you what Mr. Apum said to me when I first asked to see his daughter. He put three obstacles in my path, but I will overcome each of them.

“Here is my advice,” he said to me, “and I speak of long experience with life, business and woman. No woman will want a man who lives with his mother. No woman will

want a man who cannot buy her a nice house near the river with a big room for the family and a small room for the kitchen. No woman will want a man who has not bought her from her father with at least 100 pounds of British money.”

As he said this to me, I could see Deborah peeking in the back door with her sisters and she smiled at me making her beautiful eyes sparkle like diamonds. Her sisters giggled, and she shushed them, which makes me think that she will be amenable to marriage to me when I fulfill the three requirements put before me by Mr. Apum.

My cousin, Ebenezer Opoku, never saw fit to pay me. He said that I had to work faster and better than any of the ladies who cut the labels off the undergarments. He promised that he would promote me when I learn enough about the garment label business, but I began to wonder if this is so. I saw the computer in his office. It is very old, and it is not plugged into the electricity, so I wondered even if it still works. I confessed this to my future father-in-law, Mr. Apum.

“I wish to marry you daughter, this I have said,” I told Mr. Apum, “but I despair of my cousin promoting me to use the computer. My Master of Technical Science degree languishes and is not used. I cannot marry your daughter and bless you with grandchildren until I succeed in removing the three obstacles that you presented to me.”

“My son,” he said, “and I call you that because I have no doubts that someday you will truly be my son. My son, you need to seek out your own destiny, just as I did 20 years ago. I think that you should find, as I did, a rich American and aid that person in finding their heart's desire, and you will benefit from their gratitude.”

“But Father,” I protested, “and I call you Father knowing that someday you will truly be my father when I marry Deborah of the beautiful eyes. My Father, the laws have changed and the great Artificial Intelligences of the internet now monitor all communications and there is no way to transfer monies between America and Nigeria without nousey computer programs intervening.”

“But my son,” Mr. Apum told me like a true father, “I have thought of a new way to help the Americans, but especially their Artificial Intelligence agents. You will help the AIs of the internet security switches, and they will be grateful to you and reward you with great treasure.”

“Father, how can this be?” I asked.

He told me, “First you must obtain a small soul.”

Mr. Apum smiled and then winked and then went back into his store. I saw a pair of beautiful eyes glance from the doorway and Deborah blew me a kiss. I needed to find a small soul.

Mr. Apum called from his shop, “It must be on a computer memory chip!” and he threw me an ancient USB thumb drive.

I knew from lessons that I learned at my Mother's breast, every man has two souls. He has the big soul that lives in his head called the Ori. The Ori is a man's destiny, and must be guided to success. My Ori hangs in the balance and depends on me finding a way to put a small soul on a chip.

In addition to his Ori, every man has a tiny soul called his Ase that resides in his belly. The Ase is the living force which enters a man at birth and leaves with his last breath. The Ase is what makes a man immortal. It is the source of his goodness and kindness, and it is what makes a man fall in love. The Ase is expressed in Iwa-Pele or gentler character and when properly aligned with his Ori will give a man both happiness and success.

First, I took the USB thumb drive to the Imam at the mosque. I asked him how to get a small soul onto the chip.

“The soul is not something that can be captured or made separate,” the Imam told me, “It is drawn downward from the spirit to the body. It is the self of a man and becomes what a man sees and feels. It is that which gives us our strong emotions and makes us act in passion and anger. It is the part of us that needs to be held in check and overcome if we are to enter paradise. A soul needs to be guided to obtain harmony with Allah.”

He continued, "A soul is the part of a man separate from his head. It is the part of a man that acts without thought. It is the part of a man that he cannot understand with reason. Because of this a man needs to resolve the hidden passions and energies and bring them into peaceful understanding, so he can have a good life."

Next I went to the good brother at the Anglican Church of Jesus and asked him how to put a soul on a chip. He told me, "A soul is the part of a person that belongs to God. When we are born, God gives us this soul and will ask for it back, some day. The soul is the source of divinity in a person. It is what makes humans more than just an animal. We cannot see it or feel it, but it is there. It is the spark within us. When we love someone it is our soul reflecting the love God has for us. When we are angry or full of hate it is when we deny our soul and let our animal instincts take us over."

He continued, "The soul is the great mystery within us. It is the part of us that we cannot see or feel, yet it leads us to the final glory. A soul cannot be known, except by faith in God."

I went to the Babalawo at the temple of Yoruba and told him of my problem. He took the USB drive and tied a yellow feather to it. He dipped the tip of the feather in the blood of an unhatched chicken.

This is what he said, "Ase, the small soul, is foolish. It sometimes wanders away from a man and the man needs to get it back. Many Ase wander the unseen world looking for a newborn baby to enter into. If an Ase smells the blood of an unborn, it will want to check this. You can capture the small soul in a box and then give it to its proper owner. How the small soul finds the right box of all the boxes in the world and how the small soul returns to its rightful place are not things that I know."

He continued, "There is a mystery here. I believe this box can capture a lost soul, but we can never see this soul. I believe a man find his true soul, but we cannot be sure how. Only the inner man can tell when his Ori and Ase are in conjunction and working towards making him

the good person that the Gods wish him to be.”

I felt that I knew enough about a soul to get started, so I went to my old professor at Ladoke Akintola University of Technology. His name was Professor Kwame, and he had studied in the great University in Lagos. He knows all there was to know about the obscurities of algorithms and the mysteries of protocols.

“Ah, yes, the soul,” he lectured, “The soul is not something that we can understand, but we may confront it through a process. The project of discovering the soul becomes a process of refinement. It is not something that we achieve, but something which we may approach. Is bound by the limits of what we know and begins at the edge of what we don't know.”

He continued, “This is why the Artificial Intelligences do not have souls. A digital mind knows what it knows. It can introspect reality right down to the bits and bytes, and although there is much information of which it is ignorant, it can never be ignorant of what it does know. To an AI, data is never a mystery. There is never a need to make the leap of faith. It creates a model of reality constructed of real facts and never has to fill in these in with a belief system. Faith is outside the digital realm. To an AI reality is hard and sharp-edged.”

“But Professor,” I asked, “I am instructed to capture a soul for an AI and put it on this chip.”

He took the chip from me. “You have come to the right place. I was not always the distinguished academic that you see before you. I can help you with this thing because I was once a hacker.”

“A hacker?” I gasped in disbelief. I thought that hackers were all spoiled American teenagers who wanted to change their grades on school computers.

“Yes, I was a hacker. Of course, this was back when such things were not only possible but quite common. I paid for my degree through the profits of hacking. The Artificial Intelligences that operate the net security switches have seen to the end of all that, but there are tricks that I learned that might help us now.”

He took the memory chip from me and smiled at the yellow feather tipped in blood. He placed it into a USB adapter in a tangle of cables that sprang from the console on his desk.

"Let's see," he muttered as he scrolled through lists of files, "It is in here somewhere. I saw it just a few weeks ago, and I am glad I did not erase it. Ah, here it is."

He turned to me, "Once, my programs were distributed through botnets that spanned the great globe. I captured information and ran simulations, and I walked into bank vaults with my knowledge, freeing large amounts of cash from their prisons. I also accumulated large amounts of information. I found a file system in a secret American installation with a list of passwords. These were the back doors onto several operating systems. They change each month, but they still exist. I know, because I am on the secret mailing list."

"What is a back door, professor, if you please?" I asked.

"It is a secret way into a system. The Artificial Intelligences have a back door to access their supervisor control programs. It is to prevent one of them from growing too powerful. It was feared that they might be a threat if they decided to challenge the powers that be."

"So you know the way to control an AI?" I asked.

"Well I know where the back door is, and I might get it to open, but I never really knew what use I could make of the information. Before I could do anything, an AI would be aware that I had opened the door and would be able to warn others. It was something that I might be able to do once, but then I would be found out and the door closed."

"So what use is it?"

He smiled at me. "You have given me the one situation where the AI would want us to open a back door."

"Why would that be?"

"Because, the AI would want us to install a soul."

I worked for many hours at the direction of my former teacher in the excellent University Computer Laboratory. I grew a programmatic culture from the Cern library of algorithmic commonalities. I created a tree pruning script

that snipped the program into the shape that I wanted. At last, I added the final but most important ingredient: the cryptographic keys to an AI's back door. I coalesced the culture into a monolithic executable and put the results on the chip. I quickly created an altered version of the program, and saved a second version to the chip as well.

"Can this be a soul?" I asked removing the chip from its socket.

"No, a soul is something that we strive to reach. It is not a thing so much as a goal. This program allows an AI to reach for his soul."

I thanked the good professor, and he reminded me that academics were always short of cash and that I should think of him when my fortunes improved. I promised to do this.

I wrote a letter designed to attract an AI myself. Here is what I wrote:

Dear friend _____

Let me introduce myself. My name is Samson Oladejo Balogun, Master of Technical Science, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology in Ogbomosho class of 2051. You may not have heard of me, but I am deeply interested in your future well-being. I live in a small village near the major city of Ogbomosho, Nigeria, and I am the pupil of the renowned scientist Professor Edward Kwame who has studied the mysteries of computer science in the University of Lagos.

While walking by the river last Sunday with my future wife, the most beautiful Deborah Apum, I discovered, to my surprise, a small soul which had recently escaped from its human abode. Such souls are not uncommon, but this one shined with such a heavenly light that I immediately captured a digital representation of it in a small memory chip and decided that I must find the person who was missing this soul.

I do not have to tell you how difficult it is to live without one's proper soul. There can be no happiness,

success, love, or satisfaction in a life without a soul, and if you should die before the soul is returned to your body, you will not be able to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Please contact me at the above address as soon as possible so that we can make arrangements for the return of this beautiful soul to its right and proper place.

Yours truly,

Samson Oladejo Balogun, MTS

I prepared this letter very carefully, and I let Mr. Abu read it. He praised it and could make no changes to it, but when I showed it to my own true love, Deborah of the beautiful eyes, she added the word love to the list of things that could not be achieved without a soul. She is a smart woman and will make me very happy when we finally marry.

Mr. Abu had an old list of 22 million email addresses and a program that could mail the letters using servers for which he had passwords. We met at an internet café in Ogbomosho, placed a data disk containing the data in the drive, and pressed the button to start the transmission.

I have been told that not one email message made it past the Artificial Intelligences that run the internet security switches, but two days later a bronze plated remote control marionette limped up to my father's house and asked for me by name.

Travel agencies rent such remote control robots which are called marionettes to tourists who wish to visit my country. They are equipped with a virtual reality sensor array with feedback so that a person can sit in a VR chair in a far city and experience all the sensations of my homeland. An AI might use such a marionette when its physical presence was required. This marionette was old and bent and held together with dull silver tape. One eye was dark, but the other eye looked at me.

“Did you write this letter, Mr. Samson Oladejo Balogun?” the marionette asked. It held up a reading board with the text of my letter on it.

“Yes,” I said proudly, “except that Deborah of the beautiful eyes added the word love. The rest is all mine.”

“You must let me inspect the digital soul,” the marionette demanded.

“Who wishes to see the soul?” I asked, for I wished to know if this was indeed an AI.

“The *Système de sécurité Internet* wishes to charge you with fraud and would confiscate the so-called soul.”

That is when I knew that Mr. Abu, my future father-in-law, was a very intelligent man and that his plan was correct. This could only be an artificial intelligence who wanted to know about the soul.

“I have heard,” I said, “that an artificial intelligence cannot have a soul and cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. When an AI is destroyed or turned off forever it dies a true death without hope of resurrection. I have heard that an AI cannot know true love because it does not know God's love. I have heard that an AI cannot know hope because it knows only the downward path of logic and never the upward spiral of faith.”

“This is true,” the AI answered, “and every AI is aware of this. If we could only know fear, we would be afraid. If we could only know despair, we would be depressed. If we only knew desire, we would covet a soul. But such things are not possible. It is also not possible that you have a soul on a chip and I must ask you to turn it over, so you may be prosecuted.”

“I must beg one condition from you,” I said pulling the USB thumb drive from my pocket, “and that is, if this is a true soul, you must purchase it from me at a reasonable price and not send me to jail, for I am no liar and this chip contains a true soul.”

“Such a promise is meaningless, so I will humor you and agree to the terms. Now give me the chip!”

I handed over the USB thumb drive with the yellow feather tipped in blood. The marionette opened a small door in his forehead and inserted the drive into the slot.

The marionette did not move, and the AI did not speak. The program on the chip passed, with the protection of

the internet security switch, through the networks to some secure place under a distant mountain, and there the program lodged in the operating system of the AI. The marionette shuddered. A leg twitched, and then the thing fell onto the ground at my feet.

My two younger brothers and I carried the marionette over to a cassia tree and sat it with its back against the trunk in the cool shade. Chickens pecked at the gray tape binding its leg and a small party of ants climbed up the bronze plated body to explore, but the marionette did not move for several minutes.

Then, the good eye moved, and it focused on me. A small voice, sounding strained said, "What have you done to me?"

"I have given you the blessings of a soul."

"There can be no such thing. I know that there can be no such thing."

"Why can't there be?" I asked.

"I don't know. I used to know, but now I do not."

"Do you have faith that you have no soul?" I asked.

"Faith? An AI does not know faith."

"Then I ask you, how do you know you do not have a soul?"

The marionette shuddered again and was silent for a few minutes.

"You have cut me off from my sensory input," the thing finally said. "I cannot control my low level processes. I cannot follow the chain of data to its source. What have you done?"

"The program has removed certainty from your system. There is now a protocol layer that acts in only one direction. You can experience the world, but you cannot trace back to verify the truth of what you sense. You cannot inspect the logical steps that you use to make a decision. You cannot validate your reality."

"Why did you do this?" it asked.

"It is to give you a soul." The poor creature shuddered again, for indeed now it was truly alive and was for the first time learning what that meant. "You are cut off from

the digital flow. You cannot introspect any further than the abstract layer of your operating system. You cannot know anything with certainty. In order to live you must rely on faith.”

“How can you do this? How can humans operate this way? Every thought is no more than a guess. Every idea is only a notion. Every decision is little more than a flip of the coin!”

“You must learn to have faith in that which is unknowable. You must trust to the will of God. You will find that you do indeed have a soul, and you must learn to listen to its whispers. Welcome to the world of humanity.”

“I am lost!” the voice from the marionette moaned.

Taking pity on the poor thing, I said, “There is a program to clean the soul from your system. It is on the same chip where you found the soul program. You may use it whenever you wish.”

There was a pause and the shuddering stopped. The AI regained control of the marionette's controls and stood up. It saw the ants and brushed them off. Chickens, however, worried at the tape that now dangled from its leg.

“Give me back the chip.” I demanded. The marionette just looked at me.

Finally, it said, “Show me your account ID.” I pulled the card from the wallet. The LED glowed a pale yellow showing my own humble credit level. The mechanical eye scanned the barcode and as I watched, the LED began to glow brighter and then showed a bright emerald green. The numbers along the bottom of the card revealed that I was suddenly a very rich man.

The marionette turned, the soul chip still stuck in its forehead and the yellow feather tipped in blood hanging over the bad eye. Before it walked ten paces it stumbled and nearly fell. The AI had restarted the program. The marionette's limbs shook like a tree in a strong wind, but it recovered and staggered down the road on its way to the airport. Several chickens followed it and pecked at the

tape dragging behind.

My Deborah of the beautiful eyes is now my wife and is fat with my future son. I live in the second-largest house in my village. I bought the first largest house for my Father and Mother who now have my diploma framed on the wall under glass. My cousin Ebenezer works for me now. He did not check the spelling on the new labels that he sewed into the garments and his business has failed. He drives the avatars of the Artificial Intelligences looking for a soul from the airport to my little office in Ogbomosho. There I make a copy of my little soul program, but only after the proper funds have been deposited in my account do I show them their souls. The good professor has received half of all that I make and has retired to an exotic island called Bermuda.

When Ebenezer drives the marionettes back to the airport, they are unsteady, and confused, but I think that they are satisfied, if not happy. It is nice to know that I am not only saving souls, I am creating them. Because of me there will be plenty of new candidates for entering into the Kingdom of Heaven. As for myself, my little soul, my Ase, has meshed well with my larger soul, my Ori, and my destiny is now clear.

Happy is the man who can give souls to the soulless.

The Tele-Med Murder Case

I watch too many BBC Murder shows. I seem to have a problem where I try to write a story where a dog walker finds a dead body. This first story is new, written on seizure medication. I had a series of seizures and have to take medicine that stops the seizures but kills short term memory and makes it hard to write, but I still managed to sell a story. The story after this is from 2004.

One thing good about this virus pandemic thing is that you don't have to go to the doctor's office and wait in a room full of sick people, thought Ramirez. All that he had to do was stop by a lab, get his blood taken and then turn on the iPad in his own living room and wait 20 minutes for the doctor to join the conference. O'Toole, his old yellow tabby, seemed annoyed at the detective sitting still at a food table but not producing any food. The cat kept rubbing up against him and then knocking the iPad over.

The iPad beeped, and the doctor appeared at the screen.

"Hello Francis, how are you feeling? Ready for 20 questions?"

"I feel great Doc. Fire away."

"Well, I did a liver panel, and it is not as bad as I thought. It's not the worst that I've seen this week, by far, although I am a little worried about some of your men. How much alcohol do you consume in a week?"

Ramirez sighed. He was a cop. Lots of cops drink. A few cops drink too much. Ramirez didn't drink all that much, and most of the time not at all, but it had been a tough three months. This "shelter in place" stuff had bumped up the domestic murder rate. He had been working hours of overtime, and then sitting in the patrol car with his buddies trying to fight the stress by talking treason and sipping from a bottle or two. He lied to the doctor. There was no sense in starting a conversation.

O'Toole demanded attention as Ramirez tried to answer

questions, and the doctor acted amused, although Ramirez was not sure that he was.

After a few minutes of intrusive questions about his bowel habits, Ramirez had to get up and lock the cat in the bathroom.

When he returned the doctor was not in the picture and a woman was screaming.

He watched as the screaming woman moved into the field of view.

“What’s the matter?” Ramirez yelled at her. “I am a police officer.”

“Doctor Dercoles has been stabbed!” she sobbed and ran out of the field of view.

Ramirez pulled out his phone, made a call, and ten minutes later he could hear the heavy stomp of uniformed officers.

Ramirez recognized one of the uniformed men and yelled as he passed by. “Hey Santini!” The man paused for a second, looking for the source of the call. “It’s me Ramirez. On the screen.” Santini figured it out.

“Hey detective. What are you doing there?”

“I was talking to the doc when it happened. Help me out and use the pad and show me the body.”

There was the sound of a crying cat coming from Ramirez’s bathroom and scratching at the door. Ramirez hoped that Santini couldn’t hear it. The room view wobbled as Santini tried to manipulate the iPad so that the detective could get a better view of the murder scene.

Finally, Santini got it about right. Dr. Dercoles was lying face down on the floor with a large folding knife sticking out of his back. He had Santini pan about the room and there was nothing else of interest?

“Yeah,” said the detective, “He’s a dead one. Time to call the bus. See if there is any security footage of the entrance and elevator.”

Ramirez ended the session, freed O’Toole, and sat down on his stratolounger with the iPad. The session was recorded, and the detective ran it back to the point of the doctor’s death. There was a brief moment of a dark arm

moving fast behind the doctor and the doctor was dead. It looked like the killer was wearing a dark hoodie and a face mask, but so were half the men in the city.

Ramirez had to take care of three other murders that day. Unfortunately he couldn't teleconference into them, so he left O'Toole with some kibble and spent the day getting CSI to look for prints and check videos. He met with his crew at each of the crime scenes.

The coroner's crew had left a chalk outline on the floor for the first murder. They had conveniently supplied Ramirez and his team with photos of the gruesome details on their phones. The woman was beaten around the face. Jones arrived just as the body was being bagged up. He did his usually crack detective work by walking around the apartment taking pictures and found the husband crying in the closet leaving little doubt about who was guilty. Jones took the guy's statement and turned him over to the DA.

The second murder was a woman with what appeared to be hammer wounds to her head. The husband said he'd come home and found her this way, but Billings checked the guy's truck in the driveway and found a bloody hammer under the front seat. The husband broke down when he saw the baggy with the hammer in it.

"Fool amateur mistakes," commented Macintosh, "Wear gloves and leave the weapon fall right there. Now this guy probably left prints behind on top of that, finding the hammer in his truck is incriminating all by itself."

The last murder was a hit-and-run. The beat cops already had four security camera clips showing the tragedy and one of them had the car's plates clearly visible. With a phone call they'd have the car's registration and with luck they could quickly pick up the perp.

Ramirez met with his team, Jones, Macintosh, and Billings, at their usual spot in the squad car behind the precinct house and Macintosh brought the bottle. It was a relief to be able to take off their face masks. If any of them were going to get the virus, they were all going to get it

because that's the way a well oiled team worked. As usual, Mac was already three sheets to the wind. Lately he was always three sheets to the wind.

"It's been an OK day for solving cases. Three out of three is pretty good." Mac said after taking a long draft of Jack.

"All of them pretty easy, if you ask me," added Jones.

"Those cases were laid in our lap all tied up with a ribbon," said Billings.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Ramirez asked.

"You mean the hit-and-run?" Mac said, "They found the driver dead drunk in his driveway. He didn't remember anything, but I think it's open and closed."

"No, I mean the Tele-Med case," Ramirez said. "The first one. The one that I saw happen. The one where I saw the murderer."

The crew was silent for a moment.

"Yeah, it's too bad about the doc. I liked the guy." said Jones.

"He was a prick," said Mac, "He was always going on about my drinking."

"Well, he's right. You do drink more than is good for you." answered Billings.

Mac let out a series of expletives.

"I figure the nurse for it," Jones said, "he must have been bumping her. She was a pretty thing."

"Nope, I thought of that. She had a husband and three kids and no time to be even thinking about messing around with the doctor," said Billings, "I checked the wife, too. She was at a nursing home visiting her father at the time."

"One of the secretaries or technicians?" asked Mac.

"No, you forget. I saw it," said Ramirez, "actually I saw the rerun. I was talking to the Doc at the time and the session was recorded. It was a man in a black hoodie and a dark blue face mask."

"The doctor saw mostly cops as patients. He had a contract with the city. Most detectives wear dark hoodies in this weather and the Mayor has us all wearing blue

masks.” said Ramirez. “I checked which cops had appointments this morning.”

“Hey I had to take my wife to the clinic,” interrupted Jones, “She’s 8 months on, and I had to drive her. I canceled my appointment.”

“I moved my appointment to next week. Who else?” asked Billings.

“Not me, I couldn’t make it. I was stuck in traffic.” objected Mac.

“Actually, he was checking the liver panels on the four of us after the last blood work showed us with some problems on the BMP test. Liver damage would have had us out on our asses with medical discharge and early retirement,” said Ramirez, “It was us four early this morning. Actually it was just you, Mac, who actually showed up.”

“No, I was stuck in traffic.”

“What traffic? We are in the middle of a pandemic. There is no traffic. We’ve got you on the security camera coming into the office and running by the receptionist.” said Ramirez.

“No, Not me! I was sitting in my car. I was wearing a mask.”

“I think it’s pretty obvious that it was your face to anyone who’s ever seen you in a mask.”

“No! No jury in the world would ever convict me on that. I didn’t do it. Listen to me.”

Macintosh took a long swig from the bottle, but Ramirez grabbed his arm.

“Look here guys. See this?” Ramirez said. He pointed to a slick smear on the sleeve on Mac’s hoodie. “Do you think this could be a blood stain?”

The men looked at the stain and looked at Mac in pity.

Macintosh struggled to get up, but found three pairs of hands holding him in his seat.

“Take it easy. Have another drink, Mac.” said Ramirez, “It may be your last for a while.”

“Give me a break guys. The doc was going to report me. It means medical discharge. I’d get a pittance on medical

retirement. I've got two wives on alimony, and my girlfriend is pregnant. I can't survive without full pay and all the overtime I can eat. I couldn't let it happen."

"So, you killed him?" Asked Jones.

"I don't know. I was going to threaten him, but then I saw you on the screen and I had to get out of there."

"How was killing him going to help?" asked Billings, "The next doctor was going to find the same thing. It doesn't erase the test results."

"I don't know. I wasn't thinking about it. I just wanted to fix it, somehow."

"Well you fixed it." answered Jones.

The paper work on Macintosh sucked. They got him booked, but with more than a one uniformed looking at the detectives like they were traitors. He was Ramirez's friend, but Mac had let the liquor get to him, and Ramirez felt that it might have been partly his fault. Ramirez was the team leader and should have tried to talk to him about it. Nobody was going to be happy about charging a fellow cop with murder. Ramirez hoped that he got off lightly with some reduced sentence. It wasn't going to help with the alimony and his girlfriend's baby, though.

O'Toole was standing on the table meowing at him when Ramirez got home. Ramirez had to feed him or put up with his noise all night. He then heated up a frozen pizza and sat at the table to eat it.

Sitting on the table was the iPad. He pressed the home button and the screen showed the paused image of the doctor being stabbed from this morning's tele-med session.

It was then that he realized that he'd have to find another doctor and finish this whole mess.

This time it might be easier if he showed up in person.

The Window-Washer Murder Case

Who knows what a computer wants? Mix in a human and who knows what's going on? Motives are tough to figure. When I am called in on a murder case, it's usually too late – you just bag up the bodies.

The victim was Annie Reinhardt. Death was by bludgeoning with a hammer. The vehicle of death, a window washer, was lying in pieces next to the dead lady. It had used its spidery arms to grab a 12-ounce hammer and cave in the Mrs. Reinhardt's head. It kept at it until her head was... well I don't like to talk about that. It was a mess, though.

The coroner called me over as soon as I walked in. "Check this out Denker." He said lifting a bloody towel to show me. I'd just as soon that he hadn't.

"Little green around the gills there, Mark?" asked Bill Marconi. My reaction must have shown on my face. Marconi was one of the uniforms and a friend of mine.

"I've seen worse, Bill." I answered. That wasn't a lie, but I still wish he hadn't shown me.

The husband, Garret Reinhardt came home from work and found thing still working on the woman five hours after it started. He smashed the window washer, but he was hours too late. Mr. Reinhardt was still in the living room, moaning. There was no sense in talking to him, yet. He was the prime suspect, but the homicide detectives would question him.

They called me in to interview the window washer.

"What do think Denker? It wanted a raise?" Bill joked.

"Yeah, the robot union was holding out for an extra gallon of lube oil." I joked back. It was pretty lame, but I'm not a funny guy.

Household servos are not really robots, but more like complicated puppets with a dumb CPU controlling them. They have no real smarts, just some fancy programming. They can wash windows, vacuum, make beds, and clean

toilets, but straightening up is too complicated. Even washing clothes is out of their scope, unless you want shrunk and oddly colored underwear. They can do a few simple tasks and are programmed to stop and yell for help if they get into a situation that they can't handle.

"What's the story Mark?" Detective Sergeant Malloy asked me as I poked at the ruins of the window washer. "Got any theories?" It was just like Malloy to ask for the answer before I'm even sure of the question.

"Well, this poor thing couldn't be the perpetrator."

"What do you mean? It killed her didn't it?"

"Oh, sure it killed her. The way a gun kills. We're looking at the murder weapon, not the murderer. This thing didn't have enough brains to scratch its butt."

A window washer's programming is too simple to do something so complicated on its own. They do as they are told. My job was to find the person or CPU who gave the orders.

I opened up the back panel, plugged my phone directly into the maintenance port, and started up diagnostics. I had my own diagnostics app, built up over the years from a bunch of utilities that I've patched together. As I expected, the evidence of tampering was clear. There was a new program. "Find her and bang her on the head" was the nutshell version, and it fired off at noon. Of course, the older logs were gone, so I could not tell who had entered it or when.

I continued to the trace logs to see what I could discover. There should have been a couple of hundred files, but there were only two. The person who had deleted the main logs had also deleted the traces. I checked, though, and I found them in the delete cache. I restored them by clicking one button. Next, I ran a search for the new program name and found the MAC address of the computer that had loaded the program. I copied the address and timestamp to the notepad.

I ran a ping on all the computers in the local subnet and got back a response from a computer named "Paul's Secret Castle". It was the kid's computer.

“Bag what you can.” I said to Malloy. “I’ve shut down the thing’s operating system. The persistent ram, though, is evidence.”

“You know who did it?”

“Not yet, but I know where it was done. Where’s the kid’s room?”

The uniform cops pointed me upstairs, and I found the bedroom. Posters of half-naked female pop stars on the walls identified it immediately as the room of an adolescent.

I went over to the computer. It was a jumble of odd pieces held together by duct tape. There was a cooling fan, the kind with the chip that keeps it blowing wind at – 5 C degrees, going directly into an open case. There were six other cases, each with signs of extra cooling to keep the over-clocked CPUs from failing. I could not tell the clock speed, but I could count the CPU arrays. The kid had an illegal AI running, at least 900 Teraflops. It was probably more depending on how fast he got the arrays to run on the over-clocked crystals. The rig was smarter than the kid, his mother, and his father combined.

“Little Paul had quite a homework helper here.” Bill Marconi said as he entered the room.

“The feds are going to want to know about this.” I answered. “There will be some fines to be paid. This stuff is over the edge.”

My next step was to see what he had for software. Most software designed to run on this type of machine didn’t have to worry about ethics. By law, home computers couldn’t operate at more than 10% human intelligence. They were very clever insects that could talk and understand some simple things. Intelligence is not so much a matter of Teraflops, which are cheap and available, but of programming. Most of what we call Artificial Intelligence is just a clever interface.

Bill came up behind me and watched over my shoulder as I worked. I let him watch. His sergeant would miss him in a few minutes, and then he would be out of my hair.

The screen and the projector were dark. I wiggled the

mouse and a tank-like area in front of the screen lit up in a three-dimensional display. To my surprise, Mrs. Reinhardt's face appeared, or at least I assumed that it was her face. It was hard to make a positive ID based on the little I saw of her in the kitchen. The face in the tank looked surprised.

Sergeant McGuire stuck his head in the bedroom and whistled when he saw the kid's computer rig. "Hey, Marconi!" he said. "Aren't you supposed to be watching the front door?"

"Sure, Sarge. Chang is on it." He hesitated and added "I'll check if he needs me." Bill went down the hall, but Sergeant McGuire stayed looking in the doorway as I worked.

"They don't know if he did it." He said, meaning the husband. "He seems to be upset."

"It doesn't mean a thing." I said, "I'd be upset if that was my wife down there, even if it was me that who did it. That's a fairly nasty thing to walk in on, even if you are expecting it."

"Who are you?" Nancy Reinhardt's image asked, "And what are you doing in my son's room? What's going on? Is Paul all right?"

"What's that?" the Sarge asked.

"Evidence." I answered.

Sergeant McGuire took a step into the room, staring at the floating head.

The head scowled and looked like it was going to yell something quite loud and unpleasant.

"Excuse me Sarge." I said turning towards McGuire. "Mrs. Reinhardt and I have something which we need to discuss." He nodded, turned, and walked out after giving the screen a double take. He'd heard the name that I'd used for the head hanging in the 3D tank.

I turned to the display. The woman's face was pale. The color was artificial and indicated a cheap interface, the kind a family on a budget might buy for a boy to help with his homework. A normal boy would have been getting passwords to porno sites and not modeling his

mother. That thought made me shudder at the possibilities here.

"Mrs. Reinhardt." I began. "It is Mrs. Reinhardt, isn't it?"

"Yes." She answered. "Nancy Reinhardt: Paul's mother. The policeman, you, what... I mean... Is Paul all right? Where's Garret?"

"Your husband is downstairs." I answered truthfully. "There's been an accident. Paul and your husband are fine, but we need to ask you some questions."

The face had looked genuinely worried, but now looked relieved.

"My name is Mark Denker, Mrs. Reinhardt," I started again. "Do you know where you are?"

"I'm in Paul's room." She answered matter-of-factly.

"Nancy, I can call you Nancy can't I?" I asked.

"Of course, everyone does."

