

0000

GREY

Finland...

finland?

What the fuck am I doing in Finland?

...

My head was aching. It's memory gone and in its place was an empty feeling that angrily demanded to be filled. A painful gray fog coated the inside my brain which now held only primitive thoughts and questions.

"cold,
fuck,
where I,"

"who"

"damn"

One of those questions had just been answered by a blue-black waxed-haired teen street farger, barging out the icy streetsides. He replied "You're in Helsinki, freakin alcohollitouri, now get out."

This was not right, not right at all. But...

"damn"

I was not drunk, but something had happened to me.

"drugs?"

maybe.

"THINK" I shouted into the empty painful void that neck and shoulders was now carrying.

The window glass in a nearby storefront gave a ghostly reflection.

Grey,

Dirty,

Old,

Far older than expected.

Long filthy, matted gray-brown hair hung down over face and shoulders. An image emerges from the fog of an institutional cleaner's mop - long over used. Disgusted the image is pushed aside as is the clumped hair covering the face. It's better - dirty, unshaven but better. A few deep lines, crows feet and a few general wrinkles sat atop strong cheekbones and chiseled nose. The chin was tight and supported the cheeks and brows well. The eyes, despite the vacuum behind them, were clear and a bright intelligent blue. I take solace in this and smile. Teeth straight and surprisingly white flash. They stand in marked contrast to the rest of my appearance.

My reflection returns a puzzled look.

The clothes I wear are dirty, smelly and yet not worn-out. Torn without fraying.

Something wasn't right about this.

"Good, good, good." I utter aloud. A limited ability to reason was better than none at all.

The coat is long, black and of a leatherish material. A good fit and perhaps with a good cleaning it (and myself) would be very presentable. Now just who is being presented? The pockets, inner and outer are empty. They remain empty after a second check just in case the first one had missed something. Then after allowing a few minutes to pass (in which something hopefully would magically appear in them) I check again.

Empty.

Casting an eye down the street is equally unhelpful. Rows of four to six story buildings line the snowy streets. Its daytime, but very cloudy overhead. A few scattered people go about their business. Only a LIM, a limited artificial intelligent street cleaner pauses to notice me. On a primitive level, I realize it's downloading me as an undesirable, another piece of trash to be swept up. If there were town event or parade the police would take me away. Police? No not yet anyway, is concluded. I wish I knew whether it was because of pride or of fear. My thoughts, even in this brief amount of time are getting easier to put together. Slightly happier I check my pockets and look for a new outcome.

Empty, was I robbed? Beaten over the head until my thoughts and memories left screaming. No, no the pain is deep inside, and my hands can find no bump bruise or swelling.

Hands?

Hand, no, no, the wrist.

Just above the cuff of the black coat, as it crosses my vision a glint of warm gray metal shimmers. A watch? bracelet?

A computer! A top of the line Zhou Chaser 1104. A post-human work of art in a flowing graphsteel casing, six small data ports recessed deep into the bottomside of the device

and the flat hol0 projector is housed on the topside in a sexy silver raised impression, about 3 inches long and .25 inches wide. Weight is 3.4 ounces and custom fitted for each user.

Internal nanotech is mached with a 4x4 Moore cognitive array. Deep interlink processing along a Talo-Moskia cyberneural buffer. The inboard LIM was a full level 6 intelligence modified for tech development work. A 2.2 Teraoptic portable memory stick, capable of "Putting the World at Wrist"™. Input and output functions ran on any open channel spec...

Damn.

I'm a geek.

And my name is Harrison Puck.

With that realization came pain and darkness.

PEOPLE

Looking up at a grey cloudy sky is like looking inside my head.

With effort the clouds form images. These pictures have replaced the emptiness.
Disconnected flashes of my past mix with odd cartoon-like hallucinations. Unnamed
faces and events fade in out, at one point an entire city seems to float in the sky above.

I lean up, to find I'm on a bench in a park overlooking a lake in the center of the city.
Two, no three people in sight. They jog past, each trying harder than the last to ignore
me.

To one middle aged woman I shout "Hey"
Her back turns further from me. "Hey you"

Shrug

I'm a filthy old man sitting in pissed in, and oh god, crapped in clothes.

I smell horrible.

Joggers suck.

I turn and watch her run along the lakeside, past a row trees and think not about her, but
about Harrison Puk and the Zhou computer. There's no Theramin thigh-top keyboard, no
VR headset navigator, just the minitrack pad, which I don't often use. My arm falls to
the side.

The Zhou has files on me.

Where I'm from, who I know, what I do, everything is in its memory. It's my key.

Even the dark thought that "its" memory being empty is replace by a more positive notion.

The Zhou is credit interlinked.

I can rent a room, bath and eat!

No.

No.

No.

The Zhou's powercells are at critical. Only the Kinosync generator, which converts the actual swinging motion of my arms into electric current is keeping it going. The machine works (probably) and won't run out of power (probably) if I motion once and awhile.

But there's only enough power for maintaining the system, nothing for operations.

Ponder.

Banking doesn't take "much" power. It's just an auto function, like a powered version of the magnetic strip on the old bankcards. So maybe the hotel is a good bet, just need a little more power.

The Kinosync was optimized for a person in motion, running with arms swinging.

“Damn.”

Taking a deep breath I stand up.

Stretch my legs, massage the cramped knotted muscles, and begin to jog,

Arms are flailing,

The long black coat flutters madly

Do I actually do have money in my account?

Why am I so smart one minute and stupid the next?

“Damn.”

The flat dress shoes do hurt my feet.

The piss stains on the front of my pants are becoming cold with the slight breeze of running.

The fact that I'm woefully out of shape is becoming apparent.

Despite all of this, the run however still feels good. It's the first real action I've taken since whatever happened to me happened. Even with the grey overhead the park is beautiful. Crisp white with rows of birch and northern pine trees set along a paved lakeside path. The slight scent of pine trees is gratefully registered by my frozen nose. Along the water, ducks and geese stare at my passage. Seeing me madly "flapping my wings", they must assume I'm trying to fly.

A few honk as run by. "Honk, foolish human, Honk, Honk. Bring us some bread"

This inward attempt at humor is lost as I wonder if I actual heard the ducks speak to me.

"Delirious?"

"Fuck" I mutter.

Turning a corner a round a large 1st Gen Modernist sculpture I see the woman I had said "Hey" to.

She's stopped to catch her breath and stretch a bit.

Gently her arms left to right, right to left, left to over her mouth.

Her eyes open wide and fear colors her expression. She nervously begins to run.

Good, I think to myself. I didn't want to have to stop or talk or deal with her either.

Loud heavy breathes echo from my lungs, I'm a running an obscene phone call.

It's definitely good that she can't hear the lurid sound.

Still, I watch her. Her long easy strides fill me with jealousy. Soon she's far ahead, away from this perceived danger, this awful dirty man. Soon she'll be "safe".

To my surprise she stops, reaches into her shoulder pack and pulls something small out.

Shambling along, the distance between us closes.

She's talking to the little something and looking at me.

It's a cell phone.

She's calling the police.

Instinctively I want to explain.

Out of breath, the shouted words fall and fail.

"I'm... just... recharging my powercells."

"Not about you."

"Not you"

"Just I need to recharge"

She responds by running again, I can almost read her lips as she speaks into the link.

"Oh god, oh god !!!! He wants me to "Recharge" him. Send help now! Send help

Now!!!" Pure middleclass terror contorts her face and body. She screams and races away,

The pathway divides in two, she goes one way. I go the other.

Maybe it's a good time to get to a hotel. My legs heavy logs but my arms are still swinging like a British soldier on parade. A very tired British soldier that is who now tries to march but can only stagger through the snow covered side streets. In the distance sirens make themselves heard, in the distance a hotel emerges.

"Double-time it soldier."

It is a neomod structure, with white plastic flowing forms rise vertically up it's eight stories and forward swept balconies done in dark reflective glass.. Two fat columns support the entranceway. A large silver turnstile door automatically recoils from my presence and allows me access to the lobby. It is immaculate. Silver and carbon steel gracefully accent the blonde wood and white plastic walls. Tasteful if somewhat bland abstract paintings hang on the walls.

The largest painting is behind the reception desk. Sharing this space with the painting is a beautiful woman, the most beautiful one I can remember. Her hair is a deep magenta red, not a natural color but still very fitting to her, Glasses perch on her slender nose and red lips move slightly as she reads a vid screen. As she turns an ample bosom reveals itself, pushing past the unbuttoned buttons on her white pleated shirt that is the company uniform, past the red lacy brassier that clearly is not. Urges of a young man take hold as an attempt at flirting is contemplated.

I smile and nod.

She abruptly turns toward me. "We have no available rooms, please exit the premises."

And immediately turns back to her vid screen. After the glimpse of her soft breasts I can only stumble forward and shake my head. My mouth hangs open.

Unable to ignore me she turns to me again,

She starts to speak, but I'm quicker this time.

"I'm sorry miss. I've had a rough time, I believe I've been robbed"

The clear English I speak and the notion that I was robbed stops her. Her lips part as her mind starts to process this new information. Raising my arm I reveal the Zhou. It's definitely not the property of a homeless man. "Miss, I believe I can afford any room you might have available. Please I'm tired, far from home, and need to rest."

Still puzzled, she asks? " Shall I call the police?"

"No, not yet" I reply wearily "My memory is still foggy. I don't know what happened or where I've been. I don't know what to report"

Her head cocks to one side "Maybe the ticket pinned to your coat will tell us something"

My eyes lock on to hers and stare blankly.

"Sir?" she continues. "It's on the arm of your coat"

My hand reaches around as she corrects me "Sorry, it's on your right, up near your shoulder."

Mumbling like an idiot, I find the scrap of paper and slowly remove it from my shoulder. It's in a language I don't understand, so I look up and return to blankly staring at her.

She in turn reaches over, and takes it. "It's Russian, a train ticket from St Petersburg"

A "Hfmp" is all I can manage.

She nods and continues "Its dated 11/11/2067. Left at 23.10 arrived in Helsinki at 2.45. It's the night run. Hmmm... Four days ago? Sir, have you been wandering around for the past four days? "

I can't answer her question, I'm still am coping with Russia. What the fuck was I doing in Russia? Instead I shake my head.

After moment of trying to remember the events of the past four days I revert to the dealing with the matters at hand. "Lets just get me checked in. I need to be clean. I need to be fed."

"Yes, sir" she replies and begins to type on her keypad. I motion the Zhou over the data exchange pad on the receptionist's counter. Finger crossed.

Pause.

The financial data is transmitted to her terminal, as well as my public access medical file, and a mini bio with photo ID.

Leaning over the counter I stare at the image of myself. Distinguished, fits best (It is the proper way to describe an old man who is still somewhat attractive.) Below the image is a name: "Dr. Winfred Theo Poh"

It's me.

But not me.

And stranger still is that this doesn't feel strange.

"Sir?"

The fog in my head seems to accept "Winfred" as a name of mine. Flashes of parties pass by, wine, cheese, boring highbrow conversations on art. A gallery?

"Sir?"

Like a man slowly waking from a dream, I very slowly look up

"Yes?"

The receptionist smiles now for the first time, it's very pretty. "We have room 724 for you Dr. Poh. It's a suite with two iVid screens and a sauna"

Again I blankly stare at her.

The receptionist, now completely sympathetic asks "Perhaps you need a doctor sir.."

"Perhaps" I sigh. "Let me clean up first. Send a list of nearby doctors or medical centers to my room.

"Also...."

My fingers gently tap the desk

"Does the hotel do laundry?"

"Yes Dr Poh"

"Great, I'll get in the shower and leave my clothes by the door. Please send housecleaning by."

She nods and I continue. "And does my room have a VR suite."

"No" She says "But we do have a business center with two VR suites.

You'll need an appointment to use them. Call the desk or register from your rooms iVid."

A rumble from my stomach brings back that wonderful smile to her face. She asks "Can we feed you Dr, Poh"

If I wasn't a complete mess I think she's flirting with me.

If I wasn't a complete mess I might have said something else.

"Yeah, ah...hmmm...comfort food. Something quick like soup maybe and bread, and some fruit. And ah...tea - hot tea."

She picks up what might be a menu. I stop her "Miss, just send something up." With that I begin look toward the elevator and think for a moment.

I've forgotten something. (Actually I've forgotten a lot of somethings, someplaces, someones etc, but this was different.)

"Oh and Miss do you have a charger for my computer it's a Zhou Chaser 1104."

She shrugs and thinks for a moment "I'll call business services"

"Thank-you" I reply as I begin moving to the elevator.

"Your very welcome, Mr. Poh. Enjoy your stay"

A wry smile parts my lips "My friends call me Winnie". The joke is lost on her but for me it's a pleasant reminder I once had a sense of humor.

"Carry your bags Mr. Poh?" A new voice spoke. It comes from down around my knees. A LIM, this one small and wheeled, sort of a semi intelligent hand cart is offering to assist me.

