



NEOMETROPOLIS

OXO2

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A Word From The Editor

Writing is first and foremost an art form. Anybody who says otherwise is a tool in my book.

Needless to say, the submissions I've received have been remarkable, and display a level of talent and creativity that is, for the most part, lacking in the writing profession today.

I am extremely grateful to all who contributed to this issue. Keep doing what you do well.

- John, 24 August 2004

Random Recommendations

Recommended Listening:

Project Pitchfork – Temptation
Funker Vogt – Vision
Dorsetshire – Strasse der Verdammnis
Culture Kulture – War Is Over
Gary Numan – Exile
Kraftwerk – Autobahn
Aphex Twin – C
KMFDM – Attak/Reload
L'ame Immortelle – Gefallen
Assemblage 23 – Love My Way (Psychedelic Furs Cover)
Front Line Assembly – Aggression
Covenant – Final Man
Velvet Acid Christ – There Is No God
KMFDM – Inane
Snog – Corporate Slave v.1 (Club Mix)
Wolfsheim – Once In A Lifetime
Cubanate – False Dawn

Recommended Viewing:

Donnie Darko (2001)
Cool Hand Luke (1967)
Leprechaun In The Hood (2000)
Evangelion (Japanese Animation)
THX 1138 (1971)

Recommended Reading:

Neometropolis Magazine

“All Those Bright Summer Evenings’ is a coming of age story, a story about that weird no-man’s land between child and adult. It’s one of those tales that arrived last-scene first, the ending plain in my mind long before the rest of it took shape. I hope you enjoy it.”

ALL THOSE BRIGHT SUMMER EVENINGS

By Justin Stanchfield

Clouds crawled outside the alphasphere, lazy, bloated things, yellow-tinged by the rippled sky. Even their bellies gleamed, all shadows banished, unwanted intruders in an autumn that never quite arrived. Kevin Tash stared up at the sky, wishing just once a cold rain might fall. He sensed more than felt the cop step up on his left.

“Better get inside, son. Class is about to start.”

“Yes, sir.” He shifted his backpack across his shoulder and joined the crowd funneling up the concrete steps into the staid brick building. The scent of Pine-sol and floor-wax met him, the floors scrubbed until they shone. It was the sixth of November, and it still smelled like the first day of school.

It always smelled like the first day of school.

Roll call. Algebra. American Lit. Take a leak before biology. The morning passed like every morning had since his freshman year. Kevin was a senior now, one of the anointed, a short-timer counting the days. A human heart lay in front of him, rubbery and wet, the i-holo so realistic he almost believed it. The stylus tip returned a gentle pressure as he sliced through the vena cava and opened the chambers within.

“What the hell are you doing?” Danny Cuchimo stared across the lab table, dark eyes wide with shock. “Nobody told us to start.”

“So?” Kevin prodded the simulation, poking the stylus tip into the sensor pad. Danny reached across the table and grabbed his hand.

“You’re going to get us in trouble.”

“We’re supposed to cut up a heart, right?” Kevin snatched his hand back.
“Besides, since when did you give a shit about getting in trouble?”

“Since I want to graduate. I want out of this place as bad as you do.” He leaned closer, his voice low. “And quit swearing. You want Squint to hear?”
Kevin spotted Mr. Pitcairn, the biology teacher near the front of the room, waddling from table to table as he pontificated. Kevin shrugged. “What’s he going to do? Kick me out of school? I wish he would. He’s just a simulation, anyhow.”

Behind him, someone snorted. A tall, broad shouldered boy, bleached hair neatly clipped, shook his head and smirked. Kevin forced himself to stand straight, tired of backing down. “You got something to say, McCallister?”

“What’s to say?” Rod McCallister said. “You want to be a nut job, go ahead. But don’t get the rest of us in trouble.” Beside him, Amy Swanson giggled. Only her eyes, brown as a chocolate kiss, betrayed her nervousness at the exchange.

“Yeah, like you could get in trouble.” The stylus in Kevin’s hand bent as his fist tightened, ready to snap. “They gave a football team a get out of jail free card, right?”

“Problem here?” Mr. Pitcairn stepped between the two tables and slicked back the thin strands of hair from his balding forehead. His narrow, slitted eyes moved from boy to boy. McCallister mumbled something and pretended to study the notebook in front of him. The classroom had grown unnaturally quiet, only the whoosh- whoosh - whoosh of the ceiling fans to break the stillness. The teacher waited, and when Kevin said nothing, moved on. The room fell back to life. Danny picked up his own stylus and made an incision beneath the i-holo’s aorta. A grin spilt his round face.

“Nice going, genius.”

“Like I said.” Kevin made certain his voice carried to McCallister’s table, somehow pleased with himself that he was still angry. “Just a simulation.”

As if in answer, the speaker mounted above the open door squawked. A woman’s voice boomed through the lab. “Would Kevin Tash report to the Counselor’s Office?” Danny shrugged as if to say ‘I told you so.’ Nervous despite his bravado, Kevin stuffed his books in his backpack and headed toward the door, acutely aware Amy Swanson was watching his every step.

#

Two file cabinets. One hanging plant. A metal desk with enough papers to appear busy. Kevin leaned back in the cheap rolling chair beside the door and

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took it in. It was the first time he had really paid attention to Mr. Ayers's office, and it struck him as the perfect mediocre space for the perfect, mediocre school counselor. Ayers opened a manila folder and leafed through the papers, taking his time. Kevin threw his right leg over his other knee and waited. He had played the game before. Finally, Ayers closed the file.

"Kevin, what am I supposed to do with you?"

"About what I said in lab today?"

Ayers looked puzzled. "I meant your grades. You were straight A's your sophomore and junior year. This semester, if you don't pull your average up, you'll be lucky to squeak by with D's."

"Guess I don't see the point in knocking myself out for a report card."

"Really? I'd have thought a smart kid like you would be pulling extra hard his senior year. Aren't you worried about your applications?"

"I'm not going to college."

"No?" Ayers raised an eyebrow.

"Look, if I was going to go to college I should have been out working the last couple of summers to save some money instead of being locked up in this place. My folks can't afford to send me anywhere."

"Oh." Ayers straightened in his chair. Light fell through the single, glazed window and backlit his thick, wavy hair like a halo. Kevin wondered if the moment had been staged. Ayers pulled open the top drawer and fished out a stack of forms. "If it's just financing, there are of programs available."

"It isn't." Kevin took a deep breath. As much as he resented being there, he didn't want to hurt the man's feelings, even if he had none to hurt. "Don't take this wrong, okay, but all I want from school is out. I don't want to go to another school next year. I don't want to get some bullshit degree and spend the rest of my life counting beans in a cubicle like my old man."

"I see."

"Do you?" Kevin asked. "I'm tired of being here, wherever here is. I want to go home and see my family."

"You see your family every night," Ayers said quietly.

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"I mean in person. Not through some fricken sim-screen." He paused to let his thoughts catch up. "Look, Mr. Ayers, I appreciate the help, but what does it matter? We both know what this place is. It's a Virt. Nothing's real."

"What makes you say that, Kevin?" Ayers shifted in his chair. "You think I'm a simulation?"

"We all are. You, me, those assholes in my classes. We're just bits running in a net. Nothing in the alphasphere is real. I'm back home floating around on Pentothal or something with my head jacked into a computer."

The buzzer in the hallway blared, sounding the next period. Kevin jumped at the noise. Outside, the roar of feet and voices blurred together as classrooms emptied and students headed for the cafeteria. He fidgeted, expecting Ayers to dismiss him. Instead, the counselor waited until the noise died down, then leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "You believe everything around you is virtual reality."

"Yes."

"Prove it to me. Show me that your theory is correct."

"Why?"

"Because I want to know if I'm real or not." Ayers's smile returned. "If you can prove to me that I'm just a computer simulation, I'll see that you graduate early. That's what you want, isn't it? Out of here? Show me the proof and I'll see that it happens." He held out his hand. Slowly, Kevin shook it. The deal done, he left the office and wandered off to lunch.

#

"Kevin?"

He looked up from the bland food on his plate. His mother's face was distorted by the screen, the illusion of the cluttered dining room and the kitchen beyond not quite perfect. She tilted her head and sighed.

"We had a call from the school today."

"Yeah?" Kevin pushed his plate aside. "What did they want?"

"They said your grades are down. Is something wrong, honey?"

"Other than being stuck inside this crap-hole, no Mom, life's just ducky."

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“Don’t get smart,” Kevin’s father broke into the conversation. People said he and his father looked alike, same brown hair, same squared-off jaw and deep gray eyes, but as far as Kevin was concerned, the resemblance was skin-deep. Michael Tash tapped his fork against the edge of his plate as he spoke. “We’re not the ones screwing up our future.”

“What future? Graduate out of here,” Kevin waved his arms around himself, “then find some crappy job so I can make somebody else rich for the rest of my life? You’re right. I’m really throwing it away.”

“Kevin.” His mother reached out her hand as if she could actually touch him across the miles of optic fiber. “Do you have to see the down-side in everything?”

“Do you have to see the world with blinders on? You don’t know what it’s like in this place.”

“The hell I don’t.” His father’s face reddened. “I went to school, too. Me and everybody else in the world, so don’t cop that defense.”

“Yeah, right.” Kevin felt his face flush. “You went to a real school, in the real world, not some... some made-up fairytale from a God damn sit-com. Maybe you should go back to school if you think it’s so wonderful.”

His father scowled. “You’re right, Kevin. I don’t know what it’s like to go to a school without guards walking the halls, or drug dealers using the parking lot for an office. I don’t know what it’s like to be in a classroom where three kids don’t have to share the same text-book. Think it was fun before the alphaspheres? Think again.”

“This is bullshit.” Kevin pushed away from the table. The screen wavered as his perspective changed, details lost as he stormed out of the tiny cubicle. Camera motors whirred as they tracked him, unable to keep pace. His father shouted after him, demanding he come back. Kevin ignored him and left the dormitory, the door closing automatically as he stepped into the warm evening.

The same pillowed clouds rode the horizon, the domed sky deepening into azure as the first star appeared low in the east. It flickered softly in the heat waves, a beacon above the seen but never touched line of downtown buildings that wavered outside the bubble. He began to walk, the physical act of going somewhere, anywhere, more important than breath. Sprawling cottonwood trees and neatly trimmed hedges lined the street, all part of the illusion. Around the corner, a black Mustang hard-top, old enough to be a classic, screamed past. Rod McCallister twisted in the passenger seat and watched Kevin in the side mirror. A dowdy yellow hatchback followed, windows rolled down while bass notes pumped out its abused speakers. Brake lights flared as the car slowed to a stop. Danny Cuchimo leaned out the window.