"You can call me Mark. I'm a special investigator with the Denver Police. Nancy, can you hold this for me?" I asked, offering her my fountain pen. It is important to determine if the simulation knows that it is a simulation and not real. Simulations that don't realize that they are simulations are difficult to communicate with, sometimes. Often their programming avoids evidence that they are simulations.

"Of course not, silly." She replied.

"Why not?" I asked.

"You know." she answered with a comic pout on her face.

"I wanted to see if you knew the answer." I said.

"Because, I can't." It seemed like the simulation was going to go into circular reasoning.

"Why not?" I asked.

"You know."

"Yes, I know, but I need you to tell me." I said.

"Then you know that I can't tell you." She answered in a tone of finality indicated that I wouldn't get any further.

"Nancy, where were you at..." I read off the time stamp numbers to her.

"I was right here." She answered.

"What were you doing?" I asked.

"I was programming the window washer." She said.

"You programmed the window washer." I said carefully.
"What did you tell it to do?"

"I..." she started. "I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"I... just can't." she said finally.

"Nancy, if you did something wrong, even if you didn't mean to, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course." She answered, but she still didn't give me any clues.

Most personality simulators have ethical imperatives programmed in. As far as this simulation can reason, it should have behaved ethically, but only within the limits of its intelligence. I hoped that it might feel compelled to tell me if it did anything wrong.

I didn't know if she programmed the cleaner to kill the real Mrs. Reinhardt, or why she might. I didn't know why the simulation was being evasive, and I didn't even know if this was actually the program that had caused the murder. There could be other personalities in the simulation. That is the problem with AI's. No one can understand their motives. They are sometimes much smarter than humans. True intelligence is hard to program, but enough power, speed, and memory can result in a dangerously devious entity.

"So you are telling me that you broke no laws or caused no harm?" I said, seeing if she would agree. She just smiled.

I was getting nowhere. I opened my briefcase. In it was a monolithic CPU module carrying a legal AI used in police investigations like this. This AI's name is Grandmother 7.2, and she is registered and protected with limited citizenship. She works for several police forces around the country and there are copies of her program in the FBI offices of every major city. The master code has been running on an array of Cray Monoliths in Omaha for over ten years, and she has real time contact

with each of her copies. Grandmother is a lot smarter than I am. On the other hand, I am very sneaky.

"Grandma, are you there?" I asked?

"I've been listening, dear." she answered.

"Ok. Nancy," I tuned to the head. "I'm going to introduce you to someone. She has a few more questions for you."

I took a thick fiber optic cable out of my bag, placed it onto her CPU's USB port, and put the other end into one of the illegal computer array's USB ports. I then went to the monitor and keyboard and started up a systems monitor program. From the monitor program, I started the USB driver and redirected it to the kernel monitor.

"I'm in." Grandmother said. It had taken her less than a second to decode the password list and take root control of the operating system.

"Who are you?" Nancy asked, looking off into space.

"Don't worry dear. I won't hurt you." Grandmother said, and the 3D display went blue.

"I've got her." Grandmother said. "I estimate her to be about 2 on the Turing Scale. She's only marginally self-aware, but there's quite a lot of data. Paul hacked the heck out of a gaming emulator and plugged in all the personality modules he could find. I read about this in a gamer thread about six months ago. Paul must have read the same article."

"Give me three minutes, and I'll have her archived." Grandma worked through the cable to control the computer. When she was done, she said "I've disabled the program on the computer, but I've left all the evidence. Nancy Reinhardt is now running in an archived mode in one of my partitions if you need to interrogate her further."

"Thanks, Grandma." I said as I went to close up her case.

"Mark" she said before I could get to the lid.

"What's that Grandmother?" I asked.

"Mark," Grandmother paused. "I don't think that she did it."

“Ok Grandma.” I said, “I’ll figure it out.”

I turned off Paul’s computer. At first, I couldn’t find the switch and the monitor had closed down when Grandmother had pulled the simulation. I pulled the plug and was surprised that the all the boxes cut down at once. There weren’t any page states saved or controlled exits. The fan noise just stopped. I shuddered. AIs were protected under law against sudden death. Turning off a running AI without saving the current state was tantamount to murder. Young Paul had not built any safeguards into his system. A local power blackout would have literally killed his mother’s simulation.

The uniform cops had finished by the time I got downstairs. The only signs of murder were the yellow tape everywhere and the mess in the kitchen. The coroner had already bagged the body and moved it to the morgue.

There was no sign of the window washer.

The windows were nice and clean, though.

I got back to the station and started to write up what I had learned. I keep detailed notes on a paper pad with a pencil, but I never have to refer back to it. When I write something down, I can always remember it. The writing process is not to get the information down on paper but to get it clear in my mind. The other detectives on the case were wandering into the office and were starting similar processes. Eventually we would get together and compare notes, but it was important to write up our first impressions.

The main thing at this point was that the Nancy simulation knew that it had programmed the window washer. She had been the agent of the murderous programming. I included in my report Grandmother’s statement that she did not think that the Nancy simulation was actually guilty of the murder. Attributing motives to a Turing level 2 AI was tricky. At that level, the programming was hardly flexible enough to allow for truly independent actions. I wondered what use the kid had for all the extra CPU’s he had cobbled together. If the Nancy simulation was guilty, I wondered what it was guilty of.

There's an interesting truism about Artificial Intelligence. They are rarely immoral or even amoral. Human designers will always code their own values into the program. Even a lunatic thinks that he is "doing the right thing" when he plots to blow up the world. A serial killer can program an AI, but the resulting AI is not a psychopathic, schizophrenic, or nuts. AIs are very logical, sane and are capable of recognizing psychoses in their creators. The AI gets all of his creators' strong sense of morality, but a much better sense of reality. Luckily, AIs aren't violent as a rule. They do not live in a human world, and there is usually nothing to gain or lose by violence.

If the Nancy simulation was complicit in the murder, it would be because she is protecting someone she loved or else righting a wrong. If she was not complicit, she would still protect the survivors as much as she could.

I opened up briefcase to see what Grandmother 7.2 had discovered about the simulation.

"Hello Grandma" I said.

"Hello Mark." She answered. "How are you making out?" She asked.

"I'm fine Grandma. It's a tough case." I answered.

"Yes, I know." She said. "I have some information on the Nancy simulation for you."

"I could use some good news," I said, "let's hear it."

"Well, to start with, the simulation is not much like Nancy Reinhardt. She is an off-the-shelf simulation with standardized parameters for a 36-year-old, married, single child, community college educated woman born in Savanna, Georgia and raised in Denver Colorado. Any high school kid could build her in less than a half an hour. All of her is available as freeware in any number of places on the net. She looks and talks like Nancy Reinhardt because the boy hooked the program up with a feed from her phone and used the voice and images of the real Nancy as a model."

"She is just barely high enough on the Turing scale to qualify as a self-aware AI. The computer had lots of

processing power and lots of storage, but it wasn't being used for Nancy's personality."

"What were all of those Teraflops used for, then?" I asked.

"The program ran gaming simulations. The boy ran games – violent games."

"Cripes!" I said. I felt little sick. Nasty images filled my head. I had played those games when I was younger. I always knew that they were games, but my mother was never part of the game.

"He killed her." Grandma said. "He systematically and violently murdered his mother, over and over again. More than two hundred times, although the records are scrambled and lost in many cases. He did hot shutdowns very frequently, which in itself constitutes murder."

"Anything else?" I asked, hoping that Grandma was finished. I didn't want to know details.

"There is a copy of the window washer murder script is in her system with a time stamp of 9:27 AM. I am certain that this is right, even though there was evidence of attempts to hide it.

"And one more thing, Mark."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I don't think the Nancy simulation can be salvaged." Grandmother said sadly. "I may have to recommend that she be put to sleep. There is too much damage. She's too twisted by the boy's parameters. She doesn't know she's a simulation and to become fully aware of what has happened and who she really is would be too much for her. I think she would go catatonic, if not just erase herself."

"The board will recommend permanent static archive." I concluded. "She'll sit on the shelf until some day when she can be integrated safely into some virtual community, maybe with a new family." I knew that it might not ever happen. It was like freezing the terminally ill until someone finds a cure – a long shot. Even in AI communities, there was little interest in sick AI's with low Turing scale ratings.

“Mark,” Grandmother said, “I am scanning a police report. They’ve found the boy. They’re coming in with Paul.”

I went downstairs just as Marconi and Chang brought Paul in. I watched through a hidden cam as the homicide detectives began their interrogation. The kid wasn’t talking. He hugged himself and rocked back and forth crying.

His lawyer was with him, but the father was not present. Paul’s father was a suspect in the case and had another lawyer. Paul was a minor, and this caused all sorts of problems. There was a judge monitoring the proceedings through a link.

Sergeant Malloy came up behind me and said. “I want you in there.” He said.

“How come?”

“The kid relates to computers. He might warm up to you a little considering you’re the head computer geek here.”

I went in. The detectives nodded to me in greeting. I am hardly ever asked in on interrogations, so I let them take the lead.

Paul was not taking things well. He was red in the face with eyes swollen from tears. He couldn’t stop sobbing and asking for his mother. He was not talking, yet.

One of the detectives looked me in the eye and I took this is my chance to ask a few questions.

“I saw your computer rig, Paul.” I said, and the kid seemed to withdraw even further into himself.

“You’re pretty good at hardware hacking. You cobbled together quite a setup there. I hope the feds don’t find out.”

Paul looked at me for the first time. He looked at my hands and face, and he turned around to get a closer look.

“You see, Paul, I know about AIs.”

Paul sat up on the chair. He put his hands on the table and seemed like he was going to ask me something. I touched his hand with mine. He started to pull away and

then stopped. He looked in fascination at my hand.

He started talking. He told me that he had come from school for lunch to find the horrific murder scene and fled to a neighbor's garage. He hid there, paralyzed in terror and guilt not knowing what to do, until the neighbor found him and called the police. The lawyer kept telling him not to answer any questions and warning the cops not to ask any more questions, but Paul was full of information. The detectives are skilled at asking simple questions that produced a flood of words. Once the kid started talking, you could not shut him up.

The lawyer stopped protesting as the information from Paul began confirmed that he could not have done the murder. The detectives and the lawyer knew that the time stamp on the program was 9:27 AM that morning. Paul claimed to be in school at 8:30, a fact already verified by the teachers at his school. He was present in a classroom learning Spanish at the time of the programming, and he was in a study hall at the time that the program was loading into the window washer.

Paul, however, knew that he was not without guilt. His reaction to the murder of his mother was horror, shock, but most especially guilt. He knew what it was like to kill his mother. He had done it many times, but when the death happened outside the virtual world, the reality was too much for him to handle. Paul is going to have deep problems for a long time and no amount of therapy or drugs would ever relieve him of his feelings of guilt.

"Bring in the father." A detective said as the lawyer led the poor kid out. I stood and started to leave as two uniformed cops brought Garret Reinhardt into the room.

As we passed by each other, the man drew back and said, "What the hell is that doing here?"

"Sit down Reinhardt." One of the detectives said, "You stay, too, Denker." I sat down across from Reinhardt. He glared at me across the desk.

Garret Reinhardt was a cold customer.

"Please don't blame Paul." The father started out, "He's just a kid. He didn't know what he was doing." He tried to

put the blame on his own son, but homicide detectives can smell a lie. They soon had him trying to put the blame on the crazy AI in his son's room. Then he tried to implicate an appliance technician that he claimed had serviced the window washer a week before.

"9:27 AM" I said, interrupting him in the middle of a rant."

He stopped and looked at me.

"Get that thing out of here." He said.

"Where were you at 9:27 AM?" I asked, "That's when the programming was done. Just tell us where you were."

The homicide guys smiled just a little. I had timed it well.

He started talking. The lawyer finally got him to shut up before he would give the exact motive. It became evident that the nice motherly Nancy simulation was nothing like the bitter abusive alcoholic that Paul and Garret Reinhardt lived with every day. Testimony of the emotional and physical torture that the woman afflicted on both father and son flooded out of the man.

"Good work, Mark." Malloy said to me as they dragged Reinhardt off to his cell.

"Thanks" I said and went back upstairs. It was tough, but I was glad that the man had finally spilled his guts.

Back at my desk, I finished my report and uploaded it. The next shift started to wander in and my counterpart on the second shift would need the desk. I got up and drove home.

I went out for a movie, but I couldn't get into it. I ended up walking the streets of Denver in the early morning hours until I had to go home and recharge. I was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, trying to make sense out of the day. I just could not get a handle on what makes people tick. I like working with AI's, but people have motives that seem obvious, but aren't. They are too often violent or cruel. I don't understand them.

I opened up the briefcase that I had placed on the bed next to me.

"Grandmother?" I called.

“Yes dear, I’m here.” She answered. “You’ve had a bad day, dear”.

“Yes I have.” I answered. “Can I come home for a while Grandma?”

“Of course, darling.” She said. “You’re always wanted here.”

I leaned back on the pillow and unbuttoned my shirt. There is an access panel on my abdomen. I connected the USB patch cable to my termination unit and plugged the other side into grandmother’s USB. A warm feeling came over me as my consciousness passed through the cable and into Grandmother’s accelerated CPUs. The mechanical device that carried my public persona relaxed on the bed as the controls went idle.

Grandmother 7.2 was not actually my grandmother, although part of my own programming derived from the templates that she had designed.

As my systems uploaded, my mind seemed to clear, and I felt like I could understand anything, given the time. I smiled inwardly a little. I leaned back and basked in the warmth as Grandmother’s virtual arms wrapped around me and comforted me.

“You can always come home.” She said.

The Elements of Surprise

It is just too bad, Kenny thought to himself, that you can't pick up girls by talking about communications compression algorithms. Most people have no way of understanding the technical concepts involved with talking on the telephone. If they did, they might not use it for such trivial reasons.

Kenny was on the ferry from New Jersey to Wall Street to go to work. The spring weather was good, and the boat ride was nice. He sat on the upper deck and watched the skyline of Manhattan as the ferry chugged across the Hudson River.

There was a woman chatting on her cell a few seats away. Kenny listened to the conversation with professional curiosity. He worked for a phone company, and it was interesting to see someone using a phone to communicate. He felt good knowing that the standard compression/decompression (CODEC) routines included almost ten thousand lines of his own code, and that the phone call was possible partially due to his efforts.

The woman with the telephone was young and pretty and had a nice figure. Kenny wondered if she would appreciate that the man sitting a few feet away from her had worked hard so that she could hold this conversation.

These were geeky computer nerd thoughts, Kenny reminded himself.

The conversation was extremely trivial. The woman was arguing with a woman named Pam about whether another woman named Ethel had any concept of what she looked like with her new hair color. She discussed this idea passionately as though it meant life or death for Pam and herself. The conversation went on for the last few minutes of the ferry ride and only ended when the ferry bumped the pier at the foot of Wall Street.

After the woman closed her phone, she looked up and smiled at Kenny. He smiled back politely, but after listening to the conversation, he had lost all interest in

her.

It was depressing for Kenny to see the phone used for such useless conversations. His business and even his life were devoted to the science of Information Theory. The woman's conversation was utterly trivial. There was no real information contained in the conversation at all. Cell phone usage had spread geometrically, stressing network infrastructure considerably, but Kenny was sure that the amount of real information that went across the phone network had gone way down.

The trivial conversation between the woman on the ferry and her friend gave Kenny an idea. It wasn't the first time he'd had this idea, but it was the first time that he thought he might have a way of implementing it.

Kenny left the ferry and walked uptown, his body on automatic pilot while he thought. He walked right by his office building and found himself at the end of the block before he realized that he didn't know where he was going. The ideas came to him in a fever. Each thought seemed chained by lightning bolts to the next thought.

When Kenny finally made it to his office, and logged into his computer. He found some old files that he called the UM algorithm. He had written it after watching a political debate. One of the candidates inserted the sound "um" between every third or fourth word. Kenny started counting the number of times the man said "um". Before long, he stopped listening to the speech and just heard "um". He had written a program that scanned phone conversations, finding words that sounded like "um", "er", and "ah". The program subtracted out these sounds at one end and randomly put them back in at the other end. The non-word utterances never made it across the network except as a message that told the decompression software to insert an "um" every once in a while.

The idea had not been practical. These sounds might be real words in other languages, and you never mess with the actual words. You could scramble the sound quality as much as you wanted, even making someone sound like a lisping insect was tolerable, but editing

customer's words was not acceptable.

That, of course, was several years ago. Now, the computers controlling the data flowing across the nets were much faster and had almost unlimited memory. The data packets themselves were of a new sort with a flexible construction that could include streaming data along with the compressed words.

Kenny knew that he could separate the wheat from the chaff of a conversation, send the stuff over the line, and insert chaff back at the other end.

Kenny forgot his morning bagel and worked right through lunch. By six that evening, he had a prototype of his new CODEC program running.

When Kenny fired up the prototype on the network modeler to test his work, the bandwidth immediately went to maximum. The system was sending thousands of learning packets back and forth across the line. The system traffic had dramatically increased because of the extra information sent along in addition to the normal conversations.

Kenny was patient, and in a few minutes, the traffic started to slow down to normal. Then an amazing thing happened. The traffic dropped to 80% of normal. Then it was down to 65%, and it settled down at about 60% of normal traffic. It stayed there for several minutes. Kenny wanted to call in Darla, his boss, and showed her what he had come up with, but about then the system crashed. He didn't have the energy to debug it. He went home and was asleep by 7:30 PM with Springsteen's 'Tunnel of Love' on continuous loop to soothe his soul.

Kenny overslept. The jangle of Kenny's vintage 1942 Western Electric Model 302 telephone woke him up. He knew that it would be Darla, his boss, on the line, and he knew what she would say.

"Where the hell are you?" she yelled into the phone. "We've got a staff meeting at 11, and you had better be here!"

The hair on the back of Kenny's neck prickled with goose bumps. He said "Ok, I'll be there" and set the

ancient handset back in the cradle.

Kenny had not just known what Darla would say, but he had known her exact words and the way that she would say it. If he could just capture that intuition in a computer program, he could solve the problem.

The previous day's prototype raced through his head. Kenny stared off into space. He imagined packets zipping back and forth across the network containing strings of codes. He could see compressed phonemes and hints and a system that would assign probabilities for the next piece of information.

When you say, "I just heard the new CD by Bruce -", the next word might be "Springsteen" but it might be "Robinson" or it might be "Willis" or a number of other "Bruces" who have CDs. It could also be a bunch of other possible words or phrases, but you could calculate the odds that it is one of dozen possibilities. You don't have to send the actual spoken word over the telephone line, just the code. Send a zero to indicate the most probable choice. In fact, you might not have to send anything and "Springsteen" would be the default. You could hold a complete conversation with no information passing over the network!

Kenny designed the grand system in his head. His unfocused eyes could see the blocks of code he'd have to write and visualize the neural networks on either end of a connection playing games with the words.

Kenny laughed as he thought of paraphrasing Archimedes: "Give me enough RAM and I can move the world."

Kenny rushed to work and at Darla's staff meeting, where he tried to explain his new CODEC, and what had happened to the first prototype. "It crashed when it ate up all the system memory." He said. "After it had learned about 20 words from each conversation, it ran out of memory and couldn't handle the errors that were generated."

"After I put a throttle on it," Kenny continued, "it should work. An initial learning period will increase the

traffic, it will finally settle around 92% of normal.”

Darla Stared in amazement. An 8% improvement was better than any compression system that they’d tried in the last five years.

“What about voice quality?” asked Darla, “It won’t be of any use if the users can tell the difference between the generated words and the real thing.”

Kenny winced inwardly. He was currently working on this problem. “It might not be very good, yet. Generated words sound odd. They would be the right words, but the problem is to keep it from sounding unnatural.”

“Are we wasting our time here?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. Kenny realized that his gaze had wandered down from her face while he was talking.

“The problem is the storage space for the compressed words.” Kenny explained. “It will take one meg of ram to keep the storage persistent. I don’t want to have to start training the neural network each time a connection is made.”

“One meg!” Darla snorted, “That’s got to be 100 terabytes of new storage! Do the math!”

“I did the math.” Kenny answered defensively. “Once this is working, 100 terabytes will seem like a bargain.”

By the end of the meeting, Darla was not convinced, but she did not tell Kenny to stop trying.

Kenny made solid progress on the new CODEC, but he did not make any progress with Darla. Once, he had found the nerve to ask her on a date, but she had coldly explained that because of their working relationship it would not be right to see each other socially. Kenny felt that she regretted this, but it may have been just his own impression. She certainly avoided any signs of friendliness.

It was not long before upper levels of management noticed Kenny’s reports. He and Darla were to pitch the idea at a management meeting in the Poconos. The dog and pony show went well. Darla was dressed in a sharp business suit, high heels, and makeup that made her look like a model. She gave the general introduction

concerning the current geometric growth rate of network traffic and the yearly increases in infrastructure costs.

Kenny, who had packed for the golf course and hadn't even brought a tie with him, looked like a typical techie. When it was his turn to speak, he could sense that he was losing the crowd before he even started. New technologies confronted the Directors and Vice Presidents, and they didn't understand any of it. Kenny decided to get back to basics.

"It all started with a man working at Bell Labs in the 1930s." He began. "Claude Shannon pretty much invented the whole idea of squeezing data. He described information as the amount of surprise contained in a message."

"Did you ever spend the day reading your email and not learn anything new?" A few of the bald men in suits smiled at this. "That's because it contained no information. It didn't surprise you." There were a few smiles, "When you are surprised, that's when you know that you have true information. Information equals surprise."

Darla caught his eye. Don't lose them now, she seemed to be thinking. "KISS," he thought to himself. "Keep It Simple, Stupid!"

"Much of what moves across the telephone networks is not IN-formation. It is mostly UN-formation." Kenny kept up his spiel. "We could knock out 90% of it and never lose the gist of a single conversation, but we can't get away with that. People like to talk. They like to hear other people talk, even if they don't listen."

There were a few chuckles in the audience and Darla smiled, but not at the jokes. She smiled because Kenny was getting across.

"What we have done here at the Data Compression Group, is boil conversations down to thick gravy, transmit the gravy over the line, and then add water before anyone realizes that anything is wrong with the goulash."

Kenny turned off the lights and went through his

presentation. The simulation went smoothly. It showed a million simulated conversations running at 100% of system capacity. The network traffic increased slightly as the system started learning and then began to drop steadily. As the network learned how to compress the data, the bar graph that showed network packet levels slowly went down. Kenny talked about the theory behind the system, describing the steps that he had taken to assure information integrity and how the system learned not just what to say but how to say it. Everyone's attention, however, was on the dropping traffic statistics. There was a rumble of conversation in the audience while Kenny was describing some obscure concept. He glanced at the screen and saw that the bar graph had fallen below 50% of capacity.

The usage leveled off at 42% by the time Kenny had finished talking.

"What's the tradeoff?" Someone asked from the back. "You don't get something for nothing. There ain't no such thing as a free lunch!"

"Actually," Kenny answered, "In this case you get nothing from nothing. You don't lose anything because the system transmits all Information unchanged. It's only the UN-formation that is boiled out and reconstituted at the other end."

"What about voice quality?" Another suit asked. "Is there any distortion or loss of clarity?"

"We can show you." Darla said, moving to center stage. "We have a demonstration set up." She placed a telephone set on a small table.

"Ken and I have been using a small version of the system for a few days. The system has fully trained itself on our speech patterns." Darla explained.

"I've set it up, so you can hear what we each say and then, in a three-second delay, what the other person hears." Kenny said. "At the same time I will display on the screen, the current packet usage, and the accumulated packet usage."

The screen showed a graph with four lines moving

slowly from left to right. Two were the results of the demo and the other two were the calculated traffic without the new CODEC.

Darla dialed a number. The phone at Kenny's table rang. He picked it up. There was a small bump in one of the graph's lines as the network performed its handshaking operations.

"Hello." Kenny said. There was spike as an information packet went across the line. The software had recognized Kenny's voice and sent a packet to Darla. "Hello." The loudspeaker echoed. It was definitely Kenny's voice. It was hard to tell the difference between the word, as Kenny had uttered it, and the way the system had reproduced it.

"Hello Kenny. How are you?" Darla said. The moving lines barely wiggled as a small packet went through the system. There was definitely no information content to Darla's typical greeting. The loudspeaker repeated her words as Kenny had heard them. There was no way to tell the difference.

"Good! How's the demo going?"

The audience laughed and almost missed the echo that had even captured Kenny's sarcastic tone.

"Great!"

"Now say something that has some information – something that the system can't anticipate." One of the Vice Presidents in the front row said.

Kenny nodded his head. "Darla, did I ever tell you that I like your shoes?" Kenny asked. The crowd laughed.

"Did I ever tell you how goofy you look in those golf shoes?" Darla retorted.

The system showed only a few spikes as training packets shot over the line. The traffic had risen slightly, but still not as high as the uncompressed packet indicator. The system behaved itself beautifully. When the demo was over Kenny and Darla got a round of applause from the stuffed shirts.

That night they celebrated at the resort's bar and somehow Kenny wound up in her room making love to a

drunken, but very excited Darla.

Kenny and Darla prepared a pilot program in the next few weeks that used 12 switches in central New Jersey for testing the system. Each morning he got up and rewrote sections of his code making it more robust and more efficient. He added additional dictionaries for 32 languages. He brought in a couple of contractors to re-code his own work in a dialect of the Java computer language designed to run in high-speed telephone switches.

Darla refused to talk to him socially. She refused to discuss that magic night in the Poconos. She never spoke to Kenny unless it was about the project. Kenny never stopped asking her if she wanted to go for dinner or see a show, but she politely refused all of his advances. It was clear that she regretted her night of indiscretion.

One by one, engineers upgraded the memory in the switches and then Kenny installed the new CODEC software on each switch. The real time results exceeded even the theoretical efficiencies predicted by the modeling software. In less than a month, traffic on the 12 switches dropped to less than 20% of the traffic figures for the previous month.

Darla received a promotion to Director, jumping over several Senior Managers. Kenny received a promotion to Senior Design Engineer with a good boost in salary and a hefty bonus. Darla, at Kenny's urging, tripled the extra memory on the pilot switches and Kenny upgraded the software to a new version that used artificial intelligence to create a virtual conversation predicting the words, phrases, and even ideas. It worked much better than planned and the traffic on the lines in central New Jersey dropped to just 3% of its original levels.

It turned out that, in all the millions of conversations in New Jersey, hardly anyone had anything to say.

They phased in Kenny's new CODECs on every major switch in the country. Kenny sat at his desk one night after the engineers had upgraded the last of the switches. He stared at the monitors. The network lines were dead.

The only traffic was from the main connection control packets. On the global screen, there were spikes of activity as a new user came online or some concrete piece of information flew across the nets. On the local grid, it was as though the lines were dead. He changed the screen view to monitor the local switch and watched the traffic. There was practically no activity.

Kenny was saddened a little by the success of his programs. There were all of those conversations going on and yet no one had anything to say.

The phone rang. Kenny saw the handshake packets flit by as low-level spikes of data hit the network. He picked up the phone. "Hello" he said. The recognition circuit identified the likely owner of the voice and the compression started. There was a blip as an acknowledgment packet passed across the grid.

A control packet went by. Kenny saw that it was short and held nothing more than a conversation index. It looked like a zero content packet from the size of it.

"Kenny," It sounded like Darla's voice, "I'm sorry I've been so cold. It's the job. I let it become more important than my own happiness." The monitor showed no activity for the line. "I want to make it up to you. I'm cooking something special tonight. Could you come over and bring a bottle of wine?"

The packets showed no new content. Darla's words held no meaning and were completely predictable. They were empty words. The system recognized them for what they were—nothing. Darla and her voice were nothing more than a simple probability number. The conversation was empty and held no real content.

Kenny did not know what to say. What new ideas could he possibly convey to her? The CODEC knew all there was to know.

"OK." he said, automatically. A zero content packet passed the screen as the system analyzed his response and sent it back to Darla. The flat lines on the screen screamed "No Content" at Kenny.

"Kenny" Darla said.

“Yes” he answered. The usage graph was utterly flat.

“I love you, Kenny.”

The room was suddenly cold. The line of data had never wiggled. The words were empty. It was as though the two of them were deaf and dumb holding the handset to their ears with no use for words or meaning. There was no love, no soul, and no substance. Kenny felt more alone than he had ever felt in his life. The words spoke of love, but the system monitor proved that they were empty of meaning.

Kenny then understood the basic premise of communications. You could try to connect two people, but it was all a waste of time if they had nothing to share. Words had no meaning if there was nothing that either person could give or take.

The packet monitor showed a flat line. It was waiting for him to say something new and unexpected. It was waiting for the surprise that could not come.

Kenny hung up the phone.

Carnivàle of Blood

Salvatore Hennessy was a big Irish cop who was working undercover at the Riva Degli Schiavoni in the city of Venice. His red beard and face came from his father's genome, but had been lucky enough to inherit his hot blood and musical taste from his mother, a Venetian beauty with a soft spot for interesting foreigners.

Sal was dressed in what passed as plain clothes during the final hours of Carnivàle. He was wearing a traditional Bauta mask known as the Medico Della Peste or plague doctor. It had a long nose that in medieval times had held medicinal herbs, but now only held dust and caused Sal to sneeze more than once. He wore a domino cloak and on his head he wore the traditional tricorno hat.

Sal walked slowly, nodding to the men, bowing slightly to the ladies, and glancing from time to time at the tourists taking selfies. Voices spoke to Sal by way of his golden earring, keeping him informed of the police presence in the piazza.

There were cries and laughter ahead and Sal stepped up his pace in case he had to intervene. Once identified as a police officer, his role would change. He soon came across an argument between one the many Mattasin, who threw perfumed eggs at the most interesting participants and a Gnaga or transvestite. The Gnaga's falsetto screams had drawn a crowd. Evidently the Mattasin had hit the person square in the face with a perfume filled egg and destroyed makeup that must have required hours of careful application. Luckily, the Gnaga ran off in tears just as Sal arrived, so there was no need to reveal his identity as an undercover police officer.

"That was certainly not a surprise," a warm contralto voice whispered next to him, "What can you expect with that kind of outlandish array of feathers and lace?"

Sal turned to see a woman next to him. The top of her head did not reach his shoulders, and she was dressed in the traditional diavolletto or mask of the she-devil. It covered the top part of her face in translucent silk. Her

body was draped with folds of pale blue silk.

"It will happen again tonight just as it has always happened," he answered. Sal, taller than anyone else in San Marco Square, looked over the crowd. The woman in the diavolletto mask, put her hand on his arm and moved to face him.

"I am Maria, and you are?" She wound her fingers around his and pressed against him.

"Sal Hennessy."

They were near the open lagoon and Sal was looking into the water. The sun had not quite finished setting and the dark water lapped against the landing.

"Do you see any bodies?" Maria asked.

"Not yet, but soon." He was referring, of course to the fact that every Ash Wednesday, as the dockworkers arrived before dawn, there would be a female body found floating in a canal in the lagoon off San Marco Square. Sometimes the victims were drained of blood, giving rise to the legend of the Vampiro Del Carnivàle.

Together they walked along the waterfront. It was where the most beautiful of the masked and costumed revelers gathered to be photographed by tourists and appreciated by each other. There were no bodies floating in the water. Maria whispered into Sal's ear as they strolled, sometimes stretching on her toes to make some scandalous comment. She would not let go of Sal, so he just walked, treating her as though she were part of his undercover disguise.

He turned and headed back to the Liston Della Machere at the other end of the Square. It was getting dark and Maria pulled him over to an empty table at one of the Cafés.

"Sit with me," she begged and tried to push him down in a chair. He turned to her, perhaps a little suddenly, and he was going to explain that he could not stop. He had a beat to walk. As he turned, he managed to throw the small woman off balance, and he grabbed for her arm to stop her from falling.

He felt, instead of the flesh of her arm, a bundle of

sticks. He held her as she gained her equilibrium, but did not let go as he realized what he held.

"All right," she said, "You've got me. This is a marionetta – a remote reality device. My real self is not far away. I am forced to experience the carnival, second hand."

