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SUBLIMINAL

By Eric Arnold

B.A. University of Maine, 2019

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August 2021

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SUBLIMINAL

By Eric Arnold

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Hollie Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
(in English)
August 2021

Abstract:

Subliminal is a novel which attempts to encompass literary, science fiction, and thriller genres by centering on two male narrators who portray similar but different thought processes and means with which to move through their respective social contexts. The novel centers on the dueling perspectives of Neiko Plemons and David Tremble, ex-convict and scientific researcher, as both proceed along a path of discovery involving an underground criminal enterprise. The juxtaposition of their voices is intended to highlight the similarities in discursive consciousness across class, occupation, and level of education. The novel is fundamentally an exploration of many such ideas which the author attempts to render through fictional voices and actions within the limitations and affordances of a near-future context and a thriller plot.

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SUBLIMINAL

CHAPTER 1: NEIKO PLEMONS

Used to be, they gave you a number – a shirt with a tag on it. ‘Number two-four-two-two, get your ass over here for a reacharound,’ shit like that. Those were the good ole days. The only thing you had to worry about getting under your skin was Bubba’s peen.

The little chip vibrates in my wrist like a dwarf’s hammering my funny bone. I’d look at the orange digits flashing beneath the surface, but I already know the time. It’s just before my phone call, the one with the minister and my old lady. My kumbaya therapist thinks it’s a good idea.

My call is scheduled at 2:30 on phone number two and, sure as shit, there’s a slack-jawed mouth-breathing meatbag on *my phone* sweet talkin’ his cunt girlfriend as if she ain’t gonna leave him. It’s 2:25 and I’m about ready to beat his ass. There’s four fuckin’ phones and they schedule our calls on the same damn one, back-to-back – just another way for the administration to fuck with us. I don’t know this guy but I seen him on the rec yard and he doesn’t seem much more than a scraggly snitch with a lighter up his junies.

I don’t look at him directly. You don’t look a man in the eye in prison unless he’s looking at you directly, and at that you don’t stare, but make sure you look at him directly. It’s a whole ape-shit game that either you figure out or you don’t and someone decides you’re a pussy and takes your zoom-zooms and wham-whams. He’s standing with his shoulder to me and I try to catch his gaze while his little goatee flaps with his lips, but he’s ignoring me, and that’s pissing me off even more than I usually am already.

He says, “Yeah, yeah. Talk to you soon. Love ya. Bye.” He hangs up the phone like a gentleman and stalks off – good choice. I pick up the receiver and polish it up with the tail of my blues because I don’t want the residue of any bodily fluids touching my skin. It’s the kind of phone that you’d think of being made way back by Pan Am, all black and sturdy like a billy club or the Warden’s boot. The cord looks like something coming out of a Terminator robot and is a little too short to strangle anyone with. I get it all nice and pretty and put it to my ear and wait for the buzz, click and chirp-chirp that means that the call’s come in. I’m feeling antsy now that I’ve got the phone to myself and want to smoke a cigarette. I tend to pace back and forth when I talk but the damn cord has me locked in like I’m handcuffed to a bumper, which I have been. Little John, as he’s known – I’ll let you guess as to why he’s called that – gets on the phone behind me, and suddenly I’m pissed off again, because I don’t want his snitching ass listening to my phone call. I want to beat his ass, but I don’t have the time because it’s suddenly click-click-chirp-chirp and my old lady is on the other end.

“Hi mom,” I say. I use plain language around her.

“Hi honey,” she says in her gravelly, post-lung-cancer voice that used to bother me.

This is a good sign, the fact that she is the one calling. If it had been my father-in-law, I’d arrive at fire-and-fury and hell-or-high-water pretty quick and the whole thing would be a waste of time.

“You know I’m getting out soon,” I say, breaking the subject. I expect a flood of emotion.

“I’ve had Merle mark the day of your release on every calendar for the past eight years,” she rasps. I can hear the squeaky bearings of her wheelchair as she adjusts herself.

“Oh.”

“We’re very excited for you Nikki. Whole family’s very excited.”

I wince. I never liked it when she calls me that, and I began to like it a lot less as a grown man.

Little John bursts out in laughter behind me – I’ve got my back to him. “Sure, sure,” he says, and I can almost hear the moistness of his lips.

“When can we see you?” mom says.

“Uh, not any time soon.” There is this thing called probation that says I can’t do a lot of things.

“Then I’ll have Merle fix up the RV. We should be leaving right about now shouldn’t we if we’re to make it on time.”

“Mom, you shouldn’t be travelling in the state that you’re in. You need to recover.” Been saying that since I was twelve. “Besides, the middle of San Jose is no place for an RV.”

“I don’t know,” Little John says with a cutesy boyhood chuckle, “I guess he got what he deserved.” It pisses me off that I can’t shut him the fuck out of my head.

Mom starts going off on some tangent about gas prices and I stop her. “Mom, I’ll call you when I got my new place set up. If you get one of those Habit pages, I can send you pictures and video and shit.” And she could send me money.

“Okay honey, okay,” she says, and I can hear her sniffing, which sounds like a cow hyperventilating over the cheap-ass phone. “Merle wants to talk to you.” Her smothering gets louder and more distant.

Shit. That was my chance to play on her simple sympathies and get some greenbacks.

There’s the hollow knocking sound as the phone changes hands.

“Put mom back on,” I say once I hear Merle’s breathing on the other end of the line. “I wasn’t done talking to her.”

Merle has this precise, matter-o-fact tone that he uses to sound like he has more than ninety IQ. “She’s on oxygen now.”

“Yeah, well put her back on once she’s calmed down.” I get that rush, like if you put a pissed-off meter on me I’d ping it to eleven.

“You never had much patience Nick,” he mutters. He calls me Nick as if my full name’s too Jap for him.

I don’t feel like talking to him, so I stay quiet.

“Looking forward to getting out?”

“You could say that.”

“What are you going to do afterward?”

Fuck knows that’s the most obvious question in the world and he don’t know the answer to it. “You asking if I’m going to start going to church?”

“That wouldn’t be a bad start.”

He says it in such a sanctuarious tone -- I want to tell him what a son of a bitch he is and his life’s work of spinning gospel to his cadre of smalltown suckers means that he’s more of a pimple on the ass of progress than a used car salesman, but then I’d just sound like a whiney bitch, so I serve up a slice of genius: “You know what, dad, I think I’m going to suck dicks for a living.”

There’s a pause on his end. “Don’t kid with me Nick.”

“I’m not.”

“You never mentioned that before,” he says between heavy breaths.

I'm smirking so hard I gotta keep it from reaching my voice. "I think I found myself in here, you know, over the last decade. Well, almost a decade."

"You...you can't do that. I mean, you can't support yourself that way."

"Why not?"

"It's unhealthy."

I laugh like a bitch in a soap opera. You know, like when they make their dumb point. "Well dad, that's healthier than living on the street." I think he likes it when I call him 'dad' – makes his shit all tight.

"You should get a get a real job. Work at a gas station."

"They don't hire thieves at gas stations," I say. But really, I'd rather slit my wrists than ring up lotto tickets for the neighborhood bums.

"I'll help you find a job, then."

I get this feeling that I don't need to talk to mom again. "No, this is something I have to do on my own. But, if you wanted to, you could lend me five thousand to help me get started." Always go high and then lowball 'em – dupes always think they're getting a deal.

Merle laughs. "You had me for a second there."

I keep playing it straight. "Two-thousand would help me pay the rent."

"God will forgive you."

That pisses me off. "I don't care about your fucking God!"

"I know, I know. But God cares about you."

I hang up the phone, I'm so fucking mad. I've crashed the car. Little John's there looking at me with a pleasant little smile on his face. He's broken that rule of not-looking-but-staring, so I'm about to go ape-shit on him, about to take that phone cord and make him squirm with it. But

I've already crashed one car – don't want to crash another. Instead I give him one of those looks that you give to those kids on their mudder boards. Break a leg sucka.

Take a walk. That's what I do. Cause it's a half-hour before roll call and it ain't my time to go out to rec. The commissary's about ten minutes away if I walk it slow enough. I kinda have this thought in the back of my head like I'm one of those Tysoné chickens, the ones that spend all their lives indoors packed into some tiny space where they shit on each other and all that, something I saw on the TV in the mess hall the other day when Old Head Eddie got the remote away from Digby Danger (the one who talks funny). That old head likes music videos. Anyway, they went on and on about how Tysoné went through all this fucking effort to remove the heads of the chickens like how the scientists removed the seeds from grapes or whatever. Maybe it was just the brains and their heads were hollow – yeah, they had to use rubber plugs to fill the eye-holes of those ones. But I didn't think chickens had much brains to remove, so what the fuck is the difference? Anyway, they got chickens there now sittin' in the dark eatin' and breathin' through stinkin' tubes.

But like the chicken place, the walls are concrete and gray and the big doors to the cells look like the doors to an oven. I'm kinda like a chicken – someone's getting paid so I breathe. I guess that's the point.

The dwarf in my arm goes ape when I hold it up to the commissary and I punch in the button for spicy pork rinds. I get two cause my ole' bub Boot likes em' too and I don't want his boot goin' up my chute. I'm holding these two bags of pork rinds before me like a ballsack cause everyone knows I got the dope. Four dollars ain't much in the free world but you betcha it's probably a day's worth of foot massages on the inside. I'm struttin' around like a peacock to the mess hall where everybody's at. I ain't seen Boot or the other brand of brothers at one of them

tables bolted to the floor. But there's Eddie with his bag of unsalted heart-healthy peanuts and one other quiet dude who I think was sentenced for indecent exposure or something. Indecent exposure of what? Haha. So I mosey on over and have a sit in one of the velvety plushes which feels about as plush as a hooker's bony ass.

"Can I have some of those?"

I'd tell most dudes to fuck off, but Eddie's an old softie.

"You a good kid," he says after I toss him the bag.

They're called old heads cause their heads look old. He's got this misty gravy floating up his scalp until it disappears, and all that's left is a bunch of splotchy age spots probably from too much time spent shining his dome.

"Tell that to my ma," I say. The TV's this rectangle that's glued into the wall or something so no one can steal it. It's way better than the tablets they sell in the commissary which are so shit that you can't make out the nips on burn your bra Mondays.

Anyway, what's on the TV is an episode of some old crime drama where the goons always win, but I ain't ever seen the ending cause the roll call always happens before the end.

"This dumb shit," says a stereotypical white guy voice. It belongs to a stereotypical white guy.

"Who you calling dumb shit?" I say.

"The show, not you, dumbass." He sits in the chair next to mine.

His real name is something ridiculous like Leviticus Octavius Scott. So we call him Loot also cause it rhymes with Boot. We a bunch of poets.

He nods at my bag of rinds. "Got any more?"

"Fuck you."

“You gave that old head a bag and you ain’t givin’ me a bag?”

Eddie don’t seem to notice.

So I roll up the top and toss the bag over to him. Beneath his blues, Loot’s one of those lean mean motherfuckers. Got lats so big he could probably fly if he wanted to. Years on the dip bar do that to a man, even thin white guys.

So we there watching this stupid show. It’s the kinda show where everyone’s got a big ass gun or something, even the gangbangers, and they poot fireballs like those battery bombs we used to put in the genderless bathroom. Most thugs ain’t even seen a gun, and they sure as shit ain’t shot it at no cop. There’s a cop with big tits and she gets all blown to hell. Sidetrack – I wonder how big they’d have to be to stop bullets. And her cop lover gets all weepy and goes psycho. Well psycho ain’t the right word – the kinda psycho I’m familiar with don’t involve man tears. Anyway, I’m watching this thinking of whether I’d shoot a cop like that cause goddamn what a waste of society. Too bad there ain’t no CO’s like that. Cops ain’t good looking. They’re all goons far as I can tell. She ain’t a cop, she’s an actress. Now I’m thinking with both sides of my brain.

“I was in this bar one night, in Atlanta,” Loot says, swallowing a mouthful of rinds.

“Uh huh,” I say, cause all of Loot’s stories start that way.

“It was me and Ronnie.”

I heard plenty of stories involving Ronnie in Atlanta.

Loot speaks with a smirk. “This truck driver had just lost his job and was being a real whiny cunt. His name was Shaun – I’d seen him a few times. Shaun ain’t a man’s name you know?”

“Right,” I said half-listening.

“I wanna give him something else to whine about, so I go over to bitch slap him. Ronnie didn’t want no trouble so he’s holding me back. I slapped that fucker so hard that his trucker hat landed on one of the lights in the dining area. Now that’s the funny part. I look over and some kid is already jumping up and down to get it.

“So I’d knocked Shaun off of his bar stool and he’s down there in the dark looking like he’s shit his pants. Next thing I know, there’s a bang, like the barkeep put a hole in the ceiling to break us up. Thing is, I don’t feel Ronnie on my shoulder no more. I look over and see him bleeding out of his kidney.”

“Oh, so that’s why Ronnie couldn’t drink no more,” I say, feeling good about myself.

“Yeah. Turns out there was this underage bitch behind Ronnie who also ate the bullet. She bled out in five minutes.”

I notice that Loot ain’t smiling no more. I laugh. “What happened to Shaun?”

“He got life.” Loot shrugs. “I was a witness. Legal cunts made a big deal out of the fact that he didn’t have a license.”

“Was she cute?” I ask.

Loot gives me this look. “Ain’t gotta clue.”

I laugh like I meant it as a joke. Then I think about making another joke, that no girl should die a virgin or some shit like that, but I keep it to myself, cause I know that Lootie’s soft at heart and feels bad about plenty of things about women.

And then it’s roll time, cause our arms is going off and all the inmates behind us start shuffling to get back to their cells. Loot, Eddie and me are all on different sides of the cell block, so we each part our separate ways. It took me a while to tell people apart in prison cause they all wear the blues, the uniforms that pass for clothes which are too big in all the wrong places and

too tight in all the right ones. We all go and stand out in front of our cell doors, these big hunks of metal which have small windows in them for peeping. All the cameras are out there in the halls; lookin' through them squares at your slice of life. If the COs had it their way, they'd have cameras in every nook and cranny including the potty hole, but someone would get their ninnies in a fit about it.

Roll call ain't too flashy. We all smile for the cameras as Captain Chaz and his four horsemen scan our wrists with their orange blingdonges. I ain't got no cellie so I just stand at attention like some righteous prick so I put as many brownie points as I can toward my probation.

"Why don't you take that extra rec this afternoon, Mr. Smith," Chaz says to voluptuous white-collar guy known as Squee who's down the line. "You could use a few more steps."

"Yessir," Squee says. He wouldn't last long in a riot.

Then it's next in line. "Will," Chaz says to the guy in the cell next to me, whose one of those internet goons putting out fake girlfriends. "How are you sleeping?"

"Alright."

"He snores like an ape," I say. That's pushing it with any of the other COs, but Chaz n' me are tight as cops and robbers can be.

Will shoots me a look. "Apes don't snore, idiot."

I shrug. "Look it up."

Chaz taps on his blingdong. "I'll have mouth clamp pulled from inventory. Don't put it on your ass."

Then it's my turn. A flick of the wrist later, he says: "Elevated blood pressure this afternoon, eh?"

“It’s all going to my cock.”

He chuckles. “Maybe you should talk it over with your therapist.” Sometimes I worry that Chaz makes it too obvious that he’s playing for both teams, but what the hell do I care – I’m about to walk the red carpet.

He’s about to move on, and then he pauses like he’s gonna say something rich. “Just a heads-up, you’ll have a new cellmate by tomorrow. I know you like to play nice.”

“What’s the scoop?”

Chaz lets his blingdong dangle. “It’s in the Post.”

He heads on down the line.

The big buzzer beeps, meaning it’s the end of roll call and it’s time to wait in our cells for the 4:00 evening time block. Cells ain’t changed much over the years – it’s a square with two bunks and an unbreakable shitter/sink combo deal. Anything nice you get to put in your locker, this ratta-tat-tat metal box straight outta high school, except it clicks open to my wrist. I reach behind the pile of noodle soups, chili packets, honeybuns – my store of zoom zooms and wham whams from the commissary – and grab my Habit tab from inside. It’s about the size of a personal pan pizza and just about as flaccid and edible – first they made them for kid schoolers.

I plunk down on my bunk which has a mattress that’s about as thick and as comfortable as those cartons of cigarettes old timers used to smoke. The tab opens to the Prison Network, which is a bunch of stories about cute animals and shit and children being saved in Nairobi, cause that’s what us penal peoples care about. I look past that shit and open up the journal app, a big white page that’s gonna set me free.

I write some shit, cause that’s what my therapist lady wants me to do, or maybe that’s just what ladies want us to do...some kinda mind game so they can pan for the truth. And it’s

good shit too about other people's emotions and shit like that. I start writing about the girl that died in Loot's bar, but I spin it like I was kinda there, more or less so it's got more of the feels.

It's 4:00 and the halls are filled with blues again. I join the crowd but instead of going to mess or rec I head down the hall to Exit 1A from the block, where the CO blings my wrist and lets me through. I'm taken to a room on the other side where there's a big metal table bolted to the concrete floor. I sit in the chair that slides on rails and wait my turn; she's always a tad late. I been there so many times that they don't even shackle me off to the chair – lets me wave my hands around as I'm talking.

I try not to wave them too much cause I might give off a crazy vibe.

Candice walks in. Other than being one of the only people I ever see not wearing a uniform, she's one of the only ladies I seen in the past year, other than Ms. Oompa Loompa – the med cart lady – and Safa, who's a whole other ball of wax.

"Hello Neiko," she says. Her voice sounds like ice cream, which I can only imagine melting in my mouth. "How was the call with your parents?"

I tell her it was great, that we'd had the real big kumbaya and all that – that it was a whole bed of flowers and I was feelin' real bad about that old lady of mine and her tired breathing. I feel so much love. And I know how to bullshit this Candice, cause she really believes in the good of people, and I'm thinking like, how are you so dumb, don't you know who you talking to? I'm fucked in the head lady, that was our first convo. She really felt bad for me, knowing that I got all fucked up as a kid, liked to pull the tails off cats and see if they had bones in them, cause I thought they really looked like those Swiffer duster things which got wire in their core. Was all my daddy's fault. Shorten my sentence please. Done – then I got two years off ten. Yes, please feel sorry for me. Please, please, please.

But, you know, the times I see her once a month are always the best. She's better than them Maxim models – she's in the flesh. But it ain't just that. She ain't *in* prison, and she don't see me that way, the way everyone else does, like it's eat or get eaten motherfucker.

“How was your step-father? What did you talk about?” asks Candice.

Shit – got so carried away with mom that I forgot to mention him. Low empathy warning.

“Uh, well he said that the church is losing members, which sucks, you know? People gotta know right-n-wrong somehow.”

Maybe she's got my number. I don't fucking know.

CHAPTER 2: DAVID TREMBLE

“I do research for Habitus,” I said over the linguini with clam sauce and glass of wine before studying her reaction. I’d only known her for a couple of hours face-to-face and was already keen on her personality. Andrea was sincere and assertive, two things that seemed to be scarce in people in their late twenties.

“Oh yeah? What do you research?” Her eyebrows had gone up – she was impressed. The way she tilted her head to the side indicated interest.

In the presence of people I wanted to impress, especially women, I always defaulted to my knowledge on the on the psychopathology of smiles: the difference between genuine and fake expressions. Hers looked to be a Duchenne smile, a muscular pattern in which the corners of the mouth curve upward that is copresent with ‘crow’s feet’ at the outside corners of the eyes – a genuine expression of pleasure.

“I work with children. We’re doing trials of a new technology that helps us understand memory.” The problem with using the psychopathology of smiles to evaluate the people around you is that real-world lighting conditions are often detrimental to an accurate assessment. The dim, downward projected light of the restaurant emanating from geometric orbs cast much of her face in shadow, and this, combined with her moderate amount of makeup, cast her face in a soft, angelic hue. The other thing is that most people can fake a Duchenne smile anyway, so long as they know which muscles to contract.

“Why do you work with children?” Her eyebrows went further upward with a slight cock of her head. I guess she was surprised that a guy like me would end up working with children. I had to keep myself from getting lost in her gaze, the dilated centers of her eyes that threatened to

possess me, the blackness that is nothing more than the absence of light created by the retina interpreted by the male brain as carnal magnetism. I had to look away before going on.

“The theory is that the child’s memory is more concentrated. They have fewer life experiences, so it makes studying specific things a lot easier.” I neglected to mention that the child’s memory is typically more innocent, per-se, that it is less likely to be traumatic, the exception being psychopathic children, but even those subjects only harmed animals, or other humans in non-life-threatening ways, at least most of the time.

Her face lit up. “Oh yeah, like you remember certain things from childhood way better than something that happened two weeks ago.” Her eyes flitted upward, as if she were recalling something.

I nodded. “That’s a symptom of it. What’s an example of something you remember from your childhood?”

“Are you doing research on me?” she said with a playful smirk.

“Of course,” I said, taking a bite of linguini and sitting back as I awaited her response.

“Growing up, there was a boy who lived on my street, Willard. There was something wrong with him and his parents weren’t very nice people. I remember one day, my sister and I were playing out in the yard and he ran by on the street in front of our house. What I remember most was his mother running after him, screaming. She had his silver pajamas in one hand and a dog leash in the other.”

I laughed a little harder than was warranted. “That seems hard to forget.” Truth be told, I’d seen stranger things.

I asked her about what she did for work, as if I hadn’t already looked her up on social media. Her dating profile merely alluded to a career, but her Habitus network indicated that she

worked in journalism. Working for Habitus, I knew people who gave me access to some backdoor analytics, and I found out that her profile had been viewed by several executives employed by Arcturus Media, a subsidiary of CBS, small fish as far as the great ocean of mass media conglomerates is concerned. I would have been more cautious with describing my work had she been higher-up in the food chain. I asked her about her work with an element of feigned interest seasoned with mild suspicion – I hoped that she wouldn't complicate our evening by lying to me.

“I'm a media publicist,” she said, stopping to collect pasta with her fork. She looked away and then went back to eating, as if she had no interest in discussing what she did.

I smiled, and it reached the corners of my eyes. “What do you do for that?” She wasn't trying to deceive me.

“Oh, we just make press releases and other things for the local news. I got started through an internship there as an undergrad and they hired me afterward. I'd like to be a journalist someday, but...” she smiled cynically, “it's a long way up the ladder.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I said, thinking of how I had described my own job. I hadn't lied in that I did research, but I had implied that I was also full-blown researcher, which was not true. I was a PhD intern, a researcher on trial, someone more disposable. If the papers that resulted from my research were published, I'd have my foot in the door. If not, then I'd have to find some other job, probably at a venue like the one we were at, to pay off eight years of university debt. “That seems like a big responsibility given that you're working in the Bay Area.”

“Yeah, sometimes it can be.”

We finished eating and drank the wine, talked about college, reminisced about roommates who had unusual eating and bathing habits and where they ended up in life. She talked about her sister who had become a Washington state prosecutor and had a house in a beautiful place called Sequim. I mentioned a roommate I had as an undergraduate senior who would eat bowls of frozen peas and that he had been hired by Boeing.

“He showed me an analysis of all the frozen vegetables at the nearby Walmart and compared the nutrient density to the unit cost. All the other engineers agreed with him and pretty much every meal I ate that year included frozen peas.”

“I guess that’s what happens when a bunch of nerds live together.”

“It had nothing to do with me. Psychology isn’t anywhere near as nerdy as engineering. They also used the frozen pea bags as ice packs after they went to the gym. You know, every part of a machine has to serve multiple purposes.”

She laughed. “That’s gross, but it also makes sense.”

“The fridge smelled like sweat after a few months.”

We had tickets for the avant-garde virtual opera experience in SoMa at 9:00 and left the restaurant so we could get to the show with time to spare. As the waiter came, she offered to pay the bill, but I insisted. She went to the bathroom and I summoned an Uber to the virtual opera house.

I became self-conscious about my plans for the date on the ride over. I had chosen the virtual opera out of curiosity, and she had agreed that she found it curious as well. It was also close to where I lived. There in the car, doubt struck me. What if she did not enjoy it? What if she thought I was trying to impress her, that I was living beyond my means? That I was being pretentious? I tried making conversation in the car, but the presence of the Uber driver seemed to

be having a chilling effect on us, even with the wine we'd had. I felt her hand on the seat between us and resorted to touching it gently instead of speaking. The driver had only muttered a greeting before he started driving. Every now and then, he glanced back at us through the rearview mirror, as if working things out.

“You're going to the opera, eh?” he finally said after an extended bout of silence.

“Yeah,” I replied.

His eyes flitted between Andrea and me and the road in front of him. “I hear that will put you in a good mood afterward.”

“Oh yeah?” I said, sounding less dismissive and more interested than I had intended.

“Great if you want to get fucked,” he said with a smirk. It was a Duchene smile.

I was taken aback by that. A bolt of adrenaline shot through me – I was being driven through the city by a potential pervert. I wondered if the child locks on the doors had been activated. I thought of asking him to let us off right then and there. I must have clenched Andrea's hand a little hard because I felt her put her other hand on top of mine. I was wondering if I'd have to fight this guy – I'd never fought anyone before, but I could bench 220 for what it's worth. I thought of voicing concern, but I didn't want to piss him off. He was driving after all.

“Fantastic!” Andrea said loudly, which also caught me off-guard. She leaned forward to look at me and I saw a mild insanity in her eyes. She was inviting me to take part in the act.

But I couldn't. I gave a weak smile. Was the driver high? Was he drunk? It didn't seem as if he was swerving. I couldn't discern his pupil size from the back seat.

“The French sure do know their aphrodisiacs,” she added, just as exuberantly.

“Oui oui,” the driver said. “My mother is old Quebecois and I have nine brothers and sisters.”

Andrea chuckled. “Her pussy must be all worn out.”

“Non, not at all according to my father.”

I found it impossible to tell whether Andrea was enjoying the turn of events or was as deeply uncomfortable about it as I was. Had I misjudged the situation? Had I misjudged her? Was I more sensitive than she was? The list of possibilities behind the last question bothered me, and I looked out the window for signs of the virtual opera house.

“Voici!” the driver said as he pulled us up to the curb down the street from a towering, dome-like structure.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said and gave him a three-star rating for the experience.

I regarded Andrea once we were on the curb and waited for what she had to say. She turned to me and smiled.

“That was weird.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling relieved. “You handled that well.”

She laughed. “When you spend a lot of time around weird guys, you learn that one way of dealing with them is just to accept their weirdness and be just as weird.”

She offered her hand and I took it, and we began to walk down the sidewalk lined with streetlamps that cast all that lay beneath them in a blueish hue. The sky was not pitch-black but black enough, and the areas within alcoves and unlit storefronts remained in impenetrable shadow. Aside from a handful of pedestrians, the city appeared like a cadaver version of itself, its palate drained by the onset of darkness.

“You’ve spent a lot of time around weird guys?” I said. I was wondering if this meant that she’d slept with a lot of men.

“All guys are inevitably weird, under the right circumstances, I think.”

“Do you think I’m weird?”

She looked me in the eye and said, “I’m not sure yet.”

I laughed nervously. The white dome of the virtual opera house loomed in front of us like a giant breast. The Uber driver’s description of the opera came to mind and I suddenly realized the sexual connotations behind continuing to go to the opera. Perhaps she was just going along with the plan because I’d already purchased the tickets – perhaps she was averse to the opera but was just matching my level of weirdness. I stopped our walk mid-stride and she turned to me in surprise.

“Do you really want to go to this thing?” I asked.

Her eyebrows raised in surprise. “Yeah, of course, why not?”

“Well, I didn’t know that this opera thing was some kind of, uh...pornographic experience. I don’t want you to think that I’m trying to...”

“Oh, no. Don’t worry about it,” she said with a smile, and we continued walking.

The line to get into the opera extended out of the entrance and onto the sidewalk. The demographics of the line consisted of mostly couples, but a disproportionate number of men, with one cluster of pre-teens guided by a single, middle-aged female chaperone. Inside, it was something like a cross between a rave scene and Nefertiti’s throne room with copious amounts of ultraviolet and neon splashing against a neoclassical rendition of Egyptian architecture. A throbbing indie-type beat that didn’t match the decorum played in the background.

“Hey, smile!” Andrea said. She had her phone out and I was looking at our faces framed by the UI of Unigram. At least there was a record of our being here, an alibi for our smiles. I was struck in that moment, in which her face was framed by the viewfinder, by the way her relaxed gaze expressed enthusiasm, compassion, and sensuality all at once in a way that seemed impossible and contradictory. At times, I wondered: What’s in a human face? How do we see

beyond the layers of flesh and bone to the person inside? Officially, the meaningful perception of a human face is processed by the so-called “Jennifer Aniston cells” in the medial temporal lobe of the brain that interprets the stream of electrons originating from the optic nerve. Other times, I imagined that it was all an illusion created by a god. I imagined not seeing her face. I imagined running my fingers through her hair later that night and parting her lips with my own.

The theater attendant took our tickets and gave us each a foil packet with a white pill inside that looked like a multivitamin. The label claimed it was “Clownsuit-9”.

“Is this for real?” Andrea said, holding the pill up in the revolving vomit-green light.

“It’s probably a placebo,” I said, and swallowed mine. I’d never heard of anything such as Clownsuit-9 going for FDA approval. Plenty of substances in non-pill form were legal in California. I doubted that they’d hand out obscure pharmaceuticals at an above-board outlet like that. I looked ahead and saw the children making a big deal about it.

The opera lasted 45 minutes. It was a loud and abrasive cacophony that made it almost impossible to talk to Andrea. Partway through, we looked at each other with an expression of pain. There was something about a King, and a Queen, and a daughter who had become part of the wall who bled milk from her eyeballs, and they were all around us in three dimensions. There were lots of women in what looked to be latex suits, and they were rendered in PG-13 fashion, with digital blurring around their sensitive parts. Maybe that was the point. There were a couple of dudes in latex with no dicks and big hips. The music was mostly gut-wrenching bass. I couldn’t keep track of what was happening. It was a huge headache-inducing turnoff.

“What did you think of that?” I asked as we stumbled out with the rest of the denizens.

“I think I know what they were going for – it made a lot of allusions to Nabucco – but...I don’t know.”

“It didn’t make much sense to me.”

“Yeah, maybe we aren’t avant-garde enough to understand it.”

We walked in no particular direction away from the virtual opera house. I asked her whether Nabucco was an opera and how she had been introduced to it.

“My dad had a subscription to the Met streaming service when I was a kid. We used to watch them as a family,” she explained.

Her dad seemed like an interesting guy. He was a doctor with a family practice in Sacramento who liked fast cars and had been divorced three times since he’d had children. She saw him once a year.

“What about your dad?” she asked.

“Oh, he’s doing fine,” I said and told her a little about him.

As we walked and talked, I had been pondering the question of where we would go from there. I didn’t want to just blurt it out as if that was the only thing on my mind, but I also wanted to ensure that my intentions at some point would become clear. I started to be able to feel my heartbeat and the rush of blood to my face and extremities – the fight-or-flight response, as if I were about to encounter the Uber driver again. I had to remind myself that she could walk away from me, and that that would be okay. I kept thoughts of undressing her and running my thumbs over her ribcage at bay. An amazing thing had happened already, that she had trusted me, a stranger, to not exploit her on our night out together. Perhaps I should have been grateful for that, that I had maintained stability in this small part of our society. By that point, I had convinced myself that I would be content with letting her go.

“Would you like to come back to my place tonight?” I ventured. “I actually live a few minutes away in Mid-Market.”

“You have an apartment in Mid-Market?” she said impassively. She had stopped walking.

“Yeah, well I decided to get one so I would have a quiet place to work. It’s a small studio off 6th street.”

“What are we going to do once we get to your apartment?”

I shrugged. “Hang out. Whatever you’re up for.”

She thought for a moment. “Okay. Let me text my friend.”

As we continued to walk, we talked about the city. She had much more experience with it than I, and I listened as she explained how the place had been a dump when she was growing up, that people had been defecating in the streets and the homeless were everywhere, especially in Mid-Market. It had been all cleaned up somehow; she had started out working on a team that went around the city reporting on how much things had changed.

“I never knew that it had been that bad,” I said, shuddering a bit on the inside. I had only moved to the city that year and had only seen a handful of homeless people, from a distance mind you. I found them to be particularly troubling because I felt somewhat powerless against them. I would not be able to confront them directly without also exposing myself to whatever diseases or substances they had on them, so if one chose to come after me, the only thing I could really do was run away from them. I hoped not to encounter one, especially not on that night.

We made it to my apartment building without incident and climbed the six flights of stairs to my flat. I opened the door and took her coat and showed her where she could put her shoes. The studio was only about 350 square feet and it had a loft over the sofa. The walls were bright white and the floor and the blinds had wood accents. I was glad that the smell of citrus

cleaning fluid had faded by that point. I had done some last-minute cleaning in preparation for the night. All of the dirty laundry was out of sight.

“Wow, this is nice,” she said, running her finger along the edge of the countertop. She slid onto one of the stools adjacent to the counter.

“It’s small, but I like to think of it as dense, you know?” I said, opening a shoebox-size cabinet that contained the glasses. “Would you like something to drink? Alcoholic or non-alcoholic?”

“Oh, what the hell. Show me what you’ve got.”

I was grinning as I took out the shot glasses and a bottle of whiskey. “It’s been a while since I’ve done shots.”

“No kidding. I don’t think I’ve done any since those college parties.”

I poured and we both downed our glasses. She ended up coughing while I tried mightily to hold mine back.

“Jeez, I think I need some water to go with that,” she said.

I poured us both waters and refilled our shot glasses. We went another round.

“You know what, David?” she said with a chuckle, “You’re the most normal guy I think I’ve ever met. You’re not weird at all.” She tapped my forearm as some form of approval.

“Yeah?” I said and grasped her wrist, pulling the back of her hand all the way to my lips. My mouth then went to the side of her neck, and then her cheek. I looked to her for validation.

She laughed and belched in the middle of laughing. “Oh my,” she said, holding her forehead. “I think I need to rest a little. Maybe I ate too much or it was that clownface-nine or that silly opera...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, feeling concerned. I guided her over to the sofa and brought over the glasses of water.

“You’re not feeling queasy at all?” she asked, her body splayed over the cushions.

“A little,” I said, and it was true, my head seemed to have been spinning ever since that latex vortex.

“Ever seen the *Road to Damascus*?” she asked, looking at my TV.

“No,” was all I said. I wasn’t particularly interested in watching anything else since I’d already spent over an hour sitting beside her in a chair without really interacting. Then a thought occurred to me – to let her use the mnetic device, the waffle-iron shaped thing we were supposed to keep secured in the office when not being used for research because each prototype unit was worth over ten-thousand dollars. I had an agreement with one of the techs there, Looper, whose sloppiness was confirmed when he agreed to look the other way when it came to the unit’s GPS transponder.

“It’s a really good show. I mean, it’s a total political thriller, if you like those, like *House of Cards* or *West Wing* in Syria. You know, after al-Assad was probably assassinated by the CIA. That’s the first episode.”

“Yeah,” I said absent-mindedly. I wasn’t sure if I could trust her. The only other time I’d let a girl into my brain, it was after the fourth or fifth time I’d slept with her. Even then, it was more of an experiment. I was trying to show her what it was like to conduct a therapy session – something I’d done for a graduate course – and she had found it extremely boring. I’d pick something exciting this time.

And it seemed like the night had been progressing toward a sexual climax anyway, and I had already decided that I trusted her enough for that...

“You alright?” she asked, her brow wrinkled.

“Yeah, no, I was just thinking, there’s something else we could ‘watch,’” I said, walking over to the closet by the door where I kept the device.

“Oh, that’s the thing you do your research with, right?” she said as I sat down next to her having rested the device on the fabric between us.

“Ever been skydiving?” I asked as I unraveled the accessory cables.

Her face lit up. “No...but you have?”

“I went once with those roommates I mentioned my senior year. It was a blast.” She would wear the virtual headset, which provided image, sound, and a modicum of non-invasive neural stimulation. I would wear the cortical interface block, a chunk of plastic that looked like an action camera, curved on one side with adhesive to fit a variety of foreheads.

Andrea looked the headset over. “Wait, is this going to make me throw up? I get carsick sometimes.”

“Nah, you’ll be fine,” I said, not wanting to get into the difference between exteroception and interoception, the latter of which would bypass sensations of the inner ear.

“How will I know what memory to choose?”

“Just ask the voice in my head.” I connected the headset to the device. “You know, the voice in your head that you sometimes hear or verbalize, like when you talk to yourself? Just ask my voice about skydiving and it will take you there.”

“That’s crazy...”

“I know, right?” I stuck the interface to my forehead.

“Should I put this on now?” asked Andrea.

“Once I’m asleep. I’ll only be under for about ten minutes.” –

– My lids fell shut. It is a strange thing, experiencing someone else direct your thoughts. Time loses meaning as consciousness falls away, as in a dream, where the inefficiencies of the ego are shuffled off, and the only remaining interval is the electron’s speed as it is conducted along the myelinated tendrils of that mechanism we refer to as “human.”

