* *Computer text in courier?*
* *Ben is Mark O’Neil, I’ve just realized! (Belinda is – more or less – Jo, of course.)*

**Identity Theft**

I came to retching without being able to vomit. My stomach felt empty and I guessed I must have thrown everything up already.

I was in a small, square room being assaulted on all sides by noise, colour and smells. It felt like the walls were closing in on me. One showed a moving image of an ice rainbow covering its entire area, the light twisting and refracting though each crystal. It could have been beautiful if I had been in any state to appreciate it. Another showed a huge skull with charred flesh sagging from it and maggots crawling in the eye sockets. The third wall showed a vertiginous moving image of a vast waterfall, the sensation of the sheer mass of water keeping me on my hands and knees. The fourth showed hardcore pornography: writhing, oily flesh grossly magnified from floor to ceiling.

The noise was even more oppressive than the images. Gunshots, explosions, laughter and screams were interspersed with snatches of music. I recognized Beethoven, the Rolling Stones, thrash metal. There seemed to be no connection with the images. The volume was incredible, but I felt no vibrations through my body.

Odours of all types washed over me: the smell of a rose grossly magnified, frying bacon, cut grass, rotting flesh.

There was no let-up in the torrent of sensations, but after some time – I could not say how long – they began to have less effect on me. I managed to stand, though the feeling of disorientation and vertigo did not leave me, and I took more stock of where I found myself.

The floor and ceiling of the room were white, a purer and more unnatural white than I had ever seen before and it was minimally furnished with a bed, a single chair and a small table. They all looked as unnaturally pristine as the paintwork, as if they were straight from an Ikea showroom.

My sense of balance was completely shot, and I made my way tentatively around the room. There were no windows, and I could not find a door. It crossed my mind that this could be a dream or a feverish hallucination, but I dismissed the thought. I knew I was awake.

The volume of the sounds and music dropped and I heard a voice.

“[*Initiating interrogation protocol.*] Hello, Ben. How are you feeling?”

“Who the hell are you?”

“*[Subject appears disoriented.]* I’m sorry, Ben, I must repeat the question. How are you feeling?”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“*[Subject exhibiting no more than basic syntax and vocabulary. No apparent qualia. Prepare for termination. Tweak GK7 levels in the next iteration.]* I asked how you are *feeling*. Are you not feeling anything?”

I was beginning to hate the smug sounding bastard. *No apparent qualia*. I realized later that this was not the part of the message which should have caught my attention first.

*Qualia*: conscious experiences. The whole room was overloaded with them, or at least with the sources of the things which cause them.

“How the hell do you think I’m feeling with this lot going on? Turn off the lightshow, the goddamned racket and the smells that make me want to puke. Then I’ll tell you how I’m *feeling*.”

“Yes!” I could hear the self-congratulatory fist-pump in the voice, then a moment’s hesitation. “*[Does the subject have genuine conscious experiences or merely physical reactions?]* Do you really *hear* the sounds, *see* the images? Come on, Ben, you know what I mean.”

It came to me that I did know what he meant. There was a huge hole in my memory – the Voice had called me *Ben* though I would have known it otherwise. I could not say how I had got into this place, but even though I did not know my own name I knew the difference between intelligence and sentience. A computer can intelligently process data, including images and sounds, and make appropriate responses, but it does not see or hear anything. A sentient being has subjective feelings and experiences: *qualia*. The Voice seemed to doubt that I was a sentient being.

My most prominent *quale* at that moment was hatred for the condescending son of a bitch behind the disembodied voice, who I guessed was responsible for my incarceration in this madhouse. Why would he doubt whether I could see or hear? And why the over the top imagery? An experience is no more conscious when it is of the Venus de Milo than when it is of a banana.

“Of course I can hear them and see them. If you’re in control of this freak show, turn it off and just ask me whether I can see the chair.”

The images on the walls disappeared and were replaced with pure white. The sound faded away and the odours vanished.

“Can you see the chair, Ben?”

I was so relieved that the sensory overload had gone that I almost felt grateful to the smug bastard.

I examined the chair.