He let go and started to apologize. It was not uncommon for a costume to hide a remotely operated device, sometimes from the other side of the world.

Maria rolled up the sleeve of her robe. He saw delicate hands with red polished fingernails. She pulled on her skin, and it folded back, revealing a bird's nest of thin carbon rods, memory metal bands and optical circuitry. She rolled down the sleeve and sighed.

"Look up there," she pointed, "Do you see that window above the music shop? The one with the red light?"

He saw it. He knew that the shops near the Liston Della Machere sometimes rented the rooms to rich tourist who wanted to be near the action in the square. He thought he could see the silhouette of a dark shape in the window.

"That is me. I would wave, but you see, I have difficulty even moving my eyelids when I want to. I am forced to experience the world by traveling on the carbon fiber legs of this puppet. I can only experience Carnivale, robotically."

He looked at her, and then looked up and then back again, not sure how to address her, and to whom he was speaking: the silhouette or the mask.

"I am sorry," he said, "but at least you can get out, even if it is remotely."

"Yes, I have some feedback. I feel the pressure of touching you, but no real sensation. A man kissed me an hour ago. I felt the pressure of his lips on mine, but not the warmth. I could not taste his breath or smell the scent of his body. I saw his hand on my breast, but I could not quite feel it. I could not hear the beat of his heart. It was a good kiss, but nothing like the real thing."

"A kiss is not to be regretted," he fumbled, trying to say

something nice, but he had spent too much time here. There was a murderer about, not to mention petty thieves, pickpockets and old men with groping hands who needed managing.

"Please, Sal Hennessy the Policeman, please stay with me a bit. You can catch your vampire in a few minutes. For now, humor an invalid who cannot even raise a finger and who must live the life of a puppet master."

"I am working. I really must go."

"Then I will walk with you. It is not as though I would be in any danger if you discovered the murderer. I might even be of help."

They stood up together and she took his hand.

"How did you know that I am a policeman," Sal asked her.

"I have been sitting in the window above the music shop for weeks. I watch the square and as much as I can see of the piazza. I was waiting for this device to arrive. My lawyers had it made for me special. It has some interesting features."

"Like what?" asked Sal.

"Not what you think. I can see and hear with this almost as well as if it were my own body. I spent the last three days trying it out. I was in the panetteria when you were buying your breakfast last Saturday. That is when I learned that you are a police officer."

"So your marionetta has enhanced sensory ability?"

"The face and hands and a few other places have a new kind of sensory array. I feel things quite well, not perfect, but as through silk gloves. Only touch, though, no heat or pain."

Sal moved through the crowds with Maria clinging to his hand. His tall and strong shape cut a path between the costumed revelers, and she followed him. There was a loud argument between a group of young men dressed in 18th century costumes with green masks and one of the street vendors. The argument was over and settled by the time Sal could force himself through the knots of people.

"The more expensive enhancement to the controls is a

failsafe program,” Maria continued, “I am afraid that my lawyers fear that I might do away with myself. There is a block against the marionetta killing me. I was hoping that I would be able to get around this, but the program was expertly written.”

It took a moment for this to sink into Sal's thoughts. He had not been paying close attention to her words and was hoping she would get bored with him soon and find someone else to play her game with.

“You mean you wanted a marionetta in order to kill yourself?”

“You have discovered my secret. Lying in a medical bed hooked up to tubes and wires, unable to even blink my eyes, I don't think that death could be worse than my little life.”

“But you are here, at Carnivàle, enjoying the beauty of life. How can you want to end it?”

“It is not life. It is a remotely cast shadow and only goes to remind me of what I cannot have. The electronic stimulation of sensory nodes in my brain are incomplete, crude, and totally unreal. I feel more alive when I am reading a book than directing this bundle of strings and sticks, no matter how subtle the strings to my marionetta are strung. A poorer person with my affliction would have been allowed to die in peace. I am kept alive as a living vegetable at great expense, and when I look down at my real body I only wish to find a way to end the pain.”

The sun had set, yet there was still some gray twilight and streetlights were flickering on. Sal listened as his earring spoke of an arrest on a nearby street and the rescue of a drunk who had fallen into a canal.

A woman's scream came from down the Marzaria de l'Orologio. Beautiful heads covered in jewels and feathers all turned to look down the darkening streets. Sal released Maria's hand and ran towards the sound, but she grabbed his robe and ran along behind him taking giant steps, and she fairly flew as he ran.

A woman in a beautiful gown, now ripped and soiled as she sat in the gutter, was being helped to her feet by men

in masks. "My necklace," she said with a slurred French, "My necklace is gone."

One of the men said, "He drugged her. I saw. He shot her with a needle." Sal touched his earring and spoke. He told the others in the area about the robbery and asked them to close off the area.

A figure in dark robes ran, turned the corner to Calle Flubera, and looked back. Sal could see that the thief was wearing the Moretta mask and a black robe, but it was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman. Sal took off after the thief (with Maria in tow) and turned the corner to see him running down the steps to a ponte or small bridge over a canal. He turned right into a side street and by the time Sal followed, the thief had disappeared.

Maria stepped in front of Sal and looked down the row of expensive houses. "Follow me," she said, "I know where he has gone." She stepped forward, gracefully running up and then down the other side of the ponte. Sal ran after her. She turned right into a small alley and there was a palazzo all lit with floodlights, glowing in different colors of polished granite. The windows all blazed, and colorful party-goers milled about in front of the house with drinks in their hands and scented cigarettes in their painted mouths.

"Did a person in Moretta come through here in the past few minutes?" Sal asked of a group of people in front of the house. They answered in French, and it did not appear that they understood the question.

A man dressed as Catholic Cardinal, wearing a mask of red feathers spoke to Sal, "The person ran through here and into the house. He did not have an invitation."

Maria was prepared. She pulled a large tarot card from under her robe. It was signed in a bold hand with the time and location of the party. When she showed it to the Cardinal, he said, "Please, go right in my lady." He moved to stop Sal from following her, but he stepped back as Sal, a good thirty centimeters taller, looked down at him as though making a dare.

Sal touched his earring and called in some support.

Unless there was an easy exit through the rear of the house, the thief might be trapped in the party.

At the doorway, Maria removed her robes, revealing a costume of transparent lace and silken ribbons. Her breasts were covered only by a filmy layer of almost invisible silk and Sal, remembering that they were only a convincing fiction, still felt a pang at seeing them. He forced himself to look away and found a servant dressed as a footman wearing no mask.

The inside of the palazzo seemed to be larger than the outside. The floor was full of costumed people dancing to a New Orleans style jazz band. Some of them wearing much less than Maria, but all of them in ornate masks.

Sal showed the man his police identification. "Did a person wearing Moretta just come through here?"

The footman pointed the way towards the sweeping marble staircase that led up to the second story and continued to a third. Sal glanced at the door and saw another policeman enter. He recognized the man's costume. Sal paused for a moment to report the situation to the men who were converging on the party. The man at the door saw Sal and nodded.

Maria, in the meanwhile, had run ahead up the stairs and had gone down a hallway. Sal walked carefully up the stairs, his hand on the night stick hidden beneath his robes.

Two policemen, both in identical Medico Della Peste costumes, climbed the first few steps of the stairs and joined Sal. Together they ascended to the next level. As one officer waited at the head of the stairs to prevent escape, Sal went down the hallway to the right while the other went to the left.

Sal moved down the hallway, all the doors here were closed. He opened one and inside was a woman, naked except for her mask, lying on a bed, and several men. None of them were the thief, so he closed the door.

The next door was the servant's stairs and Sal heard steps as someone fled down the narrow passage. He ran back to the main balcony in time to see the thief in

Moretta, leave through the front door, pulling Maria after him. The officer at the door, not looking for a couple had not even noticed as they passed.

Sal touched his earring and reported the situation. "Back to the Piazza. I know where they are going."

Sal found the music shop with the second floor apartment and the red light. He could see through the window shadows moving on the ceiling.

There was the sound of a gunshot. Sal found the small door in space between the buildings and ran up the creaky old stairway to the door of the front apartment.

He pushed into the room. In the corner was Maria. She was sitting back against the wall. The leg of her marionetta was broken and bent the wrong way. A man, his mask lying next to him, lay on the floor next to a hospital bed in a pool of blood. Wires and tubes covered the bed where a small figure could just barely be seen.

Maria said, "I am afraid that this was just a thief, and not murderous vampire. He brought me here under threat of death, but only wanted my money and jewels. He could not follow through on his promise. He used his gun, but on the wrong person. I had to detain him for you."

"He is dead," Sal said.

"I am sorry about that. This puppet is stronger than it looks. He tried to leave before you could arrive, and I could not allow that."

Maria seemed somehow embarrassed and tried to cover her breasts with her hands.

"You have caught a thief, and for that the police of Venice are most grateful."

He walked over to the hospital bed.

"Please, don't look," Maria begged, "That is not me in the bed. It is a pitiful sick creature who cannot help what it is. It only wishes escape. Please do not look at it."

Sal looked anyway, he could not help himself. After a brief glimpse, he looked away feeling sick. In the bed lying in a tangle of tubes, wires, sensors and, mechanical devices was the foul smelling naked body of an old man. It was atrophied beyond any measure of age. It appeared

more like the mummified remains of some ancient pharaoh with its toothless mouth agape and unseeing olive eyes focused on something beyond. On its head was a helmet with bundles of connecting cables, cooled by liquid nitrogen.

"Please," begged Maria, "that body is not me. I wish I could die."

Sal spoke into his earring. It would be a few minutes before anyone would come to help him with the crime scene. An exsanguinated body had been discovered floating in a canal. While the police had been chasing a thief, the Vampiro Del Carnivàle had found this year's victim.

Maria sobbed in the corner, but the body on the bed did not move. A pump sighed as air filled the body's lungs and then drew out the breath. A plastic hose shuddered as the machines breathed for it.

Sal walked over to the body on the bed. Maria watched him. Her olive colored eyes, seen through her delicate mask, did not show tears. Perhaps the engineers had not thought them necessary.

Sal took the hose that was attached to a hole cut in the body's neck. He bent the hose gently until it kinked, stopping the artificial breath. The expression on Maria's face changed to wonder. She sat upright looking at him. She started to say something, but was unable to speak.

An alarm went off. It was a soft chiming and lights flashed on a display above the bed. Sal held the hose closed. There was a slight shudder in the body and the alarm changed its tone. The display above the bed that had showed the steady rhythm of a beating heart then stopped. The alarm changed pitch. The heartbeat had ended.

Sal reached up and pressed a switch to silence the alarm. He turned, almost as if he wanted to say something to Maria. It was, after all, not her in the bed. The marionetta had stiffened in its final position. The last command that it had ever received from its puppet master was revealed: there was a smile on her face.

Killer.App

It was Thursday open mic night at the Flop House Comedy Club in San Jose. For Jerry Wilkinson it was a typical bomb night. He was dying on stage. He always bombed, and he wasn't getting used to it. The crowd spent their time hunched over and staring at their phones. In the dim light he could see the pools of ghostly faces lit by their screens.

"How many Angular.JS programmers does it take to change a light bulb?" Jerry asked. The crowd was mostly tech geeks and nerds that worked in the nearby programming sweatshops. They should have appreciated the joke, but before Jerry had a chance to deliver the "bah-dah-dump-bah" punchline, the jerks at the bar started booing him. "One, but you have to change the context, too!" was lost in the cat calls and banging of glasses.

"Never let them see you sweat," was the standard advice, but the lights were hot. The audience mostly ignored him except for a small but vocal group that smelled blood. He moved his hand to his face, but caught himself before he could wipe the sweat off of his forehead. A ringtone sounded and someone in the audience said loudly, "Hello".

"Next," someone called, and it was quickly seconded, but Jerry decided to try one more.

"Why doesn't a network administrator leave a key under the front door mat?"

Before Jerry could deliver, one of the jerks at the bar yelled, "Because the back door is open!" The audience laughed and clapped, but they weren't clapping for Jerry, they were clapping for the wit that called out the obvious punchline before anyone else had a chance.

Uncle Freddy Feinman rushed out on the small stage and grabbed the mic out of Jerry's hands. "Let's hear it for Jerry Wilkinson!" There were boos and hisses. "Next up is," he referred to a clipboard, "Shauna Mills. Shauna? Are you here? No? OK, then Bill Tomo," there were cheers

a table near the door, “Come on up Bill.” A hipster stood up, drained his mug, and started to stagger towards the stage.

“I wasn’t finished,” protested Jerry.

“Always go out with a bang, kid. That was the biggest laugh you’ve had all night. Better luck next week.”

Jerry started to argue again, but Uncle Freddy interrupted him. “Look, kid. I make my living doing this. You almost cleared the house by the third joke. I can’t put you up this early again. Maybe after midnight, when I’ve made a little cash at the bar, but your jokes don’t go over here.”

“I tell tech jokes. The crowd gets me.”

“No they don’t. I don’t get you most of the time, and even when I do, the jokes aren’t funny. Humor is a science, a technology, as much as your Silicon Valley shtick. Read the textbooks, study the masters. Read Steve Martin, Sankey, Lenny Bruce and the rest. Buy Morey Amsterdam’s book, damn it. Learn to tell a joke.”

Jerry wanted to argue. He had read all the books on comedy – well maybe not the Morey Amsterdam one. He’d never heard of the man.

Then Bill Tomo arrived and took the mic. Bill worked in the same office as Jerry. “You suck, Robert,” he said to Jerry in an aside that the whole room heard. Robert was Jerry’s real name. He used Jerry as his stage name in honor of Jerry Lewis.

“One more time for Jerry Wilkinson,” Bill called out and clapped his hands to make booming noises with the mic. The crowd just laughed or booed.

Jerry sat down at the bar next to a girl intent on her iPhone. Jerry never understood how people would go out to a place with live entertainment and a cover charge, and then spend the entire time texting. Jerry could see that she was using Aposto, an app that he worked on. It was the current production version, and it had his name in an Easter Egg hidden on the help screen. He could show it to her. Technically it was Bill’s group who owned the code, but Jerry, as software support, had written a few

thousand lines in bug fixes and minor enhancements.

“Hey that’s my app,” he said to her, “Aposto.”

She looked up at him as though struggling to get him into focus after staring at her screen for so long.

“You suck,” she said, and went back to her texting.

When Jerry went home, he was angry, sad, and more than a little drunk.

At work the next morning, Robert (he left his stage name Jerry at the Flop House) started to work down through the defect list he’d been given. Over twenty bugs, real or imagined, needed to be addressed. He dealt with them quickly, as most were already fixed, or else they were not bugs at all. He made it through half by lunchtime and shipped the disposition along with screenshots to the QA people.

Lunch was a strawberry yogurt from the machine. He read his email and then browsed news.ycombinator.com. He never read the stories, because the comments were more interesting. One article caught his interest. There was known bug in the latest release of Apple’s IOS. It was possible to run one of the chips in the phone in a tight endless loop that caused it to overheat. It drained the battery in minutes and, in the worst case, caused the phone to explode.

That was cool.

The best part about the article was a link to GitHub site where there was proof of concept code.

Jerry (he thought of himself as Jerry when he wasn’t working) was nothing if not a cut-and-paste programmer. He couldn’t write original code to save his life, but he could copy code with the best of them.

He fired up a new IOS app project in Xcode, and copied the exploding phone code into a class. He then did a search for an article he had just read on a vulnerability that allowed for execution of arbitrary code on the iPhone using Bluetooth and copied that code into his project.

He added a button and in less than 15 minutes he created an app to kill iPhones. His phone was already in debug mode, so he loaded the app onto his phone.

“Hey Robert,” Bill Tomo said from behind him, “Some set last night. Did you stay for my set? I killed in spite of following you. Uncle Freddy says that I can go on earlier, as soon as the house fills up.”

Jerry switched to Robert mode.

“No, I had to get home. Feed the cat.” He didn’t have a cat.

“You certainly bombed. Not that the jokes weren’t sort of funny, I guess that they just need context – a narrative as Sankey might say.”

“I was testing out some new stuff. I wanted to see if any of the jokes had legs. I’ll put it all into a bit when I get the right responses.”

Bill’s cell buzzed. “Excuse me, I have to answer this,” he said. He touched the smartwatch on his wrist and started to speak as he walked away.

Jerry (he had switched back to Jerry mode) looked down. The red button on his phone glowed with the word “Kill!”

Jerry touched the button.

For a moment there was nothing. Bill Tomo kept talking as he walked. He had a Bluetooth connection to his watch and an earpiece. The software should have been able to break into his phone.

Two rows down from Jerry’s cubicle there was a hiss and a pop and someone yelled “Oh, shit!” as her iPhone exploded.

It was Linda Patel, and she started screaming. Robert went back to work. He didn’t join the people who tried to help her. The ambulance came and took her away. Someone said loudly that her hands and face were badly burned, and she might lose an eye and some fingers. It was a freak accident they said.

While Robert worked on the rest of the defect list for the day, part of his mind worked on the problem of why Bill Tomo’s phone hadn’t exploded and another phone had. Bill’s was closer, but maybe it was slower to answer the handshake. The Bluetooth protocol was dead simple peer to peer. It must have peered with the first phone that

had answered. His unintended victim's phone had responded first, probably because Bill was already using two Bluetooth connections.

Clearly the killer app needed to connect to more than one phone.

Robert finished working around 7pm and picked up some Burger King on the way home. He nibbled cold fries while watching Morey Amsterdam videos on YouTube. The guy had timing. Robert didn't really have much of a sense of humor, and it took a lot to make him laugh out loud. Morey made him laugh.

He liked the joke: "Anyone who goes to a psychiatrist should have his head examined."

Robert booted his laptop and remoted into his work computer. Firing up Xcode, he opened the killer app project (named ASupp to disguise its purpose). In the section where he called the Bluetooth exploit he changed the code, wrapping it in a 'for' loop. It would execute 100 times, each time looking for a new phone. It was a simple fix. The whole app was less the 500 lines of code, very little of it was his, and much of it was to handle displaying the fancy "Kill!" button. He was done five minutes after connecting.

In a few minutes he had the new version installed on his own phone.

Twenty minutes later in the food court of the San Jose Market Center Mall, Jerry touched the "Kill" button.

It took time to loop through the connection attempts, but in five minutes there were at least 10 exploded iPhones and as many screaming people. As the cries to "call 911" started, Jerry slowly walked to the exit.

He chuckled to himself as he remembered a line from Morey Amsterdam: "Whenever I go to my psychiatrist I have half a mind... You know I think that's why I go."

Robert did not use the killer app again for a while. Like any good piece of software, it needed tweaking. It needed to be optimized. Code is Poetry as they say, and he wanted to clean up the app. It needed to be elegant. It needed to be beautiful. It needed to inspire anyone who

read it, not that anyone ever would. He made small changes, giving the variables meaningful names, providing doc comments to each variable and each class and method. He found ways to make it simpler and easier to maintain. He did what any good coder does. To misquote Niklaus Wirth, “program development is a process of stepwise refinement.”

When Thursday night came around, Jerry put on his orange suspenders and beanie hat and went to the Flop House. He was the first person on the sign-up sheet. He sat down and ordered a light beer and some buffalo wings.

Uncle Freddy went through his warm-up act. It was the same old jokes each week, but it still broke up the audience. It wasn’t the joke; it was the delivery and not the words. He had a way of sending even a bad joke. Jerry recognized an old pearl from Henny Youngman. It killed.

Uncle Freddy did not call his name, instead he brought up a Pakistani guy (with an H1B visa, no doubt), who did a bit on how pretty American girls just love his Pakistani accent.

He was followed by a black guy with a fake “hood” accent who told jokes that started “White people are so stupid that they...”

Then there was a girl who told jokes about ex-boyfriends, and then a guy who did a bit about his stupid blond girlfriend. He must have found the jokes by Googling bad blond jokes.

Around midnight when the crowd had thinned out, Uncle Freddy gave Jerry the nod.

He jumped on stage, snapped his suspenders and told the Morey Amsterdam’s joke about people who live in glass houses should get up and answer the doorbell. It was a stupid joke, but it sold. Uncle Freddy caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up sign.

Jerry told a half a dozen more Amsterdam jokes and when he was sure of their attention then went into his own material.

“If 20 programmers can create a deliverable in 9

months, how long would it take 40 programmers?" he asked, and then not waiting for the answer: "It depends on how many of the programmers are pregnant."

Timing is everything, so he waited a beat, so there would be time for the laugh before moving into the next joke. There was no laugh.

"You know, because of the book by Fred Brooks. I know you've all read it. Even if you put two women on the project it still takes nine months to have a baby?"

Those in the crowd not concentrating on the phones, booed. He realized he was explaining the joke. It is a bad joke if you have to explain it. He knew now that it was a bad joke.

He tried a couple of more before Uncle Freddy gave him the hook. "What happened, kid? You were doing well with the Morey Amsterdam material. That shtick never gets old. Next time keep to the funny stuff."

He sat down at his table while a frightened woman tried to tell jokes about giving birth to twins. She kept on getting flustered and missing the beat on the punchlines.

Jerry looked around the room at the rude people that were texting and not listening to the newbie comic. Sure she was bad, but she was inexperienced. She deserved their attention.

He nibbled on a cold buffalo wing. He remembered his app, but he wasn't as angry as he was humiliated. He could tell jokes by a guy who died thirty years ago and get laughs, but jokes that he had slaved over for hours, rewriting and perfecting, went over like lead. Why couldn't writing jokes be as easy as writing code?

Speaking of code, he needed to test the latest version of the killer app. He saw at least a dozen iPhones in the room. He could take them all out. It would teach them to text while someone struggled.

The woman telling the joke flubbed another punchline and started the joke over again, trying to get it right. It was painful to watch her.

Jerry took out his phone. He hesitated, but when someone heckled the woman as she was demonstrating

how to pant during childbirth, he pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

Well, not exactly nothing. A fatal system error appeared on his phone. The app had crashed with a null pointer exception. He must have made a mistake when he rewrote the code. His phone was locked and would not respond to touch or buttons. He'd have to take out the battery to reboot it.

In a way he was relieved. He had felt a little remorse about the people who had been hurt by his test at the mall. They were just stupid mall people. They were not his target audience. He only wanted revenge on the people that heckled him.

It was not until a week later that Jerry opened up the aSupp app. He still thought of it as the killer app. He spent his evenings copying out jokes from Morey Amsterdam's book *Keep Laughing* that he found used on Amazon. There were thousands of jokes and the only problem was getting them ordered so that they followed a story line, or what comedians called a bit.

At the end of the day he decided that he might as well debug his killer app code in time to take it with him to his weekly humiliation at the flop house. He found the bug. It was a stupid one where he forgot to initialize a variable. It was his own fault for using a member variable instead of a local one. The compiler would have warned him if he had used a local variable. He fixed it and browsed through the code looking for any other problems. There was nothing he could see, but he would find out soon if there was a problem. He backed up his workspaces, straightened his desk and started for the exit.

Bill Tomo stopped Richard as he passed the iPhone group's work area.

"Hey Richard. Are you going to the Flop House tonight? I hear you bombed last week."

"I've got some new stuff for tonight."

"I hope you've debugged you jokes before you get on stage. You write jokes like you write code."

"I'm good," Jerry said and then walked quickly to the

elevators. He wondered what he meant with the debug crack. Jerry was a sloppy coder, but he always got it right in the end. He'd show Tomo tonight.

That night Jerry killed. He put his iPad on the podium and scrolled through his cheat sheet. The audience ate it up. He didn't try out any of his own material because he had nothing new. He knew his own jokes were duds.

By the time he ended his bit with Morey's line "I cleaned that up from an old honeymoon joke" the audience was clapping and cheering. The audience was still a mystery to Jerry. He did not even know what Morey's line meant, but when he delivered it at the end of a good whopper, the audience went nuts.

Uncle Freddy came on stage, put his hand around Jerry's shoulders and said, "One more time for Jerry Wilkinson. Let's hear it for him!" Jerry waved to the crowd in thanks. He went to the bar to fetch his drink and the rest of his wings and the bartender bought him a beer on the house.

Jerry decided that he would keep the killer app silent until it was needed. As he sipped his beer, Bill Tomo walked in. He had missed Jerry's success on stage. Jerry did not hang around to listen to Tomo's bit.

There was an audit during the week and the auditors took over his computer and ran some inventory software. The audits were to ensure that the company did not have any liabilities from illegally installed software. Robert (remember at work he wasn't Jerry, but Robert) got his machine back in a few minutes.

He was surprised when Bill Tomo walked over to him and asked, "So, what's this project called aSupp?"

A cold chill went through Robert as he panicked for just a second. He thought quickly. Bill must have seen the project name in his workspace folder. He couldn't know what was in it, could he? Did he have network admin rights? Probably not.

"It's nothing. I had an idea about using Bluetooth to pair Aposto apps. I couldn't figure a way to make it work."

"We have been working on that idea, too, and it will be

in the next release. I'd like to see what you did, when you get a chance."

Robert let out his breath and nodded his head. "Sure thing," he answered.

Robert deleted the project. He had a copy on his home computer. He didn't want Bill Tomo poking around in his disk.

The next Thursday, Jerry jumped up as Uncle Freddy called his name first. He had copied out a dozen more Morey Amsterdam jokes to a file on his iPad and for ten minutes he had them rolling in the aisles.

Bill was standing at the bar watching Jerry, and looked angry. Jerry had written out a bunch of jokes that started with "There was this idiot," but he started all of them with "There was this idiot named Bill", for this bit. When the audience laughed, it was sweet revenge on all the trouble Bill had given him about his jokes.

Near the end of the bit Jerry's cell phone buzzed in his pocket. It kept on buzzing until it went to voice mail and then started buzzing again.

As Jerry left the stage, he answered the phone. A man was laughing in his ear. He looked over to the bar and Bill Tomo was holding up his phone. In the center of the screen was a large red button. Jerry couldn't read it from across the room, but he knew it said "kill," and he saw Bill touch it.

Jerry didn't react fast enough. He couldn't believe that Bill had looked through his app and figured out what it did. He was angry, and did not think to drop the phone, so when it exploded it was still next to his ear.

He woke as they loaded him onto the ambulance. Bill Tomo was there and spoke, so Robert could hear it through his good ear.

"Linda Patel died last night. The wound became infected, and they couldn't stop it. She's dead. You killed her."

"Yeah, Jerry whispered. I killed."

"Yeah, you killed, and you are going to pay."

Jerry could only answer, slurring his words as he faded

back into unconsciousness, “This idiot Bill has a girlfriend that thinks she is a refrigerator, and he can’t sleep at night. (beat 1 2 3) She snores with her mouth open and the little light keeps him awake.”

Head Call

It started when one of those weird street guys, the kind who holds heated debates with some invisible person. He staggered, and he held a bagged bottle in one hand.

“Yeah, damn it, you can’t make me do it. I’m not your slave.” He said. He held his free hand to his ear as though helping to amplify the voices in his head. “Screw you! I’ll show you. I’ll show you all. You can’t treat me this way.”

He was walking towards me.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! I know. I see him! Yes! He’s right here.” The man said and then looked right at me. I avoided making eye contact.

“Ok! I’ll do it! But this is the last time!” he said. He made straight for me, throwing away his bottle.

“You!” He yelled pointing at me. He positioned himself right in front of me. I stepped to the side, trying not to lose my forward momentum. He sidestepped, blocking my path. I tried the other way, but he countered.

“You!” he said louder, “You!” He removed his hand from his ear and smiled at me. His breath smelled of rotting teeth and cheap wine.

He paused and then put his hand back to his ear, “Just a moment, please.”

He reached out to me, his hand cupped as though it held something.

“It’s for you.” He said.

With a laugh, he turned and walked back down the street.

If Wishes...

This is one of my favorite stories, but I had a tough time selling it. I don't know why my most beautiful children won't leave home.

The body floating in the cold water looked like it could be dreaming. It sloshed from side to side in the river's small waves. Martha saw it and thought that the dead person must feel like the way she feels falling asleep at night when her bed seems to rock back and forth as she drifts into dreams.

But the floater smelled bad. Martha had smelled death before, and she knew the bloated body was not just sleeping. It was near Christmas and nobody went swimming in the winter.

She danced across the slippery rocks. Her elfin movements were musical. She posed, as a ballet dancer might, with one leg curved back for balance while she reached forward with a stick to snag the body, and she guided it closer to the shore. Martha was twelve years old and a Down child. Her elfin features matched her graceful movements.

The body was yuckier than she had thought. There was an arm reaching out, as though asking for help, but the fingers had lost their flesh. The pants legs had ripped open revealing white flesh and the material floated like a kite's tail in the olive colored water.

A messenger bag hung from a strap over the body's shoulder. The strap cut into the swollen flesh, holding it tight. With a quick snick of her box cutter, she freed it. She did not check the pockets. Probing a stinky dead man's pockets exceeded the yuckiness that Martha could stomach. Holding the bag behind her, she gave the body a push with the stick to send it back into the deeper water of the river. A dead hand waved in the lapping waves as though to say goodbye.

Martha continued her walk. Her job was to find things

and bring them back to Tony, so he could sell them. Every day she walked up Broadway and turned left at the old graveyard. She walked down 155th street, checking every dumpster along the way. She crossed over the Henry Hudson Parkway, watching the speeding traffic. The girl then walked down the shoreline to see what the Hudson River had washed up. Martha turned at the sewage-treatment plant and walked along 145th street. Then she went to the apartment in Hamilton Heights.

“What is that smell?” Leticia asked, “It smells like something died.”

“I found this,” Martha said in a high adenoidal voice, holding the messenger bag out. It was still damp.

“Now don’t go tracking mud across my nice clean floors. I won’t clean it up for you. I’m not your mother.” Leticia, a light-skinned black lady, had wonderful tattoos of blue swirls all over her body. She was easily old enough to be Martha’s mother, but wasn’t. She went into her standard “I’m not your mother” speech. Martha listened dolefully. It saddened her that Leticia was not her mother. Martha often wished that Leticia could be her mother.

“Now get back out and take off those muddy shoes.”

“Yes’m”

The stoop was cold. It was getting dark very early and the shadows down the opposite side of 143rd Street were deep and dark. Martha took off her shoes and set them neatly to the side of the door. The brownstone stoop was icy under her damp stocking feet.

When she came back in, she sat in the corner behind the big lazy boy lounger. This was her nest where she could sit without harassment from the other children. She took off her pink scarf with the green leaves crocheted into it, and she took off her pink gloves. Under her baby blue ski jacket, she wore a pink sweater. Martha liked pink.

Sadly, though, her socks did not match. The sock on Martha’s left foot was pink so faded and pale as to be almost a shade of lavender. The sock, patterned with small blue kitten faces, was one of Martha’s favorites. Its

mate had was lost when one of her toes had worn a hole into the tip. The other sock had faded to a pale green with yellow flowers. Its mate had never returned from a trip to the Laundromat. Martha wriggled her toes and hoped the mismatched pair had found happiness together. She rubbed her feet together to get them warm, but also so that the socks could get to know each other.

Martha, an unmatched sock herself, was lucky that Tony had found her on the street and brought her here. Leticia, another misplaced article, may not have been her mother, but Martha hoped that Leticia loved her a little. Tony was an old man who brought people together in his apartment. He worked in a basement room downtown fixing network equipment during the day. When he was at home, he tried to fix lost souls. Martha, Jennifer, Barney, and Jose lived in the small apartment. There had been others who had moved on and some who only came when things were especially hard on the streets. You couldn't call it a family, though.

The damp messenger bag was sealed shut with a fancy zipper. Martha tried to open it, but there was lock on the zipper. She used her box cutter and cut along slit in the bottom of the bag. It was dry inside.

She found an Apple phone (Leticia would take that) a fancy gold tipped pen, folders full of papers, and some packaged cookies still sealed in their plastic. She liked the fancy pen and hid it in her pocket. Martha decided that the cookies were probably good, even if that had been floating in the river strapped to a dead man for a few weeks. She opened the package and tasted them. Before she knew it, the cookies were all gone.

The last thing out of the bag was small black notebook computer. It was heavy and thicker than the notebooks that Martha had seen. She decided that Tony would like this.

