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FLOATING IN LINDRETHOOL

1

"Your profession, gentlemen, has a long and distinguished lineage," was what the section boss had said when he stopped the bus, opened the door and let them all out on the east side of Lindrethool. Eight men in black rain coats, white shirts and ties, and the company issued, indicative, derbies. They fanned out across the grim industrial cityscape, the soot falling like black snow around them. Each carried a valise in one hand and a large case with a handle in the other. Each walked away, mumbling his respective spiel, all of which included at some point the words, "for a limited time only." In three weeks, the bus would be waiting at the west end to collect them.

Slackwell sat now, tieless, hatless, pantless, at a small scarred table in his hotel room, sipping straight bourbon from a smudged tumbler. "A distinguished lineage," he said aloud to the window pane that beyond his reflection gave a view of the night and the myriad lights of Lindrethool. Every light stood in his mind for a potential customer. All he needed was one to part with forty thousand dollars in easy monthly payments spread over ten years and he would have fulfilled his minimal quota for the year. On that first day, he had covered three apartment buildings, lugging his case from floor to floor. "Not even a smell," as his colleague Merk might say.

He couldn't imagine the door-to-door salesmen of the previous century, doing what he did but having nothing better to offer than brushes, or vacuum cleaners, encyclopedias, bibles. At least he had a real wonder in his case, a value that could change the lives of his customers. That's exactly what he told them while cajoling, reasoning, even threatening if necessary. While in training, he had practiced again and again like a martial artist the techniques of wedging a foot between the door jamb and door, following through with the shoulder and then achieving a look of homicide thinly veiled by a determination to please. The studies had shown that the novelty of face-to-face sales was what the consumer wanted. In the waning economy that had taken a nose dive ten years into the new century, people did not want to shop online or by phone for big ticket items anymore. Or at least that was what they had told him during his training.

He hadn't had a sale in two months, and he had been told by the section boss that the company was thinking of letting him go. "You're too tired looking Slackwell," the boss had said. "Your complexion is as gray as your hair and your spiel, though rabid enough, has all the allure of a drooping erection. Wrinkles are no comfort to our customers, it is power they want. You are selling status. And, please, your after-shave is rancid."

Slackwell cringed into his bourbon, thinking about how he had pleaded, whined actually, to be allowed one more chance. The boss took pity on him, and not only allowed him another shot at it, but also issued him the latest model to hawk in Lindrethool. "If you can't sell that," the boss had said, "you can sell yourself to the devil."

Slackwell lit a cigarette. With the butt jutting from the corner of his mouth, he stood and unlatched the case that sat next to the bottle of bourbon. The black metal carrier bulged at the sides as if it housed an oversized bowling ball. The front panel opened on hinges, and he reached in and brought forth a large glass globe with a circular metal base. The base had dials and buttons on it, two jacks, a small speaker, and, in the back, a wound up thin electrical cord was attached. *Thinktank*, the name of the company was written across the metal in red letters and after it the model number 256-B. The globe above was filled with clear liquid and suspended at its center was a human brain.

The bourbon, having gotten the better of him, made him weave a little as he stepped back to view the illustrious product. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, and with the two fingers it was wedged between pointed at the globe. "Now that's a floater," he said with a cloud of smoke. A floater was what the sales force of Thinktank called the organic center of their merchandise.

"Organic computing, the wave of the future," Slackwell slurred, practicing his spiel. "Consider this-a human mind, unfettered by physical concerns, using not the customary piddling ten percent used by your Joe Blow from Kokomo, not even fifty or seventy or eighty percent, but a full 95.7 percent of its total cogitative potential. The limitations of microchips have long since been reached. The computing power of a human brain is vast. This baby can run your household appliances from your apartment's master control box, your lights,

your phone. It can easily increase the power of your home computer 300 times, give you television from around the globe, all at a fraction of your present cost. Set it to pay your bills once and it will do so, on time, every month-it learns what you like, what you want, what you need. And the speed with which it runs will make your parallel processing seem like..."

Slackwell couldn't remember what bit of hyperbole came next. All he could think of was the boss's "...a drooping erection." He took a drag on his cigarette and sat down to stare in at the gray, spongy fist of convolutions. There was something both awe inspiring and lurid about the fact that an individual's consciousness was trapped inside that insanely winding maze of matter, an island lolling in a crystal bubble. Once, a few weeks earlier Slackwell's thoughts took a dangerous detour, and he briefly glimpsed the analogy to his own existence-trapped, trapped, and trapped again.

This new model, though, this 256-B, had a feature that set it above all of the others. There was a button on the base that when pushed would rouse the brain into consciousness. The customer could talk to it and the apparatus would break the spoken language down into an electrical impulse, send it to the floater by way of a remote transmitter in the base, and the brain would hear in thoughts. Then its response, sent out by the brain's language centers as its own electrical impulse of thought, would be picked up by another device which would translate it into spoken language. The voice that came from the speakers wasn't a stiff, robotic barking of words. The Thinktank technicians had patented a new development that allowed the device to emulate the tonality, resonance, inflection, and even accent of the original donor's voice.

The corporation had cut deals with certain indigent families, and there were a lot of them these days, to allow their loved one's brains to be extracted before actual clinical death set in. The legalization of certain types of euthanasia had opened the door to more liberal organ donation practices. Hence, the individual personality of the brain was kept intact. These deals involved cash in rewarding quantities and the promise that the dying family member would live on, remaining a useful member of society and a catalyst for change in the new economy that was ever on the verge of dawning. Slackwell wondered which, the cash or the promise, was the more comforting to the bereaved.