"No bags LIM"

"Shall I escort you to your room then?" It asked

"Lead on"

With that it moved a few feet in front of me. An elevator had arrived and a family just gotten on to it. Tourists I assume. The mother sees the rambling mess approaching and puts her arms around her two small children. A concerned look registers on her face. The father reaches for the elevator's control panel. Repeated the fingers press the door close button, but the doors will not close. My LIM has access to all the hotel's equipment and is holding the elevator for me. Unable to block the pile of garbage coming at him, his face becomes tinged with red. The kids also note my appearance, small arms quickly wrap about the mother's legs.

"Come on LIM, let's get another elevator. I've had enough trouble today."

The LIM turns and the parents, now grateful, offer a pair of meek smiles as the doors on their elevator close. A moment passes and a second elevator arrives. It's empty. The LIM

and I step on. Through the dark glass of the lobby door I see a police car slowly driving by. Its lights flash brightly.

Behind the closed doors and headed for safety, I breathe deeply. An odd sense of place settles in. The receptionist ordered me out in Finnish not English and I understood her.

"I speak Finnish?" I ask?

Missing my inflection, LIM offers an unexpected reply "That is good Mr. Poh. Most people in Helsinki speak English should you have trouble."

Trouble? I let the LIM's statement pass and focus on the fact that I knew what the receptionist was saying.

"Hemp."

After moment of mental concentration, phrases come forward. Slowly I mouth the words. "No mushrooms on my pizza", "I do not wish to be the father of your children", "Do you like the music?", "do you like Acid?". The last one brought a wave of dizzying colors and patterns, melting worlds in a purple cyberdelic haze. So many colors. So beautiful. So beautiful.

CLEAN

"Sir?..."

"Sir?..."

"Mr. Poh, we have reached your floor. Please exit the elevator"

"Sir?" The little bot spoke in loud flat tone.

Eventually, I look up and respond.

"Okay"

With that, the LIM left the elevator and rolled into the hallway. Its onboard sensors tracked my movement and kept the machine out from underfoot, yet always close by, guiding my steps. At the end of hall it opens a door and announces.

"Your room sir"

It does not enter the room and instead spoke up. "Housecleaning will come in 25 minutes to pick up your laundry. You have requested soup, bread and a fruit tray from room

service. If you have any changes or new requests, this unit will forward them to the appropriate departments."

Tired and happy I reply: "I'm fine."

The LIM leaves shutting the door behind it.

Shower, or maybe a bath, shower or bath, it's a pleasant decision to make.

The stinking filthy crapped in clothes are soon in a pile by the door.

Wash them? I should've said burn them. Oh well, its housekeeping's problem now.

The underwear is especially bad. After a moments' thought, its moved to the trashcan.

The plastic liner is tied shut.

Naked and suddenly realizing that I'm naked I do a quick assessment. Not great shape, yet not bad shape either. Slightly above average seems to fit. Some muscle tone indicates that long ago I may have been very athletic. The five to six extra inches of gut that hangs completely without grace or shame indicates that lately I've spent at lot of time sitting on my ass.

"Well, Fuck" I say to no one but myself. I want to take a bath but there is still a small, expensive, and very important computer strapped to my wrist. How does it come off?

The machine wraps seamless around my wrist. How the fuck does it come off?

There's a switch on the side that I vaguely remember opens the clasps. It's frozen. This helps explain why the Zhou is still on my wrist. After 20 minutes of prodding it remains there. Stomping around the hotel room helps calm me down. The machine is still nearly without power, only the bare minimum of functions work. I suppose I should be grateful that the banking function worked.

Frustrated, naked and so close to being clean I opt for a easy short term solution. A plastic trash bag pulled from a wastebasket fits like a long cheap glove. It covers my left hand, left wrist and hopefully will keep the Zhou from getting wet. Staring at the plastic I believe the Zhou is water resistant, and maybe even water proof. With a sigh I acknowledge that now is not the time for testing the company's claims. A second bag covers the first.

There is no bathtub, so by default I shower. The stream of mud and oil soon clogs the drain. My feet move to push the filth through it. With one hand in plastic and held up and out of the spray of water the other tries to shampoo the mass of gray dreadlocks that surrounds an aching head.

Lather rinse, repeat, repeat, repeat. The tiny bottle is soon empty and two small bars of soap are gone. My free hand is overwhelmed by the mess and grows tired. In spite of this, it's heaven. Muscles that had wanted an apology for making them run through the park are reborn beneath a hot pulsing stream of water. My back having slept on god knows what for four days relaxes. A third bar of soap disappears into nothingness.

I'm clean and surprisingly have only a few scratches, one bruise and... I guess a scab or blemish behind my ear to show for this ordeal.

Hmmm...maybe the scab is something.

"Room service!"

Barely hearing the call I turn off the water.

"Room service!"

"Just a minute!" I shout. Quickly wrapping a towel around me, I step out of the bathroom. The person from room service is gone and taken the pile of dirty clothes with them. On a small round table in the corner of the hotel room - food. Hot soup, fruit, cheese and breads. In heaping soupfuls, the bowl is empty in minutes. The bread, fruit and cheese quickly follow.

Warm, clean, and now fed, my body slides back into the chair. With a newly found and much welcomed sense of leisure I consider what to do next. The Zhou needs the charger and hopefully it's coming. I'll have to stay in the room. This is not a problem. I have no clothes.

Unable to be totally productive, the idea of more leisure steps in. It's prompted by the open door to the suite's personal sauna. A trace memory of this Finnish tradition, speaks of the popularity of this hot steamy realm. It's a haven for generation of frosty Finns

seeking a respite from the Arctic cold. The 1959 Miss Universe was from Finland. When she was asked about her wonderful skin she replied "Sauna".

"Sauna?"

"Yeah, sauna sounds good"

"Miss Universe 1959?"

"Damn"

"I should probably stop talking to myself too."

EDUCATION

Heat, wet relaxing heat, reclined on a built in wooden chair everything melts away. The indicator lights on the Zhou, now re-wrapped in plastic, glow faintly, its powercells are taking the charge from the charger. In an hour, it will be fully functional again. The chamber is dimly light by a few indirect lights and a number of small indicator lights positioned in various places in the space. It's perfectly quiet. Leaning back and stretching my arms to the sides a discovery is made. A small sliding door maybe 5 inches wide and 8 inches tall. A small green light glows to the left of the door. There's even a small shelf or countertop. A beverage dispenser? No it's better it's a cybauto drink maker.

"One frozen margarita" I command.

A green flashes while the whirling sound of metal blades pulverizing the ice is heard.

Wonderful, I think, honestly wonderful. There are only a few times when technology really rises to an occasion to deftly serve humanity.

Now is such a time...

The small door slides back. The 12 oz plastic cup is filled to the frosty rim. And there's even salt on the rim. I take a sip of the cool, refreshing, relaxing tonic. Its perfect, just what the doctor ordered after 4 days of being fucking lost inside my own head. Perfect, slowly I raise my glass and ponder some appropriately pompous phrase.

Before I can toast the technology, the automatic bartender's LIM states a message.

"Greetings Dr Poh, You have activated the hotel's Don Co Cybartender 3.3i.

In accordance to the hotel's liability insurance policy your consumption and body functions will be monitored. This information is completely secure and confidential. A complete description of the policy can be made available. Simply say "more" for more information or repeat to repeat this message."

I say nothing, but inwardly I revise my early compliments to modern technology.

"Thank-you for choosing us Dr Poh. Please enjoy your stay"

Between slurps of frozen margarita a second discovery is made. Imbedded in the arm of the chair are a number of rubberized buttons. A bit more exploration indicates it's an old fashioned keypad. A bright light appears, it's blinding.

It's an iVid screen.

Slightly dazed I read the instruction screen and flip to the main menu. Its in English, but clearly whomever designed the interface had it as a second language. Five minutes pass as I shuffle through lists and menus. What a pain in the ass. At one point, fifty categories appear. Unrelated, unstructured, information is far worse than being useless. The glimmer of functionality lies within it, what I want is in there somewhere. My head begins to ache. Selecting one, almost at random brings up a sub menu. Another fifty choices appear. The pain in my head increases as I process all these choices. Each further selection leads to things I don't want. There's just too much and my mind is too empty. Billions of choices, most of which suck, I'm lost. Fuck it, I'm partly to blame, a very small part. Not knowing what I want contrasted with having everything at my fingertips equals a migraine headache the size of some country whose name escapes me.

"Damn"

"Hey LIM, another frozen margarita"

Thankfully the bartending LIM, having already delivered it's message, produces the drink in silence. After a long slurp my eyes return to the menu screen. In the top corner of the screen a pull down menu offers a few new options.

"Choose by Previous Selections" Sounds easy.

Maybe the last person to stay in this room had good taste. The option is selected and a moment passes as the computer makes the choices. A list of titles accompanied by small pictures soon appears.

Porno

Porno

Porno

Porno

Porno

Porno

Porno, with a woman who looks like my magenta-haired receptionist.

"Click"

It begins with a close-up of plush red lips. They part, a pink tongue licks them wet, the camera slowly pans around and down, following the curves of her body. Firm natural breasts artfully pass by. She takes a breath and her chest gently rises. My own body responds in kind. A slim waist leads to a perfectly sculpted ass. The camera now positioned between her strong naked thighs. Music, sort of a country western genre plays as the focus shifts from the legs to the distance. A figure appears and quickly looms large in the scene. A cowboy deck-out with the prerequisite cowboy hat, chaps, boots with spurs, and tight, pin-stripped, bikini underwear.

He dismounts the horse, smiles and she leaps on him. The rough and ready stud is soon on his back, and she's on top grinding, moaning, and shouting names. "Nielson, Tony, oh...oh baby, Oscar." His hands reach up, gently caressing her thighs and in a flowing motion he rolls the both of them over. The gentle caress changes to series of hard smacks to her perfect ass. On cue, her bottom sways side to side. He removes his pinstriped briefs.

He a decked about like a cyborg, designed for sexual pleasure.

A silver-chromed member telescopically extends. Mini-neon running lights on the side power-up and the device begins to pulse. The tip of this synthetic penis is flat and in an instant it's purpose becomes clear. It's a mini-vid screen.

"Fuck?" I look on in amazement. And despite the naked flesh, try to see what the small image on the penis is. The camera doesn't go to a close-up, instead it moves to the women. She's nearly climaxing at the sight of his tool.

"Yes, Yes, Yes" she cries.

I wonder if they would do it?

Yep...

A vagina cam.

Positioned deep inside her, the scene (with live audio) begins to take shape. Juicy pink flesh is repeatedly thrust aside while faces on the mini vid screen, unknowingly appear and speak. One face is a prototypical geek with glasses and five-dollar haircut. A windowed logo and a chart of his net worth (several billion dollars) appears behind him. Soon other faces appear and are rhythmically juxtaposed within her walls. Businessman meet, hands shake, and images of old entertainment empires pass by.

What the hell is this? A quick click on the "info" button brings up a small window with title and credits. "New Media Cowboys - A Sexual Interpretation of the American Media Experience at the Turn of the 21st Century. Produced by the Canadian Royal Institute for New Media Arts and Sciences."

"Fuck" Back to the porn vid.

The vagina cam is still going only now it's showing old cars chasing, exploding, flying in the air. An orange car with a confederate battle flag is the climax.

"Oh, Oh Oh, Ohhhhh" The magenta hair woman cries.

The camera is back on her. Close-up, soft focus, eyes closed, lips slightly open, she's amazing beautiful.

The moment takes me. My hand goes for it. I remember sex. Still no names - but behind my closed eyes, their faces come into soft focus.

The moment passes.

On screen the porn vid cowboy is backing away from the girl. The camera shifts to the horse. He's a cyborg too.

"Click" Return to main menu.

Relaxed, calm, and happy to know my equipment still works, I lean forward in the slotted wooden chair. The sauna has done its' job. Stretching out in this warm moist place feels so good. New thoughts also come forward. Maybe there's a woman, a woman who loves me, is out there waiting for me. I believe she'd enjoy taking my newly reclaimed virginity.

The period of calm passes. Could I be married? Children?

The satisfaction of surviving the past four days gives way to questions of the past. There is no reassurance in the emptiness. It was not the lack of answers that struck out at me now. It was the questions.

Do I love someone?

Does someone love me?

Does someone hate me?

Any question poised could be valid, could be important, could kick my memories back into gear.

What is my favorite color

"Fuck" I say aloud "What's my favorite color? Blue? No wait, Green."

The answer which was no answer is Grey and it remained indifferent to my inquiry

"Am I married?"

There's no ring on my finger. Doesn't mean anything though, having been robbed of everything. Almost everything. I have the Zhou.

It takes some effort to move my muscles, the sauna has worked too well. The computer needs power. Power comes through the charger, the charger that was to be provided by hotel business service. A check on the iVid info panel, data on room 724, shows my request was not possible, no charger in stock.