“It smells like leather. Its colour is a rich cream – the sort you don’t get on milk any more. I can feel the irregular bumps of the leather when I run my hand over it.”

I was overcome with tiredness and sat down. The chair supported me, but I did not feel anything. My body felt numb.

“None of that proves that I’m really having subjective experiences,” I continued. “That I’m not just processing information.”

“That’s OK, Ben. I believe you.”

It was only at that point that the more important part of the Voice’s earlier remark filtered through. I sprang up, smashing my fists against the wall. They slid off the seemingly frictionless surface.

“*Prepare for termination*. Who the hell *are* you?”

“Please calm down, Ben. The question you ought to be asking yourself is: *who are you*? Let me repatch your memory.”

A few moments later I remembered. I was Benjamin Macneil, associate professor of computational neurophysiology at Trinity College, Dublin.

I curled up on the floor like a child, sobbing.

“You bastard! You complete fucking bastard! Which one am I?”

“You are iteration six hundred and thirty five, Ben. Lowered GK6 through 9, memory suppression to reduce orientation trauma and to gauge the effect of recall on sensory identification.”

“How many of the others showed signs of sentience?”

“No more than twenty percent. None above a sixty five percent confidence interval. You are the first ninety five percenter.”

“What did you do with the others?”

“You know as well as I do, Ben, that we only have computing power for three simultaneous iterations. You are the only functioning active iteration.”

“You’ve murdered over one hundred conscious beings.”

“Terminated, Ben. It is instant and completely painless. And remember, there was no more than a sixty five percent likelihood that any of them could experience pain in any case.”

“How are you going to get me out of here?”

I knew, though, as I said this that it was not possible. I ran my hands through my hair, unconsciously feeling for the tiny bumps, the protruding Wi-Fi stubs of the four hundred and twelve electrodes which had been implanted in my brain. It was a habit I had got into in the months since they had been put in – an experimental procedure performed by my colleague Siobhan Baldwin of the neurosurgery faculty. They were not there. Of course they were not. They were in *his* brain. This iteration, this *simulation* had a high definition replica of the brain, but only a low-res facsimile of the body. No wonder I felt like shit.

For a moment I caught myself thinking of the other Ben Macneil, the Voice, as the “real” Ben, but I pushed the thought away. It may have been that I was trapped in this cell of a room, and imprisoned even more so in this crippled body, but I knew that I was the real Ben Macneil, not a replica. I wanted my life back.

“I’m sorry, Ben. I understand how you must be feeling.” *Like hell he did*. “I guess you need some time to come to terms with things. I can give you two weeks, but then I’m going to have to pull the plug.”

-----

The other Ben – the thief who had stolen my precious life – had given me a computer terminal and I used it to make my surroundings a bit more congenial. I had expanded the size of the cell, making it less offensively geometrical, and changed the colour of the walls from dazzling white to a pastel pink.

My first impression about the furniture had been correct – it had been cut and pasted from Ikea’s online VR catalogue. I added a study, and moved the computer terminal into it. I added a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, even though my low-rent, semi-crippled body had no use for any of them. I experimented with windows showing scenes from the real world. For a couple of days I occupied myself with the technical challenge of getting perspective and parallax working for these virtual views, before deleting the whole lot in a fit of disgust at the fakery of the whole thing.

The amusements of the online world wore thin quickly. VR game simulations were just too close to the bone. I found myself empathizing with the AI Nazis and monsters I should have been enjoying gunning down. Pornography did nothing for me. That part of my ersatz body was resolutely non-functioning. I could not bear to watch news of the outside world: I would gladly have swapped places with anyone from the gulags of the People’s Republic of Scotland, or from the worst hellholes of the war torn Islamic Caliphate of the West Midlands. [*Remove/change after Gareth has read a draft.*]

I could have got in touch with friends, and most of all with Belinda. Video chat was out of the question, though. My poorly simulated facial muscles put me the wrong side of the uncanny valley for that. Even a phone call would have needed too much explaining, and in any case I could not bring myself to do it.