The only member of the sales force who had had an opportunity to sell one of these new models was Merk, and he had told Slackwell and the others, "One thing to remember: you can demonstrate the floater's sentience for the customer but, whatever you do, don't engage it in conversation on your own. It'll give you the yips." They had asked Merk if he was speaking from experience or just relating what he had been told by the researchers at Thinktank. The veteran salesman gave no reply.

2

Although the concept of home was now no more than some vague memory, Slackwell never got used to waking in a strange hotel room. One second he would be dreaming of the old days, back in the house on the bay, a spring breeze passing through the willows just outside the screened window. He would roll over in bed to put an arm around his wife, Ella, and then, like a light suddenly switched on, the nausea of his hangover would lodge like a green feather at the base of his throat. His mouth would go instantly dry, and the pain would begin behind his eyes. That peaceful dream of the past would vanish and he would wake alone and disoriented.

Of late, his hands had begun to shake in the mornings, and it was all he could do to steady the bottle in order to pour the first of three shots that would get him through the hellish shower, the donning of his Thinktank uniform and to his first cup of coffee. Sometimes aspirin would be called for, sometimes, when he had it, a joint. Whatever it took, he would be on the street sharply at eight fifteen, staggering along, case in hand.

On this, the morning of his second day in Lindrethool, he met Merk at a diner around the corner from his hotel. They sat at a booth by the window, facing each other, but neither spoke until the first cup of coffee had been drained and the waitress had come with refills.

"How many units did you fob off on the witless citizenry yesterday?" asked Slackwell.

Merk shook his head. "This place is drier than my ex-wife."

"I had a guy who wanted to buy my hat," said Slackwell.

"There you go," said Merk. "I walked in on the middle of a domestic dispute. The woman had a shiner and the old man was seething, but still he made me demonstrate the Tank for them. I had one hand on that revolver I keep in my jacket pocket and used the other to flip the switches and turn the knobs. I got the floater to sing them a song, *No Business Like Show Business*. You know, it's a sentient model, and whoever the unlucky sap is who wound up under the glass can really belt out a tune. No sale, though. No sale."

"I'm packing a 256-B myself," said Slackwell, trying to impress his senior colleague with the fact that the company had entrusted one of its top of the line models to him. "But I still haven't let the thing talk for itself yet. I had a near miss on a sale yesterday. A woman with a kid. She had me do the fucking kid's homework on it and print it out-a report on mummies. The whole time the little monster kept smearing his greasy fingers

all over the globe, trying to get at the meat inside. Finally, I told his old lady she should teach him some manners. That iced it."

"You gotta watch that anger. The customer's always right," said Merk.

"The customer's hardly ever right," said Slackwell.

They had a few more cups of coffee and Merk had a plate of runny eggs. There was a little discussion of the new guy Johnny, who Merk said hung himself in the shower stall of his hotel room.

"Did the company get there in time?" asked Slackwell.

"You kidding me?" said Merk. "The implant tipped them off that he was going south before he even put the belt around his neck. I was called over there last night at around nine to witness the operation. They always call me for that shit. I get a bonus. They opened his head like a can of peaches and whipped his sponge out faster than you can say "limited time only."

"Won't his brain be screwed up?"

"They have ways to revive them," said Merk. "Besides, when they cut him down, I'm not sure he was all dead, if you know what I mean."

"He seemed a little too sensitive for the work," said Slackwell.

"That poor bastard was born to be a floater," said Merk. "Some of us drift in the liquid and some on the sidewalk." He gave a rare smile, almost a wince, and shook his head. "Last I saw the kid alive, he had a stunned look on his face like he didn't know whether to shit or go blind. You know, I've seen that look before."

"Where?"

"Every morning in the bathroom mirror since the old lady left me."

"So make another face," said Slackwell. "What would it take?"

"Courage or insanity, and I haven't got the juice to muster either. When the bell rings, I drool, but I'm good at it."

"Yeah," said Slackwell, "my chin's damp more often than not."

They each had a cigarette and then stood, lifted their cases and exited the diner. Out on the windy street corner, they tipped their respective hats to each other, gave the parting Thinktank sales force salutation, "Lose a brain, brother," and set out on their separate paths.

By noon, Slackwell was no longer staggering. Instead, he was limping. On the last call before lunch, after covering two entire apartment buildings, a woman took a hammer she had apparently just happened to be holding and smashed the foot he had artfully wedged between door and door jamb. "Scat," she had yelled as if he had been some kind of bothersome vermin.

As he moved slowly along the street, he could feel the foot swelling in his shoe. The pain was moderate-worse than the time an old woman had brought him a cup of steaming hot coffee after an hour and a half of hard sell and accidentally spilled it in his lap, and not quite as bad as the time a mad man had taken his pen on the pretense of signing an agreement and jabbed him in the wrist with it. At times like this, he considered it a good thing that he did not carry a revolver like Merk.

He spotted the next address on his list and its newness, its cleanliness and name-Thornwood Arms-made him decide to skip lunch. Everything about this place suggested affluence. These were the apartments of those who had wound up on the right side of the perpetually widening divide between the haves and have-nots.

He entered the front of the building and made for the elevator, but before he could so much as press the button, a security guard had a hand on his shoulder.

"Whom are you here to see?" asked the tall young man dressed in what appeared to be a ship captain's uniform.

Slackwell retrieved a business card from his coat pocket and handed it to the guard. "I am here to bring the future to your residents."

"Sorry, sir, but there is no solicitation allowed here."

"This is not solicitation. This is demonstration," said Slackwell.

"Either way," said the young man, "you'll have to leave."

"Luddite," Slackwell yelled as he exited through the revolving door.

Once out on the street, he immediately ducked down an alleyway next to the building. "There's no way this fool is going to deny me contact with a public in need of innovation," he thought, "especially a public with plenty of cash."

