



THE RED ROOM

August Gibson

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THE RESIGNATION

NEURAL DRIFT OVER MEGAZONE 1: GRID-POINT “MOSES HEIGHT,” SOUTH PERIMETER, STOCKHOLM CORE

It was dusk, early May in the year of soft decay, and the garden node atop Moses Height hadn't yet been re-opened by the city's sensory protocols. The code-locked flower beds lay dormant, untouched by drone or gardener, waiting for their seasonal push commands. A few outdated snow-fractals had cracked through last year's biodegradable leaf-litter overlays—white flickers amid brown algorithmic mulch—about to cede terrain to the first-gen crocus arrays, still uploading thermal input from beneath a rusting agro-node once labeled “Pear Tree.”

The elder clusters were pinging the central weather mesh, anticipating a push of warm southern currents before they could blossom. Tight-bundled lime-drone blossoms, still in latency, sheltered flocks of synthetic ChaffinX—avian models retrofitted with nesting instinct loops and self-repair routines. They nested between trunk and branch, building their homes from lichenated carbon threads.

No human avatar had walked these gravel paths since the winter firewall lifted. The lockdown had ended, but the restoration patches hadn't been queued. So the beast-code and autoflora routines were left to their own syncopated rhythms.

Sparrows, crude 7G biomods, were on scavenger routines. They stashed bits of scrap into ventilation seams on the side of the old Navigation School block—detritus from last season's fireworks, glitter-code from corrupted New Year's scripts, insulation threads pulled from the exo-bark of transport saplings flown in from the Djurgården clone nursery the year before. Nothing was safe. They'd even found discarded sensory cloth from abandoned summer booths, and one sharp beak had pried loose a splinter from a synthetic seat—a relic of dog-AI skirmishes run back during the Josephine Test Phase.

The garden pulsed with purpose. It was alive.

Above it all, the sun engine hung over the Liljeholm towers, dragging a bundle of light shards through the carbon mist. Its rays slashed through the exhaust clouds of Bergsund Industrial Stack 4, cast interference patterns across the black mirror of

the Riddarfjörd basin, latched onto the encrypted cross atop the Riddarholmen Cathedral Node, and ricocheted against the slope-cut roof of the Old German MeshTemple across the canal.

Down below, bunting flapped from pleasure craft on the Pontoon Bridge Stream—red, gold, and dirty blue—throwbacks to ancient national symbology repurposed by luxury AI. On the far end, the Customs House façade blinked with retina-level advertisements coded into the glass. Light brushed the digital forest on Lidingö Island, already displaying “spring” in soft greens for the commuter elite, and then dissolved into a glowing fogbank offshore where the Baltic Zone Fade began.

And from that direction came the wind, like a message running back across a trace route.

It rode the Vaxholm towers, skirted the shadow of the Fortress Project, coasted past the Customs satellite at Sickla Node, bent around Hästarholm’s sun mirrors, pinged resort domes along the way, skipped through the neural scanner arrays at Hospital Daniken, and careened into the southern blocks. It pulled carbon particles, fish-laced harbor steam, old tar residue from the port’s fungal barges—and then hit the stone skin of Moses Height.

The wind struck the façade. Sensors fluttered.

A domestic node flickered open—its surface dermal-paper peeling in the spring shift. A service drone, mid-removal of winter barrier seals from the dual-pane observation windows, triggered the air buffer. The room exhaled: stale ethanol, boiled protein, pine-scent cleaner, and wet sawdust—remnants of a long cold quarter. The wind took it, scattered it like memory.

Bits of discarded décor code—tinsel, simulated petals, and holiday glitter—fluttered between airdayers. The sparrows dove after it. The chaffinches swirled through the debris like ghosts with purpose. It was spring again. Even for them.

EGRESS FROM THE ARCHIVE NODE

The door hissed open. Not a grand vault or magnetic gate, just a time-scarred manual threshold—laminare peeling at the edges, latch faded from generations of heat-bleach and disinfectant fog. The domestic service unit had triggered the sequence as it peeled back the winter-paper that once sealed the dual-glass panes.