They require a call.

POWER

"Business Services this is room 724, I'm awaiting a charger for a Zhou 1104"

The reply is short and immediate "We don't have that item."

“Do you have a 110 volt sUSB charger”

The next reply is shorter “Ah...”

“It’s the standard for 25% of the mobile devices in the world. Check any existing devices you have and chances are its charger will work for me.”

There is a lull before he speaks. He is contemplating his own ignorance, makes plans to defend it further, and responds accordingly.

“We can’t break-up a set of devices”

“I need it for 2 hours tops, the Zhou is a quick charge device. Just send a LIM.”

And I add. Or, I can come down there.” This sentence is spoken with the anger that now wells up inside me. There is a second lull followed by a more humble response. “Ah, I just checked and yes we can help you. A LIM will arrive in the next 15 minutes.”

Then with a sudden sound of authority “You’ll have 2 hours and then the LIM will return for it.”

“Fine”

I’d be angry with the hotel’s business services person but there are other more important matters to attend to. In a few moments many questions would be answered. My confirming my true name for starters. Winfred Theo Poh was clearly an alias. It sounds too close to a 20th century children’s story character to be real. I frown. A man with an alias is a man with secrets. The Zhou may not hold all the answers. After all, secrets are not meant to be found.

“Damn”

Returning to an earlier line of reasoning, there must be people out there looking for me. People who know me and care about me. Family, friends, a wife...a child. Slumping back in a chair with eyes closed I try to think back. The pain in my head returns, but less so. I press deeper into the tattered remains of my consciousness. The process of teasing out the thoughts yesterday is hard and unfulfilling.

Dark, empty, yet in motion. Turmoil. Something was behind the grey. It was like a curtain now. Drawn closed to hide my past. It rippled. It flowed without form, slowly rose upwards and was followed by pain.

“Where is my family?” brings a rippling, hurting, now burning sensation replies

Deep in its rhythms, I could feel the past was coming. Pain was hiding it now, but pain was better than the void. Pain could at least fill me. Beads of sweat formed and droplets soon fell to the floor. The hurt in inside grew. Unbearable it was and yet there was a promise of life returned if it was embraced. The promise of a life lost if it was rejected.

Quietly, cautiously names appear. Pain mixes with hope. Hope brought strength. Corresponding faces slowly emerge. Ross, Rachael, they are friends I know. Clint, Madonna, a boy in a red shirt and white hat named Gilligan, then comes an English man who likes martinis and they are shaken not...

“Oh for crying out loud!” I shout and quickly try to stand. Legs will not hold, the chair greets my collapse in silence

“Fuck Me!”

Hope lays shattered at my feet. With effort I kick at the broken pieces

“God, God Damn TV, Fucking with me.”

“With me”

“Real memories! damn you!”

“Give me real memories!”

The desire to kick is gone, memories are gone. Inwardly only a vast emptiness remains. It is huge. I am small, tired weak and alone.

Alone, so alone and just full garbage. I like old style non-interactive television. It's hopeless. One tear forms and falls. It is followed by many more. Softly, I say the only word I can think of.

“Fuck”

I weep. The chair refuses to hold the burden I've placed on it.

The floor is hard and cold.

From the grey depths, an image of myself takes shape. I'm in the chair or a chair and there is someone else. A black man is on a stage. He plays a musical instrument. Slowly, sadly long dark notes of sorrow-filled jazz surround me. The black man is crying. I am crying. Soon these tears blur my inner vision. Sobbing helplessly, I am broken. Hope lost. Soon the knowledge, the feeling that tears are falling inside my head as well as out is

more than I can bear. Sprawled on the floor I close my eyes ever tighter wishing it would go away. It doesn't. It can't, the vision is shifting a different man is now watching me cry. He's impassive, like he see that I'm even there. He is a plain, somewhat large, chubby man. His face full and innocent while the hair is cropped short and a snowy white. His eyes...

The eyes set my heart pounding.

They are beautiful. Bright, alive and green, the like color of spring grass in a park or baseball field. Only nobody here is playing. The pain inside my head is crippling. My body shakes madly, driven by a now relentless heart.

Suddenly I realize that I've seen eyes like that before. Eyes that were bright, sharp and yet behind them lay only emptiness. It was this morning or maybe the day before in a ghostly shop window. Whatever happened to this man also happened to me. Unable to bear the truth, my heart beats in fast and frantically random rhythm. I know this person and was unable to help him. My eyes close. The vision, as if on cue, changes slightly as his lips slowly move. Sounds do not form but his message is clear
"Who".

In the brief moment before the darkness again sweeps me away.

"George"

REVELATIONS

The ring of an alarm clock pierces the deep morning slumber and slowly I move hit the snooze. My arm flails in the direction of the sound. The clock is not close enough to the bed.

Reluctantly, I open my eyes.

The bed is the floor where I fallen the night before.

It was not dream.

There is no alarm clock.

The ringing is from the hotel Vid phone. With a growl, I reach for it with my left hand.

My right scratches a back that did not wish to sleep on a cold hard floor.

A man appears in the Vid screen.

Immediately he speaks to me “Hello Michael, I was very worried about you”

Michael? My right hand moves up to scratch my head. I am Michael?

He knows me. Michael. He is. He is

“Alex?”

“Yes” he responds. “Good, your memory is returning.”

He then looks down at the upper left corner of his screen and presses a button. A small double helix symbol appears in the upper right side of my screen. This message is now secure. Anyone listening to it will hear and see only an encrypted jumble.

I don't like this person. The face is thin and his eyes are dark and cold. His body language is tight and controlled. Professional and confident, he looks to be in his mid 20's. He's a young man who believes he in himself, perhaps too much so.

“Michael” he continues in a voice designed to show authority. “Have you checked your email?”

“No, not yet.”

“Michael, is your the Zhou 1104 functional?”

“Yes but, the power is at critical. The hotel has a charger, it will be here shortly.”

Alex nods and considers this information. “Good, I've sent you several emails, check them. This line is not secure so I can say little.” He pauses, something big is going to said. ”Michael you were jacked by a low level Russian Mafia capo. His people saw the input jack behind you ear. As a rich looking foreigner they thought your memories might be worth something. They grabbed you and downloaded your mind. When they reviewed the data they found they got much more than they bargained for.”

With effort I nod slightly and think to myself “I was jacked?”

“We aren’t the type of people the Russian mob likes to mess with. With a well-planned digital strike we could shut them down. Even their nukes wouldn’t touch them. The low level Capo panicked and shipped you off to Helsinki. Out of sight, out of mind.”

Alex draws a breath, looks to see that I understand him and continues. “We’ve met with the Russians. They say they’ve deleted your memory file and as offer of good faith provided you with 25,000 US dollars to cover your expenses and any inconveniences you’ve had. The specifics and an apology are in an email they’ve sent you.”

“Good” I nod. Whoever I was; Michael, Harrison or Winfred, I deserved an apology.)

“Now Michael, here’s the bad news. Regardless of what the Russians say, we still have to take precautions. Your error has put our whole operation in jeopardy. You had access and Admin privileges to everything. For the moment, we’ve had to lock you out of the system. This includes your bank account. We had left it open hoping you’d use it and we’d track it back to you. Now it’s off. You have the Russian money and the hotel will bill me personally for everything – so live well but not too well.”

Alex chuckles but I offer only another nod.

Alex is continues. “This is hard on you but it is harder on us. I’ve spent the past four days, 24 hours a day personally rerouting security access codes into my computer. It’s the only one we are 100% sure you didn’t have privileges for. So at the moment I’m the only person with Admin access. This will change once we purge our network of all the command level code and replace it with new code. It will take months on a network our size. In a way it’s good, our system needed an overhaul. Much the code is 20 years old.”

He pauses and I, by force of habit, nod dimly. He’s taking over everything. Huge gaps remain in my memory, disturbingly little relates to Alex or the organization.

“Ok Michael, we sent a team to St Petersburg to talk in person to the Russians a few days ago. They’ll wrap up our business there tomorrow afternoon and take a train into Helsinki. You can expect them around 6 p.m. that evening. At 9.20 p.m. we’ve got all of you on the last flight out of Helsinki. The morning after you return we’ll do a full debriefing. Michael, is this acceptable? Can you handle yourself for another 28 hours?”

“Yes I’ll be alright”

“And Michael, you have the Russian money and it can be routed in to your Zhou. The info is in their email. If you are feeling better, maybe take a walk around the city or hear some music. You used to like old jazz.”

Jazz strikes a chord with me, “ Yea, that does sound good. Jazz.” After a moment I add”
...and also...ah...how is George”

Alex's mechanical facade breaks for just a moment and his mind seeks out the proper, politically smart answer to this offhand question. Eventually he finds one and the facade is back. "George is fine, He's adjusting very well and actually happier than he's been in a long, long time."

A slight smile crosses my lips. It feels like a small victory just to get Alex on the defensive. Ending this conversation on that small positive note is appealing. "Alright Alex, I guess I'll see you late tomorrow or the morning after. Good-bye"

Hurriedly, Alex chimes in. "Don't forget your email"
"Yeah" I reply and with a click end the conversation.

Slowly, the reality sinks in.

My memory was jacked by the Russia Mafia.

They were afraid of the organization I'm with.

They set me on a train to Helsinki.

It seemed clear.

As for my names, Harrison was what I was called at a boy, Winfred is what I have on my bank account, by default Michael occurred in the middle. All of this probably relates to the organization I was associated with. (Or I could have yet another layer of secrets.)

Unfortunately a new questions arose.

Exactly why are they afraid of organization I'm with.

Move to the point – what is this organization?

It is related to the net.

My role is related to my computer skills.

I had complete Admin access.

Therefore, I was a very senior person in a dangerous organization.

People will code for months to fix the possible damage I've done.

A bad feeling washes over me.

Mentally I want to change the subject. I need to shower, get my clothes and get the charger. Last nights attempt at getting one flashes up and is quickly pushed aside.

I want breakfast, but clock clearly states that it will be lunch. A late lunch. For man whose mind was empty not to long ago, it now felt very full. It needed to get washed and dressed.

In the bathroom mirror I can now clearly the biojack implanted behind my ear.

It's small, in fact not really visible with my long hair. Maybe for the event I had my hair in a ponytail. Hmmmm. As the drops of water sprayed against my back, another line of memories made themselves known.

My childhood in New York City. There's a fire hydrant that's been opened and all the neighborhood kids are playing. A chubby kid with white hair is laughing hard as the streaming water nearly pulls down his shorts. He's my best friend, George Lanier.

George lives with his father a system engineer for Nordicon. They had spent a lot of time together as father was an early virtual commuter. His mother had past away when he was 2 or 3. He's shy and very, very smart.

Stickball, writing computer programs, and watching old style TV shows on the net made up the bulk of our youth. Hours of hard thought coding were matched by mind numbing non-interactive video. In retrospect, we didn't play as much stickball as I would've liked. George wasn't the athletic type, and neither was I really. More memories, bright, shiny and full of youthful carefree play pop from the shadows of my mind. It was so easy back then, so safe and without worry. It would be easy to stay here in this place with its kite flying and the watching of baseball games for forever. After a long, long while I accept the need to move on. My life has adult problems which need to be solved.

KNOWLEDGE

The hotel's business service department was on the third floor, next the "kissa" conference hall. A trio of mid-sized graphsteel tables held a collection of computer equipment, some of which was nearly as old as I was. To left was a macro printer, with

shelves for sheets of plastic e-paper below. Only 8 _ x 11 was stocked, the other shelves up to 36 x 24 were empty and dusty. To my right was a and a 2-3D Makia video Scanner, 12 years ago it was a top of the line product. This hodge podge collection of tech gear was dominated by the tall white counter topped in black marble in the far back of the room. It is a wall, built clearly to emphasize that no unauthorized personal may enter. As is so often the case was no person, no staff to assist me or provide authorization. Leaning over the tall counter wasn't helpful either. There were other rooms beyond, the two closest appear to be VR suites. Curiosity getting the better of me, I move behind the barrier counter. Its hardly a surprise when the clerk now decides to appear. He's the same one I dealt with the night before.

"Hello" I say

"hey" he says. His tiny slot machine of brain begins to spin. Would I get lemons or would I have to keep pulling his handle...

"You, didn't open your door for the LIM last night, I suppose you still want a charger for that Zhou? He said flatly.

"Yep" I reply with the hope that a "Here a you go.", will come soon.

Speaking without any more emotion than before, he offers "sign in here, I'll get one".

Jackpot on my first try, and quick bit of confidence strikes. "The VR suites, can I sign one out."

"Sure" he states from down the hall.

Double Jackpot, my luck is changing. Deep inside I feel I have a connection to that media and that parts of my life will only become clear once I dive into it.

“only” he continues now coming back with the charger.

My luck isn't changing.