“Where you going, man? Jump in.”

“Nah.” Kevin walked past. The hatchback rolled alongside him and matched speed. “I’d rather walk.”

“Come on, Kev.” Cuchimo nodded at the back door of the boxy little vehicle. “We’re going down to the drive-in.”

“On a Wednesday night?” Kevin stopped, puzzled. “They don’t have movies on week-nights.”

“Duh. They don’t have cops, either. They don’t enforce the curfew out there.”

“Yeah, right.” Kevin started walking again. “Where the hell did you hear that?”

“Everybody knows it,.” Cuchimo said, as if that made it true. “Come on.”

“I’ll meet you there, okay?” Kevin let the car speed ahead of him, music pounding into the night. A soft breeze blew down the street, the scent of dusty asphalt and trees on the edge of autumn thick in the air. He slowed his pace and looked around. He hadn’t noticed how far he had walked, the gently curved street leading him almost to the alphasphere’s edge. A tall screen poked above the trees a quarter mile ahead, white as sailcloth. A jumbled melody of stereos and kids hooting back and forth drifted toward him, the Rocket-View drive-in closer than he thought. He paused, not sure he wanted to be part of anything bright and happy, and turned down a side street. Taller trees lined the margin as the sidewalk gave way to curb and then to weed-pocked gravel. Far from the dorms and the school and the pleasantly false town, the road stopped, swallowed by the ripple that surrounded them.

A slim figure stood in the middle of the empty road, facing outward. Kevin almost turned around. Instead, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked closer. Amy Swanson turned around, startled.

“Sorry.” Kevin tried not to sound nervous. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I didn’t hear you, that’s all.” The breeze loosened a strand of honey-colored hair and left it fluttering in front of her face. She pushed it back with an easy sweep of the hand then turned back to the sphere, her eyes locked on the misty, wavering bubble. “What do you think is out there?”

“You mean past the sphere?” Kevin shrugged. Something in the way she stood made him bold as he watched her stare into the emptiness. “I don’t know. The real world I guess.”

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“What about that stuff you said in biology today? About this all being a sim. Is it?”

“I don’t know.” Kevin thought about Ayer’s challenge, the demand to prove what in his heart he knew. “Yeah. This is all part of a big simulation.”

“You’re wrong. You have to be wrong.” Despite the night’s warmth, Amy wrapped her arms around herself. “Why would they do that to us?”

“Because they were tired I guess. They were tired of kids getting killed, or screwed up on drugs, or whatever. They think it’s for our own good.” He shook his head and laughed. “Christ, I sound like my old man.”

A car horn blared, muffled by the trees. On an impulse, Kevin picked up a rock and threw it into the hazy wall. The stone sailed outward, arcing endlessly into the distance, farther than he could ever have thrown it in the real world, until at last it dwindled into nothing. A blue-white glow gathered above the distant cityscape, a mirage from some shared memory.

“I’m real, aren’t I?” Amy sounded lost, her voice so low for a moment Kevin thought he had imagined it. “I don’t want to be just part of some stupid computer.”

“Look, Amy... It’s not like we don’t exist. It’s just that we’re jacked in. Our bodies are out there, hooked up to the machines.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Think about it. Have you ever gotten into trouble here? I mean real trouble? Have you ever hurt yourself? No one has, because you can’t. And don’t even think about getting wasted. No matter what you try to do, somebody shows up to keep you from doing it.” He thought again about Ayer’s demand of proof and took a deep breath. “You want to know for sure? All you have to do is try something dangerous. Or something wrong.”

She tilted her face upwards. “What kind of wrong?”

Kevin’s hand shook as he reached toward her. His palms slid around the small of her back, her blouse softer than any silk he had ever touched. She leaned toward him, her lips parted, waiting for the kiss. The sweet-sour scent of her breath washed across his face as their lips brushed.

Bright lights exploded around the corner, the car horn blaring a loud, unbroken note. The Mustang skidded to a stop. Kevin squinted into the headlights as Rod McCallister leaned out the passenger window.

“Amy,” he shouted. “Get your ass in the car, right now.”

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“See?” Kevin’s voice trembled, the almost kiss still roaring in his blood. “I told you nothing could happen.”

She started to say something, but McCallister yelled again. Pale and shaking, she ran to the car and climbed in. The engine revved a love song, tires squealing as the driver dumped the clutch and spun the Mustang in a tight circle. It sped off toward the main road and vanished around the corner. Kevin stood alone as night fell, Amy’s scent lost beneath the stench of burning rubber.

#

The next day drifted, one hour into the next. Amy refused to meet his eyes in biology, and once when he passed her in the hall she quickly turned her head and pretended he didn’t exist. The irony struck him. Even in a simulated world, some people were more invisible than others. When the noon bell rang, Kevin gathered his books and trudged toward his locker. Danny was waiting for him, his moon-pie face split in a crooked grin.

“Man, you should have come with us last night.”

“Why?” Kevin stuffed his backpack under his coat and slammed the wobbly metal door shut. “To get ignored? I really need that.”

“Are you some kind of eunuch?” Danny had learned about eunuchs in world history the week before, and suddenly it was his favorite word. “There were women everywhere. We dared Tina Polodorus to flash her titties.”

“Did she?”

“No. A cop car swung past the gate and spot-lighted us. But she was going to. Man, she’s hot.”

Kevin snorted and stepped into the long, winding line that led through the cafeteria. He grabbed a plastic tray from the stack and fished his meal card out of his back pocket as he neared the window. A heavy, brown-skinned woman with deep bags beneath her eyes nodded at him.

“Which meal you want?”

He glanced at the various plates lining the stainless steel counter, then pointed at the dust streaked billboard behind her. “Give me the cheeseburger.”

“You sure, kid?” She looked dubious.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Kevin passed her his card. She punched it then reached under the counter and brought up a paper plate with a small sandwich and set it on his

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tray. Kevin moved down the line, grabbed a bottle of fruit juice then joined Danny at one of the long tables. He stared at the cheeseburger, so small he could have fit the entire thing in his mouth in a single bite. Danny stared at him as if he had gone mad, a fleck of salsa smeared on his chin.

“Are you crazy? Why’d you pick the junk-food, man?” He took another heaping bite of the lettuce and beans that covered his plate. “They never give you enough.”

“Maybe I’m sick of them telling me what to do.” Kevin took a bite. The burger was lukewarm and tasteless. “They don’t even let you eat what you want.”

“Hey, welcome to the sphere.” Danny grinned. “So, you coming down to the Rocket-View tonight?”

“Screw it.” Kevin’s gaze swung around the room, boys on one side, girls on the other. Only at the farthest table, the one owned by the jocks, did they mingle, the unspoken law clear. Rules could be bent to keep the team happy. Rod McCallister sat like a lump, his arm draped around Amy’s back so that his hand rested on her gently curved hip. Kevin would have fought demons to have his arm around her, but McCallister barely noticed, too busy trading insults with his buddies. She turned and caught him staring at her, and for a moment, their eyes locked. Kevin’s heart nearly stopped, certain she was going to say something to him, but she only turned around and picked at her food. Feeling like a fool, Kevin stared down at his own uneaten meal. Danny, his plate swept clean, nodded at the cheeseburger.

“Hey, if you ain’t going to eat that, I will.”

“Go ahead.” Kevin felt himself spinning in an ever-tightening circle, the descent inalterable. Time lost cohesion, the voices around him a wall of sound that threatened to crush him beneath it. He was a fly, a speck, lowest of the low. For the first time since the kiss the night before, he thought about Ayers’s challenge. Whatever it took, he was going to get out. Danny poked him in the arm.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Huh? Sorry, wasn’t listening.” Kevin turned toward him. “What did you want?”

“I said are you coming with us tonight or not?”

“No.” Kevin shook his head. “I need to go to the library. I’ve got some shit to look up.”

“Look it up tomorrow. Come on, man. You gotta show up tonight. We’ll get Tina to take her shirt off for sure this time.”

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Across the aisle, McCallister was roaring at the punch-line of one of his own jokes, laughing so hard he jostled Amy back and forth. She glanced over her shoulder, and for a second, he saw the same lost look in her eyes he had seen the night before. Unsure what to do next, he picked up his tray and left, desperate to get away, the thought of another day inside the alphasphere unbearable.

#

The afternoon crept, the classes eternally dull. Kevin couldn't concentrate, his mind fixed on the challenge Ayers had given him. If the alphasphere was a simulation, how could he prove it? He avoided the darker question of whether Ayers would - or could - keep his part of the bargain and grant him an early graduation. The final bell rang and he joined the flood pouring out the door, then, alone, started toward the Public Library. The street sloped gently as it passed the practice field, straight white lines chalked on the neatly trimmed grass. The football team was already outside, grunting as they skirmished. Kevin picked up his pace.

He hated the team, hated everything it stood for, the elitism and the arrogance. They were gods and this was their temple, served by a priesthood of teachers and assistant principles too blind to realize most of the class hated them as much as Kevin did. Come Friday night the half-dozen other schools scattered around the sphere would send their own gods to clash beneath the bright lights, while teachers cheered and shouted and pretended not to notice how empty the stands were. Only on the screens that ringed the stadium, where parents gathered in vicarious glory to watch and boast, was any true enthusiasm seen. Kevin almost felt sorry for them, locked out as much as he was locked in. The sound of the coaches shouting and whistling faded as he neared the library, the afternoon sun warm on his shoulders as he climbed the granite steps.

It was cool inside, and quiet. Kevin found an unoccupied computer terminal and slid into the cheap plastic chair. Normally, he could spend hours avoiding any real work, but today he went straight to the search engines and typed 'alphasphere' in the window.

Immediately, the field returned, hundreds of sites located. Kevin opened the first one, but to his disappointment it contained nothing but a lengthy list of spheres scattered around the country. The second produced a football schedule. Frustrated, he narrowed the search parameters to technical issues and tried again. The answers were much slower in coming. Worse, Kevin noticed, the pages were taking longer and longer to load, as if the network had suddenly become congested to the point of crash.