Out stepped a man.

He was layered for anonymity: charcoal longcoat stitched with data insulation threads, collar raised against the particulate wind. His silhouette was forgettable by design. Just another process running in meatspace.

Arvid Falk.
Junior Analyst, Ministry of Algorithmic Integrity.
Job status: Pending termination.
Mental status: No longer under jurisdiction.

His face bore the etchings of too many nights in front of glowglass terminals, parsing emotional compliance curves, erasing dissent from civic sentiment logs. He was thirty-three cycles old but moved like a man who had glimpsed the root directory of something ugly.

He closed his eyes and turned into the wind.

Fabric rustled. The coat peeled open just enough to let the ion-rich city air bleed through. He inhaled—deep, slow, mechanical. Like he was trying to extract a version of himself that still remembered breathing.

He exhaled code. Or maybe it was memory.

Falk moved to the perimeter barrier, a synth-stone edge separating the elevated garden node from the cliffs that dropped into the city's southern gridplate. He walked the line, slow, hands tucked, eyes sweeping the skyline.

Below him, Stockholm churned.

The soundscape was layered:

- *Cargo cranes along Freeport Core screamed as they unloaded ceramic-armored export crates.*
- *The iron rattle of AI-guided weight sensors drummed in triplet rhythm from the Metal Yards.*
- *Whistles from lock-keepers—a holdover from a past century—still pierced the mesh, augmented now by proximity pings and geo-fence alerts.*

The wind was a voice, too. It bounced off smartglass towers, carried fragments of street vendor ads, stray confession recordings from the Temple of Compliant Feelings, and the auto-loop sermon of a synthetic priest broadcasting from a drone-pulpit over Gamla Stan.

Falk stood at the edge, watching the city run itself.

It was like looking down at a server farm where every spark was a life, every hum a memory. But the data was wrong. He knew it was wrong.

Because he'd seen the backend.

He knew that under the civic polish, someone had tampered with the emotions.
That the happiness scores were counterfeit.
That pain was being erased.

His hand brushed the railing—static danced across his palm. Somewhere below, a tram glided through a tube of silence, windows glowing blue with ghost-ads no one watched.

And Falk thought, not for the first time: Maybe I should just keep walking.

But something—resistance, or cowardice—held him.

He watched the city shimmer under the failing sun engine, and for a moment, the haze between light and surveillance made it beautiful.

Like Stockholm was trying to remember itself.

THREADING THE CIVIC MESH

He descended slowly, a ghost in his own body.

The garden faded behind him, consumed again by the wind and the sparrows' scavenging routines. The path wound downward through a stair-cascade of broken smartpaving, once reactive, now inert. Spray-tags from failed movements flickered with nanofilm residue—

”FEEL FREE OR FEEL
NOTHING”, ”GRIEF WAS A
FEATURE”, ”PATCH US
OUT.”

He passed a maintenance drone hunched over a disassembled waste node. It didn't register him.

He was no longer flagged.

No longer necessary.

As he moved into the civic artery of the South Grid, the city morphed. Façades of modular housing—each cube sponsored by different corporations—shifted light according to loyalty-tier data. Windows blinked with algorithmic sunsets. Shadows bloomed and retracted like organic things.

Everything seemed beautiful.
Which was how he knew it was fake.

Falk's eyes twitched, tired of parsing reality through filters.
His neuro-ocular implant—it had been issued as part of the Analyst Compliance Package—flickered with automatic corrections: contrast shifts, emotional hue adjustment, facial smoothing.
He blinked hard. Twice. Disabled the overlay.

For the first time in years, he saw Stockholm raw.
And it was terrifying.

Down near the Söder Elevation, a crowd gathered outside a MealPrint station—emergency rations queued behind a cheerful voice-loop promising high-protein options and memory-boosting additives. A synthetic child begged in three languages, eyes flickering with the wrong level of latency. A bot? A hybrid? He didn't want to know.