“they aren't working. I've requested more parts but the management won't get them. they just want me to fix this stuff. well it's no going to happen and I'm sorry but that just the way it is. if they want to complain, then complain and if you complain don't complain about me. I just work here. Well, I try to. I need CPS 4.0 certification training and a couple of membooks on neural buffering. Good books, training memsticks and all. But they won't get it for me, even though I filled out the forms 6 times. Its just so hard sometimes. That's just the way life is you know, same shit different tech.”

During his mental reload process, I reach for the charger and make a quick exit.

MORE

The hotel's restaurant is designed in the old classical sense of the 18th century. Its beautiful. Real plaster moldings and a fine mahogany wood floor give a old world sense of charm to the space. The tall walls are covered deep green print with honey brown outlines of tree leaves. Keeping the dark green walls from making the room into a cave is a long bay window faces the park where I'd been the day before.

I take a table in the left corner so that the view of the park is on my left and the green wall with its a small and very helpful power outlet is behind me. The running lights on

the Zhou flash an old style Morse message after the power cord is attached. It indicates the machine is accepting the charge, no mechanical issues to be reported. The lights stop the message after a two and a half minutes, by which time the hotel waiter has not only taken my order, a hummingbird steak and potatoes, but has returned with my Finnish coffee, otherwise known as kaffee.

A few more minutes are needed to get the Zhou up to operational power levels. These moments are eagerly claimed by long sips of hot kaffee. I'm surprised the restaurant is so good while business services is so horrible. My guess is that ovens and cookware is obsolete every six months. It's interesting but the question, gets shunted aside as two other events take precedence. The Zhou is charged and the food has arrived.

In a purely American manner and without thinking, I work on both.

The food is as good as the service, the hummingbird steak cuts with a butter knife and is thick juicy and spiced with just a bit of something. Its also huge, and its hard to fit the notion of the tiny bird with this large piece of meat. The facts though are straight-forward. After organ cloning became a reliable process, a few meat producer concluded why raise a whole cow when you could just grow the meat in a vat. It was an odd kind of issue, animal rights people couldn't complain anymore because these muscles were never attached to a brain. The anti-genetic food groups couldn't claim either because the animal DNA was never altered, just cloned. And again the cloning process was good enough to make real working body parts. The needs of a good cut of meat were small by comparison. Half the steak disappears as I weigh these issues and prepare to run a quick diagnostic. The holopanel rises from the small wrist computer. The interface to much of

my life greets me. It's just as I left it, (or so I vaguely recall) The feeling is one of an odd homecoming. Through this window on the world I've chatted, played, worked out problems and sometimes just tinkered around. I'm unable to remember place to call home, and I wonder if I had such a place or is this little window what the people of the fast moving, always changing moderne world would claim as a home. Is this claim made by choice or by default...

The computer appears to be alright.

The ability to think and philosophize is a welcome one, but the two tasks food and the email need to be addressed. Mentally I file this line of thinking away, take a few bites of the red mashed potatoes. They have gotten lukewarm. The price of contemplation in the moderne world.

Damn, I've got to get control of my internal monologue.

The email Inbox lists some 270 messages. Its very nice, yet the reality is that most of these are not from old friends seeking me out. Nor are they from family, colleagues or next door neighbors. Two hundred and sixty-four of these are from email lists that I'm on. Thankfully each group has its mail in routed a separate folder and each fold has auto commands which handles issues such as which mail asks for (and needs) a reply, from the tech lists, which information is cut and pasted into my fact personal library and even how long before unread mail is auto-deleted. It's all very organized, thoughtful and

surprisingly reassuring that the information on the 264 messages will be handled. Its not perfect though, two of the remaining messages are spam (and well that shouldn't be possible) I mark them as block sender and move on to the more interesting messages.

“Auto Emergency Reply:

Mr. Poh, an type I.C Distress Message (DM) was sent (11.4.67)

GPSIII sets position at Russia > Moscow > Prada St.

Actions taken:

Voice reply at approx. 5.12 minutes after receipt of DM

- outcome: no reply –

Notification of requested personnel in the event of I.C DM

This service was unable to provide direct assistance because of:

- location outside of serviced locations (see serviceable locations)

Auto Track engaged: Data sent every 10 minutes.

- see log file on location

Warning transmission service has limited power, further tracking and contact via user device will not be possible in (2 hours 14 minutes)

Future Action:

Every 15 minutes a voice call will be placed to user

All data will be forwarded, real-time, to users requested personnel

Insurance information prepared and ready to be given to medical provider

(Should you request one or should one find you in a state in which you are unable to take the necessary actions)

- NOTE information that you've list as private will not be sent.

Mr. Poh, please take the time to reply to this message. We are concerned for your safety and hope you are safe and well. Even in locations that we do not service, we may be able to provide contact information to those who could assist you.

Regards James Sherry

Dispatcher 2030, Lighthouse Emergency Services

“

Well, they lived up to their contract. I glance up at the voice mail Inbox, there's four messages. Two are likely to be from Lighthouse, after the email is covered I'll check them. The next three email messages came from Alex. In the top corner of every page was the DirectDNA encryption logo. The number 3 next to it indicated a mid to light encryption level

“Hello, Michael,

We've just been notified that you are in trouble in Russia. I've data tracked the signal and sent people to retrieve you. Whatever is happening hold on, we are coming. Reply to this as soon as you can.

Be safe

Alex

“

And a day later.

“Hello Michael,

We have people on the ground in Moscow and have learned that Mafia elements have jacked you. You have loss your memory, but will regain 80% of it in 4-5 days. We are working on getting a meeting with them shortly. They say you are safe but have failed to give us a location.

They seem to be apologetic, apparently this was an accident by some lower level capo. Don't worry, we will bring all our resources to bear if that's what it takes to bring you back safe.

This was a major security breach, I'm taking steps to neutralize any potential issue that could arise. Your Admin access privileges have been revoked.

I will fly you back as soon as I locate you. At that time you'll get a medical check-up and a debriefing

Regards

Alex, “

His third message, dated yesterday, had a key attached to it.

Michael,

Our people have had a face to face with the Russians, It appears the low level capo who jacked you panicked and sent to Helsinki. This much I hope you are already aware of. The Russians have offered you a formal apology, 25,000 in US dollars and promised to delete the memory file they jacked from you. I think they have deleted the file, but to be safe the security process I've started will continue. We actually have a productive dialogue running and have another meeting with them in a few days. After that our team in Moscow will track down in Helsinki.

The 25,000 dollars can be directly routed into your Zhou by double clicking the attached key file. As soon as you can, reply to this message.

Regards

Alex”

There was no way the Russians would let my memories go. They don't fear very much and if I actually knew as much as has been hinted at, its all the more reason for them not to let it go.

The last message was different, it was deeply encrypted and used a blind address.

Selecting it from the email Que. the holopanel shifts to accommodate a new full screen image. A pair of old school rap gangstas appear. Back to back, arms crossed, panted

bagged, and necked decked in gold chains they look like they stepped out of a true-classic “real Crime” show. They animate, slow, with sneers and shrugs. This is the opening screen of Blood NCrypt - my favorite old school security software. I click on the screen and the UnCryption process begins. One gangsta speaks “Yo, Yo, Yo, Speak on this” and below him appear a line of text. “The article of knowledge is blue power dog, word” Verbally I repeat the phrase as normally as possible,

“The article of knowledge is blue power dog, word”

A “Yo, try dis one, and say it like a big dog” from the other gangsta indicated that that the first test was done and next step was beginning. Below him another line of text appeared.

“Consolidation nation, pretext frustration,”

And in the deep voice of a big dog I repeat it.

“Consolidation nation, pretext frustration,”

“Y’all Kol, peace” the characters pronounce and wink out of existence.

I like Blood NCrypt, it uses all the nuances of an individual voice inflection to check and see if you are what you are. Even down to making you use funky voices that nobody would ever hear you say, like say it like a ho, or be high on mary jane. It does require a two hours of so of speaking to the software so it these voices so it can set the lingual pattern buffers. The two hours is trip as the two gansta’s teach you to talk smack so they can recognize. Some people prefer DirectDNA which scans live DNA from your fingertip to check for security. Despite the hype the two are both about equally strong and that is well, unbreakable or a close as anyone has come to that. The only downside

with Blood are the funny looks people give you in restaurants when to speak like a big dog to decrypt something.

The mystery email is from an old friend.

Hello Michael,

I was just told the news about you, I'm so glad you are alive. Everything sounded so awful, hope you are feeling better. If not, well please brace yourself there's more bad news coming.

Alex is making a power play and using the incident with the Russians to move you out entirely. He's gotten just enough support to pull it off too. People that were loyal to you are unhappy about all the extra work you caused them. It will take months to put our security systems back up. Meanwhile, Alex has routed everything through his machine.

He's even planning to wipe your memory when you return. Just like he did to George. Michael It's awful, I don't want to lose you. My hands are tied and there's nothing I can do. I feel so helpless. You've got to do something. Alex is even using this to create a relationship with the Russians. He wants to add their real-world influence and outright muscle to our high tech organization. Its scary, and I'm not the only one who hates this. Most people who signed on with us were in it for the vision and grand ideals. The crew doesn't want the Mafia involved, but are too afraid to speak out.

If you could get back to Russia and get your memory file or somehow delete it you could screw Alex's deal with the Russians. It'd also prove that you weren't too

old or inept handle a big problem. Its been a while seen anyone here saw you in action. I remember those days, I hope you can remember them too.

I miss you and this happened just when we really started to happen.

Please get those Russians then come back and kick Alex out.

Please come back to me.

Love

Angela”

A chill moves down my spine. This is bad. Alex, the little snot-nosed punk, will wipe my memory when I get back. It will be just like the last four days only the memories won't come back. Who I am will be gone, substituted by a grinning inept puppet. George, where ever you are I'm sorry I let this happen to you. I'm going to make it right. First the Russians, then Alex...

Correction, first money then seek friends. Money, my accounts were shut down. A quick check showed even the private one, one no one should of known about was closed. Alex was smart but not that smart. He couldn't have found that private account in only four days. He must've had this planned for some time and waited for some incident, like the Russians, to occur. Hmmm, the Russians, the funds they gave me as part of their apology aren't transferable and they are trackable. They'll know where I am and what I buy instantly. Worse, they can void any purchase or transaction they wish. Even if successful I'd be throwing a flag up saying "Here I come" to them.

Perhaps I have a friend with some money to loan me? No names came to mind. Sigh. If one did emerge, could I trust them? If I failed what would I cost them, what price for their involvement? Both these issues removed money from friends as an option.

The Russian cash was the answer. After a moment more contemplation, it seemed pride would allow no other option. A half hour the money had been moved to a private account in an offshore account. They never saw it coming, nor will they find where it went.

I ask for a cup of kaffee, to go.

COINCIDENCE

After returning the charger to business services I stroll through the lobby. The magenta haired receptionist isn't there. Disappointed I make for the door. It opens automatically. I however don't walk through it. A bulletin board of sorts is on the left side of the vestibule. Two racks filled with various tourist and nightlife magazines sit beneath it. On the cover of one of the magazines sits a black man. His hair, the little that remained around his head and the stub below his chin were lightly grey. More than a few lines and wrinkles crossed his face, yet they did not make him look old. His lips drew a child-like grin and behind round thin-framed glasses, dark eyes twinkled. He tenderly holds a tenor saxophone. Above the image reads "J'acid, back to reality" He is the musician from my prior vision. The magazine is quickly opened, the page with his interview thumbed to. I blink, once twice, but the text remains the same. In the third paragraph J' talks about his

early days. The pioneering performances he did on the internet. He spoke of the excitement, the rush of exploring virtual reality. A vast new medium for human expression that he grew to understand while teamed with VR artist Harrison Puck. A few paragraphs later came the announcement that he was playing tonight at a place called Kava. His first live show in a long, long time.

“Damn” I can barely say the word through the smile that overwhelms my face. A friend, old and dear. His face, music, laughter, and wisdom all flowed back to me. A melodies, rifts, and beats swept up, down in and out. Soon I was outside again, walking through Helsinki, happy. J’acid was a large part of my prior life, a better life. He was a soulful musician seeking a means to reach out to the world. I was the artist and computer programmer who felt his talent and sought to give him a connection to that world. Oh, we did more than that. Online in that new reality, his music took physical form. We no longer played songs, we became them. The audience too would join us in the show that was his soul. Images, colors, people, places moved in tune with his harmonies. Artificially intelligent shades of blue would wash against the deep amber hue of city images. Old women on front step chatting, kids playing double dutch, Curbside vendors and street walker made their place in the songs we played.

We played? Hmmm, I recalled that I do play the harmonica. Not great, perhaps not even good but J was a true friend and felt that to play with an honest love and affection was all anyone truly needed.

Would he be in danger if contacted? This was a chilling thought. He could handle himself, but it was more of a street wisdom than any high tech savvy. Not that he was bad there either. He was very good, but against the likes of Alex it wasn't nearly enough. He'd be vulnerable if Alex knew of him.