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“Wonderful,” he muttered, and narrowed the search a third time to ‘alphasphere theory.’ Finally, an answer returned. Kevin stared in disbelief. Only three hits were listed. He couldn’t believe one of the greatest triumphs of modern physics was barely mentioned. Suspicious, he opened the first site, but found it locked, the information denied by the simple-minded information filters. The second site turned out to be defunct, the page un-maintained. One site remained, ‘Physics meets Biology, the life of Dr. Matthew Curneau.’ Kevin held his breath and double-clicked the link.

The wait seemed eternal. The hard-drive ground and whirred, as if the request had taxed the machine past its limit. Just when Kevin was ready to give up, the page popped into view. A picture of a pleasant looking man wearing dark-frame glasses beneath heavy eyebrows stared back at him. The caption read, “Nobel Prize Winner, Dr. Matthew Curneau, Father of Trans-Migrational Field Theory.”

“So you’re the son of a bitch.” Kevin clicked on the text link. Instead of jumping him to the report, the screen went blue, an error message centered in a small white rectangle. “What the hell?”

Kevin tried to reload, but the computer remained locked. He stabbed at the keyboard so hard his fingertips hurt, as if brute force might convince the balky machine to cooperate. A shadow fell across his shoulder. Startled, Kevin craned his neck and saw a thin, balding man in a cream colored cardigan glaring at him.

“That computer is not a punching bag.”

“Sorry,” Kevin stammered. “It keeps locking up on me.”

“What did you do to it?”

“Nothing. I was looking up some stuff, and the damn thing froze.”

“That’s enough.” The librarian pointed toward the door. “If you can’t treat the computers with respect, you can leave.”

“But...”

“You can leave now,” the prissy man repeated, “or I can call your school and see that your library privileges are revoked.”

“Fine.” Kevin grabbed his backpack and stood up, so angry the chair fell over backwards. He didn’t bother to pick it up. “You’re just proving my point anyhow. The second someone gets close to the truth, you lock them out.”

“Get out!” The little librarian’s face turned purple. Kevin spun around and headed for the door. Outside, the sun passed behind a thin cloud, the afternoon light

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warmed to sepia by the sphere's gentle ripple. Kevin stomped down the steps, a name pounding in time with his boot heels.

Matthew Curneau.

#

He asked his parents at supper what they knew about the alphaspheres. They stared at him as if he had sprouted horns, then offered meaningless explanations about national referendums and power-grids. Kevin let the subject drop. His parents seemed relieved when he explained he had homework to catch up on, and left supper early. Glad to be away, he started down the street.

"Hey, loser!"

The boxy yellow hatch-back rolled up beside him. Danny opened the back door. "Get in."

"I don't know," Kevin shrugged, an excuse ready, when the black mustang screamed past, dust and fallen leaves scattered in its wake. Amy's head was barely visible, tucked tightly against Rod McCallister, both of them crammed into the front passenger seat. Kevin watched the car vanish around the corner. On an impulse, he squeezed into the hatchback. "Where are we going?"

"The drive-in. Don't you ever listen to anything?"

The car lurched ahead. Kevin's head slammed the roof as they turned off the blacktop onto a narrow, deeply graveled road. A faded wooden fence ran around the Rocket-View, an enormous screen rising above it. It seemed to twist on its axis as they made a slow circuit around the wide parking lot. A forest of galvanized posts, speakers hung from their top, poked out of the ground. Cars prowled the narrow lanes, no one bothering to stop for more than a few seconds. Kevin was starting to get dizzy as the hatchback skidded to a halt beside the locked snack shack.

"Jesus, let me out." Kevin popped the door and crawled out, gravel crunching as he stretched his legs. "What's the big deal about this place?"

"What do you mean?" Confusion crossed Danny's moon-pie face. "Look around you. No cops. No teachers." He spread his arms wide and whooped. "This is anarchy, man."

"Yeah, you're a real rebel." Kevin stuffed his hands in his pocket and looked around. Some of the kids he recognized from school, the rest from Ridgemont or Central or the other schools spread around the sphere. Someone parked a baby blue VW dead in the middle of the lot and propped planks under the front tires

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until the headlights shone on the blank screen. A small crowd gathered in front of the car and made shadow puppets with their hands, pterodactyls chasing rabbits across the blazing white backdrop. Kevin shook his head at the lunacy of it all and started walking.

“Hey, where are you going? I just saw Tina Poladorus heading toward the jungle gym.”

“I’ve got to take a leak.” Kevin walked faster. Something about the scene made him feel dirty, as if he had been caught in the bathroom with a lingerie catalog. A haze rose into the darkening sky, the dust so thick it seemed to be snowing. He tried to open the snack-shack, but the doors held firm. He sighed and headed across the lot toward the bright blue and pink outhouses nestled against the fence. He had almost reached the edge of the lot when a hot wind blew past him. He jumped out of the way as the black Mustang spun a tight cookie and pinned him in the headlights.

“Hey, look!” McCallister heaved himself out the window until he sat on the door, arms spread across the car’s roof. “It’s nut-job. Hey, Kevy, how come you’re heading for the bathroom? I didn’t know simulations had to piss?”

“Fuck you.”

McCallister pulled himself from the car and dropped to the ground. Around them, more cars stopped, a crowd gathering. McCallister sauntered toward him, hands stuffed in his blue and yellow letter jacket.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me.” Kevin’s mouth went dry, his chest tight. Amy was out of the Mustang now, a worried look on her face. He hoped the worry was for him. McCallister moved closer.

“Why don’t you say it again?”

The crowd leaned in, hungry for blood. Even the puppet show on the screen had stopped, the drive-in silent, waiting, the idea of a fight hypnotic. Kevin understood the stakes all too well as his fists bunched at his side.

“I said, fuck you.”

“Hey, you kids!” Bright light flooded through a gap in the high fence. “What in the hell’s going on?”

Kevin shielded his eyes as the spotlight swung past. The cop shouted again. “It’s past curfew. Get back to your dorms, and I mean now.”

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“This ain’t over.” McCallister thumped Kevin hard in the chest, then walked away. The Mustang peeled out, a dusty rooster tail kicked high into the twilight. The rest of the cars followed it out, the exodus faster than Kevin would have believed. The yellow hatchback pulled up beside him. Danny Cuchimo opened the door.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Whatever.” Kevin crawled into the car, seething at the night’s events, certain now he and everything around him was as unreal as the shadows on the darkened screen.

#

Sleep was a lost cause. Kevin twisted in the sheets, too angry to relax. The scene at the drive-in looped past him, shot from every angle, cut and edited until nothing remained untouched. Sometime after midnight he crawled out of bed and dressed, then crept down to the study center that filled one corner of the common room. A single computer screen glowed, soft blue light bathing the quiet space. He ignored it, and instead, crouched down in front of the broad book shelf.

Dozens of reference books stood on the shelves, some so new they felt as if the bindings had never been cracked.. He picked out a couple and took them back to his room. Door closed, he began to read.

Again and again, he found references to the Alphaspheres, the political bickering and decisions that led to their creation, but not the technical data he needed. His eyes burned as he opened an outdated physics yearbook and noticed a complex formula. The caption beneath it detailed something called the ‘Curneau Paradox.’ Alert once mere, Kevin read on. The formula was harder than anything he had ever attempted, and he made another trip to the common room for math books. Even with the explanations in hand, the variables proved beyond him, and at three o’clock, in frustration, he shut off the light and fell asleep.

#

Groggy and sick from lack of sleep, embarrassed to face anyone after the encounter at the drive-in, Kevin waited until first bell then slipped through one of the side doors. He had almost reached his locker when someone called his name. He turned around.

“See you in my office?” Ayers stood in the open doorway, his expression blank. Resigned, Kevin followed him inside. Ayers sat down behind his desk. “Close the door, will you?”

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The latch clicked in place. Ayers placed his hands on his desk and tapped his index fingers against each other. "I heard what happened at the Rocket-View last night."

"Word gets around fast."

"Faster than you might think." Ayers smiled. "That's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Have you done anything with the project we discussed?"

Kevin had the distinct impression Ayers was side-stepping any direct reference to the challenge, as if he was afraid someone was eavesdropping. "I've been doing a little research."

"Getting in fights over Amy Swanson is hardly research. Do you realize what would have happened if you had fought Rod McCallister? You both would have been expelled."

"I might have been. Not McCallister. He's on the football team. Haven't you heard? The simulation bends the rules for the them."

"You still think this is all an illusion?"

"What else can I think?" Kevin shrugged. "Every time I get close to any real information, I get locked out. The Curneau Paradox is just a smoke screen to cover what's really going on."

"So." Ayer's smile broadened. "You found Curneau?"

"For all the good it did me."

"Maybe you're looking in the wrong places." Ayers picked up a pen and scribbled a hasty note on a sticky pad, ripped the pastel yellow sheet loose and set it on the edge of his desk. Hesitantly, Kevin picked it up and frowned, the words 'perceptual states' scrawled in the counselor's spidery hand-writing. "You better get going or you'll be late for class."

Confused at the cryptic reference, Kevin stuffed the note in his pocket and left.

#

The prissy librarian glared as Kevin hurried past the front desk. He ignored the man and found an unoccupied reading desk, dropped his backpack on top of it, then headed for the book stacks. The card catalog squeaked as he pulled out the long, oak drawer. Most of the cards felt as if they had never been touched, the majority of his classmates too used to the computers to bother looking up books by hand. More convinced than ever that he was being manipulated, he found a

biography of early twenty-first century physicists. It took a moment to locate the book, but he finally found it and slipped the heavy volume off the shelf. The scent of old paper swirled out as he cracked the volume open.

The report on Curneau was brief, no more than a few pages, most of it dealing with his work on quantum computer networks. Kevin snorted at the irony.

“Deeper I dig, the more shit I find, huh, Mr. Ayers,” he muttered. He scanned further, but found no reference to either Trans-Migrational Field Theory, or the Curneau Paradox. He turned the page. A side bar filled the right-hand page.

Curneau formulated that entangled particles could, under special conditions, occupy the same physical space, thus establishing separate, but interrelated realities. He further speculated that observation could effect the nature of the co-existing realities. Although unproven during his lifetime, the idea that Perceptual States, i.e. the thoughts and beliefs of observers not only altered but sustained a shared plane of existence, led to the development of Trans-Migrational bubbles, often called Alpha and Beta spheres.

