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Part 2

2028

“Why didn’t they look around, realize what they were doing, and stop before it was too late? What were they thinking when they cut down the last palm tree?”

--Jared Diamond, *Easter's End*

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“Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.”

–Buddha

North Carolina
37 miles southwest of Fayetteville
September 19, 2028

My father used to tell me that of all the human emotions, anger is the most dangerous. Not because it can lead to high blood pressure and arguments that can destroy a relationship, but because, when a person gets really angry, their soul actually vacates the body. Sounds crazy, right? Just wait, there's more. According to ancient Jewish teachings, the danger in a soul leaving the body is that another soul – a lesser soul – can temporarily take over, and that's when the really bad shit can happen.

Today marked the eighth anniversary of the murder of my family. As if channeling my father, my on-line therapist advised me to let go of my anger through forgiveness. Humoring him, I asked myself, if my child was starving, would I take another person's life to feed my kid? My father, being a moral man, would not have taken another person's life under any circumstance, nor would he have resisted sharing our food, especially if the lives of his family were threatened. Had one neighbor approached Dad, it would have been a different outcome. But the neighbors had formed a mob, and mobs thought collectively in primordial terms, as in, “the Jews are hoarding food” or “*Juden Raus!*” (See Hitler's Germany), or “the Jews poisoned the wells, causing the plague!” I could go on, but it wouldn't change a thing. Dad was dead, so were Mom, Diane, and Debby. . .so were a lot of other innocent people.

If you haven't noticed, I still have anger issues. In fact, I'm having one right now, sitting here in my first class berth on a solar-powered train en route from Orlando to Washington, DC. The bellows fanning the fire in my veins was the "vanilla sway" spewing from the mouth of the peroxide copper-blond sitting across from me. Vanilla sway was Dad's pet term for contrived lunacy reported as fact to sway public opinion, specifically climate change "science" funded by oil companies and repeated ad nauseam on certain cable news networks and blogs until the contrived fiction became accepted as debatable evidence. My father, a progressive thinker sickened by corporate corruption, warned me that even the most outlandish lie, repeated enough times to enough people could eventually turn horseshit into vanilla, thus the term, 'vanilla sway.' "Don't get sucked into a debate with these types, Robbie, they'll drain you like a thousand dollar whore."

"Shall I repeat the question, Mr. Eisenbraun?"

Katherine Helms certainly appeared over my h-phone's holographic transmission like a thousand dollar hooker, her skintight black halter top accentuating her breasts, which looked like two cantaloupes cloaked in plastic shrink-wrap. It was an interesting ploy, considering the religious group she was representing, funded by the Clean Coal Coalition. Before you get any wild ideas about my politics, it's important I mention that the C.C.C.'s claims about producing a greenhouse gas-free fuel is simply more vanilla sway – sort of like Ms Helms' breasts. Based on the obtuse angle of the nipples, I'm ninety-four percent certain they're fake – not the good surgically-enhanced fake either, but the virtual fake – an h-phone app designed to enhance phone sex.

Alexander Graham Bell would be proud.

"It's *Professor Eisenbraun*, Ms Helms, and I can hear you just fine. As to your question,

any answer I give will simply be manipulated by your network to stoke the debate against fusion energy.”

“Five billion people died in the G.D.O., Professor. Are you telling me the thought never occurred to you that the event was an act of God? Even the initials G.D.O. are an anagram for a higher power.”

“It’s also an anagram for DOG; are you saying the family pet pushed our species to the brink?”

“What I’m saying. . . what I’m asking is whether you believe God wants man tinkering with His creation.”

“Based on the small size of your frame, I’m guessing God didn’t bless you with those imposing thirty-six D’s. Wouldn’t breast implants be considered tinkering?”

I smiled as the reporter’s cheeks flushed red, her eyes narrowing. “How dare you compare my breasts to your blasphemy! I know your type, *Mister Eisenbraun*. A woman to you is nothing more than a life-support system for the vagina!”

I muted the h-phone, silencing the four-letter barrage. For the record. . . wait, that’s a bit redundant. Technically, all of this is for the record, recorded internally inside my skull by ABE, the Amalgamate Biological Enhancement chip I designed and had surgically implanted in my brain stem. The ABE prototype is the reason ‘Milk Cans Malloy’ over there was interviewing me, only her vanilla sway was not outweighing the vision of those simulated cantaloupes bouncing on her chest and my patience had reached its limit.