That question caused a pause in my thoughts. A sip of kaffee later, my thoughts were back along with my a bit of my heart. The change of my name, my being from Harrison Puk to Michael Arris was done to protect my friends and family. Joining a secret organization brought risks and danger not just to me, but to those around me. Suddenly the lack of memories of family and friends made sense. It still hurt, but apparently whatever I'd become involved with required me to distance myself from people I loved. It was a relief and it was true.

Still, I was a distant sort of person, arrogant, aloof, and caught up in high-minded causes. A tang of regret brought Dr. Winfred Theo Poh to mind. This was my identity of exit, the one by which I'd leave the organization behind. The one through which I'd reclaim friends and seek a family.

"Fuck you Alex" I mutter on the now crowded street. "You saw this as my weakness, and so you encouraged me. Just to fuck me." I kick an empty beer bottle into a bench by a bus stop. It shatters. "Fuck you Alex. Yeah Fuck you Alex".

People in Finland are reserved by nature. No one cared that I was speaking. Out in the cold, heads down, they simply accepted. I too came to realize something. I was a moody son of a bitch. Happy one minute, sad the next and angry soon after. Present circumstances probably caused a lot of this, not all of it. I wonder if I'm on medication.

There is a woman who says she love me (moody or not). The emptiness within suddenly longs to be fill by her, by the touch and tender words of a woman. Angela is young, active and alive. No memories arise other than her face, short cropped black hair and ravenish sort of features. Angular and sharp, even her body was hardened by hard exercise. She is a professional and businesslike. She is a little like Alex.

I need a beer.

And music.

RAMBLING

Kava was down on in the historic district not far from the sea. To work off a little more anger I walk. The streets of the city were covered by a mix of salt and soot from the many old automobiles that drove on them. Patch of pure white snow could be found in the small plots of earth along the apartments or restaurants. In summer these would be green with grass or colored by flowers. Now they were white like a space waiting to be filled. Even with the warming, the wait was a long time. Finland is a cold country, not

particularly hospitable to human life for much of the year. Settlement came late young by European standards. The city of Helsinki is 700 years old and the Finns don't see much history in it. Relative to the cities like London, Paris, Tallinn or St Petersburg, the city is brand new. Compared to the American cities of my youth it is very old.

There's an odd reflection of America here, on the surface and in its depths. Much of signage is in English as is the most of the music, the television, and movies. Too late the Finns understood theirs was an endangered culture. After the fall of the Soviet Union some eighty years ago, the Finnish people were suddenly allowed to look to West. Able to embrace that which had been forbidden. Consumerism and Capitalism grew fast and deep in a country that had a strong work ethic, a desire for quality, good education and very low wages. Corporate empires sprang from new technologies and reached outwards across the globe. Finland was still geographically isolated, filled with English speaking people who were in general very accepting of the next new thing. Test marketing of new concepts, technology and ideas threw the culture into consumer overdrive. With pride the Finns replaced the Japanese as guinea pigs of the new world order.

That's why I had come to Helsinki some 30 years earlier. It was the place to be if one was exploring new media. J'acid came to play jazz. He had settled comfortably into the music scene prior to my arrival. Being black and being a jazz musician gave him a certain rarity in this whiter than white nation. The additional fact that he was extremely talented opened all the doors in the city. There was racism and other problems but in Helsinki they were easier to see and to deal with. Often these run ins even worked in his favor.

American racism was different, it was more refined and worse other blacks used the game to get ahead and to hurt their own colleagues. J'acid had played in New Orleans, Chicago, LA, New York and everywhere in between. Politics and jealousy screwed him at every turn. Those were tough times for everybody in America. Washington DC had been hit by a small nuke, California had the big quake and the warming was slowly turning the southeastern US into a desert. 45% unemployment among people of color. Riots were common. Some tried to say that technology and the new modernism had failed humanity. A few pointed to other facts. The EU was doing well and the Meritocratic Nation of China was fast becoming the world's next super power. These few concluded that America had sold out its children at the end of the 21st century. The culture had broken the bonds of the extended family. Capitalism pushed companies from the long term support of employees. Government aid programs were cut. At the time these actions were sold to the public by both the left and the right in terms of freedom, self reliance and individual happiness. It worked while these neo individuals were young. It gradually failed as they grew older.

30 years ago Europe had know better.

Finland was an exception.

On a street corner I pause to catch my breath. My legs remembered the hard jog through the park the day before and ached even in the bones. They force me to lean against a bland concrete building. It's ugly. The street itself is a random mix of old classical structures with sculptured stone and ornate wood working, and the concrete slab

apartments of the less is more but really isn't variety. The cold and the ugly concrete force a shudder. Soon I'm back walking the grey salted streets.

Next time I take a taxi.

KAVA

It didn't look like a club. It was hidden beneath an old hotel and if the nightlife guide hadn't mentioned that the place was literally underground I would have missed it completely. A set of steps led down to what once was I assume was the basement / storage area of the hotel. Just below street level an old wooden door sits. Its dirty. The white paint is cracked and peeling. Beneath the white paint and seen through the cracks and peel is a sad yellow layer. At the bottom the yellow gives way to dirt and rotted wood. In cheap black vinyl a number, the address, 1024 is stuck on a white plastic cylinder that covers the light. It is not an entrance that panders for people to go through it. It was just there. Cold, curious and now more than ever in need of a beer I grab the knob. It turns and then with a gentle push it opens. Inside is dark, smoke filled and oddly comfortable. The few lights allowed by the owners were randomly hung and offer little help defining how big or small the place was. They were mostly hand-made amber shades that covered low wattage bulbs which clung tightly against the upper reaches of the ceiling. This allowed the airducts, the plumbing, the wires and the occasional bit of hanging art to cast odd shadows and reflections. Directly beneath a light one could focus and converse with a girl or small group of friends. Every else faded into a warm and deep

haze. It is a place where one could retreat into those depths and watch the more sociable meet and mingle. Mismatched cushy chairs and couches litter this side of the space. Most are taken by the silhouettes of young people who seem to drape themselves over the soft furniture in the deep amber shadows.

Only two places was the light somewhat brighter. One was at the bar where it was focused on the bartender and his / her work space, the shelves of various liquors, and a old blackboard featuring today's special, Buffalo Herring. (this required a mental double take to allow my imagination to create an image, then a shake of the head to lose it).

The other lit spot, lay on the other side of the bar. A small rounded wooden platform 12 feet across and maybe two feet high lay at the back of the club. A techie in a black T-shirt was setting up the basic equipment. I walk around the bar and take seat along the far wall at a small square table for two. Leaning back in the old chair and against the brick wall I watch the stage get set. Two microphones were soon joined by several stools. A few cables were laid out, attached to a mixing board and then to various amps. The drummer (I assume) starts assembling his kit and an oddly preppy kid walks the stage. The preppy in his short sleeved, collared iborg shirt makes a couple mystical gestures over his eyes, then points to four locations. "There, there, there and there" he says to the black shirted techie. The techie nods and the preppy kid disappears.

"Sir?" says a voice from my right. "Can I get you a drink?"

It's the waitress. She can't more than sixteen years old. Damn she's cute and with a the same magenta tint to her hair as my receptionist.

"Ahhh... beer, Lapin Kulta" I reply.

"Draft or bottle" she adds

"Draft and ahhh," I pause to find the right phrase. There isn't one. Drawing a breath I try to appear curious and not like some smart ass. "The special, Buffalo Herring, is that a new gene modified food? Half buffalo DNA half fish DNA?" I knew the vat meat people were getting creative, but not *this* creative however.

She beams "That's exactly what I asked too" and adds a little giggle. "No its just fish, real fish too. Like from the ocean. Umm its like Baltic Herring coated all crispy spicy like." She adds "Its really good but very hot and spicy. Do you like hot food?"

"I like hot food" I beam back at her "Especially after such a cold grey day."

"OK" she says and heads back to a door which I assume leads to the kitchen.

Back on the stage the preppy has returned, two black carry cases hang from his shoulders. He moves to a table in front of me. Against the brick wall he leans and from one of the cases he pulls a titanium colored laptop and places it on the table. From the other bag four iVid Cameras, four remote tracking mounts and a wireless networking hub emerge. The gear is sweet. With a touch of self importance he takes a camera and a mount and moves into the audience to attach it one of the thin columns that support the ceiling. A bright yellow tag in Finnish hangs from the mount. I can't fully translate, "Don't Damn Touch This" is close. Typical t-prep, I bet his daddy brought everything. The flash of bitterness

demands a beer to rinse it away. I look for my waitress. She's busy, but she does see me. With a sigh I look back to the stage and think of J'acid. This show will be webcast / recorded, I already want a copy

More people take seats. Several old Arabic gentlemen, some girls no older than my waitress, six art school boys, a few couples, and pair a large black women. The art school boys take a large table to my right. They are mirror images of each other. Six pairs of black leather shoes, six pairs of black leather pants, six black turtleneck sweaters and six shaved heads. After my beer (in a bottle) arrives I take a few sips and then notice that they all have blue eyes. I wonder if there was only one original and the rest are clones created as some "artistic" statement. Self-amused, I smirk. One of them notices, pauses, thinks, decides that thinking hurts, and goes back to listening to his associates. "Kant ...", "Jung ...", "Buddha..."

I decide that eavesdropping hurts and move on to a more important subject. Scoping the bar for good looking women. Its not a bad past time, unfortunately men of my age aren't the scoping targets of the young women we view. At least not until other factors kick in, like showing that we are rich. The tears in my coat, the tangles in my hair, the stubborn stain on my shirt voids this possibility. Well, the two large black women have noticed me. For a moment I'm grateful. Until I notice the blond haired woman that sits on the far side of them. She's alone. Even at a distance I note she's attractive and older than the twenty-somethings around me. Not much older, likely she's at the age where she wants to settle down with one man. It doesn't show but she probably has children too. Oh well, I

came for J. Focusing back, the large black women between us are taking turns staring at me. I reach for my beer and hope that it's not empty.

It was. A hand reach over and gently pulled it from mine. The young waitress was back. A basket of Buffalo Herring was placed in front of me along with finger bowl with a bleu cheesish dressing and some celery. "More beer" she asked. "Keep'em coming" I replied, smiled and looked down at the odd combination of food before me. The Herring look awful. I place a napkin on my lap and move rest beside the basket. With caution I pick one up by the tail and take a bit. Its good, very spicy. I take another bite. Its hot. Its very hot. Its causing second degree burns. I turn toward the bar. The waitress is only a few feet away and she's got my drink.

"I knew you'd need it quick. I did say they were very good and very hot" she said. "Oooo...thanks for the beer." Brief pause "You were right these are hot, and very good." After a long slow sip I lean back and enjoy the meal. Thoughts of Russia, the organization, and of Alex go nowhere. More R&D both on the net and in my head is needed. J could help with both or at least I hoped so.

Without fanfare the band took to the stage. A tall thin man in dark sparkly sunglasses. holds a bass guitar, gold chains shine on his bare mocha chest. A white kid in a white silver shirt and black tie takes a place behind the keyboard. A dark haired women in a lime green dress pulls a huge bass violin on to the stage. In the center a large round man with a tenor sax sits down, J'acid. He is dressed plainly, Just work clothes, common and

mundane. He is, however, not lost amidst the color and funk of his fellows. To the contrary, something in his just sitting there seems to overshadow them all. They warm up a little, improv a few choruses, tune a few instruments and chat with the tech on the sound board. The preppie in the iborg shirt, heads toward J' and for a moment they speak. The preppie points two his cameras and his table. J'acid looks at the table for just a moment and does a double take. No, not at the table, at me sitting three tables back from it. A sappy sweet, warm fuzzy feeling strikes dumb. I nod and he responds with a huge flash of white teeth. I've got a friend, an old one, on stage. This reunion was long overdue. The preppie actually pokes him to gain back his attention. The drummer lays a up tempo track down, J looks again to me, nods and moves back to his chair. The show goes on.

J speaks makes a round of introductions, with each musician responding with a little rift. He looked out to crowd, this was his first live show in a while. "Let's go" he intones and leads the others in jazz fusion piece. Blue....flowing....deep....mysterious its covers a range vast musical range. The song becomes an ocean. On the shoreline the audience, swept by the waves, rocks to and fro. My own eyes close as I swim on the notes. Damn, why I did I leave this behind?