There we were in our colorful suits fashioned for falling, eyes giddy behind glossy goggles, heads within helmets, resembling cybernetic insectoid beings about to fall to an unknown planet. The chutes hanging from back-mounted sacks added to the notion of our beetle-like posture. Mine felt like a bag of concrete, pressing on my shoulders like an armored shell which would hopefully catch me with the sky. There were only two chutes packed into that carapace, not three, and I had repeatedly questioned the logic behind that design decision. Of course, the probability of both chutes failing was exceptionally low, likely beyond the 99th percentile, nevertheless the number “three” seems to have some essential valence which overpowers any sort of Bayesian reasoning. The rule of three (mathematics), the rule of thirds (photography), three laws of thermodynamics, three little pigs. I’d watched the guide pack my parachute – a man with a bushy mustache covering his lips that was whiter than the collar of his fresh undershirt, on his creaky knees, squeezing the air out of that crinkled canopy. He looked like he knew what he was doing even though he was beyond retirement age. No one else seemed as nervous as I. My friends had clustered around the door to the side of the aircraft – the engineers and the girlfriends they had dared to join them on that skyward expedition who seemed to be equal parts afraid and in awe of their partner’s gallantry. I had forgotten how afraid I’d been and how desperately I sought to emulate their fortitude. Then there was Steve, mumbling over the sound of the aircraft as he pulled me closer to the portal of decompression. I should go

first, he said, and I replied with too much sincerity that he was much more of a man than I. He laughed and said that going first would help with that situation. His girlfriend at the time, Martia, an exotically dark kind of girl/woman, stood just beyond the horizon of his shoulder and bicep, looking at me with eyes enciphered by protective plastic lenses which reflected my overt ambivalence. As a physics major, her calculations were likely several orders of magnitude beyond my own.

Watching the memory unfold in that hazy, dream-like trance, only then did I realize that I'd chosen wrongly. Andrea was supposed to witness my exit of the plane, but instead I had shown her the moments lead up to the event which I had worked to suppress in which my disgusting self was laid bare.

I looked away from Martia. With her, I had a subconscious policy of avoidance, for too many times she had caught my gaze from across the freshman lecture hall. She had woven in and out of my undergraduate years, an unattainable thing of beauty. There she was, suddenly in my midst, silently judging. I looked out the window of the at the leading edge of the aircraft's tail, which seemed to explain the helmet requirement. I took the privilege of opening the door. I ducked my head and flung myself into the bright abyss, punching through the clouds of fear which threatened to forever ensconce me. I jumped first for Martia, for a girl repeatedly encountered but never spoken to, who had caused years of silent grief. I jumped for the idyllic version of her situated in my fantasies, that apparition with which I had made solitary love on a number of occasions.

Her years-long grip on my soul was released several months later when at last I saw her intimately.

We were cruel to one-another, us roommates – our pranks sometimes involved food and bodily fluids. Of course, this was not something that I was at first interested in participating in, but one eventually becomes the average of one's friends, as they say. Patrick, the most sociopathic among us, had once pissed in our bottle of milk, which he admitted after half of it had been consumed. Piss was sterile, he'd explained, and he'd been screened for hepatitis a year ago after hooking up with a girl from animal science. The concentration had been less than one fluid ounce per pint. I watched as Steve and the others wailed on him – my contribution had been a kick in the buttock. Then they gave him half a bottle of Jack for the pain, and everyone watched the Homer Simpson make a fool of himself until four in the morning.

I was the only one home that night, studying while the others were out drinking. Steve's retribution was in the palm of my hand, a flash drive with some benign ransomware usually encountered as a side-effect of free pornography. Instead of demanding payment to the FBI, the version in-hand demanded payment to a group called CHOICE – Christ's Holy Organ for Inspiring Chaste Excellence. I'd already installed a keylogger which had nagged his password. Then I'd have made up for the bags of peas I'd found loose one morning in my backpack.

I decided not to infect everything on his computer – a camera card appeared among the list of connected devices. Photography was on the short list of things Steve was confidently incompetent at doing. I wondered if there was anything meme-worthy on the card. I opened it and began scrolling through its contents. That's when I found the video.

I imagined that the camera had somehow been anchored to his abundant chest hair as the view in the thumbnail nauseatingly bounced back and forth above a slew of backs, sides, and asses. There were many girls, of course, many bodies, all different colors, shapes, and sizes acting as receptacles for his being over the years. While I found his videography humors, I was

also aware of the part of me which felt that my prank had turned into an uncomfortable violation of his privacy. I wondered if he had ever posted them anywhere.

Curiosity overpowered my conscience. I sorted the videos by date, bringing the most recent ones to the fore, and that's when I saw her exoticism in the flesh, and that sweet voice of hers I had only heard on rare occasion speak the things I had dreamed of. I experienced piloerection, the feeling of standing hair, as her voice echoed in the room. I paused the video and ran through the house, checking to see if any of my roommates had returned. I was alone, nevertheless, the fear remained, a growing sense of urgency which was accompanied by another feeling, a baser urge which seemed to originate from my groin. I went through the motions as he thrashed her, going so far as to couple my climax with his.

It ended with the sound of their synchronized breathing, which I was dimly aware of amidst the onset of my limerence. An arrangement of flesh which elicited a pre-programmed erotic response, all if the result of some genetic algorithm in its totality still far beyond 21st century comprehension. I clicked on another of his videos and watched the pleasure ooze from her body.

Then she laughed as he knelt next to her, and they talked about what they should have for dinner. She didn't like tomatoes and was allergic to capers. What a funny thing. Her mother had made her eat too many of them as a child. That was how allergies worked.

I closed the video with my unsoiled hand and limped to the bathroom. The feelings of shame faded as my sweat was washed away. I thought of Martia for the last time that night, that beautiful girl who was allergic to capers, and I was finally able to place her in a more wholesome part of my mind, where she was more than a sexual fantasy, but a person who had a childhood and dietary preferences, among other things –

– I awoke on the couch a short time later. The cortical interface slid off my head as I sat up. It took but a moment for me to realize what had happened. The headset was on the table. The impression left by Andrea’s body had almost completely worked its way out of the couch cushions.

“Oh no,” I said to myself. She had taken her things. Her shoes were gone. I put mine on and ran out the door.

“Andrea!” I called down the six flights of stairs and ran down them faster than I would’ve thought possible. Drunk with grief, I stumbled onto the sidewalk. “Andrea!” I saw no sign of her amongst the handful of darkened silhouettes out and about at that hour. Still I waited with bated breath, but to no avail. Like Martia, she had vanished from my life.

I considered my limited options for reaching out, to leave a voicemail, to send a text, to send an instant message. My phone slipped between my clenched fingers.

As it turned out, she made that decision for me. The device vibrated with a message which read:

I’m sorry David

I flopped onto the couch with my head in my hands and immersed myself in the pain of losing.

CHAPTER 3: NEIKO PLEMONS

The visiting room is a family therapy session on vodka and Dramamine. You gotta sit away from your loved ones if you're on the inside cause they don't want no contraband changing hands beneath the table, which means the trailer park soccer moms and their blue-eyed slut counterparts have their meat hooks all over the little ones. You get one hug at the beginning or the end of your session. Push it to two hugs and the session's over. Columbo's in the corner, and his friends have one eye glued to each of the half-dozen-or-so CCTV cameras peeping from the ceiling. It's hard to move shit on visitation, but there are a handful of us who can – the few, the proud. Maybe it's cause I'm good with the kiddos. I ain't got no tattoos and haven't spent too much time in solitary. I ain't too bad a guy, as far as they're concerned. But as much as the CO's like to flatter themselves with how much they think they know about us, they're calibrated for the retarded common denominator.

There's a handful of round tables in the room, like white picnic tables at the park but with no umbrellas and the seats spaced a ways apart. I see Safa, the girl I'd been meeting with in the corner. Her long dark hair and full set of lips make her look hot from a distance, but her fucked up teeth and mild-but-permanent scowl on her too-long face always convince me that she isn't once I get up close and personal. The little boy whose name I can't remember is with her. She's sitting in the corner that's farthest away from the cameras and the CO in the room. But when you haven't seen a woman for weeks, other than miss Ompa Loompa, the substance abuse counselor who makes her rounds every Thursday at the most inconvenient time possible. A woman like Safa takes on an allure that brings me to the edge of having a boner no matter how many prison dates I've treated myself to.

What kills it is the spent piece of chewed-up generic Tonka truck that plows into my shoe from across the room. I almost give the kid who sent it the finger.

I sit down with Safa and we do the ritual of finding something to talk about for thirty minutes because we're not really together and have to make up that real-life shit. Even though we've talked about it at least a dozen times, I kind of remember that she works at a daycare in the bad part of Cupertino and ask her about that.

"They don't want us to touch the kids anymore. I don't get it. Like, how am I supposed to take care of your kids without touching them?"

"Oh, I know," I say, looking at the boy whose name I can't remember, thinking about how I can't touch him and that I am depending on him to find a way to pass the bag of drugs he undoubtedly has in his shirtsleeve to me without being detected, maybe in the bed of a Tonka truck. Safa rubs his back knowingly. Her face has softened, and now all I notice is the bump behind her lips made by her fucked-up teeth.

I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "Yeah, well, they don't know where your hands have been."

The scowl returns.

"That was a joke," I add.

She reminds me of the boy's name again, and I forget what it is again. He's an innocent mestizo from the neighborhood, the kind that flunks math in highschool and bullshits his way to a GED if he's lucky. I don't have high hopes for him. His little teeth that have yet to fall out poke out from his little mouth as he looks up at me with helpless boy eyes. If he's smart, he'll become a plumber. If he's a pussy, he'll work at the Citgo. If he's stupid like me, then he'll fuck a lot of women, take a lot of drugs, break into people's houses, and piss off others who fuck and

get high who will come after him like a herd of monkeys. I see his face morph like in those time lapse videos, and I see his baby-eyes frost over with the gaze of a man as the piercings and the scars show up on his face. Somewhere his future is wrote. No one knows where the futures are wrote.

“When are you getting out?” asks Safa. And I respond automatically, instinctively, because everyone starts itching for the day they get out the moment they get in the fucking hole.

“Next Wednesday.”

“What are you going to do after that?”

I look to see if it’s a genuine question. It’s just the kind of touchy-feely thing a woman would say to get under your skin, and it’s got a no-bullshit answer. I’m gonna fuck. I’m gonna get high. I’m gonna eat a dozen doughnuts in one sitting. How soon I do those things is debatable and concerns my finances. Obviously I’m going to do all the fucking things you can’t do from behind bars. But I stop myself and think of a way to answer the question that don’t piss her off and is age appropriate.

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to get a job,” I admit, and the words feel like a flip-flop flipping and flopping out of my mouth. I had a job in high school. Did I have to get one? Not unless I wanted the probation office sniffing up my ass.

Safa looks like she’s grinning, but her fucked up teeth make her look more pleased than she probably actually is. “What are you good at?”

I had to grin. “I could work in construction,” I say, thinking to myself that my experience lies more in breaking open homes than building them up. “I can paint.”

“That’s nice.” She nods, and I’m staring at her full lips as her head bobs up and own. My mind wanders and I wonder what her teeth would feel like against the shaft of my cock while I

run my fingers through her waves of hair. No—I can't think those thoughts next to her kid. I shoot them out the emergency airlock.

“Yeah, I don't know. I want to do real work. Anything but Seven-Eleven.”

“I like Seven-Eleven,” the boy says.

It occurs to me then that I might never see Safa again and I suddenly feel like shit about it. I imagine that after I'm gone she'll deal with another guy on the inside. I want to see her again, out there in the real world, in our natural environment. But why would I want her when I could have any two-bit hooker for the right price? I don't know, man. I decide to get her number in case I want to hook up in the future, but it would have to be a pump and dump just so I could blow her memory out the airlock. I guess my fuckscapade would start with her.

But I'd have to connect with her first. Sure, we'd talked a lot in the visitation room, but I'd have to push it further to get what I wanted.

“Why do you do this?”

Her eyebrows raise in a mixture of surprise and suspicion. “This—?” she glances at her boy and seems to regret things.

“It's for the money, right?”

She sits up and looks around until her eyes settle on Columbo, who's across the room helping some girl pick up a slew of colorful beads. “What's it to you?” she says.

I give Julio or Mateo or whatever-the-fuck his name is a look that says I'm gunning for your momma, and he gives me a smile that is wise beyond his years.

“I'm going to miss you,” I say. Her teeth are throwing me off. I can't tell if her mouth is a grimace or if her lips are pursed. It's really not that bad and kind of cute. “You're the only part of the real world I've seen in seven years. You may not realize it, but this has meant a lot to me.”

Safa shifts in her seat. “Oh yeah? Well I’m glad that we’ve given you something to look forward to.”

“It’s more than that,” I say, and reach across the table to grasp her hands. I’m not even aware of the fact that I’ve violated the no-touching rule, but I don’t care. I don’t care if Columbo comes over and breaks us up right fucking then and there and I lose the four ounces of coke beneath the table in Johnny’s Tonka truck. I’m feeling her hands—fucking her with my brain through my hands, man, I don’t know—but it’s turning into a magic hallmark moment and I can’t stop myself. “I don’t want this to be our last time together.”

I see her teeth as she lets out a laugh. “You’re not the only one.”

I realize I’m squeezing her too hard and soften my grip.

“Course I’m not,” I say. “But you don’t know me.”

“Yeah? What makes you so special?”

I pause. I look at the situation, see the tools at my disposal. I see the boy next to me, the giant question mark stamped on his forehead. “Where’s his dad at?”

She straightens. Jackpot. “His dad is none of your business.”

“The same thing happened to me,” I say, letting go of her hands. “I hardly remember what he looks like.”

The boy looks confused. His eyes turn into crescents and he seems about to cry. Safa rubs his back, and as her hand makes circles behind him, she looks at me with an air of hostility and something else.

“Neiko, it’s nothing personal. I just don’t get involved with clients.” Safa lets out a sigh and pushes the boy to get up. “Let’s go, Roberto.”

Roberto. I’ll remember it this time. Roberto.

“Bye, Neiko,” the boy says, coming around the table to hug me. I almost miss the baggie full of powder that he presses against the side of my leg. I catch it quickly before it falls and stuff it into my blues. I ruffle his hair.

“Bye bye my little man.”

I watch mother and son weave through the tables of the visitation room toward the exit. Safa holds his hand and turns to the side to slip between visitors. I know that if our paths ever would cross out in the real world, I'd bed her for at least a night.

Roberto.

Then I'm walking, out of visitation toward security, suitcasing the bag of coke where the sun don't shine. The goons cop a feelie after a visit. After I bend over and cough, I get a pat on the dick and a shove back into general population.

It's the middle of the day so I go back to my cell and wait for rec to be called. I want to cash in on my contraband as soon as possible since there's been rumblings of a shakedown. We haven't had one in a while and I bet the goon squad is just itching in their jock straps to bust into some poor soul's lot like the priesthood from Hell and beat the living shit out of anyone who looks at them the wrong way. The white leather sand-filled glove hits like Ron Jeremy riding a Mack truck. I seen all the teeth on the left side of my cellie's face fly out of his mouth, but I didn't feel so sorry for him. They found that CHOMO's porn he tried to flush down the toilet. The CO had this perverted look of pleasure as he was bent over the bowl, his head cocked the side, the lip of his rubber glove beneath the surface of water as he reached into the dark hole. He was looking at me and then at my cellie, wondering which of us was hiding something. His gloved hand came out holding a soaking wad of fantasies peppered with flakes of shit that smacked the concrete floor with the force of a drenched mop. I didn't know he was a CHOMO

until then and eyed the wad with as much anticipation as the CO unraveled the pedals of paper. The realization sunk in, as did the odor of shit, and my cellie ran. It was a retarded thing to do cause there's nowhere to run in prison. The side of his face ran straight into a goon's Mickey Mitt and he was spun around like a rag doll with his pearly whites flying out of him like sparks from a firework. You don't laugh when you see something like that happen in front of you. I'd be on the goon squad if they let me. I'd beat the shit out of anyone who deserves it. Every shakedown would be my field day.

The rec yard is the closest thing any of us have to the real world. It's a patch of green about the size and shape of a baseball field at the corner of the unit. I've shat out the coke and stashed it beneath my mattress, so I walk out onto the yard with my hands in my waistband and nothing on me. The rec yard has zones, to include the weight pit, the basketball court, the benches, the horseshoe area, and the grassy knoll. It's like a colony of ants has popped out of the ground as each of the blue uniforms makes a beeline for their area. You might think that the rec yard and prison in general is a twisted and simple version of the real world, but you'd have to be stupid to not see the humanity on display. I think it's more real than real. You have the weight pit, controlled by the blacks, members of KUMI 415, and they're generally not to be fucked with, especially if you're white. You wait till they're done to use the weights, and you probably can't lift them anyway since the COs welded the plates to the bars so they're harder to use as weapons. Then there's the ball court, a more mixed area that's part-time owned by a surprisingly tall cadre of Mexicans and mestizos, mostly members of Lo Nuestro. You can play ball there but try not to win too much. Us white guys own the benches. The concrete and immovable benches are all along the edges of the rec yard, but 'the benches' are the ones tucked in a corner to the right of the baseball diamond at an angle to the guard towers and cast in shadow in the afternoon.

The other end of the diamond is where the gumps get it on in the morning. The horseshoe area is where the old heads argue about useless and meaningless shit and the funniest fights break out. It's hilarious when a pair of senile lovebirds in for life on drunken manslaughter charges topple end-over-end over a fucking horseshoe. There's the grassy knoll, out by second base—which ain't owned by nobody—a little hill where inmates go to sunbathe on their prison towels. I shit you not, grown men roll up their blues like a thong to tan their junies. They ain't gumps far as I know but dudes with nothing better to do. Heck, I've found myself laid out on the grassy knoll more than a few times. It can be a space where you work out differences.

And then there are the octagonal towers rising up from beyond the fence, where the guards sit behind tinted glass and look at our asses. They got cameras hung beneath the glass that can spot a cunt hair in a sex offender's mustache from a mile away. The old heads still don't believe this, but I myself have seen how a splotch of white powder looks beneath a nose at five-hundred yards. I didn't give in to the Major's questioning.

I say it's real cause this is what people do. We're like fish in a tank in here. All the mamby-pamby bullshit you can probably come up with that describes the human condition don't apply. It's kill or be killed, rape or be raped, eat or don't eat, and you need friends cause you can't make it alone. The dudes that are in here for life, in here for a long time—they live the shit. They evolved and adapted to the habitat. You learn to get the shit that you need to be respectable and comfortable and you make it painful for anyone to take that away from you. You're all doing that shit out in the real world, you just don't realize it until you lose your job or the tax man puts a notice on your door. In here, you don't sue the guy that takes your zoom-zooms and wham-whams or your noodle soups; you get your buddies and beat the shit out of him. It's more pure on the inside. We're closer to our apeshit selves.

I look over the short list of asses on the grassy knoll and find the one I'm looking for at the end of the line, a set of thick and hairy cheeks attached to a body that's as wide as a walrus. You don't get fat in prison unless your name is Max Maxim, known for his exuberant collection of magazines. He sleeps on magazines, sells magazines, makes love to magazines. You don't get fat in prison cause there's not enough to eat. But if you have enough money for the commissary, you can buy as many noodle soups and comet bars as your heart desires. I know the other thin asses on the grassy knoll cause they're his protection. I get the usual hairy eyeball as I pull up my blues and plop down to his majesty with my ass facing the outer fence.

"Visit with the missus today?" says Maxim.

"Mhmm."

He reaches down into the pocket of his blues, which are mostly buried beneath his exposed stomach. "I'm gonna miss you when you're gone Neiko." He tosses a tube of lotion onto the grass in front of me.

I look at the tube. "What the fuck do you want me to do with that?"

"Lube me up. I feel myself burning already."

I'd see him paw through enough editions of Maxim to know he wasn't a gump. But the thought of running my fingers through his ass hair gives me pause. "No way I'm touching your junies, man."

Maxim groans. "Just my back. My upper back."

I get up on a knee and squirt the lotion in my palms before rubbing them together. The shit I do for Max. The guards must be having a chuckle.

“So what’s the score?” asks Max. My hands make a sucking sound as they peel away from Max’s back. I can’t even begin to feel the muscle and bone underneath. It’s as if there isn’t any.

“Four,” I mutter. There’s so much surface area to his back that I have another go at the lotion.

“I’ll take it for the usual amount.”

An ounce of coke in the real world is about \$1500. But guys are desperate on the inside, so Max pays me pretty much double that. Once Max divvies it up amongst his guys to distribute, the price has gone up three-fold. I’d have gotten three-fold selling it myself, but not only do you have to do the legwork and take the risk of getting caught making multiple sales, you also have to deal with actually getting paid. Five-dollar bills, noodle soups, and IOUs only go so far when we’re talking about thousands of dollars. And forget loading all that money onto your prison account. Most gangs have accounts on the outside. Max has them set aside the amount he’s paying me which I will pick up once I’m free. The house takes 20%, Safa takes 30% as courier, and I’m left with the rest, which means I’m basically making street price. That’s not a bad hustle when you consider that all I have to do is shove it up my ass and cough and do Max’s bidding.

“I want to hand it over tonight,” I say, avoiding the splotches of acne on his back.

“I can arrange tonight.”

I’ve given most of him a good rub and run my hands through the grass of the knoll. I can’t get up and leave right away since that would make it look as if a deal had gone down. I’ll have to wait for at least half of rec to pass.

I mutter, “What happens when I’m free. Who do I contact?”

“The Syndicate takes care of its own. We’ll find you on the outside. But there’s something you have to do first.”

That ain’t the answer I was hoping to hear. But that’s how it always shakes out, one step forward, one step sideways.

I turn to watch the old heads sling horseshoes around the pole in the ground and two gumps making out in the corner. I see the big black dudes doing dips on the dip bars, their triceps flexing like dump truck springs in the midday sun. It’s like a painting, and I wait to hear about Max’s next errand.

CHAPTER 4: DAVID TREMBLE

I rode the elevator to the twentieth floor of the Albion building and boarded the overhead tram headed for Sunnyvale. The front of each car sported a bronze plaque that spelled in embossed letters, Musk Bay Area Distributed Access System Suite. That was probably some uncreative marketing major's idea of a joke. The morning sun's reflection in the bay water that glimmered through the tram's glass bottom was distracting as I glanced through my notes on Grist et al. (2037), a paper that described the relationship between trait compassion and epigenetic memory. I flipped through the pages one after the other trying to locate a marginal note on the relative frequency of selfless acts committed by those whose forefathers and mothers had experienced trauma in the past. It was as if I was looking in a dictionary for words that didn't exist. I had been distracted by the look of horror on Andrea's face after her moment of discovery, one that I imagined again and again. I couldn't decide what was behind that look; disgust, pity, fear. Perhaps all of the above. I wondered if I would ever see her again and whether I should.

The tram car tilted as we turned toward San Jose, flying between concrete pylons as if they were goal posts in the end zone. Downtown San Jose sped into view on my left and the old Apple campus rolled past on my right. After the mantle of American tech was sold to the Nile corporation, the old discus was liquidated and turned into sustainable housing for refugees from South America. Small figures milled about the tents that packed its circular interior, some of them adding to the lines of hanging laundry that twisted in the morning breeze. The conservatives saw the campus as the decline of American exceptionalism. The liberals saw it as a sign of American exceptionalism. I thought it was a good thing that they had a home.

I would have to meet her again, if only to confirm suspicions. I imagined her somewhere below me in the urban landscape going about her day as I passed over her, painfully aware of the

gulf between us. I went over the words in my head again, I'm sorry David. No doubt, I had slipped into the part of her mind that regulates threat response, the amygdala, the brain's center of fear and disgust sensitivity that activates in response to physical threats and diseases. I had undergone a magical transformation that night. In an instant, I had turned from a prospective intimate partner into a sexual threat, something metaphorically akin to a disease. When I had slipped into Steve's closet, had I not become a sort of disease, a sexual parasite within society? I couldn't make sense of my feelings toward myself. On the one hand, I wanted to excise the diseased part of my heart that caused me to do such things. On the other, I needed more than ever to see Andrea. The image of her horror and disgust flashed before my eyes again.

The side of my face pressed against the structural pillar adjacent to the tram's window. It was a textured off-white plastic that acted like a mechanical skin, covering up all the tangled wires and rough metal underneath. I ran my hand along its flowing, contiguous, hypoallergenic surface, wondering what people would think if those thin, organic panels were torn away, exposing the machine underneath.

"Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides," I said into my phone, and the post went live on the Habitus cloud. It was a quote from an author I'd read during my semester abroad in France.

It was a stupid quote, a pretentious quote, and it was foolish of me to think that Andrea might see it and understand how it related to my current condition. I regretted posting it as soon as I put my phone away.

The sustainable living projects on the southeastern side of the city came into view, a series of colorful and vase-shaped structures that looked like a formation of beehives with the swarm of delivery drones forming a dark cloud around them. I retrieved the tablet from my

messenger bag and adjusted the fifteenth entry in my questionnaire according to Grist et al.'s (2037) work. I knew that I should have run the change by Dr. Chen, my thesis advisor, but we would be meeting the following day and I would be able to come up with an explanation by then. I had at least three unread papers on my desk for that meeting. It didn't help that I'd been distracted by my most recent failure.

Like most places of learning in America, the Oak Hill community school looked very much like a department store. Beyond the semicircular drive where school busses came and went was a long and flat glass facade divided by rectangular window frames and topped by a flat roof that hung at a slight angle. Younger children ran amidst and clambered upon a tangle of mass-produced playground equipment within an enclosure surrounded by a wire fence ten feet tall with dome cameras hanging from equally-spaced poles. I walked along the path leading to the main entrance, a set of steel-framed doors with safety glass in the middle with wire mesh that looked like it belonged in a chicken coop. I stood before the intercom box mounted beside the door's bulging hinges and pressed the intercom button below the pinhole camera.

The attendant's disembodied voice crackled through the speaker. "Raul is waiting," she said, followed by a snick as the door unlatched itself.

I walked along the long corridor that stretched all the way to the main office. My shoes made a clapping sound against the waxed floor that rang out amidst the gentle hum of the air system. There were no signs of children as they were locked behind fireproof doors that studded the hall at every interval. One could not feel comfortable in such a space, enclosed in white block walls bathed in cool blue light at a frequency calibrated to promote awakeness. A door down the hall shunted open, briefly admitting the sounds of learning. A group of adolescents trotted out, their only items being the black rectangular tablets manufactured by Habitus that they tucked

under their arms. They took off running, only to be discouraged by an overhead voice that reminded them that such activity was only permitted on the playground. They slowed and disappeared behind one of the many right-angle protrusions from the walls intended to provide cover from a mass shooter.

“Have you come to any conclusions about Raul’s state of mind?” asked the counselor, who looked rather small in his disproportionately large chair. His desk was sparse save for a small document organizer, a picture of his pregnant wife and infant child, and a potted baby cactus with a face drawn on it.

I removed the files from my bag and held them under my arm for the meeting. “He was bullied, has bullied, and his posts on Habitus indicate anti-social behavior. But none of that seems to explain why he ran away from his foster parents.”

The counselor idly clicked his pen. “Any recommendations?”

“I’m a researcher, not a psychologist.” I felt myself becoming anxious to start the interview in the conference room.

“Hmm.” The counselor got up and stood alongside his desk. He really was a short man. “Maybe you’re not asking the right questions.”

I straightened. “The questions I ask are none of your business.” I never got into fights as a child. But I liked to think as a grown man that I’d be able to throw a pretty good punch despite my lack of experience. “Are you going to let me interview him or not?”

“Of course, but I can’t help but think that that technology of yours would be more useful in more capable hands.”

“I’ll put it in my notes.” I brushed past him to the conference room.

Raul sat at the far end of the table with his shoulders slumped forward and the hood of his black sweatshirt over his head. His eyes were trained downward. I circled around the desk and sat in a chair adjacent to him, placing my files on the table such that he could see them as well. I folded my hands and looked at him.

“How are you today, Raul?”

His body shifted as he swung his feet beneath the table. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“Your memories and everything we talk about is confidential,” I said, leaning closer to him. “You know what that means, right?”

He looked up. “Everything? No matter how bad?”

“I wouldn’t be able to do my job if people didn’t tell me the truth.” I smiled. “So where should we go for our last session?”

Raul shrugged and looked down again. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe we could go back to when you left home in Brazil?” I hadn’t examined that part of his past. Perhaps he had run away because real his parents were still back there. “Or we could go back to when you ran away?”

His eyes suddenly met mine. “I don’t remember much of that.”

“Do you know why?” I took out my pen.

“No.”

I had been so focused on trying to understand why he had run away that I hadn’t considered looking at the act itself. Perhaps I would uncover some feeling or hidden impetus of

his that would help explain his delinquency. And perhaps by vividly re-experiencing those memories with me he would better understand himself and be less likely to run away or do other delinquent things in the future. All in good time, of course.

I set my pen down, even though I hadn't written anything. "Let's go there," I said and reached into my bag for the cortical interface.

At first there was only the distant rumble of a diesel engine and obnoxious hiss of conditioned air. All that could be seen was the pink hue of Raul's eyelids as he squeezed them shut beneath a bright light. I felt the hard plastic seat beneath his back that also pressed against the back of his head. Then there was a lurch and before he opened his eyes, I knew he was aboard a public bus in the middle of night headed away from home.

It was an autonomous bus and the only other people present were a pair of figures slumped over each other in the back covered by a black jacket. Their faces were not visible. Raul looked at them now and then to make sure that they were asleep, but his gaze continually wandered to the world outside, the rolling tapestry of the nocturnal American landscape that was to him a never-ending sequence of streetlights, doors, windows, and towers that stretched all the way to heaven. The six-lane road that ended at an equally large intersection seemed as wide as a canal and was bustling with traffic even at that hour of night. I was always struck by how children perceive the world, how large and impressive even a block of sidewalk seems from their perspective. America was utterly massive and impossible to comprehend compared to the cities back home. He did not understand them, the Americans; everything was paid for by someone, by someone else, and money and unhappiness was everywhere. He thought of his mother, who leapt at the opportunity to wash clothes. They celebrated the rain which watered the crops and washed away the smog and the river trash. It was always sunny in America and people ran away from the

rain. They ran away from the sun. All they saw were the numbers on their devices which told them whether they were winning or losing the game. The people in the back of the bus had lost.

Raul hated the game and hated that everyone played it.

The buildings themselves had little in the way of detail that could distinguish them as being part of any particular American city. Raul's memory was not photographic, which meant that his brain stored information abstractly, so every building looked like an American building, a tower with windows jutting into the sky. It wasn't until two of the large green overhead signs caught the bus's headlights and the boy's attention that I knew where he was going; Terminal A and B, San Jose airport, and the unmistakable curvature of the airport terminal that looked like the belly of a white whale slid into view. The boy glanced at the time scrolling at the front of the bus: 11:53. He grabbed a backpack on the seat next to him and stepped out the open doors of the bus, which slammed shut behind him with a hiss that made him jump.

Anxiety sat in the pit of his stomach like the wads of newspaper and diapers and bloody clothing that clogged the stormwater drains back home. He had never been alone like this, not even on the journey to America. He had been surrounded of hundreds like him, children, families, all sharing in the struggle for the northbound passage. In America, both parents worked. In America, it was too dangerous to play outside. In America, he was not American, and everyone knew it.

The man was smiling, the man walking toward him with a close-shaved head, trusting eyes, and a prominent jaw who wore a leather jacket. Raul's anxiety disappeared as soon as he saw him and was flooded by a sense that everything would be all right. Then darkness flooded Raul's vision, a fountain of blackness that emerged from the pupils of the man's eyes and flowed

across the boy's retinas as they walked toward each other until there was nothing left for me to see.

"Show me where you went with the man at the airport," I asked his subconscious mind.

Nothing. I could see nothing, feel nothing, sense nothing. That had never happened to me before.

I pulled off the virtual headset and looked at the swirl of his dark hair as he sat slumped over the table. I knew that I had witnessed some form of amnesia, but I didn't recall hearing about anything like it in the training sessions from anyone in the office. There was no way to fool the system or fabricate a memory, at least none that I knew of. I wondered if he had an undiagnosed neurological problem or memory disorder.

It also occurred to me that Raul may not have run away from home, but that he had been kidnapped by the man at the airport.

Raul raised his head half a minute later. I was about to conclude my interview but decided to ask some questions of his conscious mind. He didn't remember the precise date when he had left the airport nor did he remember whether he had taken a plane or a bus.

"Where were you headed?" I asked, my pen hovering above the page.

Raul frowned and looked at the table. "Pleasure...island."

I scribbled the name. "Where's that?"

"An island...in the sea. From the pictures in the advertisements."

I handed him my tablet and asked him to show me the pictures. He spun it around and the screen displayed images from the Universal Studios remake of Pinocchio, which I had never seen because I was an adult when it came out. I vaguely remembered seeing the Disney remake as a child.

“You went to an island from a movie?” I said.

Raul’s eyes widened. “It’s a real place.”

“One that you don’t remember?”

He hesitated. “No.”

I wrote a note to myself to watch Pinocchio if I had the time.

“Who was the man at the airport?”

He didn’t know. I set down my pen and sat back in my chair. I decided that we had reached the end of our session and told him that I would schedule a follow-up a few months into the future. I supposed that I had gotten what I’d come for – I’d seen his trauma, the alienation he felt from the culture that had adopted him. I didn’t know what to make of the loss in memory. I thought I’d ask around the office before mentioning it to the counselor. Raul left the room and I began to pack up my things for the Starbucks on 5th street downtown where I usually wrote up the results of my session while it was still fresh in working memory. Perhaps Raul’s memory was having an effect on me – the thought of writing indoors on such a sunny day filled me with reluctance. I felt a sudden urge to go put on my running shoes and trace Embarcadero and then travel the length of the beaches on the west side of the peninsula. I hadn’t gone the full distance before but was feeling up to it. I hadn’t run since that disastrous night.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. It was Dr. Chen.

“Your session with the boy has ended, yes?”

“We just finished.” I let out a pent-up breath. I had a bad feeling about what was to come.

“Unfortunately, I’m going to have to cancel our meeting tomorrow and move it to noon today. You should be available then?”

I considered denying her request, for a second, but she knew my schedule like the back of her hand and would rightly assume that I was stalling. I had come to understand why no one wanted to work with Dr. Chen.

“I’ll be at your office by noon,” I said.

“Thank you.”

I bumped into the counselor on my way out. He had rushed through the door with a bag lunch in his arms. “Oh, about earlier...I’m sorry. Don’t hesitate to reach out if you need anything.”

“You bet,” I said, and left the office. I’d forgotten to schedule a follow-up with Raul.

After the tram ride back to San Francisco, I had about thirty minutes in the office to complete the progress report which I customarily handed in every time we met. I opened my tablet on the tram and typed hurriedly. The reports were supposed to be a reflection of my thinking when it came to my bibliography and my latest research data. Dr. Chen returned them to me a week later with notes on where my thinking had soured or where I had taken a wrong turn. It would be a botched job this time, and she would know it, but I saw them more or less as busy work as not a single word would end up in the final paper. In one of her long rants, Dr. Chen had explained the importance of such work, that it allowed us to distribute our cognition. Seeing her track record of brilliance, I could only agree.

The research division was housed on the upper floors of the Transamerican Pyramid, which had been remodeled at exorbitant cost to suit the preferences of the founder, Dr. Feist. As part of the office warming process, every intern was assigned to read the many research papers that demonstrated the psychological attributes of the design decisions made for the space. High ceilings and the predominance of green promoted serotonin production. Islands of closed office

membranes separated by open mingling spaces promoted both private interaction and emergent collaboration. The Habitus research division made the dorms at UC Santa Barbara look like they were from the stone age. Every one of us had also been given a copy of Nema Patel's biography, a little red book that sat on all of our desks. I'd actually read my copy. She was the kind of person you couldn't help but admire, a lawyer from a small village who started a nonviolent movement to reform the government's affirmative action programs to obliterate the caste system.

I stood over the copier as it spit out the handful of pages that comprised my report. The last was single-spaced from being typed on the train, but there wasn't time to change it. I looked up at the wide-open inter-office space that looked like the organelles of a plant cell and prayed that the serotonin would rush through me.

I hurried back to my cubicle, passing a number of fellow researchers who were clustered before a television mounted to the ceiling. Looper the nerd and Cara the friendzone were among them, staring up at some redneck in a suit gesticulating wildly on national TV. His voice was overpowering in the placid office environment. Cara turned and ran over to me, her short hair bouncing like a horse's mane.

"Dave – Dave – Malak's gone public!" She grabbed my arm and started pulling me toward the group. I was instantly reminded that despite her physical attractiveness, she was far too extroverted to be my type.