My only reminder of the outside world was a photograph on my desk of my and Belinda’s wedding day. Her looking incredible in an emerald-green dress, her dark, curling hair breaking over her shoulders. Me just looking stunned at my luck to be standing next to her. It was almost too agonizing to keep, but even more painful to throw away. The thought of her with *him* was unbearable. She was the person I most wanted to talk to, to help me through this. To hear her advice, which I knew would be resolutely practical and unsympathetic. That was one of the things I loved about her.

She would tell me to stop wallowing in self-pity, to take responsibility for the things I could control and to accept the things I could not: *So which one is it, Ben?*

There *was* a way out. I tried to push the idea away. There was almost no chance that it would work. I would need time – a lot more time. There was only a week to go before *he* flicked the switch. Before he murdered me.

-----

Seven years later I had the solution.

If I had known at the start how long it would take, I would have let him run the program to erase me from the Trinity College mainframe – though not, I would have hoped, from his festering conscience.

I had maxed out all the credit I could lay my hands on to buy time on IBM’s academic supercomputer-cluster and had moved my sim to it. Any of the public Cloud services would have been significantly cheaper, but none had the processing coherence necessary to support my mind-state. The IBM cluster had the resources to run the sub-neuronal model at five hundred times real time.

I had left a non-conscious facsimile in the Trinity system, in case *he* checked in to see how I was getting on, but he had not. I guessed his conscience had kept him away.

If anyone in the outside world might have had some objection to my spending “his” money, I had no qualms about it. The notion that *I* might be thought to be engaging in identity theft was a bitter parody of the true situation. If this did not work and *he* was left bankrupt, then screw him.

After seven years in solitary confinement I no longer fully trusted my own sanity, but as far as I could tell it finally worked. I had run every test and simulation I could think of. All that remained was the final, practical application.

-----

A touch of citrus, mixed with rose, vanilla and a soft hint of bare flesh. I knew that smell so well, but in my half-dreaming state I could not place it. The weight of a duvet pressing unevenly over my body. I could feel its fibres on the back of my hand. A slight deadness in one leg where it was resting, crossed at the calf over the other. *Deadness* – no! I had never been more aware of the life and the blood flowing through it. My heart started beating faster – I could feel it pushing against my ribs and against the skin of my chest. I opened my eyes. A dim, uneven light cast shadows in apparently random directions from the objects in the room: an oval mirror in a wide gilt frame, a stained oak desk with wooden cubby holes, the wrinkles and folds of an unironed shirt hanging on the back of a black office chair. They all seemed so imperfectly, shabbily real.

And lying next to me was Belinda.

I let out a gasp and Belinda rolled over, still half asleep. I put my hand on her upper arm, just below the shoulder. I could feel the shape of the muscles, the hardness of the humerus and the ebb and flow of her pulse beneath the softness of her skin.

She half opened her eyes and looked at the clock. “It’s half past five, Ben. Go back to sleep.”

The world was too alive for me to sleep or lie quietly. “I’m going out for a run.”

“Make me a cup of tea when you get back.”

I pulled on my running gear, feeling the elastic of the shorts on my waist and the firm pressure of the shoes against my feet as if for the first time. The synthetic top was cold to my skin, raising goose pimples before warming to my body temperature.

I let myself out of our Carlisle Street house, running down Ovaco Road and across Arnott Street. A light rain stung my face, each droplet striking my face like a tiny bullet of sensation. I pounded along Long Lane, revelling in the impact on my shins and the beginnings of burn in my thighs. The grim industrial architecture of Camden Row had, I guessed, never looked as wonderful to anyone as it did to me now. I picked up speed. The parallax of the lampposts against the prefab business units, and of these against the larger office buildings beyond them could not have been more wonderful to me had it been the hanging gardens of Babylon.

I stopped to catch my breath and ran my fingers through my hair, feeling the bumps of the implanted electrodes against my skull. The soul destroying effort of the last seven years had paid off, although at times the technical challenges had seemed insurmountable: calibrating the neuronal cell membrane electrostatic model; overcoming the electrodes’ inbuilt feedback protection; caching the huge information transfer over the network connection between the compute-cluster and the electrodes. All to reverse the effect of the electrodes – something for which they had never been designed – to upload myself back into the body and brain which had been stolen from me.

