

The Eyes of God

Peter Watts

I am not a criminal. I have done nothing wrong.

They've just caught a woman at the front of the line, mocha-skinned, mid-thirties, eyes wide and innocent beneath the brim of her La Senza beret. She dosed herself with oxytocin from the sound of it, tried to subvert the meat in the system - a smile, a wink, that extra chemical nudge that bypasses logic and whispers right to the brainstem: *This one's a friend, no need to put her through the machines...*

But I guess she forgot: we're all machines here, tweaked and tuned and retrofitted down to the molecules. The guards have been immunized against argument and aerosols. They lead her away, indifferent to her protests. I try to follow their example, harden myself against whatever awaits her on the other side of the white door. What was she thinking, to try a stunt like that? Whatever hides in her head must be more than mere inclination. They don't yank paying passengers for evil fantasies, not yet anyway, not yet. She must have done something. She must have *acted*.

Half an hour before the plane boards. There are at least fifty law-abiding citizens ahead of me and they haven't started processing us yet. The buzz box looms dormant at the front of the line like a great armored crab, newly installed, mouth agape. One of the guards in its shadow starts working her way up the line, spot-checking some passengers, bypassing others, feeling lucky after the first catch of the day. In a just universe I would have nothing to fear from her. I'm not a criminal, I have done nothing wrong. The words cycle in my head like a defensive affirmation.

I am not a criminal. I have done nothing wrong.

But I know that fucking machine is going to tag me anyway.

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At the head of the queue, the Chamber of Secrets lights up. A canned female voice announces the dawning of preboard security, echoing through the harsh acoustics of the terminal. The guards slouch to attention. We gave up everything to join this line: smart tags, jewelery, my pocket office, all confiscated until the far side of

redemption. The buzz box needs a clear view into our heads; even an earring can throw it off. People with medical implants and antique mercury fillings aren't welcome here. There's a side queue for those types, a special room where old-fashioned interrogations and cavity searches are still the order of the day.

The omnipresent voice orders all Westjet passenger with epilepsy, cochlear dysfunction, or Gray's Syndrome to identify themselves to Security prior to entering the scanner. Other passengers who do not wish to be scanned may opt to forfeit their passage. Westjet regrets that it cannot offer refunds in such cases. Westjet is not responsible for neurological side effects, temporary or otherwise, that may result from use of the scanner. Use of the scanner constitutes acceptance of these conditions.

There *have* been side effects. A few garden-variety epileptics had minor fits in the early days. A famous Oxford atheist - you remember, the guy who wrote all the books - caught a devout and abiding faith in the Christian God from a checkpoint at Heathrow, although some responsibility was ultimately laid at the feet of the pre-existing tumour that killed him two months later. One widowed grandmother from St. Paul's was all over the news last year when she emerged from a courthouse buzz box with an insatiable sexual fetish for running shoes. That could have cost Sony a lot, if she hadn't been a forgiving soul who chose not to litigate. Rumors that she'd used SWank just prior to making that decision were never confirmed.

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"Destination?"

The guard arrives while I wasn't looking. Her laser licks my face with biometric taste buds. I blink away the after-images.

"Destination," she says again.

"Uh, Yellowknife."

She scans her handpad. "Business or pleasure?" There's no point to these questions; they're not even according to script. SWank has taken us beyond the need for petty interrogation. She just doesn't like the look of me, I bet. She just *knows* somehow, even if she can't put her finger on it.

"Neither," I say. She looks up sharply. Whatever her initial suspicions, my obvious evasiveness has cemented them. "I'm attending a funeral," I explain.

She moves along without a word.

I know you're not here, Father. I left my faith back in childhood. Let others hold to their feeble-minded superstitions, let them run bleating to the supernatural for comfort and excuses. Let the cowardly and the weak-minded deny the darkness with the promise of some imagined afterlife. I have no need for invisible friends. I know I'm only talking to myself. If only I could stop.

I wonder if that machine will be able to eavesdrop on our conversation.

I stood with you at your trial, as you stood with me years before when I had no other friend in the world. I swore on your sacred book of fairy tales that you'd never touched me, not once in all those years. Were the others lying, I wonder? I don't know. Judge not, I guess.