"Sorry, I have a meeting," I said, resisting her pull.

"It's crazy! He's calling us servants of the devil!"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, but really I have to go."

She laughed. "You're missing it."

I entered my organically-shaped cubicle and scanned through the abstracts and conclusions of the three unread papers back at my apartment. They were a blur in my virtual office environment. I created a new document and hastily transcribed the timeline of meeting with Raul. I had only a few minutes left. I took a deep breath and forced myself to calm down. Even the best designed office environment couldn't compensate for shoddy work.

Her office was upstairs. I arrived thirty seconds before noon and sat on the bench opposite to her door. Dr. Chen stepped off the elevator twenty-nine seconds later.

"Hello David, it's good to see you again," she said, flashing a non-Duchenne smile. In her case, it suited her. She unlocked the nondescript wooden door and stepped into the dark interior. She drew back the blinds, revealing greenish walls that held only a few pieces of artwork typically found in doctor's offices. The table was covered in a light coat of dust. She spent a great deal of time at her office in China. I assumed that her hours spent at the offshore orbital terminal allowed her to distribute cognition nicely.

"Your last progress report," she said, sliding the packet of paper covered in scrawl across the desk, leaving a darkened trail in its wake. "Hmph. I'll have to get on custodial's case about this."

I flipped through the pages. The intensity of her feedback grew as the report went on. After our first few meetings, I had come to realize that I wanted as little feedback from the good doctor as possible. I could feel her expressionless gaze as I looked over her writing.

Finally, I looked up and said, "I see some areas where I could revise my thinking."

The doctor didn't break eye contact. "Tell me why you took this internship."

I scanned her face for discernable intentions and only felt the coldness of her gaze. "Well, I..." I struggled to come up with words that would make me sound appealing. The phraseology

of the marketing course I took as an elective in my junior year came to the fore of my mind. “I believe in our mission.”

The Doctor leaned back in her chair. “Go on.”

“Well, um,” I said, thinking back to the inaugural dinner at Dr. Feist’s mansion and the speech he had given us. He was the kind of man suited to giving speeches; you expected eloquence as soon as you laid eyes on him. “Our mission is to change humanity. To make the world a better place by dissolving the existential barriers between people so we can be more empathetic.” I searched for a hint of recognition in her face. She had been at the dinner as well. “I believe that...that is a good thing,” I added.

The Doctor smirked. “The American universities still don’t teach hard work, do they?”

I laughed uncomfortably. “I didn’t think that could be explicitly taught.”

“Perhaps not by your system.” The Doctor opened her tablet and began marking up her schedule. “I doubt many of your peers would survive the schools I went to. When there are so many people, so many great minds to choose from, it is not as great a sin for a number of them to go to waste.”

I swallowed and said, “That makes sense.”

Her stylus dragged across the screen as she panned to the future. “The next time I will see you is at the publicity banquet a week from now. You will turn in a completed bibliography and draft of your framework that evening. I don’t want to see any of your work until then.”

I nodded. “Understood,” I said. The banquet at Feist’s was something I had been looking forward to for a while. Aside from the good food, I’d get a chance to rub elbows with heavyweights in the field. After all, that’s how I’d met Dr. Chen.

The Doctor put away her tablet and straightened her blouse. “You like working with refugee children, yes? I’ve forwarded a list of approved subjects. You will continue collecting data.”

“Yes, of course,” I said and got to my feet. I was ready to get out of that room and to put out of my mind the mixture of shame and guilt clouding my thought process. Then in my haze I remembered the blank spot in Raul’s memory and my questions about it. “One other thing...Raul, the boy I interviewed today, I couldn’t see part of his memory.” Chen looked at me impassively. “Has anything like this been encountered before in a person so young?”

Chen smiled. “We’ll talk about it if you put it in your next report.”

“Very well,” I said. I thanked her and headed back down to my cubicle downstairs, where I sat in the dark and listened to the murmurs of conversation and the laughter of the crowd before the television. For a moment, I imagined that we were all sailors traversing the rough seas toward the bright future, and I saw myself slipping overboard and falling to join the wasted minds that lined the ocean floor, the forgotten detritus that escapes humanity.

CHAPTER 5: NEIKO PLEMONS

The new inmates enter the housing unit through the gate by the mess hall where the goon squad comes rolling through on a shakedown. They come strutting down the corridor as us apes in the mess sling shit at them. Not literal shit obviously. It's about sizing them up, knowing whether they're predators or prey, givers or takers; whether they'd rather curl up in a ball and take it in the ass when you come for them. So I'm there in the mess with Boot and Loot, also friends of Max, peeling the layers of a lasagna that looks like abortion excrement when two new dudes roll in. I'm looking for my new cellie. The first is a short black dude with big biceps and thin wrists that make his arms look like turkey legs. "Hey turkey legs," I shout, joining in the chorus of other inmates, "you got some gravy to go along with those turkey-leg arms of yours?" The first thing that pops into my mind usually isn't the greatest, so after I've screamed that at him a few times, I look him over again and notice how flat the top of his head is. "Hey chuck hole! Did yo momma drop you on yo head when you was young? Chuck hole!" Boot is laughing and he's putting his big hand on my arm cause I think I'm at risk of pissing off the blacks in the room. They tend to stick together unlike us white guys. Must be something to do with being slaves together for all those years. Anyway, Chuck Hole goes on strutting like a stoic to his cell and I know he's probably not someone I want to fuck with, so I hope he ain't my cellie. I don't want to chance finding out myself whether those biceps are made of synthol or real gains if you know what I mean. I'm betting on synthol but you never know in state prison.

Then there's the guy Max said would be my cellie, some skinny white-collar white dude who has a face that you just want to sucker punch. He's also the kind of dude who wears wood beads and a gold watch on the same wrist and drives a red sports car cause he can afford it and

has no imagination. He also has a wife that's a little younger than he is but not by much and is extremely fuckable even taking into account long-term effects of gravity. He takes Viagra to get it on and she has fake tits and everything about them is fake including his botoxic injections which he pays for with cash. His kids hate him, goldiggers love him, and I instantly want to beat the shit out of him. But there's something different about this guy. He aint' got no strut but walks clean and mean as if his mane of black hair is floating on ice. He's got an angular tanned face that looks Italian, and I'm wrecking my brain for an OG punchline but I can't think of a damn thing cause deep down I think he's the coolest dude I've ever seen behind bars.

It's too bad he'll be a corpse in a day or two.

"Hey limp dick! Yo homie you take Viagra for that limp dick?" It's too easy to make fun of white dudes. His head snaps to the side and he's staring right at me, but it's too late cause all the black dudes are joining in chanting: Limp Dick, Limp Dick! I ain't afraid of him. His pecs look like slices of thin crust pizza beneath his blues.

Max want's him dead, that's the gist of it. All I have to do is let him know when my new cellie goes to wash his tanned flakes off. Unless you're dropping some kind of cyanide in homeboy's ramen, the best place to kill a guy is the showers where there ain't cameras and the king's got no clothes if you catch my drift. And it's a real clean death cause the blood can wash down the drain and the bitches on mop duty can just keep where they belong. All the chimps know to stay away from a shower shanking. Ain't good for your line of credit.

I got no problem with killing. I thought I killed a man twice before and each time I believed it for about a day until I found out I was wrong. I was nineteen and only half as retarded as I was the year before. He was my drunk friend Fred who thought I was fucking his girlfriend and I explained to him that she was a hooker and that meant she was not his girlfriend. He

followed me out with a tire iron and I backed over him by accident. I thought I killed him. I got out and looked at his body and got sucked into a whirlpool of defeat. You know, that feeling when your life is over. You don't even know what your life is or what it means that it's over but just that it has suddenly ended and that you face a future of misery and boredom. Well, I dragged his body between some parked cars and drove off. I drove and I drove and I even thought about turning myself in cause I couldn't stand my mind which was just circling and circling all the possible pains and tortures I would experience. You become a man when you see that life is over cause once you realize it you see past all the childishness that most people don't grow out of. The fake life where everyone acts nice cause you give them money and big tits are a few clicks away. It ain't shit. You get real when you realize that you're a pair of genes and that a goon in a uniform will bust down your door and fucking kill you if you don't play by their rules. You get real when you realize that the deck is stacked against you cause you ain't got a chance of making it in the polite society and you ain't got a chance of surviving the other one. That's life. Fucking hell. And the goons, they don't care about some dead dude between two parked cars; he's just an excuse to fuck shit up. We just pretend until we see an opening like a woman happily married until she slaps him with the divorce papers and takes all his shit—AKA my momma. People are cunts. Maybe I'd rather be a slave cause then it's just obvious. Well, it's obvious to me now.

I found out from Lacy the hooker that all Fred had was a dent in his head. But I'd already been to hell. The second person was someone I wanted to kill and didn't care whether it meant the end of my life. She was a dumb college girl new to escorting that I'd sold some painkillers to. Before I knew it we were fucking but not for money. I'd never had anyone fuck me for free before—I suppose drugs are a form of payment. Anyway we were high one time in her friend's apartment and I'm overwhelmed by this feeling that we could really be together and that I could

be in a zone of life that I've never experienced before. She's conked out next to me and I'm watching her sleep thinking that she's a smart college girl and could have a future in that polite society. To make a long story short, I found out she was seeing—not escorting—some hick named Carl who flipped cars, so I found out where he lived and went to his house and hit him with a bike lock. I left his bleeding body on the floor.

That was my first police interview but they couldn't prove anything. I had to act pleased when they told me that he was alright when deep down I was disappointed that I hadn't completely fracked his spinal cord. It didn't make me feel better that I'd almost killed him.

I broke into her dorm about a week later to take back any of the remaining drugs I'd given her. At that point I was pretty good at breaking into things, but nowhere near as good as I was in my golden days. I searched everywhere and didn't find the drugs. Then classes changed and students were everywhere and I thought I should get the hell out. Then it occurred to me that I should leave her a note. I thought for a minute about writing something frou-frou and bullshit that might make her feel like a bad person, but I settled on I LOVED YOU in permanent marker on her white pillowcase.

I should probably be feeling sentimental about finally getting out. I seen straight-up dudes PMSing about release, crying themselves to sleep late into the lockdown. I try and apply the mirror technique to the situation, imagine Candice talking me through the places in my mind. But all I got inside is the sense that time's running out and my life's about to change like the seasons.

“Like man,” I say to Boot, who's sat next to me on our yard bench, “sometimes I wonder why we ain't just born in prison, you know, like why even try and live a real life and shit?” We watching the thin trails made by the rockets shot towards the moon or wherever.

“That wouldn’t be cool,” says Boot.

“Yeah, but think about it. If you didn’t know what good was you wouldn’t know what bad was either.”

“Guess that makes sense.”

“It would just be the way things are.”

“Sure.”

Boot’s boring. And I start thinking of the things that I can do in prison that I can’t do in the free world, and it hits me: I probably ain’t ever gonna get a chance to play horseshoes again. In my seven years at Mule creek I never wanted to touch the dang things cause they’re all real bright colors and look like kids toys – that’s probably why the old heads are the only ones who can throw a horseshoe worth a damn. Ain’t none of ‘em out today though. I take a horseshoe off the top of the pile and flip it around in the air like those Olympians flip their torches. Thing’s surprisingly heavy, and I’m looking at it trying to figure out the fizz-icks of how the heck it wraps around the little pole in the ground.

That’s when this horseshoe flies outta nowhere and hits the metal pole with a clang so loud that I jump like a bitch.

I turn to see who the thrower was. I’m expecting Eddie, but it had a little too much mojo behind it to be thrown by him.

I shit you not, like forty feet away stands Little John lookin’ right at me.

“You trying to hit me with that bitch?” I look to where Boot was on the bench, and he’s sat there with his nose in his tab.

“If I’d wanted to hit ya, I’d have hit ya.” He’s got that dumbass grin. “Easy with that.”

I realize he's talking about the horseshoe in my hand, which I'm clenching as I'm walking toward him. So I turn around and wing it like a frisbee toward the post, but I put a little too much spin on it and it almost hits one of the black dudes on the dip bars.

"What do you want?" I say. I'm thinking that whatever he wants from me has to do with my new cellie cause after four years we ain't had much reason to talk.

"Gonna show you how to play the game, bro," he says, holding another horseshoe. I see that he's throwing the thing underhand, like a girl. It arcs real nice before clattering around the pole.

"I ain't gonna pay for your stupid lessons."

"Don't worry, this is on me," he says and hands me a horseshoe.

I fling it to another part of the yard and start walking away.

"Your new cellie? Suarez? He's an FBI informant."

That gets me. "What's it to you?" I look around and see that the dudes in the weight pit and on the gym bars have taken notice.

Little John shrugs. "I'd watch my back if I was you."

"Thanks for the tip," I say.

So I go back to my cell to meet this Suarez dude. He's already there, laying on the bottom bunk, which he rightly figured was his. He's got this lone wolf vibe, and we don't say much other than hi, and I pick up one of the Maxim magazines I got and look at the ladies in underwear.

CHAPTER 6: DAVID TREMBLE

“So which one is it going to be?” asked Looper. He had been reaching for his computer mouse when he knocked over an empty can of chips which rang hollow against the tile floor of the server room.

I’d been cycling through the list of candidates for more than five minutes, longer than I ever had, thinking of the possibilities each of them offered. I hadn’t slept well since my meeting with Chen. The words on the bright screen in that dark place seemed to weave in and out of one another.

There were only seven who fit the criteria, boys and girls from the South American theater orphaned and living with American parents. The one who may have been a child soldier seemed promising. There was also a girl with no known physical or mental ailments who seemed unable to speak. The notes left by the analysts within the Habitus backend referred to her as ‘mute girl.’ I put the child soldier on the back burner. Mute girl it was.

When I first met Looper, he struck me as one of those kinds of people who claims a niche within society as a sea-dwelling creature tunnels into the silt and waits for microplankton to come swimming its way. Looper was hardly a predator, but a consumer nonetheless. Behind that passive exterior of ironic t-shirts coupled with eye-glasses was an opportunist, and that became apparent one day as I passed his desk he offered to sell me a mild neurological agent.

“Hypogen,” he said with a technician’s characteristic flat affect.

“Hydrogen?” I said in return. He had quietly said it so the techs in the nearby cubicles wouldn’t hear.

“*Hypo*,” he said, this time with a wink which, coupled with his smile, must have been an imitation of a gif.

It sounded like a depressant, which was exactly what I needed. After hours of intellectual labor, the balance of dopamine and norepinephrine is inevitably destabilized, and I would often feel the onset of irritative energy – an overabundance of the second neurotransmitter, the brain’s version of adrenalin, which on its own creates a feeling of agitation.

It was a foil packet filled with little red pills which glistened in the overhead light. I’d experimented with alcohol and found that while its presence in my system reduced the need to interrupt my concentration, in equal measure it also inhibited my ability to think in general. Hopefully this substance wouldn’t cause the same reaction.

I slipped him four twenties. He slipped me the pills. I headed straight for the elevator, knowing not to make the mistake of engaging him in conversation which somehow always meandered back to technology. Truthfully, we weren’t all that different, he and I – but I was obsessed with the more complex problems of humanity.

I returned to my cubicle and left an audio message for the mute girl’s parents. I felt like a telemarketer. A thought flashed through my mind, that I should be prepared to accept the mundanity of menial labor.

“Hey!” Cara poked her head through the opening in my cubicle, snapping me out of my daze. “I got an extra Frappuccino from the machine. I mean, Andy didn’t want his. Do you want it?”

I spun around in my chair to face her and thought of the various ways in which I could politely dismiss her. She was holding the cup out toward me with a bright and wide-eyed smile.

“I’m sorry, but…” I said, choosing my words with care. “I try to avoid drinking large quantities of sugar.”

“Oh, I completely understand!” she said, blabbering with incognizance. “I’ve been trying to reduce my sugar intake as well. I just finished reading this book by Sasha Edson on the neurological effects of the standard American diet. Did you know that frozen chicken tenders account for an estimated five-billion per year loss in gross domestic product?”

“Um, no.” I was beside myself.

“It comes down to an unfortunate combination of macronutrients. The high concentration of refined carbohydrates and animal proteins in the absence of fat spikes insulin, which has the effect of spiking dopamine and norepinephrine levels and creating a deficit in the long run, which degrades prefrontal cortex activity for a period of up to four hours.”

“That’s not very good,” I said, nodding amicably.

“I know, right? How’s your research going?”

I had always suspected that sharp turns in conversation were indicative of lowered prefrontal cortex function as the person lacks the ability to meaningfully continue a single line of inquiry. “It’s going alright. How about you?” I figured my only remaining strategy to get out of that conversation was to head for the eye of the storm. “What are you researching again?”

She set down her drink and the drink she had brought for me and straightened herself.

“Well, I’m investigating how the interface can be used to comprehend and potentially counteract institutional racism.” She crossed her arms and leaned against the cubicle wall. “It’s going okay, but honestly, I don’t think anyone takes what any of us is saying too seriously. My advisor seems to think that if it’s about the technology, it’s publishable. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, suddenly lost in thought. I’d considered switching advisors early on, but the option seemed much more appealing as of late. “Do you think the other advisors feel that way?”

“Pretty much. I mean, it kind of sucks that I did all that work in grad school only to end up here where pretty much anything I write is acceptable. I was hoping...I don’t know...that I would learn something new here?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, well, you could always switch to Dr. Chen.”

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard she’s really knowledgeable. What’s it like to work with her?”

“Rough. She doesn’t like my approach.”

“I’m sorry. You seemed very upset the other day.”

Cara’s admission that she was monitoring my emotional state made me feel suddenly uncomfortable. “Uh, yeah, well...I might end up working with someone else.”

She smiled. “Yeah. I’ll send you list of recommendations.”

“Well,” I said, getting out of my chair. “Thank you.”

Her smile faded. “Where are you going?”

“I think I’ll go downtown to get some work done.”

I wasn’t going downtown. I took an Uber back to my apartment where I wrote a lengthy email on my desktop explaining to an administrator why the working relationship between Dr. Chen and myself was unsuitable. By that point, Cara had forwarded her list of alternate advisors. I glanced through their CVs and chose a Dr. Anderson, a man in his sixties with a chin hidden beneath a bulging neckline who had an overall round appearance that seemed to suggest amicability and blitheness. I immediately felt good about my decision and was about to hit the send button. Then I reread the email and began to worry. I wondered whether my decision to change advisors would reflect badly on my character. I changed a few of my adjectives so that the overall tone of the message was reduced. Then I changed half of them back. I’d been sitting in a chair for a half-hour at that point and decided that I should get up and let the problem roll

through my subconscious. I hadn't run since the meeting. I changed clothes and hit the pavement.

I headed to Mission Bay and then followed the Embarcadero which was a four-lane boulevard that followed the docks and took me beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. It's a thing you see in so many movies that it looks less impressive in real life. There it is in its faded glory, looking out of place next to the modern, organic city. I run past all the old buildings on the pier and the Ferry building, which looks like it's from the era of Charlie Chaplain. Then I've run along, past the solar boats and the piers and Colt tower until there's sand beneath my feet and the terminal to the orbital platform stretches off toward the eastern horizon. Then I stop there and look at the sea, which has hardly changed since the dawn of time, where a nearly infinite breadth of life teems, consuming itself indiscriminately as the unwitting humans play and dance on the very edge of its epic surface. And for a moment on the beach I was content to be a living thing consuming the oxygen that feeds the ticking clock of biology counting down to an inevitable death. Only in such a state of mind can one contemplate the absurdity of our existence, our obsessive drive to make meaning of things, to make better things, to build upon the obvious. I wondered why we tortured ourselves with such pursuits when, as living things, humans should be content to eat and reproduce as noble savages. It was not obvious to me that a survival strategy involving rockets and memory interfaces was necessarily superior to that of any other mammal, other than that it offered a superficially more pleasant subjective experience.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the ringing of my phone which I struggled mightily to retrieve from the extraordinarily small and sweat-laden pocket of my running shorts. I almost dropped it in the sand when I heard the voice on the other end.

“We would like you to interview our daughter as soon as you can,” Cynthia, the mute girl’s mother said. “Would you be able to do that today by any chance?”

It was a new dataset, a fresh start to my research with a new advisor. “Yes, of course!” I said, and she gave me their address.

About an hour later I was showered and fully dressed in the back of an Uber headed down the winding roads of the hillside suburbs on the outskirts of Redwood. Nestled amongst the whispering trees, the houses had the characteristic sameness that typifies all housing in Suburbia; here it was an earthly tone set by wood siding and brown tile roofs that slanted symmetrically over each set of walls. In front of each house was a line of hedges manicured to an unnatural level of squareness. I saw the America that Raul despised in the houses, each of them replete with the order of an idyllic world. It was a nice neighborhood.

My ride ended before one such house that was distinguished from the rest by a lengthy glass facade through which much of the house’s interior was laid bare. Between the hedges I saw a kitchen and a lounge enclosed by walls that were colored with the warm hues of a sunset. I grabbed my bag and walked toward the front door along the pavers that cut a clean swath in the fertile lawn. A woman I took to be Cynthia approached the door to greet me. She showed a welcoming smile and I couldn’t help but take note of her elegant look. A set of gold hoops hung beneath her ears which blended almost perfectly with her fountain of white-gold hair. Even though I was positive that she was in her early forties, less than a decade younger than my mom, I couldn’t help but feel an immediate attraction to her.

We shook hands and she led me inside.

“Would you like something to drink?” she asked, stepping behind the kitchen island which was covered with a great slab of stone. I came to see that it was an open concept house, that I could look from the dining room table all the way to the two-car garage.

“No, thank you,” I said. I suppressed the urge to watch as she bent over to retrieve an item from the bottom of her refrigerator and wondered if she lived alone. There were no large-sized pairs of shoes by the door. I hadn’t seen any wedding photos. The walls and furniture were rather devoid of trinkets. She had moved here recently.

“Please forgive me, but I wasn’t expecting you to be so young,” she said, pouring a bottle of seltzer water into a tall crystal glass. “It seems like quite an accomplishment for a person of your age to have reached your position.”

I felt myself begin to blush and averted my gaze. “Thank you, but I’m only an intern.”

She retrieved a lemon from a bowl filled with them and sliced it into quarters, one of which she squeezed into the carbonated liquid. She wore a number of rings on her fingers, and her hands were moving too fast for me to tell what they represented. I chastised myself for being so base. I needed to focus on the research, on improving the conditions of human existence.

“If you wouldn’t mind, I—” I said, and was interrupted by a door opening. I turned toward the noise and was confronted by a woman of about my height with short hair, wearing grass-stained jeans and a red flannel shirt. She was stepping out of the bathroom.

“David, meet my partner, Rose.”

Rose looked me up and down. “Pleased to meet you,” she said, and unceremoniously went over to the refrigerator and grabbed a fruit-smoothie drink which she shook vigorously before downing in a handful of gulps.

“Uh, pleased to meet you too,” I muttered, hiding my disappointment. I set my bag on the island and opened my notebook. “Well why don’t you start by telling me a little about your daughter?”

Fiona had arrived in the United States eleven months prior. All her family had died or gone missing in the wake of tropical storm Regio which had recently devastated the Dominican Republic. She was nine when it had happened. It wasn’t known whether she ever had the ability to speak. At ten years old, she was able to read and write in basic English and Spanish and worked with a tutor to improve her fluency in both languages.

Rose had been scrubbing dishes at the sink. She turned and said, “She doesn’t speak because she doesn’t want to is basically what the doctors said.”

“That was their main hypothesis,” Cynthia said, glancing over at her partner. “But they have no way of knowing that for sure.”

“Odds are it’s neurological,” Rose continued, letting the dishes loudly clang as she dropped them into the dishwasher. “We know so little about the brain, no offence David. My aunt died of an aneurysm in college; believe me, all it takes is a little thing like that to screw up your head.”

I opened my mouth to qualify her initial statement: Most people know little about the brain, but I kept quiet.

“She also has chronic fatigue syndrome,” Cynthia said, shaking her head. “Maybe that’s got something to do with it.”

Rose slammed the dishwasher. “Well, she’s not so fatigued that she can’t play with the dog or go for long walks.”

I butted into their exchange. “What is the symptomology of her fatigue syndrome?”

“She spends a lot of time indoors and naps throughout the day,” Cynthia said.

“It’s not even a real illness. They don’t even know what causes it. She has no immune issues, no hormonal imbalances, no spinal inflammation.” Rose turned to face me. “I’m a nurse. I know what sick looks like.”

Cynthia shook her head. “Do you have enough information, David?”

I closed my notebook. “I think so.”

“Okay. I’ll see if Fiona is awake.”

A minute later Cynthia took me to her room. There was only darkness on the other side of the bright orange doorway. Cracks of light bled around the edges of the blackout window shades. In the gloom I could barely make out a bed and a desk and a chair. Beneath the covers of the bed was a small form that moved in response to our presence. Cynthia touched a switch on the wall, filling the room with crepuscular hues.

“Hello Fiona,” I said, pulling over the chair so I could sit alongside her. I could only see her small face as it was framed by the bedding. Her wide eyes stared up at me, wide from the darkness, but also wide with anticipation, curiosity, and fear I imagined. “My name’s David.” To my surprise, she responded with a hint of a smile. “We’re going to do a little test today.”

“I would like to watch the test if you don’t mind,” Cynthia said, sitting at the foot of the bed.

“Of course not,” I replied, opening my bag to retrieve my equipment. I showed Fiona the patch before putting it on her. Within three minutes she was asleep and I had the donned the headset.

At first, I asked for her happiest memory. There was a beach that stretched with the curvature of a scythe for as far as the eye could see. To her left the sand was swallowed by the

cold ocean which lapped the shore with its chilling waves, and to her right the sand faded into tall grasses with palm trees jutting into the air like the fur strands of some great animal. Her brother, tall and slender and older than she, ran ahead and scaled one of the trees with inhuman efficiency. He disappeared into the canopy and after a few violent shakes of the leaves three hairy bulbs the size of small watermelons tumbled in his wake. Her brother returned and they sat with their backs against a nearby rock where he showed her how to crack the fruit open using a hammer and a screwdriver he had on his belt. I realized that it was the last time she saw him before he went off to work as a sous chef at one of the resorts on the other side of the island, where the housed the homeless and the sick and starving later, which was ultimately burned down by looters. He handed her the coconut and she put the hole he had made to her lips, drinking semi-sweet juice inside.

“Delicio,” Fiona said, setting the coconut in her lap. Cynthia would be glad to hear that. Her brother smiled and drank his. They both stared out at the sea together.

I decided to push things. “Show me a time when you were afraid.” Her vision turned to darkness and for a time all I could experience was the sound of hard-soled shoes clicking rapidly against a river of dark pavement and the sharp inhalations of one marked by fear. Uncertainty washed through her like the floods of a tropical storm. She was about to do something she had never done, something that might end her life.

She stepped out of what had been a dark alleyway and rounded the corner onto a main thoroughfare. A set of streetlights hung in the distance bordered by glass storefronts and empty parking spaces. A large SUV rolled past on the right, soaking up the potholes with its large tires. It didn’t look anything like a city I’d imagine existing in the Dominican Republic; if I didn’t know better, I’d imagine she was somewhere in a city in America. Out of the corner of her eye, I

spied a woman next to her wearing high heels and a leather jacket. Fiona was hardly five feet tall—she should have been looking up at her, unless she was a very short person. That’s when I realized that I wasn’t looking through Fiona’s eyes.

An unmarked white transit van pulled up alongside them. The back door hung open, revealing a man crouching in the back. A Steelers ballcap cast his face in shadow. Several silhouettes lurked behind him.

“Remember to have fun tonight,” he said. His white teeth hung in the darkness as he flashed a grin.

“Just don’t get too caught up in your wet daydreams watchin’ us,” the other woman said.

“Jordan, I’m sorry to say it, but you’re not my type.” He slammed the rear door and the van sped off.

“Ha,” Jordan said, and they continued at their brisk pace. “How you doin’?”

“Alright, I guess,” said a voice, and I realized it was the woman whose perspective I was inhabiting. She ran a hand through her hair and it came back thick with grease. “I hate this shit.”

“Yeah, well it gets them off. We gotta stoop to their level to be effective.” Jordan turned to look at her, and I saw that she was a rather attractive black woman despite her disheveled appearance. “It’ll completely wash out after a couple of showers.”

“Roger that.”

“Or, you could use dishwashing detergent like me. Gets it out in one shot.”

“Um, no thanks.”

Jordan laughed. “You do this long enough and you start using dish detergent for everything.”

They walked for a few minutes in silence along the nighttime street. I spotted a sign that pointed to Jack London Square. I remembered that place from a run I'd gone on. To their left, a series of palm trees had been planted in perfect formation in the spaces between a set of concrete pavers. Beyond the trees, a series of masts wavered with the calm midnight water in the harbor. They were in Oakland.

Every other step caused an ache to flare in her abdomen as a sharp edge dug into her skin. She wasn't accustomed to wearing it and reached down to adjust the item. It had a round and textured handle that sat at just the right angle for quick retrieval. As she felt it, I came to understand that it was a small dagger in a sheath clipped to the inside of her belt.

"This is it," Jordan said, nodding toward a three-story building with peeling paint and a fabric awning out front torn in several places.

"I wonder if they have bed bugs."

"Lots probably," Jordan said with a snort. "Dish detergent works good on them too."

The woman paused beneath the overhead lights of the revolving door and looked at herself in the cracked mirror of her makeup case. Her hair was dyed overly blond and matted in places where clumps of grease had taken hold. Thick makeup lined her eyes as if it had been applied by a depressed teenager. Her lips were drawn wide in the same shade of red as fake roses.

"I look like a clown," she said despairingly.

"Jesus Christ Anne, stop fussing over your appearance."

She snapped the mirror shut. "Don't use my name!" Anne hissed.

"You might look like a clown, but keep in mind that you're one hot-assed clown, now get in there!"

Jordan shoved her toward the revolving door so hard that she almost tripped over her high heels and banged into it.

They walked past a half-asleep lobby clerk who seemed startled by their appearance. He ripped the earbuds out of his ears which clattered to the floor and knocked over the empty vape tank sitting on the table in front of him. “Can I...help you...girls with anything?” He regarded them with partially open puffy eyes. “I have a...drinks special going...tonight.”

Anne was too busy navigating the overly plush red carpet in her high heels to pay much attention to him. She wasn't used to such footwear and felt as helpless in them as a newborn fawn taking its first steps into the world. A trail of dirt led the way to the elevator.

Jordan strutted past her. “No, thank you.”

The clerk's mouth hung open as he gazed at them.

They stepped into the elevator and Jordan pressed the button for the third floor. “What a creep,” she said once the doors had closed. “Maybe we should bust his ass after we're done upstairs.”

If we're still alive after what happens upstairs, thought Anne.

The doors parted and she followed Jordan down a long and brightly lit hallway with a carpet so brown that it didn't need vacuuming. They came to a door at the far end of the hall and knocked. The muffled lyrics of rap music could be heard inside.

Just as Jordan was about to knock, the door flew open. To Anne, the man on the other side was a cheap two-bit version of his profile picture. Alexander Gonzalez was dressed in faded button-down T-shirt with jean-shorts and scuffed Doc Martens. A line of unkempt stubble ran from one ear to the other, covering up a face that indicated he was twenty pounds heavier with a hairline that was two inches closer to middle age. There hadn't been any pictures of him smiling.

When he spoke, he revealed a mouth yellow with decay punctuated every now and then by a tooth covered in a gold jacket.

“Please, please, come on in, come on in,” he said, taking each of their hands and guiding them in. The hotel room was outdated by at least twenty years with abstract wallpaper that looked like it had been sprayed with ketchup and mustard in random directions. Gonzalez’s partner was there, Ralph Thomaston, a white guy leaning against the bureau with his arms crossed who silently eyed the women with a threatening glare.

Jordan sat on one of the two beds, and Anne sat next to her. She was worried that she was sitting too close to Jordan and decided to move more to the side to appear less afraid. She made sure to sit with her legs apart, as that prevented the knife from digging into her waistline and would allow her to get up more readily. To her mind it had the extra benefit of making her look more like a whore.

“So, ladies,” Gonzalez said, turning down the music. “I have to say that I’m very impressed by what I see. You’re both very beautiful.” His eyes shifted back and forth between Anne and Jordan, widening with anticipation. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

Jordan placed a hand over her heart. “Oh, thank you sweetie. And you’ll be more impressed by what you see when I’m out of these clothes. An hour with me is half a Benjamin.”

Gonzalez moved closer to Anne until he stood with his crotch in her face. It took every fiber of her will not to pull away from him. “I’m more interested in this submissive creature,” he said, running his hand through her hair and dragging his fingernails along her scalp as if he were scratching the fur of a dog.

“You don’t want none of that, mister,” Jordan cut in. “She’s one high-class bitch. Double my rate.”

“Oh, I think I do,” said Gonzalez, his breath lingering around her head, clouding her thoughts. He ran his fingers down the side of her face and touched her lips. “What was your name again? I seem to have forgotten it.”

Anne cleared her throat and gently pushed his hand away from her face. “Carmen.”

“Mmmm. Carmen.”

She had to keep from shuddering. Anne had known this would be a bad experience, but the others had talked her into it. She decided that she’d never do this kind of work again, no matter how much it benefitted society. She’d rather put herself in harm’s way busting into meth labs than letting some cretin feel her up.

“So what’ll it be?” asked Jordan, sitting back on the bed. She needed him to agree to a purchase of services for the evidence to stand in court. Anne glanced at her and envied her calm resolve. She needed to calm down. It wasn’t that big of a deal. They only had to pretend until he said the words.

Gonzalez looked at Thomaston, and then back at the women. Thomaston smirked. “You two broads working for anybody? Got a pimp?”

“No sir, we freelance,” Jordan said, looking at Anne.

Anne cleared her throat. “Yeah.”

Gonzalez turned around and poured himself a glass of whiskey from a bottle sitting on the bureau. When he turned back around, one hand was holding the glass of whiskey while the other held an M&P .40, which Anne knew to be the weapon that had been issued to California highway patrol officers for decades. Bare metal showed on several of its surfaces as it dangled from his right hand. She looked to Thomaston who causally tucked his shirt behind a Glock that was stuck in his waistband.

“Hey, what the hell man,” Jordan said, jumping to her feet. Anne thought of joining her but didn’t want to make any sudden moves. Her heart was racing and not rushing the guy was the most difficult thing she could do. “We came here to do the dirty, but if you ain’t interested, then we got other places we can go to make some money.”

“Oh, these are just for personal protection,” said Gonzalez, sipping his drink. “For starters, I find it odd that two beautiful women like yourselves are doing this without a pimp. You would be much safer that way, and you wouldn’t have to post ads to find clients.”

Anne’s hopes lifted. “Are you making us an offer?”

“No. I don’t make offers to police officers.”

Anne was stunned. *How had he known?*

“What the fuck?” Jordan screamed, backing into the bed. “We’re not cops!”

“No...” Anne stammered. “No, we’re not.”

Gonzalez motioned to Jordan with his M&P. “Check her for a wire.” Thomaston lunged forward and pushed Jordan backward with the butt of his gun. He picked up her handbag and flung its contents all over the floor between the beds. Seeing nothing of interest, he turned to Jordan and ordered her to take off her clothes.

It was quickly degrading into a hostage situation. Anne thought of saying the code word, but the officers outside couldn’t safely breach when the perps had weapons trained on them. The team would clearly see that from the cameras planted in the room. Even if she could incapacitate Gonzalez, she wouldn’t be able to do so before Thomaston shot one of them. She needed to defuse the situation somehow, before Thomaston found the wire.

Slowly she stood with Gonzalez watching her, his gaze divided between her hands and eyes as she advanced toward him. His grip on the gun wavered as she closed the distance until

she was within the aura of his breath and her hands slid along his love handles. She could taste the whiskey and the metal on his teeth as his saliva invaded her mouth like an oil spill contaminating fresh waters. Her lips remained pressed against his until the taste of him faded and she said, "Forget about her, baby. I want you." She backed away from him and began to take off her jacket.

Gonzalez swallowed. "Maybe I was wrong about you, my dear," he said, setting the gun on the bureau behind him. He undid the top few buttons of his shirt with his free hand while the other held his glass of whiskey.

Jordan roared with laughter and leapt upright. Anne was laughing too and Thomaston had a disgusting grin on his face as stepped back and held the gun at a low-ready. Anne was struggling to free her shirtsleeves which had caught on the cuffs of her jacket when Jordan jumped on top of her, knocking the wind from Anne's lungs. "Let's party!" Jordan screeched and wrapped her arms tightly around Anne. She struggled to breathe and writhed beneath Jordan's weight.

"Whoa, I wasn't expecting any girl-on-girl action tonight!"

The last thing she heard was Thomaston's breathy chuckle.