Still, I suppose the vagina comeback deserved something.

Closing my eyes, I regurgitated the first lines of an opening address I had committed to ABE memory. “If you believe that God is perfection and that we were created in His image, Ms

Helms, then why aren't we perfect? The answer lies in the human brain. Like a computer, our brain was designed to process information – in our case about 400 billion bits of information a second. We're only aware of an infinitesimal percentage of that storehouse of memory because our brain must adhere to the programming limitations imposed by the blinding forces of our perceived reality – a reality anchored by natural selection and the weight of our evolution as a species. While there are exceptions to the rule; photographic memory. . . Mozart composing music as a child – solving abstract problems of logic or recalling previously read texts was not a skill our ancestors required to survive while hunting and foraging. Furthermore, the human brain cannot relay to the mind what our senses cannot perceive, and our senses lie to us during every waking moment.

“By the baffled look, I gather you're lost. An example then: As we speak, our planet is rotating on its axis as it soars through space at a speed exceeding eleven hundred miles a minute. And yet, we feel nothing. Why? Because our senses lie to us, concealing the velocity from our brain. The walls of this train possess atoms, each a universe unto itself, and yet we cannot perceive of the micro any more than the macro. If our senses cannot perceive it, Ms Helms, then for us it does not exist, and yet it does. What is needed is a pair of neural spectacles that will allow us to see.

“Enter ABE, a bio-chip that allows its user to direct his or her thought impulses to the parts of the brain best suited to download, comprehend, store, and retrieve the information. Think of ABE as a television remote control, one that uses thought energy to enable its user to channel surf or immediately dial up their desired program or app.”

Stealing a breath, I had ABE restore the h-phone volume, catching Mount St. Helms in mid-gust.

“...virtual research showed that eighty-six percent of a populace enhanced with your neural chip would use ABE like an LSD trip, smelling colors and seeing music in their heads. Ninety-seven percent of subjects using ABE would miss at least five hours of work each week, absorbed in some sordid act of mental masturbation. Of greater concern to many of us New Americans who adhere to the guiding principles of the bible is that your neural chip can control the secretion of hormones like progesterone, allowing a woman to abort her own child.”

And there it was. No matter what the topic, the religious radicals always steered the conversation back to what Dad had dubbed the “G.A.G. reflex” – God, Abortion, and Gays, only now the crusaders had a new tool in their arsenal of crazy in which to fool the public – virtual research. The dysfunctional algorithm was a turd of vanilla sway shifted by a group of Creationists demanding that on-line school curriculums offer their contrived branch of science, which claimed to debunk evolution as an improvable theory.

Virtual research. The words made my blood pressure spike, causing the carotid artery in my neck to throb. For a split-second I could feel my anger summoning another soul, looking for a vacancy.

Ah, but I had ABE.

Sensing the emotional tsunami, my tiny neural implant reduced my level of adrenaline, causing my constricting blood vessels to re-dilate – a sensation similar to submerging oneself slowly into a cool pool of water on a hot summer's day.

Ahh. . .

With the physical symptoms of my anger subsiding, it was time to demonstrate to “Madame Mammary Glands” what ABE was really about.

“Ty mne Vanku ne valjay.”

"Sorry, I don't speak German."

"It's Russian, Ms. Helms, and it's one of several dozen languages I now speak, thanks to ABE's temporal lobe setting which stimulates memory, allowing its user to create his or her own data base in the time it takes one to listen to a language CD. Read a book and you've memorized the text; engage ABE's dictation unit and you can record a letter or even a novel and simultaneously download it to anyone else who possesses an ABE chip. Program ABE's self-diagnostic app and your brain will boost your body's immune system to prevent cancer or cure virtually any ailment. Immortality is within our reach, Ms Helms. ABE bridges the gap between human frailty and human perfection; unfortunately it doesn't come with an app that conquers human ignorance."

"If ABE has made you so smart, professor, why were you kicked off the *Omega Project*?"

