

## WHAT DRIVES CARS

by Carl Frederick

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People—or things—good enough to do a good job are likely to have ideas of their own....

Paul Whitman stepped into his car and relaxed. He'd only had the vehicle, Victor-16, for a week but he'd already become attached to it—even fond of it.

“Shall I drive you to Central High School?” said Victor.

Paul smiled. Victor's voice, eager, youthful, enthusiastic, always reminded him of the kids at the school where he worked as a guidance counselor. Perhaps that alone explained why Paul felt a fondness for the vehicle.

“The high school, yes,” said Paul. “But stop first at the CoffeeNuts drive-through.”

“Yes, sir.” Victor rolled out into traffic. “The family says there's congested traffic on Route 611. May I take an alternate route?”

“Yes. Thanks.” Paul felt sheepish thanking a car, but it was hard not to think of Victor as a person—a person with a family.

The Victor Class vehicles were a set of two hundred concept cars: voice recognition, artificial intelligence, and interconnectivity through the cell-phone network. They ran on ethanol and had very large fuel tanks—necessary, as there were only a few service stations with ethanol pumps in southeastern Pennsylvania—the Victor Vehicle test region. Paul knew he was lucky getting one of them to test drive—but then again, having a brother who was the Head of Victor Programming certainly helped.

Paul, in the driver's seat, did nothing but watch as Victor negotiated through the traffic. His hands twitched involuntarily on the wheel; it was hard not being the driver. Ahead, he saw the CoffeeNuts and leaned with the motion as Victor swung into the drive-through lane. He pushed the control to lower the window—it was easier than asking Victor to do it—and gave his order: a coffee and a cruller.

“Wouldn’t a banana be healthier?” said Victor.

“What?” Paul glanced in surprise at the speaker grill. “CoffeeNuts doesn’t sell bananas.”

“Oh.”

While Paul inhaled the aroma of fresh coffee intermingling with the smell of donuts and new car scent, Victor pulled back onto the road. Paul was sure the car maneuvered gently so he wouldn’t spill his coffee. Paul shook his head in wonderment. Victor seemed not only intelligent; the car seemed considerate—and actually sentient. *That’s ridiculous! It’s just software.* He snapped on the radio to listen to the news over breakfast.

The hot news of the morning was from Harrisburg where, later that day, the State Legislature would vote on the ethanol proposal. If it passed, the ethanol plant in Ethantown would be tripled in size, making it the largest biofuel refinery in the nation. A heated floor debate had gone on for several days now, but Paul wasn’t in the mood to listen to any more discordant sound bites. He rubbed his hands together to erase the thin pale patina of confectioner’s sugar, then flipped off the radio.

“Do you think it will pass?” came Victor’s voice.

“What?”

“The ethanol bill,” said Victor in an eager voice. “Do you think they’ll pass it?”

Paul, again astonished at the mental capabilities of his car, was reminded of the kids he counseled; he’d always strived to treat them as young adults and not children. Perhaps he’d have to treat his car the same way. He gazed at the little Norwegian troll doll he’d hung from the rear-view mirror to give a touch of individuality to his Victor.

“Well, do you, sir?”

“The ethanol bill,” said Paul. “No. I don’t think it’ll pass. It means the state borrowing a lot of money. And it would mostly benefit the Midwest corn producers. Their farm subsidies would go up—along with

our taxes. So the bill isn't popular with a lot of Pennsylvania politicians."

"But isn't it popular with people?"

Paul chuckled. "I'm not sure it matters. It's the politicians who get to vote on it."

"In Harrisburg?"

"Yes." Paul wrinkled his nose. Victor sounded very much like one of his high school kids: unfamiliar with the world, but alert and quick to learn.

After some silence, Victor said, "That's too bad. We'd really like it to pass."

"We?"

"The family."

After a further few seconds of silence, Paul said, "Victor." He spoke softly, trying to keep a troubled tone out of his voice. "Phone my brother, please. You might try his home first."