There was a bang and the sound of splintering of wood. The glass in Gonzalez's hand exploded, flinging glass and alcohol in every direction mixed with drops of his blood as more than a dozen deafening *thwacks* of suppressed rifle fire rang out. In less than a second their bodies were reduced by the hail of gunfire to masses of limp flesh which collapsed out of view just like the man-sized targets at the station's range. Anne could feel Jordan's heartbeat through her shirt. It was all that she could feel as the smell of smokeless powder and death poured into the room.

The first thing she saw was a Steelers patch stuck to the side of a helmet as the tactical team funneled into the space. He stepped aside and looked under the beds as more officers entered to check the perps and clear the bathroom.

Jordan peeled herself off Anne and slumped onto the other bed. “Great timing as always, Jamison.”

“My pleasure,” he said, taking off his helmet. He swung his rifle out of the way and went over to Anne. “Are you alright?” he said, checking her eyes.

She freed her hands from the sleeves of the jacket. “Next time we do this, you and I should trade places.”

“I thought there wasn’t going to be a next time,” he said wryly.

“There isn’t,” Anne said, pushing herself up. She saw Gonzalez’s body. One of the rounds had hit him in the face and had blown out the back of his skull so that she could see its spherical interior. Thomaston’s lifeless eyes stared toward heaven. She had seen dead bodies before, but none like this. Not the skull of a man who had just been talking to her.

She got up and ran toward the bathroom. The other officers got out of her way. The contents of her stomach were just passing her lips as she thrust her head over the toilet bowl. She retched until there was nothing left to vomit and flushed the toilet. Physically and mentally drained, she turned to sit on the edge of the tub when she noticed Jamison standing beyond the door frame staring at her with eyes full of sorrow.

I ripped off the virtual headset and flung myself out of the room. I ran to the bathroom and loudly and rapidly emptied the contents of my stomach. Cynthia came after me.

“David? David, what’s wrong?”

I washed my mouth out with faucet water and ran back into Fiona's room. She lay there as still as she had been when I met her, the sedative patch discarded on the pillow at her side.

"Something is very wrong," I said.

CHAPTER 7: NEIKO PLEMONS

So my new cellie is an FBI informant that everybody wants dead. That's about one step below dick cancer in my book. At least he don't snore though. After lights out, it's all peace and quiet on the bunk below. And that makes sense cause he ain't got that coked-up Jack Nicholson look that ya get after you fall out of the second story window of the insane asylum and they drag your face across the lawn. He's cool – too cool for comfort, this Suarez guy. I'm wondering if he's actually sleeping or if he can tell that I haven't fallen asleep and is waiting for me to do it so he can let his guard down. Maybe he hears my awake breathing. I think of poking my nose over the edge of the bunk to eyeball him, but that would just give away my superstition. So I climb down the bunk real slow like one of those freaky caterpillars inching down a jungle branch and go over to the toilet to take a piss. I didn't really have to take a piss, so it takes a minute to get the valves going, and even then it's this two-second drip-drab that probably makes it seem like I got a small dick. Motherfuckers hose the shitter at two o'clock in the morning like it's a golden shower. Whatever man. I done my dillygence and turn to climb back into the bunk. That's my chance to catch a look at him.

It's like I seen a tiger in the forest. The whites of his eyes stop me cold. And I know that he knows that I seen him. Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Yo, you uh, can't sleep?” says I, wishing to fuck that I hadn't said nothing. “Happens to everyone's first night on the inside,” I add, feeling like I got to wrap it up or something, but it just comes across like I'm a chick in high school looking to get laid.

“This ain't my first time, kid,” he says like he's the grim reaper. Or an angry dad.

“Fuck you man – I’m halfway to thirty,” I say, realizing that that didn’t make sense. “Halfway between twenty and thirty.” I’m almost thirty but, you know, chicks lie about their age all the time.

Suarez lets out a muffled chuckle.

“At least I ain’t a dirty old grandpa,” I say, cause it seems like I can fuck with him.

“Keep that up if you want to make enemies.”

“Who says I haven’t?”

“Look kid, I’m not gonna fight you in the dark. Go to bed.”

I have to laugh. “Oh, I ain’t looking for a fight either. I’m about to walk the red carpet.”

“Congratulations,” he says, like he’s handed out a ‘good effort’ award.

I dunno what else to say, so I climb back into my bunk. I keep on wanting to talk with him. Maybe it’s cause he’s in with the FBI and I want to know what his deal is or because he’s tried to give me fatherly advice about not getting killed behind bars.

“So what’s it like out there in the free world?”

“It’s free.”

“Gotchya,” I say, wondering whether I should ask the million-dollar question. “So why ain’t you in it?”

“Kid, don’t act like a snitch.”

“I ain’t a snitch. Like I said, I almost done my time.” Funny for him to say, being an informant and all that.

So I go on to tell him the story about how I ended up on the inside, and he don’t fuss or nothing, so I end up giving him the breviated version, but with some bellishments that make it sound like I’m more of a badass than I was. What really happened was me and my crew – these

two douchebags from the Midwest – jimmed into this Cupertino pawn shop in at two-o-clock in the morning. Mateo, our tech guy, bangs the LTE security system with his black box of Chineseium and I’m cracking the front door with a screwdriver. I was the hands-on guy – I’d cased the place and knew where everything was at, including the dome camera tucked behind the sail of a largeish display of the Japanese Vikings riding the waves to Valhalla or something like that. If it had fit in a trash bag, I’d have taken it. I knew where the safes were at too – that’s the important part. The other guy, Frank – practically the whitest man on earth since he was albino – handled the locks. He had that troll DNA that meant he was good with his fingers. Even though I’m making it sound like I was boss, I gotta also make it sound like I wasn’t running the show, because Mateo was running the show, and he’s the one who fucked me over.

“We’re in and out in fifteen,” I say, “with about ten-thousand in pure Khyber diamonds. But whitey leaves a handprint on the glass door on his way out. Gets picked up about a month later. Next thing I know, I’m behind bars, and they’re both testifying against me.”

“Why didn’t you testify?”

I think back to that moment, the moment when life became a shit sandwich that I knew I had to swallow, cause it was like everything had been leading up to that, all the times I thought I’d been done in before – the shit was finally happening. Like, I’d really ruined my life, and I knew it was coming, like a present you open on Christmas which you know is gonna be fucking shit because your parents are poor and they don’t give a shit, so they buy you some crappy action figure that you can shove up your ass.

“I was down with these guys. We did like five jobs before that. And, you know, you’re supposed to take one for the team, right? Like, go down with the ship? They pussied out, man,

made it sound like I was threatening to strangle their mothers. Luckily the derps bungled the case and all I got sentenced for was a drug charge.”

“You live and you learn,” says Suarez with a sigh.

“You sayin’ I should’ve snitched?”

“I’m saying that you can’t expect too much from human nature. At the end of the day, people only do what’s best for themselves, you know? You were being noble, but it ain’t always the best thing for yourself.”

“That why you’re here?” I ask, thinking that all this rich bullshit is some kinda justification for his masochistic attitude.

Suarez stays quiet a moment, like he’s working out how much of the truth he should tell me.

“I did the wrong thing all my life. I was selfish. And when I finally did the right thing, I was punished. And I know what I’ve got coming to me.”

All this poet-ism about the right and wrong things – I wonder if he knows that he’s gonna die with a shank up his ass. Like all those third-world dictators, you know, who get dragged out into the street by all the pissed-off people, living life like it’s an assembly line to public execution. You gotta feel sorry for a guy in that position, don’t ya? My brain’s fucked up and all that, but even then I know a tragedy when I see one.

I kinda wanna ask him about what the things are. Maybe if he lives long enough I’ll come to find out. Maybe I won’t. Life’s full of mysteries. Even prison. That’s what makes it exciting.

But I’m thinking about it all night, this Suarez dude, thinking that he’s not so bad but also thinking that I’m stupid for feeling that way. I shouldn’t stick my nose in other people’s

business; I should just go with the flow and let the begones be begones. I learnt my lesson – we make our own way on this fucking rock.

After roll call, I'm watching him, wondering if he knows what's waiting for him in the shower. He don't go, but slouches right back into our cell where everyone can see him.

In the holy church that is prison, the showers are the motherfucking shrine of apeshit. It's this long tile room about the size of a garage with enough heads for twenty dudes. The walls are this sick blue color that makes it look like you're on an airliner when everything's steaming at full blast—at least, that's what I think the sky looks like from a plane. And it always smells like Mr. Clean's east Asian factory in there, like laundry exhaust, but someone took a dump in an armpit and baked it with yeast. The first thing I learned is that you never walk in if there's anything in the doorway—a pair of boots, mop handle, anything, cause you could see something you don't want to see. And when you can get in there to clean off your junies, keep your peepers up on the tree line above the flora and the fauna where the hairy squirrels and cucumber monkeys are at, unless you want to do the fisticuffs buck naked and chance ending up face-down in the runoff of scum water mixed with piss and the leftovers of last night's baby batter. Or you're a gump, and all I have to say to you is: choose wisely. But even though most of us ain't gumps, you gotta walk the line with pride. They ain't looking but they looking, if you know what I mean. Hiding your junk is like wearing a sign that says you're a bitch.

Also look for boots. Naked men wearing boots means they ain't there to shower.

So I'm looking for an empty shower head keeping my eyes on the tree line, but I don't see no boots or anything else out of the corner of my eye, just two rows of blacks and whites scrubba-dub-dubbin. Then I see the massive v-shape of Loot's lats covered in sick tats rising through the steam cloud. The untaken shower head next to him which he probably saved for me.

I go over and plop down my towel and two bars of soap – always take a backup bar in case the first one gets away from ya. Normally I'd follow the urinal rule and shower as far away from a dude as I can, but Loot's the kind of bro that you wouldn't mind banging a girl with. Fuck. I'd feel so much more manly if our nuts were high-five'n.

I start washing and tell Loot that we'll have to get Suarez another time. The sound of running water and smacking of flesh masks my words.

“That Suarez,” Loot says, wringing the water from his jutting beard, “heard you guys chummin it up all night.”

“Oh, you know,” I say, pausing to rinse my dome, “just the new cellie routine. Getting us comfortable.”

“Sounded like he was spilling his guts.”

I wipe the water from my forehead and wonder how much Loot had heard. “Naw. Nothing juicy.” Loot's cell is a ways down the aisle from me – he couldn't have heard much. My talk with Suarez must have made the papers already.

Loot's looking down, hosing his undercarriage. “Dude's a grade eight freak.”

“That good or bad?”

“Man, I heard things...fucked up things.”

“What? He a CHOMO?”

Loot shakes his head. “Human trafficking.”

I laugh without thinking.

“For real.” Then Loot leans in real close to me. The water spray bouncing off his delt flicks into my eyes. “Don't let him play you, man. The sooner we put him in the ground, the better.”

“Man, I don’t give shit about that Suarez dude. I’m about to walk the red carpet.”

It’s like I’m saying it again because I want to convince myself of it. If Suarez had shown up halfway into my sentence, I’d have been all over his shit. But I got Max and that crew and a whole ton of money waiting for me on the outside. What do I care happens to some high-level gangbanging piece of shit?

That’s when our friend, Chuck Hole, enters the shower wearing his tight whities. Maybe it’s the contrast between the tree line and the fauna that’s tripping me up. I don’t feel like laughing. I don’t feel like calling out: ‘Chuck Hole.’ I just watch as everyone turns to look at him and as Loot spools up his wet towel and snaps the air inches from Chuck Hole’s dick. Hole’s screaming cause a viper almost ate his manhood. Loot’s got the devil’s smile on his face. The black brothers are coming out of the woodwork, and the skinheads’ micropenises are sneaking from the shrubs. All I can think is, fuck this shit. I don’t want it anymore. Fuck Loot and the rest of them. I can’t tell if it’s sweat or shower water, but Chuck looks like he’s bawling his eyes out. He slouches to the black quadrant of the shower. A brother slaps him on the ass and whispers in his ear. Chuck’s wet boxers smack the floor. Everyone goes back to facing the walls.

I towel off and head back to my cell. Through the slit at the top I see the sky darkening with storm clouds. You can barely hear the rain against the thick concrete walls, as if it’s part of the real world knocking on your door. The hallway is flooded by wet uniforms and the sound of boots slipping and sliding.

I feel my heartbeat and for some reason it’s deafening, like I’m about to go to the prom that I never went to. I get up and go to the mess hall and plop down in front of the TV. Old head Eddie’s got his dry-ass hands on the remote and it’s turned to the mammal channel. I’m fine with watching cowboys making their cows fuck, but instead it’s about this family with a retarded dog

that keeps biting the neighbor's baby. And it's supposed to be real sad cause the camera looks real close at the dog's eyes as they put the rubber muzzle filled with gassy drugs that give it a peaceful death. Then the owners get a new dog and it's all sunshine and rainbows for about a day.

"Fuck, Eddie," I say, "can't we watch some real shit?"

"I used to have a dog," Eddie says, choking a handful of pork rinds. "Before they put him in a pound."

"Just before they put you in the pound?" I say with a chuckle.

"He was only uh pup."

Eddie's some other kind of noble. For him, it ain't a choice. He just is. And I wonder why I gotta be cursed with this kind of knowledge.

"But y'know," Eddie says, his eyes glazed over, "sometimes you got to put a good dog in the pound."

"Sure," I say, not really listening to his old head frou-frou bullshit.

"We ain't dogs Nick-o. This ain't no pound. Dogs is just dogs. Ain't no dog seen the difference between himself and another dog. They just dogs. But us men has got all kinds of ideas."

The hall is packed with inmates now. It's getting tense. The COs are standing in the wings, looking us over with their arms crossed. Maybe it's time for the shakedown. Maybe it's time for me to get the fuck out of here.

CHAPTER 8: DAVID TREMBLE

A girl glides through the bright world beyond the glass of the downtown coffee shop, her ponytail flicking behind her like tongues of flame. I couldn't stop her momentary presence from pulling me away from my work, couldn't help the instant gratification of settling my eyes on her. I wonder if she knows how many strangers are watching her, men like me, clawing with their minds after her image.

Would she enjoy it, knowing the effect she had? Perhaps she was oblivious to her magnetism, or perhaps her appearance was a calculated demonstration. By the time she had faded, I was thinking of the concept of sexual market value (SMV) and her place in the romance economy. In the end, I was unsure as to whether it mattered if a person was attractive or not. It is safe to assume that a majority of people are interested in pair bonding and limit themselves to enjoying one partner at a time, therefore attractiveness is only a useful trait if one is 'for sale,' so to speak. It was also safe to assume that she was in a relationship, given her attractiveness, so the question is why would she publicly exhibit her sexuality if she was in a relationship? I didn't know the answer to that question. One could conclude that women who do this – most women – are keeping themselves on the market because they are prepared to trade partners at any time, but I knew that conclusion had implications that I didn't dare speculate on.

I had been in the coffee shop for little over an hour and I had already wasted about a fifth of it glancing at articles on SMV. When the search results began to include links to pornography involving what I expected to be people in lab coats, I decided to clear my search history and get back to work.

The document in front of me consisted of rewritings to my latest writing in accordance with Dr. Chen's suggestions...to be handed in to Dr. Anderson. As someone familiar with the

behaviorist conception of dopamine and reward, I was just as skeptical of the relief I had felt after I submitted the request to transfer as I was, well, relieved by it. After my brief correspondence with Anderson, I had a hunch that my work was about to head down a more enlightened and positive path.

I pecked at the keyboard for another hour, gleefully disappearing whole phrases and paragraphs and in their place erecting fresh gardens of prose. Chen was right, of course, but I couldn't take her style. I'd learned all I could from her, I'd decided. Another hour passed, or more, I didn't know. Two empty coffee cups had turned into three. The cups were handmade by artisans in Chile, that's what the text at the bottom said, immersed in a refuse of frothed milk. An incandescent glow replaced the daylight and I didn't even see the patrons as they came and went, not even the women who entered laughing with their girlfriends or clinging to a man's shoulder. I lost myself until I felt the odd sensation that comes with being out in public all day, the sense that people are looking at you because you have been in one place for too many hours.

I had done a poor job of regulating my caffeine intake. Cara would be happy for me.

I thought of Cara but didn't know what to think of her. She was not bad looking, obviously an intelligent woman, available, and completely undesirable. I found myself on the Habitus portal and selected her name from my search history. I inserted my headphones and listened to her posts, her contributions to the discourse, ramblings about adolescent subjects that sounded nothing like our conversations about research. Maybe that was all a presentation for my sake; maybe that's what I sounded like to her. I wanted to laugh and punch myself at the same time. After staring at her photo for ten seconds, I decided that there was no way that I could make myself attracted to her, no matter how much I refined the argument in her favor.

I found myself looking at my search history again and this time noticed Andea's name near the bottom of the list, in the handful of girl's names I'd searched in the past year. As soon as I saw her I felt a pang that resembled grief. I saw her walking along the beach with friends. I saw her legs basking in the setting sun. I saw her holding the hand of a guy that I instantly despised and envied. My attraction for her was predominantly physical, as it was for all the women I had encountered. I wondered what that said about the human condition, that between someone like Cara and someone like Andrea I would choose deprivation over sustenance. I wondered what that said about me. After all, what was I attracted to, but a combination of genes that resulted in a human being that resembled an unconscious and socially constructed ideal?

I needed to forget about her, so I took one of the hypogen pills. I expected that it would take some time for the liquid gel to leave the capsules and interact with my system.

I ended up opening my inbox and looking at the last email from Cynthia, another thing I had forgotten. Fiona was a mystery, yes, but I knew that there was nothing I could do to help her. Her investigation would have to wait until I had submitted a draft of my research for review, perhaps longer. The only thing that mattered, I reminded myself, was the establishment of my credibility as a researcher, was being published.

Nevertheless, questions remained, so I did some digging. Remembering the officer's name, I searched for "Anne Ferguson," and came up with results for podiatrists, pediatricians, real estate agents, and law partners. I refined my search by specifying the bay area.

That's when I found her Habitus profile, a largely blank page, save for the litany of posts expressing condolences to the family.

That only raised more questions. Too many to deal with.

I felt the urge to return to my research. The hypogen must have been working. But since I was still viewing the Habitus portal, I decided record a message to my parents: “Mom, dad, how are you? It’s surprisingly chilly on the west coast. I’ve made lots of progress. Love you.” The barista’s espresso machine squealed like a bad car motor, and the bespoke glasses clinked as they were slid onto the storage racks behind the counter, and I got back to work.

CHAPTER 9: NEIKO PLEMONS

“Man, gimme the scoop,” I say to the dark. It’s after lights out. “I gave you my scoop – now you give me yours.”

Suarez does that thing again where he don’t say nothing. After a minute, I don’t think he’s gonna talk and I close my eyes.

“I was married for seventeen years. They never knew.”

He says it with such pain in his voice, like the pain you just know when you hear it when a dog’s barking from a broken leg. I’m awake all sudden, real excited. I dunno how, but I’ve made the bitch talk.

“Never knew what? About your side chick?”

“It wasn’t different from running a business,” Suarez goes on in his sermon-like tonality. “Supply and demand. Suppliers, retailers, marketing. Salaries. This thing of ours, like family. They always talked about it like family, the old timers, like they had lived through a time when it was more than a commerce model. That’s how they justified it to themselves – you betray the business, you betray the family. Of course, it was never about family when they fucked you over.”

“Who fucked you over?” I got him gushing like a zit!

“I don’t know. No one in particular. What surprised me most was how much it affected me when my wife and children found out. People aren’t rational when it comes to that kind of thing. I didn’t understand...it wasn’t as if I had changed as a person. I was still the same husband and father. I tried to explain, but some things are inexplicable. I don’t understand why I couldn’t handle it when they left. They’re just people, and people never bothered me. We had to get rid of an entire family one time – husband, wife, three kids. They must have suffocated the kids

because there weren't any marks on them. Children deserve to go peacefully – I wish they'd been shot like the parents. We bagged them and poured the foundation. I think back to them from time to time – they were the only family I'd ever done. Couples, sure. Singles. Something about family. My wife asked me if I had loved her, but my children never did. I wish they had because I'll never know if they doubted it. You can tell a person all about the things you've done for them out of love, but that doesn't make it real. Love doesn't work that way.”

I see the big question hanging overhead in the darkness, like that one-ton weight that always smashes the cartoon animals.

“That why you're a sellout?”

“No. I told the truth because I finally saw myself. Evil comes from solitude. You can't lie, cheat, steal, rape, or murder if you aren't truly alone. I saw that in myself. I had always been alone.”

“You were married,” I say.

“Having a family is different from being part of one.”

I dunno what to make of it. It's kind of curious, really, listening to this guy's fucked up existence. Never heard someone so screwed talk about it so nicely. Like he'd planted a beautiful garden or something and it completely died over the winter.

“So...you fucked a fifteen-year-old and realized what a son of a bitch you were?”

“Kid, all you do is relate things to sex. You're worse than my oldest son, who's a ninth-grader by the way.”

“Whatever.”

“And despite what you've heard, I'm no child molester. Although I knew a few.”

It's like he's trying to parent me or something. We're like only fifteen years apart. I'm smiling cause that's funny as shit.

I say, "My last cellie was a CHOMO. Got the fuck beat out of him. How do ya feel about that?"

"If you're asking whether I feel guilty, I feel it."

"Say it again."

"Fuck you."

"I want you to say it loud! Raise the roof!"

Suarez sighs like a rhinoceros. "I guess I can't get through to you, kid."

"You want to get through to me?"

"My life is over and yours is about to start again. I'm trying to get through to you."

"Wait, are you...do you...feel love for me? Is this some Jesus the Christ shit?"

Silence.

"Alright," I say, "take a chill pill. I'm just fucking with you. So, you got life? There wasn't a plea deal or something? None of that sweet, sweet witness protection?"

"Did it occur to you that since I just admitted to being involved with organized crime, I should be in federal and not state prison?"

"Uh, yes."

"And that if I was an FBI informant, I wouldn't be here at all?"

"So you're not a sellout?"

"They sold me out before I could sell them out."

“Ah,” I say, like I believe him. If it hadn’t been for that story in the papers, I would’ve thought he was a total nut job. They got Al-Capone on tax evasion, right? That’s justice for ya. “Who’s they?” I ask a moment later.

“The usual cunts.”

I go to sleep that night trying to decide whether Suarez deserves to die for all the things he’s done. I mean, if I was the judge, what would I choose? I start thinking that it doesn’t really matter. Like, it kind of makes sense that someone should die for killing someone else – a death for a death. But if a dude’s gone and killed a hundred people, it’s not like you can make him die a hundred deaths. So I guess you make him spend three lifetimes in jail? Or give him a medal if he’s killed a hundred of the ‘right’ people? I dunno. Thinking about it makes me sleepy.

“If you want to be good, kid, don’t go it alone,” I hear him say, and I wonder if I’ve dreamed it.

The next morning, we’ve got roll call. Everyone’s out stretching in the hallway and talking the same shit, and it’s like normal, one of the COs coming around with that blingdong, Mrs. Oompa Loompa making her rounds with her junies jangling like slabs of buffalo hide. I wonder if she’s got a man who’s into that, and I’m about to ask because I probably won’t get another chance to. Some dudes are giving Suarez the side eye. He’s stood next to me with a spine straight enough to be hopped up on dick pills. And I’m stood there, wondering whether he’s gonna go shower or not, cause that’s gonna force me to make my move. I’m kinda hoping he doesn’t, and he doesn’t tomorrow so I don’t have to make the call, and Max and Loot and them will have to get after him some other way.

But no, after roll call, Suarez takes a towel out of his locker and pads down the hallway, and I’m like, fuck, I gotta do it. It ain’t about family or any of that seminal shit, it’s strict

business and my bottom line is on the line. Soon as he's out of sight, I'm headed up and up to the second floor past the lookout to where Max's cell is. They're gonna have to move quick, Loot and the rest of them. Gotta nuke their arms with one of those contraband microwave contraptions so the chips are scrambled, and the COs can't track them – and then they gotta do the deed. It don't take much to clear out a shower. Everyone knows when a shanking's gonna go down.

“It's time,” I say to Max, who sits up from the bottom bunk, stacks of magazine paper crinkling under his ass.

He nods to the other guy in his cell who just gets up and walks out. The wheels is turning.

“So,” I say, “How soon can I get my money?”

Max puts on that eye-roll face like I just shit my pants in front of him. “I said that we'd find you.”

“When?”

“Whenever we can. You realize that you're gonna be hot shit as long as you're on probation. Can't touch ya with a ten-foot pole until you're off the radar.”

“So I'm just supposed to live off food stamps and watch the fucking news?”

“Hey man, that's up to you. Shack up with a chick. Ask your parents for money.”

“You can't, like, arrange a drop or something?”

Max smiles. “It ain't worth the risk.”

I realize that he's saying that I ain't worth the risk. I feel it bubbling up inside, like a soda that's been dropped. “I fucking hustled for you over the years. I suitcased tons of shit. I set up drops. I might as well have wiped your ass. And this is how you repay me?”

“Neiko,” he says, leaning forward with that smile of his, “loyalty ain’t free. Its scarcity makes it valuable. You gotta let that shit grow. Stay clean for a year and we’ll come find you. I promise.”

And I see it. He’s like one of those clowns wearing a suit that’s mostly air. Suarez was right – it’s only about the business. I spent most of my adult life with this prick and he’s gonna make me wait. Fuck him. And I probably killed Suarez. I got him killed for no fucking reason. What the fuck.

I go back to my cell and lay down with my tab, just waiting for all hell to break loose. I end up doing this quiz on the Prison Network about what job I’m suited for and I end up getting “driver,” but the stupid fucking thing doesn’t know that I got my license revoked before I got sentenced. Second time I get “packer,” and I’m like, people will trust me to pack their shit for them? No fucking way. Just for shits and gigs, I answer a whole bunch of different ways to figure out what kind of test it even is. Food service. Construction site laborer. Janitor. Does this shit think I’m fucking stupid? Turns out, the most I can achieve in life is “plumbing inspector.” Like, yeah, let me see those pipes.

Then the chip in my arm is gone berserk, and the alarm bell’s ringing like it’s a shakedown, and that’s followed by the usual apeshit of grown men crying like little boys as they try to ditch their contraband. I put down my tab and stand outside my door like you’re supposed to. Finally, captain Chaz shows up not as his usual self but fully engorged with a line of hard-up goons behind him with their big plastic shields and riot gear. He’s walking straight towards me and I’m wondering if he’s just going to smack me in the face. But he ain’t got nothing to pin it on me and he knows that I know it. What’s he gonna do when I’m almost a free man?

“You come with me,” he says, and one of the goons drags me off by the collar.

CHAPTER 10: DAVID TREMBLE

As I stood on the stretch of sidewalk in front of my apartment that evening, awaiting the arrival of Dr. Anderson, my ride to the pre-conference banquet, I lost myself in the strobe of oncoming headlights and the flickering figures of passers-by. It is strange how visual and auditory stimuli have the ability to smother the sense of self, and that can cause one to question where the edges of the mind terminate and the outer world begins as those boundaries ultimately dissolve. It is tempting to believe that this is an ideal state for humankind, to exist as a present sentient entity without preconceived notions of what should or should not be. What a beautiful thing it is, even though such moments are fleeting – that we return is probably for the best as we would cease to be the orderly, self-centered creatures we are. Without the self, we are madness. And so after a transcendent moment, I collapsed back into myself, into the overture of anxiety that is modern life, into the rhythm of my heart muscle and into my sweaty palms.

The people on the other side of the street all scrolled from left to right at the same speed, as if they marched in formation. The same could be said of those on my side, except I could see their eyes, white like headlights against the darkness surrounding them, staring ahead, down, at their devices, anywhere but at the person blatantly observing them. Perhaps they had lost themselves as I had, or perhaps they were so trapped by the conventions of acceptable behavior that they didn't dare divert their gaze a few degrees in my direction. The consistency of that logic has caused me to question whether other people are humans at all, or whether they can be considered machines, complex and multifaceted networks of stimulus and response to be contemplated systematically. I had in the past month, skimmed the collected works of Wilbur Wilhelm Wright, a notorious millennial philosopher, and listened to his cannabis-fueled ramblings as I fell asleep, which had been uploaded prior to his disappearance. Perhaps we living

things are as simple as the behaviorists would have us think, moving through mazes of our own and responding to inner drives such as food, sex, threat, and domination in predictable ways.

Cloaked in this logic, one moves through the outer world as something of a machine, a machine of machines, holding onto the secret of one's inner sophistication.

I tapped my foot on the sidewalk, still slick from the recent rain. All things had a lively sheen, except for the deep black of my rented blazer, which stood out in the darkness something of a cheap façade. Dr. Anderson was five-and-a-half minutes late. He could have been an hour late and it wouldn't have mattered.

I had gotten to know Anderson well – too well perhaps – after just a week of collaborative sessions together. His car emerged from traffic as a bird does when it departs its flock, a polished teardrop that looked more like faceted stone. I found him nestled within its brilliant white interior, a coy smile on his face and a bottle of liquor against his thigh. His longish gray hair splayed out of a charcoal hat with a narrow brim, as it always did. The door was as wide as the car was long and raised itself like a wing of a gull – better yet an albatross. The seats, which were more like sofas, were diametrically opposed with an open space in between. I elected to sit opposite of him.

“My boy!” he said, and welcomed me with open arms, which I misinterpreted as being a handshake. Without skipping a beat, his warm and slightly damp hand shook mine. The sharp aroma of cologne hung in the air, its presence an unexpected slap of the nostrils.

This was what I wanted, wasn't it? An easygoing professor, someone who would help me get published. Was it that he was too easygoing? Too lavish? I glanced every now and then away from the speeding city at his warped reflection in the canopy, the small part of him hidden beneath the brim of his exotic hat. His hand rested on the hilt of his walking cane, tucked

between his leg and the door, a slightly curved piece light in color that had supposedly been whittled from an elephant tusk by Nepalese artisans.

The car reversed without warning, almost pushing me out of my seat as it accelerated in the opposite direction.

“German engineering!” Anderson shouted, although he didn’t have to because the vehicle was almost silent.

I laughed cordially.

When speaking with Dr. Anderson, the more appropriate question to ask was what Dr. Anderson hadn’t done. He’d been divorced seven times, cooked for the Queen, and served as a UN envoy to the Ivory Coast. I wondered if he’d been diagnosed with narcissism, or mania. Maybe that was something he wouldn’t have been willing to talk about.

“Do you believe that people are machines?” I wagered. I had the impression that he might enjoy an abstract exchange.

He removed his hat and ruffled the stale-looking hair that had been trapped within. His eyes had narrowed with skepticism. “In what sense of the word?”

I briefly explained that line of inquiry.

“Quite a reductionistic premise,” he said, pursing his lips. “Probably a result of new age reactionaryism. Do you believe in it?”

“No.” I shook my head – words incongruent with gestures are common in liars.

“Good. Behaviorism is now regarded as a hallmark of, shall we say, inconsiderate ideologies. And if I were you, I wouldn’t bring it up tonight.”

“What inconsiderate ideologies?” I said, inwardly bemused, and unsurprised by his sudden turn to closemindedness.

“The old humanist progressivism. I’ve lived long enough to see through it. I was one of them, one of the believers in the power of technology to change our ways. But look at us today...still searching for radical solutions to age-old problems. Hell, if it were up to me, I’d say that we ought to return to our caveman days – to live in huts! Freud said it best...we will be prosthetic Gods, but only prosthetic at that.” He picked up his cane and shook it at me. “Here is my God!”

I recoiled from his words. “You don’t believe in the mission?”

Anderson shuddered in his seat as he laughed. “What mission? That pseudointellectual capitalistic nonsense?”

Our conversation was interrupted by a sharp change in momentum. The car had halted beside the sidewalk adjacent to the Dimetricon building, a wholly unoriginal luminous spiral which at its base housed a Marriott hotel. The side door elevated with a hiss. She ducked into the cabin and discarded her high heels, which slid to a stop inches from my shoes. My fingers slid along their interlocking emerald scales, a rigid material that seemed to match her shimmering outfit. Dr. Anderson held out his cane to guide her in, which she grabbed in a fit of laughter.

“Sophia, meet Dave Tremble, my most recent project.”

“How do you do,” I said, holding out her shoes.

“Nice to finally meet you,” she said in accented English, taking her shoes.

“And I am Miss Turgenev’s project,” the Doctor said. “Unlike me, she is the world’s foremost expert in ballet.”

She waved him off. “Doctor is much too complimentary.”

“Indeed, he is,” I said, relaxing back into my chair.

They began touching each other affectionately and I averted my gaze. They laughed and conversed in a romance language. He waved a cigar and let her light it before sticking it in her mouth, which she accepted with muffled laughter. The smell of the smoldering cigar, his cologne, and her now apparent perfume conjured for me the burning of Dresden.

Cara was our next stop. After a few minutes on the highway, we found ourselves parked before a structure that in many ways resembled the plastic brick towers constructed by absentminded children in the waiting room of a doctor's office from the random shapes at their disposal – the Neuesleben complex, a Hungarian corporation with a German name inspired by Japanese minimalism. Cara lived somewhere up there, in one of those jutting pods which had the minimal manageable volume for a person of her stature and caloric density. That was Cara. I could only speculate at the underlying trauma which caused her to take such drastic measures, for life in that sustainable environment was not inexpensive. She could not be happy up there – I couldn't imagine anyone being happy living in what equated to a jail cell. If only I could find the root of her trauma, I had a chance of saving her from her overly logical compensatory thinking.

It was only a moment before Cara stepped into the car. Her flat shoes gave her no trouble as she swiveled onto the seat next to me. She wore a set of characteristically mundane khaki trousers and a heather gray blouse with a high collar. However, in lieu of the efficient bun which typically handled her hair, her dark brown waves had been steamrolled into rare form. "You look nice," I said. Despite the ample width of the bench, she sat inches from my shoulder. "You too," she said, her teeth flashing between her pale lips. The light of the cabin faded, immersing her features in the unnaturally pale glow of the urban landscape. Our knees bumped as the car took a turn. I believed that her smile had reached her eyes.

“Dave and I were talking about humanism. What are your thoughts on the matter, Cara, as a young person?” Anderson seemed to have finished fondling his mistress, and he turned towards us.

“I suppose that there are good reasons for any such movement. But I consider myself to be a pragmatist.”

Anderson slapped the seat next to him. “How unexpected! That way you can get away with believing in nothing at all!”

“I believe in doing good in the world.”

“And what is the definition of good in your case?”

I looked to Cara to see whether she was annoyed by this line of questioning. She didn't seem to be – she had recommended Anderson to me, after all.

“Ridding the world of evil in any way that I can.”

“Ha!” Anderson said. Sophia jumped. “We have a revolutionary, a humanist, and an old deadbeat cynic all in one place. Oh, and the world's foremost expert on ballet, I didn't mean to forget you, sweetie.” He rubbed Sophia's knee.

Cara rolled her eyes.

It wasn't long until we found ourselves immersed in traffic, with cars on all four sides. I glanced up through the glass roof of the vehicle at the blanket of clouds that scraped past the high-rises as they were illuminated by excessive amounts of light pollution. And I looked back at Cara, who had then moved on to describing tribal tendencies in developed nations, to which Anderson responded with his work on countercultural discrimination. I wondered if the right moment would come that night, when the conditions were right for me to move on her. Amidst the kairos of socializing, I would have to watch for that moment, for I could see no better set of

circumstances for confessing my attraction to her. In the corporate opulence of the occasion. I lost myself, briefly, in a recent fantasy about her, that we would somehow combine our powers of intellect and together work to change the world.

I looked away. I had been staring at her too long, and I chastened myself for investing myself so heavily in a vision that had yet to come to fruition. But I felt a confidence that I had not felt since...

“Would you do it? David?” Cara’s voice snapped me back to the present.

“Of course, he would,” Anderson said. “He believes in the mission.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Submit yourself to me for implicit bias testing?” Her raised eyebrows were distinct against her pale face.

I thought for a moment. “I’d submit myself for more than that.”

Sophia burst out laughing. Cara seemed to blush, but I couldn’t tell if it was just a trick of the light.

The traffic got moving again. We had almost arrived at our destination, Bascom tower, a building on the left that was outwardly far less original than the Dimetricon building – a black rectangle covered in glass that looked more like the night sky than the night sky did. There was some commotion in the street involving flashing police lights and the telltale oscillations of a mob. A figure stood on the roof of a van, the apparent source of the commotion and the traffic jam.

Anderson craned his neck to see what Cara and I were looking at. “What on earth...”

Protest signs depicting slogans and images which I could not make out at that distance waved above the crowd. The figure on the van brandished a megaphone as if it was a loaded weapon.

Images of the Oakland hotel flashed into my mind, of one of the Johns pointing the gun at Anne.

I put her out of my mind.

As we drew closer, Anderson cracked the long windows on the albatross doors. "...tolerance in the light of God. We know all about the Satanic rituals, your goblin fest – just come out and face it, mano e mano, you old dinkubus!"

"That's the guy on TV," I said, turning to Cara.

"Johnas Malak." She nodded.

