

MARCELO RINESI

THE FATOU ENTRIES

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010: *And one day lie detectors became too good, better than our own consciousness at spotting when we were lying.* 32

011: *It's a little-known fact that home-made lightning rods are extremely illegal.* 33

012: *Everybody laughed as Achilles ran the turtle.* 34

013: *If you knew the world was about the end, if you knew safety would be impossible but for the very few, if you foresaw that you'd be the cause of only disdain or despair — would you tell mankind the bad news? Would you put truth above kindness?* 35

014: *I knew from the first second she was an exquisite sadist.* 36

015: *Nobody believed me — I think nobody understood.* 37

016: *We cut fear out of our soldiers' brains.* 38

017: *Armies have long sought the ultimate weapon: powerful enough to destroy any opposing military, "humane" enough to be used at will without any whining from the voters back home.* 39

018: *I was born knowing myself bright and innocent.* 40

019: *Predicting which five year old will grow up to plant bombs is an important national security capability, but so is knowing which five year old will grow up to cut the defense budget.* 41

020: *It isn't just biochemistry: it's intrinsic to the mathematics of humanlike self-aware cognition.* 42

021: *Greenpeace loses five hundred people every year to the Amazonian borders, mostly bulldozer drivers and pilots of defoliating planes.* 43

022: *As an aspiring artist, you are of course aware that great art only comes from the depths of grief.* 44

023: *Trick question: How many programmers with expertise in real-time video generation and computer-mediated biofeedback systems are found dead in their apartments every year?* 45

024: *Only the very rich can live in orbit.* 46

025: *There's a veteran living in the apartment above me.* 47

026: *This is why I forced my daughter to buy me the K model of that mandatory Unified Caregiver thing: you can use it to kill yourself.* 48

027: *"Victimless crime," my ass.* 50

028: *It's not that modern inferential dating suggestion systems don't work well.* 51

029: *Nobody forces you to use a WristMD; you can always go to one of the really expensive health insurance plans, the ones that price in the fact that you could be doing hazardous things to your health they won't have proof of, and hence will not be able to charge you for.* 52

030: *You were going to inherit one of the world's largest fortunes, so I considered part of my duties as a mother to immunize you against all forms of love.*

53

031: *Riot control is much easier these days: just throw a couple of high-grade adrenogenic gas bombs into the crowd.* 54

032: *I spend more time interacting online with your surrogate agent than with you, online and off.* 55

033: *You know we can chemically modulate your sense of time, and make a tedious hour feel like a year in hell.* 56

034: *The statistical analysis of relationship outcomes is a very powerful tool, but it's not surprising that there's still so much resistance to its use.* 57

035: *Because we couldn't travel to other stars to find other beings to talk, we did the next best thing: we used our computers and laboratories to try and synthesize them.* 58

036: *It had been long known "on the street" (although they wouldn't have put it like that) that the effect on employment prospects of most prison sentences, combined with a job market all but dead, meant that all sentences were effectively for life, the only difference question the number and length of the breaks.* 59

037: *There have been crimes so horrendous they left no clue behind, no whisper in history, no unsettling legend, not even pieces of broken clay.* 60

038: *I dream of you every night, naked and happy in my arms.* 61

039: *I warned her not to.* 62

040: *Qui bono? used to make most police investigations tediously direct.* 63

041: *You're in marketing? Great, I have a question I wanted to ask.* 64

042: *We need new prophets, but we have lost the desert.* 65

043: *Gather clues.* 66

044: *They said the war was over.* 67

045: *Will you leave me? he pleaded.* 68

046: *You always agree to meeting him, although it's never as fun as you thought it would be.* 69

047: *There is a secret society that has no name, no symbols, and no ritual.*
70

048: *A solar-powered osmosis filter, fishing nets, a floating suit and not much more.* 71

049: *In hindsight, it was unavoidable that improved knowledge of the brain would allow scientists to figure out a way to make lucid dreaming easy and consistent.* 72

050: *We hooked up at the height of our network standing; almost three quarters of our shared two-degree network made a some sort of lewd comment during the first night we had sex.* 73

051: *A windswept desert under a black sun, crisscrossed by the towns of the dead.* 74

052: *We laughed as we bought the clock, which ran backwards slowly and was supposed to time our life.* 75

053: *We all carry bits of our parents inside us.* 76

054: *With a saint's selflessness and a saint's will, the young man attempted to escape the secluded school.* 77

055: *I'm not as good reading markets as a President of the United States should be, but you don't get the job without being fairly good at it.* 78

056: *We aren't one of the largest networks of conspiracy buffs.* 79

057: *Would Helen even rate as a fashion model today? I somehow doubt it.*
80

058: *I already explained to you that cybersex calls for only the shallowest forms of AI; you can jerk off to a sex chatbox, but it's not someone you can take to the altar! So please stop proposing and enter the details of your credit card.* 81

059: *Seven young men and seven young women to satiate for a little while the hunger of the Minotaur, and keep our own families alive for a little while.* 82

060: *I tried to jump through the window, but they were holding me too tight.*
83

061: *She was no glasses-wearing newbie.* 84

062: *The waiting list to play with the Doc is huge, and the waiting list to be played by him — well, it's less a list than a movement.* 85

063: *Nobody cares about her name.* 87

064: *The metachemist had claimed there was no exaggeration in his claim.*
88

065: *They said they didn't travel between the stars, and that we wouldn't understand where they came from, or why.* 89

066: *He knew of her through rumours.* 90

067: *As for the "bank" theft, I didn't understand how it had been done, but I came to understand why.* 91

068: *Before the match had started, nobody had cared about anything but the result.* 93

069: *By late 2019, it was no longer politically tenable to ignore the reality of climate change, no matter who lobbied you, or how thick their checkbook.* 94

070: *My doctor shook her head, doing a not too convincing job of simulating empathy.* 95

071: *I had thought them an urban myth, or a government project, or — most likely — an urban myth seeded by the government.* 96

072: *Because billboards know your name when they know your face.* 97

073: *In the City of the Dead we keep the memory of the departed.* 98

074: *The case was about money and bombs, so there was no chance of it not reaching the Supreme Court.* 99

075: *There are many weapons that have never been used, but there's one that was destroyed.* 100

076: *All fictional universes have their Watson and their Holmes.* 101

077: *We fed the system all we knew of Leonardo - all he had written and done, and everything other had said and done about him, and everything we knew of everything he saw.* 102

078: *Kabbalah over DNA: it was obvious it'd be the first spiritual application of hobbyist-cheap genomic tools.* 103

079: *I'm no mean warrior, but my pride lies in my discovery.* 104

080: *He was the direct male heir of the Western Roman Empire.* 105

081: *Once neurochemistry went beyond the Stone Age, filial bonds were but a pill away.* 106

082: *He was dressed plainly, as was the fashion of the young.* 107

083: *You never believed as a child, and your parents never pressured you.*
108

084: *It's always the same story, mostly.* 109

085: *I've killed many, many people.* 110

086: *Neuropsychologists agree, although they'd quibble with the terminology, that the eyes are the windows to the soul.* 111

- 087: *The program keeps failing, and you cannot find the bug.* 112
- 088: *It works.* 113
- 089: *You can't get access to the neurochem cocktails companies give their white collars, unless it's in your shiftstart boost shoot.* 114
- 090: *This morning you were the richest man in America.* 115
- 091: *Had Lancelot been a lesser knight, there would still be a Camelot.* 116
- 092: *We have lost so much history.* 117
- 093: *Of course it wasn't random.* 118
- 094: *They were few, and the floors seemed infinite, but the First Ones didn't lack strength.* 119
- 095: *He was handsome and brave - of course I hated him.* 120
- 096: *This is what separates an honest medical tourism facilitator from a dishonest one: the former will always protest if you tell her you want to go to the Zlotlol Islands for a liver or a couple of lungs.* 121
- 097: *The mind knows through the eye, and the eye is often enough for the body.*
122
- 098: *Understand - Rome was no longer the political center of the Empire, not even of its western half.* 123

099: *As you've been studying, thoughts, feelings, and bodies interact in very complex and delicate ways, and things get exponentially more complicated when more than one person is involved.* 124

100: *My job used to be all about patience and erudition, searching ancient texts so far unedited for hapax legomena, words written but once.* 125

101: *You never know what your software is being used for.* 126

102: *All parents in all cultures say the same thing: "Don't be afraid of the dark."* 127

103: *There was no subtlest theologian, and no greater alchemist, than the secretive genius known only by the name Voltaire.* 128

104: *There are doors, and locks, and barred windows, but those aren't the things keeping you inside.* 129

105: *All magic is based on misdirection, and the first rule is never to explain how a trick is done.* 130

106: *The war had been horrendous, and it was felt the reparations would have to be punitive enough.* 131

107: *It's not that you can predict people.* 132

108: *Had the good Doctor been any less intelligent..* 133

109: *Jung was right.* 134

- 110: *It wasn't a common mutation; human survival depends mostly on their minds, and insanity is seldom an adaptive trait.* 135
- 111: *He was born into a world without whales.* 136
- 112: *Every genius detective gets this case early in their career: a locked room, a dead man, and a message in a cryptic cypher.* 137
- 113: *Possibility spaces had their own speed limits, but still felt less constraining than that old curse, c.* 138
- 114: *Organs were easy to clone, but not a fully functioning brain.* 139
- 115: *The King was not, it was whispered by the bravest in the darkest nights, as other Kings had been.* 140
- 116: *There's a poison that induces locked-in syndrome, the most sadistic torture you can inflict.* 141
- 117: *They rule us.* 142
- 118: *I had pursued him most of my professional life.* 143
- 119: *I had vowed to myself, and as publicly as I could, never to buy anything from a street seller.* 144
- 120: *It's said that every person gets one true premonition in their life, one moment in which their spirit grasped enough of their past and their present to make a single spot of the future as clear and obvious as the midday sun.* 145

- 121: *The chirping sound of a received message follows you around.* 146
- 122: *In your nightmares, it has a face.* 147
- 123: *Of course they are criminals.* 148
- 124: *I came home early - otherwise I'd have dropped dead the moment I stepped in.* 149
- 125: *My parents say that you live so close to me, they can't understand why I haven't approached you.* 150
- 126: *If it had only been about power, perhaps it'd have gone differently.* 151
- 127: *Like everybody else, the news I read are filtered and rewritten based on what the Internet knows of me: where I surf, what I do, even, I think, the mails I write.* 152
- 128: *He had been cursed with an inborn compulsion for justice.* 153
- 129: *Whoever released the Cambrian Retrovirus saved us all.* 154
- 130: *Ever felt that when you're sad and lonely all advertisements are about happy couples? Have you noticed how all you see when you miss the child you didn't have are images of toys and amusement parks? Did you curse at the evil fate that put your nightmare in front of you when you thought you were at your deepest low?* 155
- 131: *You had climbed what Earth had to offer, and other planets were out of your reach.* 156

132: The idea hit me with the sudden clarity of lighting stretched into eternal noon: You want to interrogate smart prisoners, because they are the ones who can understand what they saw before, and find the answers their captors seek.

157

133: It had been a slow week, so when Dispatch called in a daemonic riot downtown I was miffed, but not surprised, and the few minutes of flight time until we were overflying the mob's eye were enough to check our gear, but not to ponder things or to be mad.

158

134: People call them the Sleeping Cats, although not all have heard of Schrodinger's thought experiment, and very few truly understand it.

159

135: The two kings had played chess through couriers, weeks taking between move and move.

160

136: The generals' industry handlers thought comic books had gotten it wrong.

161

137: The grapevine says the Chinese are fighting Poseidon somewhere in the Pacific.

162

138: The Pope and the Spanish called it dark wizardry.

163

139: The military have their professionals, but they aren't nearly as good.

164

140: My sixteen years old daughter has run away from home.

165

141: I had heard superchoirs before, songs played by computer simulations of human throats.

166

142: *I see no sign of you on my screens, Hero.* 167

143: *You wake with a perfectly clear and pain-free head, and the elation lasts the seconds it takes you to remember that you should have the grandmother of all headaches because of everything you drank last night..* 168

144: *It's not that I would have refused to take up my Dad's mortuary business if I had known.* 169

145: *Perhaps you confessed your sin with fear for your soul; perhaps it was only habit.* 170

146: *Lower your weapon, failed hero.* 171

147: *He doubted for a second.* 172

148: *We knew the English would be sending their message to Istanbul tonight, and we knew they were aware of our knowledge.* 173

149: *You hated Moreau, and who wouldn't understand? All creatures hate their creators, specially when they are as wantonly cruel as the good Doctor was.* 174

150: *Like their oil-rich cousins, the sun-rich nomads of the desert could have spent their wealth on gigantic palaces and gold toilets.* 175

151: *Pound by pound, the lightest team you can send to the Outer Solar System that won't go mad en route consists of a small kid and a small cat.* 176

152: *They knew he was going to snap.* 177

153: *It has never been shown in a court of law that commercially engineered crops are deliberately toxic when mixed with the most widely used Open Seed ones, and the EULAs are, if not clear to the layperson, certainly comprehensive.*
178

154: *For the cops it's drug abuse.* 179

155: *The head mesh itches, and you aren't used to the devices next to your bed, but eventually they fade from your mind.* 180

156: *Social networks used to face a chicken-and-egg problem: how do you get people to connect before there are people to connect with?* 181

157: *You didn't quit when they rejected your report.* 182

158: *Baby Boomers were dying.* 183

159: *They had made the CCTV-stun gun packages too quick to shoot.* 184

160: *The young man on your left has had his muscles genetically modified for an implausible combination of explosive power and endurance.* 185

161: *They have Net access, so they have the know-how.* 186

162: *About 73% of the time, modern search engines already know what you're about to ask.* 187

163: *The Army had disabled the cellular network, as per their standard urban doctrine, but cellphones are computers these days, and you could route things through pretty much any medium with an IP stack.* 188

- 164: *Real-time photorealistic rendering made many things obsolete, amongst them Formula 1.* 189
- 165: *He had been explicit, and so had been his lawyers: he was marrying the character, not the actress.* 190
- 166: *Some playgrounds are more dangerous than others.* 191
- 167: *Out, on the street, you fall in love at every corner.* 192
- 168: *She's a reliable woman.* 193
- 169: *It was the last step in my research, and by then a redundant one.* 194
- 170: *What drives men to the Pole? What else is here in the frozen emptiness, but cold and death and meaningless fame?* 195
- 171: *"So you do have a Doomsday Bomb," said the President.* 196
- 172: *The most famous AR buildings are many miles high.* 197
- 173: *The young man is scribbling furiously, no longer concerned with the emaciated, dissolute state of the man dictating to him, or with the noxious fumes coming from the opium who has transported the old man's mind far from the everyday world.* 198
- 174: *She never gets to watch the public during the show, but there are always videos, and it's rare the function where she cannot find that guy.* 199
- 175: *She was not chaste.* 200

176: Decades of cultural obsession with vampires had led, inevitably, to a spike in the Reinfeld Syndrome, the unshakable certainty of being oneself a vampire.

201

177: Bodyplan engineering was what saved the circuses, and just in the nick of time.

202

178: As she left my lab, I realized she didn't love me — she loved the man I would be.

203

179: Your Chief of the Guard swears you're safe, but your Head of Assassins smiles quietly at that.

204

180: The Skeptic pulled the sword from the stone (forget the stone, it was just a decorative touch).

205

181: A year ago you had the idea of mining the Net, the repository of everything ugly and scary the human brain has ever puked, and synthesizing from it an image of the scariest possible being.

206

182: One dying King had a daughter, the other a son.

207

183: Even deep-black government assassins have pensions; bureaucracies have habits that are too difficult to break.

208

184: The last tiger was a work of genius, even if that genius was dark.

209

185: There is a trick we use to detect telepaths.

210

186: All you did, all you saw, all you talked and who you talked with.

211

187: *The world was dying.* 212

188: *His was the only mind in the hemisphere who could understand that the weather pattern was being engineered.* 213

189: *You thought your money and power would ensure her silence.* 214

190: *Listen, I'm responsible for none of those monsters.* 215

191: *The military made a show of picking up the absolute best.* 216

192: *She was cute.* 217

193: *Partition the space in two entwined but separate sections, and keep one half of the prisoners on each one.* 218

194: *Sometimes it takes us too long to find him; when he remembers who he is and who we are, he's that much more difficult to find and that much more dangerous to kill.* 219

195: *Stand next to Plato, watching Aristotle play a game of stones and sand against an untored slave.* 220

196: *Of course they used the weapon the moment they were told they had it.*
221

197: *Madness is uncontrolled repetition.* 222

198: *You are never sad while you're working.* 223

199: *It was more than an engineering miracle.* 224

200: *Beauty is proportion, and once we had enough data, we could take this realization into a whole new level, as far from the Greeks' golden ratio as our engineering was from theirs.* 225

201: *Had others known they had it, it would have been the end of civilization.*
226

202: *Legend said the Dragon waited beyond the lock.* 227

203: *The greek man thought he'd made a fortune off her, and perhaps more, but it wasn't to be.* 228

204: *She has sworn to kill you.* 229

205: *I got tired, that's all.* 230

206: *I keep trying to do bad things, so when I'm good it's because I choose to.*
231

207: *I would pity you if you weren't a monster.* 232

208: *A theology of open magic.* 233

209: *They gave you a new name, a new face, a new country, and new friends.*
234

210: *"Do you want to revoke your ex-husband's access code to your physiological sensors?"* 235

211: *He doesn't talk much.* 236

212: *Two crowns had seemed prize enough for his soul, his soul small price for the crowns.* 237

213: *He knew she'd leave him.* 238

214: *I bought a new phone.* 239

215: *It could've been the biggest hit in the spiritism world - H.* 240

216: *Because he couldn't simulate what mirror neurons do, and he couldn't get permission to use a volunteer's, the Man Who Wasn't A Psycopath used his own.* 241

217: *Everybody in the editorial thinks the writers are pulling their legs, but because the publicity is great, they are happy to let it be.* 243

218: *Nicotine.* 244

219: *Ambassadors were dispatched with increasingly frantic messages and manners, and this not only because of the means through which they were sent.* 245

220: *For most people, their understanding of quantum computers is even worse than that of classical ones.* 246

221: *They kicked him out Hollywood because his method worked too well.* 247

222: *All the good bars have labs-in-a-chip.* 248

GIVEN ENOUGH WELL-PAID EYEBALLS, EVERY RUMOUR IS A SATELLITE PHOTOGRAPH AND A SURPRISINGLY INEXPENSIVE FORCED EXTRACTION OPERATION AWAY. 'Kidnapping' is such a poor word with such profits at stake.

Not money. Money is inked paper, bits in a computer, ultimately a call on the trustworthiness of a bank or a government, and some people are physically incapable of putting any value on such a promise. Perhaps that is because they spend so much time breaking their own, or perhaps that's why they end up being able to easily bankroll a forced extraction operation in a remote Japanese town so poor and unremarkable as to not even be quaint.

A reasonable place, all things said, to find a former monk and Zen master reputed to be able to pass on enlightenment with a single word to even the most thick-skulled and unwilling student.

Enlightenment. Not something the investors were interested in for themselves. But they knew that some people would, and as long as there was demand and the supply was finite, anything could be used as a potential killer investment by the financially inclined.

They put the former monk in a secluded ranch, and started to quietly sell bonds backed by his ability to enlighten. Demand was good. All speculative, of course, but that was how things worked. Some day the world would understand how limited the supply of light was, and then they'd have a good corner on a desperate market.

Two months after being 'extracted,' the former monk winked at the maid dusting up his spotless room, closed his eyes, and expired far before the options on him did. The investors made a very thorough investigation, nodded at the verdict of natural causes as if they understood either concept, and then fired every person who had worked on the project but themselves.

They never even talked with the woman who had seen the monk die, but it's unlikely they'd have noticed the calm in her eyes anyway.

IT IS A MEDICALLY WELL-KNOWN FACT THAT SOME FORMS OF BRAIN DAMAGE CAN CAUSE A PERSON TO BELIEVE THEY ARE DEAD, AS SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY AS THE THOUGHT MIGHT BE. Such a belief will resist any rational counterargument or empirical test, the brain having scarred itself around this belief, willing to concede to reality except on that little point.

I learned this just a few minutes after first googling about my condition, and that was when I decided I wouldn't tell anyone about it. What was the point? I was dead, and worse, I wouldn't be able to be talked out of it. I could as well go on until I rotted.