Behind the mic J speaks up "Thank y'all for coming out to see us tonight, its really great to be back playing live in clubs again. It's great to meet a new generation of folks who love this music. It's especially great to see old friends. It's just nice to be here, on stage with my fellows. Got old classics coming, got a few new pieces too. We even got a little

help this evening. Oh ladies, layyy-D's come on an help me." Three women emerge from back and take a position at the secondary mic. They are quite the sight in tall black go-go boots, short dresses made of nothing but transparent fringe topped off by seriously retro big bouffant hair. The bass guitarist puts a heavy groove down, and leans way over into J's mic. "Ladies, for the rhythm impaired members of our audience we need a demonstration. A demonstration of song inspired booty testification. Shake it darlings" On keyboard a wild series of syncopated electric notes put hip hop kinda funk in the air. Hands up as if to reach for the groove the women do the gyrate thing. The bass guitarist isn't happy yet and returns to the mic "We need more power captain" J' responds instantiously. His soul driven sax wound through the stylings' of the other performers, binding them, lifting them, and ultimately freeing them. Under the spotlights beads of sweat appear. The music kept coming. As the song closed all the energy put out by the band came back to them in loud applause. Some shouted "Yeah", others pounded the tables. The six art school boyz clapped as one and the two black women in front shrieked and hooted. To my surprise I hooted too. I was young again.

J'acid was glowing from the outpouring "Well then, lets just keep going" he said and launched into another song. After a moment the bassist guitarist was back at J's mic. "Yo Layyy-D's we need just a little more power." Somewhere a switch was flipped. The fringe wasn't just fringe. It was fiber optic. Colors pulsed and shimmied with the hipsway of the ladies. The house lights went down into a disco flash. The place is awash in swirling color and sound. The musician's instruments were now their dance partners, each in love with the other. My little corner, I am a voyeur. One who blushes as they

grind it harder, stroke it smoother, drive it faster. In the middle of it all sat J'acid, head gently bobbing, his shoulders rising, turning and grooving on each note.

I go back to closing my eyes. I still see J, a younger J. I see myself. There are colors around us, almost like the bar right now. That was virtual reality, this was a real one. Nowadays the difference was harder to tell, the lines had blurred over the years. Reality still had substance, but one could work, play and live in the virtual one. One learned to the value of a physical world by leaving it behind. One could learn who they were deep inside with the superficial appearances of flesh to hold them. With only a shade for a physical form, one could live as the mind would live, pure consciousness, pure energy. It was a fantasy, nightmare we'd opened. Neither good or evil in its on right, VR only reflected who we humans are inside. No, not reflected, well, or not just reflected but magnified it, our inner nature, a million times over. At the very least, I hoped that humanity was now wiser because of this new insight.

Damn Alex.

With eyes still shut, I groan. My current situation indicated that humanity would not change, at least not dramatically. Someone would seek power. Power would be abused. With effort I tuck this bit of bitterness away and return to the music. (the beautiful, this is what life is really all about music)

It stops, (it figures) and I hear J say that the band is going to take a break between sets. My eyes open. A blonde woman had joined me at my table. The blonde I'd seen before and assumed she'd had children etc. She wears a tough looking black leather jacket, underneath a soft fuzzy blue sweater. On her face is mile-wide grin. She's beautiful.

She speaks first and with confidence. "Enjoying the show?"

"Very much so." I say with a smirk "Though I didn't realize I was on stage as well."

She throws the smirk back at me. "Well, when I saw you sitting here. Your eyes closed in a musical epiphany. I wanted to be here when you opened them and share that vision."

That was sweet, I pause "I'd love to share, but its hard to describe. Memories of my past are coming back. Wonderful dreams of music and hope from long ago. I remember being young?"

"Really" she replies. A slightly quizzical look appears in her eyes.

We stare at each other.

This woman knew me.

Memories were the wrong thing to say.

We stare at each other.

Slowly, her smile shifts downward.

I'm in trouble.

(fuck)

She leans forward as if to speak.

(fuck)

I can't chance it.

(fuck)

"You look wonderful" I interject

(fuck, that was lame.)

She nods twice, shrugs and decides to play along.

She compliments me. "You're looking fit."

"Thank-you, I've been jogging a bit lately." I offer back.

"Your welcome" She says slowly.

We are silent, I press my memory for details. The effort brings a slight twinge of pain but no answers. Who is this woman? How does she know me?

(well, fuck)

Tiring of bland remarks, starts on a different tack. It is less nice. "Now your hair is another story" there is a touch of anger in her voice. "Dreadlocks? Bad mini dreads too..."

"I needed to change."

Her expression worsens, chilling the air between us.

"You still need to change" Ice forms on her lips. "Harrison, you really need to change."

She gives me a last chance. "Do you remember me?"

I can only look at her blankly. It doesn't help.

She is going to blow up on me.

Anything I say will come back at me.

I shouldn't say anything.

It can't be helped.

"I'm sorry."

Her face goes red and hands become shaking fists.

Her coldness has quickly been replaced by fire. "How can you be sorry Harrison Puck?"

She continued "Huh? Harrison? Huh Harrison Fuck?? You self-centered prick. Go fuck your sorry self. You didn't know that I was alive. I'm alive and beautiful."

She stood up.

She got loud. "What's my name Harrison Fuck? What's MY name!! God Damn you!"

"Fucking arrogant prick. You are nothing, not a DAMN thing! What's my NAME HARRISON!"

From behind her two voices boom in chorus "You tell him sista, Don't let him off the hook. What's her name player? Uh huh, you better know it... Hey, lets tattoo it on his ass."

It's the pair of black women. The whole club is watching us.

I pray to black-out.

Silently the waitress touches the blonde woman's arm. Help had arrived

The blonde looks to the waitress "Fuck him"

Tears start to form on her face.

The waitress replies a meek "Yeah" and quietly nudges her towards the restroom.

As they move on the art school six-pack goes into a long collective whisper.

Afterwards the one nearest to me leans over. With caution he speaks. "Mr.

Puck...sir...we'd like to say much we respect the work you've done in online virtual worlds." His nervousness fades a little. His excitement grows a little. "and its really amazing and ahh, um...amazing to really meet you." He looks to his friends and then back to me. "We'd read that you were dead."

None of this I want to hear.

A way out is needed.

After a moment.

"I'm not Harrison Puck"

The words come out sadly ringing of truth. "The woman was mistaken. But...it's not her fault. I've been told I look like Puck before. It made me curious about him. Showing up here, seeing part of his life and his early influences sounded kinda fun."

The art school boy understands, nods. "yeah, it does sound neat."

“Yeah” I take my beer to my lips, sip slowly, and turn slowly away from the conversation. This wasn’t helpful, the past wasn’t always beneficial. On the stage the musicians have circled up. They are probably discussing the recent disturbance too.

AID

J’acid takes his chair, the other move into position. The old black musician speaks deeply into the microphone. “We got it covered, people. . . .no worries. . . .Hey Tomas!” I iborg preppy looks up from his laptop. ”Up the audio density to max, we got something new to give the people.” J flashes an assuring look at me then searches the crowd for the blonde. He gives small frown and a slight head shake. His lips press to the sax.

A long lone blue note hangs in the smoky air. Slowly it turns up, and its followed by another, this one curves, slides down. More notes follow, the bass violinist joins J’. The club has moved to New York, gone back in time to 1963. For a while it’s very nice.

Then they pause. The bass player smoothes the lines on her lime green dress.

J’ and the bass player stare at each other. Then away from each other, time passes.

J leans over taps her shoulder without expression. It begins again.

She starts aggressively,

J’ responds quietly.

There is no harmony.

In quick high pitched notes the pianist adds his commentary.

The bass guitarist, his body swaying, steps in and heightens the discord.

Intricate, painful, chaotic, loud sound demands attention.

The crowd has no choice but to hear them all. Even J who still is playing quietly can be clearly made out. Something is there. I look at J, focus on him, only him and the music changes. No, no the music is the same as before. I'm seeing it differently now. Beneath the chaos was a harmony had grown. It's strong, powerful, yet sensitive and yielding, and also ...passionate. The lack of volume forced the listener to focus, to seek it out. The drummer, who had been silent follows J' lead and takes the others to task. One by one, the musicians change the slightest of rhythms in their individual songs.

It's incredible. The effect leaves the audience astonished. Jaws drop, and freeze open, the new sound expresses everything, Love Hate.

Pain Pleasure.

Gently J'acid turns up the volume. Rising into a solo, he pulls everything that was before into one song, his song. Flash licks bounce through a sometimes sweeping, sometimes rollercoaster melody. The music which was at first tuned (I believe) to the issues between myself and the blonde now included J'acid. It was about the three of us. He was reliving his past now and his hopes for the future. Caught up in the memories and idealism that brought us together so many years before he stands up from his chair.

I home, but then who is the blonde?

Time had stood still inside Kava, but outside hours had gone by.

With a dim nod J'acid says "good night people" and to the nearest internet cam "goodnight world" The band kicks back silent, exhausted and amazed by what just happened.

"Damn" I utter slowly through my smile "Damn"

J'ACID

So where's the blonde. I stand and look over the place. With other people now milling about and all the shadows she's not going to be easy to spot. Especially if she doesn't want to speak to me. I stand by the bar with one eye on it and one on the ladies restroom. She's not to be seen. Replaying our last conversation, a flaw emerges in my efforts to speak with her. My last apology sent her into orbit, there's no telling what another one would do. What's her name. With a heavy sigh I order a beer and return to my table.

The people have mostly cleared out. The band has nearly cleared the stage. J'acid and the preppie are talking. I can overhear the preppy apologize, he didn't get all the high density audio recorded. The band played too long and the prep only had the one opdisc to record to. I would've been angry, but J just tosses it aside. He puts his hand on the iborg prep's shoulder gives a little shake and sends him off. Afterwards, J' looks over to me.

My arms stretch wide and his respond. We hug and take seats at my table.

“That was great, just really really great” I’m almost gushing. “It was like old times, and damn it, its really really great to see you”

His boundless smile continued to stretch across his face. “I wasn’t sure if I’d ever see you again. I knew you weren’t dead like the vids had said. But that business you’re in is a rough one.” His expression changed, a look was now one of concern and seriousness. He had put two and two together. “You’re in trouble aren’t you.”

“Yes” I take a quick sip of beer and collect my thoughts. No sense delaying the truth. “It was about a week ago at a digital media conference in Moscow. A low level Russian capo jacked my memories.”

With a frown, J’ took this information and reply. “You are lucky not to be dead.”

“Yeah well” I began “It seems that when this capo found out who I work with he got nervous. He didn’t have approval to whack somebody like me. Fearing a reprisal from both his superiors and my organization he dumped me on a train for Helsinki. I guess he hoped that somebody else would kill me or the memory loss would hide the fuck job he did on me.”

J’acid nodded, then stopped abruptly. “but you know who you are and what happened”

“That should’ve been good news, unfortunately a person in my organization sees me as a liability because I was jacked. He wants to make my memory loss permanent. Plus he now wants to partner with the Russians.”

J’s hand rubs up against his chin. “What about George? Is he still around.”

“George has already been wiped. He had a virtual reality pysco schism and was deemed a security risk.”

Leaning back, and clearly unsure of how to be helpful, J asks slowly. “Is there anything else important that you can remember?”

“Just that you are and always have been the best jazz musician on the planet.” It’s an attempt to lighten the mood, I wish I’d some how kept in touch with him after all these years. He laughs long and loudly. It brings a renewed sense of warm to my grey interior.

“Good...good, You are still have your charm. You’ll need it if Tulsa is ever to forgive you.” He continues to chuckle.

“Tulsa?” My head bends slightly. “That woman?”

J coughs a muffled laugh. “That woman? You really didn’t remember her.” He thinks for a second. “Russians or no Russians, she’s going to be very pissed for a very long time.”

“Why? I mean maybe it’s a dumb question, but I remember only a little about her. She was what 14 years old back then and we were friends. I don’t think anything could’ve happened.”

J shakes his head. “She was 17 when you left and you did kiss her good bye. For a girl who thought she’d found true love it was enough to break her heart.”

Dumbfounded and feeling defensive, I try to explain. “I’m sorry but that’s not my fault. She was a great friend to me, teaching me to speak Finnish and showing me around the city. She saw me with other women. She knew I had to leave.”

“Love is nobody’s fault.” J’acid replies. “In truth, the fact that you were aloof, sort of a new media star, good looking, and the two of you got along so well. It had to happen. I saw it happen. You never knew it did you? You can figure out any computer in the world, create new genres of art and literature, but you can’t see love. I guess I’m not surprised, You were always so focused on projects and on noble causes that you forget about people. It’s funny, I think that makes you easy to love at first and so much harder in the end.”

“I did care about her, maybe it was love. But, it was a brotherly sort of love. She was like my baby sister.”

“For you maybe, not for her. For her it was out and out love.” He sighs “Maybe I should’ve said something. She is my grand daughter.” He signals the waitress for a couple of beers. “Maybe now you can patch things up.”

“J’acid, I’m sorry but I have to go to Russia. I have to erase the memories the Capo took from me. I have to stop Alex from taking over.” The next statement is suddenly harder to make. “and there is another woman in my life now. Angela and she too loves me.”

“Do you love her?” J asks

It’s a good question. “I don’t remember.”

The waitress drops the beer off. She has great timing.

I reach for one and ask “J? can I stay at your place.

“Sure” and J takes a long sip.