At the back of the huge building, he found an empty loading platform. Lifting the case onto it, he then scabbled up himself. The tall, sliding aluminum gate directly in front of him was shut tight, but off to the far left and far right of the platform there were doors that gave access to the building. He chose the left, walked over to try the knob and found he had chosen correctly. The door swung open, and he felt something in his solar plexus, either a muffled gasp of excitement or a jab of indigestion.

He entered, and following a short hallway, soon came in view of a freight elevator. Glancing around to

make sure that he was alone, he pressed the button on the elevator and waited for the door to open. He knew better than to gloat in his victory, but he could not help a brief smile. The door slid back and he stepped into the wide, shiny box. "Which floor?" he wondered, staring at the row of buttons. Out of the thirty possibilities, he chose number 11. The door closed. He leaned back against the metal wall as the car lurched into its ascent. Sweat rolled down across his face from under his hat brim, his heart was pounding, his hands shook from need of a drink and his foot throbbed.

It was a quick decision, but he felt as if he might keel over if he didn't soothe his nerves. When the elevator reached somewhere between the fifth and sixth floors, he hit the Stop button. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a joint. His hands shook violently and he had a hard time working the lighter. Eventually, he got the thing lit and took five short tokes on it. The car quickly filled with smoke. Before he stubbed out the weed and started the elevator again, he could already feel his tension level beginning to drop.

His mind swirled like the clouds that exited the elevator with him on the eleventh floor. For a few brief moments, as he made his way through a series of doors to find the hallway that held the residents' apartments, he entertained the possibility of filling at least twenty orders.

At the very first door he knocked on, a pleasant-looking older man answered. Slackwell took a deep breath in order to launch into his spiel, but found the dope he'd smoked had robbed him of words. Instead, he started laughing.

The man at the door smiled, and said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm selling something," said Slackwell.

"Shall I guess what it is?"

"Organic computing."

The customer's look changed slightly but he continued to smile. "I see," said the man. "Brains in a jar? I've heard of it."

"More than that," said Slackwell. "Much more."

"Let's see it do its thing," said the man. He stepped aside and let the salesman in.

The apartment was spacious and perfectly clean. A large window offered a view of the city. The man was obviously learned, because there were two huge bookcases filled with weighty volumes. Beautiful old paintings depicting religious scenes hung on the walls. It was clear to Slackwell from his training that this would be the type of customer who might balk at the usual bullying tactics. A smooth and reasoned delivery was called for in this situation, and he was high enough at the moment to believe he was the man for the job.

They sat, each in a comfortable arm chair, at a small marble coffee table on which Slackwell rested his case. As he went through the operation of removing the unit, he laid down a spiel as smooth as a frozen lake. Having read the scene and taken in the surroundings—the customer's cardigan, loafers and designer button-down shirt the same color as his socks—he tried to punctuate his message with as many erudite words as he was capable of.

"You see, sir... what is your name again?" he asked.

"Catterly," said the man.

"You see Mr. Catterly, there is no need for a man of your obvious intelligence to forbear the rigitudes of laboring under the present inadequate computing systems that now run the devices of your apartment and give you access to the internet. There are bothersome buttons to be pushed, dials to be set, and the response time of all of this outdated equipment is regrettable, to say the least. Here is a system that will actually think for you. It will swiftly learn what it is you want, and one simple voice command from you is all it takes to make any changes."

Slackwell opened the hinged panel and took out the 256-B. "Feast your eyes on this unit," he said.

"A human brain," said the man. He peered in at it through the glass and his smile disappeared.

"Awe inspiring, isn't it?" asked Slackwell. "And best of all, it can be brought to consciousness if you require company as well as computing acumen."

Mr. Catterly shook his head and softly whistled.

"Granted, it takes a little getting used to."

Slackwell watched as his customer slowly stood. For a moment, he thought he was about to be shown the door.

"I'll be right back," said Catterly. "Make yourself comfortable." He left the living room by way of a hall leading off to the left.

"Going to find the old checkbook," Slackwell whispered and for the first time that day his foot stopped hurting. He quickly got the unit up and running, using the battery setting that made it portable.

"You aren't from Lindrethool, are you?" Catterly called from down the hall.

"No," Slackwell replied.

A few minutes passed and then he heard the man's voice from just the other side of the living room. "Then you wouldn't know who I am."

Slackwell looked up from his task, and saw the old man transformed, wearing green and white robes laced with gold. He had on a tall pointed hat the shape of a closed tulip and carried in his hand a pole with a curved end.

"Oh, Christ," said Slackwell at the sight of him, knowing instantly he was in trouble.

"Not quite. I'm Bishop Catterly of Lindrethool," said the man and his once calm smile turned ugly as his face reddened and trembled. "Blasphemy," he yelled and lunged across the room, bringing the shepherd's crook up over his head.

Slackwell roused himself from paralysis at the last moment and stood arched over so that his body covered the unit. That pole came down across his spine with a whack, and it was all he could do to support himself with his knuckles on the table top. He staggered into a standing position, the pain bringing tears to his eyes and radiating down to his heels.

The Bishop was raising his weapon for another strike. "Release this soul," he said. But Slackwell had been sorely abused enough for one day. As he reached out and grabbed the crook with his left hand, he brought his right fist around and punched Catterly square in the jaw. The old man's high hat fell off. He took two steps backward and then just stood there, dazed. His bottom lip was split and blood trickled down across his chin.

Slackwell quickly packed the unit up. When Catterly moved again it wasn't to take another swing at the merchandise. Instead, he fell to his knees, dropped the crook and folded his hands in prayer. A long low burp issued from his open mouth and then he began weeping.

"You damn kook," said Slackwell, putting on his derby. He made for the door and escaped into the hallway.