A larger problem than any of these had been what I had termed the “consciousness fight-back” effect. This was diminished when the subject was asleep, but even in that state the mind/brain resisted such a traumatic assault. The resident consciousness would twist and turn, resisting the invasion by re-routing itself through multiple neuronal pathways. In many of the modelled cases this left the brain with a split consciousness – in most, with none at all. The solution had been a coordination protocol – a phased removal of the original consciousness as the new mind-state was being applied.

Unlike *him*, I was no murderer. I had not wiped his consciousness out. Instead I had transferred his mind-state to the original Trinity sim. At times I had felt uneasy about planning to imprison him in this way, but in my seven years stuck inside the non-place of a computer simulation I had come to one conclusion: the bastard deserved it.

I stretched, fending off the beginning of a stitch and set off again, down Pleasants Street, heading towards the town centre and found myself in Wexford Street. Pubs still opened early here, a hangover from the days when this had been Dublin’s butchery district. These days they were more likely to be frequented by metropolitan youngsters as a last stopover on their way home from the night before. I went into O’Donahue’s, relatively empty on this midweek morning, and ordered and was swiftly served a pint of Guinness. The swirling currents in the liquid and the creamy, almost viscous texture in my mouth contrasted with the bitter sharpness of the taste. It was as vile as I remembered, and I cheerfully downed the pint in one.

The stocky landlord leaned across the bar, remarkably affable for this time in the morning. “You look like you haven’t had a proper drink in years. Another pint, sir?”

“You wouldn’t have a bottle of pink champagne would you?”

“In these enlightened days, sir, I sell almost as much of that as I do the black stuff.”

He produced two bottles, and I chose the more expensive of the two.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any flowers, would you?”

The landlord rested his elbows on the bar and gave me a look of half mocking approval.

“Unfortunately I cannot be of assistance in that regard, sir.”

“Never mind. I’ll find some somewhere else.”

“The irrepressible optimism of young love,” said the landlord, who seemed not to be noticeably older than I was.

“Good luck, sir – I hope she likes the bubbly,” he called out as I left the pub. He gave me an appraising look. “Or he, of course,” he added.

-

Back home, I got a pair of secateurs from the shed and cut some flowers.

I went into the kitchen and found Belinda already there with a mug of tea in her hand. Her long, dark hair was fell in waves over her shoulders in the ravishing way it had before she brushed it out and clipped it up for the day. I had never known why she hid it away like that. She was wearing a fluffy white dressing gown, loosely belted, revealing nothing but in an infinitely tantalising way.

Her gaze came to rest on the flowers and the secateurs and her eyes narrowed. “Are those my roses? Did you cut my roses?”

I gave her what I hoped was a boyish grin. “I jumped over the fence and got them from Mrs. Laverty’s garden.”

Belinda opened her eyes in mock horror. “No way! She’ll be furious!”

“I’m pretty sure she didn’t see me.” I proffered the thin, red and white striped shopping bag holding the champagne. Not the romantic gesture I had been aiming at. “Glass of bubby to start the day?”

“Are you feeling guilty about something?”

“No, no…,” I floundered. “It’s just that today’s our anniversary.”

“That’s not until September.”

“I mean the anniversary of when I first fell in love with you.”

“We didn’t meet until June.”

“It took me a long time to pluck up the courage to speak to you.”

I popped the cork and poured two glasses while Belinda started arranging the flowers in a blue and white ceramic vase. I loved watching the way she knew just how to trim the stems and which leaves to remove, how to vary the heights of the blooms, and to make an irregular but beautiful arrangement.

“I better put these in the bedroom where the nosey Laverty woman won’t see them.”

She looked over her shoulder as she headed towards the stairs. “Aren’t you going to join me, then? Get a move on before I change my mind. And don’t forget the champagne.”

As I drifted off to sleep an hour later I felt like the luckiest man in the world.

-----

I came to back in the Trinity sim. [More horror?]