Anderson brought the windows back up. "Well he's a ripe old cunt, isn't he? A devout humanist!"

"I have nothing in common with him," I said, holding up my hands.

"You're both men," Cara pointed out.

I turned to her, surprised by that turn of phrase. I was tempted to point out how reductionistic that was, but I thought there had been some playfulness in her remark. "True," I said, and left it at that. Sophia chuckled. Anderson seemed to be concentrating on the crowd, which despite being a small gathering had managed to envelope the street. I opened my mouth, but the opportunity to speak had passed. Cara's silhouette leaned back in the seat.

We exited the car amidst the cacophony of idling engines, police radios, and the guttural utterances of the madman Malak. The handful of officers who had formed a sparse line in front of the building admitted us without question. Anderson's car returned of its own volition to the

sluggish traffic. As I ducked underneath a length of yellow tape which Anderson had insisted on walking around, I caught every other word of Malak's speech, and it was about sacrificing children for the underworld. "Demons, I say," he spat. "Demonic Pedophiles!" Cara burst out laughing. Our hands touched briefly as we wound our way through the extensive array of police barriers placed before the entrance of the building. I looked at her to see if she had noticed. She gave me a smile.

It was then, just as we were about to pass through the entryway, that a white van bearing the logo of one of the local news agencies pulled onto the sidewalk next to the parked squad cars. The driver and passenger got out and walked to the back of the van, where they spoke briefly. The passenger turned and removed her hat, and I realized at once, with the force of a Freudian ego death, that it was Andrea.

"David?" Cara said, noticing that I had stopped walking. She followed my gaze to the van. "Who's that?"

Andrea and the driver disappeared to the other side of the vehicle. It had been her – I was certain of it. The brain has dedicated circuits for the perception of faces – creating an acute awareness of such things, so acute that we even perceive faces where they do not exist. No, it hadn't been her, I decided, but someone who resembled her at that distance. "Someone I thought I knew," I said, my gaze still oriented toward the van.

Cara touched my elbow, bringing me back to the present. "Let's go then," she said with eyes smiling.

A pair of additional police officers had been stationed in the lobby, their tired blue uniforms looking out of place in that empty cavern, a great box of black and white marble alternating like the stripes of some animal. We had caught up with Anderson, whose cane

clacked against the polished stone, sounding much like a distant drip of water working for millennia to obliterate the tired rock. The officers' radios bleated in the near silence, causing the receptionist stationed behind a stone monolith of a desk to jump. Cara let go of my hand once we had passed through the doors. Following Anderson's lead, we crossed the room and called forth one of the many elevators which were accessible through a handful of gray steel doors.

"Who did you think you saw back there?" asked Cara, eyebrows elevated slightly.

Anderson's cane smashed into the floor as he spun around. "Ah? Dave's in league with them? Well, it's good to keep an open mind, I suppose!"

"No, no..." I said. "It was...it could have been...an old friend."

The steel doors of one of the elevators slid apart, admitting what appeared to be several Asian businessmen to the lobby. They wore identical suits and walked with a uniformity of step and lack of affect that somehow struck me as being indicative of an underlying axiom...that they were machines. I looked to Cara and Anderson, who seemed not to notice them, and at the police officers, who were as still as they had been when we had entered.

"What are the chances that we'll be able to speak with Doctor Feist?" asked Cara, once we were in the elevator, which was as much of a stone box as the lobby, in miniature form. There were no buttons; it began moving without command, as if the building already knew of our destination.

"Oh, the good doctor will make his rounds tonight, after he makes his speech. He is not the pioneer he used to be, but he will undoubtedly make his rounds tonight and meet as many of you young people as he can."

"Young people?" I said, detecting an undercurrent of cynicism within that statement.

Anderson smiled and cocked his head. "Is there any better way to categorize you?"

Cara glanced at me suddenly, as if alarmed.

I laughed nervously. "I find it to be quite reductionistic."

Anderson twice tapped his cane on the floor. "Actually, we would consider that to be a deduction, my boy."

I inwardly bristled.

Sophia turned and playfully tugged on Anderson's tie. "My Doctor. The deductionist."

"Well," Cara said with a sigh, "as my advisor at Penn State once famously said, 'any good deduction starts with a gross reduction.'" We looked at each other. She rolled her eyes.

That gesture made me want to like her even more. Perhaps her earlier comment had been a 'gross reduction.'

We had cruised upward for what felt like a few floors before halting. The elevator opened into a carpeted hallway with walls paneled in rich wooden slabs, making it look as if a great pair of hands had unfurled the rings of a tree, stretching that single organism across the length of the space. The sounds of commotion filtered in from the distance, the polite and restrained murmurs of civilized discourse, not the riotous gurgle which resided far below the floor of our thoughts at that altitude.

We made our way down the hall to a room uncharacteristically large for a structure that one would assume was filled with offices, a space at least two stories tall which was, unlike the lobby, warm and organic-feeling with a pair of crystal fixtures hanging from the ceiling above a large wooden table with raw edges that looked somewhat like a Hirst vivisection of a great oak. A grid of windows beyond looked out at the neighboring building and the street far below, where the flashing red and blue lights twinkled dully as they were reflected and refracted upward by the two glass facades.

Then I remembered the glow of the red and blue lights pulsing like the beating heart of a child outside the beige curtains, and an abating feeling of surprise at seeing two men slaughtered before my eyes – before her eyes – rendered into the vessels of skin and bone that they always had been, to the machines which we so often mistake for men, reduced and revealed for what they truly are, a system of functioning systems rendered inoperable by a few eager bullets.

Defective units within a defective system.

“David? Which of the breakouts would you like to go to?” asked Cara. There was a short list of presentations spanning the next few hours after the opening remarks, which were soon to take place in the large room. Cara pointed to an entry named: *Constructing the Transcendent: Mnestic Therapy and the Gentrification of Genetic Morality*. “I really want to see this talk, but it’s so late in the evening. Maybe we should start out with something simple, like *Experiences in Split Personality Disorder*. What do you think?”

It seemed that Anderson had abandoned us – nowhere did I see the telltale emerald flashes of Sophia’s clothing amidst the room. As with most clinical audiences, it was a predominantly cool congregation, with the lower wavelengths adorning most of the members. I gazed at the sea of people, feeling overwhelmed by the wealth of voices.

“I’m okay with that,” I said to Cara.

She said something in return, but I didn’t catch it. A moment later she took off for the long table to gather refreshments. The next thing I knew, she held a plate stacked with sushi rolls, slivers of meat of some kind, and an assortment of biscuits.

“What?” she said, glancing at my empty hands. “I’ve been looking forward to this for weeks.”

“Me too,” I said, looking over the vast selection which seemed to cater to every set of tastes imaginable. I turned back to Cara, only to see her stuff an entire roll into her mouth and laugh silently.

“Well, if it isn’t the biggest pair of nerds I know,” said a voice belonging to Looper, who swaggered forth in a pair of dirty converse and obscene red pants. I didn’t want to hang out with him or his kind – the data whores, who stood across the room in a tight cluster away from any apparent attraction. But then I realized that they of all people would be most willing to recognize the machine-like nature of us conscious beings and so I gathered up a plate of Mediterranean origin before joining them.

But there is a difference between conceptualizing people as machines and more closely resembling them, I soon realized, and I was relieved when Cara’s presence brought with it the attention of other researcher-types, allowing Looper’s kind to return to their discussion of virtual games and the like. They really were there just for the food.

But researchers can be just as boring, if only in a different way. Only so many things can be said about one’s own struggles of industriousness before the patterns become all too obvious. While researchers are hardworking people, they are not the imaginative visionaries that the phrasally complex titles of their publications imply them to be. Cara seemed quite at home in this banter, but she seemed quite at home in any conversation. Was she the free spirit that I had imagined her to be? Should I have harbored such a conception?

“You are working under Dr. Chen,” said one of the researchers, a tall and thin Asian fellow with a deep voice who stood about a head taller than me. He had gestured in my direction with a glass filled with a small amount of bubbling liquid, which he then brought to his lips and succinctly drained.

I winced reflexively. "I am now working under Dr. Anderson."

"Ah," he said, with a look of recognition. "She was once my advisor as well. I take it that her disagreeability played a role in your transfer?"

"You could say that," I said with a shrug.

"Do you know anything about her departure?"

"I wasn't aware that she'd quit."

He shrugged. "I don't know much about it either."

A moment of silence passed between us. I turned to see that Cara had moved some distance from me and was engaged in conversation with a handful of female researchers.

"I'm Hiroto Okada," he said, holding out his hand.

"David Tremble," I said, accepting the handshake.

"I find the premise of designing a traffic system to be very intriguing. Do you find...that kind of thing...to be intriguing?"

I nodded, curious as to where this line of inquiry was headed. "I suppose I would think of a traffic system as an expression of human thought."

He leaned closer, as if to listen with greater intensity. "Expression?"

My only thoughts on traffic until then had been to curse it when it put me behind schedule. However, moments after he had asked the question, a metaphor for the brain popped into my head, causing me to speak with excitement.

"Yes, well, we could think of the roads like the neural pathways of the brain. A distributed network, where some connections are stronger than others...because they are often used...as some more well-travelled roads of a city are revised to have more lanes with increased demand."

Okada's eyes narrowed as I spoke. "Interesting," he said, nodding. "Very interesting. However, I was thinking of it in a different way; from the standpoint of controlling behavior."

It was my turn to listen intently. "I see."

"I see a traffic system as a set of fundamental principles governing human thought, as long as there are human drivers, of course. Take, for example, a pedestrian who is struck by a motorist, and is perhaps killed. In Japan and in the United States, the punishment for the motorist is severe to begin with and becomes more severe if the pedestrian is killed. This makes sense, wouldn't you agree? However, in China, for a number of years the punishments for injuring a pedestrian were greater than for killing them. Perhaps this discrepancy was unintentional, but the intentions of drivers became very clear: there have been cases in which pedestrians have been driven over after they have been struck to kill them."

"Are you saying that's what happened to Dr. Chen?"

Okada leaned closer to me, such that I smelled the alcohol on his breath. "I am saying that a small, fundamental change, can cause people to act against their better nature." He looked me in the eye. "Do you find that to be interesting as well?"

The figures on the other side of the room seemed to shift in unison, catching my attention. There among them stood Dr. Feist, the distinct arrangement of his features plainly visible above the crowd as he made his way to the small, raised platform at that end of the room.

"Yes, I do," I said, unsure if I had caught his meaning.

"I will be presenting in suite twelve," he said, gesturing toward another hallway leading out of the chamber, "in thirty minutes."

He meandered toward suite 12, seemingly indifferent to Feist's upcoming speech.

I gravitated toward Cara, who I discovered had migrated once again to another group of people.

I touched her shoulder. “You seem to be getting along nicely.”

“Me? Ha! How was your conversation with *that* guy?”

“What do you mean?”

“The guy you just talked to. You don’t know who he is?”

I shook my head. “I just met him.”

“He was brought before the institutional review board for something bad he did.

Something about failing to report adverse events. But he got off scot-free because he was friends with one of the company’s ex-board members who writes grants for the members of the review board.”

“Oh. How do you know this?”

“Everyone knows Hiroto’s a weirdo,” said Cara with a shrug.

She would have known about a thing like that.

At once, silence filled the room, as if a great gust of wind had snuffed out the small flames of conversation. Dr. Feist stood above us, his arms at his sides as he gazed with fatherly wisdom at the researchers and faculty dispersed before him.

“It is with pleasure and gratitude that I welcome you to the ninth annual conference of Mnetic Psychology,” he said in a low tone that rolled across the ears. A burst of applause followed. “Marking a decade of partnership between Habitus and the kind faculty and students of the University of San Francisco.”

I lost myself in the flow of his words, in his image as he stood before the window with strobing lights to his back. He held the room with a loquacious spell, becoming in that moment

more than an individual, a symbol perhaps. I glanced to Cara and saw her transfixed. As with the others, she was frozen in time.

“We must never forget that it is the scientific endeavor, the will to science, which distinguishes us from our infernal nature.”

And which was more mechanistic, scientific inquiry, or the programmatic stimulus and response associated with our evolution from primates? The act of reasoning is an application of logic, of true and false, of observing patterns within a dataset and comparing those to models of the world. What is the difference between that and the desire to commit acts of vengeance against a perpetrator of immorality? The desire to seek comfort when one is distraught?

Feist looked to his side, as if to indicate the protesters below. “It can be tempting to take our work all too seriously. It can seem as if the weight of the future and all its promise has fallen to our shoulders, where it teeters on the knife’s edge of opportunity. That is true. All I ask is that tonight, we enjoy ourselves and learn from each other.”

A final round of applause followed. Feist waved and walked off the platform.

I nudged Cara, who was still busy applauding. “I think we should go to Hiroto’s presentation.”

“What’s it about?”

I shrugged. “Traffic?”

We found ourselves standing before the entrance to suite 12, looking at a small screen beside the door that read: *The Recovery of Lost Dreams*

“Doesn’t sound like he’s going to talk about traffic,” Cara remarked.

“I guess not,” I said. “Are you interested?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, why not? The juicy stuff doesn’t happen until later tonight anyway.”

Suite 12 was like a smaller version of the main hall, but with a spotlight on the presentation area, and a dimly lit seating area. The side table and podium at the front sat unadorned with any computers or notebooks. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw only a handful of people in attendance, faculty and students. And then I noticed a green shimmer that was accompanied the bullish gray outline of a tired professor.

Cara and I decided to sit just in front of them.

“Do you know anything about Hiroto’s work?” I whispered.

She shook her head. “He was very secretive about it. He thought people would steal his ideas.”

Anderson butted in from behind. “Actually, I’m quite sure that he stole other people’s ideas. My ideas. ‘Heavily borrowed’ would be a more appropriate term.”

I was beside myself. A minute of silence passed as we waited for the talk to begin. One other person entered the room, closing the doors behind them.

I looked to Cara, who had retrieved her phone from her pocket and was scrolling through her social media feed, her face lit by its intense luster. I felt something, a response to her stimulus, the natural effect of looking at a person whose features you find attractive. It was as if I hadn’t seen her in that light before, seen her...

She looked up suddenly, having noticed my gaze. “What?”

I looked away, and then found the courage to look back at her again. “Oh nothing. Well, I was thinking that you are quite beautiful for a researcher.”

“David...”

“It’s a statistical improbability, that’s all,” I said without thinking.

She gave me a look that implied some level of annoyance. “I suppose that you find all women to be statistically improbable.”

I'd never seen her so annoyed. "Some are more probable than others," I said, and bit my tongue in disappointment.

"Well, what you just said to me is, according to my research, quite probable for a man."

"Oh," I said, and left it at that.

About five minutes had passed. A wellspring of awkwardness had erupted between us and seemed to be heating up the room. I took off my jacket and rolled up my sleeves.

Cara stood and turned to me. "It doesn't look like he's going to get started. I think I'll go to another room."

Before I could reply, she began walking toward the exit.

I heard movement behind me and turned to see Anderson and Sophia getting up from their seats as well. "Looks like he's a no-show," Anderson said as they slid between the rows of seats.

I sat in silence for a while as the feeling of failure washed over me. How had I misjudged her? Misinterpreted her words, her expressions, her apparent affinity for me? I was supposed to be an expert in deciphering those nuances. Moreover, I felt as if I had lost a friend, that I had become the same kind of 'weirdo' she had made Hiroto out to be. I would have to apologize to her later, make her realize that it was merely a mistake on my part, that I hadn't realized that such a remark would be unwelcome. More people filtered out of the room, until it seemed that I was the last to be present.

Finally, a tall, dark figure seated in the front row stood and walked toward the exit, rubbing his hands. For a second, I thought it was Hiroto. He looked in my direction just as his head was caught in the stage lights; he was a white man with a long face adorned with a fair bit of stubble. He winced and strode through the double doors.

I got up to leave, but instead of walking through the double doors, I walked into the presentation area to see if I could find any evidence of Hiroto's presence. The surface of the table had been laid bare, so I turned to the podium. Then I noticed a sheet of yellow paper with what looked to be a series of names written with careful penmanship along the faded blue lines. I went up to the podium to have a closer look.

They were names, many of which I didn't recognize. Some had been underlined, some were crossed off, and some had checkmarks to the right of them. Out of the dozen-or-so entries, I recognized only two: Raul and Fiona.

I folded up the paper and stuck it into my rear pants pocket. My curiosity had morphed into urgency. Hiroto had left the list of names for me to find; I was sure of it.

I rushed out into the hallway, having forgotten my rented blazer. I looked in both directions and saw that it was quite devoid of people. I half-jogged toward the hallway where the elevators were. Passing through the main room, I caught the attention of Cara and Dr. Feist who were, among a handful of others, not attending presentations.

I strode over to them.

"Dr. Feist, pleased to meet you," I said between breaths.

"What's going on?" Cara said.

I took the yellow paper from my back pocket and shook it open. "This," I said, "Hiroto left this in the room."

She raised her eyebrows. "And?"

"It's a list of Dr. Chen's research subjects. And..." I realized that I couldn't tell them about the children's memories. "I'll explain later. I just need to find him."

A troubled look came over the Doctor. "Where is Hiroto now?"

“We have no idea,” Cara said.

“David, why don’t you calm down. I’ll ask the building staff to search for our missing student.”

“I’m going to look outside,” I said, backing away from them. I stuffed the list back into my pocket. “Maybe he went outside...to speak to them.”

I stepped onto the nearest available elevator, for which there were no obvious buttons. “Ground floor,” I said. Regardless of whether it understood me, I began accelerating downward. The next time the doors opened, I found myself looking out into the marble expanse of the lobby.

I walked up to the police officers, who were still leaning against the reception desk. I asked if they had seen an Asian man leave the building in the last half-hour.

“You mean the guy who just fell off the roof?” said one of them.

“What?” I said in disbelief. I didn’t hear his response. He may have asked me who I was. I turned instead toward the revolving doors throbbing with red and blue light and made my way through them.

The crowd in front of the building seemed to have thinned. The police had cleared the roadway and cars moved left and right at their normal speed. To my right, at the corner of the building, there was a new convocation, one involving an ambulance and a different kind of crowd, bystanders, who looked on at the unexpected scene. I slid between the clusters of bodies until I found myself face-to-face with an officer blocking further passage. He only spoke in questions.

I looked as far as I could down the alleyway between Bascom tower and its neighboring structure, down the narrow path, past the line of utilities towards where a number of uniforms huddled beneath temporary lighting. What concerned them was a shape beneath a bright orange

blanket. One of the persons, a medic, shielded his eyes from the light as he peered up at the top of the building. Something shiny, like an oil slick, leaked out from beneath the orange.

“What a surprise, what a surprise,” Malak roared, as if he had his megaphone pointed straight at my ear. Up close, he was even more imposing, for despite the fact that he was a short and stocky fellow, for the first time I could perceive the anger in his eyes, the force of a tremendous will reaching out to grab me.

Instead of a megaphone, he held a microphone which he extended toward me as if it was a medieval saber. A bright light shined in my face.

“Who jumped off the roof? Was he a friend of yours? Did he kill himself or was he killed by internal affairs? As we know, folks, this kind of thing happens all the time in secret societies!”

I held up my hand to block the overwhelming light. “I don’t...” I began, stumbling backward.

“David! Don’t say anything to him!”

It was a voice that I thought I’d never hear again.

A hand pulled me away from the light and through the mixture of bystanders. I was in too much of a daze to do more than stumble in the direction in which I was pulled. I thought of what falling from that height would do to the human body, to the skull, to the soft tissues of the brain as they smashed against the fragments of bone and the world outside.

The inertia.

I had been pulled to an open space on the sidewalk and found myself staring into the black pupil of a news camera. Another bright light flashed on.

“No. We’re not interviewing him. Put that away.”

“What, he some friend of yours?”

“I know him.”

Andrea guided me over to a stone feature in front of the building beneath an outcropping of trees. I sat on the smooth granite.

I looked up at her. “Hi,” I said.

“Try and throw up in the dirt over there if you have to,” she said, standing over me.

“I’m not going to throw up.” I’d seen worse.

“Well, you look like you’re going to at least faint.”

“I might,” I said, bending over and catching my breath. Out of the corner of my eye, Feist, Cara, and several others were approaching. “You can interview them.”

“My camera guy can take care of himself,” she said, seating herself next to me. “How are you feeling?”

I felt a shiver and crossed my arms. “I’m surprised that you’d even want to talk to me, after what happened.”

She turned to look at the passing traffic. “Yeah. I’m surprised too.”

CHAPTER 11: NEIKO PLEMONS

The goons take me to the room that no one wants to be in, where everything is black or gray and no one wants to be there. They even go the extra mile and put me in cuffs which they lock to this ring on the table. Chaz is trying to put the fear of god into me. He's trying to squeeze me for all I'm worth. But he knows that I know that he ain't got shit. He comes through the door all serious-like. Maybe he thinks he can catch me off guard by being mean, but that ain't gonna work either. He's a CO, I'm a con, and any nice-guy-ness is just frosting on the cake that gets licked off at a moment's notice.

“You know, I could have you put away a very long time for what you did.”

“What'd I do, officer?” I say, like I'm bambi or some shit asking the squirrels where they go for winter. “All I heard was the alarm, and now I been dragged in here.”

“You set him up. You knew they were going to kill him.”

All I can do is play dumb. “Set up who? Kill who?”

“Your new cellmate.”

“He's dead? Man, that's gotta be the shortest life sentence in history.”

Then Chaz goes through this whole charade about how I went up to Max's cell right before the killing took place. He's got it on video as well, yada yada yada.

“We were just talking about what to do with my stuff after I get out. I was gonna give it to the guys.”

“Why do you associate with a known gang member?” says Chaz.

That question kind of puts me on the back burner. I think a moment. “You know man, you think you know all about us inmates cause you watch all day on your monitors as we jerk off or whatever. But you don't know the first thing about being on the inside – what you gotta do to

get by. You can't just fly solo in here if you ain't an old head. You gotta make friends to survive."

I ain't sure if I believe myself, but what I said rings poetic. Like, yeah, maybe that's what I should do after I get out – bein' a poet!

"Do you want to go to the hole, Neiko? I can send you there."

"No you can't."

"Watch me," he says and starts to walk out.

I only been in solitary once, when I got caught with illegal batteries in my mattress. There's this constipation that anyone can get thrown in solitary for up to twenty-four hours before they get an appeal, and I'm like, "hey, wait man, don't throw me in the hole right before my release!"

He wants me to snitch, of course, to spill the beans about Loot and all of them cause he's been dying to bust their asses and get them transferred. He just needs one of those legalistic things, an affidavit, which I'm surprised I remember my days in court years ago.

Maybe it's scare tactics. Maybe he's knows more than I think and is just starting to put the boot on me. I gotta hold out for twenty-four hours, just one day, then I'm home free, I hope.

The goons return and haul me to the hole. If you thought the regular cells were shitty, the ones in solitary make those look like a fucking resort. But it ain't just that they're shitty inside, you're also all alone in there, and that drives even the toughest dudes crazy. I was in there a week at first, and I woke up one morning only to find water all over the floor from dudes overflowing the toilets. Place reeked the rest of the time I was there. And the COs didn't give a fucking shit – I didn't get no towel, no moist wipes, no nothing.

You'd think cause I been in there for eight years that one day in solitary would be a cakewalk. And it should've been, cause all I had to do was sit there and nap. But my thoughts was swirling – I couldn't stop thinking about the possibilities, running them round and round my head. Like, what if I wasn't getting out? What if I got life for telling on Suarez? Could you even get life for that kind of thing? Even if it ain't life, helping with a homicide can be three decades. It's so bad that I can't nap, I just lay there and stare at the ceiling. There ain't no windows – I don't even know what time it is. It's worse than it was before, cause I'm thinking and thinking about all the good things in life I could miss out on. I ain't gonna see Safa again, and there wouldn't be no point in doing it either since I'd never be getting payment on the outside.

I could do it, prove Suarez right, that I'm the piece of shit he thought I was and turn them all in. What could they do anyway? I'd be out – I'd be free. But it would cost me, wouldn't it, cause some day an asswipe in a bunny suit could show up at my front door and blow a hole in my head. That ain't con-science, that's just reality.

What do I do? I'm fucked either way.

Time does this funny thing when you got nothing but your thoughts. I don't shit – I don't piss – it's like I got my body on hold. And it feels like I've been in there for days when they finally turn the lights off.

Then I have this thought, or maybe it was a dream, of being this old man out there in the countryside with just a flock of sheep, and every one I eat makes one of them give birth another, and I use their furry sides as clothes to keep me warm and wear their tails as scarves, and it's just me out there with my sheep in this dink of a cabin, and I got this old, black radio that's from way back which plays voices when I turn it on, the voices of all the people far, far away who are all pissed off at each other, and I'm like: fuck that shit, I've got my sheep, and there ain't a person

in sight. Then one day, this boy shows up, and his name's Roberto, and I raise him to take care of the flock of sheep after I'm gone, cause I'm getting old ya see. And then I'm gone, but I can still see through my ghost eyes that Roberto's taking care of the sheep.

When I wake up, I feel a tear fall down my eye, cause it was that beautiful, and I get a feeling that I ain't ever gonna see something like that cause I don't deserve it. Carl was always going on about sheep. Maybe there's something to it.

Turns out Chaz didn't have shit on me. And I guess it makes sense that since I was in solitary a day someone figured they might as well let me out. So I jump through all the hoops and don't hear a word anybody is saying. I'm holding my breath until I see sunlight, and then I'm looking back at the goddamn place from the back seat of a bus, looking back at the shithole that was the last part of my life as I get further and further away. I almost can't believe it. I'm out, I'm free, and I'm headed for the sheep!

CHAPTER 12: DAVID TREMBLE

“Would you like a coffee from around the corner?” the policewoman said. She stood with both hands resting on the assortment of small leather pouches lining her waist which glinted in the bright light of the detective’s office as she rocked back and forth.

“No thanks,” I replied, “I’m trying to reduce my caffeine intake.” That was a lie – I could’ve used a good cup of coffee, but I was anxious enough as it was. Afraid that I might open Pandora’s box in giving away too many details.

She laughed. “We run on coffee around here. I couldn’t live without the stuff.”

The office had light blue walls, a dark carpet, and a wooden desk that was devoid of any personal effects. To my left, there was the door, and a series of windows with open blinds looking out at the office space beyond. Navy-colored uniforms strode past every few seconds. Many carried documents, devices, or devices and documents. And for the most part these items seemed to be accompanied by a nondescript paper mug with a plastic lid.

“Alright then. The detective will be here in a minute. Let Gerald at the desk know if you need anything.” The door shut behind her with the rattle of metal blinds.

I closed my eyes and began to feel the pool of exhaustion which had been with me all morning ebb at my consciousness. I hadn’t slept that night, for it seemed that there was no escape from the never-ending cycle of remembrance which follows the arousal of one’s mind. Mystery, in that way, is inescapable. Hiroto’s words to me, the list of names, the memories of the children, the words of Malak, all of it revolved around my brainstem as water circles a drain. Perhaps Hiroto had been depressed – perhaps the matter was as simple as that. If only I could convince myself of that probable reality. This was further evidence in favor of our existence as

machines, that I was powerless against my mind's curiosity, as I suspect all of us are. My only option was to reconsider it ad-nauseam until I finally fell into an apathetic torpor.

The door's latch clicked sharply as it was wrenched open, followed by the rattle of blinds.

My eyes jolted open and I found myself looking at a man whose clothes were, to my surprise, predominantly brown.

"David Tremble?" he said, moving around to his side of the desk. He had been carrying a laptop which he haphazardly dropped onto the desk and opened.

"Yes," I said, unsure of how to respond. I stood to shake his hand.

"I'm detective Holt," he said, dropping into his chair, which creaked as it shifted beneath him.

"Have a seat please."

I returned to sitting.

A moment of silence passed as he turned his attention to the laptop. The laptop screen was reflected in his eyes, a blue square which then shifted to white as he clicked around.

I tried to avoid scrutinizing him for too long and looked around at the blank walls of the room.

"How are you today?" Holt asked without looking up.

"I'm doing well," I said, maintaining a level tone of voice. "How are you?"

He glanced up from the screen and said, "You look tired."

"I didn't sleep much," I admitted.

"I guess you didn't," he said, slapping one last key before leaning back in his chair. It took him a moment to find the right lever to adjust its position. After another creak and a hiss, he turned his attention to me. "We could start with the event last night. Tell me what it was about."

“It was a pre-conference banquet, which is, you know, a way for scientists to get to know each other.”

Holt smiled. “I know what a banquet is.”

“Ok,” I said, unsure of whether I had said something wrong. My hands felt clammy.

“Continue,” he said, still smiling. It was a Duchene smile, but it seemed forced.

As I explained who was there, why I was there, and my conversation with Hiroto, I couldn’t make sense of it myself. It was as if I was recounting a dream only partly remembered. And there was something about Holt’s face, a sense of recognition, as if I’d seen him on television before.

“Do you think those things were connected?” he said, interrupting my train of thought.

“What?”

“Dr. Chen’s absence and the thing about traffic.”

“I don’t know.”

He made a note on his computer. “Let’s go through this again...you realized that Hiroto was missing because...”

“He didn’t appear for his part of the presentation.”

Holt nodded. “And then you decided to go looking for him.”

I thought of the list of names. “Yes.”

“Why did you go looking for him?”

“I...” I said, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze. I glanced at the blue walls before looking back at him. “Well, I thought it was strange that he left, and I guess because we had been talking about traffic, I assumed that he had gone outside.”

Holt's smile reappeared again. "That was quite the assumption." He turned briefly to his computer.

There was something about his teeth, about the way he smiled, I realized. A familiarity about how they came together beneath his nose.

"I had no idea that he had jumped from the roof at that time."

"You think he jumped?"

"Well...jumped or fell."

"Would you say that he was particularly anxious during your conversation?"

"I'm not sure. He could have been."

"I see," Holt said, clicking his chair backward.

I was tempted to tell him about the note, to tell him everything that I had seen and how it might have all been connected. But those thoughts felt as if they belonged to an alternate reality, a realm beyond the wall of acceptable thought.

Malak's realm.

"Is there anything else that you want to tell me, David? Anything that might help with the investigation?"

My head shook. I told him there wasn't.

He thanked me for my time and gave me a card with his number in case anything came up. He then escorted me from the office and past the reception desk to the station lobby.

"Enjoy the rest of your day," he said, before turning on his heel and heading back into its interior.

I rotated the card in my hand, inspecting it before placing it in my pocket. Detective Jamison Holt, it read. I looked up, only to see his brown countenance disappear through the double doors.

The Steelers hat. The back of the dark van. He had been wearing a helmet in the hotel room. My first thought was that he hadn't seemed like as much of an asshole in her memory.

I could have still told him the truth; I could have called him later. But how would I explain what I should never have been able to witness? And why hadn't I volunteered the information in the first place? He would think I was hiding something, that I knew more about Hiroto's death than I was letting on.

I'd arranged to meet Andrea at a breakfast diner a few blocks from the station. It was a small diner with patchy vegan leather seating and dirty windows. The place smelled like fried fish. It had been her choice.

The waiter seated me in a booth beside the door. I looked out the window at the flow of traffic and people outside to stay awake. A cup of coffee arrived. I must have ordered it.

I'd end up seeing Cara again. She'd be waiting for me like a bad dream at the conference, at the office. I didn't know how I'd misjudged her, how my interpretation of her behavior could be so inaccurate given that I such a degree of familiarity with the inner workings of human beings. But perhaps that was just it, then – perhaps I knew too much, relied too heavily on rational deductions concerning my environment. But what alternative was there to being a conscious perceiver – to embrace my true nature as an animal-machine? To admit that I was no different than anyone else?

“Hi.” It was Andrea. And she was looking quite nice in a pair of fitted jeans and gray fleece.

I said hello in return. She ordered coffee and we talked a little about my interview with the detective.

“I wasn’t of much help,” I said, finishing my cup of coffee. “I don’t know. It turns out that I was the last person who saw him alive.”

“That’s terrible.”

I stared at the table. Beneath its transparent top was a map of the city. The land was white and the ocean was yellow, and the streets stretched as red lines across the white land.

“People commit suicide all the time,” I said. The waiter stooped to refill our coffees. As I reached for a packet of sugar and two small containers of creamer, I felt an urge to ask the question that I had been wanting to ask her since our unforgettable night together. “Where did you go after you left my place?”

Andrea cocked her head to the side. “I got on the subway and walked home to my apartment.”

“Oh.”

“Where did you think I went?” she said, stirring the cream into her coffee.

“I don’t know. Nowhere, I guess. You kind of vanished.”

The seat sighed painfully as she shifted in it. “Well...who wouldn’t.”

I looked at her, wondering if this was the last time that I’d see her, for the second time. “I’m sorry that you saw that. What I did was disgusting.”

“I’m sorry too.”

“What do you have to be sorry about?”

“I wasn’t supposed to see that. I asked to see it. The last person that you had feelings for.”

I was about to take another drink of my coffee, but then I set the cup down. “Well...” I said but couldn’t find words that fit the situation. I drank my coffee.

“And, you know, the strangest thing of all is that I know that I should be disgusted by it, but I’m not. I’ve gone over it in my head so many times since then. I don’t know. I know how you felt then, and now I just feel as if I understand.” She shrugged.

I wasn’t sure if this meant that I’d be seeing her again. “Oh, well, that’s nice.”

“Just don’t ever put that thing on my head.”

I felt myself smile. “Never? Why not?”

“I’ve made some pretty questionable decisions.”

“Haven’t we all,” I said with a laugh.

I couldn’t lose her. Not again. She might be able to help me figure things out. Together, perhaps we could figure out what had happened. A moment of silence passed as I worked up the courage to tell her about Hiroto’s list.

“Speaking of questionable decisions,” I said, and told her the rest of what had happened.

CHAPTER 13: NEIKO PLEMONS

Never thought I'd wake up at four in the morning scared shitless. But here I am, lying awake in the most comfortable bed I can remember being in. What is this shit? I can't see it, in front of me, over my head, this thing that's never been there before. I get up to piss. When I get up, it feels like I'm sinking into the floor, the plush carpet. Like I'm standing on a mound of corpses. Like I've died and gone to that place full of dead people. I catch myself on the smooth doorframe, which feels like a hairless forearm cause I can't see it.

My piss slaps the water and it's the only sound I hear, other than the sound of my breathing and the faint hiss of ductwork. It's strange not having to think about the other guys in the cell block as you piss. I got used to it pretty quick all those years ago, but now I gotta get un-used to it. And then it hits me – I can walk around naked if I want to, and ain't no CO can do nothing about it. Fuck yeah, I'm naked!

I kinda get turned on by my own breathing, I think, or maybe it's just the idea of the whole thing, not giving a fuck about someone walking in on my prison date. I'm tempted try and find the porn channel on the TV in the other room, but it's probably not hooked up yet. It's the most romantic fucking thing I've done in a lifetime. I don't even turn the lights on.

I'm imagining a woman. She looks like Safa, but she's pleased to see me like she wants me or something. I want her I guess. Wonder what Candice would say about the whole people wanting people thing. I'm imagining Candice naked with her small tits and small ass and big brain. She's the only woman who ever wanted me other than my mother, I guess. I can't still figure out what exactly people want from people, like what they get from them. Something tells me it's gotta be something true, and not just, I dunno, the universe. But Safa's ass is round,

colored like pecan ice cream, and there's a strip of hair down there – not that nasty gump shit, but a dewy patch of catnip that's ticklish like shag carpet.

That gets me off.

I take a shower. It feels weird cause when I close the curtain, I feel like I'm trapped, so I don't close it all the way just in case someone else is out there. I don't remember how long it lasts but there ain't no time limit. I just close my eyes and let the water wash all over me. Keep soaping myself cause it's making me smell like tree sap made by Pepsi. And I don't have to think about anybody else, cause it's just me, and that's as beautiful as it's terrifying.

At some point I get back in bed – my bed – and lay there until the blue glow hiding behind the window shades quits being so illusive. Then I throw them open and look out at the world. The cars, the people down there, so many, so small, going somewhere with things to do and things to be done to them. The fact that they're out there with thoughts in their brains makes me afraid of them. Something makes them different from me – don't I know it. Even though we both got two eyeballs, two hands, two feet, we ain't alike at all. I'd get locked up all over again if it was up to them.

It's gonna happen again. I ain't one of them.

Of the hundreds of people in my building, how many of them could be ex-cons? How long will it be before they figure me out and think it's time to do something about me? Like those zombie movies when they figure out one of them is infected, that they will turn and bite the others. They gotta do something about it.

I turn on the TV. The remote's got a whole bunch of buttons; I dunno what they're all about. I guess I better watch some shit about the world, cause there's a lot of it, right? Here, this white man will explain all of it for you. But all I get is this dude with a combover who's so

obviously full of someone else's own shit. There's a war going on – what a big surprise. I see dudes in the jungle who ain't too white shooting rockets and shit outta broken windows.