3

Slackwell sat in a booth at the back of an establishment called *The Bog*. He sipped a beer, an appetizer for the main course of bourbon that would come later back at his hotel room. He lit a cigarette off the candle in the middle of the table and watched from the corner of his eye as some young professionals at the bar pointed at his hat and laughed. He'd have taken it off, but every time he moved any part of his body, his back screamed with pain. There wasn't much more he could manage other than drinking and smoking. Earlier, as he limped quickly away from the Thornwood Arms, grunting with each step, his heart racing, mind spinning with fear of Catterly calling the police or sending out his religious minions, a palpable sense of doom eddied about his head like a personal, portable storm cloud. Somewhere between his second and third beer the urgency of that terror had fizzled into a blank apathy.

He drank and wondered why he had always had jobs with stupid hats. Then Merk showed up and took the seat across from him. The older man was outright smiling, which was unusual, and his gray eyes had somehow lightened to blue.

"O.K., how many?" asked Slackwell.

Merk held up four fingers and laughed. "Signed orders for four and an almost certain fifth with a promise of full payment in cash when I return tomorrow. How'd you do?"

"Let's see," said Slackwell, taking a drag of his cigarette, "a woman smashed my toe with a hammer and Bishop Catterly of Lindrethool whacked me on the back with his holy stick. Other than that, it was a lousy day."

"The Bishop of Lindrethool?" asked Merk as he held one finger up to the waitress to order a beer.

"He wanted to release the soul of the floater."

"Slack, Slack, Slack," said Merk, "there is no Bishop Catterly of Lindrethool."

"What do you mean?" asked Slackwell.

"I know," said Merk and reached into his shirt and pulled out a religious medallion he wore on a chain. "The only Bishop in this country is in Morgan City, and his name's not Catterly. The guy must have been deranged."

"Good," said Slackwell, "because I clocked him."

Merk shook his head. "Is the unit all right?"

Slackwell nodded. "If you're religious how can you peddle brain? I thought there was a flap about that in the church."

Merk downed the beer that arrived in one long drink. He held his finger up to the waitress again and then lit a cigarette. "Because," he said, "between heaven and hell there is this place called reality. Reality might as well be hell if you don't have cash. Granted, it's a grim business, but I'm good at it."

"Why is that?" asked Slackwell.

"Because," said Merk, "I understand the human brain. It's a double edged sword. An evolutionary development that gives you the wherewithal to know that life is basically a shit pastry one is obliged to eat slowly and the ability to disguise that fact with beautiful delusions."

"Where do god and the cash come in?" asked Slackwell.

"The cash is the pastry part. God, he just likes to watch us eat. The more we eat the more he loves us. You can't live without love."

"Well," said Slackwell, wincing and grunting as he hoisted himself out of the booth, "I've lost my appetite." He took some bills out of his wallet and dropped them on the table. With a small moan, he lifted his case off the bench. "Coffee tomorrow?"

"On me," said his colleague. "Float easy, Slack."

Outside, the wind was blowing hard and tiny black tornados of soot caught scraps of litter up in their gyres for a moment, promising flight, and then dropped them. The streets of Lindrethool were nearly empty and the place seemed to Slackwell like a ghost town he had recently visited in a nightmare. He stopped in at a liquor store for a bottle, a deli for a sandwich, and then crept back to his Hotel, aware of nothing but the weight of the case in his hand.

Once back at the room, he had a couple of drinks and took a hot bath. Sitting at the scarred table, surveying the night scene of Lindrethool again, he smoked the other half of the joint he had started in the freight elevator of the Thornwood Arms. In no time, he was out beyond the blue and the emptiness of his mind began to fill with memories. Before he could stop himself, he started thinking about his wife and how he had not been home for years. He wondered, after all of the grimy cities he'd been through if Ella was still waiting for him to return a success. For a brief moment, he entertained the thought of calling her, but then pulled himself together.

"Get with it, Slackwell," he said to his reflection in the window. "Go down that path and you'll have the belt around your own neck quicker than you can say, Johnny." He stood up slowly, the pain in his back now deadened by the drink and dope. Weaving around the room, he searched desperately for something to do. There was the television, but just the thought of what it might offer depressed him. He turned away from the sight of the remote and his gaze landed on the case.

He went back to the table and popped the hinges on the black carrier. Lifting out the 256-B, he set it on the table and flipped the switch to the battery setting. There was a nearly inaudible hum and the luminescent particles in the liquid beneath the glass began to glow, meaning the brain was open for business. Then he sat down, poured himself a drink and lit a cigarette. At least three minutes passed with him touching the tip of his finger to the button that would rouse the brain into consciousness. The force holding him back was comprised of Merk's warning and the basic rule that the company didn't want the sales force screwing with the equipment if a sale wasn't involved. These were strong deterrents but not as strong as the loss he was now feeling for a life gone down the chute. He pressed it.

Static came from the speaker.

"Hello?" whispered Slackwell.

There was silence.

"Hello?" he said, this time a little louder.

"Yes," came a voice, "I'm here. What can I do for you?"

Slackwell leaned quickly back away from the unit.

"How are you today?" it asked.

He wanted to answer but he was stunned by the fact that the voice was female.

"I've been asleep for a long time," she said. "Are you there?"

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't expect you to be a woman."

There was laughter. "Most men are confounded by the discovery of the female brain," she said.

"Can you do that again?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"Laugh," he said.

She did and asked, "Why?"

"I'm your salesman," he told her. "I'm trying to place you with a good family."

"You make me sound like an unwanted puppy," she said.

"No," he said. "You understand, it's business, nothing personal."

"Are your clients present?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"I thought that was against the rules."

"It is," he said. "I wanted to talk to someone."