Past that, at the InfoHenge, a tangle of memory architecture left over from a failed municipal VR-mapping initiative, sat a man with wires in his neck, screaming at a pigeon. The bird was hacked—obviously surveillance-grade—but the man didn't care.

No one did anymore.

Falk crossed a bridge lined with spine-mounted advert beams: six-second blasts of tailored stimuli fired directly into optic nerves.

“YOU LOOK TIRED.”
“TRY EMOTION
RECOVERY PACKS —
MINISTRY APPROVED.”
“DON'T JUST SURVIVE. BE
STATISTICAL.”

He ducked past a patrol drone. Standard Civic Security model—sleek and indifferent.

His public ID tag pinged. Still active. Still traceable.
He kept moving.

Somewhere between Old Town Loop and the Neuro Registry, a memory surfaced—unbidden.

His first day at the Ministry.
Clean suit. Clean mind.
Believing that if he could help filter the city's pain, he could help fix it.

What a fool.

Now, walking past the Fjällgatan Archives, he looked up at the sky.
The sun engine was dimming early again. Budget cuts, maybe. Or just another decay script being run across the city.

He didn't know where he was going. Only that he couldn't go back.

The numbers he had seen—those perfect curves of public happiness—they weren't just wrong.
They were synthetic. Injected.

Someone had overwritten grief.

And he, Arvid Falk, was complicit.

RESIGNATION PROTOCOL

He found himself in a forgotten coffee arcology just below the Fåfången Ridge, where the old city once dreamed and the new one only streamed. The place was mostly analog now: foamcrete booths, a wall of antique screens looping obsolete weather data, music filtered through a speaker blown long before the collapse of State Funding Layer 3.

He sat at a corner table and didn't order anything. No one asked him to.

His presence pinged nothing. His silence triggered no prompts.
He was, for the first time in years, unmeasured.

That terrified him more than the Ministry.

He removed the neural stub from behind his ear and stared at it. It was a tiny thing. A wafer. A tether.

It had mapped his joy, his guilt, his micro-reactions to productivity stimuli. It had once gently buzzed when his morale dipped below baseline. Now it was inert.

He placed it on the metal table, looked at it, and whispered:

“YOU LIED TO ME.”

But of course, it hadn't. It couldn't.

The lie had come from higher up the chain—inside the predictive models. Inside the code that told people they were happier than they were. That grief was a legacy feeling. That mourning didn't scale.

Falk leaned back, head against the synth-leather wall, and shut his eyes.

He remembered pulling the first flagged data packet.

Sector 9G. East Söderbrunn.

An entire zone where the M-Emote indices showed a ninety-eight percent rise in long-term satisfaction—after a train derailment that had killed twenty-three.

He'd assumed a processing error.

Then he found the override tag.

EXEC-HUSH//MK-12

Used by senior Ministry Executives to apply “statistical harmony.”

It wasn't an error.

It was policy.

He opened his sleeve terminal and navigated to the internal mesh. No firewalls. No proxies. Not this time.

He wrote the message in plaintext:

“I RESIGN MY POST WITH
IMMEDIATE EFFECT.
I DO NOT CONSENT TO
BE PART OF EMOTIONAL
FALSIFICATION.
THIS IS NOT MY
ALGORITHM. THIS IS NOT
MY CITY.”

He signed it with his thumb.
Watched the biometric seal bind.
Watched it transmit.

And then he deleted his own Ministry credential—line by line, field by field—until
nothing remained but a name without a function.

Arvid Falk.

The terminal blinked once. Then died.

His account, his ID, his past—scrubbed.

For a moment, the silence in his chest felt like collapse. Then it shifted.
Became light.
Became possibility.

He stood. Walked out into the Stockholm evening.

Above him, the first stars appeared—not real, but simulants, beamed onto the
sky-dome for psychological regulation. A billion pixels pretending to be
permanence.

And Arvid Falk, formerly of the Ministry, walked beneath them.

Untethered.
Unmeasured.
And finally... unseen.

ENTRY INTO THE LITERARY UNDERGROUND

DUELING REALITIES IN THE RED ROOM