Wherever it is, it looks hot. Bright and sunny. Not my kinda weather. They got big rocks and funny trees.

Then they show a bunch of guys in crispy camo flying over, looking at a bunch of land. Those dudes are our dudes, so we only get to see them chill. I guess that's the point of it all, our dudes chill while other dudes go apeshit at each other. Go figure.

It ain't like that in prison.

So I get bored real quick of that and find the button that switches things over to the real tube, whatever that is. After awhile I find the war on it and get some janky footage of these two dudes walking down a dirt road that's cut through a bunch of those funny trees, talking in Mexican. It kinda makes me feel good just watching them. Like I'm part of the conversation.

Then there's a bang and the camera goes flying to neverland. I guess they both died, cause it's just left looking at those trees.

That was a surprise. I kinda like surprises so I go to another video, this one in English. Sounds like they're flying. It's a view of these other two dudes looking down at a bunch of spots that are people walking next to a big truck. The white dudes are wondering whether it's food or fuel or bullets or baby powder. Then a bitch gets on the horn and tells them that it's been 'confirmed,' and they start thrashing the spots with whatever big dick cannon is strapped to the camera. It's kinda funny cause for about a second you can see the big white bullets in the air as they're headed over to the truck – the dumb fucks on the ground have no idea that they're about to get blown to smithereens. I'm thinking that they're going to get shredded by those bullets, that limbs and guts are going to get tossed everywhere like Friday the Thirtieth. But it ain't that way.

They just kinda disappear in a cloud of dust. And when dust goes away, it's just their bodies laying there like they all zonked out after an orgy.

The white dudes talk in German letters and shit. "Ex-Ray, Alpha, Bravo, Two-Four, Over, Under, Roger, Out." Cool as fuck.

I could do that job. Pay me to sit in a chair in the sky and shoot the right people. I'm good with that.

Until I shoot the wrong people.

Next thing I know I'm watching black girls dressed like the candles of a birthday cake lighting each other on fire to some happy tunes. What the fuck, over.

Seeing these birthday-themed things makes me think of the last time I had one. A birthday cake. I could just buy one. Maybe that's what I'd do.

I guess I need breakfast, cause there ain't no mess hall around here no more. The place is palatial compared to my jail cell, but all it's got is just a small kitchen place that's just a little bit bigger than the latrine. The fridge is empty and there's no zoom zooms and wham whams in the cupboard, so it seems like it's high time that I went out into the free world.

I ain't naked by the time I get to the elevator. I'm not sure if I'm ready to meet people yet and the metal walls remind me of solitary. You'd think I'd be happy to ride an elevator, but I'm not, so I think I'll take the stairs, wherever those are. I find this one door with an exit sign above it at the end of the hallway. The stairs behind it are made of pure concrete, which reminds me even more of prison. And it's a kind of stale and old smelling area, those are ok reminders cause I know how to deal with it. So I'm skippity-do-da-ing down the floors. Didn't realize how long it takes to get down ten floors.

There's this one white dude in a snapback hat stood on the corner of the third floor, smoking and looking at his phone. Maybe he's the other ex-con in the building. I think about avoiding eye contact as I skip past him, but it would be good to form an allegiance with somebody in this fucking place.

"Hey man, I'm new around here. Any good places to buy a phone nearby?"

He looks like he ain't gonna say nothing at first. Then his mouth opens: "Take a left when you get off second street. Can't miss it."

"Thanks, bro," I say. Maybe that's what the whole 'people wanting from people' thing is. He gives me directions – feels good. Fuck yeah.

"Check out the Novo Necroid if you're looking for a good time. Congrats on your release, bro."

I take a step back. "How the fuck did you differ that?"

"All the dudes in this building get put here by the state. 'S why there's like no chicks around."

"Good to know," I say, and move on down the stairs, feeling less alone than I had waking up that morning. In actuality, it's kinda like I never left the joint.

So I get outside and I start looking at everybody like they're suitcasing shit, cause they probably are. No biggie. But some of them actually have suitcases, which confuses the fuck out of me.

As I'm walking, I get this sense that I just stepped outta a time machine. I ain't ever lived in this part of the city, so I dunno...everything looks the same but different. The cars is different, the clothes is different, and there's all these little drones buzzing over our heads. It's like I ain't changed a day.

And it's so big, all of it, the buildings around, and I ain't even in the big part of the city. I look back at my building, and I get the sense that it's round and colorful not cause they wanted to make it sexy or anything, but cause they were thinking of those poisonous reptiles from the jungles which have bright stripes to warn everyone else away.

Something like that.

Anyhow, I see the place, all this glass beneath another fuckton of glass that Necro-bro was talking about. That's how they sell it – a whole bunch of luxurious transparency crap just to put a chip next to your junk so they know where to point the big dick cannons if they have to. But it's like, I can't live without it, cause how else am I gonna figure out where chicks are at so I can call 'em at four-o'clock in the morning?

But before I head into there, I duck into a fancy-pants coffee-and-an-eyefuck place where antisocial dudes and dudettes go to sit with their kind and stare at computer screens. Confuses the shit outta me, cause why pay money to sit in a place with people and then not talk to them. Like, don't they have wifi at home? They ain't there just for the coffee. Maybe their brains are so big that they sucked the blood outta their nether regions. Man, I'm so fucking horny, I might get convicted of sexual assault just by looking.

“Hey there, can I help you?”

There's a girl behind the order desk, pixie level seven. Round face, cute smile, happy eyes, and wearing a white t-shirt covered by a brown apron that's sexy cause it ain't sexy at all. She's the kinda girl that breaks herself when she realizes the world ain't as innocent as she is.

I order this long and complicated drink that probably requires half of the supermarket to fulfill – nutmeg mocha cacao whateverthefuck extract.

She asks me what kind of milk I would like with that. It's the first time a normal person has asked me a personal question in almost a fucking decade.

“What options do you have?”

“We have literally every kind...whole milk, soy milk, almond milk, oat milk, coconut milk, cashew milk, pea milk, and now hemp milk.”

The energy she uses to name all those milks tells me that she hasn't had her life ruined yet.

“I want all of it. And can I get a dozen of those?” I'm pointing at the glazed doughnut-shaped things in the display that have such an absurd pattern to them that they look like they should be framing something by Mozart.

She gets this look of reluctance. “Sorry, uh...those are made in small batches...I can't sell you a dozen of them.”

“So how many can you sell?” I've got my prison gift card in hand.

I dunno how much time has passed, but I'm sitting in the corner with a stomachache cause they don't actually feed you in prison, they just make sure you don't fucking starve. And I'm trying to figure out whether the person sitting four tables away from me has a penis or ovaries by looking at the back of their knit sweater. There must have been some kind of shrinkage effect from the glass of the display case cause these doughnuts turned out to be the size of fucking landmines. I decide that the person across the way probably don't have neither option and checks the white space somewhere on the census. Then I split the joint.

I walk into the tech store and they make me leave my bag of leftovers by the registers cause no bags allowed. I tell the pudgy dude on security ‘not to touch my doughnuts’ and then laugh it off like I meant it as some sort of joke. He wouldn't last a day in prison.

“So this is the LG 46, which has a four-point-six inch display...” The sales associate, dude with a neck the size of a pencil and probably a dick to match, guides me over to a patch of wooden table like he’s an exotic pet salesman.

I’m looking at this tiny piece of shit that’s \$800. “What the fuck, over?”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding symphonically. “Screens have gone the way of the charge port and headphone jack in recent years. Habitus has these new models which have a dot-matrix for reading text...and they’re super thin and flexible in your pocket. Low data consumption as well.”

I feel like I’m in the matrix. “People are okay with this?”

Cause how am I supposed to hook up with chicks if I can’t see them first?

So I split the joint feeling kinda luxurious. I got a phone and a plan – but not the kind of plan that tells me what I’m gonna do for the rest of the day or the rest of my life. I step out of the store onto the wide sidewalk and spot a big green bus pulling into a stop a ways away. So I think to myself, what the heck, and hop on. It’s my first day out of prison and I might as well see as much of the world as I can. While I still can.

I plonk down on an empty bench with my bag of doughnuts and my phone in its box. I have no idea where the bus is headed and I don’t really care. It’s a nice smooth ride and we get up on the raised highway which gives me a good look at some of the city. Downtown is to my right and I can just kinda see San Francisco poking over the horizon. The feeling of speed is good, like I’m learning it all over again. Like I’m learning to live again.

I gotta cut the tape around the box with my fingernail, but after awhile I get tired of that and just tear the damn thing open. I put all the trash in a pile next to me and go through the whole rigamarole of setting the thing up with a fake name and password that I’ll probably forget, and then putting the little card in that actually does fuck-all and calling the number on the

package. By the time it's all said and done, I look up and see that a whole bunch of brown people on the bus. The sign thing over the door says we're kinda on the west side, near Cupertino.

There's an old woman whose back looks like a banana beneath that shirt she wears. She holds onto the pole and looks out the window. I don't want to give up my seat cause it's just about the softest thing I've sat on for as long as I can remember, excluding the bed and the couch at my new apartment. But then I think to myself that if I'm going to be an upstanding member of society or whatever, I guess I'd better start taking care of old ladies' backs. So I pile the phone trash into my doughnut bag and slide over for her. As soon as she sits down next to me, I kinda regret it, cause she totally smells like a garden of garlic.

The internet looks about the same as I remember it. I don't know what I should be searching for...of the plethora of shit that's celebrities, wars, space travel, all I know is that it's a world of shit out there – too much to think of in a moment, or in a lifetime. And it kinda makes me think of where I'm at, fresh outta prison, compared to a dude that's fresh outta college and the world of difference between me and him. A whole fucking world. Even though I'm supposed to be happy cause I'm out in the world again, I just feel this mountain on top of me. Seeing all these people, all these things, is just a reminder that I'm not even a billionth of this life, and I ain't ever gonna be.

There's a tingle in my arm, and at first I think I've just been leaning on it too long, but then it happens again. The phone's got a notification, *Pairing...* Oh shit. I pull back my sleeve and see that my wrist is flashing the code 88. Then my wrist goes blank and so does the phone screen. I wake it up again only to see that I've received a message from an unidentified number telling me that I have a date with my probation officer.

Fuck me. The party hadn't even started.

CHAPTER 14: DAVID TREMBLE

The truth is, everyone dreams while they are sleeping, however few dreams are ever remembered. Many have speculated as to the function or purpose of dreams, but decades of research with increasingly sophisticated methodologies brought about by ever more advanced technologies have yielded little in the way of fresh hypotheses. The field is left to ponder with the likes of Freud, those who would claim that a dream involving broccoli is a metaphor for hair loss. But there is another camp of puritanical thinkers who assume that dreams are vestiges of the human brain's chaotic and nonsensical evolution, a sign of errors within our code. Our code, as if we are machines. The beings that we could one day become may never dream, but sleep in the solitary certitude of restfulness.

I was in a maze, searching for something. An object, or a person. As I pushed open wooden doors that belonged in a medieval keep, I found myself in different places. A concert packed with people; an abandoned skyscraper ruin. The dream ended before I discovered what I was looking for. But I awoke that morning, that of the last day of the conference, with a realization: it was the last day that the offices would be empty during normal hours, a span of time in which I would have free reign of the place to find anything worth finding.

Perhaps machines should dream.

I left the conference with two hours to go. Neurolinguistic Programming was as much a dead line of inquiry as dream theory, and the poor bastards were too desperate to realize it. I ran several blocks to get away from the busy street before catching an Uber and entered the lobby of the TransAmerica Pyramid fifteen minutes later. I was out of breath by the time I got to the forty-third floor. My hands shook as I began typing at my desk. There was no rhyme or reason to the office cubicles – they were assigned on a first-come-first-serve basis. Each was numbered

and displayed the names of their occupants. I brought up a spreadsheet of contact information available to all research personnel, but it did not designate anyone's cubicle number. His entry had been deleted, but I recovered it through the version history, even though his phone number and email address were of little use to me. I got up and paced around the office space, running my eyes over the assortment of nametags pinned to the sporadically spaced clusters. Enough of the cubicles were unoccupied as to make narrowing down the list impractical. There were also two floors of office space. I stopped in the middle of the floor, suddenly struck by the loudness of my shoes as they pummeled the soft carpet amidst the quiet of the place. I took a deep breath. What if someone discovered me? I hadn't broken any rules yet. Was I going to break rules? I thought of what Cara had said, that he didn't spend much time at the office, which was probably why no one spoke to him. Nevertheless, it was worth looking to see if he had left anything else behind, another list of names perhaps.

I returned to my computer and racked my brain for alternative ways of discovering his location. A search in my inbox for his name returned only the generic emails sent at one time to everybody about such things as updated bathroom policy. I found his name on one of the physical mailboxes for the research assistants on my floor, so I knew he was somewhere on my floor. The box itself was stuffed with junk mail which everyone received, free editions of paid journals desirous of subscriptions, invitations to obscure conferences, dubious academic opportunities. I resorted to scattering the sheath of papers across a nearby desk for the sake of thoroughness. There was nothing out of the ordinary as far as I could tell, other than the sheer quantity of mail, which only suggested that he had not been there to collect it for some time. The earliest postage stamp had been dated back to October 30th of the last year – almost a full year to the day. Perhaps whatever had happened with his research happened around then. I considered

taking a photo of each piece of mail so I could go over it later but was struck by a strange thought, the absurdity of spending hours looking at photos of mail while I should be doing research or studying.

And what if somebody walked in on me then? How would I explain what I was doing?

In a panic, I gathered all the mail together, compressed it in my hands, and shoved it back into Hiroto's slot. As I was doing this, one thing caught my eye, a glossy red brochure with sleek formatting that seemed unrelated to academics. It had something to do with telecommunications, I realized, and was from the company Dimetricom. It was accompanied by a thin packet of similarly colored materials. I didn't recall receiving such a packet myself, but the postage mark placed it months before my arrival.

I returned to my cubicle defeated. I was thinking of asking someone other than Cara where Hiroto's cubicle was and then waiting a few days before snooping around, perhaps doing so at night with only the janitors and statistical minority of highly conscientious researchers present, who would be completely focused on their work anyway. But no, if I was to examine Hiroto's workstation in the safest, most inconspicuous way possible, I had to do it there and then, while everyone was still away at the conference.

I thought back to the inane ramblings of Looper about the stringent network security of the place and how there were too many different network 'VLANs' for every part of the building, an artifact of having so many tenants over the years. I had taken networking in high school and gotten an A in it even though computers were not my thing, even though I use them all the time as a metaphor for conceptualizing people, so I had a fuzzy understanding of how things worked. A VLAN is a network within a network that serves as a way of compartmentalizing devices connected to it, often for the sake of keeping things organized. I

logged out of my workstation and found the link to the network management tool as an icon within the settings page on the login portal, something Looper had done to demonstrate his point about VLANs. My regular credentials were enough to access the tool in a view-only state. The application appeared before me as nothing more than a predominantly white page with a few boxes for search criteria. There wasn't an option to enter a person's name or a date or anything else sensible to a human being; only numbers. All the network addresses for the workstations on the floor began with 250, so I started with a search for that. After a moment, the white page was filled with columns of information about the devices registered on the network. The only active address was listed at the top as my workstation; the rest were grey from being inactive. I scrolled from left to right, looking at the various parameters of network information, such as current bandwidth, whether the connection was simplex or duplex – whatever that meant, up and down activity over time, the polling rate, and numbers associated with a number of protocols that I knew nothing about.

I was in over my head. As the minutes passed, the sense of disappointment crept further into my awareness. The elevator doors opened, a deafening sound that caused me to jump. I listened, frozen in my seat with growing anxiety as the sound of footsteps increased gradually. I didn't dare peek over the lip of my cubicle to see who it was. Then the footsteps dissipated, only to be punctuated by the slam of a door on the other side of the office space.

After what felt like hours of searching, I found a link within the page to a histogram of port activity over time. Again, I saw my own workstation as an active device, a lonely blue point followed by a trend line that dipped into the past. A green line joined mine – the person who had just stepped off the elevator. There were one hundred and ninety-two devices in total on thirty VLANs. I stared at the lines and de-selected the ones that looked like they belonged to printers or

wireless access points. That left one hundred and fifty-eight total devices. Then I de-selected all of the devices and associated trend lines which seemed to have been at least somewhat active in the past year, leaving about twenty low-activity addresses. Twenty. Fifteen had not been active in the past two years. Of the five remaining trend lines, three fell to zero at some point between September and November of the previous year.

I stood up and looked at the cubicles around me.

My cubicle cluster's VLAN was 256. The one adjacent was 257. The three workstations that might have belonged to Hiroto were all on the other side of the space.

I found unallocated cubicles at each of the three clusters.

My hands began shaking again. I felt ridiculous opening desk drawers and pawing through stale old papers and flipping open lightly-dusted binders. What was I looking for? I didn't even know what he had been studying. I looked up every now and then from my snooping. I hadn't heard the elevator doors open. The floor still seemed vacant.

The first three drawers of the desk in the last cubicle were empty, which seemed to be an even stronger indication that I was looking in the wrong place.

I opened the big drawer at the bottom of a filing cabinet. It was empty, save for a half-depleted pad of blue notebook paper. Blue, not yellow. But the margin of the page was delineated by three red lines, closely spaced. I unfolded the list of names, which I still had in my back pocket.

The margin had the same three red lines.

Was it the same notebook paper? I wasn't sure. Perhaps the different colors had been purchased as a set.

I went about looking through the other drawers, all of which were conspicuously empty. Even the drawers of other unoccupied stations were filled with something left by the previous tenant.

Finally, I reached the main drawer of the workstation desk, a thin rectangle tucked above the leg area. It was the only drawer in the cubicle to feature a lock. None of the drawers in the other cubicles had been locked.

Of course, it was locked.

I stared at the damn thing. It was probably empty like the other drawers. Then why was it locked? I wondered if I should try and open it. Breaking open a locked drawer felt like more of a violation than anything else I had done already, including going through another's mail.

I didn't know how to break it open. I'd never been confronted by such a situation before. I wondered if I could pull on the drawer hard enough to break the locking mechanism – but that would leave evidence.

Rake the lock. The words came to me from nowhere. My immediate thought was: perhaps I'm experiencing late-onset schizophrenia induced by stress. But I began to imagine what the words could mean. A raking action, with something that fit inside that small orifice. A paperclip, or something sturdier. A small lock like that was in all likelihood cheaply made and susceptible to such a basic attack. Where had I learned this? I didn't know, but the knowledge was there, buried in my code.

I tensioned the lock with another paperclip. After a few rakes, the drawer gave way, revealing something that I hadn't expected.

A thumb drive.

The elevator dinged and the doors rolled open. I froze. Two people were talking, Cara's distinct voice and someone else. It sounded like they were headed to the coffee machines.

I pocketed the drive and used the paperclips to re-lock the drawer.

Back in my cubicle, I rummaged through my bag for the appropriate dongle to connect the drive to my workstation. The drive seemed to be an older model, equipped with USB 4.0. The workstations were equipped with USB 5.0 A and 6.1, which looked identical to one another but were completely incompatible, and my tablet didn't even have a port.

I logged back into my workstation with the drive properly connected. It appeared as a folder icon within the list of accessible storage devices. I double-clicked.

A prompt opened, asking for a username and password.

Shit. I'd come so far only to be completely stumped.

My first thought was to bring the drive to Jamison. I had practically done his job for him. But he would probably not share its contents with me, nor would he or any other police personnel have the expertise to properly interpret scientific research.

I opened a private message window to Looper in Habitus.

– *You going to be in tonight? Have a computer problem.*

He saw the message almost instantaneously and began typing a response.

– *Be there in about an hour. Maybe 2*

– *Great, thx*

An IT guy. Less punctual than most professors.

“Hey, what are you doing here so early?” It was Cara, leaning against the frame of my cubicle.

“Oh, you know, trying to get work done,” I said, keeping my voice level. I wasn’t sure of how I should feel about her with Andrea in the mix again. I wasn’t sure of how to feel about Andrea either. I guess I wasn’t sure how to feel about anybody at that point of my life.

“Yeah?” she said, glancing at my screen.

“What are you doing here?”

“The same,” she said, and shrugged. “I wanted to say that the way in which I reacted to you the other day was based on some...core emotional wounds. You know, things that I’m working out with my therapist. And it was not necessarily based on what you said or who you are. It caught me off guard.”

“I understand,” I said, feeling that it was the most therapeutic thing I could say. But I didn’t understand anything about what she had said at all. “I’m sorry that I triggered that in you.”

“You’re a, um, good person David. I just wanted you to know that.” She frowned as she pulled away, and the rest of her face flashed for a split-second with anguish, at herself I supposed. With that she began walking away.

“Thanks,” I said, inwardly tempted to argue with her statement. Obviously she was not a Freudian, or a moralist, and she did not know me very well. Perhaps she was the humanist among us. Like many others, I presented to the world a carefully constructed veneer of goodness which simply served to facilitate dialogic interactions with knowledgeable others in my strata of society. And of course goodness or badness is not an absolute state of being, but a mediation of impulses by prefrontal cortical activity, a moment-to-moment negotiation of societal situations where one’s actions impact not only immediate participants, but also those not present for the interaction, those second, third, fourth, and fifth-degree separate persons constituting the world across which the effects of our decisions ripple like the minute gravity waves emanating from a

single particle, hardly but thoroughly touching in some way all other particles in the known universe, no matter their distance.

I realized that I hadn't said what kind of person she was. But there was no way to politely communicate that another is a morally gray machine, like all other morally gray machines which came before, and have yet to arrive at this planet in her stead, the ripples of their actions clashing and colliding and fusing with one another in a global cacophony.

Hiroto's Habitus was sparse – almost as much of a veneer as mine, so I knew how to read it. He had been an avid reader of Murakami and Camus, listener of Vivaldi and Charlie Parker, audience to film noir and dramas featuring Richard Gere. He said things that were obviously profound and had surrounded himself with a handful of others with similar compulsions of profundity. His public profile told me nothing and everything about him – we were alike in many ways, 87% to be exact, if the analysis did not include our artistic preferences.

I listened to a handful of his utterances. He was as fluent in his own brand of psychobabble as I was in mine, though he was more a follower of the Eastern school, the likes of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. I thought I'd go through his page one day to pursue that line of thinkers.

“Taking crazy things seriously may be a serious waste of time, but taking life seriously is a serious waste of life,” Hiroto once said, over a year ago. In the web browser I clicked on the post, opening a full version, and saw in the description a link to an old video by Jonas Malak on the origins of the Zika II virus, something that had been on the news when I was in college. In my neuroanatomy class, we had spent almost the entire semester studying preprint research papers published as the incidence of microcephaly in a number of South American nations rose to as much as 1 in 1,000 births.

I found myself watching a video of Malak enthroned behind a facsimile of a news desk, the flowing background behind him complete with fluid graphics. “We need to wake up people. Wake our friends up, wake our families up to the fact that the global elites in this country want to shrink our babies’ brains! And these shithole countries are their petri dishes.” Malak’s eyes shined with rage. He slammed his fist on the rickety faux desk for emphasis. “The WHO admitted this back in 2049 when they banned the Russians from researching almost the exact same viruses found in these mosquitoes. And we have the documents from whistleblowers to prove it! We’ll go through those after the break, but first I want to ask you a question. Do you have a family history of prostate cancer? Have you ever suffered from erectile dysfunction? Let me tell you, the last thing the juice in this little bottle right here will ever do is shrink your baby’s brain...”

Viral replication in the fetus’s brain was, of course, the cause of microcephaly, and no dietary supplement in existence could prevent that. A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. In our age, the lies could probably circumnavigate the solar system in the same amount of time.

In the end, there was a grain of truth to part of Malak’s story. That Poland and several other NATO countries launched public investigations into a handful of insect-borne viruses emerging from Russia. I wouldn’t have imagined that the country was warm enough to harbor any insects. There had been whistleblowers, some of whom had been debunked. All had disappeared from the public eye in the years since. The world had moved on, except Malak. The supposed link between Russian research and a South American pandemic hung like a ghost in history’s wake.

“Lemme ask you this,” Malak said, leaning forward as if to drain himself into the interviewer, “If you were the head of a multibillion-dollar corporation that controls people’s lives with its digital platform and is developing mind-altering technology, why wouldn’t you want to control the world? Ever read Nietzsche dear?”

The interviewer bristled at that. “Some of his work, but that’s beside the point –”

“I dropped out of college and read him. Didn’t just read but understood what I read. Throughout history, demonic forces within mankind have sought control over all domains of life. With their power they wish to perfect humanity. I’ll fight it as long as hot red blood courses through my veins. Now and then, the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of tyrants.”

“Are you calling for violence?”

“I metaphor in jest.”

I skipped forward in the interview.

“Mr. Malak, hundreds of thousands of children are reported missing every year. If that’s your primary concern, why not focus on the victims?”

“I –”

“Many believe that you are only interested in enriching yourself by peddling conspiracies to a gullible audience.”

Malak’s head spun to face the camera. Sweat glistened on his brow. “Here we go again, folks! That’s what the liberal aristocracy thinks of the open-minded – they insult you; they thumb your nose at you; and above all, they think they’re smarter than you!”

“Those are the words of the *New York Times*, not mine.”

“You’re all the same to me. And I’m running a business, not a politically correct state-sponsored slush fund staffed by ivy-league dumbasses. Your accusation of sensationalism is tea pot calling the kettle black.”

“That’s an antiquated and offensive idiom.”

“Deal with it.”

“Whoa,” said someone behind me. I jumped. “You’re a fan of Jonas Malak?”

I tabbed out of the window and tore the buds from my ears. It was Looper. “No. Just doing a little research.”

“He says some crazy shit sometimes,” Looper said, shaking his head.

“Yeah.” I nodded in agreement.

“Too bad most of it’s true.”

He seemed serious. I laughed uneasily. “I don’t see how.”

Looper glanced around before leaning towards me. “Do you know why we’re dropping bombs in Peru?”

I remembered hearing on the news reports of a warship at one point being targeted with explosives, but I didn’t know the specifics. “No,” I admitted.

“Explosives were attached to the hull of the USS Oklahoma when it passed through the Panama Canal. Not by Peruvian terrorists, but by Israeli special forces.”

“Israeli.” That seemed like another ridiculous claim.

“Have you seen the security cam footage?”

“I haven’t.”

“It was at night, and they were clearly wearing Yamakas.”

I couldn't tell whether he was being serious. Maybe the interviewer was right – maybe they really were that gullible.

Looper chuckled. “That was a joke, man.”

I realize that it was the first time I'd actually had a conversation with Looper. He didn't seem like a weirdo when he was talking about crazy shit. Then again, discussing conspiracies far outside the bounds of socially accepted discourse is a symptom of being a weirdo.

“Alright,” I said.

“You've probably got four degrees – you'll figure it out sometime.”

“I double-majored and have my masters.”

“Okay, so like three. Anyway, my point is that there's some real shit there if you take the time to look for it.” He straightened. “So what did you need me to do again?”

I unplugged the dongle and flash drive from my workstation. “One of the conference attendees gave me this, but they left it encrypted. It has some of their work, maybe a couple of presentations.” Even though he was a conspiracy theorist, it was probably for the best if I kept him out of my conspiracy.

“Sounds like a piece of cake. A few minutes on the mainframe should do it.” He snatched the drive from my hand and walked off with it.

I got up and followed him.

“What do you make of his allegations concerning Habitus?”

Looper smirked. “The part about total blood transfusions is definitely true – ever heard of the Blood Countess? Nineteenth-century noblewoman who bathed in virgins' blood to get her youth back? Same shit, different day.”

“That's funny,” I said, checking his expression to see if he really meant it as a joke.

“Not really. I’ve heard it takes up to two babies per liter, especially if they’re premature.”

A moment later he grinned. “You gotta have fun with it somehow.”

“Yeah, right.”

We rode the elevator up to the technicians’ offices.

“Malak goes off the deep end with his evangelical shit,” said Looper as he swept aside the pile of computer components adorning his desk. “But I bet there’s a demonic cult of pedophiles that caters to politicians somewhere in the country.”

He inserted the dongle and drive into his computer. I scanned the workstations and cubicles in sight for any potential listeners. The only other person I could see was seated at his desk on the other side of the room, faced away from us, wearing large headphones.

“Is there going to be a record of what you’re doing here?”

“Yeah dude, it’s the 21st century. You worried or something?”

“It occurred to me that...she might get a notification.”

“Nah, nothing will happen unless it’s got malware. I work in an isolated VM anyway. Should only be a minute.” His keystrokes sounded like a waterfall. “Oh, this looks like the Norton software we use.”

“Yeah?” I said, sticking my hands in my pockets to stop myself from fidgeting.

“Should only take a second, then. Their stuff is practically bloatware – that’s why I’ve been pushing ArchiCrypt on everyone. But, you know, it’s open source and we need to justify our budget somehow.”

I looked over his shoulder at the screen. A blue progress bar flashed into existence, stopping at ninety-nine percent, then one hundred. It disappeared, replaced by a window displaying the drive’s contents.

“Man, looks like she gave you everything on her CV.”

“Yeah, that’s a lot more stuff than I was expecting,” I said, looking up and down the assortment of text documents and spreadsheets. None of the file names seemed particularly important.

“If I remove the drive now it will go back into a locked state. I could upload the files to your folder in the cloud and then just toss the drive. Or I could download the files, format the drive so it isn’t encrypted, and then put the files back on it.”

I thought of asking him for the username and password of the drive as it was, but that might give away its true owner. Instead I asked, “Why not the cloud?”

“You said you were concerned about leaving a record.”

I wiped what felt like a bead of sweat on my brow. “Oh, yeah. I’d like the second option. Actually, could you put a new username and password on it?”

“Sure.” The cursor flew around the screen in a blur, like a rat in one of Skinner’s operant conditioning mazes. He pushed himself away from the keyboard. “All yours.”

I entered a username and password that differed from my research credentials. “Thanks,” I said, clicking to eject the drive.

“Malak’s got a special on tonight. The Lords of Sealand are watching it at my place.”

“Who are the Lords of Sealand?”

“My friends. You’re invited.”

I pursed my lips diplomatically. “Sorry. I’ll be busy with work. Maybe next time.”

“Suit yourself,” he called after me. “Someday you’ll see how deep the rabbit hole goes.”

I took a deep breath once the elevator doors had closed. The flash drive and dongle felt as if they would slip from my damp palms. I wondered if I was afflicted with hyperhidrosis, a

condition of excessive sweating from the hands and feet which makes certain occupations more difficult, such as those within law enforcement or the military. My sweaty finger had left an imprint on the elevator buttons.

“Hello, David.”

The elevator doors had parted and I found myself standing before Dr. Feist.

“Good afternoon,” I said, smiling to hide my surprise. If he had as much of an awareness of interpersonal psychology as I did, then it was probable that he saw through my façade.

I slid the drive into my back pocket and reached out to shake his hand. His palms were as dry as a sociopath’s sense of humor. His eyes held an aged warmth. Pupils naturally shrink with age. Magnified by his glasses, those black specks held steady on the calm seas of his faded blue irises.

“David, I was hoping to speak with you about what happened with...our colleague. Have you ever been to the observation deck?”

I’m not sure why it had never occurred to explore other parts of the building, even though the building was famous within the city’s skyline. I said that I hadn’t. He joined me on the elevator and we rode upward.

I found myself acutely aware of his presence. We stood at similar height, and he was about three decades older than myself, yet I wondered what weapons or devices he could have concealed in that black jacket of his. Most modern suits didn’t have pockets, but I imagined that his had been tailored. Before I became interested in Malak, I had seen a popular meme about his claim that servants of the devil smelled like sulfur. All I could smell then was a hint of deodorant and a light draft of my own perspiration. I wondered if it was possible for someone to be as two-faced as popular culture would have one believe. I looked at our distorted reflections in the steel

of the elevator doors. Can deception be so perfect? Is such acute control over the habituated neurological pathways governing one's psychomotor activity possible? As the floor number continued to rise, I wondered if his plan was to simply throw me off the building. But two research assistants falling to their deaths days apart would bear too much scrutiny. I felt the urge to swallow, even though my mouth was abundantly dry. Mephistopheles had appeared as a man, though he was wearing a red suit in the production I saw. That was before he appeared shirtless with horns protruding from his scalp, serenading his denizens with a blue balloon.

"I must say, I have been impressed with your writing. Dr. Anderson occasionally shares with the staff excerpts of outstanding work."

"Thank you," I said, trying to remember if he had ever asked to share my work.

"You must be in your late twenties?"

"I'm twenty-nine."

"Ah," Feist said, nodding. "Those of us in the social sciences are lucky. Mathematicians and physicists typically make their greatest contributions at the age of twenty-five, but we only get better with age."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, it probably has to do with the subject matter. People are abstract, numbers are concrete. Rules are hard and fast in mathematics. The human psyche is malleable, changing based on one's perspective. And we all have a unique perspective, don't we?"

The elevator slowed as it reached the apex of its travel. The doors parted, revealing a dimly lit hallway with blank walls. There were no windows. It was then that I began to wonder if the building had an observation deck at all. The Transamerica Pyramid was, after all, shaped like

a pyramid, ending in a point. There couldn't possibly be an observation deck such as that of a rectangular tower.

"I suppose we do," I said, staring down the hallway.

Feist stepped off the elevator. "Right this way."

The corridor took a turn and ended in a nondescript wooden door with a card-reading device. The lock within clicked from his inserted card. Feist held it open, gesturing me forward with his other hand. "After you," he said with a smile.

The space beyond was pitch-black, a void from which there was no escape.

There was no way he could've known about what I'd done in the office earlier.

"This is the observation deck?"

"Yes, David. If you step inside, the projectors will turn on."

I did as he asked. Suddenly, every surface in the room became luminescent – the floor, the walls, the ceiling, a cool white stretching towards an infinite horizon. I walked further into the room and looked down. It was as if my shoes were floating on a cloud. Feist entered the room and closed the door behind him. Its edges faded seamlessly into the wall.

"Sometimes I come up here to think. This room was one of the reasons why I decided to establish our offices in this building, of all buildings. God only knows it wasn't because of the rent. It was a passion project of...an old friend of mine."

The white faded and was replaced by what I took to be camera feeds from the top of the pyramid. Each of its four sloped surfaces stretched from the center of the room toward the distant ground below, as if I was standing on an invisible floor suspended from its point. The perspective of the city shifted subtly as I moved about the floorspace, and I was overwhelmed by a sudden fear of falling.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should’ve asked, are you afraid of heights?”

I stared into the sky to alleviate the sensation. “I’ll get used to it, won’t I?”

“Some people never do, in my experience.”

Keeping my eyes on the horizon seemed to help. Without looking down, I would’ve believed that I was standing on top of the city.

“Quite a bit better than a headset, isn’t it?”

I looked at Feist, who seemed to be floating over the bay. “Can it be used like a headset?”

“That was the original intention, but our engineers were never able to successfully extrapolate three-dimensional space from visual memory. Another one of those hurdles to be overcome.”

“Is that what Hiroto was working on?”

The smile shrunk from the doctor’s face. “No. Hiroto was not an engineer. He was working on a different problem. Potential side-effects of using the technology, to put it bluntly.”

“Did he find anything?”

Feist turned to face me, his hands in his pockets. “No. The Mnetic devices are exclusively read-only and have no effect on the tissues they interact with.” He took a step toward me. “How well did you know him?”

“We hadn’t spoken before the banquet.”

“I see,” Feist said, nodding. “Nevertheless, suicide is a traumatic event for all those involved.”

“It was a suicide?”

The doctor seemed surprised. “Could it have been anything else? Why would...” He looked at me, as if seeing me in a new light. “David, you may be experiencing symptoms of

complex PTSD. You have been working very hard lately, I'm sure. Add in this traumatic event, and it may have overwhelmed you. I can recommend a therapist."

I let out a breath I hadn't been aware of holding. "Thank you."

In that moment I felt a powerful urge to tell him about the memories within Fiona but managed to stop myself. He likely sensed this and averted his gaze to the floor, where the small cars below passed through the dagger-shaped shadows cast by the surrounding structures.

"Well, David, let me know if you have any other questions or concerns, or if you want to tell me anything. This room is always available, should you choose to use it."

I thanked him again, and he left me to look at the city.

CHAPTER 15: NEIKO PLEMONS

It had only took a few hours for ‘real life’ to bitchslap me in the face. I don’t want to go to the fucking probation office just so I can get told all the shit I already know. So I get off the bus and walk into a bar. They tell me to get the fuck out cause I ain’t supposed to be there, an ex-con and all – guess they gathered that from my glowy wrist. Threatened to call the cops. So I’m outta there and on the street somewhere in the downtown San Jose area, putting the bum in bumfuck. All I feel is like this crazy energy all around me, like I can feel the life force of people or something, just hanging around me like magnetism, and I want to eat it up, kinda like how young kids go around putting their mouth on everything. And I feel like shit, like the weight of the whole fucking sky is on top of me, cause it is in these giant-ass buildings filled with pricks and assholes and dry cunts. Like bro, I got a dick too you know, but that don’t bother nobody. And I’m thinking about what my old man Carl said about an hour after a whooping cause I threw something or broke something or tried putting the neighbor’s dog in the dishwasher – “God loves you; he forgives you; his love is eternal.” And for the first in my life, the idea that the sky loves me really comes to mind. Like, I get it, why those dumb shits believe in an invisible man. But I ain’t crazy enough to start talking to myself like I’m talking to the man. Why the fuck is he a man anyway? Cause if god was a chick, most dudes would imagine her as a crazy sexy slut and that would kinda ruin the whole marriage thing.