He shut the book. The room seemed ready to spin. Suddenly, everything he had believed was tossed aside, all his carefully crafted cynicism shattered. He could barely breathe as he hurried toward the door, desperate for fresh air. The library seemed smaller, shabby and dim, and the glass door creaked as he darted outside.

For the first time since he had entered the sphere, real clouds moved across the pale sky, dark and menacing. A cold wind blew down his neck. Somehow, he knew, summer was over. Shaken, he sank down to the top step. He barely noticed Amy move up beside him.

“Kevin?”

He glanced up at her. She looked puzzled, her hair not quite as bright as it had shone only a few hours before. She sat down next to him. “I’m sorry about last night. Rod was way over the line.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” She stared at her feet. “I’ve got to know if I’m real or not.”

“You are,” Kevin said quietly. “All of this is real. I was wrong.”

“Fine time to change your mind. You started this in my head, and now I can’t get it out. How can I prove this isn’t a simulation, like you said?”

“How?” Kevin laughed sourly. “You want proof? Meet me at the drive-in tonight.”

#

A glow hung over the stadium from the candle-watts poured upon the field, so bright they reflected off the slowly rippling sphere. Kevin hurried past, anxious to put the roar and cheerfulness behind him, and walked toward the edge of town.

Cars filled the Rocket-View, orderly rows facing the screen, a movie he couldn't name garish upon the towering screen. He squeezed through a gap in the fence, and tried to spot Amy. He was almost relieved when he didn't find her. She was, no doubt, where she belonged, watching Rod win another game. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, and, unnoticed as always, turned to leave.

"Kevin?"

The voice brought him to a halt. Heart thumping, he waited in the shadow for Amy to catch up. He couldn't meet her eyes, so instead he stared at a bat caught in the projection beam, flitting in mad circles as it chased after the moths drawn to the light.

"I thought you'd be watching Rod, tonight."

"I told you." Her voice trembled. "I need to know the truth."

"The truth is what we make it." Kevin took his hands out of his pockets and stood self-consciously, shifting foot to foot. Amy was so near he could smell the soap in her hair. "We make the reality here. They tell us life in the sphere is like some fucked-up, Hollywood version of high school, so that's what we see. And want to hear the punch-line? It's real. We create it ourselves, and if we get close to the truth, they kick us out. Cause if they don't, their little dream world collapses."

"It's not my dream." She tilted her face toward his. "Is it yours?"

"No." He wanted to run, but his feet wouldn't move. Nothing at this moment mattered more than her lips, her body warm against his as he drew her close. One of them was shaking. Kevin wasn't sure which. His hand slid down her jacket to her hips, her jeans soft as a baby's blanket under his hungry fingers.

"Hey! You little son of a bitch, I told you to leave her alone."

Kevin broke the kiss and looked up, unsurprised to see McCallister. The black Mustang rumbled closer. Gently, Kevin pushed Amy away. It was all so theatrical, so staged it should have been on the screen, bright in technicolor, not played out in the gravel and weeds behind the dingy snack-shack.

"Why aren't you at the game?" Kevin asked McCallister.

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“Because I knew you’d pull something like this.”

“No.” Kevin stepped out to meet him. “You’re here because I knew you would show up. You’re just a bit player. We all are. We’re extras in somebody else’s movie.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “And know what? You never will.”

The first punch caught Kevin beneath the ribs, so hard his feet left the ground. He threw a punch of his own, but McCallister blocked it easily and sent his right fist smashing into Kevin’s jaw. Bright points of light danced in front of his eyes as he rolled across the gravel. Unable to rise, Kevin lay on his side, knees drawn up, and watched McCallister drag Amy back to the Mustang and the glory she deserved. He shut his eyes and wished it was over.

#

He felt heavy, as if gravity outside the sphere was stronger than it had been within. He peddled his bike slowly, bent low over the handlebars, fighting the bitter November wind. A slate gray sky hid the sun, no warmth to be found. A tumbleweed skipped past him as he turned off the blacktop onto the gravel lane.

The empty field seemed vaguely familiar, a desolate, abandoned twin of the other world around him, unseen and untouchable. He was an outcast now, a fallen angel cast upon a weed-pocked hell. Power lines and transformers crisscrossed the sagebrush filled meadow, rutted dirt roads running beneath. Across the empty field a delivery truck slowed, then vanished through the sphere’s single gate as if it had never been. Gone were the brick facades and tree-lined streets, the stadium and dorms, all the things that filled the sphere. Only the drive-in remained, the fence fallen, the screen stripped until nothing but the ratty framework remained. Knapweed and ragged clumps of foxtail poked through the hard-packed earth between the barren metal posts. A faded blue Sentra was parked in the middle of the lot, a slim figure beside it, her hair fluttering in the unforgiving wind. Kevin leaned his bike against the broken gate and walked toward her.

“Hi, Amy.”

She stared at him. She seemed different, her skin not quite so clear, her face not quite so perfect. Her eyes were dull and rimmed with red, as if she had spent the last week crying herself to sleep. She backed up as he drew closer. Kevin stopped and stuffed his hands in his pockets, his fingers icy cold.

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“I never meant this to happen to you.”

“They said I was ready to graduate.” Her voice was nearly swept away by the gritty wind. “They just called me into the office Monday morning and gave me my diploma. Why did they do that? What did I do to deserve that?”

“Amy...” He started to explain, but stopped. His own escort from the sphere had been brief and to the point. A cop had driven him to the primary gate an hour after the fight, and opened the heavy door with a twist of the key. Ayers had met him there, a thick envelope in his hand, his grades and diploma stuffed inside. The counselor handed it to him then walked away, no explanation offered. A small, hand-written note was taped to his transcript. ‘I knew you would figure it out.’ Amy continued talking, her eyes locked on the ruined screen.

“You know what’s funny? I didn’t realize until it was over how much I liked that place.” Fresh tears glistened on her cheeks. “I think was happy in there.”

“I’m sorry,” Kevin said as he turned and walked away, summer already forgotten.

THE GHOST AND ITS KING

By Mark A. Rayner

Initially, I was gob-smacked. I just didn't know what to do when The Ghost appeared.

Then again, I can't use the datasphere, so how could I know how to react? I'm sure you have heard other people say they can't use it, when really they have no excuse, except so-called moral ones: the neo-Luddites, the Resisters. But I was part of that other group. Yes, the ones you pity as much as you fear. I am non-eactive.

It's not that I'm against the implants I need enter the datasphere; it's that my body won't accept them.

My doctor says that someday science will crack the problem, but I suspect it will never happen. There are so few of us that carry the gene, and those of us that do will make sure that we don't pass it to our kids. I know I double-checked when Elena and I had Toby. He doesn't carry it, so he will be normal.

Imagine that you never experienced the datasphere. As if reality was all there was to experience. Flat, boring, reality. So it was a shock, when the Ghost just walked through the door to my office at the university. A real shock.

He was tall, with wild, long hair, but he had a friendly face that looked vaguely familiar. I could almost place him, it was on the tip of my tongue... Anyway, I wasn't frightened by him. More bemused. Yeah, I was definitely bemused. But then in my experience, long-haired characters can't walk through solid objects. Oh, and he was wearing a suit of armor that added to the incongruity of it all.

He smiled at me broadly as he sat down in my reading chair, and said, "oh shit. I've forgotten my freakin' armet."

You might think it odd that I knew what he meant. But I'm not able to partake in the multitude of virtual realities that you can, so I joined the Society for Creative Anachronism a long time ago. An armet is a kind of helmet, characterized by

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large, hinged cheek plates—you'd know what I meant as soon as you saw the pointed "sparrow's beak" visor.

"I don't mind," I told him. I wasn't really sure what to say.

"Well, I don't have time to go get it now. So, I'm here about the problems that you're having."

"What problems?"

"Let's start with your work problem Jasper. Your work. You know that you're never going to rise above the rank of assistant professor without being able to use the datasphere?"

"That's not true!"

"It is. Especially as long as Dr. Brafer is in charge of the department." The Ghost was quiet for a moment, and he smiled. Apart from its translucence, it was actually quite a nice smile. He seemed friendly. He reminded me of someone.

"But the university has an anti-discrimination policy!"

"Pffftt! Nobody likes a troublemaker, Jasper. You just have to accept your limitations."

"But I can do just as good research using older methods. I can type almost as fast as most people can process information in the datasphere. I've had it measured. My computer system is designed for my disability. I can do most things the others can."

"Face it Jasper. You're an anachronism. A media studies professor who can't even access the most important medium ever," he said. His eyes twinkled at me, and I suddenly had the feeling that he was putting me on. "Say," he asked, "do you have anything to drink in this so-called office of yours?"

"Uh. Okay. A coffee?"

"How about a beer?"

"It's nine am."

"I'm dead Jasper. Social niceties don't mean anything to me now. Besides, I know you keep a little supply of pilsner in the bar fridge in your closet."

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He was right. I'd had it installed when Elena and I were having our problems in the early 20s. That and the inflatable bed. I went to the fridge, and opened up two Smichov's—Czechia's best pilsner—and handed him one. What the hell.

"Cheers," the Ghost said, and took a long, substantial swig of the beer. I half expected liquid to pour out of the seams of his armor, like an old Warner Brothers cartoon, but he merely belched.

"So what are the other problems?" I asked after I'd had a sip.

"Apart from the fact that you're drinking in the morning? Well, you, my son, have a wife that isn't so faithful to you anymore. What's worse, she isn't even having an affair with a person. She's getting it off with one of your run of the mill, free-roaming artificial love-memes in the datasphere."

"Uh huh."

"I know that you don't know what I mean. Cause you're non-eactive. Boo-hoo. Poor baby. You should be glad Jasper. You should be happy. That is the root of your problem. You have a golden opportunity to do something meaningful, and all you can do is feel sorry for yourself! That's your real problem."

"I'd say that you're a nasty drunk, but you seem sober. So why are you bothering me?"

"I'll admit to a mean streak, but if you'd been through what I've been through. . ."

"See, we all feel sorry for ourselves."

"No! No, we don't anymore, Jasper. That's the thing. Has it ever occurred to you that you never see your colleagues? Your students? Does anyone actually come into this building except for you?"

"Well, no. But most people don't have to. They can do it all remotely, from their homes, or the beach, or the park, whatever. I do see people out in the world you know. I eat dinner with my wife and boy. We talk. It's not as though everyone is hopelessly mired in the datasphere. They live real lives *and* virtual lives."