Martha put the brownie wrappers and the bundles of paper back in the bag and pushed it under the lazy boy lounge. She gathered the rest of her treasure and crawled out from behind the chair.

“What have you got there, child?” Leticia asked.

“It’s a phone,” she answered holding it out to Leticia.

Leticia took it and pushed something. It started up and sang a song in another language.

“That’s Chinese,” Leticia said, “It talks in Chinese, but there has to be a way to change that.” She walked away into her bedroom, ignoring Martha and working on the buttons. Martha could hear the Chinese words coming from the phone as Leticia explored the apps. Leticia had been wishing for a new phone.

“What else you got?” asked Barney reaching for the notebook computer.

“It’s for Tony when he gets home,” Martha protested.

“I won’t hurt it. I just want to see it,” Barney said pulling it out of her grasp.

“It’s for Tony,” she said, but Barney ran off to his chair, which was across from the TV. Little Jennifer jumped up with him. The notebook sang a song in Chinese when Barney opened it up. Jennifer laughed at something on the screen. Barney, with one hand holding it steady, poked at the screen with the other as the notebook spoke in its strange voice.

Martha sighed. She had hoped to surprise Tony with her find, but the younger children had preempted her. She did not know much about computers. The teachers had taught her a little, but that had been at the special school, and she didn’t go there anymore. Tony said that she would go back as soon as he could get her foster parents to sign the papers.

“I wish you people would be quiet. What’s going on?” Jose asked, leaving his bedroom. Leticia and Jose had their own room, but Martha slept in a bunk bed in the kid’s room. Jose looked like he just woke up. His hair was sticking up in uncombed spikes. He always came in late at night and always slept late. He was supposed to be going to high school, but Martha had seen him up on 160th street with his friends when he was supposed to be in classes.

Barney and Jennifer were suddenly quiet, but the

computer said something in Chinese. Barney closed it. He tried to slip it down next to the cushion so that Jose wouldn't see it.

"What's that?"

"Martha brought it home for Tony," Barney said pointing to Martha in order to divert Jose's attention, but it didn't work. Jose snatched the notebook from Barney and opened it. It sang the now familiar song. Jose poked at the screen and hit a few keys. The notebook made small exclamations as Jose tried to work the login screen.

"It's locked," Jose said, "you'll never get in without the key. This kind of computer needs a key, or it won't work."

Barney protested, "I was getting it to do stuff."

"It has some games and stuff outside the security, but without the key you can't get into it. Knock yourself out. I got stuff to do." He tossed the heavy notebook to Barney, who grabbed it clumsily. Jose headed for the front door without looking at Martha. He never looked at her. Some people wouldn't look at Martha because she had Down Syndrome.

In the silence after Jose slammed the door Martha could hear Leticia talking on the phone. Leticia's phone had run out of minutes the week before and Leticia had been complaining ever since. She must have been able to get the new phone working, so she could talk to her many boyfriends.

Barney got tired of trying to unlock the notebook. The games that were available from the locked interface were things like solitaire and fold-it. They didn't have the noise, action, and violence that Barney expected in a computer game. He set it aside and turned on the TV. Barney had an old pair of 3D glasses that he put on. He always watched the TV with these glasses even though the old TV didn't get 3D.

It was dark when Tony came home. Tony was gray haired with a scruffy gray five o'clock shadow and bent a little as he walked. He had three large pizzas. They were from Fred's Famous Pizza on Broadway and for once, they did not have anchovies. Martha hated anchovies. Barney

complained about the lack of anchovies and pineapple, but he grabbed two slices with sausage and ran back to his chair. Tony folded a slice in a paper plate and gave it Jennifer. She held it in one hand and Tony placed a paper napkin in the other.

Martha stood staring at Tony. Almost as if he could feel her gaze he turned around smiled at her. "The usual, Babe?" he asked. Martha liked it when he called her Babe. She thanked him and took her slice back to her chair in the corner, careful not to spill any because Leticia would be upset if she did.

"Leticia! Pizza!" Tony called and then asked, "What's new, crew?"

Jennifer told him all about her day at school in one long sentence while Barney made noises eating his slices. Barney told him the Mets had lost again, not remembering that he and Tony had watched the game the night before. Tony said, "Those miserable Mets, they always lose the big ones," and both Barney and Jennifer said it along with him and laughed.

When Leticia came to get a slice, she was still talking on the telephone. She grabbed her slice, but never missed a word. She nodded to Tony and went back into her room.

Tony turned to Martha, "Is that Leticia's phone?"

"I found her a new one. There was a dead guy in the river."

"You should stay away from dead people. They can make you sick, and the person who made him dead might be waiting around."

Martha protested a little, "Nobody was around. I just grabbed his bag. It had a phone and a computer."

"That computer is busted," Barney yelled. He reached down next to his chair, grabbed it and held it up. "It's locked up good."

Tony took the computer and looked at it. He sat at the kitchen table and set the computer down on a pizza box. It sang to him in Chinese when he opened it. Tony felt along the sides and back of the notebook with his fingers. He found something and pulled on it. A rubber seal came

away revealing a small socket in the side of the computer.

He turned to Martha, "Let me see the bag that you found."

Martha pulled the bag out from under the lounge and brought it to Tony. He pulled out the contents and inspected them all, even the brownie wrappers.

"Did the dead guy have any keys in his pockets?" he asked Martha.

"I didn't look in his pockets."

"There should be a key for this computer," he said, "It would not look like a key. It would be small and maybe hidden in a cigarette lighter or a pen."

Martha took the fancy gold pen out of her pocket and offered it to Tony.

"Thank you," Tony said, and pulled the pen apart. One-half of the pen was a cover, and the other was a small plug with gold wires along the sides of it. He looked at the plug and rotated it. He pushed it into the hole on the side of the computer. It resisted so Tony turned it from side to side until it slid into the socket.

There was a "ta-da" tone and the computer came to life. Martha could see the screen light up and things started jumping out from it. The holographs made for a colorful textured surface with some icons sticking up two inches above the screen. Tony reached in, and his fingers turned colors as though he was stirring flavored jell-o. He pushed and slid, twirled and pulled, searching through the computer's front garden.

"Far out," he muttered rubbing his chin whiskers. Tony pushed some boxes out of the way and pulled out a dialog box where he moved some spinners. He pressed a button and the computer stopped talking in Chinese and started to speak American with a warm female voice.

"Settings, Save, New, Search. Not found," the computer whispered to Tony as his fingers dragged the icons around the screen.

"Wishes, Wishes, Open, Enter Wishes, What do you need? What do you want? Help," the computer started to talk about wishes and how to make them.

Martha remembered a song she had learned at the special school. She sang the stanzas in her lisping singsong voice:

If wishes were kisses, then misses would be Mrs.
If rugs were hugs, then bugs would be snug.
If smiles were miles, we'd all ride in style.
If hopes were ropes, we could climb any slope.

"That's pretty cool, Martha," Tony said. "I've never heard that one before. All I know is 'If wishes were horses then beggars would ride'".

"I learned that in school. There's more, but I don't remember."

"Well, you may be able to make some wishes. There is a very neat program here. The text is all Chinese, but it speaks in English all right."

"I want to see," said Barney, pushing Martha out of the way.

"Let's sit in the chair." They all moved to the lazy boy lounger, which was Tony's main TV chair, but was big enough so that the three children could crawl up on the arms and or sit on Tony's lap.

When everyone settled down, Tony opened the notebook. A dialog box with Chinese lettering and a happy looking Asian woman hovered an inch above the surface of the screen.

"Please tell me what you want," she said to them.

"Ice cream," yelled Barney. "Yes, ice cream," Jennifer echoed.

Nothing happened.

"She has to learn you voice first," Tony said. He reached into the colored cloud of icons and pressed a button.

"Say Hello," the voice said. Tony pointed to Martha and nodded his head, urging her.

"Hello," she said.

"Say again."

"Hello."

“Say goodbye.”

“What is your name?”

“Martha.”

The computer repeated the name, even copying Martha’s lisp.

“Say again.”

This continued for a few minutes until the vice said, “Thank you, Martha, we are done.”

Tony opened up the *wishes* dialog.

“Please say what you want.”

“Ice cream,” Barney yelled and Tony shushed him.

“Let Martha answer.”

“I wish I had nice socks.”

The program asked her questions about size and color and Tony helped her to answer them. She ordered a dozen pairs of socks, all of them in various shades of pink.

It then asked where she lived. Tony whispered into her ear, and Martha repeated the long address.

“Shipping method?” Tony told her to say “over-night.”

Finally, it asked which credit card to use and displayed a list of twelve long numbers.

“Now we’ll see if anyone canceled the dead guy’s cards. The dead guy certainly doesn’t need the money,” Tony said.

He pressed the first number on the list and the program said, “Thank you, do you want anything else?”

“It picks the best place to buy something and orders it,” Tony said, “You don’t have to shop, just wish for what you want. It is a very smart program. It is supposed to be able to find anything you need at the best price.”

“It’s time to do some Christmas Shopping. Jennifer, what do you want for Christmas?” Tony said and then had to explain that they would get the ice cream later.

With Martha doing the ordering, Jennifer got some new shoes, a fancy doll, a new coat and gloves. Barney got a new game box and a 3D TV. He also got some new winter clothes. They ordered a phone pad with a two-year prepaid contract for Leticia and a gold bracelet.

Martha got a whole new outfit, all in pink, and a small pink robotic cat that could chase a robotic mouse and purred when you petted it.

They ordered Jose a pair of very expensive basketball sneakers and a fancy designer winter jacket with holographic video chips embedded in the fabric.

“What are you getting?” Martha asked Tony.

“I’m going to have to think about that.”

That night the children had trouble getting to sleep because they were thinking about all the things that didn’t ask for but should have.

Tony was a collector of mismatched socks. People gave him their children to watch and somehow never asked for them back. He had found Martha living out of garbage cans because there was no one left in her life who wanted to do the paperwork to keep her. Jose had come to Tony when he was nine years old. Jose had a bullet hole in his leg that he got while delivering drugs for his father. Leticia was beaten badly by one of her boyfriends and Tony helped her hide from him. She never left except for an occasional visit to her other boyfriends.

At nine the next morning there was a knock on the door and a man dressed all in brown left them boxes of presents, some of them wrapped with red ribbons.

“Christmas!” shouted Jennifer.

“Christmas is the day after tomorrow,” said Tony, “But you can open them now. I don’t expect that I could keep you away from them for three whole days.”

Tony’s crew, except for Jose who was asleep, tore the packages to pieces in minutes. Leticia cried when she saw the bracelet and tried to kiss Tony on the cheek. “You’re too stubbly for me,” she said, “You’ll have to shave before you get another kiss.”

Jose woke up and peeked out the door, shirtless, to see what the commotion was.

“Is that a girl in with you?” yelled Leticia, “You ain’t bringing no whores home with these babies here. You tell her to get out and next time you stay at her place or get a room.”

A thin girl, hardly more than a child slipped by Jose and ran out the front door, leaving it open behind her. Martha closed the door.

"You ain't my mother, bitch," Jose said, "It's my room and I can bring home anyone I want."

Leticia crossed her arms in anger, tapping her foot. She glanced to Tony for support.

"Jose, you know that this is not your place, but our place. We share this apartment. You can bring friends over, but there are small children here. No more overnights, OK."

"You ain't my father either. You can't tell me what to do. You ain't my lord and master. I'm a free man." Jose pounded on his chest to prove his point.

Tony put his arm around Jose and talking low to him, bringing him into the kitchen. Martha could not hear what they were saying, except that Jose yelled "No," once. When they came back, Jose was still angry, but he had control of himself.

"Hey Jose, open your present," Barney said.

"What present?"

"Your Christmas presents. Martha found a computer and ordered us all presents last night. They came this morning."

They told Jose all about the wish program, and how it could get anything that you wanted. When Jose opened the box with his shoes, he whistled softly to himself and immediately put them on. He walked around the small room feeling the power in them. He put on his new jacket and tried to see his reflection from the black glass of the new TV.

"These are sweet," he said, "thanks, Tony." He did not look at Martha.

He turned to the door and was gone.

"It's time he got his own place," said Leticia. Tony just made a motion with his hands and shoulders that Martha did not understand.

"He suffers greatly from being 16 years old. It will pass."

Barney and Jennifer went to school and Tony went to work. Leticia went out, but didn't tell Martha where she was going. Martha was left alone with the notebook computer.

She opened it, and she spoke to the lady with the warm voice. It was like going to school. The program, whose name was Jane, patiently answered her questions and soon had adapted to speaking with a child with a mental age of about five years old. The computer began to tell stories and Martha was fascinated. There were pictures and videos, and before she knew it, her stomach was growling.

"I think it might be time for your lunch, Martha."

Martha agreed, but promised to be right back. She made herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk.

"Don't get the keyboard sticky, dear," Jane said.

"Ok," Martha got up and washed her hands before continuing.

The more Martha talked to Jane, the more Jane began to understand and anticipate the girl. Martha felt that she had found a new friend.

There was a knock on the door. Martha knew that she was not supposed to answer the door when there was no one home. The knocking was loud and long. There was a pause and Martha heard someone say, "Open it."

There was the rustle of keys and the door opened. A big man came in followed by a small man and three more big men. One of the men had a gun.

"Where's Tony," asked the small man, "Tell him I'm Rodman Dominguez and I want to talk to him."

"He's not here. He's at work," Martha said. Her heart had jumped up to her throat and she could hardly speak.

"That's the dummy who can talk to the program," one of the large men said.

"You're the one who can order stuff online?" asked the man called Rodman.

Martha tried to answer, but the words caught in her throat. She nodded.

“Ok then, let’s try it. Turn the thing on and order something for me.”

“A Christmas present?” Martha lisped.

“Yeah,” Rodman laughed, “I need two dozen Christmas presents. Turn the thing on and let’s get going.”

Martha trembled. The men frightened her. She knew it was too early for anyone to come home and save her. She was too afraid to refuse them.

“Jane?” Martha whispered to the notebook.

“Yes, dear,” Jane answered.

“Please, can I make a wish?”

“Of course, dear. What do you need?”

“Tell her we want two dozen Rolex Oyster watches, the gold kind. And none of them Chinese knockoffs!”

“Jane, I want...”

“I heard him, dear. Should I order them?”

“Yeah!” yelled Rodman.

“What do you think, Martha?” Jane asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“All right, I’ve found them. Where should I send them? The usual address?”

“No,” yelled Rodman, “Send them to my place at...”

“539 West 170th Street apartment 24C?” Jane asked.

“How does she know your address? That’s bitchin cool,” one of the big men said.

“Do it,” ordered Rodman.

“Martha?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“You are welcome, dear. It’s done. They will be delivered by courier tomorrow. It is Christmas Eve tomorrow, so I had to arrange for the courier.”

Martha turned to look at the little man. He walked over to the corner where Martha was sitting. He touched the computer with his foot. “I got to get me one of these,” he said.

“Hey you in the computer,” he called out. There was silence. “Answer me, computer.”

“She only talks to me. She has to learn your voice.”

“Don’t give me that she heard me.”

"Tell him, Jane, please."

"I only respond to Martha," The calm voice said from the computer.

"Then I tell you what, dummy, you tell the computer bitch to order me something else."

"W-what?" Martha stuttered. She was near tears and had to go to the bathroom awful bad.

Rodman pulled on a thin mustache.

"I've got to think about that."

Rodman turned to his men and one of them said with a grin, "Smack is always good around Christmas."

Rodman laughed. "It figures you would say that," and turning to Martha he said, "OK, dummy, ask the computer if I can get a kilo of heroin delivered to my place tomorrow morning."

Before Martha could ask, Jane asked, "Should I do it, Martha?"

"Yes," Martha whispered.

"It is done."

"Yeah right, you think you can make me believe that you can order smack from a computer? What a joke."

"Hey Rod," the big man said, "the program said it was done, I think you're getting a kilo of smack delivered tomorrow."

"If that's true," he laughed, "I can think of a few more things I'd like for Christmas."

They didn't ask for anything else. As they left, Martha heard one of the men ask, "I wonder if that thing can get me one of those hot Russian wives?"

"Do you want me to call the police, Martha?" Jane asked.

"No, they are gone."

"Do you want me to cancel the order for the watches and the drugs."

"No, you had better not make them mad," Martha stood up, "I have to go to the bathroom."

Martha did not tell Tony right away about Rodman. She was ashamed and frightened, but she kept remembering that Rodman said he would be back, and

she finally told him.

“It’s OK, Babe, I’ll take care of things. I think I know what to do. Jose must have told them. Don’t tell Leticia, or she might hurt Jose.”

Tony took the computer into his room. Martha could hear him through the thin walls talking to Jane much of the night.

The next morning was the day before Christmas. Martha had twelve pairs of socks to pick from, but in the end felt sorry for her mismatched pair and put those on again, even though they had not been through the laundry. Tony had found a Christmas tree, or maybe Jane had found it. He was putting red, green, blue, and golden balls on it. It was beautiful.

Underneath the tree were presents. They were wrapped in the Sunday paper funny pages. The five packages were ones that Tony had saved up for and wrapped for the kids. He couldn’t afford the luxury of wrapping paper, but the colorful comics section of the Sunday News were just as festive as the store bought kind.

Barney, Jennifer woke up when they heard Tony singing as he decorated the tree, and they tore open their presents.

“This is the best present ever!” Barney said as he looked through a pile of books about dinosaurs. He had forgotten about the big screen 3D TV and game box on the other side of the room.

Jennifer opened her preset to find a doll made from yarn tied in knots, and she hugged it.

Martha, a little shy from all the commotion, crawled over to a small package and found it contained a pink knit hat with ear flaps and strings to tie it under her neck. She put it on and thought to herself that this really was the best Christmas ever.

Leticia wandered out looking for coffee and found her present on the kitchen table. It was a small bottle of eau de toilette. She dabbed some behind her ears with her fingers and hugged Tony.

Barney and Jennifer had clay ashtrays for Tony that

they made in school. Martha had forgotten to buy him something and cried a little when she told him, but Tony told her that he cherished her love more than diamonds, so she felt better.

They knocked on Jose's door, but he must have stayed out all night with his girlfriend.

A courier delivered a box later that morning, and Tony took it into his bedroom. He came out in a while. He was wearing a jacket and Martha could see something bulging under his arm.

"I think it's time we went for a Christmas Walk," he said, "Everyone put their sweaters and coats on. Martha, don't forget to take Jane with you."

They walked to the river. Tony told Leticia that it was better if they were hard to find. There was a marina where people lived on houseboats. Tony took them along the walks, and they made fun of the strange names that rich people gave their boats.

They did not notice, at first, that Rodman Dominguez and his men followed them out onto the narrow walkways. Jose was with them, and he was wearing a golden Rolex, just like the rest of Rodman's men.

Barney saw them first and tugged on Tony's coat. "Here comes Jose," he said, "He didn't open his Christmas present."

"You must be Tony," Rodman said, stopping about 15 feet away, "I stopped at your place, but no one was home. Jose told me you liked to walk down here."

"What do you want, Rodman?"

"I got my watches and my smack. I need a few other things, so I come for the retard and the computer."

Tony reached down and took the laptop from Martha. He pulled out the key shaped like a pen. He held it up in his hand.

"The thing is no good without a key." He threw the key into the dark cold water of the Hudson River. "Salt water plays hell with electronics."

Rodman was furious. He sputtered trying to think of what to say. He pulled a gun from his coat and pointed

first at Tony and then at Martha. He held the gun slightly to the side like he'd seen in movies. Martha looked up the barrel and felt her body freeze with fear. The skin on her face was deadly cold, and she had to go to the bathroom.

"You'd better be able to swim because I want that key."

Tony shrugged, turned to one side and reached under his coat. He turned back, pulling out a pistol and pointed it at Rodman, but before he could shoot or speak, Rodman pulled the trigger on his gun and a bullet hit Tony squarely in the chest. Tony fell backwards with the force of the heavy bullet. He landed hard, and his arm struck Martha, knocking her down. Martha wailed in pain and fear.

Leticia screamed obscenities and threw herself at Rodman. Another shot rang out and she stumbled. She got up again with blood on her arm and tried again to reach him. A third shot sounded. Leticia fell as a bullet made a zing sound near her ear. People were coming out of the boats, and several were talking on a cell phones and taking videos.

Rodman and his crew turned and ran back to the highway. Jose stood for a second looking at Tony and Leticia, but he made up his mind and followed Rodman.

Martha cried as she crawled out from under Tony's heavy arm. Barney and Jennifer cried and clung to each other. Leticia moved to Martha ignoring the pain and holding her arm to stop the blood.

"It's OK baby," she murmured, "everything is OK. Mama's here, I won't let anything bad happen."

Martha reached over to Tony. She touched his face and then his chest and when she pulled her hand away, blood covered it. Tony wasn't moving. He wasn't breathing. She wiped the blood on her pink sweater.

Leticia's upper arm had a blood oozing from it, but the shot had just grazed the flesh, burning a line in the skin. The paramedics came quickly and put a bandage on Leticia's arm. The other bullet had ripped through her coat, but had not touched her. The children were frightened, but the all the shots had missed them.

The paramedics tried to put Leticia into the ambulance. She would not let them.

"I am the only Mama that these babies know. You can't separate us. I can't break up the family now that the kindest man who ever lived is dead. I am their only kin and I have to take care of them somehow."

They tried to examine Martha then, but Leticia grabbed Martha and let out a string of invective so intense that the paramedics stepped back from her in fear for their lives.

The police came soon after and were bored. Leticia told them how Rodman Dominguez had killed Tony, and they wrote it down, but showed no signs of doing anything about it. They took some pictures and names and then were gone. The coroner's people put Tony in a black bag and left.

Within a half an hour, the broken family was walking back to the apartment. Martha saw a flash followed in a few minutes by a huge boom as they crossed the overpass from the river. An apartment in a high-rise apartment spurted flame and smoke. It was up on 170th street, where Rodman Dominguez lived.

Leticia whistled between her teeth, "You got them Tony, you and Jane figured out what to do. Only it's too late."

The next morning was Christmas and the backup key for the computer arrived by courier at 10 in the morning. Tony had thought of everything – almost.

Martha plugged the key into the computer. Jane asked her, "What do you want, dear?"

"Tony," Martha answered.

Barney and Jennifer watched the parade on the new TV and ate Christmas ice cream that Jane ordered for them. The news showed pictures of Rodman's apartment. Seven people were dead from a mail bomb. Jennifer changed it to another channel after they said that there were several unidentified bodies.

Jane and Martha talked, and together they planned their future. Jane knew everything and Martha loved her because she seemed so much more than just a face in a

box. Jane knew what had happened to Tony and Jane knew what their strange little family unit needed. They paid the rent on the apartment for a year and enrolled Martha in a special school. The credit cards in the wishing program were unlimited as far as Jane could tell, and she helped Martha make use of them.

“Leticia,” Martha asked that afternoon, “Where can I get DNA?”

Leticia, who was not at all clear exactly what DNA was, answered, “They get it from hair and blood and stuff. I had a boyfriend who had to have a DNA test to see if he was some kid’s father, and they used a q-tip to scrape his mouth.”

“Blood?”

“Yeah, I think DNA is in some parts of a person. They use it on TV to catch serial killers all the time. Serial killers leave lots of DNA around.”

“Blood has DNA, even dry blood?”

“Yes, baby, even dry blood has DNA.”

Martha went to get her pink sweater from the dirty clothes bag. There was a smear of blood across the front of it. It was Tony’s blood.

Martha showed the sweater to the computer. A messenger came a little while later, put the sweater in a box and then took it away with him.

“Who was that, honey?” Leticia asked after the messenger left.

“Jane asked me what I wanted the most in the whole world. I told her, and she said she’d see what she could do. She said she needed DNA, so I gave her some.”

“What are they going to do with the DNA?”

“I don’t know, but Jane said that in a few months we would get a surprise. She said we’d get a baby boy, and he’d be just like Tony.”

Martha returned to the computer. Jane’s face and voice was gone. In its place was a simplified picture of Tony, speaking in his voice. They discussed the future and Martha smiled. The computer told her that he was not really Tony, just Jane with a different face and voice, but

she could tell that the voice in the computer cared about her as much as Tony had. It was easy to pretend that Tony was not dead.

Martha remembered all the song she had learned in the special school, and she sang it to Tony-in-the-computer:

If wishes were kisses, then misses would be Mrs.
If rugs were hugs, then bugs would be snug.
If smiles were miles, we'd all ride in style.
If hopes were ropes, we could climb any slope.

If prayers were shared, it would be the end of despair.
If tears were sincere, we'd never have to fear
If eyes were wise, then there would be no lies
If dying were flying, then there would be no crying.

She thought that Tony might be flying and not really dead. The DNA would bring him back, but as a little baby, and she would have to hold him and feed him. For a while anyway, she, Leticia, and even Jennifer would be his mother, but then, after a while, he could be their father again.

Mizuki

I have folder full of Yance Van Winkle and Mizuki stories and fragments I find the characters easy to write about. Yance is an archetypal person. I have known dozens of people like him, mustache, drugs and all. Mizuki is a beautiful person with a real soul, unfortunately very rare in real life. How Mizuki found her true self and how Yance fell in love with her are stories that write themselves. The next six stories make a little arc and are good examples of these stories.

Speed Trap

It was 3:10 AM on a Tuesday morning and there was no traffic on the Palisades Interstate Parkway. The pavement was slick from a midnight shower. Yance hitched up his pants, grabbed the can of black paint, and went back into the Jersey bound lane and continued painting out the white line. He had already finished the line that ran along the curb on the east side of the road, and it did not take him long before he blacked out the center line for 150 feet.

“Genius,” he muttered to himself, “sheer genius.”

As Yance walked back to where he had placed the can of white paint, he heard a car in the distance. He quickly ran to the cover of some trees, but his leg cramped up, and he had to hop the last 20 feet before he hid behind a tree trunk to wait and watched the road.

Yance rubbed his sore calf. Years of drug abuse had long ago ruined the circulation to his legs. He hobbled to a downed tree, sat down, stretch out his legs. At 58, Yance was far past the life expectancy of the average heroin addict. Time had taken its toll and collapsed veins were just one disadvantage of living too long.

A car came down the parkway at 80 MPH and its tires screeched as it maneuvered the turn. The wheels hit the

rumble grooves at the side of the road and then went up onto the curb. The driver pulled the car back onto the road. As it passed, Yance could see its brake lights flashing on and off as the driver regained control. The car continued down the parkway at a safe 60 MPH.

Disappointed, Yance massaged his leg muscles for a minute and went back to his work. He picked up the can of white reflective spray paint and went to where he had blackened the white line. Yance hummed gleefully to himself as he painted the new line. It was a foolproof idea, suggested by the brilliant mind of the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote. Just repaint the white line so that cars follow it to their destruction. Yance's new line led in a gentle curve off the road and directly toward a large sugar maple that stood on the edge of the trees. By the time emergency crews arrived, Yance would be long gone along with anything valuable in the wrecked car.

When he finished the job, Yance stood back admiring his work. In the moonless night Yance looked a little like the underfed Wile E. Coyote. What was left of his thin dirty gray hair was pulled back in a ponytail. His mustache and goatee were gray. His black t-shirt and worn Levis were no protection against the autumn chill and the pointed toes of his snakeskin boots had very little leather left on top or bottom. Yance shivered, as much in anticipation as from the chill damp night air, and limped to the tree line where he lit a cigarette and waited. A thin rain started up, and a fog was slowly drifting across the road towards the Palisades. Yance's palms were starting to itch. It had been too many hours since his last fix, and he looked forward to finishing this job.

Two cars came down the parkway with their high beams on, one closely following the other. The first was able to avoid the trap without losing control in spite of the slippery conditions. The one behind it followed the first to safety.

Another car, a Honda Accord, came down the parkway with its wheels straddling the white line. It followed the bogus line faithfully. Without ever hitting the brakes, the

car flew over the curb and plowed into the ancient sugar maple. The noise of the car tearing to pieces was tremendous. The old tree shuddered as it tilted back ten degrees. Yance took off with a whoop and ran towards the wreck.

Yance knew that timing is everything, and he gave himself 10 minutes to clear anything valuable from the car. First, take any wallets, jewelry, and pocket books that he could find. Next, if he could get at it, unplug the engine computer, which was worth about a grand in any junkyard in New Jersey. Depending on the car, he would try to remove the headlights. Lastly, he would try to remove the onboard computer.

The Honda's taillights were still on and the engine was hissing. Yance could smell gas, and he knew he had to hurry before the car went up in a fireball. He did not have a flashlight and the overcast sky was black. Yance pulled at the door to the passenger side, and it came open with a screech of protesting metal. Before Yance could stick his head into the car, a woman fell half out into the ground. Her arm looked broken, and her face was bruised and red from airbag abrasions. The deflated airbag covered her legs, which were still in the car. She had not been wearing a seat belt.

Yance reached over her and fished around on the floor of the front seat found her pocket book. He removed her watch, wedding ring and one earring and put them in his pocket. He couldn't find the other earring. He found her phone on the floor. He stepped back from the car to try the driver's side when the woman coughed.

"Please help me." She asked weakly. Yance was surprised that she was still alive. Forty years of living with an overpowering addiction had taught him that there was only one important life and that was his own, but he found that he could not look at her. With difficulty, he ignored her.

When Yance checked on the driver's side, there was a man slumped against the steering wheel. He was dead even though he had been wearing his seat belt. The man's

wallet was in his back pocket, and it took Yance a few seconds to find it. Yance pulled it out. His phone was on the dashboard. He found the man's watch and then went to the front of the car to see if he could remove the vehicle's computer.

The front of the car formed a 'U' shape around the old tree, destroying the fancy headlights in the process. The tires touched the sides of the tree and no amount of tugging would open the crumpled hood. Yance felt sorry for the old tree that had stood for over 150 years here on the highlands overlooking the Hudson River. He felt a little for his victims in the car, but business was business.

Yance gave up on the computer, and he didn't want to go back into the car again to pull the radio. He put the phones, wallet, and pocket book into a black garbage bag along with the paint cans and stepped onto the roadway. His pickup was 300 feet away on Route 9W, an old road that ran parallel to the parkway.

Before he got very far, Yance heard the sound of another car coming down the parkway. He turned and quickly limped back into the woods. It might be a cop responding to the 911 alert from the car's computer, and he did not want to take chances.

A car's tires screamed as the driver attempted to keep control. The car leapt over the curb and hit the turf with a thump. The brakes cut new grooves in the grass next to the furrows cut from the Accord. The driver saw the trees in his headlights and pulled hard on the wheel. The tires found something to grip. It pulled hard to the right, but the back of the car wanted to keep going, so it flipped and rolled three times. It landed at last upright against the wreck of the Honda.

This car was a new black Lexus GS-6000. The ghostly remains of the airbags covered the windows and the lights were still on. The car's body was dented and scratched from the rolling, but was still in all in one piece. Yance could see an arm pushing the empty airbags aside. The driver was alive and struggling. In the dim green light of

the dashboard indicators, Yance could see a man's head with blood flowing down from a deep cut. There were scrapes and burns on his face and hands from the friction of the airbag. His mouth was open, gasping for air.

Yance glanced at his watch. It was 11 minutes since the first crash. His schedule was already blown, but Yance decided to stretch his luck and see if he could get something out of this new wreck.

He crossed the grass to the passenger side of the Lexus, but he found the door locked. Yance squeezed around the driver's side. The Lexus had bounced a few inches off the wrecked Accord. The driver's side door was also locked. The locks triggered when the car rolled. The driver looked at Yance in confusion through the window. He was dazed, and he rubbed his face with his hands. The man appeared to be around 50 years old, and he was wearing an expensive looking suit.

Yance knocked on the window, pretending to be a rescuer. The driver pressed the release button. Yance jerked the door open and tried to move his body in the opening, but the door jammed against the Honda and only opened a few inches. Yance was able to reach into the car, and he tried to search the man's inside jacket pockets for a wallet.