But you were judged, and found wanting. It wasn't even newsworthy - child-fondling priests are more cliché than criminal these days, have been for years, and no one cares what happens in some dick-ass town up in the Territories anyway. If they'd quietly transferred you just one more time, if you'd managed to lay low just a little longer, it might not have even come to this. They could have fixed you.

Or not, now that I think of it. The Vatican came down on SWank like it had come down on cloning and the Copernican solar system before it. Mustn't fuck with the way God built you. Mustn't compromise free choice, no matter how freely you'd choose to do so.

I notice that doesn't extend to tickling the temporal lobe, though. St. Michael's just spent seven million equipping their nave for Rapture on demand.

Maybe suicide was the only option left to you; maybe all you could do was follow one sin with another. It's not as though you had anything to lose; your own scriptures damn us as much for desire as for doing. I remember asking you years ago, although I'd long since thrown away my crutches: what about the sin not made manifest? What if you've coveted thy neighbor's wife or warmed yourself with thoughts of murder, but kept it all inside? You looked at me kindly, and perhaps with far greater understanding than I ever gave you credit for, before condemning me with the words of an imaginary superhero. If you've done any of these things in your heart, you said, then you've done them in the eyes of God.

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I feel a sudden brief chime between my ears. I could really use a drink about now; the woody aroma of a fine old scotch curling through my sinuses would really hit the spot. I glance around, spot the billboard that zapped me. Crown Royal. Fucking head spam. I give silent thanks for legal standards outlawing the implantation of brand names; they can stick cravings in my head, but hooking me on trademarks would cross some arbitrary threshold of *free will*. It's a meaningless gesture, a sop to the civil-rights fanatics. Like the chime that preceded it: it tells me, the courts say, that I am still autonomous. As long as I *know* I'm being hacked, I've got a sporting chance to make my own decisions.

Two spots ahead of me, an old man sobs quietly. He seemed fine just a moment ago. Sometimes it happens. The ads trigger the wrong connections. SWank can't lay down hi-def sensory panoramas without a helmet, these long-range hits don't *instil* so much as *evoke*. Smell's key, they say - primitive, lobes big enough for remote targeting, simpler to hack than the vast gigapixel arrays of the visual cortex. And so *primal*, so much closer to raw reptile. They spent millions finding the universal triggers. Honeysuckle reminds you of childhood; the scent of pine recalls Christmas. They can mood us up for Norman Rockwell or the Marquis de Sade, depending on the product. Nudge the right receptor neurons and the brain builds its *own* spam.

For some people, though, honeysuckle is what you smelled when your mother got the shit beaten out of her. For some, Christmas was when you found your sister with her wrists slashed open.

It doesn't happen often. The ads provoke mild unease in one of a thousand of us, true distress in a tenth as many. Some thought even that price was too high. Others quailed at the spectre of machines instilling not just sights and sounds but *desires*, opinions, religious beliefs. But commercials featuring cute babies or sexy women also plant desire, use sight and sound to bypass the head and go for the gut. Every debate, every argument is an attempt to literally *change someone's mind*, every poem and pamphlet a viral tool for the hacking of opinions. *I'm doing it right now*, some Mindscape™ flak argued last month on MacroNet. *I'm trying to change your neural wiring using the sounds you're hearing. You want to ban SWank just because it uses sounds you can't?*

The slope is just too slippery. Ban SWank and you might as well ban art as well as advocacy. You might as well ban free speech itself.

We both know the truth of it, Father. Even words can bring one to tears.

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The line moves forward. We shuffle along with smooth, ominous efficiency, one after another disappearing briefly into the buzz box, reappearing on the far side, emerging reborn from a technological baptism that elevates us all to temporary sainthood. Compressed ultrasound, Father. That's how they cleanse us. You probably saw the hype a few years back, even up there. You must have seen the papal bull condemning it, at least. Sony filed the original patent as a game interface, just after the turn of the century; soon, they told us, the eyephones and electrodes of yore would give way to affordable little boxes that tracked you around your living room, bypassed eyes and ears entirely, and planted five-dimensional sensory experience directly into your brain. (We're still waiting for those, actually; the tweaks may be ultrasonic but the system keeps your brain in focus by tracking EM emissions, and not many consumers Faraday their homes.) In the meantime, hospitals and airports and theme parks keep the dream alive until the price comes down. And the spin-offs- Father, the spin-offs are everywhere. The deaf can hear. The blind can see. The post-traumatized have all their acid memories washed away, just as long as they keep paying the connection fee.