“And J, for now can we stop talking about my like. Every moment brings a new complication and I’d to try to forget again at least for tonight. How about music and art? Just like in the old days.”

With a tip of his bottle, J nods “The old days...”

FRAUD

The hours past quickly and by the time we arrived at J's home It was nearly dawn. His place, his old place. Little had changed in 20 something years. The first floor was a bookstore filled with old paperbound books. I think many of the same books are still on display. Nobody reads paper anymore. Shame really, most kids today have never touched one. The Basement was his studio and digital work space. The 2nd on 3rd floors were his living quarters. The 2nd floor lights are on.

J too notices this and turns to me. "You must pretend to be passed-out."

My reply is a well practiced blank look.

"Just, fall on my shoulder and say nothing." He bends to one knee and waits "Come on now."

I lean over close my eyes and rest on his shoulder. He lifts me. It makes no sense.

Nothing makes sense. Damn it. J carries me up the stairs. We enter the lit room. Curious, I open my eyes. Draped over J'acid's back the first thing I see is his butt crack. I do an appropriate half laugh half cough. In turn J responds with a low "shhh..." I hear footsteps but can see no one from my position behind J.

"Get his fucking ass out of here. NOW."

Oh shit, my eyes snap shut instantly. Its Tulsa.

“I mean it J’acid. Drag his sorry ass back to the gutter. Let him rot there. God damn fucking prick.”

J softly interjects. “He needs help.”

“Of course he needs help. The fucker didn’t remember my name.” She groans “Drop his ass down I want to start kicking it.”

“Tulsa, he was jacked by the Russians. His memories were stolen. He didn’t even remember me until he my name in a promo for the show.”

“Fuck him, fuck him.” The anger leaves her voice. “ He always has an excuse.”

.

“Let me put him down and we can talk in the other room.” J says with comforting tone only a grandfather has. He puts me on a couch – I think. I don’t really know, I don’t dare open my eyes. I do know she is staring at me.

“Come now girl, let us talk” J says. A door closes behind them. They’ve left. I don’t know if I can sleep. I wish they’d turned the lights off.

NAKED

An hour passes. The sun is rising. I am not asleep.

The desire to be awake conflicts with the need for sleep.

I hear a door opening, footsteps, two sets and a voice. It's soft, warm and concerned.

"So he's really in trouble."

J's deep voice returns a with a "Yep"

"Look at him, oh the stains on his shirt, his pants. I didn't see how bad he was in the club.

Russia mob, Jacked yeah that sounds like our man."

J gives another "Yep"

"I'm going to wash his clothes maybe. Maybe try to get those stains out. He's been sleeping in them for what 5 days out in the streets."

No answer from J. With my eyes closed I see him simply nodding.

"If your sure he's passed out, I'll take his pants on shirt off. He can still sleep in his underwear."

"Yeah I'm positive that he will not wake up." He says it kinda loudly.

I'm sure he's smiling.

But I'm suddenly afraid.

"Well if he does wake up I'll probably want to kill him again." She says also kinda loudly. "And after I kill him, I will kill you for instigating this. Don't tell me didn't."

Tulsa comes close to me. Her scent stirs a desire in me. Strong hands with a delicate touch lift my arms, roll my back removing my shirt. She pauses. The pants are next.

I'm on my back.

She pulls down the zipper and gives a quick tug to my trousers.

“I’m going to kill him.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Where is his underwear.”

“Oh child I do not know” Says a deep voice.

“He probably met some other girl, some other night. He isn’t in trouble is he.”

This has taken a nasty turn.

“No, No granddaughter. He is in trouble. It is true and given that I’m sure he’s got an explanation.” J offers with a touch of pleading.

Silence.

He adds. “Just finish what you started. Helping him, washing his clothes was a nice gesture on your part.”

More silence.

“It might get caught on the zipper, could be pretty painful if the job is not finished” J adds with surprising sincerity.

She now answers “Good, I hope it gets cut off.” She’d made up her mind to be angry.
“He always has an explanation, a reason and I don’t care anymore it still hurts. It hurts more when I can’t hate him and I can’t love him.”

“Or anyone” she adds in voice not meant to be heard.

The deep voice returns softly. “I know, and I feel for you. Go to sleep now. I’ll do the rest.”

Her footsteps move toward his voice, pause and then leave the room.

I open my eyes. J’acid is holding a blanket for me.

In a whisper he leans over. “Boy, give me your damn pants.”

The blanket is thrown atop me.

The window blinds close

The light is turned off.

SECTION II - AWAKENING

FIX

Once again my eyes open to find much of the day has past by. It’s afternoon and there is much to do. With a groan and a series of stretches events are set in motion. First to the Zhou, there’s a few things that should’ve been done sooner. A deep system check. The

Russians could've by-passed my security and placed a tracer file on my os. An online tracker or worse one that could help them pinpoint my em signal and lead them back to the very sofa I sat upon. That trick worked only if I was online. There was no danger yet, everything should be safe.

“Damn”

The Russian cash was still traceable to me. I need to completely change my access config otherwise they could find and track me on the server side. Virtual Reality is both the easiest and the hardest place to lose oneself. It's easy if one has the software. Subnet maskers and portal scramblers are great for covert ops. For plain old animinity. A new identity does the trick nicely. It seemed I'd add another alias in the near future.

Meanwhile the manual search turns up a rogue system prefs file. It's a standard file, something I installed. Trouble was that the install date didn't match to its partition location. If it was installed when it said it was. It would be physically stored in a different block of memory. The difference is something nobody would catch. Unless you knew that everything on your drives could be altered. Files and even full applications can be hacked with new commands, virals, or the cruisers for user info - babel phish. The Apps, phish and all, are reloaded exactly as it was. Typically the only trace of a change is the install date. Changing the install date is a piece of cake. The paranoid know this, the smart fingerprint the drive blocks, the professionals double check everything. The fully charged Zhou has another benefit an onboard LIM with voice rec.

“Zhou. Run a full system security diagnostic. Also check your own memory core for differences in your buffers and previous memory maps.” The Zhou’s level six intelligence in a old sys school voice replies “Understood, ETA for process 2 hours”. After this check, the other actions could be taken.

2 hours, enough time to catch up to J. Hopefully he’s in the shop below or in his studio. Tulsa was another story, maybe J had done more damage control. Again the word hope comes mind.

One last thing before closing the Zhou’s interface. The rogue file. In an BS editor the file opens. Text scrolls down screen. It’s very good work. It’s very Russian as well.

Down the stairs the music and bookstore feels familiar. Tall dust covered cases of bound paper volumes form a small maze, with some points punctuated by a soft leather reading chair or a display case filled musical instruments. An old man in a ratty, though probably very comfortable sweater sits at one of the chairs. Hearing my intrusion he leans the book down, with hand keeping his place in the thick yellow pages.

“You Harry? Ah yes must be. Yes, J’acid is in studio, go down there.” Pulling his hand from the book he points to a door marked Staff Only “ Go, He waits, you see him.”

“Kittos” I reply,

“Damn” he says. Not to me though, when he pointed at the studio door he had moved the hand which held his place in the old yellow pages of his book.

The door at the bottom of the stairs is far different from the old wooden one at the top. This one is all metal and is edged by a flexiseal. To my left is a vent strongly sucking air into it. The reason is clear – dust from the room above. The knob turns easily and it opens. A swath of darkness spills out.

“Hello” I say to the dark.

“Hey there” the dark replies.

With eyes adjusting, my feet decide to move forward. Points of light twinkle in what appears to be a corridor.

“Harrison” says a deep voice in front of me.

Jump say my feet. “AH....”

The small space is ringed with laughter “I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you.”

Professes the still laughing voice.

I add. “And I wasn’t frightened.”

“Good good, then now, come this way.”

“J I still can’t see you”

“Access Command Panel – all lights up 20%.” J’s figure and the place is now lit. “Sorry Harrison, I had been Holo painting and darken my whole studio accordingly.

“Painting? Is this a new hobby”

“Been doing it for a few years now. Sort of an offshoot of the music and VR expressions we had done. Only now I do it in peace and quiet.

He leads me to a room floating in its center is a abstract painting. Slowly is animates.

Blonde strokes wash over a blue ravine. Red and magenta appear from the friction.

Blonde...

“J’acid where is Tulsa?”

“Gone I am afraid. She did not stay here last night.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“No. She has many friends in the city. I’ve put out a few calls.” He pauses and senses what I want to hear. “She will be alright and she will be back. But remember when she returns do not apologize do not offer any plan or even a thought. She will have worked everything out. Just agree will her and everything will be fine.”

“But what if I disagree with her.”

“Ahh..” says the deep voice. “She is a very good honest and smart person, she will propose a reasonable solution. You will agree Trust me. But also you really must remember this. Disagree with her and you can chuck good and reasonable out the window.”

“Ok J, OK” I sigh. “That just leaves me the Russians and my former organization to deal with.

“Piece of cake.”

In the dim light I nod with him. We both know it's not true but the humor and confidence are needed to get started.

“So...” J begins “Any new memories surface this morning? And, um, how about other friends or people that could help us?”

“Sorry J, nothing new this morning and that probably means that I have gotten all that will surface on its own. There's a probably a few things or a few people that could emerge if that memory is partially intact and near the surface. As for people that could help, I'm sure that there is somebody, but I can't remember.”

“Harrison, I read that during a memory jack, that the more time they spent downstreaming neural data in a particular sector the more likely those memories will return.”

“That's what I was thinking. The Russians would be mostly interested in the newer memories and especially those concerning the organization. What's really funny is that is better than the alternative, which also could be true.”

“And the alternative is?”

“That I'm a completely self involved son of a bitch and have no friends.”

“Hmm, you have friends Harrison. You often don’t think about them enough, but they accept that is a part of the relationship. Our friendship is proof of this. And Harrison shouldn’t you have a list of email contacts, even a stack e-biz cards tucked away on the Zhou.”

I blink, that was obvious. It couldn’t be that easy. A few keystrokes showed that it wasn’t. “They deleted my address book. The LIM’s personal secretary was purged. And I didn’t get any new email. Alex shut down my account.”

I would’ve been cursing immediately but J interjected

“So who is this Alex character.”

“Alexander Morningside, he’s a programmer / legal specialist. George and I hired him years ago to act as a front for some of the legitimate ventures we started. Mostly it was open source libraries of code and a few tech innovations. The goal was to get our work out into the public domain while remaining behind the scenes and fighting for the free net.”

J rocked back in his chair. “A free net, the internet as nation. I remember you talking about it years ago. Honestly, I didn’t think you were right. Course at the time, online virtual reality was mainly a gamers’ paradise. Technogeeks from around the world lost in their fantasy adventures. Yes, yes there were those who ranted into ether about the sovereignty of cyberspace, but those people knew little of what was to come. Like

Barlow's 1996 Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace. Classic libertarian anti-capitalist angst."

I kicked back into my chair, a memory much to my surprise was there...."*Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel. I come from Cyberspace, the new home of the mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty over where we gather.*"

"Well, J'Acid, at the time the web seemed to hold many utopian promises."

J'Acid grinned in the dim light "When the telegraph was introduced, many applauded. A few disagreed, and commented that "*Now people can lie to one another over great distances.*" In the end both sides were right."

"Hmmm, and wrong." I began "The culture of the time tends to think the future revolves its issues or forgets that it tempospatial biases. I recall seeing a 1950's futurist's drawing of the home of tomorrow. In the middle of all the new technology was a woman in 1950's garb doing the housework. The caption declared how easy her life had become. Shame they forgot to tell her she had to have a full-time job and still do much of the housework in the future."

"Speaking of working...it would've been nice if hyper-competition had been considered." J'Acid added. "There always somebody hungrier than you in this world...At least it hit companies and individuals alike."

“Some companies” I corrected, “and then increased competition herded them like sheep into the cyber-frontier. ”

“With dogs like Microsoft, IBM, barking at them. Buy this, Buy that, we’ll guide you to the future. Woof Woof. Woof.” J’Acid added and paused. An awkward moment foreshadowed a turn in the conversation. “Harrison were we any better than them in those early days? We helped crack open the door to the virtual. We performed for millions, and naively believed we were good in a moral sense. But once the doors were open, the power struggles, and the abuses of power that happened were staggering.”

With that came a sullen sense of responsibility for the past tinged by the lack of knowledge of the present. Sensing my mood shift, J’Acid commented further. “Do not feel bad, perhaps the upcoming Constitutional Convention will bring the virtual community-states and corporate-states together.”

The performances we did brought millions of people together. Those people logged off feeling like they’d really seen something, something special. And they had. When their children began attending some virtual reality classrooms and graded on what they learned.”

“And disciplined for misbehaving.” J interjected.

“And disciplined for misbehavior.” I answer back. “People decided that virtual reality was an extension of reality and not some fantasy land. Their whole mindset shifted.” J’acid “I didn’t truly doubt that people would eventually accept vr as being real in a sense. I guess it was the concept independence. Real world governments and corporations never give up power willingly.”