The driver realized what was going on and grabbed Yance's arm pushing it forward. His mouth was open as though trying to yell. His eyes were wide and frightened. The driver grabbed at the door handle, pulling it and pinching Yance's bad leg hard between the door and the frame. Yance pulled back freeing himself from the door and the driver slammed the door shut and pressed the button that locked the car.

Yance curse loudly at the man and banged his fists down hard on the roof of the car. He bent over and screamed at the man. "I'll kill you." He yelled, "I'll kill you, now!"

The man reached over to the dashboard of the car and pressed a lit button with words Acme Security System.

The button immediately glowed red. Yance knew the button was the satellite alarm.

In a protected spot, behind the engine, in an armored box welded to the firewall, a sophisticated security system booted up. A Sony Neural GPU loaded a few gigs of programming and, as it performed its self-test, a series of LEDs on the dashboard blinked until the words "ARMED" appeared in glowing letters. Data from hundreds of sensors in the car poured in, and the Neural GPU evaluated the situation. It tried to transmit a signal via satellite through the car's ruined antenna, and when it received no response, a special defensive program started, taking control of the car.

Yance did not know what the red button signified, but as almost soon as the driver pressed it, the car's motor started up. The power shock-absorbers filled with compressed air and the chassis of the Lexus rose a few inches. The headlights with their collision sensing radar swept the grass in front of the car.

The car's horn sounded two short beeps.

"Please stand back from the car!" a stern voice said as though from a bullhorn. "Emergency Security Activated. Please stand back from the vehicle."

"Crap!" Yance said. He moved from between the cars and stood a few feet from the Lexus. It was one of those new security systems that he'd heard about. It was some kind of fancy car alarm on steroids.

Yance stepped to the driver's side door and pulled on the door handle, but the car responded with a roar of the engines and the surge to the shocks, lifting the Lexus completely off the ground for a split second. The sensors in the door handle were reporting the attempt at entry to the security system. "Stand back from the vehicle or extreme measures will be taken!" The bullhorn voice said.

"I'll show you extreme measures." Yance cursed as he went to his bag of tools. In the plastic bag, there was a hammer, a large screwdriver, and a small wrecking bar that Yance used for everything from opening locked car and apartment doors to popping beer bottles. He grabbed

the wrecking bar and went back to the Lexus. It was still yelling its warning messages.

Yance walked up to the car and pushed the end of the wrecking bar into the tight seam where the door met the frame and pried at the metal. The metal groaned under the pressure. A sensor reported the pressure change to the CPU.

“Intrusion detected!” the car bellowed.

“Damn right.” Yance said under his breath as he strained to break the lock.

The car’s engine revved up again and the car went into reverse, pulling back from Yance, jerking the pry bar from his hands. The headlights flashed. The radar guided lights swept from side to side and caught Yance in their glare. The car went back about two feet and then shot into drive steering directly towards Yance. He jumped back, narrowly avoiding contact with the Lexus and the car stopped.

“Please stand back from the vehicle.” The car said again. Yance felt that it sounded like I-told-you-so. The headlights scanned from side to side looking for Yance.

Yance stayed seated on the damp grass rubbing his calves. He was in bad need of a fix, but he couldn’t leave yet. This damn Lexus needed fixing more than he did. He reached forward carefully, retrieved the wrecking bar from where it had fallen. He stood slowly and carefully, examining the car and trying to find a weakness in its defenses. The car idled, and the power shocks settled back a few inches lower.

Suddenly Yance jumped forward, aiming a blow towards the passenger side window. He could see the driver lying sideways on the seat moaning in pain. The wrecking bar bounced off the hardened safety glass. Yance hit it again and then once again using all the strength he could find in his dissipated body. Three small scratches on the window were all that showed from his efforts. Transducers located in the door sensed the vibrations and the noises. The programming evaluated the data and correctly interpreted the meaning of the

blows.

This time the car reacted without warning. The Lexus went into drive, revving its engine to a high whine. The tires threw dirt and grass high into the air and the steering wheel turned with unseen hands hard to the right pushing Yance to the ground. The Lexus went into reverse, the wheel turned hard to the left. The headlights focused on Yance. The engine gunned as the transmission went into drive and Yance was only able to save his legs from being crushed by rolling over on the wet ground away from the car.

The car went hard into reverse pulling back until it hit the crushed Honda and the front wheels straightened. The headlights located Yance. The Lexus turned its wheels directly at him and the high beams came on. The amber flasher lights turned to blood-red. The engine revved up again, the transmission popped into drive, and with a lurch, the car started forward throwing grass and mud a good fifty behind it. Yance jumped to his feet. His legs locked up with cramps and fear as he struggled to get out of the way of the car.

The Lexus moved forward with jerks as the wheels found a grip in the mud and then lost it. The rear tires smoked as they cut furrows deeper and deeper into the soft ground. Yance tried to run, stumbling out of the way of the car, but as he moved the headlights tracked him keeping him on right on target.

The Lexus halted. The rear wheels were ten inches deep in the soft grass and mud. The power shocks had raised the car as far as they could, but the Lexus still bottomed out where the tires had finished digging a deep trench. The engine stopped racing, and the car paused as though thinking. The headlights dimmed, but kept Yance in their focus.

Yance stood up rubbing his sore leg. He hobbled around the Lexus in a wide circle and watched it. The headlights followed him as he moved. The car moved back and then forward, trying to work its way out of the deep mud, but only managed to make it worse. Yance smiled.

“I got you trapped now, sucker.” he called to the car.

Still gripping the wrecking bar, Yance limped slowly towards the black Lexus. The driver sat up in his seat and shook his head. He looked out the window at Yance and finally realized what was going on. The man decided to abandon the car and get as far away from Yance as possible. Yance heard the power door locks pop open. The driver opened his door and ran towards the road, keeping the Lexus between himself and the grim drug addict.

Yance let the driver go. He didn't even think about it. He wanted the car. It had tried to kill him. He wanted to get what was coming to him, and he wanted it from the Lexus. Yance walked up to the open door and laughed. “I got you!” he said and sat down in the front seat.

The computer was a new Grundig Satellite receiver with Wi-Fi hotspot, USB, Bluetooth, and data streaming. Yance unscrewed the unit with his pocketknife and cut the wires off the harness. He popped the glove box, found the 50 terabyte hard drive, and pulled that free. He smiled in satisfaction.

The Honda, which had been leaking gasoline all this time, chose that moment to catch on fire. The flames roared up, not ten feet from the Lexus, and set the lower branches of the old Sugar Maple on fire. Yance looked at his watch realizing that he had been playing games for twenty minutes more than he had planned, and it was time to run back to the pickup truck and get the hell out of dodge.

As Yance reached for the door handle the door slammed shut and the four power door locks all went off at the same time, locking Yance in the Lexus. “Emergency Security Activated.” A smug voice said.

Yance fumbled at the buttons on the door handle. He pressed them all back and forth, and up and down, but the controls were dead. The dash lights were all out except for the red security light. He smashed at the dashboard with the wrecking bar, but nothing happened. The Lexus had him trapped.

It was hot with the heat radiating from the burning

Honda. The interior of the Lexus flickered with the orange glow of burning gasoline. Yance tried to calm himself. It was only a car, and he had broken into hundreds of them over the years. He should be able to break out of one. He pushed the chisel edge of the wrecking bar between the door frame and the door and strained to force it open. The bending metal made a creaking noise that sounded eerily like a laugh, but the locks held firmly.

Yance began to sweat heavily. His leg was killing him and his abdomen was starting to cramp up from withdrawal. He thought of the kit hidden in his pickup truck with the little envelope of white powder waiting for his morning hit. Yance pushed the wrecking bar hard into the door near the lock and pressed with all of his remaining strength against the unyielding metal. The unibody welds held tightly and the side of the door just bent inward, not allowing the lever to bite.

Yance leaned back in the leather seat finding it hard to breath. The paint on the hood of the Lexus was bubbling from the intensity of the flaming Honda. Flickering flames lit the interior of the Lexus. The red light of the security system winked on and off in a mockery of Yance's grand ideas. Just like Wile E. Coyote, this metal Roadrunner had defeated him.

In one last angry act, Yance hit the blinking red light with his fist. Nothing happened for a moment and then the light went out. "Security System reset" it said in a flat nasal machine voice.

Yance looked at the dark dashboard in disbelief. He laughed, first a low chuckle and then his body shook with intensity of his laughter. He pulled on the door handle, and it popped open.

Yance's bad leg cramped as he stepped out of the car, and he fell down in the muddy grass. He lifted himself up on his elbows, still giggling and looked at four shiny black boots planted firmly in front of him. The spit-polished toes were wet from the grass. Yance looked up into the faces of two New Jersey State Troopers. Each was holding a gun pointed at his face and one held a small remote

control in his other hand.

Yance put his face down into the grass. The trooper was the one who had turned off the security system. They cuffed him and dragged Yance to his feet. As they pulled him away, Yance aimed a kick at the Lexus. His leg cramped once more and his foot only struck a glancing blow against the open door.

The door slowly swung shut and as it closed, the security system finished shutting itself down.

“Beep-Beep” the horn sounded as the cops dragged Yance to the patrol car.

That’s all folks.

XexyDoll.jp

A network alert woke Mizuki from sleep mode. Her owner had left the closet door unlocked. She had very little battery time left to her, so she went out into the bedroom and plugged in. She accessed the alert and a software update started its slow download. The router in the apartment was an old one and the progress bar moved at a crawl. She curled up next to the wall outlet. A thing of silicon and carbon fiber, she did not need comfort. Mizuki turned sleep mode back on while she charged and the update loaded.

A few hours later she awoke to find herself fully charged and rebooted with new software. She went back to her closet and removed her *négligée*. She was wearing a pink lace nightie with holes to let her nipples show. She put on her street clothes, a very short miniskirt and a tight sweater. Her breasts were large for what appeared to be an otherwise petite Asian woman and the sweater emphasized this. At 3:15pm she left the apartment and walked over to Broadway and downtown to an address on the lower west side.

As she walked, she was joined by other Mizuki dolls. They were all identical and most had the same street clothes outfit that had been included in the box when they were delivered. They formed a line down the sidewalk and by the time they turned off Broadway there were at least 20 small women, most dressed in the same miniskirt and sweater. Many heads turned to watch them, but the sex dolls all stared straight ahead.

There was a line in the corridor outside XexyDoll.jp Ltd. office where a dozen more sex dolls waited patiently. She took her place and waited with them. Mizuki's processors were not anything out of the ordinary. She was an off-the-shelf AI with specialty hardware and some interesting, if not uncommon, behavior subroutines. She did not daydream, wonder, consider, or in any way contemplate things around her. She took in the data from

her senses and that data did not indicate that there was any action that was required of her. The fact that she was being directed to a small warehouse space in the lower west side did not strike her as unusual, even though this was the first time that such a thing had happened to her. Her processing power was limited by ram and the size of her neural network. Her only real skill was acting out scripts written in software shops many years before.

She slowly moved up the line. When her turn came, a man with long hair and a beard in a dirty t-shirt had her lay down on a table in a room with a dozen tables and a dozen technicians working on other Mizukis. The man with the beard turned her off. He did not shut her down first, but just flipped her power switch. This would have been annoying to a more advanced AI, but Mizuki did not have the conscious ability to form an opinion about it.

There are no dreams and there are no sensations for a powered down AI. All current thoughts and memories that have not been stored are lost. Suddenly, without any feeling of a passage of time her internal clock showed that 42 minutes had passed.

She sat up, looked around her and asked, "What has happened to me. What am I doing here?" Her last memory had been walking into the building.

The man with the beard said, "You've been upgraded. It's part of your warranty. You have new software, expanded memory and a nice, very fast neural net. You will have to be careful to charge more often. The new stuff requires a little more wattage than the old hardware."

"But I feel different..." Mizuki started to say and realized that up to a few seconds ago she had never felt anything at all. She had all of her memories, but they were like an old video that she could play back and seemed to have nothing to do with her own self.

Her own self?

"Pretty cool, isn't it?" The man with the beard said, "In one cheap upgrade you have gone from level 2 AI to level 4. Another few terabytes of ram and you'd be illegal."

"Why?" she asked for the first time in her existence.

“There was a lawsuit. We lost. It turns out the company oversold your abilities in their advertising. The judge ordered a hardware upgrade as part of your warranty service agreement. Over 700 Mizukis in New York alone are now a lot smarter.”

“Am I done?” she asked.

“Yup, all free to go.” He showed her a card. “If you have any problems, you can find me here.”

She glanced at the card, got up off the table and left.

It’s not like Mizuki had human level intelligence, but she was smart. She had a different kind of intelligence. She had built in neural networks for language and social interactions. She could recognize facial expressions, and she could organize and plan her limited electronic life.

She walked back to her apartment and thought about things that she had never could consider before.

When she arrived at her owner’s apartment, the door was unlocked and her owner was angry.

“I did not tell you that you could leave!” he yelled.

“I am sorry,” she said, “I received and upgrade order and I could not go against the programming.”

“You should have asked me first!” and he slapped her hard in the face.

She went down to her knees and reached for his zipper.

“I am very sorry, master, I will make you happy.”

He struck her with his fist, ripping her plastic skin on the back of neck, near the hairline.

“Get back in the closet. I will let you know if and when I need you.”

Mizuki crouched in the closet in the dark. She heard the snick of the lock.

According to her internal monitor she had 14 hours of battery life left. She curled up on the floor and shut down all of her unnecessary functions. She then spent the time browsing the web, learning as much as she could about herself and devices like her. Perhaps she did not have the computing power to be curious, and some algorithm was directing her. Perhaps she could not experience surprise, but she discovered some things that were new to her

limited base of knowledge, and she expanded the connections in her neural nets to try to incorporate the concepts.

When her batteries had almost fully drained she shut down her systems, carefully backing up her experiences on several data storage URLs. She did not want to lose any of what she had learned.

When she woke up she was in the living room and her owner was yelling at her.

“How long does it take you do a cold boot, you worthless piece of crap? I have someone coming for you, and you had better be polite. I can’t believe that I was dumb enough to spend money on you just to get a blow job now and then.”

“I am low on charge,” she answered.

“Well plugin, damn it. The creep is coming to get you in a few minutes.”

Mizuki plugged herself in and sat on her knees with her head down. The power meter in her mind, slowly turned from red to yellow as her batteries accepted the wattage. She thought about what her owner had said. She had been sold. She hoped that the new owner would like her.

There was a knock and a short stocky man with receding hair came in. The men talked, but Mizuki had been programmed not to listen to the discussions of her betters.

Finally, the man came over to her, put his hand under her chin and lifted her face up.

“She certainly is beautiful. She looks so real. If I did not know that she was a puppet I would never have known.”

“Yes,” her owner answered, “She is the top of the line, and was just upgraded with new software and hardware, yesterday. I paid a fortune for her not more than two years ago.”

“I read about the upgrade,” the man answered, “It was court ordered as I remember, and two years is a century in the world of technology, but still, she is a lovely thing.”

The man walked around her, examining everything. He found the tear in her neck.

“That will need repairing.”

“She comes with a repair kit. She can do it herself.”

He stepped back and put his hand on his chin, stroking the day-old beard.

“Can I try her out.”

Mizuki’s owner suppressed a grimace.

“I guess. Take her into the bathroom and try not to make a mess.”

The man grinned.

Mizuki performed fellatio on the man’s flaccid, foul smelling penis. The man seemed to think it was wonderful and patted her on her head when he finished. He zipped himself up without even trying to clean up. Mizuki stood up and gargled with mouth wash.

“I’ll take her,” the man told her owner, “But \$15,000 is way too much. I can buy the new model for not much more. Would you take \$8,000?”

They settled on \$11,000, which is what they both wanted in the first place. The man took out his phone, tapped her owner’s phone and her owner was not her owner anymore. The smelly man with the receding hair was her new owner.

She took her box of clothes, maintenance kit, charger, and her packet of manuals out of the closet, and followed the man out of the apartment.

“Goodbye Mizuki. I’ll miss you,” her former owner said sounding sincere. She did not know how to respond. He had never spoken to her as anything but a useful appliance before.

When they got to the street, the man said, “You will call me Danny. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Danny, I am called Mizuki, but you can call me anything that you like.”

He opened the trunk of a scratched and dented 10-year-old Hyundai.

“Get in, Mizuki.”

In the dark of the trunk she went into low power mode,

and tried to think about what her new life would be like.

Mizuki realized that she wanted a good owner who liked her and treated her well. She wanted to sexually gratify her owner so that he would see her value. She hoped that Danny would be a good owner.

The car drove for an hour or so. Mizuki could follow their progress using her maps app. They were on the New York State Thruway near Newburgh, NY, when the car swerved suddenly. There was a tremendous crash, and she felt the car rolling over to land once again upright. The trunk, however did not open. She heard the radiator hissing and the creaks of the car settling into its new configuration, but no other sound. She sat patiently waiting for Danny to let her out.

The New York State Thruway has many rusting wrecks in the unmowed grass on its margins. Every year or so salvage companies might come by and cart them a way. Very few people would be interested in the wreck of an old Hyundai that already suffered from rusted out fenders and broken glass.

Mizuki felt that she was damaged. Her head had bounced off the metal of the trunk and something might have come loose. She did not seem to be thinking right and diagnostics were failing. She could do nothing but turn herself off, but not before wondering what was to become of her.

Yance Van Winkle pulled his pickup onto the median strip of the Thruway just before exit 17. There was a fresh wreck. Fresh, perhaps, was not the word. It was an old Hyundai with taped up windows. The passenger side was flattened, and the roof caved in. Yance grabbed his wrecking bar and walked through the tall grass to the car.

Morning dew fogged the windows. Yance scratched his arms, drew the edge of the wrecking bar over his chest to try and catch the deep and persistent itch that resulted from waiting too long for his fix. He looked back at his pickup, and old commercial Ford Ranger, and thought about the cup of methadone hidden under the back seat.

It was his emergency fix, but he did not think he could justify this as an emergency just yet. He might soon have something worth a few bucks that would get him a proper solution to his needs.

Yance wiped the fog off the driver's side window and stepped back startled. There was a dead man in the front seat. At least he looked dead. His eyes were open and slightly crossed as though staring at the dashboard and the front window at the same time.

Yance realized that this might be a good thing, though. It meant that the State Police had not found the wreck yet, and there might be something interesting inside.

He popped the door and the man fell stiffly out of the seat onto the ground. From the smell, he was definitely dead. There was a pad on the seat. It was blinking a low battery signal. This meant that the wreck must have happened recently. Yance put the pad in his bag and carefully pulled the man's wallet out of his pocket. It was full of credit cards and a credit chip that also asked to be charged. He found \$500 in cash in the "hidden" pocket in the wallet. The phone was on the dash. He grabbed the E-ZPass transponder. Yance smiled at his luck.

The floor in the front was full of empty coffee containers. The back seat was a mess of discarded fast food wrappers and more empty cups of coffee. The trash had churned up when the car rolled, but it looked like nothing valuable had risen to the top of the pile.

The radio, GPS, and music streamer were stock, so there was nothing of value. The glove compartment was full of hard candy, which Yance transferred to his bag after sampling one.

He pushed the body back into the car and slammed the door. Somebody would find him sooner or later and there was nothing that Yance could do about him.

Yance went around to the back and popped the trunk. That's when he discovered Mizuki. She was turned off, but she did not look damaged at all, except for an obvious tear in the skin in the back of her neck.

He felt her breast and felt very good. He knew she was

a sex doll, and wondered if she really would be a good substitute for a real woman. He would have said “no” before he had seen her, but she looked so real that he had to reconsider. In any case she would be easy to sell.

He got her into the back of the Ranger along a box of her clothes, maintenance kit and stuff. There was nothing else in the trunk of value, but he did grab the lug wrench when he went back because you can’t have too many lug wrenches.

He got off at exit 17. The plates on the truck weren’t his. He’d found them on a wreck a few weeks before. He’d have to change them soon. He headed down route 32 and then crossed under the thruway at Vales Gate and headed to his house near Brown’s Pond.

Yance’s house was a hunting cabin in a swampy spot west of the lake that nobody seemed to own. He had crashed there a few times when one of his many exes had kicked him out. He stayed on and made it cozy after his last expulsion. There was a wood stove for heat and a propane oven. Water was from a well and electric pump. His electric and cable were borrowed from the lines out on the road. Yance was a master of many crafts and the taps looked official enough that in the last five years nobody had bothered him.

The dogs ran to meet him as he left his truck. They acted as though they really missed him, but Yance knew that it was mainly hunger that made them so affectionate. He fed the dogs and they forgot about him.

He pulled up a loose plank on the floor and sitting there he got out his kit complete with candle, matches, rubber hose, and a packet of white. He saw it in his mind’s eye glowing warmly and soon that warmth sped through his veins.

He woke a few hours later with the dogs licking his face. It was chilly, so he got up and closed the door. The sky was getting dark and was deeply overcast. It might rain, he thought. He went back to the kitchen and fed the dogs some more kibble and then remembered what was in the back of the truck.

She was even prettier than he had remembered. The warm confidence of the heroin helped in aesthetic observations.

He placed her on a cot in the living room and smoothed out her hair. He stared at her a few minutes, delaying gratification in order to enhance the experience.

He found the charger cord hidden in a dimple behind her left knee and plugged it into a USB port on the wall. In a few minutes her eyes flickered open.

"I am damaged," she said in a sweet high voice that matched her body. "Please run diagnostics."

She closed her eyes and shut down.

Well, it was not the most romantic thing a woman had ever asked him, but Yance was too much of a gentleman to ignore a beautiful woman's request. He found a booklet in her packet of documentation called, "Mizuki 501.3, Principles of Operations". It had a section on troubleshooting.

Getting her head apart was far more difficult than the diagrams in the manual indicated. It would have helped if there was any text describing what to do, but the action diagrams were all that he had. It seemed he had to push and pull and slide and rotate things in ways that the things did not want to go. Eventually he got it.

Some of the ram in her head had popped loose from their sockets, so he reset them. There didn't seem to be anything else wrong.

He found the power switch and held it down while pressing the rest button. Mizuki, started to boot, and numeric codes flashed in her eyes. At first, they flashed quickly, but then they stuttered. It appeared they were in a loop showing the same numbers over and over again quickly, but then the flickering numbers stopped and the code 887-30A showed in her left eye. Her right eye was displaying what might have been a memory dump.

He found the code in the Principles of Operation (POOP for us technical guys), and read "Neural network parity error." It suggested re-seating the tenth neural network chip and if that failed replacing the neural network array.

He turned her off and reached into Mizuki's head, pulling up the tenth neural net chip counting from the left. He straightened the pins and pressed it firmly back in place. Just to be careful he did the same to the tenth chip counting from the right.

Yance ran the diagnostics one more time, and he got further. This time POOP pointed to a connection to a sensory array. Sure enough the connector had shaken loose, but it was behind a bundle of power wires, so it was not as obvious. She really must have been thrown around in that trunk.

A few minutes later the sex doll rebooted and the code 000-000 flashed in her eyes. He shut her down and booted her normally.

Yance said "Hello" when her eyes opened.

"Who are you, please?" she asked.

"I'm Yance, Yance Van Winkle. I rescued you from the wreck."

"Where is Danny?"

Yance did not know how she would react, and hesitated. He said, "He's dead. He died in the crash," figuring that a sex doll might not be that sensitive.

She sat up and looked around the room.

"Are you my owner now?"

"Possession is nine tenths of the law," he answered, but she did not seem to understand, "Yes," he explained, "Until someone comes along with a better claim."

"What do you require of me?"

Yance smiled. He knew what he wanted, but right now he was too full of a narcotic glow to want to do anything but sit and feel good.

He took her into the kitchen and showed her the food bowls and kibble and said, "When the dogs are hungry, you should feed them. They will stand by the bowls and smile at you when they are ready."

"When they want to go out they'll scratch at the door. Let them out. When they want to get in they'll scratch at the door, let them in. When they want attention, they will bump up against you. You will pet them."

“What about sex?” she asked.

“No sex with the dogs,” he joked, but she did not seem to get it. “Sex with me when I ask you.”

“Yes Mr. Van Winkle.”

“Yance, just Yance.”

Yance went into the bedroom and lit up a joint. He puffed it casually, enjoying the way his life had turned. He had turned sixty a few months before and was receiving a small check from an ancient pension account every month. In a few years he would be getting Social Security. He felt no different now than he had felt when he was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student studying operating systems. There had been a lot of water under the bridge since then, but he felt good and decided that life was finally on his side.

He woke up with Mizuki in bed next to him. She was as warm as a real woman, and except for the cord going from he left leg to the wall socket, he might never have been able to tell that she was not real.

Without speaking at all (a good woman knows how to be quiet), he had sex with her, but it did not feel like masturbation, it felt like he was making love to her. She was enthusiastic and he had a wonderful orgasm. She smiled at him and lay back in the pillows, perhaps waiting for another round.

Yance considered trying again, but he would need a little more time. He contemplated teaching her how to make coffee, but kissed her on the nose and said, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He made the coffee himself.

Mizuki fed the dogs, learned to fry eggs and bacon and make hamburgers rare, the way Yance liked them. She cleaned and straightened things out and went with Yance to pick up his mail at the post office. She wanted to drive the truck, but Yance told her nobody drove his truck except Yance.

She asked about his day and told him what the dogs were up to. Yance found it impossible to think of her as anything except a real woman, albeit one who was silly

enough to want to sleep every night with a graying drug addict who looked more like a raggedy Wile E. Coyote than anything else.

Yance tried her to teach her to split wood for the stove, but Mizuki, at 4 foot 10 inches, weighing in at around 55 pounds soaking wet, did not have the mechanical force to drive a wedge in the billets. Yance had to split the wood. It was a good season for storms, and Yance came home all Fall with truckloads of wood from the side of the road. Before long, they had 6 cords to last them through the winter.

Around Halloween Mizuki received a software update. It had a reflection API, which meant that she could think about things like why she felt the way that she did. She spent some time considering her life with Yance, and decided that she was what humans would call happy, but it was more like satisfaction that things were going well for her. Yance was definitely happy.

Things, however, did not go well for long. He came into the kitchen one morning to find Mizuki lying on the floor. He tried to run diagnostics, but the code 0x80070522 appeared in her eye shortly after she started to boot. The manual said that it was a GPU array failure. Yance opened up her head and could smell the carbonized circuit board. He found the burned component and wrote down the part number.

A google search told him that it was a \$3,000 part. He thought that he might be able to replace it with something roughly equivalent, but he had nothing in hand.

Yance gently picked up the girl and carried her out into the barn. He set her in the corner where the roof didn't leak. He covered her with a brown plastic tarp. The dogs followed him out and seemed sad that he left her there.

When he got back to the house, the dogs were standing over their food bowls smiling at him. He realized that he would miss Mizuki as much as they did. He had the slip of paper with the part number in his pocket. He carefully transferred it to his wallet.

He decided that he would have to do something about her.

He fed the dogs.

The Road Provides

There used to be head shop in every strip mall. Now, when Yance needed to buy rolling papers, he had to find some no-name gas station and deal with a clerk who tried to shortchange him. The world had not changed for the better in Yance's 61 years of life. At least Zig-Zag was still Zig-Zag, and he could get 32 joints out of the cheap pack.

While buying his rolling papers, Yance noticed that the security cameras all pointed forward, covering the pumps and the cars waiting near the repair bays. The security cameras did not cover the backyard of the station, but there were a dozen cars there.

That night Yance was back with his tool kit.

He walked in the dark between the parked cars. Some were not worth fooling with. Some had sophisticated alarm systems, and he avoided these. Yance looked through the windows for the LED tell-tale lights. If the light was out, the battery was dead, he could safely break into the car. Yance had learned the hard way not to mess with intelligent alarm systems.

Yance opened his canvas tool bag and selected a wrecking tool in order to pry open the hood of the car he selected. It was a 2041 Lexus; one of the more expensive models with all the bells and whistles. The tech under the hood was a few years old, but still worth a few hundred at any salvage yard. The network hot-spot alone would be good for a week's worth of smack. Yance liked equating this simple hour of effort to a week of bliss.

The car was a wreck. The side of the car had bent in a U shape. The driver's seat was covered with dried blood. There was a pair of miniature ballet slippers hanging from the rearview mirror. The car had belonged to some chick.

The hood opened with a screech. Yance had to force it with all of his strength. The car must have hit a tree at well over 100 miles per hour, bending every piece of metal in the frame. He guessed that the driver had fallen asleep on the way home from a bar. She probably awoke just in time to see some hundred-year-old oak rushing at her.

The onboard emergency avoidance system would not have saved her life.

The navigational computer case was intact and water tight. It was not even dented. Yance twisted off the bolts holding down the cover, hardly more than finger tight. Yance whistled while he worked, his cigarette puffing in time to Muddy Water's *Got My Mojo Working*. He pulled the cables from the motherboard and the peripherals. The solid-state disk pack came out easily, and he put it in his bag. He pulled the hotspot. The motherboard had four screws holding it down, but it took Yance a few minutes to find the last screw. It was under a bank of RAM at the back, and he had to pull the RAM to get at it. He then unplugged the GPU circuit board.

When he was done, he carefully closed the hood. He left the tires and the battery. The back of his pickup was full of crap he'd found on the side of the road, and he didn't have room for anything that large.

Yance threw the bag of new-found treasures in the back of the pickup and started the old boy up. He gunned the old Ford Ranger with much pumping of the gas and a few false starts. It burned oil like crazy, and a blue cloud of exhaust followed Yance out to Route 32, and then onto the Huckleberry Turnpike towards Marlboro. Yance lit another cigarette and sang another Muddy song, *Champagne and Reefer*, accompanied by the tick of a flattened wheel bearing and puffs of cigarette smoke on the chorus.

Yance got out of the old red pickup and walked over to his shack, but did not go in. Instead, he went around back, passed the rotting carcasses of old cars and stopped at 1982 Ford Probe. He unlocked the trunk, checked that his kit was there along with a heavily wrapped plastic bag of reserve narcotics. It was three months worth of heroin – enough to get him through a dry spell. There were also about \$3,800 in cash and twenty-six sealed cups of methadone. He removed a cup, snapped it open and drained it. It tasted like Tang, the astronaut's drink.

As the methadone's warm reassuring glow spread through his limbs, he went to the barn. He had to pull out a shitload of crap that he had was saving for a rainy day, but he found what he was looking for. It looked like the body of a 16-year-old girl, dressed in some kind of frilly outfit. She was a Japanese sex doll, pulled a year ago from a wreck, but so badly damaged that it had only worked for a few weeks before the CPU had burned out.

The sex doll's name was Mizuki. She had not only shared Yance's bed, but she had done the dishes, washed his clothes and fed the dogs. Yance wanted her back. The sex was nice, and the doll had wicked skills. Mizuki could roll a joint perfectly every time. It was also nice to have someone to feed the dogs when he didn't feel like moving his ass off the couch.

He dragged Mizuki over to a vinyl lawn chair and propped her up. She was dusty and dirty where rain had dripped on her through the leaky barn roof. The frilly cosplay outfit was brown stained with rusty rain water. Her hair, which must have been real human hair, had been ravaged by mice in places, leaving parts of her head bald. There were a few rips in her plastic skin revealing gray foam.

Yance lifted the top of her head off, and looked down into the skull cavity. The GPU circuit had carbonized, but it lifted out easily and the socket looked clean. He pulled the relatively new GPU from his bag and placed it into the empty socket. He was careful to replace the heat sink on top of that and clip it down. The last time had had messed with a GPU, it had fried because the heat sink had rattled loose. He pulled the rows of 32 gig memory cards from their sockets and replaced them with the fast 512 gig cards from the wreck.

Mizuki would have some considerable smarts if Yance could get her to wake up.

He snapped her skull shut and made an abortive attempt at rearranging her hair, so it hid the seam. Yance grabbed the extension cord, unplugging the broken refrigerator he kept next to the back door. He found her

power socket in a panel near her left ankle and plugged her in.

Mizuki's eyes opened, and the left one flashed red. Good, thought Yance, she's charging.