Ouch, didn't see that one coming. "Who told you that? An anonymous source?"

"Actually, it was Monique DeFriend. You remember Dr. DeFriend? I believe she was your supervisor for three years. She told me you were assigned to GOLEM, the computer now being used to remotely mine the lunar surface."

"I was one of the design engineers. And I wasn't kicked off the project, I resigned. . . for personal reasons. . .to work on ABE."

"She said you'd say that. She also said, and I quote, 'while Robert Eisenbraun is a brilliant scientist, his brain enhancement chip is designed only to serve its owner's personal needs, as opposed to GOLEM, which is true artificial intelligence, created to protect and serve all of humanity. In the wake of the Great Die-Off, Professor Eisenbraun's decision to seek personal glory over the needs of mankind is more than a bit disconcerting.' Care to rebut the comment

before my news outlet runs with it?"

"Ty mne Vanku ne valjay."

"Yes, you already said that. What does it mean?"

"It means, don't make yourself more stupid than you already are. Good day, Ms Helms."

I terminated the interview, the hologram poised above the work table pixelizing into a thousand micro fragments.

Brilliant work, Eisenbraun. So much for not tossing red meat into the arena.

The small audio device attached to my left earlobe clicked twice. "ABE, identify new caller."

"ANDRIA SAXON. LOCATION: CAPE CANAVERAL."

"Accept call. On visual."

The three-dimensional video cone reappeared, revealing my beautiful fiancée, her recently trimmed short-cropped raven-black hair streaked with ocean-blue highlights that matched her eyes. Her sex was barely concealed beneath a two-piece neoprene running outfit and her astronaut trainee's athletic physique glistened beneath a layer of sweat as she jogged at a brisk pace on an all-terrain treadmill.

She looked up at the h-phone poised above and in front of her and her smile lit me up.

"Hi, babe. Still adore me?"

I held back my joy. Our last argument was still fresh on my mind. Personal query: Was having ABE the equivalent of possessing a woman's elephant memory?

"That depends," I said, sounding a bit bitchy. "Are you calling to apologize or to break off our engagement?"

"Don't whine. You know I want to be with you forever, I'm just not comfortable

planning a spring wedding right now.”

“So we’ll elope.”

“Why don’t you just club me over the head like a Neanderthal and drag me off to your cave?”

“As I recall, you were the one living in a cave when we met. And this astronaut training regimen is getting old. Seeing you three days a month isn’t working for me. At least if we were married--”

“In six weeks I’ll have earned my astronaut wings. Once I complete my internship at Alpha Colony--”

“Whoa, you never said anything about Alpha Colony. How long are you going to be on the moon?”

“Three weeks. It’s a new requirement of all shuttle personnel, in case something goes wrong and we get stranded.” She increased her speed, the simulated gravel grinding louder beneath her feet – her attempt to avoid the conversation. “After that, I’ll be assigned to a fusion depot and we can plan out the rest of our lives.”

“What did you say? I can barely hear you.”

She changed the setting on the all-terrain treadmill from *gravel* to the far less noisy soft sand. The pliable surface forced her to cut her speed in half. “Better?”

“Yes.”

“Six weeks and our future will be resolved. These days, six weeks to you is like six days, the way you hibernate inside your head like a Shaolin monk.”

“I didn’t realize I’d become that bad.”

“Face it, Ike, you’re addicted to your own brain device.”

"Tell you what, while I'm in DC, I promise not to access ABE."

Andria smiled. "I'll bet you your Stones CDs you can't do it."

"And if I win, we get married when I return?"

"No deal. Anyway, I already took the discs. Ike. . . you never told me, what's this meeting with your uncle all about? And why DC? The city's barely juiced."

"Uncle David told me our agenda's strictly on a need-to-know basis, and I never argue with a three star general. Now, if we were married--"

"Fine. Don't tell."

"I don't know why he wants to see me. These days, the Pentagon has more to do with tracking power surges and estimating crop returns than security measures."

"When will you be back in Florida?"

"Miss me already?"

"Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Is this business or personal?"

"Both, and I'd rather not do it over the phone."

"The weather forecast from Orlando to Washington calls for overcast skies. My travel time could be anywhere from thirteen to eighteen hours, depending on how well the train's back-up batteries are working."