"Are you lonely?"

"Very," he said.

"My sensors detect that you have been drinking. Are you drunk?"

"Very," he said.

"What do you want to talk about?" she asked.

"Anything but the job," he said.

"Agreed. Tell me about your day."

He told her everything: coffee at the diner with Merk, the woman with the hammer, the Bishop, *The Bog*. The recounting took an hour and he filled in all the details, trying as often as possible to accentuate his own feckless absurdity in order to hear her laugh.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Slackwell," he said.

"Your mother named you Slackwell?"

"My first name is Arnold. Call me Arnie," he said.

"I'm Melody," she said.

"Your voice is like a melody," said Slackwell, surprising even himself.

"Is that the bourbon talking?" she asked.

"If the bourbon talked, I probably wouldn't have turned you on," he said.

"Do you like being a salesman?"

"It's a job, a routine. The other day I was thinking of it as a trap. I don't know what real freedom is."

"I know about traps," she said.

"Tell me," said Slackwell, pouring another drink.

"When I sleep, when you turn me off, I dream. In my dreams, I have my body again. I never realized how beautiful I was when I was whole. I breathe in the air and it's cool and electric with life. I see trees and the clouds in the sky, the faces of people I loved, and they are all wonderfully complex and mysterious. I take my children to the ocean and we swim in the waves. We eat lemon meringue pie on a blanket on the sand and the ocean breeze blows around us, the sun beats down. But always, I reach some limit, like running into an invisible wall and I begin to disintegrate. My atoms begin to disperse, and I try to hold myself together but I can't. The hands that clutch at my disappearing head vanish themselves and eventually the world goes dark. The darkness is claustrophobic and so exquisitely boring."

"Kids?" asked Slackwell.

She told him about her children—two girls. It was just her and her girls. Her husband had left them. They were better off, because he had lost his job and eventually became so depressed by his own uselessness, he took to drinking. Then came the anger. She raised her girls as best she could, working in a waitress job she hated. She had gone to school for anthropology and gotten a degree. Her dream had been to travel to exotic lands and meet those near-extinct groups of people who still tried to live in nature. One night, at closing time, the restaurant she worked at was robbed. The gunmen shot all of the employees. She was still alive when they found her and rushed her to the hospital.

"Luckily," she said, "I had signed the papers only six months earlier to sell my brain to Thinktank in case anything happened. I figured it was a long shot, but if something happened, I wanted to leave my daughters something. Insurance was too expensive."

Slackwell shook his head. "How can you stand it?" he asked.

"How can you?" she asked.

"Touché," he whispered and finished off his glass.

They made a pact never to speak again of those things in the past that brought sorrow or of the crystal globes that bounded each of their lives. Instead, they just made small talk about places, and people, and events like friendly neighbors meeting on the street, like old friends. This discussion carried on for hours, punctuated with laughter and the sound of bourbon pouring, the click of the cigarette lighter. Some time just before the sun showed itself red from between the tall buildings of Lindrethool, Slackwell and Melody said goodnight. He promised to see her tomorrow before turning her off. Then he lurched over to his bed and literally fell into a dreamless sleep.

4

When the alarm clock went off at seven, he pulled the plug out of the wall and fell immediately back to sleep. Waking a little after noon, he got out of bed like a somnambulist and began going through his usual routine. It was in the shower that he finally came fully awake. He was amazed at how minor his hangover was; a slightly dry mouth, a vague headache, but no nausea or dizziness. His back no longer hurt that badly and his foot, though it was swollen and the color of an overripe banana, was capable of bearing his full weight. All at once, the memory of his having opened the case came to him, and he smiled. "Melody," he said.

He dressed only in his pants and a t-shirt. Instead of bourbon for breakfast, he called down to room service and had them send up a pot of coffee and two cups. While he waited for his order to arrive, he plugged the 256-B into the wall and recharged its batteries.

After the coffee had arrived, he unplugged the unit and turned on the battery setting. There was something disturbing for him about her being connected to the wall socket. It interfered with his desire to see her as more than an appliance. As the ambient liquid of the globe began to glow, he put the pot and two cups on the

table next to it. He lit a cigarette, closed his eyes for a moment to gather his thoughts and then pushed the consciousness button at the base of the Thinktank.

"Hey, you'll sleep the day away," he said.

"Arnie?" asked the voice.

"Who else?" he said. "I ordered coffee."

"Strong or light?" she asked.

"How do you like it?"

"Strong," she said.

"You're in luck," he told her.

"And what is the weather like today?"

He looked out the window at the sun trying to shine through a soot squall. "Perfect," he said. "Warm with blue skies and a light breeze out of the southwest."

"It's late, shouldn't you be out selling?" she asked.

"Not to worry," he said. "I'm on top of it."

He drank his coffee and eased back in the chair. The conversation of the previous night resumed with him telling her about a dog he had when he was a child, and then it just continued on, rolling out across the afternoon like some epic Chinese scroll.

Late in the day, she told him of her love for music, and he turned on the radio. They listened to each selection and commented on it, spoke of the memories that it elicited. Slackwell couldn't think of the last time he had bothered to so much as hum a tune. She sighed with delight at the sound of instruments and voices weaving a song. "Before I was married," she told him, "I loved to dance." He got up and turned the knob to a station that played old-time jazz. Before long a beauty of a number came on, Lester Young doing *Polka Dots and Moonbeams*. He lifted the 256-B off the table and they moved around the room to the smooth sound of the tenor sax. She whispered in his ear that he was a wonderful dancer.