I’m walking down a narrow alleyway. It’s dark cause the buildings are close together and only a few feet of sky is above. When I look up, it’s like the two jaws of a vise are about to squeeze my head.

“You thirsty bro? Come on inside.”

I got this theorem that a dude's beard can tell you a lot about 'em. Thickness follows strength, form follows cred. The dude's beard is the world's roundest cone hanging from the bottom of his face. And he's bald, so the whole package looks like a rifle bullet from the front. His status of round is off the charts.

“Straight up or strawberry lemonade?”

It's dark as shit in there, darker than solitary in the daytime. It's dark, even though the windows are open, and they're just big bright squares. Actually no, squares are rectangles, rectangles aren't squares, so they're rectangles. And then there's all this science right in the middle of the room, bunch of shiny metal tanks and shit with tubes coming out of them. There's people in there too, but about half of them are mannequins, which gives the place this weirdo vibe. The other half are so dead-looking that they might as well be mannequins. Far as I can tell, there ain't no chicks or chicks that look like chicks, so I plan to split.

“I'm straight,” says me, and I slip him the plastic.

He puts this faded big gulp beneath the spigot and lets it drip for about a minute.

“Clownsuit nine, ten, or eleven?”

“Take it up to eleven,” I tell my bearded friend.

Likewise, I got another piece of internal wisdom from the likes of Eddie, that “It's uh good thing that nobuddy cares about yuh, cause yuh gotta be yuhself inna world.”

I'm looking at bullet head. He don't care if the shit he brews is gonna kill me. And I don't give a shit about none of the other fucks.

Nobody gives a shit, not even the sexy god of my dreams.

And I keep thinking it over and over again as I'm headed off to nowhere sipping from my big gulp. It tastes like ass, but I kinda forget the taste even though I'm still gulping it.

And it's like the vise over my head gets pulled apart and the shit around me don't seem too tall, cause I'm floating, floating, till I'm the god and I'm looking down on all the puny shits, and I'm able to see who's gonna get hit by a car, have a heart attack, get pregnant, go to sleep, wake up, gonna hang themselves, gonna get stolen from, gonna steal from someone else, who's gonna drown their babies, gonna smother their neighbor's dog. It's so awesome that I'm laughing, and people are looking at me cause they think I'm a god. That's right motherfuckers! I'm your god! I'm gonna take that big dick cannon from the sky and gun all you ungrateful shits down cause you were born and had got all that love and shit and you fucking didn't give it back. All you want to do is just eat it, you selfish cunts. Well, eat this!

The woman in the big SUV at the stoplight has this look about her, the type that says that she has a degree in eating ass. Her car's probably got six future ass-eaters in it, but I can't tell cause the windows are tinted. Anyway, her head explodes from the impact of the bombs I dropped on her from the heavens, and the blood from all that is splattered all over her kids' faces. I let them live, most of them, as a warning – don't grow up to be assholes.

There's a man in a suit covering up a cashmere cardigan that's way fucking off. So I look down into the earth and hammer this spike up through the sidewalk that skewers him two stories in the air where everyone can see. The look on his face – it's hilarious, that look that people have when they realize that they've been fucked over in a way that they can't possibly imagine, these big wide childish eyes showing how truly innocent and pathetic they always were, how easily they were duped into thinking that the world is all about gardens of roses and piccolo-dillies. His scream has no limits and is never ending cause it's a warning to all the sons of bitches like him out there who suck.

I've got planes and helicopters buzzing overhead like flies on a civilization-sized turd, culminating on that piece of shit like it's their moaning lisa. I got death squads checking all the deserted carriages for the offspring of sinners. Everybody's running and screaming and I'm there smiling at the center of it all, cause it's the retribution I've always secretly imagined.

Then this one dude crosses the street and is walking toward me. I don't get it, cause he's wearing the face of Michael Suarez. He must have skinned it off the corpse. Either that, or he's Mr. Tom Cruise Impossible.

But it's too good to be just a skin. It's really that Suarez.

"You fuck!" I scream, charging at him like a Spanish bull. "You're fucking dead!"

Then he's dancing away from me like the conquistador, waving that red flag just to piss me off.

Except it ain't a red flag in reality, but the words from his mouth.

I lunge at him again. "What did you say to me?"

No matter how hard I try, I can't catch him. He's too fast for me.

"You're one of them," says Suarez, laughing as he jumps out of my way.

"Fuck you."

"You're one of them."

I can't catch him and I can't seem to get any of my minions to kill him. And I realize that's because he's already dead. Son of a bitch. Haunting my jolly paradise.

I start walking away from him, and I keep walking till he goes away. The smoke in the sky has blotted the sun and all I hear is the sound of flames, the searing-popping sound of metal and flesh combusting turning into ash or whatever the fuck smoke is made of. Good riddance – I detonated the world's supply of mindless corporate procreators.

The only place I got left to go is hell, I figure. Funny thing is, I wanna go there. Makes sense, you know. My phone calls it the Novo Necroid. I get to the place like how a sperm gets into an egg. Swimming, swimming in the darkness, brushing past the skin of the old world, upwards, onwards, inwards. You get the picture.

I guess they expect you to do a lot of fucking in hell, cause that's all I see. These things in the walls, coming out at you, funny things that used to be people, their limbs, their faces, their thighs. There ain't no fire, that's for sure – everything's blue, and looks like Walt Disney got it right. There's a pair of boobs sticking out of the wall, so I touch them and find out that they're a squishy plastic. Real tits would be tougher, I think, so I squeeze and squeeze like my fingers are tipped with daggers and pull them right the fuck off. Ah shit! They're somewhere down there on the floor where I can't find 'em no more.

“I got my eye on you, kid,” says Suarez.

I whip around but see no one. Then I'm afraid. Afraid that this guy's gonna haunt me forever. Someone's coming after me – it's probably him. I take off running through a hallway of hands that are reaching out to catch me by the dick. Which leads to a hallway of feet and a hallway of eyeless faces, and finally a room with this other kind of creature – a big blue monster with a brain the size of Volkswagen. The eyes – the eyes are following me like prison cameras. Shit. I gotta get out. The big red exit.

Three women in summer dresses dance across the grass. They're pretty hot and at least one of them has to be single. But I think there's something about them that's better than their looks, and I don't exactly get what it is. A feeling, I guess, that somehow their lives haven't been ruined – something precious like that. They won't look at me. Then there's a mushroom cloud in the distance, rising over the land like a silent ghost about to start haunting. A rumble from the

explosion, and I know it's coming straight towards us. The blast rips off their clothes and for a second they're all standing naked. Until their soft, pale skin starts to burn and they become a trio of matches dancing in pain. Until the blast wave comes and they're blown to dust.

“Hey buddy? You alive?”

Something pointy pokes me in the side, which hurts me almost as much as the pain I feel in my chest. Like holy shit, am I having a heart attack? No way, brother. The air is cold and the world is dark. I've got dirt stuck to the side of my face. When I wipe it away, the back of my hand feels wet. Then this heavenly light shines on me, just like Josie's light shining through the window to my cell. No, no. This can't be. I sit up and see streetlights shining through the crisscrossing branches of trees, taste the aroma of dirt mixed with leaves, feel the weight of the earth beneath me. There are two lights pointed at me, and without seeing the uniforms behind them, I already know I'm fucked.

“Sorry, sirs,” I say, staggering to my feet and almost faceplanting into a big-assed tree. “I, uh, didn't mean to fall asleep.”

“I'd like to see some form of ID.”

“Uh...ID...”

I take off running.

They start shouting things at me. Calling me names. Telling me to stop. All I know is that I've gotta stay away from the place they're gonna take me. Their lights flicker behind me like the strobe of some kinda rave, just letting me see the tree branches in front of me. I'm in a park – just gotta get on the path, then I'll be home free.

They shut their lights off.

It only takes a few seconds of running blind for a branch to find my shin, then I'm truly good and fucked.

"Gonna teach you a lesson, asshole," the one says once the lights are on me again. This time it ain't a prod, but a full-on whack to my junies.

"Fuck, man," I say.

"Will you run next time?"

The goons start moving up my body like it's some kinda evil Nazi massage.

"No!"

"Come again?"

Whack, whack, whack, whack. Laughter.

I wonder if they're gonna kill me. Maybe this is it, my reward for surviving prison. Ferris Bueller only got one day after all. Shit, maybe that's all I'm owed.

Next thing I know, I'm behind bars. Not imaginary bars, but real honest-to-god steel bars that you can get your meathooks around. Guess they wanna give you the real jailhouse experience in the city slammer.

Most of the cells around me are empty, I think, until I spy some of the dudes out cold on the small cots which are exactly like the ones they got in Mule Creek, but even more used. I've got a headache, and my stomach feels like ground zero. My wrist tells me it's four in the morning. Fucksake. I'm starving. My doughnuts and the big gulp are gone. So's my phone, I realize, and the little bundle of papers that says who I am. Now I'm just an asshole with a chip in his arm.

And I get this sinking sense that it really was my day off, that it's about to be, 'back to my hole I go.' And really, is that so fucking bad? I got people who know me, even though they're all assholes. But that's what makes us good, right?

Right?

I think of all the free people out there, so close to me that I could've touched them. Touched all of them. The hoarders, keeping behind the walls of their eyes their kind of distinction.

What?

I close my eyes to force myself asleep before the others hear me thinking.

CHAPTER 16: DAVID TREMBLE

I didn't have the software for viewing three-dimensional brain scans, so I had to make do with the two-dimensional images on Hiroto's flash drive – the slices of people's brains. I didn't know how to read MRIs either. Aspects had been circled and coded which were then referenced in some of the papers. A lesion here, inflammation there, gaps caused by physical trauma or abnormal development – who could say? Folders marked before and after scans, named using sequences of numbers and letters – XVM4001 through XVM4004. It was ten-o'clock when I decided to call it quits, for in healthy adults the greatest release of melatonin and tryptophan takes place one-and-a-half hours before midnight, unless one has abnormal circadian rhythms. The sequences seemed to denote differing patient groups, which seemed like an odd way of naming them.

It was a dreamless night. As I made coffee and went about my morning routine, it occurred to me that over last six months in the program, I hadn't made any friends. Faculty and researchers at Habitus didn't count. My forays into the dating world had simply been an attempt to satisfy the 'love and belonging' sector within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and they had yielded little in the way of companionship. Perhaps I had been so focused on my work that I had lost sight of my humanity. Perhaps the primal nature of fear resulting from the ideation of conspiracies had pulled me into a lower state of being.

For the first time in a long time, I felt alone.

Three quick bangs on my door reverberated throughout the apartment, deafening me to the drip-drip of the coffee machine. My socks slid against the faux wood floor as I spun to face the door. No one had knocked since I had moved into the place. Who could it have been? One of the neighbors or a maintenance person – someone who had access to the building. Through the

peephole, I saw a man wearing a black jacket and jeans. His beard was carefully trimmed and curated and flowed into his scalp as if it was one continuous surface. A small gold loop hung from his left ear. I couldn't recall ever seeing him.

“Who is it?”

“Yeah, I'm with the Federal Trade Commission, here to inform you that your identity has been stolen. Unfortunately, due to security concerns, the paperwork must be completed in-person. We should move on this as quickly as possible, but if now is a bad time, I can come back later.”

Despite his appearance, his manner of speaking seemed genuine. “Can I see some identification?”

A business card slid through the slit beneath the door. It named, among other things, a .gov email address.

“Give me a minute,” I said, leaving the door. I brought up my bank account on my tablet. Sure enough, transactions ranging in the hundreds of dollars had taken place just before midnight as I had slept. My phone showed several emails about suspicious card activity. And two missed calls from Andrea.

Why would Andrea be calling me?

I set the ringer to 'active' and left the phone on the table in case she called again.

“Thanks for responding so quickly,” I said, opening the door. “How long will it be before this is resolved?”

I was greeted by a cloud of stinging gray mist which burrowed into my eyes, making it feel as if I had just submerged my head in a bucket of bleach. My hands flew to my face out of instinct. A second later it felt as if a log had hit me in my stomach. I was unable to resist the

blow. The systems of balance governing my musculature had failed and I must have collapsed backwards.

The door slammed.

“Where is it?” the guy said, his voice oddly calm.

Was I going to fall asleep? Had he dosed me with a kind of aerosol anesthetic? But he had not been wearing any respiratory protection. Why would he question me if I was going to fall asleep? My questions were answered moments later when the chemical agent got to work and I felt as if a colony of fire ants had invaded my eyes and airways.

My eyes. The most sensitive organs in the body.

“Where the fuck is it?” he said, more aggravated this time. The cupboard doors banged against one another as they were opened. Glasses shattered as they fell to the floor. What did he think was in my cupboards?

I inhaled to speak, sucking the vapors of the noxious chemical into my lungs. “Where is what?” I said, rolling on my back with my eyes still covered.

He must have kicked me in my kidney, for I felt an explosion of pain which I cannot describe. It was concussive, as if something had ruptured.

“You know what I mean. Just tell me where the mind control machine is and I’ll be on my way.”

I had to throw him off but was unable to conjure any complex remarks. “You’re crazy, man,” I said, squeezing my eyes shut. Hopefully my tear ducts would secrete enough fluid in the next few seconds to flush the chemical from my eyes.

The name ‘pepper spray’ is far too innocent, making it sound more like a condiment than a chemical weapon.

I had stood back from the door – I had been in the outer radius of the cloud. The likelihood that I would experience the full duration of duress, ranging from thirty minutes to an hour, was quite low. I knew this because Anne had been a police officer.

I acted as if I was in more pain than I was, shrieking as I lay doubled over on my side. He went about the apartment leaving a cacophony in his wake. What I assumed was the television made a snapping sound as it was tossed to the floor. That probably wouldn't be covered by my deposit. Then I heard the hollow sound of his shoes as they contacted the rungs of the ladder to my loft. That was when I made my move.

I needed to call the police, but before that I needed to clear my eyes. I got to my feet quietly and efficiently and felt my way to the bathroom.

Rubbing the water from the sink into my eyes seemed to help. Then I tried shooting shower water into my face.

I opened my eyes and glimpsed a slanted, pained version of the world.

I hadn't heard him come back down from the loft. He was charging toward me with a raised fist that punted my head, followed by the rest of my body, into the slack shower curtain, which caught me like a tarp before breaking and throwing plastic ringlets everywhere.

I tried hitting him somewhere on his body, but he managed to catch my arm. We both fell into the shower tub where water sprayed us both. The rounded edge of the tub pressed into my side, but I was likely too saturated with adrenalin to notice the pain. It became a wrestling match where he and I pulled on each other's damp clothes. There wasn't enough distance for punching. I attempted to knee him in the groin. He butted my head with his, causing light artifacts to form in my already impaired vision. My grip on him weakened and he managed to stand. His hands were around my neck, and I was seized by a sudden horrific thought, that I was going to die that

morning, that my last moments would consist of being choked to death or being drowned in the inches of water which had accumulated at the bottom of my shower tub. I couldn't see his face – couldn't see anything through my waterlogged eyes except for the ape-like outline of a man, a dark figure with arms outstretched.

I choked twice before managing to gasp the word. "Closet, closet," I said.

"Which closet?" he said, pulling me from the tub. I fell to the floor like a ragdoll.

A quantity of blood rushed to my head. He was screaming at me, but all I could perceive was the movement of his jawline. I must have said something about the closet by the door, because he left the room in a hurry.

An amount of time passed, enough that air returned to my lungs and energy to my limbs. I emerged from the bathroom just in time to see him leaving the apartment with my bag over his shoulder.

I ran after him.

I'm not sure how I managed to catch up to him. Even though I was only wearing damp socks, he was not as fast at running down the stairs as I was. As we approached the second floor of the building, he attempted to jump down half a flight of stairs and onto the next landing; however, his wet shoes slipped out from under him and he fell on his back with the bag partly beneath him. I unzipped the bag and reached inside to pull out the device and its connected headset. I didn't unzip the bag enough and its boxy frame got caught on the opening.

He spun around to get away from me. The bag's strap slid down his arm and was caught by his hand. My grip on the lid caused the zipper to rip open, dumping the device and headset onto the landing between us.

His glance flicked downward.

I let go of the bag and kicked him as hard as I could. He almost flew-end-over-end before crashing into the stairs. He rolled the rest of the way down and his head made a distinct thumping sound as it hit the floor.

I gathered up the headset and the bundle of wires wrapped around the mnetic device's central hub before looking down at his motionless body. I was surprised by how good I felt. A kind of elation rushed through me, a perverse pleasure almost sexual in magnitude. I had won the conflict – conquered someone else, ensuring my dominance and survival in the process. That was the evolutionary machinery in me at work, rewarding me for a hard-fought battle. It occurred to me that I may have killed him, but that didn't matter to me then – the consequences of having vanquished my foe paled in comparison to the biochemical victory making its way through my brain.

Pain emanated from below me. I looked down to see that my white socks were coated in red – I had stepped on shards of glass as I had run from my apartment.

I needed to call the police.

The ringing of my cell phone signaled that I was approaching my apartment. I felt myself grow weaker with every step upward. I passed through the open door, careful to avoid any shards of glass, of which there were many, and locked the door behind me, swearing to myself that the next person I would open it to would be a police officer. After setting the mnetic device on the table, I picked up my ringing phone and walked to the bathroom, where I would let my bleeding feet soak in the shower water.

“David, thank god you answered,” Andrea said. “Malak used his footage of you as part of his special last night. He said some awful things, but after the show ended someone doxed you. Your information is all over the internet. You need to get somewhere safe. Call the police.”

I couldn't help but laugh.

"Is something about this funny to you?"

"No, no. I already have to call the police. Someone just broke into my apartment. I may have killed him."

I then assured her that I was safe and told her that I'd call back later before hanging up. A minute later, I gave the dispatch my address and told them that there was possibly a dead guy at the bottom of the stairs. Then I turned off the water and checked the bottoms of my feet for shards of glass. I picked them out and wrapped my feet in a pair of clean washcloths. I was thinking of the glass in my kitchen area and wanted to clean as much of it up as I could before the police arrived so they wouldn't be cut to smithereens. This didn't make any sense – perhaps I had gone into shock.

I was shuffling around on my towels, having found my broom and dustpan, when it occurred to me to check to see if the mnetic device had been broken in any way. The lens within the goggles was cracked, but those were easily replaceable. I turned the main body of the device over in my hands, looking for any fractures in the plastic housing. The pepper still burned my eyes and I might have had a concussion. I couldn't feel any cracks. However, the white label with a barcode and several sequences of numbers and letters had been partly scraped away.

The largest string of digits was spelled out in bold lettering: XVM4001

I'd never heard of other kinds of mnetic devices being used for research. I wanted to go back to Hiroto's data, but the glass was still on the floor.

An officer showed up at my door about fifteen minutes later. The adrenalin had worn off and I had to sit down because the pressure on my feet made it feel like I was standing on hot coals. Suddenly tired, I answered his questions as best I could. I gave him the guy's business

card. I twice explained that I didn't know anything about the doxing. I wasn't high. More people arrived, some of them in different uniforms. The guy had gotten away, but he'd left a bloody mess on the stairs which would help them find him. That was good news. I'd removed the mnetic device's battery and wrapped it in some grocery bags before shoving it to the back of my freezer – I'd seen someone do that with a severed head in a movie once. Or perhaps I was thinking of Poe's *Tell-Tale Heart*. I had no idea what the guy was after – highly disagreeable people low in conscientiousness, criminals in other words, often don't know what they're after either. He may have experienced a traumatic brain injury. He may have been neglected as a child. I wasn't concerned with the true nature of his past traumas, for they had been refracted by the prism of his soul and visited upon me.

The paramedics refused to hobble down the stairs with me, or to allow me to stand at all for that matter. It was their pride or mine. I was whisked from my home on a stretcher and hoisted into a strobing ambulance pulled on to the curb in the exact spot where I had waited for Anderson several nights before. I felt that was beginning to understand why medical care is so expensive in our country.

I never imagined that I'd find myself in a wheelchair before the age of sixty.

"This is gonna sting, hon," said the nurse, using her gloved hands to guide my feet into a turquoise tub that looked like an enlarged dog bowl. She was an older nurse, with gray curly hair, and a hardness to her face which suggested an acquaintance with hemorrhaging.

The liquid in the tub did sting. It was about thirty percent hydrogen peroxide and seventy percent distilled water judging by the length of her pour.

She had me straighten my legs so she could have a better look at the damage. She examined the soles of my feet as, I imagined, a farmer examines a newborn calf.

“It looks like there are still some small pieces stuck in you,” she said with a hint of a smile. “I’ll be right back to get those out.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome, hon.”

It was as if I had booked a session at a spa for the gravely wounded.

About five minutes later, I was sitting, reclined, in the wheelchair with my legs propped up on a stool, feeling a small tug every few seconds. My hospital gown fluttered in the draft coming from the open door to the hall. I wasn’t too concerned about the possibility that she could see under my gown. Despite her friendliness, I was more than likely just another piece of meat stuck with glass.

A figure appeared in the doorway, a dark-brown smudge in the corner of my eye that seemed to hesitate before entering.

“Friends or family should wait outside,” muttered the nurse, her gaze unwavering.

He spoke, and I recognized his voice as belonging to Jamison. “Thankfully, I’m neither.” He stepped into the room and displayed his identification.

“Would you mind waiting until I’m finished?”

“I won’t be a nuisance,” he said, continuing into the room until he was standing over her shoulder. He too, was looking at the soles of my feet. “You alright, kid?”

“I feel fine,” I said.

“Slipped in the shower, huh?”

I couldn’t help but play along. “Right into a pile of glass.”

“Didn’t think I’d be seeing you again so soon.”

“Me neither.”

The nurse extracted one last chunk of glass and set down her forceps. She picked up the tub of bloody water and left the room. I didn't feel much in the way of pain due to the painkillers I had been given, but I wondered how bad my injuries were, how long it would be before I could walk or run, or even leave the hospital. What would I do after I leaved the hospital? Go back to my research? I wondered what Dr. Feist's reaction would be to this development.

"Mind telling me what happened? I got the story from the officer you spoke with, but I'd like to hear about it in your own words."

I walked him through the chain of events that morning, including the voicemails left by Andrea. He listened with the occasional "aha" or "mhmm" as I spoke.

"So you chased him out of your apartment and then caught up with him and then kicked him down the stairs. That's impressive."

"Thanks," I said, hoping that he wouldn't continue questioning me on that moment.

Of course, that's exactly what the detective ended up doing.

He stroked the thin line of stubble at his jaw. "David, I don't quite understand why you left your apartment at that point and chased a guy who just kicked your ass."

"Well, frankly I was feeling better at that point. The pepper spray was wearing off."

"But that still doesn't explain why you chased him."

"Oh, well I suppose I wasn't thinking straight. He had my bag and I didn't want him to get away with it."

Jamison's eyes narrowed. "What was in the bag?"

"My tablet, with all of my research data on it."

His face changed – he raised his eyebrows in a display of pleasant surprise. "You would risk your life for that?"

I concentrated on keeping my expression neutral. “Federal law...it’s against the law to disclose confidential research.”

“I’d imagine that would be the least of your concerns,” Jamison said, turning away in thought.

The nurse returned with a fresh tub of water. She removed the stool propping up my calves and adjusted my wheelchair into an upright position. Jamison looked as she immersed my feet again. I began to wonder about what he was thinking and suddenly felt embarrassed by the situation.

The nurse unraveled a roll of gauze.

“How soon can I walk?” I asked. “Will I be able to leave the hospital?”

“That depends on what the doctor says, but most likely. None of the shards were deep enough to damage your nerves or blood vessels. It was a good thing you were wearing socks. I wouldn’t plan on running any marathons in the next month or so.”

I thanked her again before she rushed out of the room.

“I dated a nurse once,” said Jamison. “Sometimes I think they’ve got it worse than us.”

“Got what?”

He took a step towards me as he spoke and ignored my question. “So where were you the night before all of this happened?”

“I was working from home.”

“And where were you before that?”

“I was working in the office,” I said, examining him for any indicators of suspicion.

“Working,” he said, tapping his foot. “Talk to anyone?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. People around the office. And I had a conversation with Dr. Feist.”

“Oh? What was that about?”

“Mr. Okada’s suicide.”

Jamison chuckled.

Even I felt the look of shock that must have crossed my face. “You don’t think he’s involved, do you?”

“I keep my thoughts to myself, kid.” His foot-tapping ceased. “You don’t have to lie to me about what was in your bag; I know about the kind of work that you do, with the memory tech.”

Sensing that he was trying to keep me on the back foot, I smiled. “Our research is public knowledge. And it wasn’t in my bag – company policy is to store the devices in the office space.”

“Come on, man, don’t lie to me. Did the guy who attacked you this morning make off with it?”

“Why are you so interested in the device?”

“Just answer the question.”

“No, he didn’t. Like I said, the devices are stored under lock and key at the offices.”

He sighed and began pacing back and forth with his hands on his hips. “God damn it,” he said. The edge of his jacket had pulled back, revealing his gun in its shiny leather holster and several other items attached to his belt.

I didn’t know what to say. I sat up and rested my forearms on the wheelchair’s armrests, placing my fingers inches from the emergency button that calls the nurse’s station.

“Alright, David, thank you for answering my questions. We’ll let you know if we find the fucker who attacked you. Call me if anything else happens.”

With that, he left the room.

My lunch consisted of several bland items, an arrangement of carbohydrates, lipids and proteins made for an elderly person with a chronic disease. They made me lay down in the bed, I imagined, to reduce the fluid pressure in my feet. The doctor stopped by and confirmed the amount of healing time that was required. I would have to return to the hospital a day later for the removal of the bandages, which they would replace with a hemostatic glue, so long as the swelling was low enough. Urine tests came back okay. I'd get an MRI if the pain in my kidney persisted for more than three days. They also gave me back the sweatpants and t-shirt I had left the house wearing, minus the towels for my feet, which I didn't blame them for discarding. Beneath the clothing was a sealed package containing a flimsy pair of slippers. Perhaps they handed out more substantial footwear if there was snow on the ground. I found my phone in my pants pocket which displayed a text from Andrea asking me to call her when I was available.

"I'm at the hospital," I said, after she had answered.

"Jesus Christ, how bad is it?"

"Not too bad. I stepped on some glass. I'll be okay."

"You can't go back to your apartment. I mean, to live there."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You can bring your things to my place if you want, at least until you figure out a better living situation."

I wondered if that meant that I'd be staying at her place along with my things. I wondered what that could mean. "Yeah, that's very generous of you. Thanks."

"How long are they going to keep you there?"

"They said an officer will come to drive me back to my apartment in an hour or so."

“Oh, ok. I can head over after work and we can load your stuff into my car.”

She had a car. That was convenient.

I thanked her for her willingness to help and ended the call.

The little wall-mounted television in the corner, which all hospitals seem to have, had a limited number of channels which were about as interesting as, I imagined, the kind programming they show in prison. My attention gravitated to my phone and I used up much of the remaining battery life watching videos of Jonas Malak as I tried to find last night’s broadcast.

Then I saw myself amongst the crowd that night, squinting into the penetrating light of the camera, the bewilderment on my face rendered in exquisite detail. There was Malak, standing before me as if he were my duelist, prepared to strike me down with the power of his questions.

The scene cut back to Malak in the newsroom.

He referred to me as a ‘troubled soul caught between the realms of light and darkness,’ another useful idiot serving the forces of oppression. “People like this ‘David’ here have a civic duty to come forward, to expunge lies from the public record. But they are afraid, folks, very afraid, just like the Nazis were when Hitler took over. If anyone in David’s position wants to set things straight, here’s our 24/7 hotline.”

A phone number flashed across the screen.

“David, my gosh, I never thought I’d see you here,” a nurse said from the doorway. My phone fell to my chest. I craned my neck to see who it was, a tall-ish woman with short hair wearing scrubs. She seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place her face. “I’m Rose, Fiona’s other mother,” she said, as if to answer my question. “When I saw your name on the patient list, I couldn’t help but stop by.”

“Oh, it’s good to see you again,” I said.

“Someone beat you up?”

“It’s a long story,” I said with a sigh, not wanting to explain things again. “How’s Fiona?”

“She’s doing well. Very well, actually. I mean, she still doesn’t talk, but she’s been happy. Whatever you did to her, it helped.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Rose smiled and turned to leave. “I hope you feel better.”

A couple of hours passed and my ride still hadn’t shown. I donned my regular clothing and slid the slippers over my gauze-encased feet, which sent sharp pains shooting up my legs. One of the nurses had left a bottle of painkillers on the stand next to the bed along with a pair of crutches leaning against the wall. I was almost reluctant to take them as I probably wouldn’t need them for long and they probably weren’t covered by insurance. I hobbled over to the crutches, leaning against the chair rail along the wall as I went, and placed them beneath my armpits. Walking around with them didn’t feel too bad – so long as I put most of my weight onto the crutches.

Things were going to be more difficult than I’d expected.

It was between three and four when the officer finally took me home. By the time I was standing on the spot where the ambulance had been parked that morning, Andrea had already texted me letting me know that she had arrived.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said, hobbling toward her. She had been leaning against the wall next to the main entryway.

“Don’t worry – I got out early,” she said, looking me up and down. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Not at the moment,” I said, grimacing as I attempted to turn. Pivoting on one of the crutches meant that I had to put some weight on my feet.

She rushed ahead of me to open the door.

The cop rode up the elevator with us. He let us in to the apartment before bidding us farewell. Everything was still in a state of carnage. The cabinet doors still hung open; the TV was still in its same spot; every piece of furniture was askew from its original position, and my belongings were all over the place. I couldn't imagine what the loft looked like.

I wanted more than anything to collapse onto the sofa and do nothing but think about what had happened. But first thing was first – I pivoted over to the refrigerator and yanked open the freezer.

The mass of plastic bags was still inside.

“Could you help me pull that out? The bags in there?”

Andrea set the bundle on the counter and began pulling back its layers, revealing the XVM4001 and its battery.

“Don't put the battery in. As it thaws, condensation will form inside.”

“I wasn't going to,” said Andrea, backing away from the device as if it was a toxic substance. “Why did you put it in the freezer?”

“I couldn't take it with me, and I couldn't risk the police finding it.” I crutched my way over to the couch and let myself fall onto it. I felt an explosive jab of pain as I landed on the cushions.

“You okay?” Andrea said, standing across from me, next to the broken TV.

“No. I don't know,” I said, resisting the urge to lay down. “Maybe my kidney is ruptured. They didn't give me an MRI.” A moment later, I found myself on my side.

“That would not be good,” she said, bending over to lift the corner of the fallen television.

“You don’t have to –” I began to say, and then I realized that she wasn’t trying to put the TV back into the hole it had come from. She leaned it against the wall and walked past it.

I felt so much more tired than I had at the hospital. I wondered whether it was the painkillers, or perhaps my body had finally realized how damaged it was. But I couldn’t allow myself to fall asleep while she was there.

She sat on the coffee table facing me.

“I just need a minute,” I said.

“There’s no rush.”

“I’m sorry that I’ve dragged you into this.”

“I dragged myself into this.”

“How did you know, this morning, that I’d been doxed?”

“I work in the news and have friends who know about these things.”

“I see.”

A moment of silence passed between us, and I became acutely aware of the things inside myself. Aside from the aches and pains in my body, I felt a wave building within my body, made of grief I think, rising and rising until it was so tall in the abstract sphere of my intuition that it seemed liable to sweep away the island of my consciousness. I must have closed my eyes because I could only perceive the sound of our staggered breaths. I wanted to tell her that I was a disgusting person, that my insides were hideous beyond recognition, for I more closely resembled a machine than anyone she had ever met. I knew these thoughts could not traverse the

impossible gulf of space and time. I knew the thoughts themselves were hideous and would only serve to alienate her from me.

“My clothes are up in the loft,” I said, raising myself. “I’ll do what I can down here.”

CHAPTER 17: NEIKO PLEMONS

“Yo, hey – Yo, hey –”

I wake and think I’m dreaming, or that I’m all up in the clownsuit again. Shit’s dark. Then I see him peeping at me through the bars, his face caught in the sliver of moonlight coming through the slit above his cell. I ain’t got no slit.

I’m thinking, what does this fucker want? Some sort of escape attempt?

“N-ea-ko, that you?”

“Oh shit, Donny?” I say, cause he’s got that same stupid way of saying my name, like it’s Diego.

“What up bro?”

I catch his crooked nose in the light, cause he’s got the face of a jagaloon, one that’s all self-satisfied and shit no matter the weather. Why is it that retards are always happy? Probably cause he can’t remember the last thing that happened to him from all the coke he’s done. Then it gets into my brain, this plan, like if I act crazy or something, I can get myself lobotomized and sit in a chair like one dumb happy fuck forever.

“Bro?” says Donny, like he’s missed something.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“What’re you in here for? I had my cock out in public without a nudist permit.” He chuckles. “Good thing they didn’t find out why!”

“Fucking idiot.”

“It’s been years, man! How long you been out?”

“Not long enough.”

“I know these chicks man...Tammy, Tara, and Tina...got buzzers in their tongues...bzzzzzz. I’ll have ‘em show ya next time.”

The light catches his eyes, and I see ‘em, all bloodshot, all big and fucked up on something. “You ain’t going anywhere anytime soon,” I say, sliding my ass away from him. Cause he is a disease, man, one that’ll put me back on the yard.

“Man,” he says, real low all sudden, like he’s trying to grow a spare nutsack, “I had a crew, man. Real sick bunch of dudes. Worked the east side. I think...”

“What?” I say, kind of interested in how bad he’s screwed the pooch.

“I don’t wanna go back,” he says, cheeks glistening. He don’t look smug no more.

His sentence had been four years the first time. “I did eight,” I say. “You’ll live.”

“Naw man, it’s longer than eight.”

“For having your cock out?”

“That’s just how it started.”

I’m shaking my head, seeing where it’s going. “You ain’t got no other choice.”

“My guys...they’re kids, man. They got time to live.”

“Their time ain’t yours to take,” I say, thinking of Suarez, feeling that pang of guilt cause I was too afraid and took all of his.

“It’s a world of shit – that’s the game, bro.”

“Yeah, it’s the game alright. I got my eight years that way.”

“I can’t do it again, man. I can’t go back.”

I start laughing what sounds to me like this old man Satan laugh. Like ha-ha-ha, it’s funny to me that you’re dying and that you will hurt the whole time.

“Well go ahead and be a cunt about it,” Donny says, all morseful.

“If we end up at Mule Creek again and I find out that you got a reduced sentence, I’m gonna kill you for even thinking it.”

“Bro...”

I sit back against the wall and close my eyes. And I’m actually feeling good about going back to prison and doing it cleanly. Maybe I could be like one of those guys from the TV shows that murders the murderers. Like a good bad guy. Maybe then someone would make a show out of me, and then when I’m an old fucking head I can go on TV and talk about how I inspired one of the normies to take a step out of Kansas. And I’m thinking of all that applause I’d hear for having done something right, that kind of reward. But why do I want that? Why does everyone want someone clapping for their sake? Cause we’re so fucking weak, that’s why. A real man goes into his shithole and dies by and for himself. Suarez was ready to die. And I should be too.

“Neiko? How are you?” That softness to Candice’s voice, it’s like sex, or the idea of it, and it always makes me feel like a little boy again. It’s been so long that I might as well be a virgin.

“All right,” I mumble groggily. They got me in another room in the station sitting in a chair that’s about as comfortable as the sidewalk. She’s smiling like she’s happy to see me, but I can tell that there’s something behind it, like there’s something scary about me. “I’m doing fine,” I say with a clearer throat. “Yeah.”

“A number of people reported that you were running around town, screaming about the end of the world.”

“Oh, yeah, I don’t know what happened. I guess I got kind of freaked out by the city.”

“They said that you broke into a sex shop. And then you were found in that park...”

They sent Candice in to talk to me, not some cop, so they must think I'm crazy or something. Better to lie or tell the truth? Her motherly eyes are positively smothering. I'm trying to frame the words in my mind.

"I was just going down the list of freedom, you know?"

She smiles. "Tell me what's on the list?"

I tell her about the coffee and the doughnuts, and the phone, and how the chip in my wrist told me to go to the probation office but I found a guy in an alleyway who gave me some sort of drink.