As if on cue, the air conditioning in my cabin shut down, the lights dimming. "Here we go again. Computer, reduce window tint by seventy-five percent." The window, which had been a darkened rectangle, brightened to reveal a gray countryside, blurred by the bullet train's 264 mile-an-hour velocity.

"Don't worry, Ike. In a few more years we'll have mined enough Helium-3 to keep the

world running twenty-four/seven.”

“Andie, talk to me. What’s so important—”

“Gotta go, baby. Call me after your meeting, okay?”

The call powered off before I could respond.

With no sun to energize its solar-paneled roof, the bullet train gradually shed its forward inertia until it rolled to an annoying, schedule busting, perspiration-inducing stop. Outside my private compartment, I could hear a knocking make its way toward my cabin, eventually striking my door.

“It’s open.”

The conductor poked his head inside my first-class berth. “Sorry for the delay, Dr. Eisenbraun. Back-up batteries didn’t have a chance to charge with the brown out in Charlotte. Forecasters are predicting a delay anywhere from one to three hours. Those windows go down if it gets too hot. Can I bring you a cold beverage?”

“I’m fine for now, thank you.” I waited until the cabin door clicked shut, then locked it. What I had not told Andria was that it was not my uncle who had summoned me to the Pentagon, but the Vice President.

The question remained -- why?

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The bullet train rolled quietly through the pre-dawn darkness, its solar panels handicapped by the night. Only its proximity to Washington’s Union Station kept the seven-car aluminum and steel beast inching forward at twenty miles an hour, its back-up generator suckling off the energy junction still another thirty-three miles to the north.

I stretched myself awake in the queen-size berth. Sunrise and its accompanying

burst of velocity were still fifty-eight minutes away, ABE's built-in chronometer, functioning like a sixth sense, intuitively informed me the time was 06:12 AM. Unlike the train, the tiny neurological device implanted in my brainstem was powered neither by battery nor photovoltaic cells but by my body's own internal heat. As long as I functioned, ABE functioned.

Climbing out of bed, I entered the bathroom. The water closet was barely large enough to accommodate my frame. I relieved my bladder, then brushed my teeth, staring at my reflection in the oval mirror. My hair was dark brown and kept Jesus-long, my beard and mustache neatly trimmed. I hadn't been without facial hair since a bad case of acne when I was seventeen. For a long moment I contemplated shaving, if only to get a reaction from Andie, only I was afraid the acne might have left pock marks on my cheeks, and who needed to see that.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I dropped to my chest on the warm tile floor and pumped out a quick set of push-ups, stopping at thirty. One whiff of the musky scent coming from my armpits sent me back to the sink for a sloppy hand washing, followed by a fresh coat of anti-perspirant.

Now what? A train ride that should have been completed in seven hours had entered its second day, thanks to fluctuating weather patterns and a new power grid still in its infancy. A year after developing ABE, I had considered purchasing an old steam locomotive and fitting it with a system that used the train's own rotating wheels to keep a series of batteries permanently charged. By the time I had set my design to paper, the world had committed its future to an entirely new source of energy.

I sighed with relief as the air-conditioner clicked on, a wave of cold air filling the cabin as the train's velocity increased.

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At precisely 7:14 in the morning, twenty-five hours after I had boarded the train in Orlando, I stepped out onto the concrete platform of Union Station's upper level. Unlike Central Florida, the morning air was crisp with an autumn chill, forcing me to root through my old gym bag for a sweatshirt. Andria hated the relic, threatening to burn it along with my old college boxer shorts with the elastic exposed in back, but I'm a creature of habit, and besides, I prefer a carry-on that I can sling over my shoulder or, if need be, use as a pillow. With the city's escalators no longer running, my way proved more pragmatic than Andria's fancy suitcase on wheels.

Adjusting the sack of clothing over my left shoulder, I followed the other two dozen passengers into the historic terminal.

A vaulted ceiling heavy in Roman architecture greeted me as I made my way through the dimly lit one-hundred twenty-one year old structure. The G.D.O. hadn't been kind. The food court was gone and the store fronts were all empty, looted a decade earlier. A recent restoration project had cleaned up the vacant shops and their rodent population, but the terminal remained a generation away from returning to its stature as a tourist Mecca.