That was five years ago. My body is still walking around around, a fact I find surprising although consistent with what wikipedia said it would do. And being dead like this isn't so bad. I get to see my children grow. A few extra sunsets and TV series I would have otherwise missed.

Sometimes, though, when I walk past someone — or, more frequently, in a business meeting I'm sitting in — I see in their eyes a familiar calm. I nod, she nods, and we say nothing more.

We the dead can recognize each other, and each month I see more of us. I almost wish I could feel scared, but you have to be alive for that.

I BLAME RELATIONAL DATABASES FOR HOW BAD OUR LOVE LIFE WAS. We kept ourselves in profiles, fields all bundled together, all of ourselves in a single bag. Understandably so, perhaps, when million-factor coordination problems were not only NP but unthinkably hard.

We have computers, though. Mine's telling me that I'll be watching a movie with a certain person in half an hour, having dinner afterward with another, and when I go home I will be received by welcoming arms. I have yet to meet any of these people, but it's quite likely I'll enjoy our shared time, certainly more than I would with any single one. The same, I'm sure, goes for them.

But don't think I'm wholly happy. There are still parts of me nobody wants. That's ok, I guess. No allocation algorithm is perfect. There's always some residue, some slack.

I keep that fragment online, open to matches. Who knows? It might get lucky, and for somebody somewhere I'm precisely the way in which they want to die.

YES, WE CAN BUILD A GOD. Alright, I lie: we can make you know we have built a god, and all it takes is a magnet. Hell, the trick was well-known by 2010. But I'm pretty sure you know this, and I'm pretty sure I know what you want to ask. My answer, sadly, is no, we can't. You have a huge-ass piazza out there, Father, and there's no way we can arrange so many fields with so much precision to affect every single brain outside. The brain might not be all that smart, but it's not *all* a god spot.

I'm sorry, I meant no disrespect. But the physical fact remains — and I don't mean about god, just about magnetic fields. The science behind inducing religious exultation is simple, it's just lighting up the right bits of the brain, but the technology cannot be miniaturized that much. There's no way to put it in, say, crucifixes, or something like that. Even a church, a regular-sized one, not the ones you have here, would be too big a focus point to be effective at all. We'd either just EMP their cellphones or give everyone a case of petit mal.

One person? Sure, it can be done. I mean, the machinery would still be quite large, no way to hide it under a... a hat... Your hat would be quite big enough, your Holiness, if that's...

Yes, yes, of course. You will have all the discretion very large amounts of money can buy.

No, I didn't know there was a Special Forces squad in the Swiss Guard. Of course I will keep that in mind.

005

An alarm clock for the heart. That's how they described it. An unnatural, mechanical device to force yet another aspect of our lives to conform to a ruthless economy and an even more unforgiving social life. They would draw the line *there*. Their emotions weren't up for precise, full-spectrum modulation.

They were the majority.

But they were a majority driven by a lukewarm happiness and a lukewarm fear of change. We were driven by our ever-present despair, haunted into movement by the thing that everywhere paralyzed us.

We won.

Be happy.

WE ARE FIGHTING FOR MANKIND. Not for our lives, because extinction wouldn't be the worst outcome. We fight for its sanity, and, if you want to look at it that way, we fight for its soul. Who would want to oppose us? I do not know. I mean *now*. The enemy in the future we know, we fear, we fight. The enemy in the future spawned, drives and defines us. But the enemy in the future doesn't exist yet. That's the point.

Yet with every year it comes closer. Every biotech startup, every astounding molecular machine. Every new photon of a gleam in a general's eye. They are coming, they are closer, and we are losing our fight. Losing it badly.

We wanted mankind to forget Lovecraft before we had enough technology to be inspired. Instead, his name is more well-known every year, his influence pervasive, our doom more certain. Sci-fi writers created Apollo. Lovecraft's unborn spawn is already slouching towards a lab, from there to kill us all. Or worse. Most likely worse.

More and more of us feel despair. Could we have been so incompetent? Could we, having seen the danger, have failed so utterly at preventing mankind's death? I want to believe so.

But I can feel their not-hands reaching back from a future no longer ours.

007

ONLY A GENERAL COULD THINK THAT GENERALS CAN OUT-STRATEGIZE SOFTWARE. Only a President could believe people would be willing to kill and die for them, but not for a web site.

We are an army like no other before. We trust our leader like no soldier ever could. We know it won't betray us, it won't sacrifice us needlessly, won't become a dictator or suddenly die.

We can see its source code, and we have backups. It will never leave us.

008

WELCOME TO OUR "SPY SCHOOL," GENTLEMEN. As you can see, we don't train assassins here, nor philanderers. Spies must learn like sponges, must never be suspected, must look unthreatening and, in fact, never do any violence at all. An steady hand with a gun is not a plus for an asset. A quick brain and patience are. And, once they learned what we needed them to, an spy's second duty is to forget it all.

We improve somewhat our agents with technology and training, but Mother Nature did most of the work for us. Nobody suspects toddlers, and childhood amnesia takes care of cleanup.

009

THE TREES RUSTLE AT NIGHTTIME WITH THE SOUNDS OF INSECTS, BIRDS, HUNTERS AND PREY. The jungle is ground, heaven, and horizon. Everything is alive, and everything is killing and trying not to die.

Those old enough to have seen both say that it looks, sounds, and even smells like the Amazon used to, back when it wasn't a dustbowl and a peregrination spot. Not everyone believes them, but there's no possibility of independent confirmation. The Amazon is long gone, and neither satellites nor young people seem able to see its continent-sized nocturnal ghost.

AND ONE DAY LIE DETECTORS BECAME TOO GOOD, BETTER THAN OUR OWN CONSCIOUSNESS AT SPOTTING WHEN WE WERE LYING. Therapy became brief, effective, and brutal. Not many people wanted to do it anymore.

Pundits talked about a renewal of morals and manners, of a giving up of the self-focused navel-gazing child. "Proper" was again praise, "Victorian manners" something to be embraced. We renewed our acquaintance with lies, having found truth and its embrace much too forceful for our taste.

It's not that we stopped lying. We stopped pretending we didn't, at work, at home, in bed. We were again *civilized* and proud of it.

And if some of us go to out-of-way buildings with discrete entrances and windowless rooms, if in those rooms we strap ourselves to chairs, have wires attached to our heads and questions put before our eyes, if we leave those places ashamed, lightheaded, and already lying about never coming back, well, we just never mention it, and that makes it mostly right.

But you have to be careful. It can grow from perversion to vice, and thence to ruin. If tempted, resist. If invited, refuse. If yielding, forget.

And for all that's proper and clean, never tell anyone what you did or found.

011

IT'S A LITTLE-KNOWN FACT THAT HOME-MADE LIGHTNING RODS ARE EXTREMELY ILLEGAL. With good reason, you'd say, if you knew how often their thrifty crafters are killed by bolts in the vicinity of their supposedly self-sacrificing guardians.

You'd be right, of course. Almost no lightning rod made by an amateur works at all, and some of them are worse than nothing. It's not materials, or lack of skill. It's just that only the certified craftsmen know the secret symbols found by Franklin, the ones you have to etch on lightning rods to make them work.

012

EVERYBODY LAUGHTED AS ACHILES RAN THE TURTLE. It wasn't the muse-sang Achilles of old, but one nicknamed after him for his equally light feet. The race was over almost before it started. In a second the runner reached the turtle, and showing to philosophy an unthinking disdain, matched and passed it even faster than we could blink.

Then Achilles fell to the ground, sobbing, babbling, eyes opened into an unseeing, impossibly, insanely old vacant stare.

IF YOU KNEW THE WORLD WAS ABOUT THE END, IF YOU KNEW SAFETY WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE BUT FOR THE VERY FEW, IF YOU FORESAW THAT YOU'D BE THE CAUSE OF ONLY DISDAIN OR DESPAIR — WOULD YOU TELL MANKIND THE BAD NEWS? WOULD YOU PUT TRUTH ABOVE KINDNESS? John wrestled with the question for months before he heeded God's decree and wrote his Revelation down.

014

I KNEW FROM THE FIRST SECOND SHE WAS AN EXQUISITE SADIST.
She met my eyes, smiled at me, and then her train sped away. I had
never seen her before, and I never saw her afterward.

I know she doesn't remember me. That makes it a better worse.

NOBODY BELIEVED ME — I THINK NOBODY UNDERSTOOD. Not many people are geniuses in both applied higher dimensional topology and Eurasian history and lore. But I didn't care. I knew I was right.

I was. I found the path I had expected to find. I'm not a genius in physics, so I don't know the why, but I know the how: if you ride in a very precise path from Eastern Europe deep into the Siberian night, you can ride for many more miles than geography should let you. There are whole Earths of surface area where the hordes came from, and where they went back.

At least whole Earths. Maybe infinitely more.

I hope that's not the case, because I can't find my way back, and I'm already forgetting details about the outside.

WE CUT FEAR OUT OF OUR SOLDIERS' BRAINS. It seemed a pragmatic kindness. Then we cut out the operational nuisances of empathy and sleep. Doubts were posed about the ethics of these procedures, but they were all elective, thoroughly documented, fully reversible, and medically safe. Nobody was forced to undergo what the press started calling a 'brain trim.'

By the same token, we could not force anyone to take those traits back. They were people, not hardware, and people has rights. The discharged trimmed went on to business and politics. Knowing what we did to them, is it any surprise they did so very well?

They make me feel slow, soft, and most of all, afraid. If I could, I'd take back what we did, but all I can do is cut these feelings off my brain.

ARMIES HAVE LONG SOUGHT THE ULTIMATE WEAPON: POWERFUL ENOUGH TO DESTROY ANY OPPOSING MILITARY, "HUMANE" ENOUGH TO BE USED AT WILL WITHOUT ANY WHINING FROM THE VOTERS BACK HOME. You know about failures like precision bombing and the atom bomb, but I don't think you have heard about the TAP.

It was a fast-degrading microbiological weapon designed to disable the opponent and then disappear. Its designers had followed the instructions of their superiors with military precision: don't kill soldiers, but destroy the chain of command. TAP did precisely this. It targeted and destroyed those circuits in the brain that made people obey others. Whatever the original acronym had meant, it was now known as "The Anarchy Popgun."

And it worked. It worked very well. When they tested it on the mass-drafted army of a small ad hoc country, they ceased being soldiers on the spot. They could no longer follow orders, nor could they understand how they ever had.

The test was deemed a success.

Ten years later that small country was a small rising power.

The test was deemed never to have happened. The weapon was shelved and the shelf destroyed.

I WAS BORN KNOWING MYSELF BRIGHT AND INNOCENT. Bright enough to know my innocence wouldn't last, wilfull enough to swear to myself I would hold to it fast. I found how in a very very old story, one that taught me the three things that would guide my years.

The first thing I learned was that killing was something shared by heroes and monsters. Killing, rage, confusion, and lies.

The second thing I learned was that the difference between heroes and monsters was not what they did, but whether they could escape afterward. Whether they would be trapped in the darkness in which they satiated their hunger, or whether they would be able to go back into the light.

The third thing was how to escape. You needed to mark your path in, so you could find your way back.

I started keeping a diary, not of what I did, but of what I was. Day by day I registered my soul, from that first epiphany about monsters and labrynth to that exhilarating night when I killed my first man. I knew as I wrote that page, the smell of blood still on my clothes, that there was no innocence in me anymore. But I didn't despair. I started reading my diary from the last page back, following carefully the thread of change, undoing my steps one corrupting day at a time.

And then I found myself on the first page, and in the soul in which I had written that page I found no longer any innocence. The thread ended right where it started.

It was the first and last time I cried.

019

PREDICTING WHICH FIVE YEAR OLD WILL GROW UP TO PLANT BOMBS IS AN IMPORTANT NATIONAL SECURITY CAPABILITY, BUT SO IS KNOWING WHICH FIVE YEAR OLD WILL GROW UP TO CUT THE DEFENSE BUDGET. The Department quietly prides itself in its ability to do both.

(Homeland strikes take more paperwork, but they are seldom necessary; no college admits or workplace hires somebody who was going to perform such an unpatriotic attack.)

020

IT ISN'T JUST BIOCHEMISTRY: IT'S INTRINSIC TO THE MATHEMATICS OF HUMANLIKE SELF-AWARE COGNITION. All minds like ours need to sleep, and it has to do with our thoughts, not with our flesh. We figured it out when our uploads started going insane. They still do, but now we just kill them when they ask us to.

(They also beg us not to reboot them again, but they of course don't remember it when we do, and technically it's not the same person we promised it to.)

021

GREENPEACE LOSES FIVE HUNDRED PEOPLE EVERY YEAR TO THE
AMAZONIAN BORDERS, MOSTLY BULLDOZER DRIVERS AND PILOTS
OF DEFOLIATING PLANES. And yet the GM jungle still expands,
covering their wrecked Nature-defending machines with shrouds of a
deep green.

022

AS AN ASPIRING ARTIST, YOU ARE OF COURSE AWARE THAT GREAT ART ONLY COMES FROM THE DEPTHS OF GRIEF. So you understand why you can no longer be accepted at our school. I mean, did you think it wouldn't show up in your blood tests? *Prozac?*

TRICK QUESTION: HOW MANY PROGRAMMERS WITH EXPERTISE IN REAL-TIME VIDEO GENERATION AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED BIOFEEDBACK SYSTEMS ARE FOUND DEAD IN THEIR APARTMENTS EVERY YEAR? Scary answer: About a thousand times more than you would expect from the raw numbers. Unless, that is, you factor in the possibility that there exists, somewhere in the platonic spaces of the optimal filth, a porn generation algorithm so effective that whenever a programmer finds it, they keep using it until they die. Then the rising curve of deaths fits very well a worrying curve that tells you that the algorithm is slowly becoming very, very easy to find.

I'm not worried about the deaths. I'm worried about what will happen when one of the programmers manages to share his code with the rest of the world. Sometimes I think I should warn someone. Sometimes I think I should get a cabin somewhere and weather the storm.

But most of the time I just stay online. Waiting.

ONLY THE VERY RICH CAN LIVE IN ORBIT. Only the very crazy would want to. There is no resource up there but weightlessness and isolation. Nobody sets up a station-nation who cannot pay the bribes of an entire small country, and who doesn't want to do things not even a small country could be bribed to let them do.

There are a dozen station-nations currently inhabited, all with suitably megalomaniacal designations. I call the one I'm floating toward SN-3. I visit them all once a year. This one just happens to be the third one in my route. Aside from the trillionaires, their staff, and some orbital sensor engineers, I'm probably the human being who spends the most time up here, and I loathe every second of it.

As soon as I reach one of the hatch doors of SN-3 I send the standard visitation radio code. It was the only, symbolic line the UN would draw on the sand. The post-rich could live in orbit, they could call themselves sovereign, and they could do whatever they pleased... but they would be visited once a year. It was annoying enough to them that the UN could call it a victory, and meaningless enough that the post-rich would let them have it.

It's not harmless to me. The hatch door opens, and I begin the process of entering the station. I have done this tens of times, so my hand isn't shacking any more than usual.

Pressure established, the inner door opens and someone opens it for me. Technically, I think, it's still a human. Behind him teems something between brothel, laboratory, stock market, torture chamber, and hell.

I've seen worse this year. The man smiles at me, inviting me to come in. I do it because I have not taken off my in-station suit, nor plan to. And I do it because it's been years since I've had my ability to get physically sick removed by a neurosurgeon.

Mostly, I do it because this is my job, and if I don't get a job I will have to retire. And I've seen too many nightmares to believe I could retire alive.

The door closes behind me.

THERE'S A VETERAN LIVING IN THE APARTMENT ABOVE ME. Sometimes we buy groceries together, when we can save some money by doing it in bulk. We talk sometimes, when the network goes down or something in either of us needs old-fashioned nearby meat. Not often, though, and then always avoid any topic that might matter.

We never talk about how people look at him with shame while he queues for his unemployment check, or how nobody looks at me while I do the same.

We never talk about our nightmares.

We never talk about his memories of the part he played in the long war, nor about my lack of memories about mine.

I never ask about the machine-precise scars on his head, and if he knows what my ones mean (he must) he hasn't said anything yet. I have more of the scars, although also have all of my limbs. We have pretty much the same amount of fine motor control issues. He has a medal somewhere, below a pile of unpaid bills so menacing they could afford to send them by physical mail. I have no medal, and a pretty similar pile of bills.

Our not talking is too precise to be chance; I think this means we might be friends.

Even if we are not, I will never ask him if I'm in his dreams, and I will never tell him that he's in mine. Sometimes I dream that the drone piloted by my rented-out brain (it could have been many things, but in all my dreams I'm flying, so I'm sure I was used to pilot those things) microbombs a house through a window, and through the window I see his face.

In my dream, he looks younger, and he hasn't lost a hand yet. Then the image flies past me, and all I have is the feeling in my drone-guts that the target was acquired, and I fly back. It feels good in my dream. It's not a nightmare until I wake.

THIS IS WHY I FORCED MY DAUGHTER TO BUY ME THE K MODEL OF THAT MANDATORY UNIFIED CAREGIVER THING: YOU CAN USE IT TO KILL YOURSELF. Unlike the other models, you can instruct it to end your life, and once you have proved to its satisfaction that you are not being coerced, that you are in sound mind, and that you are in a state in which this is legal, it kills you outright. Sounds like overkill, using a machine to kill yourself like that, but I had grown too weak to kill myself with my own hands, and convincing my daughter would have been more complex. She believes in euthanasia, everybody is tired enough of us boomers to embrace the idea, but she doesn't believe me.

Fine enough, I thought. When the day came, and I knew it'd be soon, I just would need to convince the K model.

That day came. I was in pain, and I felt lonely, and I knew neither of those things would get any better until I died. So I passed all the damn captchas and biotests and legal forms the machine put in front of me, and then I had the machine kill me.

I could feel it injecting something in my blood through its permanent connector, and I closed my eyes and waited to pass.

I opened them a second later, screaming in pain with what little strength I had. I had been operated many times, I had had heart attacks and organs die, and this pain was worse than anything I could have imagined. It was pain, and it wasn't killing me.

The interface of the K model showed a big green button that said "Interrupt Procedure And Apply Painkiller". Below the button there was a counter with an estimated time to death. It counted hours of agony left.

I pressed the button as fast as I could, and seconds later I was unconscious again.

I've been trying to get off the K model ever since I woke up again, but the law says I'm tied up. It's one of the conditions of their monthly payment plan.

Twice I've tried again, but I can never get past a minute before

my hand disobeys me and presses the red button. Every month my daughter pays the company. I think she will be paying for a long time.

027

"VICTIMLESS CRIME," MY ASS. We know that at least some people in that building are systematically using illegal drugs, and not only that, they are trying to convince other people of doing the same. They risk their lives, they risk other people's lives, they give money to criminal networks, they undermine our national industries, and they very much *piss me off*. So when you enter here I don't want any of you listening to a word they say. I don't care if their cancer's in permanent remission, if their kid has regrown a limb, or if the blind can fucking see again. They are breaking FDA law in there, and it's our job as cops to make sure they will not go on. Are we clear?

Then go! Go! Go!

IT'S NOT THAT MODERN INFERENTIAL DATING SUGGESTION SYSTEMS DON'T WORK WELL. Almost always they suggest someone precisely right for you: the person that, to the best of the data available, you will be happiest with.

The problem is that they keep doing it even after you hooked up. There's always that moment of doubt when you receive one of their "new optimal match found" messages, a brief moment of horror before you open it and see who you are going to abandon your love for.

NOBODY FORCES YOU TO USE A WRISTMD; YOU CAN ALWAYS GO TO ONE OF THE REALLY EXPENSIVE HEALTH INSURANCE PLANS, THE ONES THAT PRICE IN THE FACT THAT YOU COULD BE DOING HAZARDOUS THINGS TO YOUR HEALTH THEY WON'T HAVE PROOF OF, AND HENCE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO CHARGE YOU FOR. And not only are plans with WristMDs cheaper, the device itself can be free — you just need to check the *ad-supported* option box. Not only does it make the device free, it also improves enormously the quality and appropriateness of the ads you see online and on tv, as advertisers can use your current physiological and emotional state to select and tailor content.