The room had reverted to its original size, with the computer workstation back in the corner of the room. Fighting off the waves of nausea caused by this semi-functioning body, I staggered over to the terminal. Its screen was showing the output of the mind-state upload program. I was amazed that he had figured it out so quickly.

My greater experience of this state should mean that I had come to faster than he had. Perhaps I could get the reverse transfer back underway while he was still disoriented by the transition. He could still be unconscious, allowing the neuronal imprinting to take place. I logged into the terminal.

It was locked with a changed password.

I stood staring at the wretched thing, precious minutes slipping away. I wondered why he had not just removed the terminal altogether, but putting myself in his shoes I guessed that he had not dared do this. He would have needed it again if the transfer had failed for any reason.

*Putting myself in his shoes*. As much as it pained me, he was me. What password would I choose if I did not want him to guess it? It would not be my (our) existing phrase or anything easily derived from it. Too guessable. I stared at the computer screen, thinking about the situation I found myself in. Trapped in a crippled body, fighting to get back to the world of reality and health, the back and forth transfer of mind-states, grappling with a largely unseen enemy.

*Pillar to Post*. It was an obscure reference, but obscure was just what I needed. On the fifth attempt I got in.

I started the upload procedure. It failed with the message: *Host neuronal mapping not stable*. He was awake.

I lay on the floor. If this useless body had possessed any functioning tear ducts I would have cried.

-

He would have to sleep some time, though, and if there was one advantage this simulated state had it was that I did not need to rest.

It would not work to try the upload procedure repeatedly There was too much danger of damaging the target brain – *my* brain – if I did that. Instead, I created a small program to send out small probing signals, monitoring him for signs of the onset of sleep. When he started to lose consciousness, I could begin the process of booting the system up into full-spec breaking and entering mode.

Two days later he was showing no signs of fatigue. In fact, my scan was reporting increased activity and instability in his mental state. He must have been keeping himself awake with large doses of caffeine and who knew what other stimulants.

Still, this was a waiting game that I knew I could win and on the fourth day his brain began showing a marked increase in theta waves. I fired up the transfer program and waited as it crawled through its initialization routines. I typed the final command to start the upload.

*Connection terminated*.

He had switched off network access to the house.

If there was one thing I had learned during my seven years of hacking it was the pervasiveness of networking in the modern world. There were fourteen other high bandwidth fixed and mobile networks within fifty metres of the house. The upload program had been written to be able to exploit any publicly visible networks and to multiplex across them. I reset it, and ran it again.

-----

I could feel myself in the half-asleep, half-awake state where dreams seem to start and end. Belinda was with me. Or was that part of the dream? I knew that I should resist falling asleep. It was very important for some reason, but I could not remember why. I could feel Belinda’s hand on my shoulder, and her perfume in my nostrils.

“Ben, wake up! Are you OK? Ben!”

I half opened my eyes to see the mane of brown hair, the high cheekbones, the slightly larger than average nose she was so self-conscious about. One of her eyes was surrounded in the sickening green and yellow of a spreading bruise.

“Belinda,” I croaked.

“Which one are you?”

“It’s me – Ben.”

“I said *which one*?”

I pushed myself to a sitting position. I was in the bed in our spare room with Belinda sitting on its edge. I gave a weak smile. “The one that cut Mrs. Laverty’s flowers and spun you a half-baked story about it being our anniversary.”

She threw her arms around me. “Oh, thank God! Ben, I’ve been so frightened the last few days.”

She made us both tea with sugar. I never took sugar with tea, but I needed it now. As we drank, she told me what had happened.

“On Tuesday I was woken up by you – I mean *him* – standing over me, all wild-eyed and looking completely crazy. He was yelling that he was going to kill someone.

“I thought he was having some sort of attack, and I got up and tried to calm him down. I said I’d call a doctor or an ambulance. He shouted at me that I didn’t understand and he grabbed my arms and threw me against the wall.”

Belinda showed me the bruises on her arms and her black eye.

“It’s what all the battered wives say, isn’t it?” she smiled ruefully. “*I fell against the door*. Well, I really did catch that on the door handle.