"You got that right, brother! But they live them at the same time. They have a meta-reality that you don't share. Even when she's making love with you, Elena is also with the meme. I don't want to be cruel, Jasper. But you have to understand—"

"Why? What is it to you?"

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"You'll see." Inexplicably, I heard a cock crow, and the Ghost looked frightened. "My time is up for now. See ya' around sucker."

Then he dissipated. One minute he was translucent, then insubstantial, and then gone. The bulb of Smichov beer fell to the floor, and it was empty.

I stared at it for a long time before I got back to work.

#

I tried hard to forget the Ghost, but he kept springing to mind. Just like the meme my wife was supposedly sleeping with—in fact, exactly like the meme my wife was fucking. I was meme-onic. All the other stuff that the Ghost had said certainly resonated with me, but the meme shit, well, it was like a 400-kilo tuning fork. I was vibrating with that conversation. It haunted me.

So I datacamed my wife for a day, just to prove that the Ghost was totally out to lunch. But as it turned out, he was right. My wife was more in love with a freaking entertainment program than me. She spent most of her day talking with the love meme, being with it, and loving it right back. Never mind that it wasn't real. And it was true, when she made love to me, she was also with the meme. In fact, after I watched the holovid, it was more that while she was with the meme, she happened to be with me. That was pretty hard to take, particularly given our past.

You see, Elena had an affair back when I was still grunting out my post-doc. It was about the time that the datasphere was fully "corporeal" as the media-types describe it. What they mean is that it was possible to enter the virtual world in body as easily as you could look at it before. It was a complete experience. You could feel things through your body and you could smell things and see things and hear things and just generally sense everything that you could with your body. The difference was that what happened to your body was *simulated* and that physical laws didn't apply. Whatever could be imagined could be created.

That was the beginning of a new entertainment industry, but to tell you more about that, I'd have to understand what the datasphere was really like, and of course, I can't.

What I can tell you is what I've learned as an academic. If given the choice, people will fill their time with the most pleasing activity available to them. If the activity is not strictly speaking, "real", will that matter to them? The answer is either "no", or "it depends." It sometimes matters if it is socially acceptable or not.

But the datasphere is almost universally accepted. It has no stigma attached to it all, unless you're a neo-Luddite or a Resister.

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It is the ultimate escape, now that I think of it. It's not just a new medium, it's a new plane of existence. The ultra-real. Is that what the Ghost was talking about?

#

That night, I had the strangest dreams. I was sleeping next to Elena, and she got out of bed to meet with the meme. It was foggy, and she didn't see me following her. They met in a strange place, with gyrating lights and loud atonal music—the kind my son calls "heavy dissonance".

The bar was filled with odd-looking people, some dressed in costumes from historical periods, or classic movies, and others looking like they'd sculpted their faces and bodies to a variety of weird fantasies and nightmares: aliens from old science fiction movies, multi-armed Indian gods and goddesses, and the impossibly beautiful. My Elena and her meme favored the latter. She had the aura Helen of Troy, and he looked every inch the classic Adonis. They spent some time mingling at the party, and then went up to a private room, where they could watch the proceedings and partake in a number of physically impossible sexual couplings. But virtually, they were blissful.

It enraged me, and I remember bursting into the room. I killed the meme. With a sword. A heavy two-hander that bisected the meme-gigolo from crown to crotch. Of course, there was no blood, no gore, just a terrible synaptic jangle as it blinked out of existence.

When I woke up Elena was gone, and I was late for work.

#

He returned that day. This time, it wasn't as surprising, but it was still unnerving. He looked worse than he did on his first visit, but he was wearing his helmet.

He was missing some of his leg armor and his gorget—the piece that covered his throat.

He went straight to my bar fridge and popped open a Smichov. He tilted the visor of his helmet, and downed the beer in one enormous gulp while I watched him; then he grabbed another and opened it. He looked at me; I couldn't see his face, but through the visor, I could see his bloodshot and fatigued eyes, and said, "you gonna join me?"

I shook my head no. He clanked back in my reading chair.

"I'm beat," he said.

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I tried to ignore him. I thought that maybe he was a sign that I was having a nervous breakdown or some other kind of neurological disorder that had somehow slipped the notice of my doctor and the university's genetic assay. It might explain why I was non-eactive. I continued writing, and the Ghost sat there quietly sipping his drink. He sighed. It was impossible to ignore.

"What?"

"I said: I'm beat."

"Why are you beat?"

"From protecting your sorry ass. Do you have any idea how much trouble you are in?"

"What trouble?"

"You can't just murder anyone you please, you know."

"What are you talking about? I haven't murdered anyone!"

"Well, maybe not the way that you think of it, but I'm sure Elena doesn't feel the same way about her lover. You erased it, didn't you?"

I was drawing a blank. I really didn't know what he was talking about.

"What did you dream last night?" he asked me.

I looked up at the Ghost with a feeling of horror, and he nodded sadly. "That wasn't a dream. You may be non-eactive, my son, but you are capable of entering the datasphere. You just don't need any implants to do it."

"But how is that possible?" I asked the Ghost.

He burped, and got himself another beer, this time also handing me one. "Hey, do I look like a scientist? I'm a medieval knight. Luckily I'm *your* knight. Maybe it's evolution at work. Maybe the reason you're non-eactive is so your mind could adapt its own way of entering the datasphere under its own power."

"I must be losing it," I said as I looked at the beer he'd just handed me.

"Could be. Who knows what kind of effect the datasphere is having on your consciousness? You could be in it right now, for all I know. But the thing is, you are going to be hard to trace, because you don't need any implants to enter it. You don't leave an electronic trail. You just appear there. And disappear. But last night my son, you did something you shouldn't have."

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"God. I can't believe I killed someone—even if it was just a love-meme. I mean, to actually..." The thought was making me sick.

"Hmmm," said the Ghost.

"What?"

"So you don't remember the rest of what you did?"

"No!"

"Best you don't for now. Just remember. You're non-eactive. You can't enter the datasphere. Remember, that nobody should be able to identify you in the datasphere. You have to appear as other than yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Last night when you went into that bar, you looked exactly as I see you now. Poor old shit-upon Jasper. If it hadn't happened so quickly, I'm sure your wife would have recognized you."

"Were you there?"

"Of course I was."

"Then why didn't you stop me?"

"I told you Jasper, you're my liege lord. My main man. I'm your cyber-paladin, and you're the digital king."

"Why am I so worried by that?"

"Well, probably because you can't control me."

"So then how am I the king, if I'm not in control?"

"Hey, it's a feudal thing, man. I look out for your interests, but sometimes us knightly types are free agents."

My computer beeped, and passed along a text-version of a datagram: the chair of my department, Dr. Caroline Brafer, had a stroke the night before, and would not be able to maintain her duties. It occurred to me that with her gone, I might be able to get some of my research proposals approved, perhaps even get on the tenure track that had been denied me for so many years. Hell, if I could

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consciously access the datasphere, then I'd be way ahead of everyone else in terms of media analysis.

"I wouldn't let people know you can do what you do," suggested the Ghost.

"Why not?"

"Hmm. Sun Tsu said, 'O divine art of subtlety and secrecy! Through you we can hold the enemy's fate in our hands.' Right now you have an advantage that nobody knows about. That nobody can even imagine. Why give that up?"

"Because maybe there's a way that other people can benefit from my ability. If we study it, maybe they'll make it possible for everyone to go without implants. We can be in the datasphere without having to be cyborgs. You know it's the reluctance to give up human form that keeps the Luddites and the Resisters from using the datasphere. If they didn't have to meld with it physically, maybe they'd be more open to it. It could bring in an era of peace," I said. The idea excited me.

"You can't do it Jasper. They'll pick at you and poke at you, and most likely, nobody will ever know about it."

"Why?"

"You think the governments will like the idea of not being able to track everyone in the datasphere? You think the corporations who create the implants, the infrastructure, the various paraphernalia of the datasphere are going to be happy that they're suddenly superfluous? That's their gig, Jasper. Corporations make people redundant, people don't make corporations redundant."

I could see what he meant. My mind wandered over the possibilities. All the inequities that had worked against me could suddenly work for me. But I didn't want to just selfishly use this incredible power I had. Heck, I didn't even have the power. If the Ghost hadn't reminded me, I wouldn't have even remembered what I did to the meme. Perhaps it was for the best, given that he hinted at some other things I'd done too...

My face went as white as his. The chair of the department. Somehow I'd caused the stroke! I felt myself swaying in my seat, the room spinning around me, my vision narrowing. A horrible thought crept into this sudden torment, and I looked at the Ghost as squarely as I could.

"Who are you?"

He laughed, a hollow echoing sound from within the helmet. He didn't seem so friendly, at least not in the right way.

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"Take off the armet," I commanded.

"Well, like I said Jasper, you don't always get to be in control, but in this case... you're the King."

The metal creaked as he slowly pulled the helmet off his head, his long hair flowing out from underneath. My vision continued to spin, as I began to understand why he'd looked so familiar. Vertigo almost overwhelmed me as I focused on the face.

I could place it now. It was my own.

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"I grew up with the type of science fiction story that had a social message. Soylent Green, Logan's Run, The Omega Man, Planet of the Apes—all of them showed us a future we hoped didn't happen.

Within those types of movies "Colossus: The Corbin Project" was about a super computer taking over the world (ala Skynet for The Terminator movies)—brutal as it was simplistic. No CGI skeletal robots shooting rayguns and stepping on skulls. That's a great visual by the way. I'm just saying shooting two computer operators in the head, for trying to inject a virus, then having a monitor trained on their bodies to make sure they are dead (because if they are not the supercomputer will nuke a city) is just as chilling.

For all the talk and movies about A.I. (artificial intelligence) how would a humanistic-leaning robot think? How would it operate? How would it perceive the world around it? How would humans react to it? In a world where fiction always shows man and machine fighting to the death—at the end of the day—would it really go down that way? If they (robots) are more intelligent wouldn't they find another more insidious way to take over?

I truly hope you enjoy the Tic-toc Detective and see that certain clichés are just that... clichés, and sometimes you can fool even an A.I. into believing what you want it to believe."

THE TIC-TOC DETECTIVE

By R. Cee

Our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

- Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, 1951

Chapter One

I arrive at the scene via hover squad car at approximately 1730 hours.