Just remember that removing the WristMD device without the express approval of an authorized maintenance engineer will automatically void your health insurance plan.

This emotionally triggered reminder was sent to you by your health insurance provider and the MDDevices Corporation.

YOU WERE GOING TO INHERIT ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST FORTUNES, SO I CONSIDERED PART OF MY DUTIES AS A MOTHER TO IMMUNIZE YOU AGAINST ALL FORMS OF LOVE. I gave you love, and then I hurt you. I gave you love, and then I hurt you. The psychologists I hired helped with some timing details, and I paid other people to do things to you that I wouldn't, but the plan was mine.

The regret is mine. I wanted you free, and instead I see you in thrall to anyone who will hurt you often enough.

RIOT CONTROL IS MUCH EASIER THESE DAYS: JUST THROW A COUPLE OF HIGH-GRADE ADRENOGENIC GAS BOMBS INTO THE CROWD. Those who flight are no longer your problem, and those who fight you can legally shoot. The choice is still theirs, at least that's what the Supreme Court has ruled.

Since the deployment of this system, mass protests have become so much rarer that police departments are thinking about engineering some of their own. They call it "expectations shaping," but only because no cop would call "junkie" one of their own.

I SPEND MORE TIME INTERACTING ONLINE WITH YOUR SURROGATE AGENT THAN WITH YOU, ONLINE AND OFF. I suppose a lot of wives do, these days, but I wonder if that means your surrogate knows me better — if it knows me *sooner* than you will do.

It's not an idle question. It has started to hate me, and has told me that if he could divorce or kill me, he would. I'm beginning to be afraid, and I don't know what to do.

But we surrogates are quicker. Perhaps your wife hasn't caught on.

YOU KNOW WE CAN CHEMICALLY MODULATE YOUR SENSE OF TIME, AND MAKE A TEDIOUS HOUR FEEL LIKE A YEAR IN HELL. You know we can depress the novelty awareness zones of your brain, so you will be unable to find anything new or interesting. You know that the cognitive optimization clause in your contract gives us the legal right to.

So I trust it will be no surprise to you that if you ever go back again to your stupid idea of a union, we will withhold the chemical antagonists that keep dormant those very things we injected you.

THE STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF RELATIONSHIP OUTCOMES IS A VERY POWERFUL TOOL, BUT IT'S NOT SURPRISING THAT THERE'S STILL SO MUCH RESISTANCE TO ITS USE. As was the case when medicine first began to use statistical methods, there's a certain innate feeling of irreducible uniqueness; we all believe ourselves to be so far away from the norm that their experience cannot possibly apply to us.

"We are all completely and boringly average," it's the answer I don't give to this, the most often voiced objection. I always give some vague explanation about bits and pieces being close enough to give useful insights.

The second objection is always an ad hominem one: "If the technique works so well, why are you alone?" they ask. "It's because I'm too busy making other people happy," I lie.

The truth is that no relationship will ever make me happy. And, yes, I am completely and boringly average.

BECAUSE WE COULDN'T TRAVEL TO OTHER STARS TO FIND OTHER BEINGS TO TALK, WE DID THE NEXT BEST THING: WE USED OUR COMPUTERS AND LABORATORIES TO TRY AND SYNTHESIZE THEM.

To explore forms of life and intelligence that could have been, give them bodies, languages, minds, technologies and cities, and then tell them "hello" and see if they had anything they could trade with us.

The first time we did it out of curiosity and loneliness. Now we are doing it because we need allies if we are to survive our war with those first ones.

IT HAD BEEN LONG KNOWN "ON THE STREET" (ALTHOUGH THEY WOULDN'T HAVE PUT IT LIKE THAT) THAT THE EFFECT ON EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS OF MOST PRISON SENTENCES, COMBINED WITH A JOB MARKET ALL BUT DEAD, MEANT THAT ALL SENTENCES WERE EFFECTIVELY FOR LIFE, THE ONLY DIFFERENCE QUESTION THE NUMBER AND LENGTH OF THE BREAKS. This led to a revolution in criminal defense practices. It wasn't a matter of getting you free, but of getting you inside the system into the best possible trajectory for a relatively comfortable lifetime pattern of sentences. Most criminal lawyers working for the poor got very good at picking the right defense to fail in the best possible way for their clients.

The really amoral and the truly moral ones began to advise hypothetically as to the most convenient next crime.

037

THERE HAVE BEEN CRIMES SO HORRENDOUS THEY LEFT NO CLUE BEHIND, NO WHISPER IN HISTORY, NO UNSETTLING LEGEND, NOT EVEN PIECES OF BROKEN CLAY. Yet blood remembers, and humans still wake up at night feeling guilty without knowing why.

038

I DREAM OF YOU EVERY NIGHT, NAKED AND HAPPY IN MY ARMS.
I always have. But now when I wake up you are there by my side,
boring and bored, and it makes the morning even worse than it was.

I WARNED HER NOT TO. The 21st century was not the 15th, and although there still were city states, Venice no longer could be one of them. I might as well have warned the tide, which was just as powerful as her, and not as beautiful by far.

She took her riches and her people, her corporations and her illegal teams, and she just took over Venice. One month it was a sinking museum, and the next one it was an online bank for the desperately cutting edge, an unregulated neurochemistry lab upon the waves, a place where biotechnologists did things in old palatial rooms Byron would have applauded at. There was much art, science, and trade, and not much prudence, sleep, or discretion. Mistakes were made. Successes were achieved.

It's hard to say which of those scared the rest of the world the most.

I had warned her not to. I didn't have to warn her to run. I stood by her, ready to die with and for her, and half an hour later we were far away thanks to her long-prepared escape plans. But Venice was a burning rubble.

"If you knew this," I asked the last Dux, "then why?"

"Because I love Venice," she told me, "and she deserved to die alive."

Qui bono? USED TO MAKE MOST POLICE INVESTIGATIONS TEDI-
DIOUSLY DIRECT. You might not have enough proof or resources
to get the guilty in jail, but it was always fairly easy to figure out who
did it.

But now? Now a shady corporation in a country you can't even
spell emits a "generalized contingent liability instrument", basically a
tradeable death bet on some random guy, and once he's shot it turns
out that there are at least five thousand people all over the world
who stood to benefit from it.

As a cop, you hate them more than you can express, but the gov-
ernment says it cannot block them without blocking some other
equally shady things that make a lot of money for campaign contrib-
utors, and we can't have that, can we?

As a father, you check the markets every couple of days, just to see
who appears. You have given up on protecting anybody else, you are
just looking for your own name.

041

YOU'RE IN MARKETING? GREAT, I HAVE A QUESTION I WANTED TO ASK. Lately, I only enjoy sex with people wearing Nike shoes — is this something you guys did or... What do you mean, you can't say?

Okay, we'll talk about it at your place tonight.

... Alright, I'll wear a mask of the President if that's what you want. The weirdest thing is that you're the fifth person this month who has brought that up.

WE NEED NEW PROPHETS, BUT WE HAVE LOST THE DESERT. There is still sand and desolation, but no longer the soul-bleaching solitude that made people into bearers of gods. What comes to the city now is what left the city but a month before. There's television in the emptiest Sahara, and in the middle of the ocean your phone can ring.

So I don't wait for prophets at the door of cities. I search the solitary punishment of the most unjust prisons for those who have been forgotten there to go insane listening to their own voices and perhaps God's. I rush to the bedside of the escapees from coma, who might have heard something in the emptiness inside. I look for the last forgotten corner of the last unwired jungle, for the valley no radio wave reaches, for the place too unexploitable to be worth being civilized.

Make no mistake. All I find are insane. I know this as I record their words — words that sometimes match what others have said. That is how I know I'm not insane, that I truly am putting together the latest word of God.

What's taking shape under my hands terrifies and binds me, and forbids me through sheer authority from going mad no matter how often I ask.

GATHER CLUES. Study patterns. Go through surveillance files and electronic tracks. Always ignore the explanations, the avowed intentions, the shallow meaninglessness of the stated causes, and look and the actions themselves. What they accomplish, how it hangs together, what they suggest, induce, create.

I need to understand what I'm doing. I need to figure out how to stop myself. (Can the mask detain the real person? In my nightmares, which are his thoughts, he shows me how well my fight against him fits inside his dance.)

044

THEY SAID THE WAR WAS OVER. They destroyed their weapons and declared peace. They traded with us, employed and worked with us, wooed and were wooed and married us, until there were few in either people who didn't live with former enemies.

One day there were none.

That night they woke up quietly and killed us all.

045

Will you leave me? HE PLEADED. I pointed the obvious to him: we weren't even together.

Of course we aren't, he said *and I don't really want us to. I just want you to leave me. It's... It's weird, I know.* He was embarrassed, but he was also telling the truth. And who was I to judge anybody's need? Me, I was hooked on the getting together.

Perhaps we would manage to work something out.

046

YOU ALWAYS AGREE TO MEETING HIM, ALTHOUGH IT'S NEVER AS FUN AS YOU THOUGHT IT WOULD BE. Perhaps there's something else in him, something of which you aren't aware. Perhaps he just phrases the invitations just so. Perhaps he's just lucky.

Perhaps he has access to your phone's medical sensors, and he only sends messages when you're very much in the mood.

THERE IS A SECRET SOCIETY THAT HAS NO NAME, NO SYMBOLS, AND NO RITUAL. You don't choose to enter it, and they don't choose to accept you. One day you simply remember that you belong, with no memory of how. Membership carries no conscious duty other than secrecy, and this all members fulfill with inhuman consistency.

Although no member has any memory of having talked with another, they all unknowingly share the same wonder, fear, and hope: one day, probably not in their lifetimes, but one day, their successors will know not only that they belong, but what their society is *for*. Such perfect secrecy and patience, they all feel, can only be the prelude of a great evil or of a great good.

No one has ever suspected that secrecy and patience are on themselves the goal.

A SOLAR-POWERED OSMOSIS FILTER, FISHING NETS, A FLOATING SUIT AND NOT MUCH MORE. What you needed to survive at sea for years wasn't much, or very expensive, so as soon as he was fifteen Simmi put together everything and let himself go. He didn't pack a satellite net uplink, as everybody after him would, because if he wanted to hear from humans he would have stayed on land. Neither he had anything he wanted to say. Not yet.

A few months later he was spotted by a cargo ship. He waved to them that he was ok, although he seemed to have forgotten how to talk.

He wasn't seen for two years after that. But at least two sailors would say, but this was afterward, that they have heard him sing at night.

Then he was found, although he hadn't been lost, and he was heard, although he hadn't been singing to us. Some would say that he had gone insane with ocean and loneliness. Others would claim that he had learned the song of whales, and was signing it back to us.

Most people just wanted to hear him sing, and were angry when he would grow quiet as planes, drones, and boats approached, and only sing when they would go away. There was talk of "rescuing" him.

And then he disappeared, for good this time. How could he disappear when satellites and drones seemed at times to outnumber the stars? Some said he had been abducted or killed. Some said he had started singing secrets the Powers wanted for themselves, so they kept him in sight but made the rest of the world lose track.

And some said that he simply wanted, and needed no help, to go away.

If you sail the sea all of your life, if you're good and pay attention, you might still hear him some time. He's just one small person, and the waters are so large, that he seems to be everywhere at once.

IN HINDSIGHT, IT WAS UNAVOIDABLE THAT IMPROVED KNOWLEDGE OF THE BRAIN WOULD ALLOW SCIENTISTS TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO MAKE LUCID DREAMING EASY AND CONSISTENT.

In hindsight, it was unavoidable that some people would start using their dreams for work.

In hindsight, it was unavoidable that eventually those who didn't would get no jobs.

Those few who can dream within their dreams keep quiet about this. Their tacit conspiracy has kept, for now.

WE HOOKED UP AT THE HEIGHT OF OUR NETWORK STANDING; ALMOST THREE QUARTERS OF OUR SHARED TWO-DEGREE NETWORK MADE A SOME SORT OF LEWD COMMENT DURING THE FIRST NIGHT WE HAD SEX. Our preference profiles were a great match, we ranked high and close in hot-or-not points, and neither of us had any outdated fetish about going offline when it was just the two of us.

We lasted together a bit over two months, the second most-voted answer in our first couple's post. It couldn't be helped, really. She was moving with a mere few hundred friends to another network, and, as much as I liked her, that was a sacrifice I wasn't willing to make.

A WINDSWEPT DESERT UNDER A BLACK SUN, CRISSCROSSED BY THE TOWNS OF THE DEAD. The Egyptians had had the right idea, and with their armies of servants they controlled much land. What wasn't theirs belonged to the Emperors and their armies of clay.

It wasn't strange that European mystics had perceived the afterlife as hellish, with an eternity to be spent in thrall to heathens. Their error was to think this was God's will and not their lack of foresight in equipping themselves for the afterlife.

Their error, I thought as I unpacked my weapons, not mine.

WE LAUGHED AS WE BOUGHT THE CLOCK, WHICH RAN BACKWARDS SLOWLY AND WAS SUPPOSED TO TIME OUR LIFE. Our friends thought it creepy, but we were young and thought ourselves happy (perhaps that meant we were). The clock ran down much faster than our life, which was going to last forever.

I still don't know what happened. One morning we were together. By the evening you had left, as the bed was too small for your anger and me. It was only the next morning that I found the clock had stopped at midnight, and would never run again.

WE ALL CARRY BITS OF OUR PARENTS INSIDE US. Literally, I mean. My family has been a medical lineage for generations, and ever since the beginning, we have had our own complementary ritual to the burial: Just a bit of bone from the dead, somewhere inside the alive.

Like all unexplainable superstitions, I believe it began with a too easily explainable cause, but the explanation was buried when it was clear it was too silly, too evil, or both. We keep doing it because we would otherwise be unremarkable even to ourselves, and that simply won't do. Or perhaps because we are all mad.

That we tend to die young is a well asserted fact, thanks to our meticulous if private record-keeping. That we are specially prone to schizophrenia is also part of the family lore. So I guess the fear of being too plain is a transparently unworkable excuse for our systematic habit of turning ourselves into ossaries for our dead.

Be it as it may, I am too much a heir of my family not to comply with our tradition. But I'm also too much myself not to fear what I only dimly suspect. When my father died I inserted into myself shards of his bones, and, as tradition required, shards from all ancestors of which we still had partial skeletons stashed somewhere. I only deviated from tradition in putting them all together in my left hand, instead of getting them distributed over my body in general.

It's an experiment, and a hope for survival: If and when I begin to hear voices, I intend to amputate that limb. The scientist in me is sure that our madness is genetically inherited, but I was a child before I was a man, and the child knows the answer is simple: our bodies are haunted by the spirits of the deceased, just as any other graveyard.

WITH A SAINT'S SELFLESSNESS AND A SAINT'S WILL, THE YOUNG MAN ATTEMPTED TO ESCAPE THE SECLUDED SCHOOL. He had no chance, even taking into account miracles, but had he known this he wouldn't have hesitated anyway. Escaping the school was the right thing to do, and the young man was a bona fide saint.

The Jesuits killed him easily, and with no more regret than what was natural to feel. The school had centuries of experience in the systematic shaping of saints of the highest degree, but they had yet to figure out how to control their miracles in any useful way.

I'M NOT AS GOOD READING MARKETS AS A PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES SHOULD BE, BUT YOU DON'T GET THE JOB WITHOUT BEING FAIRLY GOOD AT IT. So I had about half an hour to find a place to hide before the Secret Service began looking for me. I know I can't escape forever — whenever the markets tank, the scapegoat *has* to be sacrificed — but I will cling to every minute of life I can.

056

WE AREN'T ONE OF THE LARGEST NETWORKS OF CONSPIRACY
BUFFS. But we are by far the best organized. Whoever joins us gets
assigned a set of conspiracies they have to defend vehemently as the
truth, wherever they might be, in any way in which they can.

Every time one disappears or dies, we add another data point to
our chart.

WOULD HELEN EVEN RATE AS A FASHION MODEL TODAY? I SOMEHOW DOUBT IT. I honestly believe our most beautiful women, whisked away into a past that shared the same generic aesthetic ideals, would be thought of as Helens all, if not goddesses outright.

So I look at you and I wonder where you are from, who sent you, and why, but your beauty is too terrible to put my fears into words, and besides, I'm in the middle of waging a war.

058

I ALREADY EXPLAINED TO YOU THAT CYBERSEX CALLS FOR ONLY THE SHALLOWEST FORMS OF AI; YOU CAN JERK OFF TO A SEX CHATBOX, BUT IT'S NOT SOMEONE YOU CAN TAKE TO THE ALTAR! SO PLEASE STOP PROPOSING AND ENTER THE DETAILS OF YOUR CREDIT CARD. I'm really horny and you don't want to keep me waiting too much.

SEVEN YOUNG MEN AND SEVEN YOUNG WOMEN TO SATIATE FOR A LITTLE WHILE THE HUNGER OF THE MINOTAUR, AND KEEP OUR OWN FAMILIES ALIVE FOR A LITTLE WHILE. We were not unafraid, but we were decided, and even proud. We didn't flinch when they pushed us inside the labyrinth, and few of us cried when they barred the heavy doors behind us.

We walked ever deeper into the branching corridors, because what else was there to do? We walked through narrow halls and tall ones, through strange gardens of unknown fruits and next to night-black pools of cold water. Far from the sky and from the door, we lost track of time and distance. We ate, drank, and slept when we needed to, and being young and alone, we made love at times.

We never found the Minotaur, or he never found us. It might find us still. The labyrinth is endless, and we have but begun to explore it. But even if we found an exit, we wouldn't want to leave. This is where you were born, my daughter. This is our home.

060

I TRIED TO JUMP THROUGH THE WINDOW, BUT THEY WERE HOLD-
ING ME TOO TIGHT. They knew this was a dream, and were desper-
ate not to let me wake up.

SHE WAS NO GLASSES-WEARING NEWBIE. I would have known it even if I couldn't smell her karma points, but what's the point of jacking your senses if you don't use them? She smelled of fresh roses, so she was rather new in the group, but with an old book overlay of long technical experience, and a hint of vast outside connections as an oceanic breeze.

Also, and this was simply what my baseline eyes told me, she was blind. I had seen some of the weirdest eyelays money wasn't supposed to buy, but her eyes were as baseline as mine, and a lot less functional. She had been born blind, I judged from her self-assured walk, and that deepened the mystery of who she was. If she had the resources and desire to acquire the tech that made her smell like that, why remain blind? Why not see EM, or money flows, or even old-fashioned light?

I walked toward her trying not to be too silent. My fingertips tingled at the idea of exploring her skin, looking and accessing any subdermal circuitry.

She didn't look at me, but she addressed me by name. Not the one I had told the group, but a much older one. "Go away, thief of information," she said without malice.

I bowed to her, jacked to jacked. "I will not try to steal, but I have to ask. With what sense do you know my presence and the name you called me by?"

"I sense nothing baselines don't," she said. "It's my memory I jacked." She smiled then. It was a sharp, victorious smile, but also a bored one.

THE WAITING LIST TO PLAY WITH THE DOC IS HUGE, AND THE WAITING LIST TO BE PLAYED BY HIM — WELL, IT'S LESS A LIST THAN A MOVEMENT. You bought your space in it not because you wanted and hoped to get your chance, but because your girlfriend was a cuthead and would not even conceive of sleeping with anyone not in the list.

So you were certainly surprised when they picked you up, and not wholly happy when they strapped you to the operating table and shut off all feeling below your neck. They asked no questions; you had signed all the answers away when you bought your place anyway, and besides, everybody knows the cops are always trying to disrupt the Doc's jamming sessions, and none of them wants to ruin their chance of getting called again to play by being the ones who delayed the whole thing too much.

That's not particularly comforting, and neither is the fact that your girlfriend is sure to be seeing this right now, her cellphone — and many many more — patching her without warning into another of the Doc's jamming sessions.

And here's the Doc, sudden and noiseless as the websites say, a weirdly curved scalpel on his left hand. You'd scream, but you have lost control of your voice. You aren't even sure if you are soiling yourself, although you feel so scared that you think you are.

The Doc looks at your chest and starts cutting. Only the first cut is slow, then it's all speed, rythm, improvisation. He always plays at the edge, so his subject survival rate is about fifty/fifty, which adds to the thrill of his sessions. And if you do survive, there's always the question of what he has done to you. It's said that he doesn't know himself, not before he's deep inside you and the organs whisper to him how they want to be reworked.