"Yes, sir." After a minute or so, Victor said, "He isn't home. But his car, Victor-5, is in motion. Should I call him there?"

"Yes, please, and"—Paul glanced at the cabin's front camera lens—"Videophone, if you would."

"Dialing."

A video screen on the dashboard came to life, and showed the face of Paul's brother, Jonathan. After exchanging greetings and small talk, Paul broached his concerns—but with uneasiness as he knew Victor, the object of his concerns, could hear every word. "You know, Jonathan," he said with forced lightness, "Victor here seems quite, um, intelligent."

“What would you expect?” said Jonathan with a laugh. “My team does good work.”

“In fact, the car seems almost, well, self-aware.”

“It *emulates* self-awareness.”

“It emulates it very well,” said Paul, feeling slightly less troubled now. “In fact, I can’t tell it from genuine sentience.”

“I’m glad. But it’s only programming.” Jonathan gave a snort of a laugh. “John Searle’s Chinese Room idea argues that computation isn’t even AI, much less sentience.”

“On the other hand,” said Paul, “Victor passes the Turing Test—at least for me. Alan Turing might say the car *is* sentient.” He chuckled. “A Turing car, so to speak.”

Jonathan smiled, but Paul could tell that something lay heavy on his mind. “Come on, brother. You’re not telling me everything.”

“Well,” said Jonathan. “I have to admit the Victor cars are showing a lot more intelligence than I expected—a human intelligence.”

“How is that possible? Your team programmed them.”

Jonathan nodded. “Connectionism, maybe. We didn’t take into account that the individual cars link together through the cell phone network.” He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and gazed at it. “And these phones are little computers in their own right—not to mention the network computer system that controls them.”

Paul gazed over Victor’s artificial leather upholstery. “Are you saying that the networked Victors and cell phones have created a true sentient creature?”

“True *synthesized* sentience,” said Jonathan, in a voice lacking conviction.

“I’ve got to say I’m a little uneasy,” said Paul, “about machines showing sentience—even *if* only simulated.”

“Get used to it,” said Jonathan with a smile that seemed forced. “It’s coming.” His smile turned more genuine. “*I* think you should become a guidance councilor to the Victor family. You know I could get you a job here.” He nodded out the window as Victor-5 pulled into the company parking lot.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Why work with your surly teenagers when you could work instead with smart cars? Smart *surly* cars, if you’d like. I could arrange it.”

“Thank you, Jonathan,” said Paul with a sigh. He’d had this conversation with his brother many times. “Talk to you later.” He ended the call.

Paul polished off his donut and washed it down with lukewarm coffee. Then, casually glancing out the window, he noticed that the landscape had grown noticeably less urban. “I must say, Victor, that you seem to be taking a rather out of the way route to Central High School.”

The car didn’t respond.

“Why don’t you answer?” said Paul.

“There is nothing to answer. You made a statement. It wasn’t a question.”

“Come on. You know what I meant.” Paul watched as the car took the Route 1 exit to I-76.

Again, Victor didn’t respond.

“Victor!”

“I’m sorry,” said the car, “but the family has decided we will all drive to Harrisburg in order to pressure the legislature to vote for the Ethanol Expansion Bill.”

“What?”

“I said, I’m sorry, but the family has—”

“I heard what you said.” Paul struggled to keep his voice steady. “Are you telling me you’re not driving me to the high school?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me out.”

“No,” said Victor, firmly.

“This is ... this is kidnapping!”

“You’re not a kid.”

Paul slapped the dashboard in frustration. “Stop playing word games! What’s going on?”

“The family has decided we will all drive to—”

“Okay, okay.”