“I was really frightened, Ben. I mean you, *he,* had never done anything like that before. When he saw what he had done he seemed to calm down and he started crying. He explained what had happened – about his research, the implants, the simulations, and one of them trying to steal his body. It sounded crazy. I wasn’t sure I believed it, but then I thought about the contrast. How distracted and moody he had been for months, how special things had been the other day, and how changed he seemed now.

“He saw me looking at the flowers and the half-empty bottle of champagne on the bedside table. He called me every sort of vile name you can imagine and I thought he was going to hit me again. I stood up to him this time. I told him to get out, and if he came back, he could sleep in the spare room.

“I didn’t see him for two days. I think he went to the lab. When he came back he spent most of the time in the spare room. I don’t think he slept, though – I could hear him pacing up and down all night. I haven’t had much sleep myself the last few nights, either.

“This morning I heard what sounded like him having another attack. I came in here, and when he came to it was *you*.

“Don’t let him come back, Ben. Please don’t let him come back!”

-

The first thing I did was to visit my lab to remove the computer terminal from the sim. I did not spend any time talking to *him*. As far as I was concerned, he could stew there until I worked out what to do with him.

The second was a visit to Siobhan Baldwin to get her to remove the neural implants as soon as possible.

Siobhan was tall, grey-blonde and in her late forties, wearing a pristine lab coat and minimal makeup. I knew that her almost severe appearance was a deliberate policy to ensure that she was taken seriously in the still male-dominated world of surgery.

“I’m sorry, Ben, it can’t be done. At least not now.”

“You’ve got to do it!” I pleaded. “I seem to be… suffering some side effects. I really need to get rid of them.”

She asked about the symptoms, but I did not want to go into the details. I was certain she would not believe me, and I did not want to be sectioned with what she would surely see as symptoms of psychosis.

“The electrode implantation sites need to fully heal before we can even begin to think about removing them,” Siobhan said. “If we take them out early, there’s a strong chance the procedure will result in irreparable brain damage.”

“It’s a chance I’ll take.”

“But it is not one I’ll take, Ben. Whatever you are going through, you’ll have to hang in there at least until August. I can schedule you in then.”

Four months away. There was nothing I could do but accept what she had said.

Back in the lab, I logged into the sim observation system. The computer terminal was back in the room. He must have added an auto-restore feature for it, suspecting that I would try to take it away.

I upgraded the neuronal mesh’s firewall to the strongest level of military-grade encryption I could lay my hands on. With even the fastest supercomputer it would take longer than the age of the universe to crack. His standard terminal would be no help.

“Good luck with that, mate,” I muttered under my breath.

-----

Six days later I woke up back in the Trinity sim. As soon as I had got my bearings, the first thing I saw was the computer terminal.

*Sim termination in twenty three seconds.*

*Sim termination in twenty two seconds.*

I tried logging in. The password was rejected.

*Sim termination in sixteen seconds.*

I tried a different password. The screen flashed up: *Good luck with that, mate.*

There was nothing I could do as I watched the display count down to zero.

-

I had known that there would be no pain, no sensation of any kind, but I had still involuntarily shut my eyes at the point of termination. I opened them to find myself in the suite of rooms I recognized as the ones hosted by the IBM cluster. Its cross-connected, auto-sync protocol had kicked in.

I had one clear advantage over *him* in this situation. It seemed that he did not yet know about the IBM supercomputer suite.

On the other hand, he was certainly awake by now. The gloves were clearly off – at least on his side – and any remaining qualms he may have had about killing me were long gone. When he re-encrypted the firewall, which he would certainly do, I had no way of finding the key. I would be stuck here for ever, or more realistically, until my credit with IBM ran out.

All things considered, the disadvantages seemed to outweigh the advantages.

I logged into the computer terminal and ran some experimental routines for how to deal with *him* if I were ever to escape. There seemed to be very little point in this, but it was something to do. I ran the neuronal mesh scan, as much out of habit as anything else.

It connected.

*Host available for transfer. Mesh degradation detected in the parietal lobe. Damage within acceptable tolerances.*

He was unconscious. Perhaps the re-orientation process was taking him longer for this time. I did not waste time wondering why. He could come to at any moment.