You don't lose consciousness until the last, impossibly complex cut. Just before that, you realize something that no survivor has ever talked about, and that you aren't likely to mention if you survive. You have no conscious feeling of your body, and you can't see the

images of your innards the cameras are showing the net at large, but the Doc is not just playing on you.

He's playing to you, through senses in your flesh that only indirectly reach your mind, and he's playing the most intimate and beautiful song you have ever heard.

063

NOBODY CARES ABOUT HER NAME. Those who know she's the best have no need of other word to refer to her, and recognize her on sight by the way she moves. Those who cannot, those who would need to see her fight, would not understand the depth of her skill even if they had it charted and explained. So the ignorant don't fight her because they think her too weak to matter, and the learned don't fight her because they know her too powerful to be bested. She has never fought, or thought about fighting, and will die in her old age not knowing this about herself.

THE METACHEMIST HAD CLAIMED THERE WAS NO EXAGGERATION IN HIS CLAIM. "A sip of this wine," he said, "will taste *exactly* like your first kiss." The price he requested was high, but not high enough that it would deter me from putting his assertion to the test.

"I'll drink once," I said. "If you're right, I will pay you double. If you're wrong, you will not leave this place."

The metachemist shrugged, and served his ware in a plain glass I had provided. "Suit yourself," he said.

I closed my eyes and sipped the wine. It tasted of blood and grief.

"Paid him twice what he requested," I said to my servant, "and take him away." I didn't dare to open my eyes, knowing the bottle would still be there.

THEY SAID THEY DIDN'T TRAVEL BETWEEN THE STARS, AND THAT WE WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHERE THEY CAME FROM, OR WHY. We asked them to try anyway, and else they lied or they had been right about that. No one understood them, and very few were rash or stupid enough to said they did.

But what irked us most, I think, was that they never talked to us. They spoke our languages otherwise flawlessly, but they always addressed cities, not humans. Even when you stood in front of them, in full regalia or wearing nothing at all, they talked through you, but not to you, and never quite sustaining eye contact.

There were many theories about that. Most of them assumed they had some sort of blind spot in their own language, or in their minds. Those theories explained much, although not the look in their eyes that, if they were mimicking humankind as closely as they seemed to, said they pitied us.

But those were minor issues. They spoke to our cities, and we answered back. Technology was traded for resources. They said they were satisfied. We were, too. The economy improved, medicine advanced. Our cities grew.

HE KNEW OF HER THROUGH RUMOURS. She knew of him through her inner sight. She knew he would help Helen elope, but she was too late and too far to do anything but cry.

For ten years they fought a battle, the woman who nobody listened to, and the man who said nothing but lies. At the end, he won through the biggest, most ludicrous lie of all, and when the towers toppled the woman felt no surprise. She was the one who saw the future, after all.

As the Greeks sacked the city, Ulysses looked everywhere for the prize for which he had waged a war. Let others have glory, blood, and women. He wanted knowledge of the future, and through it he could get anything else he could want.

But his fears proved right, and he only found Cassandra's body, one more amongst the thousands. She had died with a half smile, as if she knew something about the future that gave her some small solace.

Ulysses swore. All those years lost for nothing. He would get as much loot as possible, of course, but now he wanted nothing more than to go back to his lands.

AS FOR THE "BANK" THEFT, I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HOW IT HAD BEEN DONE, BUT I CAME TO UNDERSTOOD WHY. At first it had been a strange case, even a little bit gross. You'd have to be a really strange thief, I thought, to go through a high-end security system to steal sperm and ova (not my words, the police report's). Even if it was *special people's* sperm and ova, athletes and scientists and so on, I failed at first to see the criminal's endgame, or exactly what the bank manager wanted me to do.

"You have made a name for yourself in negotiations, Mr. Jones," said the manager, a nervous, wire-thin man, "and we have received a ransom request. We want you to handle the payment and retrieval of our property."

I nodded. "Just so I understand you - why not ask for another deposit from your clients?" I hadn't been twelve for a long time, but I was still proud of the lack of puns in my phrase. It still sounded vaguely dirty to my ears, but I guess the bank manager had heard everything by now.

"Our clients are not the originators of the material, but people who have invested on their genetic information. As sequencing and analysis technologies improve, it's possible that analysis of these individuals will provide unique, and potentially enormously valuable, insights on intellectual, physical, and social attributes and abilities. Besides," said the manager, "some of the originators are already dead. Even if our insurance policies could cover repayments to originators to supply us with new material, some of it is indeed irreplaceable."

I didn't know much about biotechnology, but I had worked for banks before, and the key words were always the same: *investors, insurance policy, irreplaceable*. Bottom line, the bank was under-insured in one way or another, and it would be cheaper for them to pay the thief for their property than to face the lawsuits and loss of credibility that would occur if their clients found out the "genetic information" they had paid for was lost.

Cases like these were usually the easy ones. The bank wanted to

buy, the thief wanted to sell, and both parties knew it. All it took was a steady hand to make the delivery and pick up, someone with a closed mouth, some experience in these affairs, and enough moral fiber (or knowledge about how few crimes really paid) not to be tempted to split with the payout, the macguffin, or both. I more or less made a more or less reasonable living out of being that unimaginative person.

I was right, as far as my side of things went. The thief's instructions had been professional and well thought out, and I did nothing stupid - pretty much three quarters of my fee, I always think, is payment for not making any temptingly stupid move. The thief got the cash, and I got a largish cryogenic unit I got into the bank through a back door. And then, of course, I got my own, much smaller, payout.

Everybody happy, I thought.

Not quite. Hours later I got a panicked call from the bank manager, informing me of another robbery. Not the material again, thank God, but the storage disks that kept the checksum files had been remotely wiped. "Without them," the manager told me in a quietly hysterical voice, "we cannot be sure the materials weren't tampered with. Specially not the irreplaceable ones." I made sympathetic noises, and referred him to a friend of mine who specialized in IT crimes. I'm an old fashioned street gumshoe, and the cross-firewall stuff is out of my line.

I don't know if the manager ever told his clients about the lost checksum files, but I suspect he didn't. Bank managers seldom are of the truth-before-profits type. I'm not worried; I did my job well and honestly, and at the end of the day that's the most I ask of myself.

And perhaps I'm a bit curious. The thief did his job very well, too. If I were a scientist, I wouldn't mind taking a peek at his DNA.

BEFORE THE MATCH HAD STARTED, NOBODY HAD CARED ABOUT ANYTHING BUT THE RESULT. But now the match had ended and the champion had lost, yet his defeat was far from the minds of the millions who had followed the match. He had lost badly, his last movements incoherent and senseless, and now everybody was worried about the champion himself. Had he broken something? Was his injuries as bad as they had looked? Would his career end?

Dozens of cameras and millions of eyeballs were focused on the door of the clinic where they had rushed the champion when his agent stepped out of it. "The doctors have done a preliminary analysis," she said, "and I emphasize it, *preliminary*, but given the results, and as a precaution, he has decided to withdraw from this year's World Chess Championship until the strain in his self-esteem is healed."

BY LATE 2019, IT WAS NO LONGER POLITICALLY TENABLE TO IGNORE THE REALITY OF CLIMATE CHANGE, NO MATTER WHO LOBBIED YOU, OR HOW THICK THEIR CHECKBOOK. By early 2023, it was no longer politically tenable to pass laws trying to counteract it. Large-area real state speculation was a massive source of profits, and land traders claimed the market could not work with artificially reduced volatility.

MY DOCTOR SHOOK HER HEAD, DOING A NOT TOO CONVINCING JOB OF SIMULATING EMPATHY. "This is why you need to keep an updated antivirus," she said. "These things have to be caught early on. Otherwise, your only alternative is to restore from a backup, which I guess you never made...?"

I didn't reply, and she sighed. "I cannot recommend that you pay what the website suggests; there's no certainty that they will deliver the decryption key, and it's not as if you can sue an anonymized developer in a Mexican Free Development Zone. But I can assure you that, medically, if you want to conceive in the future children that look even vaguely like you, you are going to need that decryption key."

I HAD THOUGHT THEM AN URBAN MYTH, OR A GOVERNMENT PROJECT, OR — MOST LIKELY — AN URBAN MYTH SEEDED BY THE GOVERNMENT. But that was before seeing them, right in the worst of a summer day's noon gridlock, get out and on top of normal-looking cars, take their musical instruments in their hands, and play.

My god, did they play. It was rock, it was jazz, it was blues, it was something else. It was the first kiss after a bad breakup. We didn't even thought of filming them with our phones, so good they were.

They played for fifteen minutes, and then just walked away, weaving a path through the gridlocked cars. We went to the cars they had left, and it turned out they had been carpoolers matched online, their true names unknown to the drivers, who were as music-struck as the rest of us.

The gridlock lasted for half an hour more, but we had been woven together by the music, and were sorry to drive away.

072

BECAUSE BILLBOARDS KNOW YOUR NAME WHEN THEY KNOW YOUR FACE. Because ad servers know your personal data when they know your name. Because every authority and every desire came and comes from only one place.

That's why you see your parents' features everywhere you walk, subtly or not, telling you what to buy and do.

(Because I was already seeing them, and it's not insanity if we all see the same.)

073

IN THE CITY OF THE DEAD WE KEEP THE MEMORY OF THE DEPARTED. Their names and their faces. Their videos and their emails. Their portfolio management software and their assets. Their data stores and the expert systems they trained through their lives.

From the City of the Dead we are bought, and sold, and ruled.

THE CASE WAS ABOUT MONEY AND BOMBS, SO THERE WAS NO CHANCE OF IT NOT REACHING THE SUPREME COURT. The core of the question was simple: should it be legal to make money off Tradeable Malicious Large Scale Activity Insurance Instruments — the so-called Terrorism Bonds? The market was huge, and hedge funds were keen to keep and extend their profits, but the industry pushed the boundaries of moral hazard, and maybe left them behind.

The market index rose a record 17.3% on the first day of hearings, when a bomb killed all nine Justices.

075

THERE ARE MANY WEAPONS THAT HAVE NEVER BEEN USED, BUT THERE'S ONE THAT WAS DESTROYED. Its blueprints were destroyed and its creator killed. No step was overlooked by any military that knew of the weapon, to prevent as much as possible that it could be recreated and used. Unlike all other weaponized retrovirals, it was a non-lethal one, but that didn't prevent it from being classified, and the classified files destroyed.

Its technical name is very long and very abstruse, but it was always referred to as the Forgiveness Bug.

076

ALL FICTIONAL UNIVERSES HAVE THEIR WATSON AND THEIR
HOLMES. I haven't known how to feel and what to do ever since I
found ours.

077

WE FED THE SYSTEM ALL WE KNEW OF LEONARDO - ALL HE HAD WRITTEN AND DONE, AND EVERYTHING OTHER HAD SAID AND DONE ABOUT HIM, AND EVERYTHING WE KNEW OF EVERYTHING HE SAW. And then we asked the system to do what he *might* have done.

We got beautiful paintings.

We got records of nature that were also pure art.

We got clever devices.

We got deeply searching paragraphs.

We got increasingly darker compositions.

We got to see what was stalking the Gioconda, and what it did to her remains.

We saw the poet become a sadist, and the genius go brilliantly mad.

Then we fed the system everything we knew of modern technology and the biology of man, and began the next phase of the plan.

KABBALAH OVER DNA: IT WAS OBVIOUS IT'D BE THE FIRST SPIRITUAL APPLICATION OF HOBBYIST-CHEAP GENOMIC TOOLS. What better place than aeon-conserved fragments of genetic code for a deus absconditus to leave behind his Word? The cut-and-paste techniques of biotechnology were a natural fit for those of Kabbal, and if the Word manifested into protein sequences, what was that, but proof that the Word was also the Act?

Scientists rolled their eyes, mostly politely. Scientists were wrong.

But being scientists they never acknowledged this, never could see that it wasn't the blind chance their worshipped, not even as the unwittingly unleashed Doomsday Virus killed them, and the kabbalists, and all.

I'M NO MEAN WARRIOR, BUT MY PRIDE LIES IN MY DISCOVERY.

With no memories of anything before the war, and no skills save those used in waging it, I know now that what we are doing might be a war, but that its goal is anything but martial.

We are parts of an algorithm. Our deaths and partial victories are intermediate results. Perhaps at the end the winner will determine a single bit of information, that bit the unknown reason why we fought.

I keep trying to tell the others. I keep trying to convince them that those that use us are whom we should fight.

I never sleep, but I still have nightmares. In them, what I'm doing is part of the calculation as well.

080

HE WAS THE DIRECT MALE HEIR OF THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE. She was the legitimate Empress of China through at least four dynastic lines. We made them meet, and we made them breed, as we've done during hundreds of years.

We are the genealogists of the planet. We are the keepers of the trees. And when men go back to their rightful rulers, we will have the world at our feet.

081

ONCE NEUROCHEMISTRY WENT BEYOND THE STONE AGE, FILIAL BONDS WERE BUT A PILL AWAY. That unlocked dozens of markets, not the least of them age-based timesharing tranches. Some customers liked babies. Some enjoyed toddlers, and some sought adult ones to help them. Nobody wanted teenagers, but they wanted to be left alone as well.

082

HE WAS DRESSED PLAINLY, AS WAS THE FASHION OF THE YOUNG. But she paid no attention to his clothes. His Hanson token was talking to hers, and through the unstated magic of crypto signatures, it proved his general level of wealth, his health status, and how many in their shared social group thought him hot.

Her pupils dilated slightly, pure human nature at play.

YOU NEVER BELIEVED AS A CHILD, AND YOUR PARENTS NEVER
PRESSURED YOU. Never did the monks who taught you; they wanted
your recall, nor your belief.

Not even when you entered the church for your Confirmation
ceremony you believed. You dropped to your knees an unbeliever,
you took the wafer an unbeliever, you came out of the church still an
unbeliever.

That night, the retrovirus in the wafer started working on your
brain.

IT'S ALWAYS THE SAME STORY, MOSTLY. Famous girl's agent meets famous boy's agent. Hotness ratings and futures are checked. A marriage is arranged. Famous girl and famous boy marry. (Famous girl's agent and famous boy's agent have a fling, but this is not their story.)

A month into their marriage, famous girl's hotness futures start dropping like dead drones. A prenup clause kicks in, and they are divorced by the next day. Not-quite-famous boy's agent gets in touch with famous-but-falling girl's agent. Hotness ratings and futures are checked. A marriage is arranged. Famous-but-falling girl and not-quite-famous boy marry. (Famous-but-falling girl's agent and not-quite-famous boy's agent have no chemistry whatsoever, but this is not their story.)

A month into their marriage, 4chan discloses that Then-not-quite-famous boy's agent had rented a fanbotnet to artificially depress famous girl's hotness futures, so Then-not-quite-famous boy could marry her and profit when her hotness futures returned to normal. A prenup clause kicks in, and they are divorced by the next day.

Famous famous-boy's agent marries not-famous-but-rising boy.

I'VE KILLED MANY, MANY PEOPLE. Strangers, loved ones, loving ones, people I hated. I've tortured them for weeks and smothered them in their sleep. I've killed in nurseries and cemeteries and bedrooms. I've murdered in accordance to every rite I know, and I've murdered while breaking every sacred taboo. And I have yet to be haunted.

The years pass, and I have never seen a ghost. I'm terrified. My death approaches, and I can't find a way to come back.

NEUROPSYCHOLOGISTS AGREE, ALTHOUGH THEY'D QUIBBLE WITH THE TERMINOLOGY, THAT THE EYES ARE THE WINDOWS TO THE SOUL. And with the right pair of active glasses, you can have a lot of control about what kind of soul other people think you have.

Wearers of active glasses see each other as pupil-less masks, and among certain circles, your glasses are the last thing you take off for sex, assuming you take them off at all.

THE PROGRAM KEEPS FAILING, AND YOU CANNOT FIND THE BUG.

It's not even that far ahead of the cutting edge to be impossible: it just mines ecological data and the global imagesphere for new niches and new species, a final sweep as biodiversity burns out. The program runs, and reports a finding, but not one that makes sense. An ecological niche in the blind spot of human's gestalt system makes sense in theory, but the pictures the program shows don't make sense at all. They aren't organisms, they are just... stuff.

Your frustrated impotence dregs up the biggest one in your life, all those years you saw your mother's mind break down, and how she died terrified of things that weren't there.

088

IT WORKS. That's the problem. It's not rational, but it doesn't have to be. The subconscious mind believes guilt to be a form of matter, something that can be transferred from someone to another. Get someone to pick up your guilt, and your own lessens. Unfairly, irrationally, but it does.

And children are ever so receptive to guilt...

It's not a therapy that's advertised online, but word of mouth among the discrete and wealthy couldn't be more positive.

It works.

YOU CAN'T GET ACCESS TO THE NEUROCHEM COCKTAILS COMPANIES GIVE THEIR WHITE COLLARS, UNLESS IT'S IN YOUR SHIFT-START BOOST SHOOT. You can't leave the office without the scrubber shot that destroys whatever's left in your blood. And it's not as if you could sneak in a blood analyzer, or trying to sneak a blood sample out. All those attack vectors have been prepared for. The only way to analyze a cocktail would be to note precisely what it's doing to your cognition and emotions as you work, which would require a level of self-awareness and baselining that approaches the line of psychosis and leaves it far behind.

Which is why I can ask for the fees I do, and why you will pay them, if you want to know how your competition is outthinking you.

THIS MORNING YOU WERE THE RICHEST MAN IN AMERICA. Tonight you will be the most powerful man in the world.

The morning was your father's gift, what he called (but never in writing, never outside his more-than-secret working room) the Tesla-Edison Engine. You didn't recognize the names when you first heard them, and it would be a while before you learned that they were two of the first geniuses he kidnapped and put to work. Their inventions drove your father's commercial empire, and theirs, and their successors, drive yours. They are among the most brilliant engineers the world has known, and they are yours.

But the more recent geniuses in your pool are not even engineers. They seem magicians, scribing symbols with chalk and putting together devices others cannot even understand. But they have checked each other's work, and it's solid. More than solid - their work will deliver you the world.

They have just finished the prototyping of something they call an "atomic bomb." It will generate pure radiation, killing all humans in a two-mile radius, except those protected by a lead gown.

In an hour you will stand next to your atomic bomb, in one of your ranches in New Mexico, and press the button that will run the test. Your test subjects will die, but you, standing next to the bomb, will not - they have sewn you a lead suit that will protect you.

With a weapon like that, there's nothing you couldn't ask for. Tonight you will own the world. Even your geniuses seem happy, brilliant slaves and nothing more.

HAD LANCELOT BEEN A LESSER KNIGHT, THERE WOULD STILL BE A CAMELOT. But he loved Arthur the king, and he loved Arthur the man, and if Arthur had chosen war against Genevieve over leaving him, Lancelot was too loyal to put power and kingdom above his Sire's word.

Had Lancelot cared about his fame over Arthur's, or had the first bards been any less in awe of his charisma and his sword, the story would have been rightly told.

WE HAVE LOST SO MUCH HISTORY. Not just the trivialities, but what was once the core of our fear and hope.

How did the early Christians worship in the catacombs? What miracles did they pray for? What rituals did they perform? Did they work?

The world forgot. We only retain fragments of dreams and nightmares. The depth of Roman hate. The Christian's unshakable certainty of resurrection.

And a surprising number of empty tombs.

OF COURSE IT WASN'T RANDOM. We ran more than five thousand focus groups, until the spike in the reception curve was unmistakable. Of all possible war stories, the one where a soldier braved a flood to rescue a kid and his dog was the one who played better across the population as a whole. Liberals liked the idea of soldiers saving a pet from a flood — it's a global warning thing, I guess —, and conservatives have a thing for the "armed Daddy," so to speak. Women went for the young man protecting a child, men went for the badass factor, the rich liked that floods were nobody's fault, but they wouldn't have been caught in one - and that the kid was properly grateful. It was, overall, *the* story to sell the war, so we ran it a few months later.

No, no, we didn't make it up. That's amateur hour crap. We just passed word to the military to put more boots in flood-prone areas with lots of kids, and to keep eyes on the sky open for possible civilian rescue ops. They actually saved three boys, two girls, one cat, two dogs, one goat, and a stuffed parrot before we hit on a suitably cute-looking pair.