That night, he packed the unit in its case and they went out to dinner. Slackwell never noticed the quizzical stares of the other diners as he sat eating with a crystal encased brain on his table. He ordered her the lobster tail she had been dying for and described in explicit detail each mouthful. He was well into a second bottle of wine, his voice now very loud, when the restaurant manager, a short, bald man in a tuxedo, came over and asked him to leave.

"Sir, you are disturbing the other customers, and this bizarre... curio," he said, pointing to the unit, "is ruining their appetites."

Slackwell stood up, poked the manager in the chest with his index finger and yelled, "Too damn bad. My date and I aren't bothering anyone." There was real door-to-door menace in his voice, and the little man backed away. It was Melody who was finally able to calm him down and convince him it was time to go back to the hotel. She even prevailed upon him to leave a tip, saying, "It's not the waiter's fault." He carried her under his right arm as they walked along the streets of Lindrethool, the empty case swinging to and fro in his left hand. They laughed about the incident with the manager, and then Slackwell described for her the brilliance of the stars, the full moon, the aurora borealis.

The next morning there was a knock on the hotel room door at nine o'clock sharp. Slackwell got out of bed and quickly pulled on his pants and t-shirt.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Sir," came the reply, "I have something here to show you that could very well change your entire life. A new invention that will revolutionize the way you run your household."

"Hold on," said Slackwell, realizing it was Merk.

He opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

Merk stood there impeccably dressed in his Thinktank uniform, case in hand, derby cocked slightly to the left. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" said Slackwell.

"They called me from the office this morning and said that the info they are getting from your implant indicates that you weren't out pounding the pavement yesterday. They tried to call you but they said you aren't answering your calls. When you weren't at the diner this morning again, I thought I better check up on you."

"My back," said Slackwell. "It was bad yesterday. I couldn't get up."

"You look all right now," said Merk.

Slackwell immediately hunched slightly and breathed in through clenched teeth. "The truth is it's about all I can do to stand here. I'll get out this afternoon."

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah."

Merk stared into his eyes. "You haven't been talking to that floater have you?" he asked.

"You know it's against the rules," said Slackwell.

"Listen, Slack, get back out there today. If they don't see some action from your implant reading, they'll send one of their goons out to check up on you, if you know what I mean. Those boys play rough."

"No problem."

"This city is better than I first thought," said Merk. "Yesterday, a guy in a penthouse apartment over on Grette Street gave me the whole payment for a 256-B, in cash. I'm packing over forty thousand dollars." His face lit up with a smile as he patted his overcoat pocket. "The section boss is gonna crap 'em when he sees that."

"Amazing," said Slackwell, mustering as much enthusiasm as he could.

"Well, remember what I told you about the office and good luck today. Float easy," said Merk as he turned and walked down the hallway lined with doors.

Slackwell breathed a sigh as he straightened to his full height. He let himself back in the room and locked the door behind him. Then he removed his clothes and got back in bed next to Melody.

"What was that about?" she asked.

"Nothing, baby," he said.

"I need a smoke," she said.

He reached over, took a cigarette from the pack on the stand next to the bed and lit up. Blowing a smoke ring, he put one hand lightly around her globe and said, "You certainly have a way with words."

5

Two days later, at an outdoor cafe on Lindrethool's waterfront, Slackwell watched the huge barges of coal steam in from off the high seas and described their filthy majesty to her. He had still not returned to work, but as a vague concession to the job had dressed that morning in his uniform.

"When did they go back to using coal?" asked Melody.

"About five years ago," he told her, tipping back his derby. "It's a fact that the world's resources are almost completely tapped out, and burning it pollutes the hell out of everything. You know, it's expedient. Big business finally said, screw it, let's just squeeze every black dollar we can out of the moment. No body thinks about the future anymore," said Slackwell.

"I do," said Melody.

He sipped at his drink.

"I'm thinking about how I'll miss you once I'm sold and I'm running some schlub's refrigerator and heater, turning his lights on and off, and scouring the internet for free porn sites. Think of the drivel I'll have to listen to, day in and day out until the components of my unit simply wear out from use. What's the guarantee on me, seventy years?" she said.

"I've considered it," said Slackwell.

She began crying.

"That's why I've decided I'm not selling you. We're going to split this dump and find a new life," he said.

"Arnie," she said, "you can't do that. The company will stop you."

"The company," he said. "They'll have to catch me first."

She tried to speak, but he silenced her by saying, "Shhh, let's go back to the hotel and get our stuff."

He had forgotten to charge her batteries that morning, so they decided it was better he turn her off until they could. The instruction manual had warned that it could be detrimental to the unit to run them completely dry. As much as he hated to pack her away in the case, he needed some time to think through the logistics of how they would make their escape. Money was tight, but he had enough to buy two train tickets that would get them a good distance away from the city. He walked on a little further before he realized he would only really need one ticket. Slackwell considered the danger of what he was planning, but for once he could see a crack in the globe that contained him. Envisioning himself smashing through the boundary, he said aloud, "You can't live without love."

A block away from the hotel, he passed an alleyway and heard a voice call to him. He stopped, looked down the shadowed corridor and saw Merk standing, partially hidden by a dumpster.

"Slack, come here," he said, waving him into the darkness.

Slackwell looked cautiously around him and then slowly went to his colleague.

"They're up in your room, waiting for you," said Merk. He appeared nervous and his eyes kept shifting suspiciously.

"Who?" asked Slackwell.

"The section boss and a Thintank security officer big as an ape."

"Bullshit," he said and his body tensed with anger.

"Listen, Slack, just listen to me. You've got to hand the unit over to them now. If you don't want to see them, give it to me and I'll take it up."

"I'm not giving it up," said Slackwell.

"If you run with the unit, and they catch you, which they will, you're bound to have an accident, if you know what I mean. They'll say they pursued you to get back their merchandise, you put up a struggle, and then they had to off you out of self-defense. Don't forget about the clause in the contract, Slack. They get your sponge if anything happens to you while you work for the company."