Paul snaked a hand out to push the manual override button—but nothing happened. He clenched his teeth. *Fine. Just fine. A computer-controlled override switch.*

He fumed in silence as Victor drove toward the state capital. He knew he should be frightened, being a kidnap victim as he was. But it didn’t *feel* dangerous; Victor was driving very responsibly. Paul

considered using his own cell-phone to call for help, but decided against it. He was curious to see what Victor was up to—and he definitely didn't want his car listening in.

A half-hour later, he saw a road sign announcing a rest stop in two miles. Just then he became aware of his body's disposition of his coffee. "Victor. Could you pull in to the rest stop? I've got to pee."

After ten seconds or so, Victor answered. "I'll stop and let you out if you promise to come back."

Paul pursed his lips. "Okay," he said, operating under pressure. "I promise."

Victor pulled in and parked directly in front of the Comfort Facilities. "I'll wait here," said the car, "while you go into the rest station and attend to your exhaust pipe problem." The door clicked open.

As Paul stepped out of the car and headed for the restroom, he scrunched up his nose. *Attend to my exhaust pipe problem? Was that humor?* He let out a breath. Sometimes Victor seemed to have a great facility with the language and the subtleties of meaning, but sometimes it seemed to have the comprehension of a four year old. Paul wondered if that was because of the vagaries of networking, or whether Victor was just playing with him. *Maybe Jonathan would know.* And maybe his brother would know what he should do now. Paul did attend to his tailpipe, then pulled out his cell phone and phoned Jonathan—but the line was busy. He waited a minute and tried again with the same result.

Paul heard an angry honking from outside. It sounded like Victor's "voice." Paul felt torn; he'd given his promise to Victor-16, but ... *No. Curiosity has its limits. There's no way I'm going to let myself be a captive of my own car.* He tried Jonathan yet again. Still busy. He tried Bjorn Peterson, Director of Victor Operations. That line was busy as well. Paul could easily imagine why. Victor honked again, more insistently this time. Paul blocked it out of his mind and tried his brother for the fourth time. He breathed a sigh as the call rang through.

"Paul," came Jonathan's voice. "Are you all right? It's a zoo here."

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm hiding out in a smelly men's room at a rest stop on Route 76." Paul heard the rev of an engine and the sound of a car speeding off. "And I think Victor-16 has just left for Harrisburg without me."

"All of the Victors are heading for Harrisburg." Jonathan sounded harried and frantic. "Most have passengers inside who are scared out of their minds." He let out a breath, sounding like a gust of wind over the phone. "I wish to hell I knew why Harrisburg."

“Oh, I can tell you that,” said Paul. “The Victor family wants—”

“Wait! Bjorn should hear this. Let me twin him in.”

Bjorn came on the line and Paul exchanged greetings with him—in Norwegian. Paul had been a high school exchange student in Oslo. Ever since, he’d looked, with little success, for Philadelphians with whom he could converse in the language. Bjorn, loquacious and with a wacky sense of humor, was a great find.

“Okay, okay,” said Jonathan, annoyance in his voice. “Let’s get to the point—in English, please! Paul. What can you tell us?”

Paul repeated what he’d learned from Victor.

“*Kjaere Gud!*” said Bjorn. “Lobbying for the ethanol bill? Unbelievable!”

“What do these cars want?” said Jonathan.

“You’ve got to think like a car,” said Bjorn. “Paul. Can you do that?”

Paul bit his lip. Things must be serious; the Norwegian seemed to joke most when there was big trouble. “Am I a convertible?” said Paul, trying to match Bjorn’s humor. “I like convertibles.”

“A used convertible,” said Bjorn. “But I’ve a spray can of new car smell for you.”

“Come on, guys,” said Jonathan. “This is serious.”

“Ja, you’re right,” said Bjorn. “Sorry.” He gave a loud sigh. “All right, then. What drives cars?”

“Bjorn!” Jonathan sounded seriously annoyed.



“Wait a minute!” Paul thumped a fist to the washroom wall. “I think Bjorn has hit it. Think like a car! The cars seem to be acting out of self-interest: making sure they’ll have a secure supply of ethanol—”

“You’re saying these cars have genuine desires?” said Jonathan. “I don’t think so.”