That's the rub, of course. It doesn't last; the high frequencies excite some synapses and put others to sleep, but they don't actually change any of the preexisting circuitry. The brain eventually bounces back to normal once the signal stops. Which is not only profitable for those doling out the waves, but a lot less messy in the courts. There's that whole integrity-of-the-self thing to worry about. Having your brain rewired every time you hopped a commuter flight might raise some pretty iffy legal issues.

Still. I've got to admit it speeds things up. No more time-consuming background checks, no more invasive "random" searches, no litany of questions designed to weed out the troublemakers in our midst. A dash of transcranial magnetism; a squirt of ultrasound; *next*. A year ago I'd have been standing in line for hours. Today I've been here scarcely fifteen minutes and I'm already in the top ten. And it's more than mere convenience: it's security, it's safety, it's a sigh of relief after a generation of Russian Roulette. No more Edmonton Infernos, no more Rio Insurrections, no more buildings slagged to glass or cities sickening in the aftermath of some dirty nuke. There are still saboteurs and terrorists loose in the world, of course. Always will be. But when they strike at all, they strike in places unprotected by SWanky McBuzz. Anyone who flies *these* friendly skies is as harmless as - as I am. Who can argue with results like that?

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In the old days I could have wished I was a psychopath. They had it easy back then. The machines only looked for emotional responses: eye saccades, skin galvanism. Anyone without a conscience could stare them down with a wide smile and an empty heart. But SWank inspired a whole new generation. The tech looks under the surface now. Prefrontal cortex stuff, glucose metabolism. Now, fiends and perverts and would-be saboteurs all get caught in the same net.

Doesn't mean they don't let us go again, of course. It's not as if sociopathy is against the law. Hell, if they screened out everyone with a broken conscience, Executive Class would be empty.

There are children scattered throughout the line. Most are accompanied by adults. Three are not: two boys and a girl. They are nervous and beautiful, like wild animals, easily startled. They are not used to being on their own. The oldest can't be more than nine, and he has a freckle on the side of his neck.

I can't stop watching him.

Suddenly children roam free again. For months now I've been seeing them in parks and plazas, unguarded, innocent, and so *vulnerable*, as though SWank has given parents everywhere an excuse to breathe. No matter that it'll be years before it trickles out of airports and government buildings and into the places children play. Mommy and Daddy are tired of waiting, take what comfort they can in the cameras mounted on every street corner, panning and scanning for all the world as if real people stood behind them. Mommy and Daddy can't be bothered to spend five minutes on the web, compiling their own predator's handbook on the use of laser pointers and blind spots to punch holes in the surveillance society. Mommy and Daddy would rather just take all those bromides about "civil safety" on faith.

For so many years we've lived in fear. By now people are so desperate for any pretense of safety that they'll cling to the promise of a future that hasn't even arrived yet. Not that that's anything new; whether you're talking about a house in the suburbs or the browning of Antarctica, Mommy and Daddy have *always* lived on credit.

If something *did* happen to their kids, it would serve them right.

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The line moves forward. Suddenly I'm at the front of it.

A man with Authority waves me in. I step forward as if to an execution. I do this for you, Father. I do this to pay my respects. I do this to dance on your grave. If I could have avoided this moment - if this cup could have passed from me, if I could have *walked* to the Northwest Territories rather than let this obscene technology into my head -

Someone has spray-painted two words in stencilled black over the mouth of the machine: *The Shadow*. Delaying, I glance a question at the guard.

"It knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men," he says. "Bwahaha. Let's move it along."

I have no idea what he's talking about.

The walls of the booth glimmer with a tight weave of copper wire. The helmet descends from above with a soft hydraulic hiss; it sits too lightly on my head for such a massive device. The visor slides over my eyes like a blindfold. I am in a pocket universe, alone with my thoughts and an all-seeing God. Electricity hums deep in my head.