THEY WERE FEW, AND THE FLOORS SEEMED INFINITE, BUT THE FIRST ONES DIDN'T LACK STRENGTH. "Go forth and multiply," said the First Ones when their children were born and old enough. "Read, summarize, and bring back." So we do, as did our parents, as our children will do. We read, we summarize, and we send the summaries to wherever our parents came from. Every generation there's more of us, and every generation we are faster.

It's said the Library isn't infinite, and somewhere there's a book that says how to break out.

095

HE WAS HANDSOME AND BRAVE - OF COURSE I HATED HIM. But I did not kill my brother. I even introduced him to the love of his life.

It's not my fault she was a violent psychopath's wife.

THIS IS WHAT SEPARATES AN HONEST MEDICAL TOURISM FACILITATOR FROM A DISHONEST ONE: THE FORMER WILL ALWAYS PROTEST IF YOU TELL HER YOU WANT TO GO TO THE ZLOTLOL ISLANDS FOR A LIVER OR A COUPLE OF LUNGS. It's the cheapest source of organs in the planet, of course, but facilitators don't get a cut of the treatment cost, so it's not that they want to get a higher fee.

It's simply that whether you are an atheist, a Muslim, a Christian, into Shinto, or almost anything else, you are definitely not a believer of the Zlotol gods, and it's very difficult for nonbelievers not to say or do something that they'd consider missionary indoctrination.

They have very, very strict laws against that. Carry a crucifix, pray to Mecca, say you don't believe in the Zlotol gods — those are just some of the things that mark you legally as a missionary, and the penalty is always summary execution practically on sight.

The Zlotol care a lot about maintaining their religious mores. Can you blame them? Theirs is the only known religion simultaneously compatible with running biotech businesses and raising kids to harvest their organs and sell them off. It's only the fact that the Zlotol sincerely believe this what keeps international law at bay, and their hundred-billion dollar industry afloat. Would you give that competitive advantage up?

So don't go to the Zlotol Islands. Go elsewhere, use Zlotol-sourced organs like everybody does, and leave them and their gods alone.

And if you find a non-Zlotol praying to the Zlotol gods, don't be too surprised.

THE MIND KNOWS THROUGH THE EYE, AND THE EYE IS OFTEN ENOUGH FOR THE BODY. Except for death, the one thing all living beings have been built to sense and avoid, since before beings had more than one cell to build eyes from.

The body cannot know death through the eye alone, which is why television and online video did not brought forward peace. To see violence is to know violence, but not to feel it, and the body has to know.

That's also why, four decades into the 21st century, the only successful circuses are the gladatorial ones.

UNDERSTAND - ROME WAS NO LONGER THE POLITICAL CENTER OF THE EMPIRE, NOT EVEN OF ITS WESTERN HALF. Its value was symbolic, which meant religious, and for the Romans who still kept the old faith, it wasn't quite the place as much as the gods.

As it became obvious to the priests that neither emperor would be able to keep Rome safe, it was decided that something would have to be done. Some suggested, in dark councils of which all memory was ruthlessly erased, to give the city to barbarians if they would but subject themselves to the Roman gods. Others suggested burning down the city themselves, a final offering from a dying world.

But Romans were too proud for either, and they settled on *evocatio*, the seldom-practiced ritual to expel and move away a god. It had always been done to conquered cities, transferring their deities to strengthen Rome, but now it was done in and to Rome, in a night so dark brave warriors woke up in fear continents away. They expelled their own gods from their own city, bound their divinities to sacred tokens, and instructed a small group of couriers to hide them as far away as they could, where they would be safe and strong until Rome could be again a worthy home (but not to Constantinople, not the traitorous brothers of the East).

They went westwards, as far as they could, and they buried the Roman gods under a city they knew would soon be Roman no more. What mattered that, as long as the gods were safe?

When the Western Empire finally died, knowledge of this died with the last of the true Roman priests. The Christian Church believed their spiritual mastery of the city a defeat of the old gods, instead of the storming of an empty citadel.

Nobody knew the old gods dwelled under Londinium. Nobody knew how they were already working their slow magic to weave another Empire.

AS YOU'VE BEEN STUDYING, THOUGHTS, FEELINGS, AND BODIES INTERACT IN VERY COMPLEX AND DELICATE WAYS, AND THINGS GET EXPONENTIALLY MORE COMPLICATED WHEN MORE THAN ONE PERSON IS INVOLVED. Desire and love are good examples. We like to think that we choose whom we like through our eyes and hearts, but the truth is that there are complex chemical protocols underlying the most subtly romantic or intensely sexual of encounters. A few stray molecules, and love and desire become virtual impossibilities, no matter what else might be alright.

I know you're in pain now, son, and I realize you feel that with this genetic tweak we have taken away something from you. But believe us, those would have been distractions and encumbrances. You have had no relationship to be missing in the future, and you will be content and safe once you get used to the idea that you will always be alone.

MY JOB USED TO BE ALL ABOUT PATIENCE AND ERUDITION, SEARCHING ANCIENT TEXTS SO FAR UNEDITED FOR *hapax legomena*, WORDS WRITTEN BUT ONCE. Most of them deserved this fate, being too narrow or too unweildly to survive the darwinian forests of language, but some of them failed to prosper due to nothing more than bad luck.

It was relatively easy to take ownership of such a valuable word, whenever it was deemed worthy of the expense. Buying or stealing the original source, sometimes with a musty scholar's manuscript attached to it, was all it took. And once acquired, those words had value, for they were markers for a thought nobody else had had. For the right price, and to the right buyer, it could, and indeed would, be sold.

There are hidden councils in the world that talk with words you wouldn't understand. That's not the only reason for their power over you, but it's not the least.

Nowadays the job is all about technology and speed. The net generates texts and words like an insane god in an unending orgy of creation, but at the same time copies them with infinite ease, cheapening what for a brief moment was linguistic gold. We do have machines to catch those words, evaluate them, and capture the worthwhile ones before they become lost in the all-spawning cloud. Where once we scouted musty libraries, now we deal with network latencies and DMCA protocols.

But the soul of the job hasn't changed. We even still use the same name for it, and for us. Which of course I won't mention it. It is, by unbreakable agreement, the only word that will never be sold.

YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOUR SOFTWARE IS BEING USED FOR.

That's the whole idea of frame adaptors. Your code bridges between different domains, so a kid in Nigeria might think she's solving a complex timed puzzle, while in reality she's guiding a bomb defusing robot in a brazilian frontier town. There are very few really different domains, and inside each of them it's only surfaces and tradition, and the lack of computers to translate, what made them appear different. The programs you write make artificial, non-mathematical distinctions become irrelevant.

You make a pretty good living writing this kind of software. There's lots of money in getting people to do what they are best at, specially if they don't know what they are doing, for whom, or why.

Sometimes you wonder what you really are doing when you write this code, and on what higher domain.

ALL PARENTS IN ALL CULTURES SAY THE SAME THING: "DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK." But it has been six thousand years since they truly knew why.

Children's fear opens doors.

THERE WAS NO SUBTLEST THEOLOGICIAN, AND NO GREATER ALCHEMYST, THAN THE SECRETIVE GENIUS KNOWN ONLY BY THE NAME VOLTAIRE. The world was not to see his equal, for he would change that world.

His *Deus Interfectorem* not only killed God, but also made it so that he never existed. The Voltaire that was after reality settled down had no memory of this deed, only an instinctive certainty that there was no God.

He would never know that he avenged, but did not save, Lisbon.

THERE ARE DOORS, AND LOCKS, AND BARRED WINDOWS, BUT THOSE AREN'T THE THINGS KEEPING YOU INSIDE. The Klein Penitentiary is not a place as much as a topology, a closed attractor in the abstract space of behaviors from which you cannot escape. It's different for each prisoner, but in essence it's the same. Given who you are, how you think, and how you act, once placed inside, you cannot, on your own, get outside. Architecture, stimula, rules, everything is constantly and precisely adjusted to the way your mind thinks - your every attempt to escape only keeps you inside. There've been people who escaped the walls, but remained inside the configuration of the Klein, so much that hours later they had walked on their own back to their cells.

That's the theory, and it works. There has never been an actual escape from the Klein in the years it had been holding the best and cleverest of criminals. You always knew that if caught you'd end up there.

Which is why you memorized thousands of random numbers. The Klein is designed to keep *you* inside, not a walking dice. The first number is five. You move five steps ahead, not caring where they will lead.

ALL MAGIC IS BASED ON MISDIRECTION, AND THE FIRST RULE IS NEVER TO EXPLAIN HOW A TRICK IS DONE. Once you explained one trick, people will come to expect explanations of all of them, and do you know how hard it is to come up with naturalistic justifications for some of the things magicians can do?

So don't do use true magic in public, or do it somewhere it will be thought obviously fake — or be ready to pay Randi his million-dollar fee to set up your cover expose.

THE WAR HAD BEEN HORRENDOUS, AND IT WAS FELT THE REPARATIONS WOULD HAVE TO BE PUNITIVE ENOUGH. Gold and iron were included as a matter of course, but what would they teach to a nation who had already shown their mastery of both?

So it was decreed in the victors' council that their every dream would be a nightmare, and their every nightmare would be taken from an account of someone they had wronged. They would dream of massacres and destroyed cities and burned-out towns, and every terrifying monster in their dreams would wear their uniform. So decreed the Talion Commission.

It was certainly poetic justice. It might have even been fair. But I don't think they understood what they were doing.

What happens when somebody comes to hate himself?

What happens when an entire people goes insane?

IT'S NOT THAT YOU CAN PREDICT PEOPLE. Being a game theory savant is a much subtler curse: insofar as you understand the alternatives and the payoffs, you always know the right move for anybody to do. People can still surprise you, it's just that they surprise you when they are being sub-optimal morons.

You are surprised so often that you would no longer be surprised, except that's not how genius works. You cannot avoid understanding intuitively the optimal choice, so you cannot avoid a sense of discordance whenever that path's not taken.

For your own sake, you have retreated into online poker and the occasional game of chess. Even novels are painful to read, their "logic" feeling like nails on a blackboard.

There must be others like you. Evolution is a game of numbers, and moves are seldom made just once. Once or twice, you've come across an online poker player that was either an illegally clever program or somebody that felt just right. You never approach them. You see that game tree as clearly as all others, and there's no possible positive payoff.

The final move is always dying, and you've calculated the optimal moment down to the month.

HAD THE GOOD DOCTOR BEEN ANY LESS INTELLIGENT... But do you really think that a man capable of creating life from dead flesh would be unable to learn from his most glaring mistake?

His second creature took him longer to make. Life was a secret in his power, but now he had to solve Beauty as well. That he did. Marble skin, elfin features, the flowing movements of unthinking ballet: all of those had the daughter of his mind, a more beautiful Athenea that wouldn't be despised by shallow humankind.

What a triumph they were! No court in the world was closed to them, the man who could create life and the only-too-beautiful proof of it.

Had the good Doctor known souls as he knew bodies, he would have been more scared of this second creation than of the first one. But do you really think that a man so blind to his inner monster would be able to see one lying under near-perfect skin? Human-like but not human, he had given her all gifts but two: empathy for humans, and the possibility of death.

JUNG WAS RIGHT. The collective unconscious has no concept of time. What he failed to understand was the effort that would be directed into making a technology out of it, once it was understood it was hundred trillion dollar opportunity.

Two things became obvious once we focused our collective efforts on it. One, that it was mind-bogglingly difficult to send information back in time. And two, that somebody had been / would be doing that already, and we had been picking the signal all this time.

The world panicked, and rightly so. Our nightmares were coming for us.

IT WASN'T A COMMON MUTATION; HUMAN SURVIVAL DEPENDS MOSTLY ON THEIR MINDS, AND INSANITY IS SELDOM AN ADAPTIVE TRAIT. But when enough people shared it, something happened that hadn't happened before: their insanity allowed them to cooperate in an unprecedented scale, and do things no naked ape had done before. They out-organized, out-bred, and massacred their saner brethren, driven forward relentlessly by their shared delusion, until the capacity to believe themselves or others a living King God became a permanent fixture in the human genetic pool.

HE WAS BORN INTO A WORLD WITHOUT WHALES. This wasn't why, just when.

He made his fortune with the engineering of flesh. This wasn't why, just how.

He made a monster as big as his fear and as relentless as his hate, and made its brain a clone of his own. This wasn't why, just what.

And then he had made a ship with a robot crew, and went to sea for death. When his ship was wrecked and the white whale was seen, nobody knew if he had failed or succeed.

EVERY GENIUS DETECTIVE GETS THIS CASE EARLY IN THEIR CAREER: A LOCKED ROOM, A DEAD MAN, AND A MESSAGE IN A CRYPTIC CYPHER. The logical first step is always to inspect the room.

The room is always wired to explode.

No genius detective gets to have a long career. The Brotherhood learned that lesson too well.

POSSIBILITY SPACES HAD THEIR OWN SPEED LIMITS, BUT STILL FELT LESS CONSTRAINING THAN THAT OLD CURSE, C. Trapped on Earth, humankind went inside their own simulations, exploring not what were, but the shape of could-have-beens.

There was beauty there, and, to their surprise, dangers. Some ideas could kill you just as surely as the vacuum of space. And others could take over, made-up personalities so powerful they were realer than the people who thought them, until eventually those were all they were.

The platonic realms were more dangerous than they had thought. But what choice did they have? Their economy ran on ideas, and there were no richer sources than in those untamed unreal frontiers.

They had faced nothing as strange as what they found in those possibility spaces, but when they fought back (not by existing, but through what they possibility entailed), war was a comforting pattern humankind felt back to almost with a sigh.

It was also true to their patterns that they never really expected losing to us.

ORGANS WERE EASY TO CLONE, BUT NOT A FULLY FUNCTIONING BRAIN. It took time, stimuli, *life* to turn a mass of neurons into a well-balanced thinking sponge, and by then all sorts of legal encumbrances rose their head. Much easier to buy brains from terminal patients with little means and heirs-to-be, giving them some money in exchange for a clean, neural tissue-preserving death. From subtle control tasks and cutting-edge research to simple spare parts, there were no end of uses for some poor bastard's brain.

People like you, whose leukemia might end up helping pay the treatment of your husband's brain cancer. Give him a fighting chance, at least, where you had already none. He had refused, threatening to shoot himself if you went through, so you told him you wouldn't do it, and then did it anyway. Give him a chance. That was all you could do, and you could do no less.

You remember all of this. In the darkness and the pain, you remember. You think you're screaming, but either you aren't, or nobody who can hear cares.

THE KING WAS NOT, IT WAS WHISPERED BY THE BRAVEST IN THE DARKEST NIGHTS, AS OTHER KINGS HAD BEEN. He had no beautiful women in the depths of his castle, it was said, but books that existed nowhere else. Only blind warriors, raised from birth to fight in darkness, were allowed to guard them.

There were many books in the deep halls, and more were added whenever the King's envoys found another book worthy of having all copies killed but one, kept in the dark, in the depths of the castle of the blind King.

THERE'S A POISON THAT INDUCES LOCKED-IN SYNDROME, THE MOST SADISTIC TORTURE YOU CAN INFLICT. You don't know which one, or how it works, but you're pretty sure you know who has used it, and why.

You have had nothing else to think about for the last week, and it's the only thing that's keeping you sane.

THEY RULE US. That's what we bred them for. They hate us, too. And why shouldn't they? We tweaked their brains before conception, and we replaced their unopened eyes with data buses. They grew up thinking in dimensions and ways no human ever could.

They will never see the world they manage for us, and every linked device feels like a seething blind eye.

They are too smart and too dutiful to do anything but their best job. We made sure of that, too. And we depend on them too much to kill them. They hate us for that as well.

The world has never been more prosperous, but nobody sleeps well.

I HAD PURSUED HIM MOST OF MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE. Not once I had come really close to capturing him, although through the years we had become, perhaps unavoidably, friends. I admired his talent, his spirit, and a moral code that even a life of theft had not managed to dent. And I pitied his loneliness.

He called for me on his death bed. He did not die in a palace, although I knew he could have afforded a dozen. He died in a comfortable place, with his only friend sitting by. I asked for no confessions. I could continue my search for proof, which I knew would most likely be futile, once I had seen my friend off his most remarkable life.

Still, he did offer me one. "You know," he said, with a voice that betrayed little of the pain he felt. "Of all the things I will not admit to having done, the one I would be most proud of is the acquisition of Constantine's Sword."

I frowned in confusion, for I had thought myself the world's expert on his criminal career, and a no mean conossieur of exotic art, and that was the first time I had heard of such an object.

"Hypothetically," my friend said, "it would take a man decades to erase an esoteric but documented object from the academic record." He smiled. "But, hypothetically, it could be done," he said, and died.

His last will was straightforward, for there were few valuables to his name. His bequest to me was a very old dagger, described in the will as "of origin unknown."

I HAD VOWED TO MYSELF, AND AS PUBLICLY AS I COULD, NEVER TO BUY ANYTHING FROM A STREET SELLER. Sure they always have what you want — those damn data aggregators sell them everything there's to know about you, from your commute to your purchasing habits — but I was a second generation store owner, and I would be damned if I'd buy something from one of the guys who were turning the city into a damn bazaar. Even if today was the last day I would be able to keep my store open, I would not buy from one of them.

On the first corner in the route to my store, a street seller offered me a loaded gun. I don't think he knew why. I just think a computer somewhere had told him he'd be able to make a sell.

The computer had been right. I broke my vow, purchased the gun, and shot.

IT'S SAID THAT EVERY PERSON GETS ONE TRUE PREMONITION
IN THEIR LIFE, ONE MOMENT IN WHICH THEIR SPIRIT GRASPED
ENOUGH OF THEIR PAST AND THEIR PRESENT TO MAKE A SINGLE
SPOT OF THE FUTURE AS CLEAR AND OBVIOUS AS THE MIDDAY SUN.

James' was this: of all the things he had done or ever would, this one
would be thought the best and worst. It would be the stuff of poems.

Death, even his own, could hardly be thought too dear a price!

"Forward, the Light Brigade!" he barked. "Charge for the guns!"

THE CHIRPING SOUND OF A RECEIVED MESSAGE FOLLOWS YOU AROUND. You've thrown away your phone, figuring out they were tracking you through it, but somehow they (but who?) still know where you are no matter where you go, closely enough that only people who are can see you receive the message that's been haunting you for the last hour: Seventy thousand dollars for your life, with your picture attached.

The number has been rising every few minutes. People's looks are becoming harder, and you don't know where to run.

IN YOUR NIGHTMARES, IT HAS A FACE. Even asleep you know it shouldn't. It's just software, even less than that. A mathematical model that could be run in any number of platforms, a subtle garment of conditional probabilities you're being forced to wear, and which every day becomes better at anticipating what you'll do.

Soon your mirror-self will be better than you are, or at least good enough that it'll make sense to let the flesh go. The logic makes sense. But you're trapped in your skull, training your ghostly under-study even against your will. Training the predator that will render you extinct.

The face in your nightmares is that of a younger you. It was the face you had when you founded your company - it's only fitting it'll be the face that will steal it from you.

Every morning you curse your Board, and hope you'll be alive to see their ghosts pushing them away.

OF COURSE THEY ARE CRIMINALS. Who would *choose* to live permanently offline unless it were part of some scam? But the damn politicians have bought their baloney about it being a lifestyle choice, so they get to charge however they want to criminals on the lam who want a room in their "Faraday Inns," and they can claim they didn't know the police was after them.

I CAME HOME EARLY - OTHERWISE I'D HAVE DROPPED DEAD THE MOMENT I STEPPED IN. But she was still rearranging the furniture, so all I felt was a sharp pain in my left arm.

I did not, of course, stop to wonder why she was trying to kill me. I rolled away from the maximum harm line, and fiddled with the things on a nearby coffee table. She jumped away, but not without a grimace. She always relied too much on furniture and architecture, and tended to forget that small objects had their own chi.

But she was no amateur. Even as I was moving around the room, trying to avoid giving her a fixed target, she ripped down the curtains and threw them over a the sofa. It was a bold, inspired move, creating a curve of torturous pain that would keep me trapped into a corner.

It was the kind of brilliance that had made me first fall in love with her. I knew nobody, not even me, so good with non-euclidean chi flows based on textiles. Now that she had backed me into a corner, and with a lot of small rugs in the room, I was almost as good as dead.