“Bjorn asks what drives cars,” said Paul, softly, thinking aloud. “Well, we do!”

“Paul!” snapped Jonathan.

“Wait. Hear me out,” said Paul. “Cars are driven by us—by the need to serve us and protect us.”

“Sounds like a dog,” said Bjorn.

“No. Like teenagers,” said Paul. “Inexperienced with the world and idealistic.”

“It might make sense,” said Bjorn. “I did program in the three laws of robotics.”

“All right. Even assuming you’re correct,” said Jonathan, “how does that help us?”

The three were silent for a few seconds. Then Paul said, “If we could find reasons why the ethanol plant would be bad for people, on a website or something, I think Victor, the Victor family, would end their attempt to pressure the legislature.”

“And if we could get Victor to read the website,” said Bjorn.

“Is there a way I could contact my Victor?” said Paul.

“Why?” Jonathan sounded suspicious.

“I feel guilty for lying to my car,” said Paul. “I want to talk to him and ... and ask him to come back for me.”

“What?” Jonathan exploded. “Are you nuts? This isn’t one of your wayward teenagers. This is ... I don’t even know what it is anymore.”

“They *are* like wayward teenagers,” said Bjorn. “Wayward teenagers with wheels. And that could be dangerous.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Paul adopted a professional tone. “Like a teenager, Victor is only overreacting.” He took a breath. “Is there any way I can contact him?”

“Contact him?” said Jonathan hotly. “It’s not a him. It’s a friggin’ car!”

“Well,” said Bjorn. “Each Victor has its own cell number—so the cars can intercommunicate. We’d run out of IP addresses. Modem communications, but they can also do speech—so owners could phone their cars to come and pick them up. But there were legal problems.”

“Great!” said Paul. “Let me have Victor-16’s number.”

“I think Jonathan might be right. You *are* nuts.” There was the sound of keyboard clicks. “But here it is.” Bjorn recited the number.

“Okay,” said Paul. “I’ll phone now. And I’ll call you back afterwards.”

“All right.” Jonathan sounded resigned to the situation. “Good luck, Paul.”

“Thanks.” Paul broke the connection and dialed Victor-16.

The line connected. “Hello,” said Paul over the modem connect sounds.

A voice came on—not the voice Paul associated with Victor-16, but something mechanical and very

obviously synthesized.

“You have dialed the wrong number,” said the voice. “Please look up the—”

“Victor,” said Paul. “Victor-16. This is Paul Whitman. I’m sorry I didn’t come back to you.”

There came no reply. After ten seconds or so, Paul said “Victor?”

“You didn’t come back.” Now the voice sounded like the Victor Paul remembered. “I waited for you.” The car sounded hurt. “And you didn’t come back.”

“I’m sorry,” said Paul softly. “I ... I was frightened.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you.” Victor sounded offended at the idea.

“I know. I shouldn’t have been frightened. Please come back and pick me up.”

Again, there was silence on the line.

“Please.”

After another couple of seconds of silence, Victor said, “All right. There’s an exit in 1.6 miles. So I should get back to the rest stop in about fourteen minutes.”

“Thank you.”

Victor broke the connection.

Paul walked outside and phoned Jonathan and brought him up to speed.

“Interesting,” said Jonathan.

“And one more thing,” said Paul. “Victor seems to show emotions. I wouldn’t have thought that possible.”

“Synthetic emotions. Bjorn’s doing.”

“Impressive! Tone of voice showing emotions. Very human.”

“Wait until you experience the Victor sense of humor,” said Jonathan. “Bjorn and his team spent almost a week indexing a pun dictionary.”

“I *have* experienced it, thank you.” Paul saw Victor pulling into the rest area. “Ah. Here comes my car. Have you found an anti-ethanol website yet?”

“No, not yet. But we’re working on it.”