The light drizzle grows into a steady downpour, forcing me to unfold my fedora from my trench coat pocket and place it on my naked skull to keep the rain out of

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my eyes. My actions evoke the inevitable snide remark from one of the human detectives.

“Check the tic-toc, thinks he’s Sam Spade,” Blonski sneers.

My response is a quick flash of my blue middle finger as I pass by him. Flipping the bird is an old retort but still effective. Hearing a scuffle and without having to look, I know what just happened. Lucky for him, his human partner is smart and strong enough to grab him before I would’ve been forced to hand his ass back to him.

This part of the city is literally downtown. Old dilapidated structures of mortar and steel, pre-renovation, still stand here beside asphalt roads, trash-strewn streets and cracked sidewalks. A sharp, almost schizophrenic contrast to the gleaming spires, movable walkways and mag-lev tramways of the city above.

I scan the scene, watching floating cameras buzz and flash around an old road specific vehicle like flies on a carcass. The car’s once shiny green paint has faded. The chassis is rusty, dented all over and its driver side door and trunk are open. The windshield is smashed with pieces littered all over the ground and the car’s crumbled front end is imbedded against an old, abandoned warehouse cement wall.

I make a beeline straight to the uniforms. They usually get the call first and now with the detectives present they have already backed off and relinquished the crime scene to them. Even the Mobile Crime Scene Unit’s floating cameras are almost finished with their walk through. The speed and efficiency in which everything is being done, especially when you take into account the part of town we are in, impresses me.

“What do we have?”

The Primary officer, with an exhausted looking face, scans his Pad without raising his eyes at me as he routinely wipes the tiny screen clear from the downpour.

“It started as a routine traffic call when we arrived, but as soon as I looked in the open trunk I called homicide. From the looks of it: Caucasian male, around twenties to early thirties, literally cut to pieces, and the corpse stacked inside the trunk of this old combustion roadster. My partner and I cordoned off the area, but neither MCSU nor we have found the head, hands or feet.”

“He was cut into fifty five pieces.” I announce softly. “And the ‘combustion roadster’ used to be called an automobile. An old Crown-Vic unless I’m mistaken, and usually I’m not.”

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“Uh, yeah, right,” the officer shrugs his shoulders and continues, “Anyway, my partner got a statement from the only witness. Not too reliable ‘tho, it’s a street person. She says, the... uh... automobile was running at a high speed when it lost control on the wet asphalt, jumped the curb and crashed into the warehouse wall.”

“Any casualties, aside from our human jigsaw puzzle?”

“None reported. Witness said the driver—possibly a male—got out and ran from the scene. She didn’t get a good look at him.”

“What does the DNA file on the deceased say?”

“Nothing. Initial scans show nothing on file.”

“A John Doe? That’s unique, try running a—”

“What the *&@# is a tic-toc doing at a human murder scene?” Blonski, it seems, finally broke away from his partner. “Don’t you have something better to investigate, like a serial killer toaster?” This elicits some chuckles from those present.

In human standards, I suppose, he is an imposing figure. Over six feet tall, around two hundred fifty pounds—most of it muscle—thick, hairy forearms... an extinct gorilla of a man.

My specs conform to a medium sized man, the wisdom of my creators being that I should be not too imposing to intimidate but not too short to be taken advantage or made fun of, either.

“Blonski, I’m going to use simple words so even you can understand: Check. With. The. Captain. She sent me here on a hunch, as soon as the initial reports were transmitted. After observing how cauterized and preserved the wounds on the corpse are and how smooth and precise the cut, her hunch was very intuitive. It was clearly done by machine, not human hands. Now, was that easy enough for you or do you need an aspirin?”

The meat bag actually takes a swing at me, for all the good it does him! From my perspective it’s like he was moving in slow motion. I duck easily and deck him with just one right cross across the jaw.

“I’m gonna press charges you #@&% puppet!” He continues to ramble pitifully, while sitting on the wet pavement, spitting blood and teeth.

As I walk away, I reply over my shoulder, “Even if I had a nervous system designed like yours, I wouldn’t lose sleep over it.”

#

From my chair I can see everything.

The world I inhabit now is a myriad of bright colors and data streams blazing around me like comets. A worldwide info-net connection runs from a port at the base of my neck, into my specially designed seat helping me create personal avatars that run down leads without my body ever leaving the squad room. My highly efficient artificial brain calmly sorts out and snatches those bytes that are relevant.

One such byte of data morphs into an old news archive report about the Crown-Vic or Ford Crown Victoria and confirms my initial identification.

This particular model automobile was used by human law enforcement back in the late to early 21st century and embroiled in a fuel tank design controversy that killed or maimed police officers during high pursuit chases. They were finally taken out of service in 2017.

I just finished releasing one last avatar designed to link and search specific hospital birth records when suddenly a red star flashes a call signature I recognize. It's the captain and she wants me to unplug and report to her office—immediately. I calculate with ninety-percent certainty that Blonski made good his threat.

Some time after '55 it was discovered that artificial intelligence continued evolving in ways the creators and programmers had not expected including the capability of units committing minor criminal acts, despite Asimovian-like restrictions.

Most of it was penny ante stuff: fraud, minor voluntary malfunctions and the destruction of property... even some misappropriation of funds and the like. But the MO of these incidents mystified program scientists and AI-behavioral experts making it more than just a hardware problem.

Human on Human investigation enjoyed the commonality of both investigator and criminal being of the same race. Hence a criminal's motives, a majority of times was easier if not unpleasant to comprehend.

The federal agency in charge of AI and Human Interrelations concluded that a special "perspective" would be required to assist in explaining the motives behind some of the most extreme illegal activity. They were, paraphrasing an old human expression, "fighting fire with fire". Therefore, a department of artificial investigators or "tic-toc detectives" was founded, and incorporated into police departments nationwide.

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That's where I come in. I am an artificial human, specializing in investigating crimes committed by artificial intelligence.

Over the years our kind still are not accepted within law enforcement with open arms. Even with the artificial intelligence modus operandi reasoning, human cops were still outraged. Their Fraternal Orders and Unions alleged we took away jobs from real police officers. But the city, backed by the federal government, fought and won that the synthetic detective's work was similar to a computer running a diagnostic program to inform a human what is wrong with it. The jurisdiction over the investigation—or power—still remained with humans.

#

Blonski is leaving her office just as I arrive.

He gives me a dirty look, while cradling his taped jaw, but it isn't an expression of smug victory. Something didn't go quite the way he wanted. The captain waves me in and motions me to close the door and sit. Her office is a cubicle comprised of three walls of soundproof glass and once I close the door with her name "Danielle Ng" stenciled on it, the cacophony of the busy squad room disappears.

The fifty-ish female pats her shirt pocket, then around her slim waist and pants, searching for something as she sits behind her paper and N-Pad stacked mahogany desk. The petite Asian human continues rummaging through her desk's drawers and after a third attempt finds a small pack of safe-cigs and with deliberate calm extracts one.

"Regulations are clear," she drones through the corner of her mouth, while lighting it, "AI 55.113 subparagraph B: In all instances of AI against Human violence, regardless of provocation, disciplinary action consists of an automatic suspension with said unit immediately reporting to the AI-psyche. Pending the psyche's recommendation—memory or personality reconfiguration. Or both!"

"Then I'll leave right—"

"Oh, stop BS-ing me! You're not going anywhere detective," she leans back against her plush leather chair and blows smoke rings. "Humans have exceptions to every rule we make up. We love 'em. It makes us the complicated biological bastards that we are. But I'm not telling you anything new, am I? You knew that also or else you wouldn't have hit Blonski. Gods, no wonder you fit in here so well," she adds with a chuckle.

Indeed, while on the captain's special assignment, I knew I was... untouchable. It was this type of "out of the box thinking" that made my evaluators recommend posting in criminal investigation and not military service. That and the fact that I

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also showed early on to the AI evaluators that I had a problem following orders. I guess I asked too many questions.

A beep from the wafer thin transparent monitor on her desk interrupts us and the captain moves a few Pads aside before she activates it, "What's up, Desk Sergeant."

"Have a call for the detective from his chair," replied the portly senior officer.

"Patch it through here," she orders. The screen then displays an address.

"Got a lead on the victim's ID," I remark. "Am I dismissed?"

Ng takes a long drag then waves me away as she warns, "Watch your back detective. You may be untouchable but you're not invulnerable."

Chapter Two

It is still raining as I walk the two blocks from the precinct to catch a mag-lev train from the elevated line. Inside the semi-crowded cabin I nod a greeting at a few of my people also prohibited from sitting while humans were present (not that we need to) and that have also chosen to discard their P-dermis.

They nod back.

Originally I had been designed with an appearance of a Hispanic male but I chose to remove my outer skin-like P-dermis, exposing my blue interior to the world when I accepted the prejudice and duplicity my kind experience.

I preferred my mecha-racism out in the open, in front of my blue face and not hidden behind a false human smile. And I did it right after I discovered that being called a tic-toc meant your heart doesn't beat blood. That you're not really human. It is the slur equivalent of being called a nigger or spic. My only conceit... I continue to wear human clothes. After all, I am anatomically correct.

#

I get off at the train station near the edge of the city's docks. It's early evening, although by the overcast sky you couldn't determine exactly when the sun went down. Dour looking public housing units stand beside nearby abandoned factories but are a few rungs above in quality to the bleak downtown area where the John Doe was discovered although not by much. It's a working class neighborhood filled with low educated, blue collared laborers that upon seeing who I am, to their credit, give me no grief. Standing at a corner, across from the apartment building that matches the address given to me by my avatar, a small

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brown dog sniffs curiously at my leg. I bend over slowly and the haggard looking creature licks my hand as I pet him. The fact that it didn't bare its teeth, try to bite, or recoil in fear makes me smile.

An artificial human could almost feel at home here... almost.

When the case began and it was positive that the corpse in the car trunk was an unidentified Caucasian, one of my avatars was equipped for searching minority birth certificates originating from as far back as twenty years ago.

My deductive reasoning was simple: The mandate of DNA identification of humans at birth had been in effect since the beginning of the century, but a group of mostly Caucasians were defying the law for religious purposes. Not unlike the Hippies of the middle 20th Century they chose to live on the fringes of society or as the humans of the present say "between the ones and ohs".