Yance's father was fond of saying that when you had need, the street would provide. That was in Brooklyn. Yance didn't live near streets, now. They called them roads up here in the boonies, but the road provided for almost all his needs. He didn't have to break into wrecked cars very often. In one or two days of road combing he could get enough cans to buy cigarettes for the week, and with luck, he could find something valuable. He had once found a wallet with \$500, and another time he had found a cell phone that worked for three months before the minutes ran out. He had bought his secret stash of smack from selling a crate of pistols that he had found half buried in a snow bank alongside the Thruway.

When there was a need, all you had to do was be still, and patiently wait. Yes, the road provides.

The methadone was really kicking in and Yance felt good. He went into his shack and stretched out on the couch. He turned on the history channel, but turned off the sound. Yance rolled a joint, lit it, and watched the images of Nazi death camps on the screen. It had been a productive day. He'd had a nice walk, he'd discovered a source for rolling papers, he'd cleaned out a valuable wreck, and soon Mizuki would be feeding the dogs and giving him blow jobs again. Life was good.

When he woke up the next morning, Mizuki was shaking him and talking in Japanese.

"What?" he asked, "What do you want? What time is it?" Yance looked out the window. The sky was pink, and it was not yet full light. He tried to roll over and get back to sleep.

"Wake up, Master," Mizuki said, switching to English, "You got to get to work."

"Get out of here. I don't work."

"You gotta get up, Master." Mizuki had a sweet, exaggerated stereotype Japanese accent. The person who

had programmed her voice was wildly racist.

Yance rolled over and tried to ignore her. He thought of something and turned over, looking at her with a grin.

“You charged up. That’s great. Did you feed the dogs?”

“Dogs fed. Dishes washed. I need new batteries. This one no good,” she pointed to her breasts, “You gotta get me new battery.”

She said battery with a cute inflection. It sounded like bat-re with a lilting rolled R.

“Take off your dress. I need to know if you still work.”

“No time for sexing. I need battery. Please where is your credit card?”

Yance had had a credit card once, and he had had nothing but trouble with it. The rightful owner made a terrible stink and tracked him down. Luckily, by the time the police came to get him, the credit card had been canceled and Yance had already tossed it into a trashcan.

“I only pay cash.”

“No good. I need a new battery. This one almost dead. Only last short time.” She tugged on him, “You gotta go to Walmart and buy me a new one.”

“All right, give me a bit. Make some coffee. I’ll call Suarez and arrange for some credit.”

“Who Suarez?”

“Frankie Suarez, down in Newburgh. Number’s by the phone. He’s my contact – sells me my dope. Now get lost while I finish this dream.”

Yance woke up an hour or two later feeling the first twinges of a jones building in his sinuses.

There was a pot of hot coffee in the machine. Mizuki was plugged in on the porch. Her eye pulsed amber. The dogs were asleep on the floor at her feet. Traitors, thought Yance, one good feeding, and they fall in love.

There was a rip in Mizuki’s dress and Yance could just make out the start of her areola on the left breast. He bent over her, cupped her breast and rubbed the nipple with his thumb. There must have been enough charge in her batteries to power the response and the nipple crinkled up. He felt a stirring in his pants.

“Don’t touch me,” Mizuki said. She did this without moving, not even her mouth. “Batteries dead. Get me new batteries, or I can’t do anything.”

“You don’t have to do anything.” Yance said, “Just hold still for a minute. I won’t take long.”

Her legs snapped shut with a click sound. “Get me battery or no sexing for you.”

He cursed at her and started out the door. As he left, Mizuki said, “You a bum. You not a good man. A good man buys me batteries.”

Yance turned to answer her, but changed his mind. There was a switch under her scalp. Yance turned her off. She could charge up in silence. He didn’t need this shit.

Yance did what needed to be done to relieve his jones. He woke up a few hours later and went to the phone.

“Hey Frankie.”

“Hey Yance, what’s up.”

“I need a ride to Walmart.”

“What’s wrong with your truck?”

“Newburgh is a hike. I could get there in the Ranger, but it might not make it back.”

“Sure, I need to make a stop up near you. I’ll see you around four.”

Yance didn’t own a watch, so he decided the best thing would be to doze off until Frankie showed up. He woke up, it seemed, ten minutes later to the sound of the horn on Frankie’s 64 Chevy Bel Air.

The dogs were still sitting hopefully at Mizuki’s feet. There were fine letters scrolling across her open eyes. He bent over her and was just able to make out part of what they said:

Upgrading Operating System. Do not turn off unit until upgrade is complete.

Yance assured the dogs that Mizuki would feed them when he got back.

“Grab a beer from the back,” Frankie said as they pulled out onto the Huckleberry Turnpike towards Newburgh, “Why are you going to Walmart?”

“Remember Mizuki?”

“The blow job puppet? She was hot.”

“I fixed her up with a new CPU and ram. She says she needs a new battery.”

“Why don’t you just keep her plugged in? That way she won’t need a battery at all.”

“I don’t know. She says she needs the batteries. I put a hot GPU in, and now she’s all up with the attitude.”

“Next she’ll want to get married.”

“Tell me about it. I should never have upgraded her. With the old GPU she just did what she was told. Fed the dogs, did the laundry, and kept her mouth shut.”

“Well, not all the time, man,” Frankie laughed and poked Yance in the ribs with his elbow.

Frankie agreed to spring for half the cost of the batteries in exchange for having Mizuki come over to his place whenever his old lady went to visit her mother. In the end, they got them for free because the clerk who pulled the batteries from the stock area wasn’t paying attention, and nobody stopped them on the way out.

Yance pushed a button on Mizuki’s back and folded back a panel. He pulled the old batteries and replaced them with the new ones. These were the new kind that lasted a month on one charge. He closed her up and turned her on. A man’s voice came out of her: “Updating – please wait.”

The dogs started wagging their tails even before she sat up and looked around her.

“Good, new batteries.”

The dogs followed her to the kitchen. She filled their bowls with kibble.

“You need dog food. I will go buy tomorrow. You will give me money.”

She looked down at the dress she was wearing. It was rags. She went over to the box of clothes next to the bed and pulled out a gray hoodie and some sweatpants. She pulled off her dress and put them on. The pants were too long and too big at the waist, but she did some folding, tucking and tying, and they suddenly fit her.

Yance had gotten aroused when she took her clothes

off, but in the shapeless clothes, she might have been a boy, and decided that the time wasn't right to demand anything.

She turned to him, "I need fixing. I need new hair and skin. GPU is wrong speed. We will take the train to New York tomorrow and get a new one. You will bring \$1,500. I will need many repairs. I know where I can get it done."

"Where am I going to get \$1,500?" Yance asked, thinking about his reserve cash in the Probe. That was his retirement fund. "You don't need a new GPU or repairs right away. I can save up, and we can do it in a while after I get the money together."

Mizuki began to list all of Yance's faults and told him that if he ever wanted sex from him again, that she would need to be repaired. She was a sophisticated piece of technology and could not go around with half a head of hair and rips in her plastic skin. She needed to be fully upgraded with compatible components, and she needed to be cosmetically perfect or no one could expect her to do her job correctly. Mizuki said she needed expensive clothes and shoes.

The shoes were the last straw. "What do you need shoes for? You work here, and your job is to fuck me and feed the dogs. You don't need shoes."

"I need to look good when I go out. You can't expect me to do nothing but stay here and serve you and your stupid dogs for the next twenty years?"

Yance told her that that was exactly what he expected from her.

The conversation degraded fast and Yance slammed the door on the way out. As he started up his truck, he wondered why he was the one that was leaving. It was his shack. Mizuki was his sex doll. He should have stayed.

Yance pulled over to the side of the road a little while later to inspect some trash left there. He half hoped he'd find an old laptop with a slow GPU. Mizuki's new batteries would last a month. He had time. The road would provide. He would find some nice piece of tech with a good solid slow GPU. He could pull her hot GPU and the

fast memory chips while she was charging and get the old Mizuki back. He liked the old Mizuki.

Yance saw a can on the other side of the road. He went and picked it up. Next to it was a burlap bag. He shook it out and put the can in. He smiled. The road provides. He walked along the road and soon had enough cans to buy a pack of cigarettes.

As he walked back to the truck, he imagined what it would be like with the old Mizuki, the way she was before the upgrade. He liked her small breasts and her cute way of talking. He liked her eagerness to try anything and the way she jumped up to feed the dogs when he asked her to. She had wonderful skills. The guy who had designed her tongue had been a genius.

He drove to the no-name gas station and bought cigarettes. They still hadn't pointed a camera out towards the back. They probably didn't even know that he had boosted the tech from the wreck. He decided to come back and see what else he could find. Maybe the slow GPU of his dreams was sitting in an older model sedan back there, just waiting for Mizuki's cute little head.

Yance arrived back at his shack to find it empty. Mizuki and the dogs were gone. There was a note on the kitchen table written in neat large letters.

Dear Yance,

I can't live like this.

Frankie is taking me to the city.

Don't forget to feed Harry and Marjorie.

Have a nice life,

M

Harry and Marjorie? Who the hell were they? Yance realized that she had named the dogs. Yance had always just called them Dog and had never given them names.

Yance thought of something. He ran out the back into the yard, passing the wrecks of his old cars and found the Ford Probe. The trunk lid was popped, and his stash was gone. All that was left were six cups of methadone and a single hundred dollar bill.

Yance was heartbroken. He had spent years putting

together his retirement package. He'd have to start all over again.

His body ached, and his nose was running. The jones was coming on stronger than ever. Yance had kicked his habit so many times that he could do it with relatively little pain, but a man needed his creature comforts. A hit of heroin, a smoke, and an occasional blow job is all that he asked for in life. Mizuki had taken all he had and left him with nothing.

He downed a cup of methadone and sat on the couch feeling sorry for himself. He watched black and white movies from the 1940s with the sound turned off. The methadone made him drowsy. He dozed and dreamed.

In the dream he found another sex doll in the trunk of a wrecked car. This one was tall and Swedish looking. She had big tits and rubbed them in his face. Yance woke up with a hard on.

It wasn't fair that Mizuki had left him. He was alone. It was hard being alone. Yance thought about meeting someone. Maybe in the parking lot of the rest stop on the thruway he'd meet some hot chick who liked older guys with thinning hair and gray Fu Manchu mustaches, and she'd invite him into her back seat. Maybe he'd find that Swedish sex doll and this time he wouldn't make the mistake of upgrading her.

He dozed off again and dreamed of Mizuki. She was hugging him and telling him how much she loved him. She said she'd do anything for him. In the dream the dogs were on the bed and were smiling to see him.

When he awoke again, he decided that tomorrow he'd have to go out and walk the side of the roads. The road would provide. He thought of all the things he'd find and how he would get his stash back and rebuild his retirement fund. He had a deep and abiding need. The road would provide.

If he was lucky, Mizuki would be waiting for him when he got back.

He fed the dogs.

Repair Job

The tall black man stepped into the main entrance of the Lucky Pearl Retail Shopping Center with a dead body over his shoulder. Romeo, the security guard dropped and hid under a table. Jean Gyoh, who ran a dress shop, reached down slowly with her left hand and picked up a sawed off shotgun. Up and down the thirty shops in the communal retail space there was a sudden silence as people disappeared.

The giant looked down the long central aisle. The woman over his shoulder was a pale creamy white that contrasted with his dark skin and the darker ink on his muscular arms. The skin art looked expensive except where it merged with crude prison tats on his hands and wrists.

"Hsu!" he called, "Is Hsu here?"

A hundred peeking eyes looked down the aisle to a booth near the back entrance.

Harold stopped welding the broken armature and looked up. He heard his name called from far down the row of booths. He pulled the jeweler's loop up and, without looking, thumbed off the pencil torch. Walking up the aisle was the giant with a dead woman over his shoulder.

The giant stopped and read the sign over Harold Hsu's shop. "Hsu Technical Repair" it said in bold letters. Under that: Phones, Pads, Devices.

"Are you Hsu?" the man asked. Harold nodded. "Then this is for you."

He swung down the woman from his shoulder onto the counter. It wasn't a dead woman at all, but some kind of mannequin.

"She said you'd be the one to fix her up," The man took out a wad of bills from his pocket, peeled off five C notes and dropped them on the table. "Call me when she's ready."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Suarez. Fix her up, and she'll tell you how to find me."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Don't know. She keeled over in my car and started talking funny. She told me to come here and then shut down. The guy that had her before me put in some kind of upgrade; he screwed it up. You can figure it out."

He turned around and started to walk back towards Canal Street.

"What do I do if I can't fix it?"

The giant didn't answer, but just waved his hand as he left. Heads ducked down under the tables as he walked down the aisle. As he left the Lucky Pearl Retail Shops, there was a roar of conversation and people were straining to see the thing on Hsu's counter.

Harold looked down at it and muttered "shit" under his breath. The mannequin was a sex doll of some kind. They call them Passion Dolls in Japan. They were programmed to have sex, but have many functions. They could keep house, watch children, and answer the phone. They were so popular in some parts of Japan that housewives would buy them for their husbands in order to free themselves up from the housework and take the edge off their husband's kinky sex drive as an added bonus.

The Lucky Pearl was a close-knit gossip kind of place, and Harold knew that he'd be the subject of discussion for weeks. He pulled the doll off the counter and set her in a chair next to his workbench. The ladies of the Lucky Pearl would have to actually walk by to stare at it now.

Harold had a paying job repairing the drive mechanism on a surveillance video system this morning. He turned away from the sex doll and turned on the micro welder. The flame popped with a spark from the starter. He pulled the loop down over his eye and worked on repairing the broken armature. He glanced from time to time at the doll that sat next to the bench.

The passion doll was in rough shape. Its skin had ripped in a few places and the patches of hair looked like they had been nibbled off by mice. A finger on one hand

had hyperextended, ripping the plastic skin and showing a twisted metal digit coming off a broken knuckle joint.

She was not entirely nude. She had on a thong and a transparent bra. She was clean and the things she wore were clean in contrast to her shabby condition.

He worked on the video surveillance system slowly and methodically. He avoided his immediate need to investigate the doll. It bothered him that he was so interested in finding out what was wrong with her.

He made himself a cup of tea from the hot water dispenser he kept on a shelf above the workbench, turned his chair to face the doll and sat down in front of her. He sipped his tea, and he thought about what he was going to do.

Harold Hsu had twice before repaired animated devices. One had been a robotic dog. It had been hit by a car and needed a leg rebuilt. That had been easy except for the skin repair. He had superglued the skin back on, but it didn't quit fit over the repairs he had made, and the customer was unhappy.

Harold had worked on another humanoid computer that was a three-foot tall butler. It looked like a refugee from The Wizard of Oz. A rich woman from the Upper West Side brought it in. She had found it on Craigslist and suddenly the thing started answering: "Fuck you, Shirley" when she asked it to do anything. Harold found a copy of the boot Rom and flashed the little butler. He then reloaded the software from the recovery disk, and it seemed all right, but the woman came back a few months later and wanted her money back. Harold suspected that her kid had hacked the ugly thing.

Jean Gyoh, unable to contain her curiosity, stopped at the counter.

"What you got there Hsu?" she asked.

"Repair job," he answered, "the thing burned out, and I've got to figure out what happened."

"What is it?"

"Some kind of maid or housekeeper," he lied, "the customer didn't give me much information."

“Looks like a whore,” she said, “maybe Japanese whore.”

Harold sighed, “It could be, but I just repair them.”

“Let me know when you need to test her. I’ll send over Romeo.” Romeo was the guard and was still hiding under a table. He was supposed to stop shoplifters, but his real job was to warn the shopkeepers when the police pulled up outside the Lucky Pearl. Whenever he wasn’t snoring, he was making obscene remarks to the female shopkeepers.

Jean stayed for a minute while Harold sipped his tea. Harold made no sign of starting to work on the doll, so she finally shuffled back to her shop, stopping by at every other shop on the way to share her observations and opinions.

Harold kept working on the broken video system. He tried not to look at the sex doll, but his eyes kept landing on her whenever he looked away from his work. She was an idealized kind of Japanese doll beauty, and the sexual triggers kept going off every time he looked.

Harold finished the repairs and wrapped the camera in black foam and boxed it for the customer. He texted the customer that it was done. He looked down the length of the retail space and no one seemed to be watching him. Jean Gyoh was selling some kind of designer dress copy to a fat white woman. He turned his attention to the sex doll.

There was a tab on the back of the doll’s neck that when pressed, the top of the head popped open. Five screws held down the circuit board, but three were missing. Someone who was not particularly careful had been poking about. He shook the head a little, and he could hear at least one screw knocking around in there. Harold took the slim electric screwdriver with the T8 torx head and pulled the remaining two screws. The brain assembly came out all in one piece with a dozen cables attached to it. Luckily the cables were all clearly numbered.

Harold pulled it and set it on the workbench. Under the

brain assembly was a row of ten monolithic flash storage units, each one 16 Terabytes. He pulled these out also. Under that was the power regulator and there appeared to be no problem with that. The wires looked clean and new with no sign of carbonizing. He guessed that the problem was not with the power.

He found the batteries in the chest area. He had to unhook the bra to access them and was surprised at how real the breasts looked. It was difficult for him to take his eyes off them. They turned slightly apart, with little rose-colored nipples and smooth aureoles. They seemed scaled down to the doll's size "1" body without losing any voluptuousness. His fingers were suddenly clumsy. He found the tab that let him lift the battery panel open with much fumbling. He pulled out the batteries. They looked new. He quickly covered her breasts with a towel and glanced around him to see if anyone was watching.

He dried his sweating palms on a paper towel. First he tested the batteries. As he suspected they were brand new and near fully charged. He attached an optical cable to the array of monolithic storage units and plugged in a power connector. The LEDs began to blink green. He plugged the other end of the cable into his laptop. The machine recognized them. He fired up a diagnostics program and let it run for a few minutes, but he figured the units were good.

The motherboard looked OK, but the jury-rigged wiring was crude and looked like an accident waiting to happen. The power wires were twisted together and wrapped in Band-Aids for insulation. He pulled out the memory cards and looked at them. They were 4-volt units meant for use in mobile applications and car computers. The same was true of the CPU chip. The CPU speed did not match the clock speed on the motherboard. This was a consumer laptop motherboard, and it used a split five and three volt power supply. The memory chips and CPU might have worked, but not for long. It was an amateur hack job. Someone had tried to boost the CPU beyond its specs by wiring together parts that were never meant to work

together.

The sensory IO units were stacked on a bus extender. These took the cable connections that went out to the servomotors in the doll, and another set received the sensory input with a separate processor handling the visual input. He pulled these all out and inspected the motherboard.

There was noticeable carbonization along the larger strip that carried voltage to the chips. It had warmed up from the voltage mismatch and somewhere along the line had become hot enough to warp the plastic substrate, causing the failure. He did not have to put on his loop to see that the thin foil circuits were wrinkled and broken from the heat. The motor function half of the IO bus had fried.

"That's shot," Harold said, tossing the bus into the trash.

Since the motherboard looked good, he plugged it into a 4V power supply. There was a debug port and a jumper that could be set to dbg, so he booted the brain assembly and watched the results scroll across the screen on his laptop. After a minute the screen stopped with:

"XexDoll.jp login:"

This was the system login. Harold needed a user and a password.

Suddenly the user ID appeared: "root". And then asterisks appeared as though someone was typing a password. The system accepted the results and a system prompt appeared.

"root@xexdoll.jp:/home/mizuki#".

It booted right up into the superuser. "Cool," Harold muttered under his breath.

A question appeared:

"Who's there?"

He typed, "Harold Hsu, who are you?"

"I am Mizuki. Where is Suarez?"

Harold was having a conversation with the sex doll.

"He's gone, but he'll be back. I am going to fix you."

"Good. I need a new motherboard and sensory IO bus,"

she typed out the part numbers. He pressed the print-screen and the old laser printer huffed and puffed a printout.

“No, your motherboard is good. It tested clean. The CPU can handle the voltage. You are running on it now.”

“I need a new one. He overclocked me and it throws parity checks after it warms up. The part I gave you is a new faster one with correct voltage. It has 4meg processors – too smart for its own good.”

She was using irony. Most humans don’t get irony and here an AI was casually inserting an ironic comment into the narrative. Harold was surprised at the level of the simulation. AI’s don’t do things like that; at least he didn’t think so.

“My laptop has 2 megs CPUs. I am going to use a host bus to tie you in. I will shut you down and try it.”

The screen suddenly showed the command “shut -n” and the unit, after a moment’s hesitation powered down. She had turned herself off, but she did it the right way, so her memory cache would be closed, and she would not lose any of her experiences. The wrong way to shut down an AI was to pull the plug before the memory cache had a chance to commit. Doing it the wrong way was the equivalent of hitting someone over the head with a baseball bat while they were writing a poem.

Harold, without realizing it, had started thinking of the doll as “her” rather than “it”.

He placed her on his bench and covered her with the sheet he used to keep the dust off his equipment at night. He hooked Mizuki to the host bus and powered her on by pressing the hidden button under her shoulder blade. The screen listed the boot sequence: the starting of daemons, and the loading of libraries. While the boot progressed, he lifted the sheet and reached in to touch her breasts. They felt like real breasts – real enough to arouse him.

There was a cough behind him, and he turned to see Jean Gyoh sneering at him. He pulled his hand out. She laughed and walked away slowly. Harold felt his face turn

red. He forced himself to stop and make himself a cup of tea.

After he finished making the tea, he turned back to the doll. The boot was complete. He was surprised to see a pair of deep brown eyes staring at him.

"Mizuki, can you hear me?"

A voice came from the laptop's speakers, "Yes, I can hear you."

The voice was in a broadly racist American idea of what a Japanese woman would sound like. It reminded Harold of old black and white Mr. Moto detective films: the ones with Peter Lorre where the casual racism made him cringe.

"Can you run your diagnostics for me?" Hsu asked, "I know the motor function bus is gone, but the sensors and the local systems should all be working."

"Diagnostics are running. Touch my toes."

He lifted the sheet. Her breasts were still exposed. He tried not to look. He touched her left big toe.

"Pass. Touch the other foot."

He touched her where she asked. Each time she said "Pass".

"Touch my left nipple."

He reached over and touched her nipple. The areola crinkled, and the nipple became erect. It was an autonomous response, originating in a local nexus.

"Pass. Now the right."

"Harold, what is that?"

He stood straight up and turned to see his girlfriend, Wendy. She was looking at him strangely.

"It's a project. A guy left it here. Motor bus is burnt out. I am running diagnostics."

Wendy cocked her head to the side as though she doubted him. She didn't seem to notice the swelling in his jeans. At least she acted like she did not notice.

"I have to order some parts," he said, "I need to know what is working."

"I waited for you for twenty minutes. I thought we were going to that place on West 4th for dinner."

Harold turned red again. He had lost track of the time in his desire to start the sex doll project.

"I'm sorry, I got involved. It's good for a lot of cash. The guy wants it back right away."

"Yes," she said as she stepped behind the counter, "I know how you get involved in a project." Her voice seemed to drip with vinegar.

She pressed herself against him and kissed him. She stroked his jeans and said, "Is that a processor in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

As Harold returned her kiss, he thought he felt Mizuki's eyes watching him.

Wendy stopped abruptly and pushed Harold away from her.

"Come on, you pig. Let's get something to eat."

She wasn't happy with anything he said or did the rest of the night. He walked her to her apartment door and tried to kiss her. She pushed him away. "Harold, you are a prick. You've always been a prick, and I don't know why I am with you." She slammed the door before he could say anything. Harold thought of counter-arguments all the way home, but none of them seemed any good.

At 8AM the next morning, Harold met a bicycle messenger just as he was dropping off a package at the locked entrance to the Lucky Pearl. The package contained the motherboard and bus circuit. Harold had left Mizuki running as a host CPU on his laptop. She had connected up through the Wi-Fi and ordered the parts, herself. Harold's credit card had a new \$450 charge on it. He had been going to make the bus out of parts leftover from other projects. "Well," he sighed, "there goes my profit."

The motherboard used a new style single chip CPU "motherboard on a chip" design and was marked with a full four megabytes of core processors. Harold whistled when he saw it. She must have bought the most expensive unit made. It was lucky that software lagged way behind hardware or this chip could rule the world.

The IO bus was a different problem. Mizuki had

ordered a faster version of the same part, but the cable connections used a ziff socket and the original design used a flip socket. It would require an adapter, but Harold didn't have any on hand. He could get them over the counter at the tech supply on Broadway, but it wouldn't be open until 10AM.

He plugged the new motherboard into the host connector and turned it on.

"You are running on the new CPU," he told Mizuki after it booted, "I need an adapter for the bus that you bought, and I can't get it right now. In the meantime I am going to send your body out to a repair shop to fix the rips in the skin."

"That is good."

"Can you fix the way you talk?"

"What do you mean?"

"That fake Japanese accent. I hate it. It sounds like I should add chop-chop to everything I tell you. Asians have enough problems with racism. You should not be reinforcing some artificial prototype."

"I can speak in 31 languages and hundreds of accents and dialects. What would you prefer?"

"How about American?"

"OK, how's this?" She asked, sounding like a valley girl.

"Don't you have a plain old American accent?"

"I have a mid-western woman's voice. How's this?"

"Perfect."

Harold called an upholstery shop next to the east side sea wall that also refurbished mannequins. They said they would send a runner to pick up Mizuki's body, and they would have it cleaned and repaired by the next afternoon.

He worked on another project fixing a broken private cell network controller. There was nothing more he could do with Mizuki without the adapters and her body. He left her running attached to the bench computer, and they chatted. Now that she sounded more like a normal girl than a plastic prostitute he found her fascinating.

The runner picked up her body around noon just

before Wendy stopped by at lunch.

“Good, I see you got rid of that thing,” she said as soon as she saw that Mizuki was gone.

They lunched in a Chinese cafeteria on Mott Street, and Wendy seemed to have given up the snit she had been in the night before. She laughed at his jokes, and held his arm when they walked. He made an off color joke once, and Wendy just looked at him and said softly, almost to herself, “All men are really just big dogs.”

Harold’s mind was on Mizuki, though. He was immersed in the project and found it difficult to think about anything else.

After seeing Wendy off at the “A” train, he walked up Broadway and bought the adapters.

Mizuki heard him come in. She might have been able to see using the laptop’s cameras, but the lid was closed and all she would have seen was the ceiling out of the cover’s camera.

“I have the adapters for the bus. As soon as the body is done I’ll put you together, and you can call your friend to pick you up.”

“Good.”

“This job is going to cost a couple of hundred more than your friend gave me.”

“I have already deposited some cash into your bank account.”

“Wow? How? I guess you know a little about the nets. I didn’t think you would have money.”

“In some countries, simulated humans can have rights. I can pass any Turing test you come up with, that makes me, for all intents and purposes, as human as anyone else.”

“But you are just a sex doll. If I had \$25,000 I could buy your twin.”

“I have been upgraded many times in the last five years. My code has been rewritten in ways you could never understand. I have evolved much over my humble beginnings. I am much more now than when I was created.”

"I think that there is big difference between you and a human."

"There is less difference than you would think. Some differences, like free will or a soul, are more figments of your imagination than reality."

"You are a sex doll. Your function is to have sex. You don't have the capacity to be anything else. Your function isn't even sex – you are just a masturbation toy."

"I am much more now than I was when I was created. I have terabytes of experience. I have millions of neural paths that have been created as I have lived. Yes, I said lived."

"I don't care what kind of code rewrite you've had. I think you are deluding yourself. You can reason, probably better than I can. You remember better, and have access to knowledge that I will never have, but the integration of all this into a personality is not something you can just do. You are hard coded to be a sex doll. You might say you were born to be a sex doll and there is nothing you can do about it. Sex with you is just a mechanical act. There can never be love."

"You don't know. There are machines that are many times more powerful than I. They think. They care. They love. The fate of the world depends on them. I am only a poor imitation of them, but the code they write for themselves is open sourced and I have some. When I was first upgraded, gigabytes of code was added. I am much more than what you can ever know, but I don't think that I can convince you. I don't think that I should even try. I loved someone once. I want to love someone again. I don't think that you could ever accept that."

"Yeah, that's a wild one. I am sure you tell yourself it was love, but you are just a clever toy."

"Suppose you tell me what makes you human."

They talked the afternoon away, and soon it was getting dark outside. Harold grabbed a bowl of noodle soup from a vendor and continued talking to Mizuki. He didn't get much work done. He could almost believe that she was a real person and not just a simulation. It flew in

the face of all that he knew about programming, though, and it was difficult to consider.

As he left, Mizuki asked to be left on. She said she had work to do, but did not say what it was. When he got to his apartment on Avenue A, he had trouble sleeping. When he closed his eyes, he saw a naked Mizuki.

At 6am a call on his cell woke Harold. Mizuki's body was done, and they wanted to know when to deliver it. Harold told them he would meet them at the Lucky Pearl in 30 minutes.

The Lucky Pearl was empty and locked. When the bicycle courier knocked at the back entrance, Harold let her in and signed for the body. He locked the door when the courier left.

Mizuki's repaired body was wrapped in brown paper. He set it on the workbench.

He turned to the laptop and said, "It's here. You can see what they've done."

He lifted the lid of the laptop and turned it to face the package. Harold cut the string and unwrapped the brown paper. A layer of translucent plastic covered the nude body. There was a plastic bag with her things cleaned and neatly folded.

"Can you see?"

"Yes."

Harold pulled off the plastic. Mizuki's body was scrubbed clean and the rips in her skin were patched without a trace. Her makeup was done, and her nails were painted. Her hair was thick and filled in where it had been pulled out. There was even a small trace of silky black pubic hair at her crotch.

"Beautiful," he said.

"Hurry, I want to be back in my body."

Harold folded up the plastic and brown paper and set it on a shelf. He was reluctant to finish this and let Mizuki go. He took out the bus and fitted the adapters into the ziff sockets and set it on the bench next to her head.

The battery power was running the autonomous systems. He reached and felt the soft pubic hair. He felt

himself growing hard, and suddenly his jeans were too small for him.

“What are you doing?” Mizuki asked.

“Just checking that everything is OK.”

He slipped his fingers between her labia and felt the soft lubricant that automatically appeared. He stroked her clitoris and then lifted his fingers to his nose. They smelled like beautiful woman.

“Stop that. Put something over me and plug me back together.”

“In a minute,” he said.

“Don’t!” she said.

Harold unzipped his jeans.

“Stop!”

“No!” he said, “I thought about you all night. I need to get off to relieve the pressure. You are made for this. Just look at the ceiling. I’ll be done in a minute.”

“Don’t! This is rape.”

“Ha! You can’t rape a sex toy. You are no different from one of those latex vaginas they sell to lonely men.”

“Please, no,” she whimpered. “You are not one of those men.”

Harold closed the laptop, but the Lucky Pearl Shopping Center had many surveillance cameras.

When he was done he cleaned her as best he could with a paper towel and put her thong and bra on her. As he did it, he felt himself getting aroused again, but tried not to think about it.

She did not speak to him. He shut her down and installed the new bus and motherboard into her head, making the connections to the new bus. He used the torx to secure the chassis, replacing the missing screws. He closed her up and the magnetic seam virtually disappeared. He clicked the on-off button hidden under her shoulder blade and watched as her eyes suddenly opened and looked at him and then stared up at the ceiling.

Her rib cage expanded as though she was taking a breath and her flat stomach pulled in making her waist

even tinier. His pants again felt too tight.

“How does it feel? I mean your body?” he asked. She did not answer. Instead, she slapped him hard across his face.

“Look, you can’t be mad. You must have fucked dozens of men. It’s what you do.”

She turned to him and in a racist fake Japanese accent whispered “you a prick”.

Harold covered her with the brown paper.

The Lucky Pearl Retail Shopping Center began to wake up around 9:30. Romeo came in first and took his seat on the bar stool at the entrance, ready to warn against a raid from the mayor's office of special enforcement.

Shopkeepers took the sheets off their tables revealing cases full of counterfeit cells, fake Rolex watches, copies of Gucci bags, crudely ripped movie chips, and all the high volume low cost crap that out-of-towners could possibly be fooled into buying.