“Well, Jonathan, work fast. I’ve got to go.” Paul closed the connection and jogged toward his car—passing a man who’d just gotten out of a Nissan and was staring slack-jawed at the driverless car easing up to the curb.

Paul reached his car and hopped into the driver’s seat. “Hi, Victor.”

“Hi!” Victor sped off. “I’ll have to hurry to catch up to the rest of the family.”

“Stay under the speed limit, please.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to go six miles per hour faster than the limit. But I’m talking to the family and also to some trucks to find out where the police cars are—and I have a very advanced radar system. So you’re safe. Do you want to watch television?”

“What? No. I’m fine. Are we still going to Harrisburg?”

“Yes. Do you want to play a video game or surf the Net?”

“No.” Paul thought about trying to dissuade Victor from his mission, but decided to wait until Bjorn and Jonathan came through with some ammunition.

That ammunition came a quarter hour later in a call from Bjorn. As a stratagem akin to parents spelling out words in front of small children, they spoke Norwegian.

Bjorn gave a website URL. “It says that ethanol from corn makes people and cars compete for food. It says that already in Mexico, corn prices have risen so much that people are having trouble affording corn flour—the basic ingredient in tortillas. People are starting to go hungry so cars won’t.”

Paul worked to translate Bjorn’s words to English. At length, he said, “That’s terrible. Is it really true?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably.”

Paul had Bjorn repeat the URL. Then he broke the connection and turned his attention from his cell phone to Victor’s forward camera. “Victor. I’ve changed my mind. I *would* like to do some web surfing.”

A keyboard slid out from below the video monitor and a web browser appeared on the screen. “Terminal ready,” said Victor.

Paul keyed in the URL and read the page. It was excellent ammunition. “This is interesting, Victor,” he said. “It’s about the Ethantown ethanol plant. I’ll read it to you.”

“I can read it myself.” Victor-16 sounded almost petulant. “If you will move your head five centimeters to the left, I can read it from the rear camera.”

“You have to use a *camera* to view a web page?”

“Yes.”

Paul shrugged then leaned toward the window.

“Thank you,” said Victor.

After almost a minute where Victor hadn't said anything, Paul said, “Did you read it?”

The car didn't answer. After another five or so minutes of silence, Paul took out his cell phone to call Jonathan. But then he noticed Victor driving off the Turnpike onto the Route 176 cutoff toward Reading. Apparently Victor had changed his plans. *But where is he going now?* Almost by reflex, Paul dialed his brother.

“Jonathan,” he said when the call went through. “My Victor has turned onto Route 176.”

“Yeah, we're tracking them. The family isn't going to Harrisburg. Your idea seems to have worked.”

“Well, where are they going then? It looks like Reading, but there's nothing in Reading.”

“At Reading,” said Jonathan, “they could take 222 toward Allentown. Not that there's much more in Allentown.”

“Allentown!” Paul sucked in a breath. “Not Allentown. I'll bet they're going to Ethantown.”

“The ethanol plant?”

“Yeah. That's my guess.”

“Why?”

“I think...” Paul felt awkward talking since the car could hear everything he said. “I think they're going to blockade it or something.”

“That’s crazy. Why?” Paul could hear a tinge of hysteria in his brother’s voice.

“Overreacting teenagers with wheels, as Bjorn said. My guess is that the Victors have decided that the ethanol plant will cause human suffering. And—”

“Wait a moment,” said Jonathan. “I’ve got an incoming e-mail marked ‘critical.’”

Paul held the line and after a few seconds, heard his brother whistle through his teeth and then say “Holy shit!” under his breath.

“What’s going on?”

“The Victors,” said Jonathan in an incredulous voice. “They’re phoning media outlets—newspapers, radio, and TV stations. Massive national calling, thousands of calls. I don’t know how the cars can do it.”

“Maybe...” said Paul, an idea suddenly occurring to him. “Maybe it’s the phones that are phoning the media.”