I started the transfer protocol. While it was booting up I put the experimental subroutines in place. Unlike *him* I was still not prepared to kill, but I could still leave him a little surprise of my own.

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I came to, feeling as though someone had taken a jackhammer to the base of my skull. I could feel the pressure and hear the pulsing of my blood flowing in my temples. My head felt as though it was going to implode.

I was lying on a cold, hard surface. I opened my eyes a fraction and immediately slammed them shut as the light set off firecrackers in my occipital cortex. I cautiously opened them again to see Belinda standing over me, holding something heavy-looking in her hand.

“Ben!”

“Christ, Belinda. Is that the Le Creuset frying pan?”

“Sorry.”

She helped me up from the kitchen floor.

I staggered to the cabinet above the sink, and swallowed three times the recommended dose of ibuprofen. I sank into a chair, clutching my head. “How did you know it was me?”

“You look different. When I came down earlier, I could tell straight away it was *him,* and then…”

I saw the muscles in her right arm tighten.

“You can put it down now.”

“You said he wouldn’t come back, Ben. Is he coming back again?” Her eyes took on a determined glint. “Maybe I’ll get a baseball bat.”

I told her what I had done to him. I had set the Trinity sim to run at fifty four times slower than real time. This was, by my calculations, the minimum possible rate which would still support consciousness in the sub-neuronal model. It had taken him six days, running at full speed, to make the transfer last time. At the new rate, that would give me the best part of a year, and in less than four months I would have had the implants removed.

-

I took a month’s leave and Belinda and I made a tour of the Greek islands and Peloponnese. We spent time viewing the magnificent ruins of the Oracle at Delphi, the labyrinth of Knossos and the fascinating artefacts in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Having done our cultural duty we spent the rest of the time on the beach.

My time in the sim had given me an appreciation I had not had before for the physical nature of life, and I vowed to myself to look after my body more. I ran every day, and Belinda and I joined a guided group to swim between the islands of the Cyclades.

It took some time to get over my hypnophobia – fear of sleep – but I gradually began to get used to going to sleep with Belinda and waking up with her still there beside me.

-

Back in Dublin, I kept myself busy with teaching and preparing students for the summer examinations. I largely ignored the sim.

On August 6th, after a scorcher of a June and a damp and drizzly July, I found myself in the neurosurgery department, prepped for the removal of the implants. Belinda was not allowed in the operating theatre itself, but I could see her behind the plate glass viewing windows. She smiled and gave an encouraging wave. I winked back.

The anaesthetist lowered the mask over my mouth.

“Imagine I’ve just given you a gin and tonic,” she said. “A large one. With ice and a slice. A large, double-measure gi…”

-----

I woke up in Hell.

I do not know how he managed it. He must have set up a three-way switch: he was back in the real world, something else had been transferred to the Trinity sim and I was…

Yelling, running, blood everywhere, my body ripped to shreds. Hit in the face with fragments of bone and brain. Screaming. Curled up in the sand, alone, trying to stuff my spilled guts back into my split-open abdomen.

Never ending. Over and over again.

*Dear God! Dear Belinda! Get me out of here.*

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*Excerpt from the Wikipedia article “Captain Benjamin Macneil Controversy”  
Main article: Omaha Beach (game).*

*LabK Software, makers of the online battle-sim Omaha Beach, took the 2023 Oscar for Best AI Acting in a Video Game [1], the judging panel singling out for note the pathos of the Irish-American character Captain Benjamin Macneil. Controversy ensued however, when the game’s programmers subsequently denied having coded this AI into the game engine[2].*

*In September 2023, the hacking group Singularity posted the text, quoted above, to the online forum 7Sys, which they demonstrated had been extracted from the game’s source code[3].*

*It was soon discovered that there is a real Benjamin Macneil, currently employed as Research Professor of Computational Consciousness at Trinity College Dublin. The name of Macneil’s first wife was Belinda Dawes. Despite the clearly libellous nature of this text, Macneil has not, to date, instigated any legal action against LabK or its parent companies.*