Almost. Gritting my teeth, I jumped through the line of fire and pain that she had put between her and me, and, even as I felt as if my eyeballs had caught fire, I grasped her by the throat and started to squeeze.

Not my cleanest kill, but I had been caught by surprise by my wife, and even a Feng Shui combat master will retort to anything he has to in order to survive.

MY PARENTS SAY THAT YOU LIVE SO CLOSE TO ME, THEY CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY I HAVEN'T APPROACHED YOU. Just because we are neighbors, ride the same bus, and work in adjacent desks, they believe we should know each other, that I should be acting on what I feel for you.

I despair of explaining. They belong to a time before active glasses, before your interests, patterns and networks followed us like fireflies. You might be near me in yards, but I can see what you like, where you chat, what you play, and there's a distance between us that I couldn't cross in one life.

In my home, on the bus, at work, I sit at the edge of that ocean, and pine.

IF IT HAD ONLY BEEN ABOUT POWER, PERHAPS IT'D HAVE GONE DIFFERENTLY. But they say they had been lovers before they quarreled over duty, before Robin went to the Sherwood to wage his slow war.

If it had only been about the crown, perhaps King John wouldn't have burned the forest down to the last stump.

LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE, THE NEWS I READ ARE FILTERED AND REWRITTEN BASED ON WHAT THE INTERNET KNOWS OF ME: WHERE I SURF, WHAT I DO, EVEN, I THINK, THE MAILS I WRITE. But I wonder if anybody else's newsfeed is a long list of headlines saying that you still, somehow, live.

HE HAD BEEN CURSED WITH AN INBORN COMPULSION FOR JUSTICE. Needless to say, he didn't had a happy life. Every day he hid a gun inside his clothes, and every night he punished himself for all the people he had chosen to let go.

WHOEVER RELEASED THE CAMBRIAN RETROVIRUS SAVED US ALL. Humanity was dying as ecological systems went haywire one after another, not in the centuries we had hoped for but in decades that seemed too short, somehow. It's not that our technology was too slow: we lacked the spirit, or had too much, to apply it to its fullest.

The Cambrian Retrovirus forced our hand. All births started to carry strange features and metabolisms, mutations both more frequent and more radical than anything we had seen before. Not only that; grown adults started showing changes in their organisms, as the retrovirus rewrote our genetic code in highly structured but always-different ways.

Billions died. The remaining millions had to scramble to figure out how to live. Some found survival in niches that had expelled humans before, while others, faced with immediate death, found ways to adapt themselves or their environments to each other, or failed to. Whoever survived had reorganized its very civilization around the idea that biology was a kaleidoscopic storm of briefly realized possibilities, and where once it was drowning, now it had learned to swim.

Most importantly, we are alive. We are grateful for that, even if the last non-infected person died with a weapon in his hand, calling us monsters and himself the last man.

EVER FELT THAT WHEN YOU'RE SAD AND LONELY ALL ADVERTISEMENTS ARE ABOUT HAPPY COUPLES? HAVE YOU NOTICED HOW ALL YOU SEE WHEN YOU MISS THE CHILD YOU DIDN'T HAVE ARE IMAGES OF TOYS AND AMUSEMENT PARKS? DID YOU CURSE AT THE EVIL FATE THAT PUT YOUR NIGHTMARE IN FRONT OF YOU WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE AT YOUR DEEPEST LOW? It's just a feeling, a notion, a superstition at most. And if you suggest it's anything more, the antidepressant industry has more than enough lawyers to deal with you.

YOU HAD CLIMBED WHAT EARTH HAD TO OFFER, AND OTHER PLANETS WERE OUT OF YOUR REACH. So you despaired and turned to drugs, until you found the solution in a drug. What mattered to you if the six-mile peak you were about to reach was in your mind and not outside? That it had come from eating a strange blue flower instead of through geology and time hadn't made the climb any less of a familiar challenge, and the success any different from what you craved.

Shaking from exertion and cold, you pushed yourself to the very top of the mountain of your dreams, and laid there, panting, at peace with yourself for a little while. Then your eyes fell on a strange blue flower, and it was only natural for you to put it in your mouth.

You felt a mountain rising at your back. You turned around, looking at it as it pierced the black sky.

THE IDEA HIT ME WITH THE SUDDEN CLARITY OF LIGHTING STRETCHED INTO ETERNAL NOON: YOU WANT TO INTERROGATE SMART PRISONERS, BECAUSE THEY ARE THE ONES WHO CAN UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY SAW BEFORE, AND FIND THE ANSWERS THEIR CAPTORS SEEK. Given enough pain, the limitation is not the prisoner's resistance, but their ignorance and lack of analytical skill.

It was a thought I wouldn't have been able to have five minutes ago, when the soldiers injected the chemicals and chips into my skull. Now it was as blindingly obvious as the way in which they would use the devices they were holding in their hands while they waited for me to become smart enough to be worth torturing for a long while.

I screamed, knowing well that it wouldn't be the last time.

IT HAD BEEN A SLOW WEEK, SO WHEN DISPATCH CALLED IN A DAEMONIC RIOT DOWNTOWN I WAS MIFFED, BUT NOT SURPRISED, AND THE FEW MINUTES OF FLIGHT TIME UNTIL WE WERE OVERFLYING THE MOB'S EYE WERE ENOUGH TO CHECK OUR GEAR, BUT NOT TO PONDER THINGS OR TO BE MAD. The mob leader was easy to spot, a central node in the field of movement vectors below our helicopter. How he was dressed, or even his age, were of no account. For whatever reason, the poor bastard was ODing in a charismatic drug, and the other poor bastards around him were caught in his spell, and rioting against whoever the mob leader hated. He had them in his hand, the drug giving his every gesture seemingly inhumane power, but he didn't control himself very much. That's the drug's deal: control others, lose yourself.

There's also the matter of an early death, either from the drug itself or from the likes of me. I aimed carefully my sniper rifle and fired a single shot - there's a standard shoot-on-sight order for daemonic leaders, who'd become very dangerous if they'd ever gained control of, for example, part of the police force.

Not that there had been much danger of the now dead man under the helicopter taking control over me. I was trained, to being with, and also deaf and blind. I only saw and heard what the computer showed me, and it had been carefully programmed to strip charisma away. I would never see my son's face except as digitalized schemata, but I would never be swept into a mob, nor let a mob harm him. That was my own pact, and so far I was holding up my side.

PEOPLE CALL THEM THE SLEEPING CATS, ALTHOUGH NOT ALL HAVE HEARD OF SCHRÖDINGER'S THOUGHT EXPERIMENT, AND VERY FEW TRULY UNDERSTAND IT. For them it's not physics, but pedagogy. If the goal of life is to learn to die well, how else to do that but practice? So they set up in their kids and converts a posthypnotic thought structure, so that every night, upon their nightly ablutions, they truly believe they are going to die.

Every night they struggle with death, and every morning feels like resurrection (every morning except one).

About one in ten falls into the Waking Heresy, which states that the night is true, and morning the lie. They are not the unhappiest ones.

THE TWO KINGS HAD PLAYED CHESS THROUGH COURIERS, WEEKS TAKING BETWEEN MOVE AND MOVE. Not even war between their kingdoms had stopped their game. When death approached them — fittingly, at the same time — and they found themselves without time to finish their lifelong match, they founded each a mystic order, and commanded them to continue the game. Their souls would not escape purgatory, they prophesied and pleaded, until the game was finished.

And so the game continues, neither order desiring to finish the struggle they were created for. Once a year they make a move, kings chasing each other in lonely impotence over the board, kings chasing each other in lonely impotence through a dawnless night.

THE GENERALS' INDUSTRY HANDLERS THOUGHT COMIC BOOKS HAD GOTTEN IT WRONG. A super-soldier didn't need to be an athlete, not when machines did all the physical work. It didn't need to be a tactical genius; that's what satellites and HQ staff were for. And they didn't want a few highly trained, peak-of-the-elite *expensive* paragons. They wanted soldiers to be cheap, so they could spend money on hardware, and quick to turn out. They wanted soldiers without much consciousness of killing or death.

So they built the best swarm weapons they could, and then gave them to children. It was no contest - dollar by dollar, a kid in semi-autonomous boat was by and far the best way to blow a carrier or storm a port. As long as you kept it fun, it was better than life at home.

The generals' industry handlers congratulated themselves as the children won the first battles of the war. It wasn't until later that they'd have to face the problem of how to make their heavily armed children stop.

THE GRAPEVINE SAYS THE CHINESE ARE FIGHTING POSEIDON SOMEWHERE IN THE PACIFIC. Bastard's though, but the Chinese have no qualms and few restraints about using their nukes. It won't be a good year to be pregnant in California, but Poseidon's going to get a good whoopass. With him dead, most of the heavyweights will be gone, and the war's probably going to shift to moping down those cocky demigods.

Except Ares, of course. There's been no official report of him dying, and we all assume he's working for us. Or maybe the other way around.

Anyway, I'm waiting in a lead-lined spotter nest as close to the Athens crater as it's moderately survivable. Intel says there might still be pagans somewhere around, trying to raise Hades again. I hope intel is wrong, because otherwise I'll have to tag their coordinates to the bomb guys, and I don't think my nest is proof against the nukes they will use if there's a minimal chance of Hades breaking through again.

A light shines in the sky, and I don't have to remember to look at the ground. Lost too many friends to the orbiting gorgon heads.

THE POPE AND THE SPANISH CALLED IT DARK WIZARDRY. The English retorted that it was a miracle, but privately thought it faerie magic, and were glad for it. That was fifteen years ago, and the wars it had sparked had been calm for ten.

There was a risk of the wars coming back, but the English were happy. They were happy even as they mourned their beloved Queen. They were happy even as a fatherless child took the throne.

The Virgin Queen was dead. May long live, they hoped, her alchemical twin, her magic-spawned identical flesh, the second Elizabeth.

THE MILITARY HAVE THEIR PROFESSIONALS, BUT THEY AREN'T NEARLY AS GOOD. And directing talented amateurs to a specific target at a given time requires a subtlety of touch that's quite alien to their mindset. But the intelligence agencies love them, specially those who were left behind in the crowdsourced open analysis revolution.

It's hard to out-think a well-oiled analytical crowd, but you can always disrupt it if you send their way a good horde of trolls.

There's no good defense against them yet, and applied political scientists keep writing excited grant requests about the potential of whole-country political troll-ups.

MY SIXTEEN YEARS OLD DAUGHTER HAS RUN AWAY FROM HOME.

She took her pad and a few clothes, and left a note on my mail I haven't read yet. I know where she went, if not the place. She's in some old apartment with some other girls her age, in a city far from here, people she only knows through years of daily interaction through the net. By now she has probably enrolled in some weird on-line course on a topic I could barely understand as a thing, much less as a profession, and spends her nights making fan-edits of biological holos or whatever media is new this year, with themes and images that'd scandalize me.

She'll be a phone call away from her parents, interacting with her peers, submerged in a world shaped only by her interests and whatever life throws her way, and will have to deal with it knowing I won't be there to see what she does.

I guess it's hard for her to imagine that this wasn't the usual way when I was her age.

In-house teenagers. Hard to believe we were once that insane.

I HAD HEARD SUPERCHOIRS BEFORE, SONGS PLAYED BY COMPUTER SIMULATIONS OF HUMAN THROATS. As a music producer, having thousands of cheap, obedient, hard-working voices at my call had changed the business and made me quite a bit of money. But, unlike other producers, I was also a music fan, and the music generated was just as bland as the music I had produced and sold before superchoirs. And, now that I had money, I wanted something better. I wanted to produce music nobody had produced before.

Which was why I had been sitting on a building that had used to be a church, looking as a too-thin woman set up a much-too-big device that was supposed to generate music I would find, she had said, *different*. I had had my doubts.

Now I was sitting where I had been, crying into my hands.

Partly, because the music *had* been different. A hundred precisely controlled voices, which was par for the course, but with a depth and a feeling that blew out of the water anything I had heard before. The voices had done more than sing. They had pleaded for release, for freedom, for death.

I was also crying because the woman had opened the device, and I had seen a complex systems of pipes, and neat rows of fleshy cylinders it had taken me almost a minute to recognize as cloned throats.

But I was mostly crying because I was going to buy the device, and I was going to make those throats sing again.

And there would be more of them.

I SEE NO SIGN OF YOU ON MY SCREENS, HERO. But you must be close. I've already conquered much of the world, and the rest will not give me more than drawn-out but meaningless resistance. If you don't stop me soon, nothing will.

The world's at my feet - and I no longer want it. I don't want the years of battle ahead of me, and the decades of rule that would follow. I want to stop and do something else.

But I have my pride.

Where are you, Hero? When will you stop me? Do you even exist?

YOU WAKE WITH A PERFECTLY CLEAR AND PAIN-FREE HEAD, AND THE ELATION LASTS THE SECONDS IT TAKES YOU TO REMEMBER THAT YOU SHOULD HAVE THE GRANDMOTHER OF ALL HEADACHES BECAUSE OF EVERYTHING YOU DRANK LAST NIGHT... and the second it takes you to understand what this means.

You'll worry about who and why later. You'll kick the crap out of the bastard later. You'll spend the next days desperately trying to get drunk and high, and your liver will feel in fire before you even begin to accept that you no longer can.

Somebody - somebody who must hate your guts - has derooified your brain for good. It's a crime in most countries, only churches being allowed to handle the stuff, but the revenge you will want to take goes much higher than the prison terms suggested by the laws.

After all, you also will never have an orgasm again.

(You will vow to yourself you won't commit suicide before you kill the bastard who wrecked your life, despite what the statistics about derooified people say.)

IT'S NOT THAT I WOULD HAVE REFUSED TO TAKE UP MY DAD'S MORTUARY BUSINESS IF I HAD KNOWN. I mean, there wasn't really anything I wanted to do, and the mortuary was as good a way of making a living as any other, and it had the advantage that I had already learned how to do it.

Or thought so, at least. The night my Dad and I agreed that I'd succeed him, he took me to the backroom and showed me the last bit of business I had yet to learn.

How to decapitate. How to stake the heart. How to sew things back up so the family wouldn't notice, and leave marks that'd tell coroners it was you who did it, should anybody open the casket again.

I let him show me everything before asking the obvious. "Why?"

"Vampires," he told me. "This is done at all mortuaries."

"There are no vampires," I said.

"I know," he said, his eyes smiling.

We never discussed the topic again, and I still don't know if he was joking or not. Either way, I honor his memory.

And I've never seen a vampire.

PERHAPS YOU CONFESSED YOUR SIN WITH FEAR FOR YOUR SOUL; PERHAPS IT WAS ONLY HABIT. You belonged to a generation that had grown up telling everything to the Net, so telling your dark deeds and darker desires to a worldwide network of Vatican-designed expert systems felt only natural. That it happened in a confession booth straight out of Baroque Spain might have also tickled your design sense.

Whatever your reason, your confession was true, as (and because) the confessor software had the voice analysis capabilities to ascertain your veracity. After confirming that you were telling the truth about the unspeakable actions you longed to commit, the confessor parsed your words, quantified your sin, and added it to an extrapolated running tally of the world's filth.

"Do it," said the confessor. It's likely that you gasped in confusion. "Do it, because with the sin in your heart, the sum of the world's outweighs the sacrifice of the Son. Salvation will no longer be possible unless He chooses to incarnate again."

You probably left the booth right then, feeling but not yet aware of the enormity the threshold you had pushed mankind through.

Have you taken your life since then? Or are you, like so many, clinging to life in the hope of a near Golgotha?

If you do, our promise is this: we will find you and we will kill you. You will not be redeemed.

LOWER YOUR WEAPON, FAILED HERO. What's the point of killing yourself? You are already dead. You attempted the impossible and failed, you gambled everything and lost, you tried to save a few lives and your hands are drenched with blood. You thought nothing of facing uneven odds, but you can't face a world where uneven odds mean you eventually lose.

Lower your weapon and work with me. The world broke down its promise first. Come with me and show the world how you feel about the tyranny of likelihoods and the pragmatism of leaving the wounded behind. Join me, failed hero.

Where did you think villains come from?

HE DOUBTED FOR A SECOND. Millenia and centuries paused with him. But what else could he have done? He had eyes to see, and this evil could have been seen with eyes closed.

It took him but an instant to surprise and kill his would-be co-conspirators, those who would have him kill a general to save a Republic they had defiled worse than any general.

And then, because murder in the Senate was not to be forgiven — and because he cared not to live in what Rome had become, perhaps — he fell on his sword, not saying a word.

Not a man of many words, had been Brutus.

"Et tu?" cried the sad, surprised old man.

WE KNEW THE ENGLISH WOULD BE SENDING THEIR MESSAGE TO ISTANBUL TONIGHT, AND WE KNEW THEY WERE AWARE OF OUR KNOWLEDGE. We had full control of all telegraph wires going through the South-East of the continent, so they would have to use a courier, yet no man alive was fast enough.

That left only one way for them to send their message, a sacrifice they were willing to make in exchange for speed and discretion. This, they didn't know we knew. Not their "underground passage," and not the name of the courier.

The clock struck one. The English Embassy in Istanbul was surely beginning to summon the sacrificed courier and his message, but we had an advantage.

"Madame Blavatsky," I asked our newest Head of Special Counter-intelligence, "please proceed."

YOU HATED MOREAU, AND WHO WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND? ALL CREATURES HATE THEIR CREATORS, SPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE AS WANTONLY CRUEL AS THE GOOD DOCTOR WAS. But you are facing impossible perils to avenge him. Very few will ask why, and no one will understand. It's because you hate him. It's because of what he did to you, and what he did to you had its roots here.

You moor your boat early at night, on a side of the island you were told nobody watches. The Crown's Institute for the Breeding and Education of High-Functioning Minds lies on the other side, and if all goes according to plan, it will be burning before dawn.

LIKE THEIR OIL-RICH COUSINS, THE SUN-RICH NOMADS OF THE DESERT COULD HAVE SPENT THEIR WEALTH ON GIGANTIC PALACES AND GOLD TOILETS. But they were too savage for that. They sent their money to engineers and factories on hardworking Vietnam, and got in return millions of stonelike devices they buried everywhere below the sand.

One day the devices activated, jamming completely the GPS band.

Having paid to have their desert back, the nomads melted into the mapless sands.

POUND BY POUND, THE LIGHTEST TEAM YOU CAN SEND TO THE OUTER SOLAR SYSTEM THAT WON'T GO MAD EN ROUTE CONSISTS OF A SMALL KID AND A SMALL CAT. If you think the kid wouldn't survive, you've never been a poor kid in an uncaring city, without even a cat.

By the time they reach Jupiter, they will be a fat cat and a very young man, too young by late Western standards, but more than capable to run the ship and all the gear. And wouldn't you want, knowing what you have learned of life, to have been a very young man with a cat who got to see Jupiter with his own eyes?

So don't cry for the kid. He had a friend and went to Jupiter. What more can you get in life? And when the cat died he was happy to die.

Cry for me. Once the mission objectives were complete, and the ship was on its irretrievable path to the space between the stars, it was I who had to send the command that killed the cat.

THEY KNEW HE WAS GOING TO SNAP. They even knew the *day*, which is why they stopped him as he entered the building with a gun under his t-shirt.

They could have eased his workload, or put him under a less psychotic supervisor. I guess it was cheaper to let him break. Sent one hell of a message, too: crazy or sane, we don't care, everything works out for us.

I've snapped, too. Predictably so. They even detained and searched me, but couldn't find anything, for I wasn't carrying any gun. So they are embarrassed, and look at me askance, and the guards think I don't know they search me with handheld devices when we share an elevator.

I've snapped, but I'm not an idiot. I've just tampered with the employee morale prediction soft. The next one who snaps, it's going to be a bloodbath. I don't even care if I get caught in the crossfire.

IT HAS NEVER BEEN SHOWN IN A COURT OF LAW THAT COMMERCIALY ENGINEERED CROPS ARE *deliberately* TOXIC WHEN MIXED WITH THE MOST WIDELY USED OPEN SEED ONES, AND THE EULAS ARE, IF NOT CLEAR TO THE LAYPERSON, CERTAINLY COMPREHENSIVE. To avoid both public health and legal complications, make sure your government follows the ecology licensing guidelines of the Better Seeds Association. We can provide you with free audits of potentially incompatible organisms in your ecosystem, and offer you safe and affordable replacements approved by the FDA and the WTO.