For now, Union Station served as the primary energy junction between Richmond, Virginia and Philadelphia, its nine hundred solar panels, lined up in rows atop its roof and the open upper deck of its closed parking garage, providing 150 kilowatts of power to the bullet train and the surrounding neighborhoods within the sparsely populated District of Columbia.

I followed the signs leading downstairs, heading for the exit at Columbus Circle. My h-phone growled in my pants pocket before I could step outside.

"CALLER IDENTIFIED. DAVID SCHALL. LOCATION: UNIDENTIFIED."

"Accept call, audio only. Uncle David, where are you?"

"Still at the Pentagon. I sent a car for you. Stay where you are, it's homing in on your

signal.”

As I glanced out the terminal exit a black sedan suddenly raced east across the deserted curved tarmacs intersecting Columbus Circle. The vehicle's wailing siren scattered pedestrians as it stopped ten feet from the Mall entrance.

“You prefer shotgun or backseat?”

“Shotgun.”

The front passenger door popped open.

Shouldering my way past nosy civilians, I climbed in the front seat and the door automatically closed behind me. The dashboard harbored a six-inch-in-diameter steering wheel, air vents, and an entertainment station set to its GPS map.

There was no driver, the vehicle empty but for me.

“Geez, Uncle David, could you at least activate a hologram?”

A young Hispanic woman materialized in the driver's seat, a voluptuous long-haired brunette dressed in a black chauffeur's uniform. The upper portion of her jacket was unbuttoned low enough to reveal a tantalizing view of her well-endowed brown left breast.

“I'm Selena. Sit back, buckle up, and enjoy the view.” She winked at me as the car accelerated down Columbus Circle.

“What is it with this country and holographic breasts?”

Selena distorted, her youthful body morphing into the frail figure of a woman in her eighties. Hunched over the small steering wheel, she turned to me slack-jawed, her eyes magnified behind coke-bottled thick glasses. “Name's Greta. Wanna see my holographic boobies?”

My uncle's shrill laugh filled the car. “What's wrong, Robbie? You look pale.”

"I think I just threw up in my mouth."

The image enlarged, the uniform filling into a non-descript black man.

"Better. Now maybe you can tell me why I'm here?"

"Not now. Sit back and enjoy the ride, I'll see you in twenty."

The call ended, leaving me alone with the holographic chauffeur and the silence of an electric engine powered by a trunk filled with batteries. The view of the former capitol of the United States remained disturbing, eight years of nature unbound, the weeds bursting through the concrete slab like a miniature forest.

Within minutes, the car had exited the interstate, following North Rotary Road past near-empty overgrown parking lots. An automated checkpoint allowed us access to Heliport Road, which led to the northern mall entrance of what had once been the hub of the most powerful military in history.

My uncle exited the Pentagon's west entrance to greet me. My only surviving blood relative was dressed in his military uniform despite the fact that standing armies no longer existed. General David Schall was sixty-seven and silver haired, with piercing blue-gray eyes that held a glint in the morning light.

"There he is. Give your uncle a proper greeting." The former West Point graduate bear-hugged me, whispering in my ear. "Vanilla sway."

I froze at the mention of our private code word.

"I'm glad you could stop by, Robbie. There's about a dozen co-workers in the energy sector who are dying to meet you. Do you mind coming in and saying hello before we head home to see your Aunt Carol? I'm sure she won't mind."

Stop by? "Sure, I'd be happy to say hello."

My pulse racing, I followed my uncle into the building, ABE immediately alerting me to the body scan as I passed through a concealed metal detector. "How is Aunt Carol?"

"Busy trying to turn Georgetown back into a proper college town." The General paused at a Plexiglas security door, then looked up at a grapefruit-size metal orb poised to the right of the sealed entrance, its core glowing a phosphorescent neon-blue.

To my surprise, my uncle looked up and addressed the mechanical eyeball. "I believe you're acquainted with my nephew. Robert Eisenbraun, say hello to GOLEM."

GREETINGS, PROFESSOR EISENBRAUN.

Too stunned to reply, I simply stared at the sensory device like an estranged father suddenly confronted by his child.

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