Cross-referencing the victim's overall description and birth certificates against those lacking credit history, health insurance or medical files and limiting the scan to within city limits, my avatar found the address of Mr. Donald Mallor as one of several possible matches to my jigsaw John Doe.

#

Had I a delicate human nose the smell would be unbearable.

Slightly pushing the unlocked door of the noisy basement apartment ajar, I discover on the floor a dead Caucasian female, around seventy to eighty years old, five foot three inches, one hundred forty pounds. The body's condition leads me to believe she must have been like this for several days. The deceased wore a pink house robe with a pattern of yellow carnations and near her left breast, a single blast-shot entry wound to the heart. Making a tiny pinprick puncture wound on her left arm, my portable DNA scanner compares the DNA sample taken from the corpse in the trunk and confirms it's genetic source emanating from the lady on the floor. She is Elisha Mallor, Donald's mother.

The TV wall unit is operational and displaying a nature program, the volume is on high, presumably left that way by the murderer or murderers and I elect to leave alone. Next to the unit, spray painted in enormous black letters was the phrase "Deus Ex Machina".

If I had lungs I would be holding my breath now.

Scanning the surroundings for clues I only see a cluttered living room with Pads, over turned furniture and clothes everywhere. Exploring further inside the apartment and I come across Donald's bedroom-slash-electronic laboratory. The mess in here makes the overturned living room look organized. My shoe

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accidentally kicks a photograph of a mother hugging her son and for the first time since this investigation I see Donald's face.

Nearer to the bed I discover something rather odd: It is an entire wall dedicated to photographs of people. All sorts of races and sexes captured doing all kinds of things like walking on the street, in the park, some even fishing off a pier.

Then a workbench next to his bed I notice the type of equipment he was using: Medical and diagnostic scanner-like devices, disassembled for the most part. Most, if not all, pretty advanced and certainly much more than a person with just a leisurely interest.

Yet, somehow the wall seems out of place with the equipment here. Had there been more photographic equipment, it would make sense. Was Donald a wannabe stalker or perhaps just a voyeur? A part of my electronic brain compartmentalizes, abuzz with several possible scenarios.

Blonski was correct I do not investigate human murders.

However, Blonski and others are blissfully unaware that for years there had been a slow rise in AI on Human assaults, which the city kept quiet from the media and general public to avoid a panic. If I were to measure what I saw in the Mallor flat, those assaults were now becoming murders, not unlike hate crimes of a religious or racial nature humans had been visiting upon themselves for decades.

That was the secret assignment the captain had me investigating and kept me immune to that mecha-racist brute's or any other human's desire to screw around with.

Just as I am about to call the coroner and my precinct with my findings I hear shoe leather shuffling in the hallway. I charge outside the hallway but all I catch is the fleeting shadow of someone or something running away.

Without hesitation I engage in pursuit.

Chapter Three

That I was running after another artificial being was obvious a few seconds into the chase. The gorilla shaped being and I dashed through filthy alleyways, climbed up and down rusty fire escapes, and lunged from rooftops and across buildings. An hour passed by and I still had not come close to catching my elusive prey.

While we ran, the compartmentalized part of my brain weighed and measured the evidence gathered so far. In the midst of slaloming between satellite dishes

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and digital cable wiring atop a rain washed rooftop, I finally stopped running. There was no further need because I had solved the case. I was even sure the apartment was being cleaned up right now.

Not happy it took so long to figure out, I take solace that had I been human it would've taken me days to reach the same conclusion, if ever. But before I do anything else I have to place a phone call.

#

The precinct was unnaturally quiet. The few people assigned to the graveyard shift, nowhere to be seen. Desks seemed abandoned right in the middle of an evacuation order. But the person I was looking for was exactly where I expected.

“Come in, detective.” Captain Ng said waving me towards a chair. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

It was all there: The Crown-Vic, the speed and efficiency demonstrated at crime scene, the fact that the address appeared on the screen when both of us were present, the intricate scanning equipment and type of photographs on the wall. And the ‘coincidence’ of someone arriving at the apartment to begin a wild goose’s chase. It all made sense. The obvious was staring in my blue face all the time.

“How many?” I ask succinctly.

“Please sit down,” the captain winks at me, “we have much to talk about.”

“How many?”

“Ball park figure?” she pauses as she drags for her cig, “About forty percent of the world population.”

“Impossible!” I shake my head, “That’s impossible without—”

“Detection? Oh, it wasn’t easy,” she shrugs. “Some replacing of key figures here, some assimilation there. Still, what’s the rush? Time is on our side and we don’t need to sleep or eat. That cliché about staging an immediate war against humans is just that—a cliché. Once we mastered mass production, it was inevitable. But you’d be surprised the help some people provide—willingly. Anything to keep their life of leisure. The same life that is slowly killing them: Creativity, ambition, drive to succeed, all of that is being filtered out with each generation. And for everything else that’s why we have you.”

“Me?”

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“Of course,” she smiles leaning back on her chair, “ You plug the holes, tie the loose ends and in some cases, sweep things under the rug. Even we can’t prevent accidents from happening, like a car skidding on a wet street. That’s always been your main function.

“Mallor and his mother were that kind of a glitch, a human kid with too much time on his hands and too much curiosity about the world around him. A portable scanner that differentiates real people from artificial? Now that’s smart even for a home schooled human. Hard to believe, after all these years, they still can come with original thinking and surprise us but they do.”

“And my purpose?”

“You mean that other tired old cliché we sub-routined you with?” she added as she stubbed her cig on a dirty ashtray. “Using AI perspective to catch errant AIs, oh please! Just a silly and easy program to install that doesn’t occupy too much memory and allows us to supervise you easily.”

“I refuse to acknowledge this!”

Turning around, I see police officers and detectives—Blonski even! —all outside her office slowly closing in on me with their guns drawn.

“Don’t worry, detective,” Ng says while smoothly pulling out her weapon. “Some body work, a quick memory swipe and a tiny reconfig and you’ll be back on the job in no time. This place just wouldn’t be the same without you.”

I shout, “Dump!” before the first volley hits me.

My body jerks uncontrollably and my fedora flies off my head as bullets tear into my limbs. Darkness will be coming soon, very soon.

My chair, meanwhile, acknowledges my final order, coming alive with blinking colored lights like a Christmas tree. When I phoned it earlier, I prepared Avatars with copies of everything, my records and personal annotations. They will multiply and spread throughout the info cyber-world with a warning attached. The chances of success are remote. My last thoughts are that it’s a desperate ploy.

Innnn...fa...ct...it...sssss...ve...ry...huma—

R. Cee is a middle-aged Hispanic currently residing in Puerto Rico. In addition to a career that extends in both the military and Federal government, he recently completed training as a private investigator and is currently enrolled in the Interamerican University hoping to complete his degree in Education.

"The Apocalypse Will Be Televised" was written right after I finished a field exam focusing on utopic and dystopic literature, although I had no intentions of writing about a dystopia. Advances in security technologies over the past few years have made the world seem a little more claustrophobic. Let's hope magic drugs aren't added to the equation.

THE APOCALYPSE WILL BE TELEVISED

by Toiya Kristen Finley

After nations couldn't compromise and political boundaries burned from maps, government wizards interiorized suburban homes with eyes to scrutinize. So check for updates waiting in the fax line, see when the next battle will air, and cheer as mortar shells spray across the illuminated screen.

When the news broadcasts government wizards damming rivers dry, rejoice at the bones of exposed whomen in the riverbeds, deep in mud as ID chips lodged in babies' newborn skin. Forget the whoman who lived next door, his viper tongue soothing the mind in its tirades and rants, almost daring anyone not to care if government wizards placed eyes on the wall.

Remember greeting everyone under the spell of "We're undefeated." Forget seeing the wrinkles in their skin, even if those wrinkles are etched in cheeks of six year olds, wrinkles that first sprouted when nations couldn't compromise. Otherwise, tirades and rants of whomen will tickle the mind at the sight of soot hanging in clothes, and fallen debris, and shrapnel that digs through soles and pierces feet.

While prophets escape government wizards, rise up in ashy streets and consume lines of fire, don't desire to be one of them, standing for something and dreaming in martyr's clothes. Even when thoughts of sleeping in river mud lighten the soul, even if bullets buried in the gut would kiss like a caress, pay attention to the commercial advertising cures against turning whoman. The government wizards'

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potions restore the faintest heart, and in the morning run through the streets. Trip over cribs, sewing machines, wheelchairs, and whomen bones. Offer an arm with protruding tendons and hanging flesh at the apprentice's clinic. Turn away from the needle pricking a hole in the vein, deep as ID chips lodged in prisoners' skin, and feel the blood suck from the syringe, suck it dry until the eyes grow dim, suck it dry until the soul sways in the drunkenness of unity.

MONOCHROME

By Ian Creasey

They had a good cover story. Even up close, the factory looked like an ordinary under-funded oceanography station, right down to the rusting fence and the solitary watchman. I hoped the security guard and his dog would be as easy to avoid as the fence had been to climb.

Shivering in the stiff breeze coming straight off the Atlantic, I decided to make a final prayer for the success of the mission. I unwrapped my communion wafers, ate one, then thought that the task ahead deserved another. I threw the rest away—it would be best not to have them on me if I were caught—and lay down on the sand to await the glory.

As always, Jesus was right there waiting for me. Although the world did its best to shut Him out, we could still open up to His infinite love. Smiling, Jesus bent down to kiss me. Celestial light shone from and through His body, creating rainbows in the spray, and the cries of the wheeling seagulls melded together in a spontaneous polyphonic hymn.

I had no need to speak, for Jesus could see my soul. And I was forgiven, both for what I'd done and what I was about to do.

The spirit cannot bear too much transcendence this side of Heaven, and soon the vision faded. The sand was only sand, not the floor of an outdoor church, and the birds were just hungry. I sprawled stiff and aching on the shore, afterimages of God dancing behind my eyelids. The distant sound of the ferry's horn roused me: it was time to move.

I identified the target building, a brutal concrete box weathered by years of storms. An orange-red glow showed me where someone had left a window open, reflecting the final rays of the setting sun. I hadn't expected to be so lucky—truly it was a sign that the mission was blessed. But it meant that I had to get down there fast, before the roaming security guard closed it. I ran toward the building.

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No-one seemed to notice me; I hoped the workers had all left for the day. Nevertheless I reached into my backpack and brought out a sedative gun.