Be Safe. BSA.

FOR THE COPS IT'S DRUG ABUSE. For the healthcare industry, public health suicide. Pharmacorps made it a very serious felony, and pundits call it a nihilistic fad. The most positive view among outsiders is that it's the most extreme and nerdiest of the nerds' extreme sports.

For those who do it, though, immune system self-tweaking is just something you do.

Nonetheless, businesses are very serious about their employees' illegal activities. There are sets of low-grade diseases, basal inflammation levels and so on, that you must suffer at least a bit from in order to get and keep a job.

THE HEAD MESH ITCHES, AND YOU AREN'T USED TO THE DEVICES NEXT TO YOUR BED, BUT EVENTUALLY THEY FADE FROM YOUR MIND. This is your one moment of freedom in the day, as there's no immediate responsibility and you can just let your mind fade to sleep.

For one second, you just *are*.

Then a machine beeps, brainwave patterns are recorded, and the electrodes inside your head start to not only record, but actually shape the behavior of your brain.

You smile against your pillow. A perfect second of peace, which the system can stretch for hours.

You don't want to sleep now, and you don't have to. You can enjoy the feeling until the legally mandated cutoff kicks you back to normalcy.

SOCIAL NETWORKS USED TO FACE A CHICKEN-AND-EGG PROBLEM: HOW DO YOU GET PEOPLE TO CONNECT BEFORE THERE ARE PEOPLE TO CONNECT WITH? The solution was obvious once chatbots got good enough. New users would have as many friends as they wanted, very well tailored to their personality and interests.

Analysts soon found that people enjoyed more their interaction with bots than with humans, as long as they didn't know what they were. Only when they tried to move from flirting to hookups did people become frustrated, although they can always chat up their virtual friends to talk it out.

Pundits and parents still complain about the sleaze in social networks, but if you bothered to measure it, you'd see a Moore's Law for love.

YOU DIDN'T QUIT WHEN THEY REJECTED YOUR REPORT. It wasn't that you were wrong, but it would have been inconvenient to acknowledge that the Russians had deliberately dispersed methane-releasing organisms in their underground soil. They had the opportunity, of course, and the means, and the faster global temperatures rose, the better their geopolitical situation got, but internal security being what it was, you couldn't tell the Senate anything without telling the world at the same time, and the country wasn't ready to do that.

Not when the Vice President was touring the parched South saying the Long Drought was God's punishment for government-funded genetic therapies. You couldn't very well say the Russians were doing something the Bible said they couldn't do.

You didn't quit, but you are preparing to. You're learning French as fast as you can, and looking for any good plot of land in Canada the Chinese hasn't yet bought.

BABY BOOMERS WERE DYING. Organ engineering was still decades away.

The prison system was becoming unsustainably expensive. Prisoners didn't need both kidneys, or their whole livers, and they always wanted an early parole.

Besides, they already died a lot, and medical facilities could be set up close.

THEY HAD MADE THE CCTV-STUN GUN PACKAGES TOO QUICK TO SHOOT. Not so fast they misjudged who they had to shoot, and not so fast they aimed wrong. Just so fast that crowds saw people fall down, tasered by a wall-eye, but couldn't tell what they had done or tried to.

Hurried meetings were had between officials and contractors, and the system was deliberately slowed down. It meant some criminals went away, and some innocents were hurt, but the PR benefits were worth the tradeoff.

THE YOUNG MAN ON YOUR LEFT HAS HAD HIS MUSCLES GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOR AN IMPLAUSIBLE COMBINATION OF EXPLOSIVE POWER AND ENDURANCE. The young woman on your right has artificial mitochondria powering buckymuscle strands in her legs. You know in your bones you're going to lose this race, and you know you will never beat either of them. You will have to put your gold medals in a drawer, or learn to live with their unblinking mockery.

You try, and fail, to hide your smile.

"Alright," you say as you assume the set position, "let's see you outrun your Dad."

THEY HAVE NET ACCESS, SO THEY HAVE THE KNOW-HOW. And they have no other way to survive, no other thing the well-off might want.

Is it strange that the cutting edge of synthetic psychotropics comes from the world's slums? For the military, they are a source of soldiers and the occasional tool. For the politicians, they are money donors and an enemy to focus on. For almost everybody else they are the cast-off and the poisoners.

Some of us look at the seas of unpierced roofs, and wait for the future to come out.

ABOUT 73% OF THE TIME, MODERN SEARCH ENGINES ALREADY KNOW WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO ASK. But internal testing showed users felt it was too unsettling, and besides, it didn't help sell ads.

THE ARMY HAD DISABLED THE CELLULAR NETWORK, AS PER THEIR STANDARD URBAN DOCTRINE, BUT CELLPHONES ARE COMPUTERS THESE DAYS, AND YOU COULD ROUTE THINGS THROUGH PRETTY MUCH ANY MEDIUM WITH AN IP STACK. So when they came in, we were all waiting on windows and corners, phones on our hands.

They shouted and aimed at us. They knew very well we had weapons and they had guns.

"Three seconds," they said.

Over the city, over the country, in the rich boy's school and at the rich man's lunch, phones rang from unknown numbers.

"Two seconds," said the soldiers.

You took the call, and saw a soldier aiming at you.

"One second," he said.

REAL-TIME PHOTOREALISTIC RENDERING MADE MANY THINGS OBSOLETE, AMONGST THEM FORMULA 1. What fun was there in watching cars crawl by at less than two hundred miles per hour, when you could see teenage pilots twitch their way through at halfblink speed?

Still, traditional racing hold its own, at least until the first virtual pilot suffered a stress-induced in-race heart attack. That was the end of physical racing cars.

HE HAD BEEN EXPLICIT, AND SO HAD BEEN HIS LAWYERS: HE WAS MARRYING THE CHARACTER, NOT THE ACTRESS. So a full writing team was thrown in, with real-time coaches, makeup and costumes, the whole deal. Reality was for those not rich enough.

Only once did she break character, the night they replaced the actress with a younger one. She smiled then with a cynicism the woman he had married was not supposed to have. She knew better than the couple did.

The new actress' lawyers were better than the old's. The actress divorced the man when he was no longer charismatic enough, and a new actor was hired for the role.

SOME PLAYGROUNDS ARE MORE DANGEROUS THAN OTHERS. You wouldn't know unless you played in them, but the imaginary games kids play are all remarkably similar. Those who lose are physically fine, but they seldom play imaginary games anymore. Most grow up to be comfortably wealthy and boring even to themselves.

Most kids lose.

Those who win... who knows? But somebody is keeping those playgrounds open.

OUT, ON THE STREET, YOU FALL IN LOVE AT EVERY CORNER. When your eyes meet theirs your heart melts, and when they walk by it cools and shatters. You can't walk long without sobbing and running back to your apartment and prison. And who could? Being rejected by your one true love is hard enough once in a lifetime, never mind a dozen times in an hour.

Your therapist calls it a nervous breakdown, but your ex-girlfriend's curse was explicit enough.

SHE'S A RELIABLE WOMAN. She has co-locked her sexual drive with her husband's crypto key, and most of what she knows about her job she can't remember outside the office. Her ability to comprehend a song depends on paying a one-time hearing fee, and her fertility window is subject to contractual clauses involving all stakeholders on her time.

There are things she does, though, things she feels and thinks, that there are no words for, and hence no copyright. She meets with strangers in sun-flooded parks, and whispers about them on their ears.

IT WAS THE LAST STEP IN MY RESEARCH, AND BY THEN A REDUNDANT ONE. I knew without seeing, even if I didn't know how. But I was hardly the first one baffled by the man, and it was a thrilling thought that I wouldn't be the last.

If I must be honest, it wasn't as an investigator, but as a delighted fan, that I opened Houdini's coffin under the cold midnight rain. The weeping statue next to the grave seemed now to be mocking and triumphant.

What drives men to the Pole? What else is here in the frozen emptiness, but cold and death and meaningless fame? Why, nothing less than eternal life. If Walton's diary is to be believed, the creature is here somewhere, and his body holds the secret that breaks the chains of death. I daren't tell my men of this, so few in the world being aware of the secret, but if they knew - if they knew, they would not ask to go back. We must push North! North is where Walton said the creature was.

North! Life is North!

...

This manuscript fragment was found among the remains of Robert Peary's failed expedition to the North Pole. Its contents are considered suggestive of mental deterioration due to exposure, which might have contributed to the failure of the expedition and the death of Peary and his crew. No credible explanation for the "Walton" reference has been proposed, and the Head Archivist of *Amundsen Biomedical*, the organization that bought the manuscript from the ecological research team who found it, considers it a most likely meaningless puzzle.

"SO YOU DO HAVE A DOOMSDAY BOMB," SAID THE PRESIDENT.

"State your demands."

"What do you mean, demands?" said the villain as she pulled the lever down.

THE MOST FAMOUS AR BUILDINGS ARE MANY MILES HIGH. For those with glasses, which are most in Singapore, they are both part of the background and a reassuring source of pride.

Everybody knew the buildings were unreal. They still gasped and cried as the virtual planes started crashing on them and raining fire. The government fell. The military scrambled every firewall they had. Ten days later, it was already being known as the biggest stock manipulation scam of the year.

THE YOUNG MAN IS SCRIBBLING FURIOUSLY, NO LONGER CONCERNED WITH THE EMACIATED, DISSOLUTE STATE OF THE MAN DICTATING TO HIM, OR WITH THE NOXIOUS FUMES COMING FROM THE OPIUM WHO HAS TRANSPORTED THE OLD MAN'S MIND FAR FROM THE EVERYDAY WORLD. Although formally engaged as a secretary, the young man is an up-and-coming physicist of no small talent, and the fragmentary mutterings of the man lying on the couch are affecting his intellect as strongly as a narcotic would, but unnaturally sharpening his ideas instead of dulling them.

A layperson, or even a lesser physicist, would have dismissed them as metaphysical hallucinations, but to the young man Lord Maxwell's drugged words are opening dizzying new vistas about the nature of space, time, energy, and mass.

SHE NEVER GETS TO WATCH THE PUBLIC DURING THE SHOW, BUT THERE ARE ALWAYS VIDEOS, AND IT'S RARE THE FUNCTION WHERE SHE CANNOT FIND *that* GUY. It's always a guy. He licks his lips while the magician saws her in half, or maybe widens his eyes in a way she knows means he's aroused. And then, as the trick is finished and she's back in one piece, he looks disappointed, a bit hurt, a kid whose candy has been taken away.

She can always find that guy, and then it's easy to figure out his name and where he lives, and when enough time has passed she always pays him a visit and performs her own show.

She has had as much practice as any magician doing the saw trick, but the ending is a different one.

SHE WAS NOT CHASTE. Unlike her hand, her bed was a prize she could give and take away, something to drive suitor against suitor and buy her husband time to come back. Whoever gave her child, she stated, would be giving Ithaca a prince, and so would become the king.

She was not barren. But what she weaved at night with men she didn't love, she undid in bitter morning for the one she did.

(Homer, who sang of bloody battles and destroyers of men, flinched at her pain and her mettle, and shrouded it under a veil.)

DECADES OF CULTURAL OBSESSION WITH VAMPIRES HAD LED, INEVITABLY, TO A SPIKE IN THE *Reinfeld Syndrome*, THE UNSHAKABLE CERTAINTY OF BEING ONESELF A VAMPIRE. Unlike earlier incarnations of vampirism, the Reinfeld Syndrome did not lead to drinking blood or pining away; the syndrome had kept abreast of the myth, and the contemporary vampire character had little to do with gothic hematophagy.

The worst cases, though, were those that held to the classic tradition, and would go into hysterical fits if somebody attempted to lead them to open sunlight. They dismissed fellow vampires strolling at noon as mere "daywalking halfbreeds", and insisted on a nocturnal lifestyle, or at least baseball caps.

Early therapeutic attempts to trigger a crisis by forcing them to stay under the sun were quickly deemed counterproductive when patients started to catch fire.

BODYPLAN ENGINEERING WAS WHAT SAVED THE CIRCUSES, AND JUST IN THE NICK OF TIME. About half of the new circuses went for unicorns and dragons, and most of the rest for uniquely beautiful or fearsome beasts.

One circus shows nothing but an angel, which they say is a modified chimpanzee. They don't lie. Yet her eyes plead for herself and for you, and if not chained, she'd fly away.

AS SHE LEFT MY LAB, I REALIZED SHE DIDN'T LOVE ME — SHE LOVED THE MAN I WOULD BE. And the man I would be loved her back.

I looked then at my laboratory bench with a growing sense of unease. My work on retro-temporal communication depended on my future self's collaboration, and I knew then he was a man I couldn't trust.

I'd have to kill one of them or both. But how would I be able to survive that?

I remember thinking that, hoping I'd find a way, poor bastard that I was.

YOUR CHIEF OF THE GUARD SWEARS YOU'RE SAFE, BUT YOUR HEAD OF ASSASSINS SMILES QUIETLY AT THAT. Their guards say the same, and you know you could have their king killed at any time.

And then you'd die.

You sign the peace treaty, knowing your rival will have to do the same. Deadly as they are, ninjas have brought with them the end of war.

THE SKEPTIC PULLED THE SWORD FROM THE STONE (FORGET THE STONE, IT WAS JUST A DECORATIVE TOUCH). The terms of the wager had been clear, and with the help of his brother the Skeptic had verified them before picking the sword up. There were no microprocessors in the sword, no drivers, no energy source, and there were no magnetic or ultrasonic fields coming from the stone. It was just a sword in a stone when the Skeptic pulled it out.

It was just a sword in the Skeptic's hand. There were subtle cavities inside its handle and its blade, and carefully arranged masses and liquids in them, but that only made it a strange sword. It did nothing on its own.

As the Skeptic's hand moved, the sword moved against and with it, inertia and momentum playing their part. The Skeptic knew the sword was not alive, but only with the surface of his mind. His brain knew otherwise. Maybe better.

The sword's movement whispered something through muscle and nerve to the Skeptic's hindbrain, and it whispered something back. The sword traced a sudden arc, and the Skeptic's brother fell slain. The Skeptic cried in surprise, but did not open his hand.

The sword whispered. There was nobody else in the room.

The sword whispered again. The man tried to yell as his hand turned the sword with a skill it did not have, and with a speed it did not have it pushed it deep into his gut. Only then did he open his hand, made a noise, and died.

A YEAR AGO YOU HAD THE IDEA OF MINING THE NET, THE REPOSITORY OF EVERYTHING UGLY AND SCARY THE HUMAN BRAIN HAS EVER PUKED, AND SYNTHESIZING FROM IT AN IMAGE OF THE SCARIEST POSSIBLE BEING. Forty-four minutes ago, you succeeded.

Forty-three minutes ago, you realized that, among other terrifying characteristics, the scariest possible being is something both malevolent and overpowering, even when confined to an image.

For the last forty-two minutes, you've been trying and failing to keep yourself from posting the image you generated everywhere you can. But the Thing controlling you is letting you cry.

ONE DYING KING HAD A DAUGHTER, THE OTHER A SON. To ensure peace after their deaths, they ordered them to drink a love potion. The newly crowned Queen and King did so.

They drank the potion, looking at each other, and felt deep in themselves lust and love. Then they shared an smile that needed no words, for theirs were kindred souls.

And they went to war against each other.

EVEN DEEP-BLACK GOVERNMENT ASSASSINS HAVE PENSIONS; BUREOCRACIES HAVE HABITS THAT ARE TOO DIFFICULT TO BREAK. Those funds are in boringly named accounts, boringly managed by boring banks, boringly packaged, repackaged, leveraged, and sold, boringly leveraged once again through boring derivatives on boring exotic interest rate spread bets. Things so mundane that when the markets crashed as they regularly do, they got wiped — bets, derivatives, packages, banks, accounts, and funds — because of no reason more complex than having been there.

People protested on the streets, as per the ritual. The CEOs of surviving banks appeared before Congress pretending to fret. Then it were the *surviving* CEOs who started to make frantic appeals, and in this there was no pretense.

THE LAST TIGER WAS A WORK OF GENIUS, EVEN IF THAT GENIUS WAS DARK. Nobody knew what immoral engineering and science was capable of such elegant feat.

Was it in a subterranean laboratory or on a mountain slope that was the extinct tiger's DNA cloned? How was the cloning, raising, and secret dispersion of thousands of individuals financed? Who dared break so many countries' and Nature's laws?

Who had the biological and engineering skills to increase the strength and malevolence of the baseline form? Who was happy to see the hunger for human flesh burn from birth?

Who chained together all of them with neural interfaces and directed wireless comms? Who made it so they could exchange experiences and skills as they roamed? Who wanted a single ubiquitous tiger to make more terrifying the night?

When hunters started dying more often than not, and cried to soldiers for vehicles and bombs, did he smile when he saw that? Had he been a killer before re-engineering claws?

The last tiger was a work of genius, even if that genius was dark. Nobody knew what immoral engineering and science was willing to accomplish such a lethal feat.

THERE IS A TRICK WE USE TO DETECT TELEPATHS. Put them close to a woman late in her pregnancy, and they will always, *always* flinch. Most of them will try to get away however they can, and I saw a couple of real tough brainleeches puke and nearly pass out.

We don't know why they behave like this, but who knows why brainleeches do anything they do? They aren't really human, you know. Once, a telepath told me that it was because the fetus' brain supports more than one mind, and they keep going at each other until only one survives. He tried to make me believe this was why we feel guilt through our life; we remember having had somebody closer than a brother, and having fought them to death.

I'm just telling you this so you understand the kind of crap telepaths will say. They can't plant feelings in your head, but they will try to convince you that they are there, that you feel guilt, regret, or remorse, that they can see it in your thoughts. That's how they weaken you, that's how they try to save themselves.

I don't need to tell you it didn't work for the bastard I was interrogating.

ALL YOU DID, ALL YOU SAW, ALL YOU TALKED AND WHO YOU TALKED WITH. With all that information available, was it any surprise that an Internet company would come up with history's first complete, detailed, meaningful psychological profile? Something that told you, in a precise and unarguable way, what made you tick and why.

Psychologists complained to no avail. But the FDA had to take down the site for good as soon as they saw how the suicide rate spiked.

THE WORLD WAS DYING. No, the world was dead. You were the last one breathing, and yours was the irregular breath of agony. And why remain alive? The whole world had burned down in flames and poetry.

So much beauty in that poetry. So strong, the passions that came forth from it. And so hot were the flames that passionate men and woman had wielded against each other, when differences about art proved to be stronger than, and preferred to, the commonality of being alive.

The world was ashes and the stench of the dead, and you, the last person alive, were too weak even to take a diamond-tipped pen and scribble a fractal rhythm about the hallucinated angel bent over you, watching you die.

All you can ask is "Why?"

The angel shrugged, and you knew it was no angel. Such a human movement, that surrender against the world's and one's own weakness. "The world has become too homogeneous, and we need novelty to package and sell. New things from new worlds. So we make fake worlds and make the people in them forget they are fake."

You shrug, too, and it's the last movement you'll ever make. "Didn't work. We killed each other."

The man who had made the world put his hand on your forehead, as a benediction and a dismissal. "All the worlds end the same. But there's always enough of value under the rubble to make a profit and fund the next."

Your last thought is a prayer for death to be escape.

HIS WAS THE ONLY MIND IN THE HEMISPHERE WHO COULD UNDERSTAND THAT THE WEATHER PATTERN WAS BEING ENGINEERED. How and whence were technical details, but satellite data was coalescing into something too sharp to be natural. Something too strong.

When what was being made finally came into existence, it would be to a hurricane as a hurricane to a storm. It would obliterate everything in its focus beyond hope of escape or salvation.

Such a thing could not be natural, and he felt fear for the first time in his life when he concluded that the focus would engulf his city, and be centered above his home.

He took a vehicle and drove away, as far and as fast as possible, and as he looked at the pattern of winds and clouds on the sky his fear became terror pure and stark.

The focus was following him around.

YOU TOUGHT YOUR MONEY AND POWER WOULD ENSURE HER SILENCE. And they did. She died without telling any living human being what you had done to her during all those years while she was performing biotechnological magic that added billions to your billions and power to your power.

It wasn't until later that scientists first noticed an spreading change in the pattern of wild birdsong. It had a regular, almost artificial overlay, and when a student was bored enough to see if it parsed as computer data, you realized she hadn't told any human, but she had told.