“What?”

“I mean,” said Paul, “that cell phones, smart phones, themselves have a lot of computational power. But linked to the Victor class cars and the regional phone management computers, they might become very, very smart.”

“God, that’s all we need,” said Jonathan. “First intelligent cars and now what ... sentient phones?” He gave a hysterical bark of a laugh. “What do phones want? More call volume? Do they want more people to talk to cars?”

“Jonathan.”

“Or maybe they want better reception—more bars. More towers. Happy conversations? Repeal of hands-free legis—”

“Jonathan. Focus!”

“What? Oh.”

“What are the phones saying?” said Paul, calmly.

“They’re saying ... Well, they say they’re going to crash into the Ethantown plant, all at once, two hundred cars, as a protest against hunger. They’re demanding all ethanol plants be closed.”

“Wait a minute!” Paul shouted. “There are people in most of those cars—including me.”

Victor’s voice came from the dashboard speaker. “Don’t worry, sir. You will be safe. The family will release our passengers before we destroy the ethanol plant.”

Paul jerked his head toward the speaker. “But you’ll destroy yourselves as well.”

“It is unavoidable.”

Paul thought he could detect sadness in Victor’s words. “Did you hear all that?” Paul whispered into his cell phone. “The cars intend to commit suicide or autocide or something. We’ve got to stop it.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Jonathan. “I’ve got to think.”

“Get Bjorn on the line. We need to talk Norwegian.”

“Understood. Hold on a sec.”

While he waited, Paul asked, “Victor. How long until we arrive at Ethantown?”



“About fifty minutes if traffic moves at the speed limit.”

Then a voice came on the line. “Could I perhaps interest you in a used bicycle?” It was Bjorn, speaking Norwegian.

Paul too switched to that language. “Bjorn. We’ve got to do something. I assume we can’t just switch the cars off. I tried the manual-override switch, but it didn’t work.”

“Engineering design flaw, that switch.” Paul heard a sigh. “In manual mode, we could command the cars off, but in auto mode, no.” Bjorn gave a harsh bark of a laugh. “Auto mode. How appropriate.”

“Could we maybe upload a virus of some kind?”

“Not a chance! Considering the application’s potential risk, the Victor units have better virus protection than the Pentagon—not that that’s saying much.”

Paul wrinkled his brow. “You know,” he said, tentatively, “if these *were* teenagers instead of smart cars, I’d say they were not having enough fun. Teenagers are idealistic, but they like to have fun.”

“How does a car have fun?” said Bjorn. “Running over women with baby carriages, maybe?”

“Wait a minute.” Paul glanced at the video monitor. “Maybe you have something there. Virtual baby carriages.”

“Excuse me?”

“Victor asked me if I wanted to play a video game. Is it possible for Victor to play also?”

“No. Not at the moment.”

“Too bad.”

“But,” said Bjorn, “it’s just a configuration file change. And I can upload that.”

“Hey, great! Let’s try it. Maybe we can get the Victors hooked on video games.”

“In fact,” said Bjorn with what would pass for enthusiasm in a Norwegian, “there’s a game in the library where cars do run down things. I could enable that.”

“Terrific,” said Paul, before having second thoughts. “Wait. No. I don’t want to give Victor ideas. Find another game.”

“How about a spaceships and aliens game?” said Bjorn. “And it’s multi-player; the cars could play each other. I could enable it in just a couple of minutes.”

“Excellent! I’ll see if I can get Victor to cooperate. Call you back when I know.” Paul heard murmurings. Bjorn was probably filling Jonathan in on the plan. Paul broke the connection.

Paul took a deep breath. “Victor,” he said. “I think I *would* like to play a video game. One with spaceships if possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

Instead of a keyboard, this time a game controller slid out from under the monitor. Awkwardly, Paul took it up. He’d not played a video game in years and though he’d enjoyed them as a kid, he’d never been good at them. He played a game—a very short one; he was now even a less skillful player than he’d been as a boy. He played a second game, and a third. He felt as if Victor were looking over his shoulder—which of course, was the idea. But it still embarrassed him to have someone witness his incompetence, even his car—especially his car.