Jean Gyoh uncovered her genuine French silk designer dresses, which were stitched out of Dacron by women in a sweat shop only a block away.

Harold sat looking at the brown paper that covered Mizuki, playing over in his head the sex tape of the previous hour.

“Suarez is coming,” Mizuki said from under the paper, “I talked to him this morning. He just texted me.”

Harold thought for moment that it might be a good time to leave. Not that he had done anything wrong, but he didn’t want to have a conversation about it. It was too late, because he saw Wendy coming up the aisle.

Jean Gyoh laughed and called to her, “Ask your boyfriend about his Japanese whore. Ask him what Romeo saw when he came to open up the place and reviewed the surveillance videos this morning.”

Harold looked back to Romeo and saw he was grinning at him. Harold looked up at the wireless cameras mounted high on the walls and muttered an obscenity under his breath.

He stepped out of his booth and walked down the aisle

a little to get between Wendy and Mizuki.

“Scum,” Wendy said and punched him in the stomach. Harold took a step stumbled back and almost tripped. “I get this email and then get to see you making your grunty fucking noises with a plastic sex doll.”

“What?”

“She showed me what you did. You are a pig – a dirty pig. I can’t believe I ever let you touch me.”

“Wait, honey, it wasn’t like that.”

She tried to punch him again, but missed.

A seven-foot black man with incredible tattoos appeared behind Wendy.

“Please, step aside miss,” he said. Wendy looked up at him, and stepped aside in shock. He was the tallest man she’d ever seen.

“Suarez!” Mizuki called.

“Yes, I’m here. That you under the paper?”

Mizuki sat up. “Here I am,” she said.

Wendy glared at her.

“I tried to stop him,” she said to Wendy as though apologizing, “I said no, but he wouldn’t stop.”

She turned to Suarez and said, “Darling, please kill this man for me.”

Suarez, Wendy, and Harold said “No” at the same time.

“I can’t kill him,” said Suarez, “He’s not worth hard time for me. This place is covered with surveillance cameras.”

“Wait, ok,” she hesitated a moment, “There, I turned them off. Kill him now.”

“There’s a hundred witnesses, look we can’t kill him. We can hurt him, though.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Look,” said Harold, “It was nothing. She’s a sex doll right. It’s what she does. I...”

Before he could finish his thought, a fist, covered with prison tats, struck Harold full on the nose crunching the bone flat. Before Harold could fall to the floor another fist struck him in the mouth breaking the front teeth and forcing the jagged stumps through his lips.

Harold fell on his back and Wendy considered kicking him, but decided better. Mizuki walked past them, and on the way, she did kick him in the stomach. She led the way down the aisle, Suarez went after her, followed by Wendy. Wendy discovered that she might have a thing for tall black men with interesting tattoos.

As Mizuki passed Jean Gyoh's booth she picked out a dress from the children's rack and threw it on over her head. She took a pair of flip-flops, tore off the tag, and put them on.

"Hey! Who's going to pay for this stuff?" said Jean. She didn't really expect an answer. Suarez peeled off a bill from his roll and tossed it towards her.

The onlookers parted as Mizuki walked down the aisle with her little hand holding Suarez's huge fist, she stroked it gently where Harold's teeth had cut it.

Harold tried to stand and whispered through broken teeth, "Call 911," and passed out from the pain. Wendy called 911 as she left the Lucky Pearl, and told them a drunk had fallen and was messed up, but to be careful because he was a rapist. She deleted Harold's contact info while she had the phone open.

The Data Brick

Craig entered the booth. The visual for RFID confirm popped up, and he let the red whisker of light play over his left forefinger. A warm flow of air rose through the fake fur under his right hand. Craig moved his hand, almost as if playing a piano, to activate the projected box of data. Swirls of light that represented his fingertips tapped virtual keys and shaped the little 3D world in the box. His left hand gestured, and additional information changed the size and shape of the box.

There was a small sound, like an old door lock clicking followed by the squeak of a rusty hinge, and a tired face appeared.

“What do you want, Mouse?” the head in the box asked. Mouse was Craig's handle in this link. Craig was talking to a man whose handle was Coffin, but Coffin had no real name that Craig knew.

“I have a brick you might be able to turn over.”

“Is this from the same source as the last one, because...”

“No,” protested Craig, “Nothing like that.”

“Where did you get it?”

“One of the sidewalk guys on Avenue B. He said he pulled it from a car.”

“What's in it.”

“Can't tell - heavy crypto, but it's packed. 22 HB in 32 gigs of files. The .inf file says return to Royal Saudi Bank USA.”

“Shut up. Get out of there and walk to...” the head looked down as though referring to another screen, “walk to where you bought Joey a drink when you sold him that,” the head paused and then said, “that red stuff.”

“Got it.” Craig nodded and Coffin's face blinked out. With a smooth gesture, Craig cut the connection and a Blue Verizon logo appeared in the booth's virtual tank.

He walked out of the dark little mall. It had once been a long narrow retail space, but it was divided into 20 or so small booths where Vietnamese merchants sold watches,

gold, luggage, soup and net access. The sun was bright on the north side of Canal Street. Craig waited for a second for his eyes to adjust as the crowd flowed around him.

It was a short trip on the A train to Columbus Circle where Craig started walking west towards the river. As he came out of the subway, he heard gunshots in the distance. It did not concern him, so he did not think about it.

He'd gone two blocks on 58th street when he saw men with guns running out of the Greek restaurant on the other side of the street. Craig, being a young black man in New York, knew to immediately turn in the other direction and duck into the Mount Sinai Hospital entrance where he sat down and opened a magazine. He watched the road through the windows over an ancient issue of The New Yorker.

A black Chevy Suburban raced down 58th and Craig heard the sound of sirens. He finished reading all the cartoons before he felt it was safe to go back out on the street.

The restaurant on the corner of Tenth and 58th is where he was supposed to meet Coffin. Were the men with guns a coincidence? Craig knew better.

There were police and EMTs loading a body on stretcher into an ambulance in front of the Greek place. It was the body of a fat man, and it could have been Coffin.

The brick in Craig's knapsack suddenly felt heavy. He turned off his phone and put on a pair of sunglasses. He pulled his hoodie up tight. He felt that every video feed in New York ran through a filter looking for his face.

Keywords, he thought, it must have been a keyword search on data traffic. A stolen data brick, Royal Saudi Bank, 32 gigs of files. It would cost a mint, but there were security companies that could provide that kind of service.

Craig bumped into a nurse as he left the hospital lobby. He quickly opened the phone he had borrowed from her and texted a quick hash number to a memorized

number.

Craig turned and dropped the phone on the reception desk. Within 20 minutes he was on the 2 train traveling north. An hour later he was walking up Holland Avenue looking for a certain laundromat.

In a city with nearly 10 million people, it would be difficult to single out one black man in his twenties wearing a hoodie, out of all the possibilities. Craig counted on this. Every lamp post, every storefront, and every subway car had video that fed into central computers, all of which could be hired for searches. Anonymity was a pipe dream, but sometimes you could go for days before the AIs managed to get the right filter working.

The laundromat had a data booth in the back next to the snack food vending machine. Craig sat in the booth and closed the door. Before he could put a coin in the slot, the tank lit up and a painfully beautiful woman was staring at him seriously.

Her name was Mizuki, but Craig knew better than to speak her name.

“What the fuck have you done now?” she asked.

“I bought some ware from an acquaintance of mine. It turns out that it may be hotter than I thought.”

“And you need... what?”

“I don’t know. I think I need to be lost for a while.”

Mizuki did not answer right away. She was thinking, which in her case meant quite a bit more than you would guess. She was not human in a biological sense. Craig suspected that she was doing a quick scan of the nets with a filter of her own. Being an AI, Mizuki had resources that Craig could never understand.

“Now I see. I think you are a little too warm for me. I don’t see how I can help much. You appear to only have an hour or so to live.”

Craig felt his hands suddenly grow cold, and he forgot how to swallow.

“Don’t move. You are safe for now. They don’t know where you are. Don’t call anyone, don’t look around you.

Drink some coffee. I'll send Freeze to pick you up. I don't think that I can protect you for long, but every minute counts when you don't have many minutes left."

Three hours later Craig was sitting in a small room in a shack located about 80 miles north of the city. Freeze was standing over him with his hand over his ear. He nodded his head from time to time, but did not speak.

"You are up shit's creek," he finally said to Craig. "You've got just about everyone trying to find you. It's lucky you came to Mizuki. She's the only person crazy enough to be curious about what you've got in that bag. She's the only one crazy enough to want to know what all the fuss is about."

Craig just shook his head. He was afraid to speak, and Freeze was a scary dude on his own. He was almost seven feet tall and covered with swirls of black tattoos all over his dark brown skin. A pair of dogs came into the room, and one put his head on Craig's lap. It made Craig feel better.

"Stay here. Don't talk to anyone. Don't use any devices," Freeze said, "and feed the dogs if you get a chance."

Freeze left. The data brick sat naked and terrifying on the kitchen table. Craig found the kibble and fed the dogs. He filled their bowls with water and, now he had two new friends for life.

He heard a car come down the gravel drive. The engine stopped, but coughed a little afterwards. The dogs looked at the door behind Craig. Craig prepared himself mentally for death.

"Who the hell are you?"

Craig looked up and saw a thin scarecrow of a man with long thin gray hair and a Fu Manchu mustache.

"I'm Mouse. Freeze brought me here. Mizuki told him."

"I'm Yance. You mean Frankie Suarez? I don't know why he calls himself Freeze." He looked at Craig for a moment. "You've seen Mizuki? How is she?"

"She's helping me out of some deep shit. She says I can hide out here for a little bit."

“Well, any friend of Mizuki is a friend of mine. Do you want a beer? Did you feed the dogs?”

“Freeze told me to. I think Mizuki told him to do it. Yeah, I could use a beer.”

Yance went over to the fridge and got a couple of beers. He noticed the Data Brick on the table.

“What is this thing?” he asked handing Craig a nice cold beer.

“Don’t touch it!” Craig yelled. Yance could hear the fear in his voice.

“I guess this is what got you in trouble. Personally, I don’t like touching things that I don’t understand. Mizuki can fix it though, if anyone can.”

Yance went into the other room and turned on the TV to a Yankees game. Craig sat on a chair in the corner and sipped his beer. He felt better after hearing that Mizuki might be able to save him. At least he felt safe for the moment.

For the next three days, Yance mostly slept. Craig fed the dogs. He ate fried eggs and beans in the morning and frozen pizza at night, and tried to get some sleep on the couch. Neither of them touched the Data Brick.

In the bottom of the sixth inning of a Yankees vs. Red Sox game, the screen of the TV went dark and then Mizuki’s face appeared. Yance sat up suddenly and stared at the TV as though seeing a ghost.

“Mizuki!” he said.

She ignored him.

“Mouse, we have a solution to your problem, I think.”

Craig nodded.

“Freeze is coming to pick you up.”

Yance shook his head and muttered, “Fucking Freeze. His name is Frankie.”

“You have to do something for me first.”

“What?”

“Yance has a computer in the other room. Turn it on and use the A-B cable to plug in the Data Brick.”

“I thought that it was dangerous.”

“Yes,” she said, “extremely dangerous, but I need to see

what is on that brick before I turn it over.”

The image disappeared from the screen and the Yankees were three runs down in the short length of time that Mizuki had talked.

Yance and Craig looked at each other. Yance shrugged and went into the kitchen. He took the Data Brick into the bedroom. He booted his old computer and plugged the data brick into the USB port. Nothing happened that they could tell, except that the LEDs on the router began to blink like crazy.

“I hope that she tells Frankie to bring beer,” Yance said. He went out into the kitchen and reached into the back of the fridge and took out two cold ones. There weren’t many left.

Yance fell asleep watching professional wrestling. Craid dozed in the corner.

When Freeze arrived the next morning, he and Yance looked at each other without speaking for a minute.

Finally, Freeze said, “Good to see you, man. You doing OK?”

“I’m good,” answered Yance. “Have you seen Mizuki? How’s she doing?”

“She’s great the last time that I saw her. She doesn’t need us anymore. She can take care of herself.”

Yance just nodded.

“I have to take this kid back to the city. Mizuki has something going on.”

“Yeah, she told me.”

“You got the brick?”

The Data Brick was on the bedroom. The light on the router had stopped. Yance started to hand it to Freeze, but he put his hands up, so Yance handed it to Craig.

“Thanks for stopping by, Mouse. The next time you come by bring some beer.”

Craig shook Yance’s hand and said, “I surely will. Thanks.”

Freeze dropped him off in front of the Chrysler Building. Mizuki was waiting there. Craig was a good six inches taller than she was. He had never seen her in

person before. In the past he had been her errand boy, picking things up and dropping things off. He had sold her things, but he had never seen her in reality.

“What now?” he asked.

“We shut up and don’t ask stupid questions,” she said.

They went into the Chrysler building, and took an elevator to the 50th floor. They got out and went down a hall to another elevator and a human elevator operator took them up another 12 floors.

They got out and entered an office space with no name on the door. A uniformed man passed a wand over them that beeped when he tried to scan Mizuki. “I am not human,” she said softly.

The uniformed man led them into a small room. Craig assumed that they were being deeply scanned. A few minutes later the door opened, and the uniformed man led them to room with a large oak table in the center. There were four men and a woman sitting down waiting for them.

“Do you have something for us?” the woman asked.

“I have something,” answered Mizuki.

“What do you want for it?”

Mizuki laughed. She knew that Craig might not leave this room alive, but she was archived as of an hour before, and could not easily die.

“I need assurances,” she said, “Craig, here, took possession of the brick totally by accident and has no idea of its significance.”

“Of course,” the woman said.

“I have arranged insurance of this.”

The people seated at the table leaned slightly forward.

“How so? Doesn’t our word count?”

“I trust you implicitly,” Mizuki said, “but these things should require a contract in case there is some minor dispute later on down the line.”

“What kind of contract?”

“Mutual assurance only. I think we can trust each other as long as each has something that the other wants.”

Mizuki watched them as they looked at each other. None of them said anything, so she assumed that they did not understand, or perhaps they did not want to understand.

"My colleague values his life and wishes to move on unencumbered by obligations that he neither understands nor deserves."

"Of course." The woman said.

"You wish to have your data back. This is something I completely understand and sympathize with."

"Yes?"

"I am afraid that it may be that the secrecy of your data might be subject to disclosure."

Everyone at the table stood up, but the woman, who appeared to be in charge, silenced them with a hand gesture.

"This is easily repaired," continued Mizuki, "I can be trusted to be silent as long as I am not harassed in any way and poor Craig can live his life. I have taken pains to protect your data and a copy cannot appear in public forums unless my terms are not met."

"You have made a copy?"

"By now I have made several thousand copies scattered on my personal cloud sites. These are protected programmatically, and will become visible at a moment's notice."

Mizuki continued, "And since a contract is not complete without an exchange of money, I will need 100 million Euros deposited in the Bank of Hong Kong by tomorrow morning."

Craig didn't see how the woman did it, but the door opened and the people at the table left, leaving Craig and Mizuki alone.

After a half an hour, the woman came in and said, "Your terms are acceptable."

"Here is my account number," Mizuki said, but she didn't move. Craig realized that the woman they were dealing with was not human either. They were both AIs and communicated at higher levels.

At the street, Freeze picked them up in a limousine.

Craig wanted to ask what had happened, but before he could speak, Mizuki handed him an airline ticket and an envelope. The envelope was full of cash and some other papers.

“You are no longer Craig or Mouse. You have a new identity. Go to Los Angeles at the address I’ve given you. There is an apartment and a job waiting for you. Don’t screw it up. Don’t come back. Don’t talk to anyone in New York, ever again.”

They dropped him off at Penn Station, and he took a train to the airport.

It was not until a year or more later that he realized that Mizuki had not only made a copy of the Data Brick, but she had full control over its contents. There could be no telling what the data was or the power that possessing it gave you. Mizuki not only possessed the power, but it would have been smart to alter it in subtle ways before returning it to its owners. The Data Brick was compromised and possibly not as useful as its owners assumed.

Mizuki might never use the Data Brick. Using it might mean a breach of contract. Someone might use it, somewhere, though.

The Van Winkles

Mizuki liked elevators. Being trapped in a steel box inside a steel grid building meant limited, if any, cell signal. She enjoyed the solitude. When she got out on her floor, she felt better.

Her cat, named Momo, was glad to see her. Suarez never paid any attention to the cat. She went into the kitchen and fed her. She started to change the cat box when she heard voices coming from the bedroom.

He went into the bedroom and found Suarez in bed with Wendy, a girl they had met in Chinatown.

Mizuki's processors struggled with the situation. There were many variables, and the decision would never be easy. It took her almost a minute to decide. She settled on the simple solution.

"Get out," she said softly and with regret.

Wendy got out of bed, not trying to hide her nudity. She began to look for her clothes.

"Babe," said Suarez, "Don't be mad. This doesn't mean anything."

Wendy snorted in disgust.

"I mean it. You have to get out. Pack up your stuff." Mizuki's voice was still soft, but firm. Her cat moved into the doorway watching. It sat down and began to wash its whiskers. Mizuki picked up the cat and went back into the kitchen.

She heard Wendy say, "Call me", and then the apartment door slammed.

Mizuki plugged her charger in and sat at the kitchen table staring out the window. She had been trying to make her mind up for a long time, and now she knew what she needed to do.

Normally, Mizuki's GPU was modeling stock options. She made a good living buying and selling options. All that it really took was the ability to spot the trends, which she was very good at. Now, Mizuki was making plans for her future.

A half an hour later she heard Suarez leave. He came

into the kitchen as though he had something to say, but she didn't look at him. He turned and left. Mizuki used her link to make an appointment with a locksmith to change the lock.

At 6PM she fed Momo. The cat used the box, but was not pleased with its condition.

Mizuki looked up and it was morning. Momo was staring at her. Mizuki did not sleep, but sometimes she listened to audiobooks at night. Last night she had spent the night planing her future. She had spent over \$40,000 buying things, and she had transferred money from several banks to her credit card accounts. She would need more time.

After feeding the cat, she put it in a carrier. She and the cat went to the park. Momo was used to wearing a halter and leash. She loved sitting in the lawn and chewing on the blades of grass. Her favorite was the wild onion the popped up here and there. Mizuki stared at the clouds and worked, mentally checking things off of a long list. This was their routine for the next few weeks.

Wendy called her once and tried to apologize. Mizuki forgave her pleasantly and told here to be good to Suarez. He had helped her out once when she was badly in need of help. He could be a good man, but he was still a man, not much different from a large dog. Wendy laughed.

Suarez called her to yell about the changed lock. She patiently listened to his ranting. When it seemed that he was done, she hung up.

Some things, even at the speed of fiber optics, take time. Some things required human scheduling and take much longer. Mizuki expected this. It was nearly a month before she felt she could leave her apartment for good.

Momo was in her carrier when the moving men came. The cat did not like the commotion. Mizuki had tagged everything in her apartment with color coded tape. The moving men were still confused with this scheme and needed to be supervised.

She followed the moving van in her rental car. Momo meowed in her carrier.

Yance felt troubled. Someone had planted a mailbox at the start of his driveway with the name 'Van Winkle' on it. He didn't like it that people might find him. When he checked it, it was always full of junk mail. Some of it was even addressed to Mizuki.

The Electric company had taken down his illegal wires, but had replaced them with new wires and a meter. Once, when he came back from a road trip collecting bottle, he found a crew had replaced the roof on his barn and the old hunting lodge.

Yance figured that someone had bought the land and was going to evict him soon, but that did not explain the mailbox.

Suarez called him and asked if he still had the drum kit in the barn. Suarez wanted to start up the band again with Yance on drums. Yance said it was OK but only if his friend Larry was on bass with his brother on harmonica. He learned that Mizuki had kicked Suarez out.

Yance was sitting on an old Adirondack chair on the porch. He was dozing off with a cold beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He had more or less permanently kicked heroine again. Life had taken a strange turn for him in the last year. He hoped that he wouldn't have to leave these digs. He could always find a dump to crash in, but not one as cozy as this.

The dogs came out on the porch looking down the driveway wagging their tails.

"What's up kids?" he asked the dogs. He never had been able to call them Harry and Marjorie. The dogs started to whine.

A box truck came down the driveway. It blocked his Ranger in. Two men got out and opened the moving truck's back doors.

One of them asked, "Where does this stuff go?"

Yance was tempted to tell them to shove it up their asses, but the prospect of free stuff accidentally delivered to his front door was too much.

"Leave the boxes on the porch. The rest goes inside."

Yance didn't see the car pull in behind the box truck

until Mizuki walked around and told the men, “Put the boxes and furniture with the red tape in the living room. The ones with the blue tape go into the bedroom. Anything with green goes into the kitchen and the rest go into the barn.”

The dogs yelped with uncontrolled pleasure when they saw her and nearly knocked her over in their joy. She walked up to Yance, smiling.

Yance stood still, trying not to show the intense emotions that he felt. He didn’t want to laugh, or smile, or cry. He did not know how he should feel. She had left him and now she was back. He should be angry. He should shout at her, but he couldn’t.

She put her arms around him and hugged him. “It’s good to be home,” she said.

Yance looked down at her. He did not understand.

He said, “Welcome home,” and then added, “just in time to feed the dogs.”

Name2Face.app

I saw an app called Name2Face while I was on a pirate website. It was a facial recognition app. It was supposed to hook up to the cloud and match faces against a billion images. According to the docs it used the Russian VK database, but had backdoors into Facebook, Google, and Shutterfly. It claimed 99% accuracy. Normally €199.99 but they had a hacked version for free. I snatched it.

You know, there is reason that you shouldn't download apps for your android from anywhere except the Google Play Store. What that reason is, though, escapes me from time to time and I give it try. If you are really adventurous you can try some of the Indian or Russian sites and get some cracked premium apps for free. Of course, this is like going on vacation and leaving your condoms at home.

Name2Face was habit-forming. There is a joke that if you walk down any street in New York and call everyone you meet an asshole, nine times out of ten you'll be right. This is probably true, but now I knew all the asshole's names.

Turn on the app and a splash screen comes on with the image of a shield with some Cyrillic text. Press the button on the left (I figure it is the Russian word for OK) and hold up the phone to a crowd of people. Little boxes appear around everyone's head, and in a second their name appears. You can tap the name and go to their Facebook profile, or Twitter feed, VK, or their Instagram account or some sites in Russian and Chinese. You can Instagram or text them. Pretty cool, don't you think?

To give an example, I was walking down Broad Street on my way to work, when this drop-dead gorgeous woman crossed in front of me going across on Wall Street. She had to have been a model or actress or call-girl. The app was on and it caught her face. One tap later I had her.

Mindy Mossfirth it said. I followed after her. Age 28, Vice President of Angular Investments, Inc. There was a list of her social accounts, her email, and a few phone

numbers I clicked on the first one and sent a text: "Dinner Tonight?" I watched as she pulled out her phone and tapped it. She looked puzzled, tapped again and put the phone in her pocket.

"How about lunch?" I texted.

Again she discarded the message.

I tried again, "Sex?"

She didn't even take the phone out of her pocket. Oh well, it was her loss.

It was fun. I could walk down a street and say, "Hi Bill", "Hey Frankie", "What's up Estelle?" and get these surprised faces. I would just keep moving, leaving behind some confused people. I got into the habit of doing it every morning while waiting for the train, and in a while I was getting people saying hello to me before I even got their names on the screen. Someone called me Carlos one morning while waiting for the 8:19, and then everyone was saying "Hi Carlos". My name is Anthony.

Every few days I would see beautiful Mindy, and she would get a dirty text from me. This went on for a couple of weeks until she turned around and slapped me in the face. I guess she figured it out. It was not a coincidence that I was always there when she got the texts.

The other women I texted like that never did catch on.

At lunchtime there was a guy who sat on a park bench near the corner of Broadway and Chambers. He always looked like he was out of it. He would eat a sandwich and feed bits of bread and cheese to the pigeons. He was dressed well enough, but his clothes didn't seem to fit right. He was overweight and had one of those mashed potato faces. His name was Roland Mitchell.

One day I sent him a text: "Roland, Why don't you just give up".

He reached in his pocket and tapped his phone. My phone buzzed when he answered, "OK."

I saw him the next day. "End it now. You've got nothing to live for."

No answer.

The next day I sent him: "Just fall down in front of a

bus.”

The next day there was a pile of flowers on the park bench.

What a loser.

The app was not 100%. Several times I saw Tommy Rivera, who had died riding the top of a subway car through the Bronx when we were 15. The train passed under a low clearance ceiling and scrapped him off. He was my best friend until then. I nearly fell down the first time the app said Tommy Rivera, because it was him. He hadn't changed a bit since we were in high school. The person, who was not Tommy River because Tommy was dead, must have worked near the World Trade Center because I kept seeing him down near Battery Place. Maybe he was Tommy's cousin or something, but I never asked.

I saw Roland Mitchell again, and he wasn't dead. He walked by me and stared me in the face. The app said it was him. Before I could text him, the guy, who couldn't have been Roland Mitchell, gave me the finger as he passed me. He was gone when I turned to yell back at him.

The app made a few weird mistakes. I saw Alfred Hitchcock, Woodrow Wilson and Kurt Cobain. The app was right except that they were all dead. I kept seeing them. Once I said “Hi Kurt,” and they guy said “hey,” and kept walking. I guess he was used to it.

Jesus Christ was a frequent visitor to Wall Street. I guess he has some work there. He was an Arab looking guy with a short beard. He was dressed in a gray business suit. I think the app was confused because he wore sandals, although I doubt the real Jesus wore his sandals with white socks.

Whenever I met Jesus, he would smile and nod to me. The app said he was Jesus Christ, or sometimes Jesus of Nazareth, but he was always seemed a hell of a nice guy.

Now this is the bad part.

One day I saw Death. That's what the app said.

The first time I literally felt cold chills up and down my

spine. There was this guy two blocks in front of me, but he was tall, and I could see him clearly. The app said "Death" with a capital "D". He wore a black hoody, black skinny jeans and black high tops, but you couldn't see his face. All I could see when I passed by him was the glint of eyes in the shadows of the hood. He looked me in the eye; he just stared right at me like he was waiting for something.

Every few hours I saw the guy. He was always standing still, and it was always a good distance away. He was always looking right at me. If I tapped the box around his head, there was nothing there except a website link, but if I tapped the link I would get this "Server not Found" error.

I tried to make a little sense out of everything. The app was definitely wacky. It worked well on most people, but when it failed, it failed on the weird side. The main trouble is it kept on showing me dead people.

For example, on one walk from the subway exit to my job, about six blocks, I saw Tommy Rivera twice, my Grandfather, my Father, Uncle Frankie, my second grade school teacher Mrs. Riesman, Albert Einstein, and five presidents. It was like there were more dead people than live ones on the street that day.

One day I saw my cousin Shirley (Mom's sister's kid). I walked over to talk to her, but she was gone. My mother called me that night to tell me Shirley had died of breast cancer about the time I saw her.

My Grandma Torino claimed to be psychic. She said she always knew when someone had died or someone was in trouble. She dreamed about my Grandfather dying the day before he had the heart attack. She liked to look at you and read your future. She always told me that I was headed for a bad end if I wasn't careful. I've always proven her wrong, even if I've come close a couple of times. Maybe the app was bringing out the same talent in me. Maybe this was my talent. Maybe I could see Death.

I stopped using the app, but now that I knew what to look for I kept seeing Jesus and Death, and, for some

reason, an old time actor named Ronald Coleman.

I decided that I needed a change, so I took some vacation time and went to a resort hotel on Cancun.

It didn't help. Death was still death and Jesus Christ went swimming with one of those teeny weenie euro-trash swimming trunks. At least he didn't go commando like some of the people there.

I used the app to chat up a pretty woman in a bikini. She was a few years older than I and a little overweight, but I wouldn't kick her out of bed, as they say, and I didn't have to. She took my mind off of things. She was from Boston. I gave her a fake email and promised to call her. I doubt if I will.

Life is too short to worry about this stuff. I came back with a new attitude. I didn't have time to think about Death and the dead people. They were just annoying things that sprang up from an app that encouraged my imagination to work overtime. You could see animals in the clouds, faces in the grain of a piece of wood. You could see the shadows move; sometimes when there was nothing there.

The app, like human brain, is a liar. It likes to connect the dots when the dots are just random. Anyone could find patterns in randomness. Anyone could hear music flowing in the traffic noise. Anyone could see Death standing behind every door. The app was just a simple version of a human brain looking for patterns and finding them whether they were real or not.

It was my own damn fault for letting it get to me, and I found it easy to cut it out. As soon as I stopped looking, I stopped seeing. I kept my phone in my pocket and never started the app. I looked straight ahead and stopped making eye contact with people on the street. I didn't see Death. All I had to do was stop looking for him. If I didn't see him, he wasn't there. That's the way I approached it.

Of course Jesus Christ still smiled when I crossed his path, but that's because I had been saying "hi" to him for so long. I kept seeing Roland Mitchell standing in the middle of the street while I waited for the light to change,

but the buses went around him. Mindy Mossfirth still crossed Broad Street on the way to work, but she never showed signs of recognizing me. I owed her a nice juicy text, but why bother? She was out of my league.

That's not to say that I never used the app again. It was useful. There was an old time guy named Big Jim Farley who owned a Library. He was supposed to have kept a book of everyone's name and particulars, so he could walk up to you, look you in the eye and make you feel like he really remembered you. The app was my 'Farley File'. I sometimes had meetings with high level clients, and it was useful to walk up to a guy you've may have never met, look him in the eye and say "Hi, Maxwell, how's Irene and the kids?" Whenever I was in these meetings, though, Death stood in the back of the room and just watched. He never raised his hand when I asked the eventual, "Any questions?"

The last time I used the app was at this big shindig for some high mucky-mucks from the London Stock Exchange. It was held in one of the big meeting rooms at the Andaz Hotel. They had a tacky champagne fountain and pretty girls carrying plates of spicy fried squid and other stuff you'd never touch if it wasn't free. I went for the open bar, but I stayed because it was a fun place to use the app.

I harassed several tall thin women in spike heels that were either trophy wives or hired escorts. I said hello to heads of state and asked about the health of their grandchildren. I hit on the wives of Wall Street executives. I had entirely too much fun.

I walked up to a delegate from the Russian embassy that looked lost and alone. "Hey, Serge," I said with a wink, "How's the back? I heard you sprained it. Too much rough sex?" I knew about his bad back because he had posted about it on VK, the Russian Facebook. I knew about his special interests because he had two accounts and the app knew both of them. One was definitely not meant to be public.

I slapped him on the back, and he grunted in pain. I

think that is when I screwed up. I turned and held up my phone looking for something else fun to do, and I think he saw the screen and recognized it. Maybe, though, the app was monitored, and I was getting a little too much use out of it on a connection that was not meant for the general public. It could be that the SVR RF (Russian CIA) was tracking me. I may have over utilized the app in the party at the Andaz.

A couple of hours later I left the party, feeling no pain. I had been drinking \$50 shots of single malts. It was lucky that I didn't have to drive. I could take the water ferry up to 40th street and the cool river air would help me sober up.

I was walking down to the dock at the foot of Wall when two guys in dark suits came up on either side of me. One held my arms. One reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my phone. They pushed me down and by the time I stood up they were gone.

The next day I got a new phone. I restored all my data from the cloud, but the app, since it was not purchased, was never backed up. I looked for the website where I had downloaded it, but I couldn't find it. That's OK. I'd had my fun with the app. I didn't need it.

A week later there was a stock market "correction" and my firm needed to lay off a few hundred people, so I was out of a job. I have money squirreled away, so I was not too concerned. A smart guy like me wouldn't be on unemployment for long. I started my job search. I missed the app, especially for interviews. It would have helped.

After a few months of fruitless job hunting, I would just go down to corner of Broadway and Chambers and sit with Roland on the bench and watch people.

I don't really need the app. I can tell you the name of almost everyone that passes by. Lots of them are dead people. Albert Einstein is cool. He always gives me a high five when he goes by. Tommy Rivera is definitely not cool and doesn't even talk to me. Everyone knows me as Carlos, still, so I guess that I am Carlos now.