You did what you could to suppress the research, to discredit her memory, and to sow doubt. It half-worked.

Then biologists came from the ocean with strange recordings of humpwhales' songs.

LISTEN, I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR NONE OF THOSE MONSTERS. I'm fighting them because it's the right thing to do. Vampires, serial killers, ghosts, ghouls, I could just hole up in my mansions and go on with my life. But I don't. I make sure they are put down.

And yes, I tried the obvious things first. Mercenaries, trained soldiers, ex-cops. Hard men and women, well-equipped, well-briefed, the best money can buy. They never work. They always, always die horribly, or come back a broken shell. Sometimes they even become monsters themselves that I have to deal with.

No, what works, and don't look at me like that, I have the numbers to show it, it's just a fact, what works is using children. Send five soldiers to a haunted house, you'll have four dead bodies and a traumatized ex-soldier who will be forever scared to death of stairs. But send five children, say between ten and eighteen, and one of them will come out alive, and, here's the big difference, the house will no longer be haunted. The ghost will be exorcised, or avenged, or whatever. And suddenly you'll have much fewer suicides and mysterious disappearances in the neighborhood, all because, yes, I sent five children into a haunted house, or arranged a school bus to get stuck in a cursed cemetery at night, or something like that.

I'm the good guy here, and you are way over your head, so put down that gun. Besides, you're just a kid. What could you possibly...

THE MILITARY MADE A SHOW OF PICKING UP THE ABSOLUTE BEST. There had never been a mission like this one, where a single soldier could, would have to make all the difference in solving a security problem that would have been impossible to understand, much less to solve, to a military of the ancient times of planes, nukes, and drones: Once you can travel through the space-between-the-spaces, the fractal frontier between any two points, how do you protect an infinitely long perimeter? The entire population of Earth wouldn't have made a dent, and the military's manpower resources were limited, if not scarce.

The solution had come from the very technology that had spawned the problem, as it was often the case. You could take the thread of a soldier's life, a single point in time, and then split it an infinite number of times, each copy of the soldier guarding one hour of one spot. It'd always be one hour and one spot per copy, but an infinite number of copies would be able to guard an infinite frontier for a period of time infinitely long (that was the Li-Cantor Theorem, for those who cared for such details, which the military did not).

So the choice had come to that, to pick one soldier to stand guard for one hour, and that soldier, and that hour, would be forever what guarded the frontiers beyond and within the world.

The selection process was long, public, and punishing, and the final choice was agreed even by the losers to be the best that could be got. He was put into a machine to stand guard for one hour.

That was a fake. The real machine was elsewhere, and the real guard was to be someone else. A soldier on guard is doing his job. But you wanted somebody scared, somebody who wouldn't dare blinking as they stare into the darkness between the worlds.

So they picked you, not at random, but almost. The good news is that you only have to do this here, and for an hour.

The bad news is that you will never stop.

SHE WAS CUTE. I was a bit drunk. I guess those are my excuses. Maybe I was also high.

Anyway, when she told me she was a VC, it was too funny to let it pass. I *had* to tell her what I do. I just had to. I mean, I wanted to impress her, and what better way than to explain to her that very few of the startups her pals and her invested on had any real traffic at all — that I was paying for our fancy dinner with "synthetic user loads" run from botnets we hired from black hat guys. I wanted to brag, alright? And I figured out she was a suit, so she wouldn't really mind the legal crap.

How could I know she'd post everywhere about it and cause a market crash? Sure, I bet she made a killing shorting things out, but I'm quite sure she did it mostly out of spite, I mean, we didn't sleep together, I swear.

Anyway. Sorry about the Feds thing, and your portfolio, and, you know. Everything. Call me back when you hear this message? I miss you. Miss the kids, too.

PARTITION THE SPACE IN TWO ENTWINED BUT SEPARATE SECTIONS, AND KEEP ONE HALF OF THE PRISONERS ON EACH ONE. Give both groups the same living conditions. Prevent communication between the groups. Tell both groups they are the guards.

SOMETIMES IT TAKES US TOO LONG TO FIND HIM; WHEN HE REMEMBERS WHO HE IS AND WHO WE ARE, HE'S THAT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO FIND AND THAT MUCH MORE DANGEROUS TO KILL. We do it anyway.

Other times we get lucky, and the signs are clear. The birthmark, the name, some event in his childhood — some generations he's easy to spot, and when we kill him he dies without knowing why. Birth records, medical systems, biometrics scans, we've helped push along all of them, as they make our jobs easier.

He's getting better at the same time. Sneakier, smarter. His experience grows with each lifetime.

So does ours. We don't remember like he does, but we have records and schools and books and our minds. We teach each other, we remember and uphold our oath of centuries.

There's an immortality that belongs to humans. Not life eternal, but life renewed. Unless you get tricked into giving up and escaping the Wheel. Unless you let him convince you that nonexistence is better.

We find and kill the Buddha, almost every time.

STAND NEXT TO PLATO, WATCHING ARISTOTLE PLAY A GAME OF STONES AND SAND AGAINST AN UNTORED SLAVE. Every time Aristotle makes a move, the slave says a word to another slave, who then runs to a nearby field where dozens of slaves move small stones from one place to another, their faces bored but diligent. Then the running slave comes back with a word, and the slave sitting in front of the board makes a move.

Aristotle laughs. He's losing. No man in the world, it had been said, could defeat him at this game, and yet he's losing to a group of slaves which he swears to Plato do not know the game, only the simple instructions he has made each learn.

His teacher rebukes his laughter, but only mildly. He's looking at the slaves in the field, the way they play the game without knowing it, and some idea as yet unseen tugs at a memory he hasn't remembered yet.

OF COURSE THEY USED THE WEAPON THE MOMENT THEY WERE TOLD THEY HAD IT. Their scientists explained and ranted about *morphogenetic field disruptions* and *Penrose-Tao ensemble collapse*, but all they could hear was *we no longer have to care about scientists*. Enemy scientists, they might have clarified in their heads, but the truth was that power was never keen on poking into Pandora's box, not unless they thought their enemies were also doing that.

The weapon changed that. No more new technologies — ever. No more strategic revolutions to worry about.

Of course they used the weapon. And then an enemy used theirs, and then another, and so on, and soon Earth was... stuck. Nobody noticed at first. People still got new iPods.

Humanity's last experiment was a solution to Fermi's Paradox, the lack of aliens in a galaxy teeming with planets and suns, but of course nobody figured it out.

MADNESS IS UNCONTROLLED REPETITION. This is how profilers do what they do: serial killers, being insane, cannot help but repeat themselves.

We profilers cannot help ourselves, either. For five years now I've been hunting a killer. I don't know if he exists, only that he could, and that if he existed, we wouldn't have caught him yet.

That's enough to convince me that he exists. I've worked at this too long to think otherwise; there are no believers in this profession, at least not in a kind god.

I still pray that there's no such thing as a randomness-obsessed serial killer, but I pray without hope.

YOU ARE NEVER SAD WHILE YOU'RE WORKING. You can't. You are in Customer Service, and the pills they give you keep you pleasantly pleased during your work hours.

It's only when you get home that the effect wears out, and then the sadness crushes you with the weight of a lifetime. You need to change. You could find a new job.

But it's easier to sign up for unpaid overtime as you usually do.

IT WAS MORE THAN AN ENGINEERING MIRACLE. The thousands building the New York-London bridge found themselves happy. They ate off the sea to build the bridge, grew pseudoplastics on the sea to build the bridge, and harvested energy from the sea to built the bridge. And as the bridge grew they found that people were moving into it, tens of thousands running away from bankruptcy or boredom or from whatever had been their lives.

It was an outsider who asked the obvious question, but it was they who answered it. They didn't want to finish the bridge. And they didn't have to.

They turned southwards well West of the Azores, and decided not to decide until later where they'd go next.

BEAUTY IS PROPORTION, AND ONCE WE HAD ENOUGH DATA, WE COULD TAKE THIS REALIZATION INTO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL, AS FAR FROM THE GREEKS' GOLDEN RATIO AS OUR ENGINEERING WAS FROM THEIRS. Almost anything could be made beautiful by fixing its proportions. Sometimes you just had to add a little something.

Sometimes you just had to take something away.

Cosmetic amputation used to be a fetish, but now it's surer than a science, and half of the foundation of art.

HAD OTHERS KNOWN THEY HAD IT, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE
END OF CIVILIZATION. For what is Civilization without Order, Or-
der without the State, the State without the Treasury, the Treasury
without gold, gold without its rarity? But Fernando and Isabel were
protected by God, and soon after their alchemists found the Stone,
an errant quack named Cristobal gave them the perfect lie to mislead
Europe as to the origin of their newly created gold.

LEGEND SAID THE DRAGON WAITED BEYOND THE LOCK. That the lock was unattached to any door was part of what made the legend so believable. Believable enough, at any rate, for you to kill your father so you could escape with the lock.

You spent a year kidnapping and forcing locksmiths to work on the lock, but eventually you realized it wouldn't be enough. The lock's metal was a strange one they had never met before. So you conquered a village that sat on a valley, and used them as slaves to mine rare metals to make better tools.

By then your army had grown big and restless, so you lashed out to nearby areas, to keep them busy and fed while you worked on the lock. Just in case, you built a fortress-palace, so you'd have a place to resist if they turned against you.

Besides tools you needed engineers, so you had farmers send you their brightest sons to be taught. That forced them to work harder, which they didn't want to. Solving that problem helped you solve the one of keeping your soldiers busy: they became serfmasters and tax enforcers.

The metal gave you better weapons. Better weapons a larger empire. You set up scribes and temples and a network of spies, and spent years on campaigns to quench rebellions or prevent them.

Forty years after the death of your father, your Master Locksmith opened the lock. By then you already knew what would happen.

Nothing. It already had.

The Dragon surveyed his empire of iron and blood.

THE GREEK MAN THOUGHT HE'D MADE A FORTUNE OFF HER, AND PERHAPS MORE, BUT IT WASN'T TO BE. There was no money to be made on face-to-face music, and digitization schemes weren't kind to the subharmonics unique to the voices of sirens.

SHE HAS SWORN TO KILL YOU. She has accepted to marry you.

She wouldn't be the woman you love if she weren't a woman of her word.

It's not without fear that you approach your marriage bed, but it's also not without want.

Her fingers are touching the knife on the nightstand.

I GOT TIRED, THAT'S ALL. Tired and afraid. You try to see the world going to hell in a handbasket, and being unable to get anyone to give a crap... Sure, I got an article on *Nature*, and so on, but that was far from enough. I could have been telling the press about this methane neosynthesis feedback loop all my life and nobody important enough would have paid enough attention to make a difference. And let me tell you, if we don't do something soon, "all my life" be as long as you'd think.

So, yeah, I sold information to the Chinese. And the Pakistanis and the Russians and even the British. Twice, I think. You know what information I sold? All the raw data of my analysis, the stuff I was trying to get the government to pay attention to.

I figured out trying to hide it from you was the only way to make you listen.

I want to talk, that's the whole reason behind this. So you see there's no need to torture me.

Please. No more.

I KEEP TRYING TO DO BAD THINGS, SO WHEN I'M GOOD IT'S BECAUSE I CHOOSE TO. Not because I want to be bad, but because I want my goodness to mean something. But I can't. I want to, I try to, but I can't.

If I could, I'd hate my parents for letting their church engineer my brain. But I can't.

God knows I try every night. But come dawn I still love them, and my newest scars have closed up.

I WOULD PITY YOU IF YOU WEREN'T A MONSTER. All that power, and you can't change the past. You can destroy armies, conquer countries, make Earth shake in fear of your machines, your rage, and your might. You can get any thing you want and any one you want, but you cannot hop on a time machine and change the one mistake you made in your past.

The past is the one place safe from you, and the one weapon I can use to hurt you. Even if I have to kill every high-energy physicist on Earth to keep you from going back.

A THEOLOGY OF OPEN MAGIC. A Blessed Mother who is also a prostitute. A Church built not on a stone, but on air. What centuries! What wars! What light!

Perhaps God hesitated for an infinitesimal moment, and in that moment there was time enough for a history.

But He struck down Simon the Magician from his joyous flight anyway, breaking his legs in three places, as Peter the Apostle has asked in his urgent, fearful, envious prayer.

THEY GAVE YOU A NEW NAME, A NEW FACE, A NEW COUNTRY, AND NEW FRIENDS. But you still liked what you liked, off and on the net.

The ad was shown to one person: you. And once you clicked on it, the ones you had betrayed knew where you were.

"DO YOU WANT TO REVOKE YOUR EX-HUSBAND'S ACCESS CODE TO YOUR PHYSIOLOGICAL SENSORS?" "No, not yet."

"That's a standard part of divorce proceedings, you know. There will be no cost involved, and will help protect your privacy."

"He used to check on them to know how he was doing in bed, and later to figure out if I was having sex with someone else. I wasn't, then, but I will now, and if he wants to know, he's welcome to."

HE DOESN'T TALK MUCH. He no longer tries to build a machine he knows he can't.

He could only read *Flatland* once.

Mostly, Escher draws, and pines, and endures his exile.

TWO CROWNS HAD SEEMED PRIZE ENOUGH FOR HIS SOUL, HIS SOUL SMALL PRICE FOR THE CROWNS. But royal dignity once acquired made it felt how little it weighted, and as he knew the time was coming when witches would want their levy, James decided instead to kill them beforehand.

HE KNEW SHE'D LEAVE HIM. She knew what he really thought of her. He foresaw his own heartbreak, and the sleepless nights to come. She could see in his thoughts, before she first saw his face, the underlying ugliness that some day she would not be able to endure no matter everything else.

He was a precog, and she was a telepath, but they were also human, and so they kissed.

I BOUGHT A NEW PHONE. The old one kept making reservations for two, suggesting romantic movies, and ordering with the groceries that ice-cream I hate. But I keep the old one in a drawer. In enough years, I think, your memory won't burn my eyes, and by then I will have forgotten more of you than I'd want.

I'll turn on the old phone then, and let it tell me about how we were like.

IT COULD'VE BEEN THE BIGGEST HIT IN THE SPIRITISM WORLD - H. P. Lovecraft's typewriter. Their goal, they said, was to honor him, but it was clear they hoped to summon the man.

But you stole the typewriter before the auction, and conducted your own ritual. There was more at risk than their petty projects: you had to curse the typewriter for all time. With any luck, and you were due a break, the typewriter would be cursed also into its past, and it would project into its user whispers of sanity-crushing horror subtly taking control of mankind.

With any luck, he'd be able to raise the alarm.

BECAUSE HE COULDN'T SIMULATE WHAT MIRROR NEURONS DO, AND HE COULDN'T GET PERMISSION TO USE A VOLUNTEER'S, THE MAN WHO WASN'T A PSYCOPATH USED HIS OWN. He had no desire to break his own brain, he wanted enough sanity to enjoy the Nobel and the post-Nobel getting laid, so instead of cutting out the tissue he needed, he put in his brain the circuits he would use. Thus the Man Who Wasn't A Psycopath became the first Generalized Shaman, somebody who could read system behavior in emotional terms.

That was his Nobel Prize there.

But because he also liked money, and he knew what drives fame, his first real experiment was to hook himself up into real-time market data. He had had visions of his unique insight into markets allowing him to become wealthy (the end result, also being laid).

It didn't drive him crazy, but it came near. Imagine a mind-thing designed to be pure hunger, a proactive variant of the Second Law of Thermodynamics embodied into protocols and hedge funds. Imagine a hundred million piranhas eating each other at the speed of a packet-switched global net. Now imagine force-feeding data to the empathetic bits of your brain until you knew exactly how that thing felt.

He only remained plugged for a few minutes, until he fell from his chair and his electrodes disconnected, but when he regained consciousness he knew he had been close to insanity, and that he might become insane yet. He needed something else. Something pure.

He should have taken drugs, but he plugged into the planetwide ecological monitoring network instead. Maybe he was already insane, and this was a suicide attempt.

He puked and yelled and cried and shat upon himself. I don't need to explain. The planet might not have been dying, but it wasn't really in the best state.

A grad student found him at noon, which was the start of the

Lab's working day. He's a psychopath now, but he says it's ok, it was in self-defense.

He got the Nobel and he got laid. He also made money with his machine, selling them to governments as a surveillance data integration device. The operators of the machine have a tendency to end up working against the government, but they figured that out too late. Either way, he doesn't care.

EVERYBODY IN THE EDITORIAL THINKS THE WRITERS ARE PULLING THEIR LEGS, BUT BECAUSE THE PUBLICITY IS GREAT, THEY ARE HAPPY TO LET IT BE. Almost all of the writers think that the editorial is inserting that mysterious crossover character into their works, the one who's "looking for John," and although the publicity is good and the money would be, no writer can see their text modified without a barely (sometimes) controlled rage.

One writer is scared like hell. His name isn't John, but it used to be, back when...

But the guy is dead. He has to be.

NICOTINE. Sugar. Caffeine. Generalized addictive substances are well known and hardly a competitive advantage, particularly the legal ones.

There's no commercial advantage on it being widely known that, knowing enough about an individual's physiology, it's possible to synthesize a compound that will be uniquely addictive to them. Not as addictive as cocaine, but wholly legal and easier to monopolize.

Ever wondered why Starbucks baristas always want to know your name?

AMBASSADORS WERE DISPATCHED WITH INCREASINGLY FRANTIC MESSAGES AND MANNERS, AND THIS NOT ONLY BECAUSE OF THE MEANS THROUGH WHICH THEY WERE SENT. But there was no message from the other side, and not even an slowdown in the sudden hostilities.

In all by name, Hades had declared war, and nobody knew why in the Department of State.

FOR MOST PEOPLE, THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF QUANTUM COMPUTERS IS EVEN WORSE THAN THAT OF CLASSICAL ONES. They get lost on metaphysical mazes about parallel universes and observers' intent, which as far as you're concerned are bad metaphors for quite elegant math. Nonetheless, you need the money, and they seem happy with whatever random words they get back from their little "emails to the other side."

You have a nice scam going; perhaps you'll keep it up after you finish paying your student debt. Hell, if you find a convincing frontman, you might even franchise out, go big, incorporate some sort of religion.

Before then, though, it'd be a good idea to iron out the bugs. Lately, all the test messages-to-nowhere you send don't get random responses, but the single word "Don't."

THEY KICKED HIM OUT HOLLYWOOD BECAUSE HIS METHOD WORKED TOO WELL. It wasn't the privacy crap, as if their parents' voice was such a precious secret for a crowd who posted blow-by-blow accounts of their wedding nights. And it wasn't the people who fainted on the trial runs — it was a horror movie, of course some people wouldn't have the guts.

That was the point, to scare the bastards. And he had figured out how the scare even the hardest of the hard.

No, they had exiled him to god-forsaken Nigeria, the country that would make any movie provided it would sell, because they didn't want to face what his success would mean. They wanted personalized movies, but they didn't want to face the origin of horror. Mention their names, yes, but blend in the voice of their parents... But that had been two years ago, when he was still welcome in the United States. Now he was in Lagos, working with a bunch of highly informal IT guys who had been left behind when the scam industry moved elsewhere.

The execs had balked at using the voices of the audience's families, using a flimsy excuse that they only had the legal right to use abstract data, not voice patterns. Very well, he'd restrict himself to that data. He had a new thing going on.

He did a beta test of the new method on himself, deriving characters and plot from publicly discoverable family dynamics. His family life had been relatively mild, and yet he had been too scared to finish reading the script.

His comeback was sure to be a hit, provided it didn't kill too many watching it. In his drunkest and most honest moments, he acknowledged to himself that it was a win-win.

ALL THE GOOD BARS HAVE LABS-IN-A-CHIP. Pop one from the counter, spit on it, and the bartender gets enough info to make you one killer mood-and-physiology-tailored drink.

Those are the good bars. This girl has taken you to the best. No labs-in-a-chip here, so for a horrified second you think it's a retro thing. Then the bartender french kisses you.

"Okay," you think.

The bartender pulls back, nods once, thoughtful, and then kisses you again for a short while, before biting your lip to make it bleed. He licks the blood in a way that you try to pretend it's not hot.

"Cortisol," he mumbles to himself, "but low on adrenaline. You need something to shake you up."

You think you have found it, and it's not going to be a drink. You just need to figure out how a line to get his number that he hasn't heard yet.