“Well, the true power of any society lies in the hands of it’s citizens. No real world government could lay claim to a global societies that vr was creating. Business were a little different. Corporations in a sense were the early landowners and users were in a sense tenants. Tenants have a habit of bonding together and fighting for rights for a voice in decision making. As these groups rose up and began to represent not just millions of people, but other businesses that were becoming a part of the first cities, the corporate owners had little choice in the end but to back down.”

“And you made sure governments and corporations had little choice.” J’acid said succinctly.

“Well, a free and independent society is the only one that would have legitimate legal and moral authority within this new frontier and they saw this eventually.”

“I’m sure that those virtual sit-ins helped them see the light as well.” J added.

“A few million people just being on their system had a nasty habit bringing their whole corporate network down. Especially if they know exactly where to sit...”

With an air of slight seriousness J asked. “Harrison, were you a part of the group who temporarily seized control of the United Nations virtual headquarters.?”

The edge of a memory appears, in it a huge fake looking monster destroys a city. The creature is supposed to be a reptile or dinosaur but, appears more like a large human in a foam rubber suit. At the monsters feet are thousands of Japanese people. They run, scream and a few are crushed as the monster tears through the city skyline.

“We didn’t seize control really. We simply placed their virtual reality inside another. In this case we used an old retro tribute simulation “Tokyo vs. Big Monster.” I think was the title. We were nice enough to not have the monster not destroy the UN headquarters, though the monster did spend a lot of time looking in the UN buildings windows. A few delegates actually enjoyed the show. The final battle scene was a real master work.”

“And the United Nations was unable to get public support for its bid to be the governing body for virtual reality.” J noted.

“Not just public support, big business didn’t feel comfortable with the UN either.” I reply.

“Well Harrison, you should be quite happy. The Third Constitutional Convention is only 2 months away. Virtual Reality is free.”

I didn't know this.

My life's work comes to fruition and I'm in the dark.

For while J'acid and I sit in the dim light of his studio, his holo painting gently shifts.

Colors fade, shapes form and break into pixel dust.

"Harrison, what is wrong?"

"Don't know J..."

"I don't remember."

A chill runs through me.

"I need to get back inside, inside a VR city. Maybe something will come back to me." A question forms. "I've got a dialogistic program running on the Zhou, checking for Russian spyware. Can I use your system?"

"Yes Harrison, of course" He says with definite sense of pride "My system is at your disposal." Even in the low light his eyes twinkle. He has a pleasant surprise for me.

He then looks downward, thinking. The twinkle fades just a little. "I, like most people, still use VR goggles, but I also have an interface for your neural jack. But first do you

not think we should run few tests on it? The Russians could've damaged the relays. It won't take long."

Another test, I shake my head in frustration. I want to dive into action but, he's right.

"That's probably best."

IMPLANT

In another room J sits me down in a black leatherish chair. He turns a computer on and brings a neuraloptik adapter and cable before me. He says "I'll jack in and slowly up the power to operational level. Let me know if you feel any pain or get any feedback."

"Sure thing."

With a click and a twist I'm connected, and literally a light goes on in my mind.

Thankfully, there's no searing pain or disorientation. The e-chem neural nets fire and the sense of data flow, of connection begins to materialize.

"Is it alright?"

"Fine."

"O.K. Harrison I'll begin a diagnostic check."

I lean back in my chair, arms crossed. Waiting sucks.

"The hardware reads as O.K. Are you ready to check sensory input?"

“Let me have it.” I close my eyes, and inside my head the darkness turns bright white. Next come solid colors, first red, then green, and finally blue. A test pattern of gradients comes and goes. Finally a real looking forest appears. Deep rolling hills under far reaching blue skies. A few clouds, big white and lazy, drift by.

“Body simulation is next.”

Hands and outstretched arms materialize in this virtual environment , an environment created by computer and feed directly to my optic nerves.

“Audio coming online” says J

The surrounding forest is alive. Birds sing, wind whistles and in the distance a lonely moose calls out.

“Ready to check navigation?”

“Go for it.” I say without hesitation.

I turn my head in reality, and the action is mirror in the virtual one. Hands reach up down and touch toes. Awkwardly I quickly realize that I’m still sitting in the black leatherish chair in J’s studio. In the virtual world there is no chair. My ass hangs magically suspended above the grass. The computer soon realizes that I’m not falling either. A chair appears.

With a gesture, my chair grows wheels.

I go for a test drive.

Blue sky, rolling green hills welcome me back to the world within the computer.

Simulated wind rushes against my face as drive toward the digital horizon.

With another gesture I access the data this diagnostic is generating.

“Hey J, everything looks fine. What’s your opinion?”

A voice from the heavens replies “Harrison, everything looks fine, but I have a question after we end this simulation.”

“Consider it ended.” A gentle motion tells the computer to stop. Visually the simulation fades out to deep gray. The gray becomes the dim light of J'acid’s studio.

“What’s the question.?”

“Your neural jack is unlike anything I seen or even read about. The tests cannot identify the model number. Only an unregistered tag “p0003c” and a date stamp of 10.3.2022.

Harrison, neural jacks of this type have only been around since 2027 and even the best of today’s aren’t as advanced as the one you wear.”

“Blame George. He’s the inventor of the deep memory neural jack.”

Dumbfounded J speaks. “George is the crazy mystery s.o.b. who open-sourced the core technology of human-machine interfacing? Damn it man!. I remember when that happened. Everybody said the guy could’ve made billions and instead he makes it an anonymous gift to the world.”

“Well, it was goodwill gesture but it also was our only option. First by open-sourcing it we allowed many others to join our side during the resulting patent and legal battles. In the end we were lucky to have remained anonymous. Exposure would’ve been the end of us. Still we had the risk it, this technology needed to be public. Imagine a corporation

with monopoly power over this. They would been in control of all the standards set forth for new virtual worlds. We couldn't let that happen.”

“O.K. Harrison but why is your old jack so much better?”

A funny twinge strikes me as the question is asked.

“George does good work.”

The answer was clear enough, yet felt incorrect. Perhaps my guilt feelings over George's memory wipe are coming through. Clearly J is not satisfied. I offer only a shrug in response. J's head tilts over, and a smile comes to his face.

“If you are ready to enter a full virtual city, I have a surprise for you. Come now, stand up and follow.”

He outstretches his hand, grips mine and pulls me up from the chair. Down the corridor on the right he opens a door.

“Oh shit J, you still have this running?”

“Oh yes . . . and I've kept the system updated.”

“Cool” With that I step on the thick metallic screen floor and move toward the harness that hangs in the center. Beneath the metal screen the plastic blades of a huge turbo prop sit motionless. Soon they'd spin and through old fashioned aerodynamics I would be lifted aloft. Virtual flight simulation was an old arcade game. It was a great way the travel in virtual environments. Unfortunately, their use was banned in the Commercial cities. Input devices like this were only good for joy ridding. Fast moving punks zipping through virtual streets and skies annoyed the typical virtual business commuter. In the end it was deemed illegal. If J had kept the system updated this might not be a problem. A quick look over to J brings confirmation.

“Of course you can fly any in any world, even the Comms. There is an *out of body* node attached to the avatar driver.”

I nod, this meant that can leave my virtual body behind and explore the world invisibly. Another question comes to mind I turn back to J. Once again he reads my thoughts and provides the answer.

“Yes, there is a full set of hacking software tools – all accessible while in you are out of body.”

“J, I love you.”

“Of course you do.” He smiles “Now put your skinny white boy butt in the harness and let’s get you flying.”

Actually I don’t have to fly, J can turn down the air so I can walk around or teleport.

Flight, however is addictively cool.

“Hey J? what city are you sending me to?”

“You got a preference?”

“Not that I remember.”

“How about Hawking” (note to self find cool city name)

“That will do it.”

SCENT

The harness has little to do with flying. It's just keeps you from hitting the walls, ceiling or floor of the real world chamber. Here, flight is body language just like actual sky diving. Accordingly, I remember to late that it's a good idea to stretch first.

Over the intercom J chimes in. "Do you want to walk in or fly in?"

"Send me flying"

The neural jack kicks in, gone is the chamber.

I now stand on a huge marble pedestal set on the edge of an infinite sky.

Wind whips up around my feet. Strong currents of air start to push me.

With arms outstretched, I lean forward and do not fall. The world supports me, raises me up, up and far above the pedestal.

Soon clouds surround me, J has preset my destination and this virtual distance I travel really reflects matter of download time. Most of the data is already on J's hard drive, and gets updated with every new visit.

In the distance a city floats. Actually its more like a trio of cities. Three huge architectural centers stand against a bright blue backdrop. Each is loosely bound by a horizontal ring with smaller elements like bridges, decks, docks and assorted platforms. They stretch outward, blurring the boundary of city and sky. A city of 100 million.

“Beatifu...”

My stomach feels like heaving.

Sickness. Disgust, Nausea.

It came too quickly

Eyes watering, I can't see.

I spin.

I vomit.

J is shouting. “What’s wrong....What’s wrong”

The air beneath me disappears and I crash to the floor. My stomach is still reeling.

A dollop of vomit that had been blown to the ceiling chooses to fall. It strikes my face just as J runs in.

“Harrison, man what happened.”

“Well,” I reply rolling over to sit cross legged. “When you ran the diagnostic I guess you put all the settings back to default.”

J for once, stood mutely.

“All my senses via the jack used the default factory setting. J, my sense of smell was on.”

Like a big blackened Saint Nick a belly thumping “ho ho ho” echoed in the chamber.

This time I am mute while J continues laughing. With a “hrump” his legs give way and he too sits down. “Oh, oh Harrison, I’m sooo, sooo sorry. I don’t use a jack and I’d forgotten all about the viruses.”

“Ya know J, your apology would be more believable if you’d stop laughing. Come on stop. Stop.” Needless to say he doesn’t stop and I, unwilling to beat the crap out of him, join him.

“Ok, its not really your fault. It’s all those hackers stinking up vr. Young punks.”

“Like you Harrison?”

Did I ever write a virus that simulated a nasty ass fart. Probably, neural jacks aren’t commonplace and over the years they became the interface of choice of elitists and media stars and starlets. Just the kind of folks who need a dose of stinking reality.

“J, remind me to write up an artificially intelligent air freshener to fix this in future.”

“Sure thing.”

“And J.”

“Yes Harrison?”

“Let’s clean this crap up so I can get back to city. I think...” A flickering sense of hope began to burn inside me. “My past is waiting there for me.”

With that we both fall silent.

REENTRY

J stands up and leaves. Hopefully he’ll return with a LIM cleaning unit that will clean the vomit up. Meanwhile I return to an earlier thought about Alex. He’s still covered in the grey fog that holds nearly all of my recent memories. What’s he up to. What were we working on. The Third Constitutional Convention must be a part of all this.

Nothing.

More effort, focus, concentrate.

Nothing.

Fuck it...

I need to deal with the Russians first. Shouldn't be hard. The location info I have via my Zhou should provide me with a starting point for eavesdropping and tracking both email and virtual traveling. Dropping a listening bug in their virtual offices is probably a good idea. Alex and the organization might've upgraded their defenses. Maybe, but hopefully they've been too busy overhauling their own system because of my lapse.

Memories taken from a human brain aren't made of bits and bytes. They are chemically woven. This puts two things in my favor. First, the equipment that can download neural data is relatively large and is semi-organic. Semi organics are very motion sensitive. Its not likely the memory storage unit will be moved. Second, only other humans can actually read memories in the organic state. They can't be searched like a database. It's possible to translate the memories into data. The process however is very very slow even for googleflexing systems. A month or more is needed.

If possible, I'll steal my thoughts back. If necessary I'll destroy them.

Do I love Angela? Without memories I have only an email and a dim vision to recall her. A glimpse of a her face, a notion of her personality and nothing more.

My knowledge and personality seem to be fine. Personality, hmmm...what am I without my past. Oddly the same according to J. Not all my past, just the last twenty years are gone. Not gone, more like burnt or fried. The downloading process fires up the brain's neural connections. Memories held in chemical fractal compression expand and the patterns are mirrored in semi organic holding tanks which are known as dream catchers. Only a real brain, chemically burning can be copied in this manner.

J returns and saves me from another round of self introspection. Unfortunately there is no LIM cleaning unit with him.

“You got to be kidding”

J simply cocks his head to one side. “No mister technology man. Somethings are best done without machines.” He proceeds to hold out his arms. Each holds a wet rag. “You may choose.”

Prior Gibson/ Stephenson
Comms
Realms
Tracts

Consitution of Cyberspace – research...

Entry
Three rings / access – distance...each building was a cluster of servers inturn the donate
processing power to the surrounding streets...plazas – walkways
Kids playing virtual mooning
Musician / Poet performing

Umbrellas

Firedoors

Surfing

Tonga

Back trace, packet jumping....

Crutchware....