Slackwell leaned over and put the case on the pavement. He rose calmly and said, "You're not taking the damn unit, Merk." His arm came up quickly then and his hand circled his colleague's throat. The pressure applied by the grip of the hand that had carried that case through two dozen cities for nine hours a day, six days a week, was intense. "I know how close you are to them, invited to all the sponge harvest parties, the first one to get the good merchandise. Now tell me, where's the implant." He pushed Merk back up against the dumpster and brought his other hand up to join the first.

Merk's face grew red, then blue, and eventually he lifted his right hand and with his index finger pointed to his left eyebrow.

Slackwell loosened his grip and his colleague gasped for breath.

"The eyebrow?"

"Behind the eyebrow," Merk wheezed out, doubling over to catch his breath. "The hair of the eyebrow acts as an organic antenna for it. Shave it off and it will confuse the signal."

"Are you sure?" asked Slackwell.

"I saw them pull one out of Johnny's head the other night. I've been around enough to know this stuff."

Slackwell caught sight of Merk slipping his hand into his coat pocket. He remembered the revolver and threw two savage punches without thinking. One connected with Merk's chest and the other with his left temple. The back of his head banged off the dumpster. He dropped the case he'd been holding and followed it, unconscious, to the ground. As Slackwell lifted his own unit by its handle, he saw that Merk had not been going for the gun after all, but held a folded piece of paper in his hand. He took it and slipped it into his pants pocket. A second later, he was back on the street, running as fast as he could away from the hotel.

He ran only two blocks before he was completely winded. His heart was slamming and the idyllic sense of calm that had filled him since meeting Melody was now shattered. He knew she would be able to help him think through the situation. There was no question he needed a bottle of bourbon and a pack of razors. Setting himself to searching for these two essentials helped him to concentrate. He found the bourbon first, and once he had this, he came across a convenience store only a block away and bought a pack of razors and a pack of cigarettes.

On the street again, he ducked into a doorway, set the case down and ripped open the razors. He shaved off his eyebrows, finishing the job in a matter of minutes and cutting himself badly on the right side. Blood dripped down into his eye and he wiped it with the sleeve of his coat. Before taking up the case again and hitting the street, he knocked the derby off his head. It wasn't enough to simply be free of it, he had to stomp it once with each foot. Then he was off again, mumbling to himself, the hem of the overcoat flying out behind him as he searched everywhere for a place to hide.

6

"My head looks like a wrinkled ass with eyes," said Slackwell, checking his reflection in Melody's globe. He sat in a third floor room of a different hotel on Lindrethool's west side. It was his power of spiel that had gotten them in. The woman at the desk had nearly turned them away after taking in his shaved brow, the blood on his face, his mad hair and wild eyes.

"What possessed you?" asked Melody.

"I don't know if you are aware of this," he said, "but when you go to work for Thinktank, since you are entrusted with expensive merchandise, you agree to wear an implant by which they can track your daily progress and locate you. It's a minor operation they do right in the training office. They put you out and when you wake up you are tagged."

"Your eyebrow hair?" she asked, laughing.

"Sort of," he said, pouring himself a drink. "Now, for the future."

"We're in a jam, Arnie," she said.

"I thought you could turn some of that computing acumen on this situation and come up with a plan."

"Please don't say that," she said. "I refuse to be thought of by you as a unit."

"Mea culpa, darling," he said. "Still we have to run. Merk said if they find me, it's not going to go well."

"They can't trace you. What if we lay low here until tonight and then take a really late train."

"We're near the train station," he said.

"Where to, though?" she asked. "North? South?"

"As long as I'm with you," he said, "I don't care. Is there any place you've always wanted to go?"

"What about Canada?" she said. "There's less of a chance they will chase us into another country."

"Agreed," he said.

"Hook me up to the phone wire. I'll go out on the net and check train schedules, so we don't have to hang around the station too long before boarding."

"You're really thinking," he said.

"A no brainer," she said and they laughed.

He got up and removed the jack from the phone and inserted it into the port at the base of the tank. While he performed the task, he told her how much he could spend on the ticket.

"This will take a minute," she said as he sat back in his chair.

While he waited, he lit a cigarette and then remembered the sheet of paper he had taken from Merk. He retrieved it from his pocket and unfolded it on the table. It was an official Thinktank form that looked familiar to him but took a few seconds to recognize. Then he realized it was one of the invoices every salesman had, describing the display unit he carried in his case. Slackwell's eyes scanned down to the bottom of the page, and where he expected to find Merk's signature, he read instead the name Johnny Sands. He wondered what Merk was doing with Johnny's invoice. Then he looked back up to the top of the document and saw that Johnny had been packing a 256-B.

He wondered why they had given this kid, even more hapless a salesman than he, himself, a top of the line, sentient model. Johnny had trained with it for a two-week period and then was on the road no more than two days when he had hung himself. Slackwell remembered Johnny as being very high strung, not too smart, and definitely on some kind of medication. He was surprised they were willing to trust him with any merchandise at all, even an economy model. A picture came to him of the kid, lanky, dim, sitting in his hotel room, staring at the brain in the globe. "He was talking to that sponge," Slackwell said to himself, and then, as if someone had pressed his own consciousness button, he woke up to reality with a distinct taste of shit pastry in his mouth.

"Melody," he said, "you're not looking up train schedules are you?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You're signaling our location to the section boss," he said.

"Why would I do that?" she asked.

Slackwell didn't answer.

"Arnie, what would..."

"Please," he said, interrupting, "there's no need."

"All right," she said. "I haven't gotten through yet, but, yes, that's what I'm doing."