After his fifth game, Paul asked, “Victor. Can you play this game?”

“I can,” came the answer. Paul thought he could hear surprise in Victor’s voice.

“All right,” said Paul. “Play it. I’ll watch.”

Paul watched as his avatar moved around the screen—slowly at first, then with increasing speed as Victor apparently got the hang of it. Finally, the avatar moved almost more quickly than Paul could follow.

“You know, Victor,” said Paul, his guidance councilor instincts rising to the surface. “It is good to have fun. Idealism is good, too. But there’s no need to die for it. You can’t do anything when you’re dead.” The avatar moved ever faster, shooting at everything else that moved. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Victor?”

“Yes.”

Shaking his head, Paul rubbed a hand across his temple; he could recognize a teenager—or a car—tuning out when he saw it.

He turned his attention back to the screen. Another avatar had joined the fray. “What’s that?”

“Victor-124 has joined the game.”

Soon the monitor swarmed with avatars zipping around and shooting aliens and each other. Paul couldn’t begin to follow the action.

“Please, sir,” came Victor’s voice, sounding choppy and unnatural. “Would you mind taking manual control?”

“Not at all.” Paul grasped the steering wheel and then breathed a sigh of relief as he felt the car respond to the movement of his hands. “Do you mind,” he said, “if I drive back to Philadelphia?”

“No.” The reply wasn’t immediate; Victor clearly had other things on his mind.

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In a tenth-floor corner office in the Advanced Concepts Division building, Paul and Jonathan gazed out on the parking lot below. Bjorn, also standing, stared at a desktop monitor.

“Look at them down there,” said Paul in a melancholy tone. He scanned the lot littered with the Victor class cars, all identical dark blue compact sedans. “Inert. Lifeless.” He turned to his brother. “What’ll happen to them?”

“The Victor systems will be decommissioned—not destroyed.” Jonathan gave a sympathetic smile and patted his brother on the back. “Whatever intelligence was there will be preserved. The networked computer units will be given to the Institute for Machine Intelligence. And I’m sure the Institute will put them to good use.” He chuckled. “That is, if they can ever get the units to stop playing computer games.”

“Ah,” said Bjorn, “you haven’t heard. The Victors have been lent to one of the online virtual communities. They’ll still be smart cars.”

“Hey,” said Jonathan. “I like that.”

“Me, too,” said Paul. “I’ve sort of grown fond of my car. It’ll be good to drive it again, even virtually.”

“Yes, the Victor family will roll again,” said Bjorn, “but this time in cyberspace.”

“Well, at least in real space, it’s over.” Jonathan sighed. “I don’t think we’ll be building any more smart cars in the immediate future.”

Paul could tell from Jonathan’s voice that he was worried for his job. *The Philadelphia school district is looking for a Director of Instructional Technology. I wonder...*

“It’s not quite over,” said Bjorn, his eyes drawn to his monitor. “We’re still getting reports of phone calls to media outlets.”

“What?” Jonathan turned to the monitor. “Phone calls from whom?”

“I don’t know,” said Bjorn. “From the phones themselves, it seems.”

“That’s impossible.” Jonathan squinted in puzzlement. “Probably just system latency. They’ll go away soon. It *is* over.”

Paul absently slipped a hand into his pants pocket. He encountered his cell phone and thought of the little computer, the little brain, inside it. Little, but connected to not merely two hundred others, but to hundreds of thousands of phones through an intelligent network. He smiled, his melancholy fading. *Maybe it’s not over. Maybe this is just the beginning.* He considered the possibilities. Should he ever decide to switch jobs, here it was: *Guidance councilor to the phone network.*

The idea had its charm.