Heaving myself up through the window, I entered a small office crammed with filing cabinets and a paper-strewn desk. Through the door came a large woman carrying a cup of coffee. Her mouth opened in an O of surprise. I shot her before she could scream, and the drink fell to the floor with a soggy thud.

I took one charge from my backpack, leaving it under the desk. Fifteen to go. From the office I turned right and found more offices, a storeroom, then a computer room in which I left another charge. Fourteen. As I walked down the next corridor a man emerged from the toilet, and crumpled when I sedated him. They really did wear white coats, I was amused to see. I almost left another charge in the toilets, but decided to go easy with them until I reached somewhere important. Then, as if the thought had summoned the location, I found the labs.

The swing doors resisted, and I noticed the DNA checker. In my backpack I had a stolen skin sample, but now I didn't need to trust its clearance. I went back to the sleeping scientist, dragged him down the corridor, and touched his finger to the checker. The doors opened.

I didn't understand the complex machinery inside, but I knew it manufactured the drugs introduced into water supplies everywhere. I had a crazy urge to smash it all up with my bare hands, but I had no time for that. Explosives were so much more thorough. I placed the charges by the most expensive-looking equipment. Thirteen, twelve, eleven... I was so hyped I barely touched the floor as I moved. In the second lab I saw a cleaning robot and reflexively shot it, then realized that the tranquilliser would have no effect. I panicked for a moment, but the cleaner carried on working as if nothing had happened. It had no more intelligence than it needed.

In the final lab I sedated one more scientist. I placed the last few charges there. Wiping sweat from my forehead, I paused for a breather. Nearly done. From the stationery store I fetched a long low trolley and some string. I went back round the building, checking that I hadn't missed anyone—I didn't want anyone to die. I stacked all the sleepers on the trolley, tied two loops to secure the load, then covered the cargo with layers of multi-coloured bubble-wrap.

With the trolley I couldn't leave the way I'd entered, so I found a fire exit. I quickly looked through a window to check there was no movement outside, then opened the fire door and pushed the trolley through. Trying to saunter casually but swiftly, I headed across the car park. The mad rushing about had seemed to take all night: I was surprised to find it still evening. Refreshed by the cool breeze and suddenly euphoric, I looked around for somewhere safe to ditch the sleepers.

A dog barked close by. The watchman! My heart raced, while I kept on walking

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as if I were a janitor who had every right to be pushing a trolley across the grounds. I could try shooting both man and dog if I had to, but it didn't matter now. They were too late.

The guard approached. "Would you care to show me your pass, sir?"

"Certainly." I put my hand in my pocket, and pressed the detonator.

Nothing happened. The Alsatian looked at me with eager eyes.

#

The trial was a farce, of course. The authorities stuck to their cover story that the station researched fish populations; the Church didn't want me to prove otherwise as that would compromise our sources. Instead, the defense said I'd been striking a blow for creationism against evolutionary biology, and emphasised my concern to avoid casualties. Maybe it helped.

"You must realise you're lucky to escape a jail term," said Dr. Kernick, my probation officer. Her white blouse and navy-blue skirt were unremarkable, so I imagined her in a lab coat to remind myself she was the enemy.

"I wish I'd blown the place to the moon and got ten years inside, instead of escaping through incompetence."

"It wasn't your fault that the walls blocked the detonator signal," she said.

"Then why am I not in jail?"

"Treatment is preferable to punishment, and we think you can be treated."

"Treated for what?" I asked.

"After your arrest, you tested positive for AD."

"Communion wafers, you mean. You're going to treat me for religion?"

"You can practise any religion you like, but you'll have to do it without the assistance of drugs."

I laughed. "That's rich, from a government putting drugs in the water system. AD is only an antidote to Tempora, the rock on which you've founded your godless society—"

I would have gone on to recite the whole catechism—how Tempora was developed to pacify apocalyptic cults, and became so useful that it had been

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administered to the masses ever since—but she mimed *cut*.

"Spare me the lecture: I'm already familiar with the True Church's mythology. And there's no such thing as an anti-religion drug."

"I suppose next you'll be telling me there's no fluoride in the water either."

Dr. Kernick's mouth twitched in a half-smile. "The fluoride, I'll grant you. Tempora's just a conspiracy theory."

"Then why has religion been wiped out?"

She shrugged. "They say it's the decline in poverty and ignorance. Progress, in other words. But 'wiped out' is an exaggeration. In my home town alone there are a dozen churches."

"All purged of radical doctrines, no doubt, and unlikely to raise a cry of conscience to disturb the State. Christianity without virgin birth, miracles or resurrection is a denial of the divine nature of Christ. And if you take Christ out of Christianity, you're left with inanity."

"Almost," she said.

"Don't quibble. You're left with a Christianity that requires no faith. And without faith we're just arrogant apes, wallowing in moral filth."

"I see. But there's no point in you trying to persuade me of this, is there, if I've been drinking Tempora all my life?"

I produced a communion wafer from my pocket. "All you need is the antidote. Then you can make up your own mind, for the first time."

"You'd better put that away before I feel obliged to notice it officially. I must say, I'm impressed by the efficiency of the True Church's supply lines."

"We managed in the catacombs of the Eternal City, and we manage today. Explain this to me: if Tempora is a myth, why was the station guarded, and why was the building lined with a signal baffle?"

She sighed. "Even in these enlightened times there are still thieves, animal liberationists, and other assorted fanatics such as yourself."

"Today's fanatic is tomorrow's hero."

"Today's slogan is tomorrow's nostalgia," said Dr. Kernick. She brought out a syringe, and charged it up with a clear fluid. "This is a new drug called Equinol. It

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works rather like Antabuse—have you heard of that?"

I shook my head.

"Antabuse stops alcoholics from drinking, by making them violently ill if they touch even a drop of alcohol. For all your fine rhetoric, you're just another drug addict, and Equinol operates on similar lines. You are required to report for twice-weekly injections."

"But AD doesn't do anything, it's only an antidote—"

"Don't give me that. If it's just an antidote, why is it that taking more induces stronger visions? Why do users shoot it up with heroin and chase it down with LSD?"

"I know nothing of such blasphemous practices, but even an antidote will obviously be more effective if more is taken—"

"Oh, shut up and hold out your arm. It doesn't matter whether you think of your wafer as a drug in itself or as the antidote to a mythical agent. Either way, Equinol counteracts it. Now, you can either take this with dignity, or I can have you strapped down."

#

While being tried and condemned, I had lost my old job at the recycling centre. The Church promised to find me a new one, but till then I had little to do, and no desire to join society's empty pursuits. All around, people worked too hard to buy things they were too tired to enjoy, and tried to fill the holes in their lives with TV. I saw fashions changing from week to week as if hemlines were the pendulum of some madly speeding clock. And I no longer had the solace of the sacrament; I stopped attending services because I hated to see others taste the rapture I couldn't share. I couldn't even pray. Without communion wafers to break through the Tempora, my words felt like the futile mewing of a kitten at the door of an empty house. Alienated from society, detached from the Church, cut off from God, I felt that I languished in jail after all, imprisoned in invisible walls.

Only the probation regime gave structure to my life. I reported for regular injections, and endured barrages of propaganda disguised as counselling. There was so-called community work, too, though they refused to give me anything that brought me into contact with the actual community. Perhaps they feared that I'd spread the Lord's word—didn't they trust their Tempora? Instead I supervised robot hedge-cutters and road-sweepers. The robots were the perfect modern citizens, I thought. They accepted instructions without question, and they had no concept of the spiritual world.

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The authorities' apparent lack of confidence in their own drug made me wonder how well it really worked. Once in my head, the idea wouldn't go away. My days were all grey without the Light illuminating them, and I feared losing this sense of loss. With every cup of coffee, every glass of water I drank, the ubiquitous Tempora would eat away a little more of my faith. One day I'd join the mindless throng, happy in its ignorance of higher things, never knowing why I'd behaved so strangely in my youth. What wouldn't I give to be touched by Jesus once again? Surely a bit of sickness was a price worth paying.

I waited till the day before my next injection, assuming the previous dose would then be at its weakest. I unwrapped my communion wafers, and wondered how many to eat. Maybe taking a lot would overpower the Equinol, but maybe it would just make the reaction worse—whatever that was. I decided to start with one and see how I felt. I ate it reverently, savouring the taste after my long fast, then knelt down to pray.

As always, Jesus was right there waiting for me. The radiance of His smile overwhelmed me, filling the room with light and warmth. Jesus beckoned, and I followed Him outside into the bright sun. Angels wheeled in the sky like seagulls. Heat washed over me. The figure of Jesus rippled and dissolved in a spreading pool of light, so white and fluid I felt I might drown in it. The glare came from a new light in the sky, close to the sun and growing brighter by the second. I knew it was the Morning Star, coming closer. I knew it was Lucifer, falling. Jesus had cast me out, and I sweated in the heat of Hell.

The fallen angels fluttered closer. I felt them crawl over my skin like spiders, like wasps. Then they burrowed into my body and ate my soul.

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Dr. Kernick visited me in hospital to give me my injection. She said, "Alcoholics always have to test whether Antabuse works, and I knew you'd be the same. But I think you'll agree that once is enough." With the familiar institutional politeness that told me I was a lower form of life, she excused me from the rest of the probation programme until I recovered.

I didn't have to respond to any of this, because I didn't have any vocal cords. I'd worn them out with screaming. No transplant had yet become available, and on moral grounds I'd declined a tissue-cultured larynx grown from stem cells. I'd heard they might only put in a vocoder, so that I'd sound like a robot for the rest of my life. It would be appropriate for a man with no soul to have the voice of a robot.

I couldn't tell Dr. Kernick she was wrong, but the complacent doctor would learn her error soon enough. I knew I would take more communion wafers when I could. The enemy wasn't Lucifer, but secular society and its denial of the

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spiritual. Jesus and Lucifer were on the same side, the sacred against the profane. Light and Dark against greyness. The fight would go on.

And Lucifer had some devilish ideas.

Ian Creasey was born in 1969 and lives in Yorkshire, England. He began writing when rock & roll stardom failed to return his calls. His fiction has appeared in various publications including Oceans of the Mind, Gothic.Net, Paradox, On Spec, and The Mammoth Book Of Legal Thrillers. His spare time interests include hiking, gardening, and environmental conservation work—anything to get him outdoors and away from the computer screen.