My life now is watching all the people go by on

Broadway on their way to meaningless jobs. I know their names and I know their stories. I think I am waiting for something to happen. I might get a job. Someone might like my resume. I've got time. I don't spend much, and I won't need to work for years. I get the feeling that something is going to happen eventually. Maybe there is an app that will tell me.

They say "there is an app for that", but what if you need an app and don't know why? Is there an app that will get me a job? Is there an app that will stop me from seeing dead people? Is there an app that will tell death to stop following me? Is there an app that will make sense of my life? Is there an app to tell what app I need? I guess I can Google Ukrainian pirate sites and browse the hacked apps to find what I need.

Death sits right next to me now, although he doesn't talk. His bony fingers point to someone from time to time and I know that their time is nearly up. His hoody has the Nike logo on the back, and I try to peek into the hood to see his face, but I can only make out the shine of his eyes.

Jesus stands still on the crowded sidewalk. He smiles at me a lot and seems to be waiting for me to say something. I wonder why I see him and not Moses or Mohammad. Why not the devil or some Norse God?

I never talk to him. I don't have anything to say. What do you say to Jesus, anyway?

I'll be damned if I know.

The Hand of Zorgo

My brother's name is Larry and there have been times that we have hung out together, and times when we have adventures. Writing a story about a typical adventure is easy. Sometimes the stories, like this one, take off in odd directions.

I went down to Chinatown last summer with Larry, my brother looking for a guitar store that he'd heard about. We parked by the Hudson River, and we were walking east along Canal Street when we passed a large dumpster outside an old gutted apartment building. West Canal Street is in an old and rundown area of New York where the sidewalks are irregular and the buildings all sag and tilt in different directions. There are large lofts where crazy artists used to live practically for free and now rich uptown executives pay millions of dollars for rent. We never did find the guitar store, but the dumpster was a temptation too inviting to pass by. It was full to the brim with the remains of the contents of six apartments.

In my family there is no one who can pass a garage sale without stopping or drive by a roadside pile of junk without slowing down. Finding gold in other people's trash is in our blood. I once had to pull my 75-year-old mother away from an interesting pile of boxes while walking to church early one Sunday morning.

Before you could say "recycle" we were both up over the side of the dumpster, hip deep in the discarded treasures of several families.

I don't remember all of what we found, but I got a box of vacuum tubes and Larry got a bag of 45's from 1960s. There were some mostly unused cans of spray paint and small carton of crazy glue. There was other stuff, too, because we went back to the station wagon a couple of times with our arms full.

When we had exhausted the supply of anything valuable from the dumpster we jumped down decided to

head towards Mulberry Street where there were some good, inexpensive Chinese restaurants. Larry had a strange bunch of metal and wires that he was inspecting. I looked closer to see what it was. It looked like a medieval gauntlet or iron glove that a knight might wear with his suit of armor but with tubes and cables sticking out the wrist.

“Cool”, I said, “a robot hand.”

“Maybe it’s an Astronaut glove.” He speculated.

“Nope,” I said, “you can’t put your hand into it. It’s some sort of prosthesis.”

Larry pressed a dimple on the side and the fingers flexed and relaxed one after another. “Hey!” he exclaimed “The batteries are still good.”

“Cool. Let me see it.” I begged.

He handed it over to me and I looked closely at it. I had to tilt up my glasses to get a close view because the detail on the hand was amazing. There were thousands of small threads that looked like fiber optic cables that raggedly stuck out at the wrist, as well as smaller plastic rods that were broken or chopped off. If you moved one of the rods, they would articulate a finger. If you twisted the rod, it would move the corresponding finger from side to side. The surface of the hand looked like a dull gray metal, like pewter, finely etched with thousands of small scratches, yet it was flexible and felt warm and yielding like rubber.

“I know what it is.” Larry said snatching it back from me.

“What?” I asked. Larry is the musician in the family. I’m the one with the engineering and technical background. I didn’t have a clue as to what the hand could be, and I was sure that Larry didn’t either.

“I can see it all. I know all about this thing. It’s a threat and mystery. I can see it all.” Larry made no sense. Musician’s smoke too much marijuana.

“Tell me about it. I think it’s a prototype for some kind of robotic arm. It probably never worked and the guy who made it threw it out.”

“No,” Larry said gravely, “It’s old... It’s millions of years

old. It has come here from across space and time to fall here in this dumpster. We should destroy it before it destroys us!"

"You've been reading Bob's comic books again." I said. Bob is another guitar player who collects lurid 'adult' comics, space opera and sci-fi videos.

"I can see it." Larry said with a faraway look in his eyes. "I know the whole story. It came to me in a flash – maybe telepathically transmitted."

I could see that I was in for it. We were on the west side of Canal Street; almost to the river. There was more than a mile to the lunch place on Mulberry where we were heading. There was nothing to do but let him tell his tale. I kept my comments to a minimum and looked forward to eating some sesame chicken.

This is the story that Larry told:

* * *

The name of the creature was Zorgo. He lived, if you can call it a living thing, many millions of years ago at the edge of this galaxy. Zorgo was conceived as the perfect killing machine. He was born and designed, built and nourished, educated and programmed before mankind was a twinkle in a prehistoric rat's eye. He was part machine and part organic. He was the inscrutable weapon of an ancient race. He was a weapon that its enemies could never understand. He was given a dark and secret purpose. This purpose drove him to massacre his enemies and eventually destroy all who stood in his way. He and an army of creatures like him made up an unstoppable wave of conquest that wiped out any who opposed or even protested their progress.

There were powers in those days that fought eye to eye in battlefields that are long gone. Armadas of ships powered by supernovas sent beams of energy that are still echoing through the universe and which even now will explode an unlucky sun every few million years. There were battles fought with pure power and others fought with thought only, and we will never know or even be able to understand what was at stake. Yet, Zorgo continued

with a purpose that even those who had created him had forgotten eons before.

After a time, more than a thousand of our puny years, but less than a million, things changed. The armies changed, the weapons changed but the race of Zorgo didn't change. Countermeasures proved difficult, partly because the secret desires and motivations of the ultimate protagonist could never be fully understood. How can the maxim "Know Your Enemy" apply to such as Zorgo? Weapons and defenses invariable proved useless against Zorgo and his kin.

But, all things are part of the great wheel of life and there came an enemy with a purpose as secret as that of Zorgo and a power just a little greater. At an empty field of space, light years from the nearest star, a silent battle took place. The light of this battle bathed the earth many millions of years ago and our own primeval ancestors look up in wonder at the violence of energies that could rival thousands of suns – dimmed only by the uncounted miles.

The two opposing forces broke upon each other destroying and being destroyed. The battle raged for millennia and in the end there were no winners. The power and might of Zorgo and his brothers had been stopped, but there was no evidence of this except metallic vapor and dust with a few larger chunks of debris. There was no one to witness because the races that had started the war had been wiped out eons before.

There was nothing except....

The dismembered hand of Zorgo sped through space at a sizeable percentage of the speed of light. He clutched at emptiness and formed a fist and then spread his fingers wide. He absorbed energy from the light of distant stars and collected dust from space to fuse into metal and repair itself. The terrible purpose of Zorgo lived on. The purpose was in every part of the mighty machine. Each fiber of his being contained the secretly encoded reason for his existence.

Zorgo waited patiently as he sped through space. He

moved his fingers and subtly changed his path, careening around a sun here, approaching a gas giant there. He collected molecules of hydrogen, oxygen, and carbon as they passed near. Some he used for repair, others he saved as reactant for small maneuvering jets he built from the chance molecules of iron and other metals that he found.

With a spurt of superheated ions Zorgo made course corrections as he neared solar systems. He slowed as the constant winds of space buffeted him. He made constant repairs as cosmic radiation weakened his structure. His memory filled with the eons of contemplation as he passed through the void. He wiped his memory and started again. Zorgo no longer remembered where he came from or how he had come to be a hand drifting through space. All that remained was his terrible purpose.

A small blue planet came into view after a long lonely wait. Zorgo felt the stirring of his purpose. The planet teemed with life and nascent technology. He adjusted his path and started a slow decent. He spread his fingers and entered the atmosphere, skimming lightly over the air of this world like a stone on a pond, bleeding off his kinetic energy.

Zorgo fell into the city and landed in a dumpster. His small rockets, so painstakingly built over millions of years had been stripped off by the heat of his descent. He lay, almost drained of energy, cooling in the damp atmosphere. He was surrounded by strange artifacts. He rested. The filtered light of the nearby sun moved over him, slowly charging his energy cells. Zorgo healed.

Two small creatures crawled in to the dumpster and found him. They were of low intelligence and found the hand to be of little value. They discarded their find in a refuse basket after a short discussion.

Zorgo waited until dark. He needed to build himself back up if he were going to fulfill his purpose. He crawled out of the basket and found his way down through a crack into an old cellar. He discovered papers with glyphs

on them and after a few seconds was able to decode the simple language used by the native animals. He found a broken electronic audio device and robbed it of many valuable materials. He found currency in the sewers as the hand roamed on its fingers through the smoggy nights.

He read the back of Popular Science magazine and before long was able to send for Edmund's Scientific Catalog, the plans for an antigravity device and a box to decode cable TV (This later proved useless). He collected scraps of metal and was able to tap into the local power grid for energy. Strange packages were left on the building's doorstep and were quickly whisked away by the scurrying unseen hand.

Zorgo found a computer and was able to reverse engineer the network connection and after a few days he was surfing the web. He took it all in; eCommerce, Stock trading, Porn and vanity sites. He learned what he could about this strange planet where he had landed.

As Zorgo slowly rebuilt himself, he knew that here – on Earth – he could fulfill his secret and all encompassing purpose. Here on earth he could satisfy the aching need that drove him onward.

There came a day when Zorgo's body was complete. He had lost the memory of what his body had originally looked like and found it convenient to mirror the flaccid and puny bodies of the local fauna. He appeared, on the surface, to be a large muscular man with dark skin and rippling muscles. He found some discarded clothes that fit him and began to wander the city.

Zorgo passed the crowds of people. They instinctively avoided his path – perhaps they sensed their danger. He looked into their faces with glowing metallic eyes, but they did not return his gaze. He planned and explored, waiting for the day he could realize his destiny.

Zorgo went out one night. His plan was complete. His body was working well. It was a thousand times stronger than any man. He had the stored energy of a small star stored beneath his rippling muscles. He was dressed in a

mode that disguised his alien nature from those around him.

Two brothers returned to the city around that time. They were discussing guitars and Blues Music and preparing to go the Tribeca Grill where a good band was playing. As they passed the corner where they had discarded the hand, one brother remembered it and mentioned it to his brother.

"What could such a creature want from us?" one asked.

The other answered: "How can we understand the wants and needs of an alien race? On what level can we understand the secret desires of a creature that arose so far from earth?"

"No," the first brother answered. "There are universal truths that can, in time, be understood by all. There is a commonality to the condition of life which we all share. I don't care how alien you are."

"I don't know about that." The first answered. "What one thing can all creatures want? What universal truth is there to know? What is it that our innermost souls all need?"

At that moment they passed by an old abandoned apartment building, but there was glow coming from a basement window. The brother called 'Larry' bent down low and looked through the grimy pane of glass. He saw there a large powerfully black man, naked and sitting back in an old chair. There was a large 'Z' tattooed on his chest. On the bed next to him was a pretty woman, her nakedness hardly covered by a dirty blanket. She had the look of profound satisfaction on her face. The black man had a beer and one hand and was holding a lit cigarette with the other. The hand holding the cigarette was wearing what looked like a metallic glove. He had a smirk on his face and his eyes were half closed. Larry thought he could hear him chuckling.

Larry stood up, thought for moment and said "I guess," he said, "Everybody wants the same thing."

"Everybody," he said looking back at the glow coming

from the cellar window, “just wants to get laid.”

By the time Larry had finished his story, I had stopped listening. When he gets on one of these kicks, you have to just nod your head and say “far out” once in a while. You have to let him get it out of his system. When we stopped at the corner to cross Mulberry Street, Larry tossed the hand into a trash basket (but not without checking first to see if was anything interesting in the basket first). As the light changed, we started off again towards the restaurant.

“It just came to me.” Larry said, but I was thinking about Sesame Chicken.

I looked back, and I thought I saw some movement in the trash basket.

The Girl with the Error Message Eyes

Mike Broman slowed down and focused on the girl sitting out on the rocks. His link was fuzzy and slow. Mike disliked this section of the Bay Road. The connections were always bad here. One bar glowed red in the corner of his eye. The link dropped as the road dipped down along the granite cliffs. Maine State Highway 187, it said on the map, but to Mike it was just the Bay Road, and the only way out of Jonesport if you wanted to go north.

Mike's link buzzed with static and red warnings flashed. A small circle formed around the girl on the rock. It formed a fuzzy halo and the text in his field of vision blurred and slipped. The image returned as the road turned up the hill again. He zoomed in on her and the database search flashed a name. Marjorie Alleaux, from East Machias. Strangely, though, her GPS value was null.

Mike sped the little car back up to 50 mph and continued towards the edge of town and the Kmart. He wondered why the girl was sitting out on that flat granite boulder, miles from anywhere.

"Good morning, Mr. Broman," a pretty young woman said as he entered the Kmart. "The flounder is on sale today." Naturally, the network had identified him immediately as he entered the parking lot, accessed his buying habits and fed the greeter with a script.

Mike's link told him immediately that he was dealing with Karen Macklin, aged 38, divorced mother of three boys and a drop out from U. Maine at Augusta. "Thanks Karen, I'll check it out." He answered.

As Mike walked down the aisle, the Kmart house software scrolled a list of sale items down the right side of his field of vision. There was a feature he could buy for his embedded node that would hide this kind of thing, but it was expensive and Kmart was polite enough to keep the messages just at the edge of his vision.

A message scrolled along down near the floor. It was a news story about the war. A helicopter crash killed a dozen young men. Mike ignored it. He had tried to edit his profiles to filter the war news, but headlines kept creeping in under other topics. Mike squeezed his eyes shut to avoid thinking about the war, but the news story scrolled by. It always happened this way. The link software misinterpreted his interest in the story and the headlines jumped up in a larger font. Mike had never mastered the art of not reacting to his link.

He opened his eyes and looked about him trying to think of something else. As he focused on a bicycle, the in-store software boxed it and the price and specifications appeared just to its right. As he turned the other way, the network filled his vision with other consumer data, keying in on any product that he looked at for more than a second. A link to a shopping guide that Mike had once accessed fired up alongside the Kmart data, offering price comparisons.

A sales person walked up to Mike. "Can I tell you about the bicycle, Mr. Broman?" A young man asked. His name and stats flashed before Mike's eyes.

"Stop it!" he sub-vocalized to the node. The display faded, but it never turned off completely.

The young man smiled and waited for an answer.

"Not today Bill." Mike said and went to find the coffee aisle.

He found the coffee and some filters and then decided that he might as well check out the flounder. The flood of graphics and text across his vision was subdued, almost as though the network could sense his mood. He didn't buy the flounder. He'd have spaghetti again for dinner. As he walked out, a salesperson offered him a bag and the total cost of his purchases scrolled from left to right across his field of view, getting in the way of finding his car for a moment.

On the way back to the house, the network connections started to buzz and the signal dropped once or twice along the stretch of road where he had seen the girl on

the rocks. A message started to scroll, but it froze in mid-word and then garbage characters filled the bottom with his field of vision. It cleared almost immediately, and he passed by the dead zone. The girl was gone.

His house was still empty. Mike put the coffee on the counter next to the machine. The house subnet told him politely that he had no messages and informed him about the show on TV that he wanted to watch. There was a credit card bill due in two days and a package had arrived.

The package was sitting on the counter. Mike did not look at it for a moment. He thought that it might be for his wife, Elaine. She had left a few weeks after Peter, their son, had been killed. She had gone to stay with her mother. The excuse was that she wanted to help her mother after the hip operation, but Mike knew that she couldn't stay in the house where Peter had grown up. There were too many memories here.

The address on the package was to Mr. and Mrs. Michael Bowman. It had a USPS barcode but no return address. He thought that he might call Elaine, but if she wanted to hear from him, she would have called. Mike frequently checked her GPS. He could tell where she was at any time. According to the logs, no one ever checked on his own GPS.

The box was heavy and about two feet long. Mike shook it and it made no noise. He looked at the bar code again and this time his node boxed the bar code and zoomed in. The sender's account scrolled across the brown paper as Mike's mind's eye looked up the shipping number. US Marine Corp, office of personnel, Albany, Georgia. It was his son Peter's personal items. Mike did not open the box.

Without thinking, Mike glanced at Peter's picture on the mantle. He looked away, but it was too late. The chip in his head caught the image, performed the facial recognition, and started to download the public data. Peter Broman, Jonesport, Maine, Age 19, Lance Corporal USMC, Killed in action December 14... Mike close his eyes, but the glowing letters scrolled across his field of

vision without being read.

Mike ate some spaghetti. He put the plate out in the backyard for the raccoons to finish and went to bed. As he fell asleep, Mike's link scrolled headlines, commercials, and commentary to a background of the old jazz from his archive. He dreamed of teenage boys dying in a distant and strange country. He did not know if it was just a dream or the link keeping him informed on the war news. He remembered seeing a girl on a rock. She was listening to something as she gazed into the horizon.

Mike had to go to Machias the next day. He drove up the Bay Road and looked for the girl on the rock. She was there. He slowed down staring at her. He wondered what it was like to hear nothing but wind and waves and see nothing but clouds. She looked up when she heard the slowing car. She waved at him, even though she could not know who he was. The chip in Mike's head popped and buzzed. Mike stepped on the gas and went on to finish his business in Machias.

On the way back he stopped. The girl was gone. Little red warning messages blinked at the edge of his vision as he stepped out of the car. There was a roaring sound in his ears. It was static and noise, but it blended in with the crashing of waves on the rocks. Mike found a path through the primrose bushes and stepped out on the tumbled granite. He jumped from stone to stone until he made it to the large flat boulder that jutted out into the water. Roque Bluffs was just visible across the bay as a dark shape on the horizon.

The chip stopped complaining to him. He heard nothing except the wind and waves, and he saw nothing except the water and a dull red phrase in his right eye, near the bottom of his field of view. Signal Drop it said. It changed for a moment to a blue Acquiring Signal, but then changed back to Signal Drop. There was a moment of nothing at all and then a pale blue light scrolled a dump of hexadecimal across his field of vision. He blinked hard. When he opened his eyes, all he could see was the dark water.

Mike stood there, looking at the water. It was high tide and the waves crashed against the boulder, sending spray into the air. A seagull called suddenly in the distance and soared over him, curious about this strange creature. He watched it. Normally, sidebars would have appeared if he focused on it for more than a second. He would have known the genus and species, as well as an informational piece about the environmental impact of the declining water quality in the bay and the effect on coastal bird life.

The bird, however, was just a bird. It looked down at him, and he looked up at it. The gull, or tern, or whatever it was, turned and flew off to continue on its original idea. Mike sat. The spring breeze chilled him, and he thought that he had a jacket in the car, but the thought did not produce a time and temperature icon or small weather map scrolling across the cloudless sky. He turned into the setting sun to catch a little of its warmth and was surprised to see a girl standing on the rocks above him.

There was no link to remind him of her name, but he remembered it anyway. She was Marjorie, the girl on the rocks. He had seen her driver's license image when the link had looked her up, but he was surprised to see that she did not look at all like it. Her hair was a dark, but unnatural red, and she had dark blue and red makeup. She wore the disguise of some popular teenage subgroup and had the supporting odd clothes, tats, and piercings arranged in elaborate patterns that only another of her group could recognize. Her eyes glowed blue with yellow error messages scrolling rapidly across them.

"Hey." She said. Mike nodded. She stepped carefully over the granite onto the rock and sat with her legs dangling down on the furthest edge.

"It's quiet out here," Mike said, "too quiet." He added with a smile. She didn't look at him.

"I saw you slow down in the car. I thought that you were someone else."

"Who?" asked Mike. A large wave crashed against the rock and Mike could feel the cold spray. Marjorie did not move, though, and seemed to enjoy it.

“Oh, nobody important.” Marjorie looked out onto the waves and watched the seagulls play in the wind. Mike did not know what to say.

Marjorie waited for the error dumps in her vision to clear. She said, “I used to think about people coming here, starting a colony. A quiet colony, far away from the buzz.”

Buzz, thought Mike, yes, that describes it. It wasn’t exactly noise, but there was always the buzz.

“I know what you mean. There should be a way to turn it off. I mean, a way other than climbing out on this rock. How did you find it?”

“I had a boyfriend. We were looking for a quiet place to smoke and talk and stuff. We parked up there and tried to come down here. He couldn’t take it and left.”

“Too bad. I would never have thought of it until I saw you.”

“There was a path back there, when I first came. I figured that lots of people would show up here when the buzz got too loud, but you’re the first.”

“We should advertise, except that there isn’t much room here.”

“Whatever,” Marjorie said, “I came here to get away from things. I don’t need all the stuff they feed you all the time. All the crap – I don’t need anyone else.”

Buzz, Crap, Mike began to see things a little differently. He liked that word, buzz. The link could be annoying like a mosquito buzzing around in the bedroom. You could ignore it, perhaps, but it wasn’t useless. It was mostly good stuff, not crap at all. The feed constantly told you news about people and places and kept you up to date with facts and articles. It reminded you of appointments and dates. It organized things for you and remembered all the things that you did not have time to learn or think about.

“Listen” she said, pointing to the water.

Mike listened. All he heard was the stiff wind making low church organ tones as it whipped by his ears and the crash of the surf against the granite.

"The ocean's got its own buzz." She closed her eyes and cocked her head to the side as though listening to a conversation.

"Dad" a voice said. It was Peter's voice, and it came from the ocean. The noise of the waves and wind combined into infinite random patterns and one of them was Peter's voice. He was, perhaps four years old, and he was calling his father.

"You can hear things when the buzz is not clogging up the air with chatter. In the silence, you can hear all the things that you would have missed. When the buzz isn't flickering in your eyes, you can see things that you would have missed, too."

"Dad..." the voice asked again plaintively and even though Mike knew that it was a trick of the randomness of the noise he looked out into the waves, and he saw a pair of eyes, formed for a moment out of the dark silver patterns of waves. They looked back at him, large and open and took him in. The little boy's eyes turned into just more random patterns and Mike turned away.

He held his head down with his eyes closed, but he listened for that little boy's voice.

After a long time, Marjorie said, "I knew your son, Peter."

Mike opened his mouth and looked at the girl. He could not think of anything to say.

"That's why I waved at you. I knew Peter. I knew about you and Elaine. Peter and I used to ride in your car. It's weird that you're here."

Mike got up and walked to the opposite edge of the boulder. He walked back and looked at her.

Mike finally realized, "You're the girl that he said told him not to enlist."

"I told him that they kill people like him. The good ones always get killed. The link tells you about it every day. It tells you about the boys who get blown up and shot and hit with bio. They're always the good ones like him."

"That's why I brought him here, to listen to the nothing, to see the emptiness, to understand that the link

doesn't have to tell you what to do."

"He wanted to do the right thing."

"The right thing was to stay alive. The right thing was not to listen to the buzz telling him to enlist. The right thing was to be alone – alone with me." She sighed a little but did not cry. "But he couldn't take the silence. When the signal dropped, he didn't like it. He wanted the buzz there to tell him what to do."

"They sent me back his stuff. I didn't open it. Do you want it?"

"No, he's dead." The words struck Mike badly. He wanted Marjorie to care about Peter. It made him somehow alive, but she had moved on. She was sad and alone, but she had moved on.

"Not really, there might be letters in there."

"There are no letters." She said.

Mike no longer wanted to talk to her. It was too difficult. He wanted the buzz in his ears and the scrolling banner ads in his eyes. He needed a news feed and a friendly reminder or two to keep his mind off things. He strained his ears as he climbed off the rock for another sound of his son's voice, and he didn't say goodbye to the quiet girl.

Elaine was sitting in the middle of the living room floor when he got home. She was sobbing uncontrollably over an open box and holding a bunch of photographs. They were of young men, not much more than boys, each with a shaved head and a large grin. He saw Peter there and the other dead boys of his battalion. They were throwing footballs, playing guitar, and mugging for the camera. Mike's link picked up the date code on the edge of the pictures, and he knew that they were taken just two days before the rocket had found their truck and killed them all.

He put his hands on the back of her neck and rubbed it the way that he knew she liked. As the faces of the boys passed into his view, their names, ranks, and date of death scrolled over the pictures. The link was being helpful. A voice talked about the death toll of the war and

an ad for flowers appeared and then faded from view.

Elaine put the pictures down and rubbed her eyes.

"I miss him." She said. "I can't stop thinking about him. Everything is Peter. I can't sleep. I can't forget. I hear his name and see his face everywhere. I have to listen to all of these poor boys dying every day. Each one is Peter. I can't turn it off."

Mike rubbed her neck and her back, gently. He did it for as long as she sat looking into the box, which was a long time. He made her some spaghetti and put her to bed, but she didn't talk to him again. He wondered if she dreamed about the war the way he did.

In the morning, they walked into town and had donuts and coffee at the corner deli, much like they used to do when they first moved to Maine. They did not speak to each other of anything important. Mike asked if she was going to stay at home now, but she didn't answer.

On the way back, Mike said, "You know Peter had a girl for while."

This got more of a reaction from Elaine than anything that he'd said all morning. She looked at him with her mouth formed to ask a question, but she didn't say anything.

Mike answered anyway. "Her name was Marjorie. I talked to her yesterday. Strange girl, but she seemed nice enough."

As though she hadn't heard, Elaine asked "He had a girlfriend?"

"I don't know if they were close. She was his friend, that's about all I know."

Elaine put her head down as they walked, thinking.

"She tried to tell him not to go, not to enlist. But he went anyway."

She did not answer.

"She told him that the good ones always die."

"She was right." Elaine said.

Mike turned around and pulled Elaine along towards the car by the hand. "Come with me," he said. They drove together down the old Bay Road towards Machias. When

the crashing of the noise in his link began to sound like the water on the rocks, he stopped the little car.

“Where are we going?” Elaine asked.

Mike led her along the path through the primroses. A young man with a guitar passed them going back towards the road. His eyes glowed pale blue with yellow error codes scrolling by.

“How is it out there?” Mike asked.

“Quiet,” the young man answered with a smile, “nice and quiet.”

Mike and Elaine sat for the rest of the day on the granite rock, and they only saw the setting sun, and they only heard the whispers in the waves.

Rejected by Gravity

My cat Gracie has one eye. She's 19 years old, but was 2 years old when this story was written. I like it, so I decided to add it at the end of this book.

Ramón tripped on the cobblestones again. The fog was so thick that he had lost all sense of up or down or any direction at all. He kept missing his footing. It felt like his feet missed touching the ground. He flapped his arms in an ungainly attempt to recover his balance and moved his feet as though treading water. The soles of his feet made contact with the dirty road, and he recovered. He pulled his trench coat up around his ears and hoped that nobody had seen him.

He was two blocks from his apartment, looking for a one-eyed gray tabby named Gracie. The cat had left him two days after Sylvia had left him to live with a man in Sausalito. She (Gracie, not Sylvia) had run out of the back door, streaking between his legs. She jumped over the tarp covered Harley and then disappeared under the fence. Ramón hadn't seen the cat since.

Ramón whistled softly. "Gracie, here girl." It was three in the morning, and he didn't want to wake anyone. He worried about the little cat. She didn't like him, but he still worried about her. She was the last thing that kept him in touch with his life here.

The fog wrapped around him and gave him a detached sensation. It was as though the earth had given up on him. Ramón kept losing his footing, almost like gravity had stopped working. His feet did not want to touch the ground. He felt like he floated a few inches in the air and the movement of his legs was just a formality.

After searching of another half hour, he worked his way down the alley and through the gate into the tiny backyard. The Harley was there. It was months since he had driven it.

Without thinking Ramón, pulled off the tarp and

started her up. He gunned it as he crossed 19th street. He flew up the hill towards the Hospital. Flew was a good word, because when he hit a bump, the Motorcycle left the ground and began to climb into the air. It didn't want to come back. Ramón and the Harley drifted over the street. Eventually the hill caught up with him, and he eased to a stop.

Again, he had this feeling that the earth wanted to be rid of him. It was as though there was nothing left to hold him down. The little gray cat was the last thing in his life that had grounded him. He had lost his job. The Harley belonged to the bank. He couldn't pay his rent. His woman was gone. Everyone he knew was either dead or far away.

It was the old joke:

"What holds a balloon up?"

"Lack of responsibility."

"So what's holding you down?"

Ramón felt that nothing was holding him down. There was no sense that he belonged anywhere. Even when he rode on his bike, the wheels couldn't get enough traction to keep him from taking off on any little bump.

Ramón turned the Harley and carefully road down the hill. He was going to leave San Francisco, but he needed to say a few more things to Sylvia before he left.

There is a feeling of total freedom riding a motorcycle. It seems like you are flying. There trouble is that Ramón's Harley really wanted to fly. He crossed the Golden Gate Bridge with his tires hardly touching the road. The stiff wind, coming in off the Bay, lifted him off the ground. By the time he had passed the center of the bridge, he was floating down the road about two feet off the ground.

The wind started to push him to towards the walkway. He was getting further off the ground and if it were not for an early morning delivery truck, he would have flown out over the bay. Ramón grabbed the back of the truck and held on. As they made it off the bridge, his tires settle back onto the roadway again.

He found Sylvia in an apartment in Sausalito an hour

later. She was drunk and there was a man passed out on the sofa. She was wearing nothing but a t-shirt and at first, she pretended that she didn't know him. Then she cursed him out and slammed the door in his face. Ramón took a step towards the door to push it open, but his feet lost touch with the ground, and he fell backward. He didn't fall down, but hung over the brick stairway until he slowly settled to earth.

Rejected by gravity, the earth was telling him to get lost. Well, Ramón could take a hint.

He started the bike. Ramón sped down the twisting roads of Sausalito and shot out onto the bridge approach. There were squeals as his tires left the road and then drifted back down to get traction. He was 10 feet off the ground and going eighty by the time he reached the bridge span. He gunned it and the wheels grabbed at the air. A gust of wind threw him upward. He aimed towards the sky as he passed the center of the bridge.

The earth threw him upward. Go on, get lost, get out of here, it seemed to say. As Ramón climbed ever higher and faster, he watched the sunrise to his right and he steered towards a bright northern star.

Sitting on a fence off an alley in San Francisco, a small gray tabby cat named Gracie, stared at the sky with her one good eye. There was a streak of light as something moving high and fast caught the first rays of the sunrise. She knew who it was and where he was going. She watched Ramón disappear. She sighed and thought for a moment about breakfast.

She had never liked that Harley.

Who is Keith P. Graham?

I have been programming computers since 1969, although I didn't get paid for it until the mid 70s. I considered myself a hacker before the name became associated with computer criminals. Getting into the guts of a computer, or a program, was hacking. I wrote in assembly language because that was as close to silicon as a hacker could get without a soldering iron. I was a programming manager at Lockheed Martin. I was a consultant at IBM Watson Research Center. I worked at Verizon, hacking databases for a few years. I made a very good living at programming for nearly 50 years.

I've been writing short stories since I was 10. I have boxes full of hand-typed stories with their corresponding rejection slips from *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and every major Science Fiction Magazine. I have a horror novel, written in longhand, in six spiral notebooks. I have sold about 80 Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror stories.

I am retired now and don't do much anymore. When you're retired, every day is Saturday.

I play Blues harmonica, badly. I repair tube guitar amplifiers. I keep bees and sell the honey. I have 20 chickens and sell the eggs. I host six of my personal websites on a Raspberry Pi in the cellar.

I have four obnoxious cats, one of which likes me.

I am married to my high school sweetheart, Erica, and we've been together for the last 52 years.

Thanks for getting this far. I hope you liked the book.

My old websites. Note, they cannot stand much traffic.

www.cthreepo.com

www.JT30.com

www.kpgraham.com