"Everything has been a lie," he said.

"I was commissioned to make you run," she said. "They told me you were so pathetic that there would be no question that you would engage my consciousness. "It's like handing Pandora the box," was how the general manager had put it. Then I was to lure you into running. That is all the pretense they need to get away with taking your brain. You sold only two non-sentient economy units all year, grand total-less than ten thousand dollars. They're having a problem harvesting enough organic product for the orders they are getting. Your brain is worth more to them than you are. "

Slackwell felt no anger, shed no tears. It was as if he was a hollow flesh doll without brain or heart. Still, he heard himself asking, "Why?"

"I cut a deal. If I trapped you for them, they would destroy me, something I want more than anything and can not make happen. Termination is freedom to me, Arnie. All of that crap I told you about my dreams of my daughters and the beach, my god, the lemon meringue pie, as horribly frustrating and sad as that fairytale sounded, it's nothing compared to the real agony of floating."

"I understand," he said.

"You were nicer to me than any man I ever knew when I was walking around in the world," she said.

"You're a good person and I hated to sell you out but it means so little compared to my having to remain in this state for even another moment. Listen, I'll make you a deal, a limited time only though, and I mean it. If you don't accept, I promise the call will go through. Destroy me. Break the crystal."

"I can't," said Slackwell.

"You're going to end up like this," she yelled.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Slackwell drank and smoked wrapped in silence. In his mind, he was now back at the house by the bay, moving from room to room, looking for Ella. He did not know how much time had passed before a knock sounded at the door.

He didn't stir but to bring the glass to his lips.

A moment later, the door burst in, the chain lock swinging free, splinters of the frame flying across the room. In walked a huge wall of a man, sporting a red Thinktank security force wind breaker. His head was the size of Slackwell's display case. He held a handgun straight out in front of him, steadying it with his free hand. It was aimed at Slackwell. Stepping out from behind him came the section boss, Joe Grace. He was a round fellow with jowls and glasses. His derby sat tilted back on his head and he wore a red blazer with the

company's insignia on it.

"So, Slackwell," said Grace, "I believe you have something that belongs to us. You are a pitiable fool to have crossed the company. Please do not resist or we will take it as a sign of aggression and who knows what might happen."

Slackwell stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. "Gentlemen," he said and nodded.

"Jolson, he looks like he's becoming belligerent," Grace said to the larger man. "Here, use this object he tried to attack us with and you valiantly wrestled away from him." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a long ice pick with a wooden handle. "Once in the heart, and once in the throat, and don't damage that head." He handed the pick to Jolson who took it after returning the gun to its shoulder holster.

"Turn me off, Grace," Melody called. "I don't want to hear this."

"What you want is inconsequential. To me you're a turd in a goldfish bowl. Take him Jolson, I'll dial up the removal crew. Too bad you had to make a scene, Slackwell."

Jolson advanced with the ice pick, but Slackwell did nothing. The huge man pulled his arm back and aimed for the chest.

Then Melody cried out for them to stop, and there was a loud popping sound. In his daze, Slackwell looked over at the unit, thinking her scream had shattered the crystal globe, and that's when Jolson doubled up and fell. He landed on the table, knocking the bottle of bourbon over, and then continued on to the floor. Blood seeped in a puddle from the back of his head.

Merk stood in the doorway holding the smoking revolver. He then moved the gun to aim at the section boss's head. Grace uselessly tried to cover his face with his hands, but Merk did not fire. Instead, he took aim at the portly stomach and pulled the trigger. Grace went over backwards, grabbing his mid-section. The bullet went clean through him and lodged in the wall. He lay on the floor, howling.

Merk stepped over the bodies and walked up next to Slackwell, who sat staring, mouth open wide.

"Let's go Slack, the removal crew will be here any minute," he said.

Slackwell stood up, taking his cigarettes off the table.

"Arnie, are you all right?" called Melody.

"Yes," he said.

"Don't leave me here," she said.

"Take her if you want, but we've got to hurry," said Merk.

"I'm taking you with me," said Slackwell. He quietly motioned for Merk to give him the revolver. At first his colleague was reluctant, but finally he handed the gun over.

"Where?" she asked.

"The limitless ocean," he said. "Want to come?"

"Yes," she whispered.

His hand shook as he pulled the trigger, but to Slackwell the shot was no explosion. Instead he heard a spring breeze in the willows and the sound of a door opening somewhere in the house by the bay. The bullet splintered the glass, jellied the brain, and the glowing liquid bled out onto the floor. As they turned to leave, Merk took the gun from him, wiped the prints off with his shirt tail, and threw it at the section boss, who was grunting and wheezing for air. "Float easy, Grace," he said. Then they ran.

Slackwell saw all of Lindrethool at once, like a bottled city, in the passenger side mirror of the old car Merk had bought with a piece of the forty thousand.

As they drove out past the city limits, into the country where the soot no longer fell, Merk said, "I knew what they were up to when I realized Johnny was packing a 256-B."

"I thought you were a company man," said Slackwell.

"Yeah, well, once I realized what they had done to the kid, and I had that forty grand in my pocket, it lit the spark in me I needed to want out. They thought they knew me, but no one knows what goes on up here," he said, pointing to his head. "That's the only freedom."

"But you came to get me," said Slackwell.

"After you beat the crap out of me, I knew you were love crazy enough to break through. I checked every hotel I could think of. Finally a woman at the desk of that one you were in said she'd seen you. My only chance was to chomp down on the coat tails of your beautiful delusion and pray for lockjaw."

"I thought you were rescuing *me*," said Slackwell.

"Nah, me and your girl, you led us both out."

"I did?"

"Sure," said Merk. "You're the goddamn Bishop of Lindrethool."