I'm innocent of any wrongdoing. I've never broken the law. Maybe God will see that if I think it hard enough. Why does it have to see anything, why does it have to *read* the palimpsest if it's just going to scribble over it again? But brains don't work like that. Each individual *is* individual, wired up in a unique and glorious tangle that must be read before it can be edited. And motivations, intents - these are endless, multiheaded things, twining and proliferating from frontal cortex to cingulate gyrus, from hypothalamus to claustrum. There's no LED that lights up when your plans are nefarious, no Aniston Neuron for mad bombers. For the safety of everyone, they must read it all. For the safety of everyone.

I have been under this helmet for what seems like forever. Nobody else took this long.

The line is not moving forward.

"Well," Security says softly. "Will you look at that."

"I'm not," I tell him. "I've never - "

"And you're not about to. Not for the next nine hours, anyway."

"I never *acted* on it." I sound petulant, childish. "Not once."

"I can see that," he says, but I know we're talking about different things.

The humming changes subtly in pitch. I can feel magnets and mosquitoes snapping in my head. I am changed by something not yet cheap enough for the home market: an ache evaporates, a dull longing so chronic I feel it now only in absentia.

"There. Now we could put you in charge of two Day Cares and a chorus of alter boys, and you wouldn't even be tempted."

The visor rises; the helmet floats away. Authority stares back at me from a gaggle of contemptuous faces.

"This is wrong," I say quietly.

"Is it now."

"I haven't done anything."

"We haven't either. We haven't locked down your pervert brain, we haven't changed who you are. We've protected your precious constitutional rights and your God-given identity. You're as free to diddle kiddies in the park as you ever were. You just won't *want* to for a while."

"But I haven't *done* anything." I can't stop saying it.

"Nobody does, until they do." He jerks his head towards Departure. "Get out of here. You're cleared."

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I am not a criminal. I have done nothing wrong. But my name is on a list now, just the same. Word of my depravity races ahead of me, checkpoint after checkpoint, like a fission of dominoes. They'll be watching, though they have to let me pass.

That could change before long. Even now, Community Standards barely recognize the difference between what we do and what we are; nudge them just a hair further and every border on the planet might close at my approach. But this is only the dawning of the new enlightenment, and the latest rules are not yet in place. For now, I am free to stand at your unconsecrated graveside, and mourn on

my own recognizance.

You always were big on the power of forgiveness, Father. Seventy times seven, the most egregious sins washed away in the sight of the Lord. All it took, you insisted, was true penitence. All you had to do was accept His love.

Of course, it sounded a lot less self-serving back then.

But even the unbelievers get a clean slate now. My redeemer is a machine, and my salvation has an expiry date - but then again, I guess yours did too.

I wonder about the machine that programmed *you*, Father, that great glacial contraption of dogma and moving parts, clacking and iterating its way through two thousand years of bloody history. I can't help but wonder at the way it rewired *your* synapses. Did it turn you into a predator, weigh you down with lunatic strictures that no sexual being could withstand, deny your very nature until you snapped? Or were you already malfunctioning when you embraced the church, hoping for some measure of strength you couldn't find in yourself?

I knew you for years, Father. Even now, I tell myself I know you - and while you may have been twisted, you were never a coward. I refuse to believe that you opted for death because it was the easy way out. I choose to believe that in those last days you found the strength to rewrite your own programming, to turn your back on obsolete algorithms two millennia out of date and decide for yourself the difference between a mortal sin and an act of atonement.

You loathed yourself; you loathed the things you had done. And so, finally, you made absolutely certain you could never do them again. You *acted*.

You acted as I never could, though I'd pay so much smaller a price.

There is more than this temporary absolution, you see. We have machines now that can burn the evil right out of a man, deep-focus microwave emitters that vaporize the very pathways of depravity. No one can force them on you; not yet, anyway. Member's bills wind through Parliament, legislative proposals that would see us preemptively reprogrammed for good instead of evil, but for now the procedure is strictly voluntary. It *changes* you, you see. It violates some inalienable essence of selfhood. Some call it a kind of suicide in its own right.

I kept telling the man at Security: I never *acted* on it. But he could see that for himself.

I never had it fixed. I must *like* what I am.

I wonder if that makes a difference.

I wonder which of us is more guilty.