"Neiko, the substance in your urine –"

I'm speaking before I can stop myself. "I don't remember peeing in a cup!" Shit, they got to me with Candice. I didn't even think of asking for a lawyer like you're supposed to. Everyone asks for a lawyer. I'm fucking retarded.

"They performed one last night with your consent, and all they found was a mild recreational substance that causes side-effects in certain individuals. It was legalized four years ago, so it's very unlikely that you've heard of it."

"Certain individuals? What sort of side-effects?"

"At this point, all I can say is that you had a bad reaction, perhaps due to your neurological condition."

"You mean...they're not going to send me back?"

Candice slides a tablet across the table. "I was able to negotiate this on your behalf..."

I scan the paper and realize that it's been ages since I've actually had to fucking read.

"One-hundred hours of public service?"

"Across four months."

“Am I supposed to sign on this?”

“Oh, the judge will have to sign it at your arraignment.”

“Don’t I get a lawyer?”

Candice straightens herself and glances at the one-way glass that’s always in these kinds of rooms.

A moment later, the door to the room opens and this policewoman comes in. I dunno if it’s the vest or the uniform, but she looks like she’s gone through about as many drive-thrus as there are drive-bys in Compton.

“You’re not under arrest, Mr. Plemons. Those are the repercussions for trespassing, disturbing the peace, and damage to private property, which will apply in addition to the terms of your probation. Whether or not those misdemeanors end up on your record depends on the testimony of our expert witness here.”

“Are you seriousing me right now?”

The cop takes on this sassy pose. “No one made you put that substance in your body.”

“It’s the best you can hope for,” Candice says, taking back her tablet.

“You’re my expert witness?” I say, looking at her, thinking that it could be the first good thing that’s happened to me in a long time. “She’s an expert in me alright.”

Candice half-smiles, like a girl trying to let me down easy. “I don’t think that’s the expertise they have in mind.” She stands and puts the tablet in her purse before stepping out of the room.

“So what’s next?” I ask, feeling light and free all of a sudden, like someone’s pulled a condom off of my soul. “I get to leave or something?”

“Mr. Plemons, I have a few more questions,” the cop says sitting across from me. “The terms of your probation are up for negotiation, you could say.”

“They are?” I asked, feeling myself get even lighter.

“Yes,” she said, smiling at me with her teeth as if I had become her next happy meal.

“Tell us about your friend Donald.”

I shrug. “We did time together at Mule Creek,” says I, something that I figured was completely obvious.

The cop frowns and leans closer to me. “He ever talk about his conviction?”

It takes me a second, cause who the fuck is Donny anyway, other than some prick I had the lucky charms to do time with? He’s in the shit anyway, and if he rats out on his bros, maybe my ratting out on him first will cancel out his ratting somehow. I could get him ten years if I told ‘em where to look. But that’s some tooth for a tooth, eye for an eye shit. Maybe in my case, it’s a tooth for an eye for a tooth, if you catch my drift. Ya, whatever – I can’t do that calculingus off the top of my dome.

“Naw,” says I, smiling cause I can hold it over her.

“He say anything to you last night?”

“Just hi,” I say, shaking my head.

“Well then.” The cop clasps her hands. “You’re sure he didn’t say anything?”

“Can I go now?”

I like it when they smile.

I guess they figure I’m on their leash, that I still want whatever goodness is out there that, I ain’t got more than I want to get back in the pound. Do I really, though? At the end of the day, I ain’t them, a family man, or some kid who likes to cut grass. I ain’t Donny or one of them either.

I ain't nowhere in between, and I don't want to think about it, cause that'll just get me more in the shit. Somewhere in the world, all the shit I've done is justice. But that ain't here. This is a game of pretend. Like Candice said way back, the question is: What do you want? What do I want for myself? Odd question for someone who is kinda a socialpath, cause that's all I'm supposed to have thought of already.

They got me in the back. Candice rides shotgun. Ms. Columba is behind the wheel. Of course, it's a long-ass drive to the probation office, and nobody's got nothing to say. At least I got my phone back. Battery's dead though since I didn't charge it after I got it.

Of course the office looks just like prison, this giant concrete turd with windows in the middle of town. It's even got a fence around it and a gate that looks like it was made by Nazis. Haha, I learned that in prison, you fucks. I give the cop the whole 'thank you (go fuck yourself)' spiel and hop out of the car, but Candice, the bow-legged broad, hops out after me, and I'm kind of sick of her at this point and like – oh Jesus this never ends.

"I could come up there with you," she says, and I'm suddenly getting this weird girlfriend vibe about it.

But then I remember that she's my expert witness and all that and I should probably be polite. "I think I'm alright. Thank you."

"Ok. You have the number to my office. Call that if you need anything."

She turns to go, and I get this urge to ask something. "Candice?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do you want to help me so much?" I don't say it, but I'm thinking about the whole thing that making new humans is easier than fixing bad ones, but we're just too cowardly to put them down.

She gives me this hard look, like she's seen my soul. "Because it's the right thing to do," she says, her hands in her pockets.

I nod and say goodbye. I don't know if it is, though. I sure as fuck wouldn't help me. And I kind of feel something then, like this look in her eye, ain't nothing sexual about it, but a feeling of more, of greatness. But it's sad, cause it's all gonna be over at some point. I'll get back on the yard from something, and then she'll learn...she'll learn that it can't be helped, the people like me, that she better focus on her own herd rather than trying to save mine.

"Thirty-six," says the voice over the loudspeaker, like I'm a kid at the DMV, but for people who shouldn't be trusted to drive. Shouldn't be trusted to do anything in fact. That's my number – thank god they called it, cause I almost stroked out from the hard seating.

I shimmy down the rows and rows of chairs in the waiting room past the occasional drunk or wife-beater wearing a wife-beater toward the glass booth that looks like it could take five hulk-punches before folding in on itself. There's a worker-ant behind the glass, this pitiful old thing that would break if she fell down a flight of stairs. If only someone would push her.

I get took to an office deep inside. The queen bee? Naw, it's some dude in a polo that shows off his shoulders and nips. It's way too tight – I can almost see the roots of the neighboring jungle. He gets behind his desk, into this leather chair that looks like it's stitched together from cows' udders. The desk is dust-free and it's got only a few things that show off how much of a cunt he is. I bet he cleans it with little miss secretary's ass when there ain't no one else around – the youngest of the worker ants.

"Read it," he says, like he's talking from his buttohole.

He's slid a piece of paper in front of me, a list of total bullshit, but whatever. I almost say that I don't know how to read just to fuck with him, but I don't think I wanna find out if there's anything more than synthol behind those teats of testosterone.

It's the pledge of allegiance all over again.

I'll find regular employment and provide documentation to my probation officer

I may not seek out an alternative residence

I may not possess firearms or other dangerous weapons

I may not ingest or transfer illicit or unprescribed substances per-sue-ant to code three nineteen-dash-forty two

I may not associate with persons who have a history of criminal conduct

I am compelled to undergo urine and blood analysis upon request

I am compelled to have my residence searched upon request

I must be within the boundaries of my residence by 9:00 P.M.

I must make monthly restitution payments of one-hundred dollars

I turn the page. The list goes on. "Uh," I say, "doesn't that about cover it?"

Mr. Nips grins from ear to ear. He's bald, did I mention that? Like, I'm getting booked by Mr. Clean.

"I've dealt with enough of your kind," he says with his mouth-hole. "With you, I fear that it's only going to be a matter of time."

The sleeves of the polo are tight around his biceps as well, pinching off the sluglike veins in those bulging monuments of manhood. I'm shivering and I realize that his office has great AC, kind of like the cool den of the wolf spider or the snakes that eat chicken eggs shell and all.

“You know you guys have one-star rating on Yelp.com, right?”

Nips crosses his arms. “Keep reading, Mr. Plemons.”

Fuck. I bet he's real good at the 'probation' part.

CHAPTER 18: DAVID TREMBLE

“Cream or sugar in your coffee?” Andrea said in passing as she walked from her bedroom to the kitchenette where the rumbling pot of water waited. Noticing that she was wearing jeans, I felt relieved.

“Yeah, thanks,” I replied, sitting up from her couch.

I’d known for a while that bitter taste preference has been associated with antisocial personality traits (Sagioglou and Greitemeyer, 2015), with an especially high R^2 value for everyday sadism. ($R^2 = 0.64$, $p < 0.001!$) Moreover, it wasn’t just that narcissists, sociopaths, psychopaths, and sadists preferred bitter-tasting drinks, but that bitter taste also temporarily predisposes one to hostile behavior. I didn’t want to give off the vibe that I was a sociopath, nor did I want to become one, so cream and sugar was always the obvious choice despite the health risks.

I’d gone to bed (the couch) with my shirt on, the previous night, but arriving at that decision had not been straightforward. On the one hand, I was very clearly injured and not at her apartment for romantic purposes. As she had done almost all the packing, we were both tired. On the other hand, she’d passed by me once or twice wearing a t-shirt and little else. Could trying to approach her in that way be construed as an exploitation of the situation? Was her lack of apparel merely a continuation of a comfortable bedtime ritual, or was it an indexical sign of some unarticulated desire on her part? I was only able to put the debate to rest after at least an hour of darkness had passed, when I was certain that she was asleep.

The bandages would have made things awkward anyway.

“Sorry, I’m all out of cereal. All I’ve got is eggs, quinoa, and cheese for an omelet. I can either put the quinoa in your omelet or leave it on the side.”

“In the omelet is fine,” I said.

The bleeding seemed to have been contained entirely by my bandages. Regardless, the pain caused by attempting to stand seemed twice as bad as it had the day before, most likely a result of the swelling. I managed to put on a pair of pants and stumble over to my painkillers, which had been left on the yardstick-sized table adjacent to a window overlooking the highway. Her place had about the same square area as mine but split between several smaller rooms.

She brought over the coffee and I swallowed the pills. It was, unfortunately, the kind of coffee you’d expect to come from a college campus – weak and burnt. That was obviously the result of her use, or misuse rather, of a French press.

Then breakfast appeared, a round protein-infused mass spackled with grains. Just by looking at it, I could tell that it would need a lot of salt and perhaps even more pepper.

Andrea took the chair opposite of me and smiled. It was a Duchene smile. I couldn’t help but notice that the coffee in her cup was black in color – more a shade of translucent brown on account of its weakness.

“I wasn’t prepared to cook for anyone else,” Andrea said with a shrug. “I hope it’s palatable.”

“Well, if it isn’t good, at least it’s good for me,” I said, laughing it off. After my first bite, I felt confident that I could at least eat the thing. “It’s not bad,” I said, nodding with too much enthusiasm.

Sitting opposite her, I felt a tangible sense of déjà vu, as if we were in the restaurant all over again and things had begun anew. A wellspring of positive emotion which had remained closed since our date those weeks ago opened again, filling me with an unexpected sense of

certainty. Regardless of what I would encounter in the aftermath of recent events, I would be able to survive it. I would get through anything.

“Do you usually work on Saturdays?” I asked.

“Unfortunately.”

Before she could say more, her phone buzzed on the table between us. She reached over suddenly and checked it before picking up her fork again. Looking at her began to feel odd, so I averted my gaze out the window, and the sense of recurrence faded. There was a certain beauty in her rawness, in our rawness, in the wetness of her drying hair and in the staleness of my shirt from having slept in it. And I felt apprehension at the thought of not being able to experience that raw moment again.

“So, what’s your next step?” Andrea said, glancing up at me from her breakfast.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I have to go to the hospital. But other than that, I haven’t really thought of what I’m going to do.”

“How about suing Malak?” she said, cutting her remaining omelet in two with edge of her fork.

“Sue him? Can I even do that?”

Andrea shrugged. “Could be a libel case. Inciting violence. I have friends who know lawyers.”

I also wondered if I should do it. The man was paranoid, perhaps even delusional. He could have been suffering with a severe personality disorder for all I knew. It is well known that mood disorders such as bipolar disorder are more prevalent among high-achievers and media figures than in the general population.

“Do you know if he was behind the doxing?”

“No idea. I’ve read about cases like this before. You’ve got a pretty good shot at winning.”

“Unless I can prove that he was directly linked to doxing or the break in, I don’t think that’s the right thing to do.”

Andrea set her mug of coffee down with surprising force. “Who cares if it’s right? You can win. And he’s an asshole.”

“Maybe he can help me,” I said, thinking of the hotline number that had scrolled across his stream.

“Help you with what?” she said, crossing her arms. “David...why is this even a question for you? Talking to him is the dumbest thing you could do.”

“Maybe it is,” I said, absentmindedly drinking my coffee. I wondered if he could give me some clues on how to move forward. Where to look. Surely, I could justify delaying my meetings with Anderson and my research because of the break-in. I’d need time to recover.

“I have to go soon. Are you done with that?” asked Andrea, pointing to my half-eaten egg.

“Sorry,” I said, scooping a mound of it into my mouth.

She took off with our dishes to the kitchen sink. “Is there something I don’t know about here?”

“I found a flash drive,” I said, swallowing, “with Hiroto’s research on it. It turns out there’s more than one kind of memory device. And he was getting a lot of mail from that company Dimetricom.”

“And that makes you want to side with Malak? Wait, you don’t actually believe the things he says, do you?”

“The model numbers on the devices Hiroto was working with are higher than the ones everyone else has. There aren’t supposed to be other types of devices in use, much less more advanced ones. At least as far as I know.”

Andrea returned from the kitchen and drank the rest of her coffee. She stood with her hands on her hips. “Dimetricom probably has a contract with Habitus for hardware.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling as if she had diminished my argument. I drank the rest of my coffee and slid the glass in her direction.

“You went through his mail?”

“There was a whole pile of it in his mailbox. It hadn’t been touched for months. No one knows – they were all still at the conference.”

“Jesus Christ. Now I wish I hadn’t encouraged you to look into it a few days ago.”

“I was going to do that anyway,” I said, getting to my feet. Even having taken the painkillers, I still needed to lean with both hands on the table.

“Is that when you got the flash drive too?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you have a future in investigative journalism. That was a pretty good move.” Her stony expression broke into a grin.

“You would know, wouldn’t you,” I said, grinning myself as I felt the urge to kiss her. But she stood more than an arm’s length away. I began shuffling in her direction, but apparently my intentions were not plainly visible.

A moment later she looked down and checked her phone. “I have to go,” she said, stepping closer and turning her head aside for a hug. “I’ll be out around the same time as yesterday. Let me know if anything comes up.”

“I will,” I said, relishing her closeness.

“Feel free to use the shower,” she said once we had parted. “Oh, and there’s not much left in the fridge. Maybe you could get us some takeout tonight.”

“Yeah, takeout sounds good,” I said, watching her go.

My heartbeat slowed with every step she took away from me, until she was no longer there, and I wondered if it would continue beating in her absence. Figuratively, of course.

I fell to the couch.

It was a terrible feeling, the cognitive state that is love, the corrosive confluence of neurotransmitters secreted by one’s cells at the hint of intimacy and affection. As the experience of consciousness is subjective, I could only speculate, as I often did, about the degree to which my experience differed from that of others. Maslow’s hierarchy conceptualized love and belonging as environmental resources akin to food, water, and shelter – prerequisites for attaining a higher existence. Do we, as civilized people, kick starving people to the curb as we pass them on the street? Generally, we don’t – we go so far as to provide basic hierarchical needs – food, water, and shelter – for those suffering, particularly victims of foreign conflicts. But love is a resource intrinsic to us – is produced by us in the same capacity that silk is produced by the silkworm, in a limited quantity over one’s lifespan with measurably tragic consequences.

And so, I thought, with increasing clarity, that was why I was disgusting. I didn’t think of others in love as disgusting, just as it wouldn’t be reasonable to think of the organisms in a pond as disgusting for eating members of their own species – they did not have a perspective from which to analyze their own behavior. I did. Moreover, I felt that I was particularly afflicted with the desire for love, a deep hunger for the sustenance provided by another being. How could anyone stand to be around such a vacuous creature? I would run screaming from myself.

Nevertheless, the desire for love and belonging persisted, in defiance even of my conscious reasoning. This was to be expected since we are nothing more than biological machines.

I blotted the concepts of love, intimacy, sexuality, and Andrea from my mind. I wasn't going to mope around someone else's apartment all day.

I called Malak's hotline.

"Thank you for calling the Jonas Malak outpost for free thought, where the revolution begins. Please press 'one' to report an infringement by law enforcement against your personal freedoms. Please press two if you have been wrongly persecuted by deep state actors. Please press three if..."

Each option planted a seed of doubt as to whether calling Malak would get me anywhere. After listening to the list of nine options, none of which seemed to fit my situation, the line began ringing.

"Thank you for calling the Jonas Malak outpost –"

"I'd like to speak with Malak himself. I'm David Tremble."

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that name."

I sat up on the sofa. "I'm the guy your boss talked about on air the night before last. The guy who got doxed and was assaulted as a result of his broadcast."

"Hmm. Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Mr. Malak does not personally or implicitly endorse violence and is not responsible for the criminal misconduct of his audience. Also, I don't watch the program, I just answer phones for the guy. He's not available right now. Would you like me to pass along your contact information?"

"Please do," I said and gave the guy my phone number.

I decided to take up Andrea's shower offer. You're supposed to take a shower after you go to the hospital, they say, because of the high microbial density. How ironic, that our institutions of health pose a health risk. But is such an irony true of all noteworthy institutions? Hospitals can make one sick. Universities can make one less knowledgeable. Prisons can make one more nefarious. Media can make one less informed. And mental health institutions...the history of psychiatry is riddled with ignominy and madness.

If one were to return humanity to its caveman state, would our lives consist of more or less suffering?

I wondered how it was possible for society to continue its forward progress given its predilection toward inefficacy and malevolence. The malfeasance of our institutions, in contrast to the problem of interpersonal love and belonging, was a failing of a higher order, an emergent property from the underlying matrix of human programming. It could be a fallacy to explain institutional malfeasance using individual psychology. Or was it? My thoughts trailed back to objectivism and egoism, from the likes of Rand and Freud, who claimed that all behavior is motivated by self-interest, roughly speaking. In Rand's view, self-interest is tempered by capitalism, allowing one's selfishness to productively serve the needs of others. In Freud's view, psychological structures known as the ego and superego form in healthy children to repress the id, the underlying manifold of bodily desires.

I turned off the water and began drying myself.

I suddenly understood why Cara had rejected me and why she subscribed to the philosophy of the Neuesleben, even if she didn't know it herself – it was an acceptance, a veneration even, of human material needs, not in excess, but in the right measure. It was a rejection of the id as a bottomless pit of desire.

I retrieved my toothbrush and returned to the bathroom. Andrea's shelves held some makeup items, a number of creams and powders and smallish vials which, when properly applied to the face, have the effect of making one more sexually desirable.

Her lipstick – red: the color of fruit, the color of blood, the color of blood-infused skin.

What was so wrong with that?

Hypocrisy for me had a bitter taste. I saw myself cringe in the mirror. It was desire, spilling over the bastion of my thought, drowning the protected space within, contaminating the clarity with which I saw the world.

I returned to the couch and discovered that I had a voicemail. I expected to hear Malak's gravelly voice on the other end.

“Hello David, this is Alton. I heard about the break-in yesterday and would like to make sure that you have safe living arrangements. This series of unfortunate events concerns me greatly. If I can help in any way, please let me know. You are welcome to stay at my residence if you wish. In fact, if you're available tonight, I would like to have you over for dinner. Please take care.”

Dinner with Feist. Was it even a good idea, given that he might have been behind the attack? The doxing? What if he and Malak were working together somehow? The straight man and the farce? I had no idea as to how that might benefit Feist.

Perhaps I would find out at dinner with him. But I wasn't ready to forgo my plans with Andrea yet.

I couldn't sit around her apartment all day – that was perhaps another element of my programming, the need to be constantly in motion. I first Ubered to the hospital, where I was placed in a waiting room for an hour before undergoing a ten-minute procedure. The nurse

unraveled my bandages and determined that I was ready for the hemostatic glue I'd been told about. It came in double-syringes, apparently, which squeezed their contents out of a single tip. It felt like someone had doused the wounds in mouthwash, oddly enough. I hadn't known that pain receptors were capable of that level of expressivity.

"Oh, you'll feel pain alright," the nurse said, continuing to glue me up. "But this stuff is stronger than the skin that it's holding together. Full bond in three hours. You'll be able to run, but it won't be fun for at least a week."

"Good to know," I said.

I'd tied my shoes to a strap on my bag and donned them along with my socks with elation. There hadn't been enough space inside due to my tablet and the mnetic device. I still had to use the crutches to get around to avoid putting too much strain on the glue bonds. I crutched my way to the nurse's station which had its desk-spaces facing a three-way in the hallways and was about to ask if Rose was available when she rounded the corner in a fast walk, almost running into me.

"Good to see that you're still in one piece," she muttered shortly after saying hello. She peeled behind the station's desk and scooped up a clipboard laden with a plume of papers.

"Thanks, and uh, you too," I said. "Sorry to ask on such short notice, but I was wondering if I could do another interview with Fiona this afternoon, if Cynthia or someone else would be around for that?"

Rose wheeled out from behind the nurse's station and into the hallway. "Yeah, just drop Cynthia a call. That's all her. She works banker's hours."

I thanked her as she disappeared around the corner.

It was about noon when I left the hospital. Over the phone, Cynthia said she wasn't going to be home, but she probably would be by the time I was finished – apparently the definition of banker's hours did not preclude working on the weekend. There would be a babysitter.

I boarded the overhead tramway to San Jose as one of the handful of midday passengers. A marbled front of clouds rolled out from the inland country towards the ocean, a cool, gray blanket reflected by the stable waters of the bay. The upper layer of clouds frothed with sunlight, like the superficial thoughts of the conscious mind, while the increasingly cool and dark layer below cast the land in a blueish subliminal torpor that encroached on the city as depression falls on a healthy mind. There was a similarity across all dynamic systems, a beauty to nature's process of transformation which is evident at all levels of analysis.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I hoped it was Andrea, for I desired the sunlight of her voice.

“David – David? Is that you? I had no idea...they went too far...too far... For my entire career, I have encouraged civil discourse! The freedom of speech! I stand by what I said and will retract nothing, but I admit, what happened to you was terrible. But we are all free agents, yes, with free will? No one is in control of their audience, regardless of what the lawyers say. Nevertheless, my condolences are headed in your direction! What can I do for, son?”

Malak's words conjured the image of a puppet show, for some reason. I could see him on the other end of the line with his hands shoved into a pair of anthropomorphized socks.

“I don't want you to do anything,” I said.

“Oh, come on. Everyone wants something. I'll compensate you with a twelve-month supply of my bestselling Nutrient X. Hardens the blood against heavy metals, toxins in the water

supply, radiation from nuclear fallout, and it'll give you a hardon like an old bois d'arc fence post. Perfect for all your postapocalyptic baby making survival needs. Just gimme an address."

I hung up. Calling him had been a bad idea.

The refugee ring rolled past on my right, its dirt-filled interior looking rather like a bruise amidst the gray urban landscape.

My phone rang again, displaying the same number. I let it ring and ring until it went silent. A few minutes later, it let out a single buzz that was a voicemail notification. I picked it up and wondered if he would try again with a two-year supply.

"Here's the truth. I'll be brief. There are plans within plans, and no one knows how deep the rabbit hole goes. I've got no idea what you do, but whatever you think you're working on there at the company isn't all there is. You're just the entourage, the dictator's children – you know how dictators always surround themselves with other people's kids in publicity photos? Kids. It's sick. Must be some kind of fetish in the collective unconscious that gets turned on when some people get rich and powerful enough. Maybe you're one of them, but maybe you aren't. I'd like to think that you aren't because you reached out to me. We need more of that in society, courage to reach out. Anywho, you'll see what I mean when you look where I tell you to. The children come into the country via any number of adoption agencies all with financial ties to a handful of charities funded by Robert Amos, the previous CEO of Dimetricom. He also owns the Transatlantic tower and leases it out to your friend, Feist. His daughter is running for a senate seat. Maybe you should ask her about it. That's the thing with all these do-gooders, man – they're no good at heart. If it wasn't for the politically-correct safe space of our democracy, he'd probably be another Pol Pot! Ha! Sorry about your friend, the guy who fell from the tower. He probably knew too much. You probably know too much. Watch your back, brother. I've got it if

you need me. Oh, and you're welcome to come on the show sometime if that's in the cards for you."

The end of Malak's message rang in my head on the ride over to Cynthia's. I could use him as blackmail, a sort of dead man's switch if I had to. Against Feist. Against anyone.

Was I losing my mind?

"Hello Fiona," I said, finding her seated amidst a backdrop of wilted plants. She held a well-worn copy of a Nancy Drew in her hands. The babysitter had led me out back before returning to her spot on the patio where she listened to music through her voluminous headphones.

Fiona's mouth twitched into a smile. "Not Monday."

I knelt before her. "Not Monday?"

"And poor humming dock," she muttered, staring at the grass. "Doctor not."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand what you're saying."

"But gone."

Fiona got to her feet and began walking toward the patio. Her speech pattern reminded me of some videos I'd seen during a lecture on stroke victims. It was of course a terrible thing to see adults unable to express themselves, but we couldn't help but laugh at the guy who only said "butts."

I placed the electrodes on Fiona's head and administered the oral sedative with her on the couch. I leaned back on the opposite end and loosened the headset strap.

"What the heck is that thing?" said the babysitter, taking up residence at the kitchen counter.

"It's just a game," I replied, dropping the goggles over my head.

CHAPTER 19: ANNE FERGUSON

“What do we know about her?”

They stood beneath the glare of work lights set up as part of the crime scene. It was hard for Anne to tell whether the girl’s eyes were blue or green as their corneas had hazed over, indicating that she had been dead for at least twenty-four hours. Perhaps longer. She had been interred face down in an inflatable kids pool, its pallid blues ostensibly faded by being long left in the sun, a semi-transparent skin enclosing the greenish water that had suspended her clothed body, as if it was a decaying organ within a terminal patient.

The crime scene investigators picked her up and laid her face-up on a vinyl sheet next to the pool. Her pale limbs splayed in every direction and compressed the shaggy grass beneath them. Her bruises told a story – the dark splotches ran in rings around her wrists and ankles. They graced parts of her neck, her cheekbones, her forehead.

She wore a red dress that hugged her shoulders and torso such that it could not be fully buttoned, while the hem ended an awkward distance above her knees. Anne lifted the girl’s head with a gloved hand to expose the tag, which confirmed what she already knew. It was a made for children.

“She’s Guatemalan,” said Jimbo, one of the techs in coveralls. He held a tablet that showed the victim's 325A and profile picture. “Fifteen. Been here a year. Name’s Aalandra.”

“Aalandra,” Anne repeated to herself, attempting to remember it. Of course, she wouldn’t remember; couldn’t, for it was a name belonging to a yet another person she would never know. The name symbolized a body, case files, remnants – pieces of evidence leading in any number of directions, all of it too much to consider at once.

“Any data on the family?” asked Jamison, standing next to her. She hadn’t gotten used to his new uniform, which it seemed was an arsenal of dirt-colored suits.

“Working on it. Real family’s south of the border. The foster parents are somewhere.”

“I’d buy you a drink if you told us where ‘somewhere’ is.”

“You got it,” said Jimbo with his usual verve before he headed off.

Jamison rubbed his eyes. “Probably have to get in touch with the state. Or the adoption agency.”

“Oh, what fun,” Anne said, turning back to the body. It took three to five phone calls to get anywhere with those people. She pulled off her contaminated glove and tossed it on the vinyl, only to replace it with another from her back pocket.

Anne resisted the numbness, but she felt it encroaching on her mind, creeping forward as a mob approaches a picket line. Who was the girl? What was her story? Her hopes and aspirations? It was all too easy to forget the meaningful questions and replace them with procedural ones, becoming harder and harder to look at them as people. As children. Ones deserving of anger and passion and energy to fuel the quest for justice. The hidden deluge of tragedy and atrocity conquered all, for when she looked at the girl’s body, all that came to mind was the tired story of salvation without morals, only suffering.

“You coming inside?” asked Jamison, snapping Anne out of her daze.

“Yeah,” she said, closing her eyes.

“You look like you need a coffee.”

“I’m good, thanks,” she said, stumbling after him. She planned on napping at the station.

The crooked fence with peeling white paint stood just within the aura of the crime scene. They followed it away from the small pool next to the shed, circumnavigating the minefield of

lawn ornaments and old toys dusted with yellow grass. The fence ended beneath a sagging overhang missing shingles. There was a doorway in the yellow siding leading into a room beyond with a faux tile floor and old laundry appliances, lit by naked fluorescent tubes that buzzed as if they were filled with insects.

Dirty dishes filled the kitchen sink and empty beer cans were strewn about the room. The smell was like that of a redemption center combined with a tobacco shop. Some of the cans were filled with cigarette butts. There weren't any family photos as far as Anne could tell. She had already given the place a once-over, including the crawlspace upstairs, which had left her uniform pants quite dusty.

Jamison looked the place over and spun toward her on his heel. "What have you found?"

"Not much," Anne said, yawning. "A few old phones. No other electronics. No weapons of any kind, unless you count this..." She went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet.

Amongst an assortment of over-the-counter drugs and dental hygiene items sat a rusty scalpel.

Jamison leaned forward to scrutinize the medicines. "These aren't very sexy."

"No," Anne agreed. "I did find two packages of Morning After in the smaller bedroom."

They walked to the smaller bedroom, which had a dark green carpet and a bed with beige sheets which looked as if they hadn't been laundered in ages. The walls were ominously bare. She opened the nightstand drawer, revealing a mixture of large socks, men's underwear, and loose blunts. Beyond those items, at the back corner of the drawer, were the two pink boxes, one empty and one unopened.

"I'll notify the coroners," Jamison remarked as he wrote into his small notebook. He turned to Anne. "Anything else?"

“None of the clothes in either of the two bedrooms is suited to a person of her size,” Anne said.

Jamison nodded. “Good observation. You find out who owns the place?”

“He’s currently doing time in the County jail for a DUI.” She showed him her phone which displayed his booking status. “He’s three months into his sentence.”

“Do we have any idea who’s been coming and going?”

“We’d have interview him or the neighbors.”

Jamison huffed and exited through the front door. Anne followed him out. He lit up the empty driveway with his flashlight, revealing a pockmarked concrete surface dusted with the residue of its erosion. “Fuck,” he said. Anne had already checked for a tread pattern. He stepped onto the street and looked at the dwellings to the left and right of the scene. Both residences appeared similarly run-down, with grass growing in their walkways and various items, including furniture, in small piles next to the sidewalk, which looked like moonrocks beneath the streetlight. “Bet these fuckers won’t cooperate.” He sucked on a fat vape machine which he then dropped back into his suit pocket.

Anne looked at the houses. She imagined whoever lived there would be afraid of answering questions.

There was nothing left for them to do but wait for the crime scene to develop so they got into Jamison’s unmarked car, a classic combustion machine that lacked any frills which would make it stand apart.

“I could drop you off at your place,” he offered.

“No thanks,” said Anne, closing her eyes. “Take us back to the station.”

“Your shift ended hours ago.”

“Just drive.”

They trickled through the insipid labyrinth of residences. The streets separating those unimaginative blocks of housing looked like the borders of a life-sized puzzle if viewed from above. After about a dozen stop signs, they encountered the highway, which was par for the course for San Jose’s east side. Like many parts of nature, it was as if a new breed of animal emerged at that time of night. Amidst the thinning passenger traffic roamed the large driverless freighters, appearing only as evolving cubes of red marker lights, which moved through the arteries of the city with inhuman speed and closeness.

“I think I’m going to propose to Ashley,” Jamison said. Anne tried to remember who Ashely was. She remembered a woman with hair dyed two shades too dark with suspicious eyelashes and nails whom Jamison had introduced to her at the last departmental banquet half a year prior. Every part the ordinary civilian.

“That’s great,” Anne said, trying to override the fatigue in her voice with enthusiasm. She couldn’t remember how long he’d said they’d been together, but it hadn’t been more than two years. Her mind drifted to her significant other at the time, whose name she was reluctant to remember. He too had been an ordinary civilian, and the contrast between them had been at first exhilarating.

“I was thinking...I’d like you to be my best man,” Jamison said, glancing at her with a boyish grin. “Or best woman, if you’d prefer that.”

Anne laughed. “It seems like you’re saying that I should get comfortable with being called ‘sir.’”

Jamison shrugged. “You could be my best dude. Or bestie. You have options.”

“No thanks. I’ll take best wo-man.”

“Alright. I can be the ‘best dude’ at your wedding.”

Anne said nothing.

“How long have you and Kody been together?”

“We broke up three months ago.”

Jamison looked at her. She was the only person to ever see him shocked. “Why didn’t you say anything about it?”

“It didn’t take me by surprise.”

“Hmm.” He looked back at the road. “That’s why you’ve been working overtime.”

“Guess so.”

There was something about civilians that made them ordinary – they were too absorbed in the hustle and bustle of work and home life to notice the terrible world around them – the deceit, the corruption, the despotism that plagued all levels of society. They saw it only through the lens of a flatscreen, heard about it through the carefully curated commentary of reporters. She could see it in the people around her; the greed on their lips and the lies shining forth from their eyes, reaching out like apologetic daggers. Everyone was corrupt or on the verge of corruption by some measure. She saw the same in her reflection.

There were only victims and perpetrators.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No,” she said. A moment later, Jamison’s phone dinged with a notification. Anne’s vibrated in her pocket. She read the message. “Looks like you owe Jimbo a beer.”

“That’s his third this month.”

Anne panned to the foster parents’ address on her phone. “You’re gonna love this. They’re in San Bernardino.”

“Great,” Jamison said, drumming his hands on the wheel. They both knew what they had to do. He pulled off the next exit and into the nearest fuel station, which the signs indicated was still equipped for gasoline.

Anne made the necessary calls as he fueled, the first being to the San Diego County Sheriff’s office to see if any missing persons reports had been filed on behalf of the victim. She had the half-awake deputy on duty spell the name five different ways. There was no such report.

Then she phoned Captain Frakes to inform him of their plan.

“Good luck,” he said in his usual ungrateful tone. “I’ll have the interns do some digging on our end. See if we can’t find out anything else about her.”

That was it. Anne put away her phone and reclined the seat. She closed her eyes to mute the harsh overhead light of the station awning, but their painful radiance still seemed like daylight through her eyelids. What awful parents they must be, thought Anne, to not have noticed the girl’s absence. The temptation not to judge had fled long ago, but so had her indignation at people’s callousness.

She awoke to the sound of chewing accompanied by the crinkle of paper and the smell of coffee. It was light out. She found herself facing a winding suburban road lined on both sides with two-story houses decorated with red tile roofs and two-car driveways. The houses were all the same shade of tan, and the vehicles parked in their midst were generally frosted in the chrome of luxury. Anne felt the need to pee. She raised her seat, relieving the pressure on her hips caused by her duty belt. It had gotten a lot lighter since she had graduated from patrol.

“McDonalds coffee still sucks,” said Jamison, spewing a trail of vape out the cracked window. He indicated which coffee was hers.

“Thanks,” she said, taking in the lukewarm beverage. She peered over the brim at the houses up and down the street. It was 7:30. Some children already stood at the foot of driveways, backpacks hugging their shoulders.

“That’s the house,” said Jamison, pointing out a dwelling three houses away from them with his vape. Anne scrutinized the place. A relatively new white Suburban with large rims sat in the driveway – behind it, a basketball hoop loomed. The plants glimmered in the breeze, a healthy green. Dog paraphernalia was strewn amidst the trimmed grass. A folding yellow sign next to the curb read: *SLOW Children at Play*. A sign posted down the street read: *Neighborhood Watch: Report Suspicious Activity*.

“You sure we’re in the right neighborhood?” Anne said, checking her phone. Indeed, they were in the correct location.

“Seems odd, doesn’t it?” said Jamison, swallowing a mouthful of dry McTriscuit. “Hiding in plain sight...oldest trick in the book.”

Anne accessed public records and brought up the deed of the property. The mortgage stretched back almost a decade. “They’ve been hiding for a while.”

The front door opened, and a figure stepped out. Anne sat up. Jamison set down his breakfast and wiped his hands on his slacks.

There were four of them, what appeared at that distance to be two boys and two girls, one darkly skinned and one lightly skinned. Judging by their heights, they ranged in age from adolescence to grade school.

“That’s quite a litter,” said Jamison, undoing his seatbelt.

The adult figure at the door went back inside.

Movement caught Anne's eye. In the rearview mirror, a yellow box approached from behind. It flashed red all over as it stopped for children.

"What are you waiting for?" asked Anne. She had her hand on the door handle.

"The kids are about to leave."

"Shouldn't we question them?"

Jamison nodded. "It's a good thing you slept last night."

They got out of the car. Since she was the one in uniform, Anne took the lead. They would respond better to her anyway.

"Hi," she called out to them. They had watched her since she exited the car. Nonetheless, she sensed that they were surprised to be spoken to by a uniformed officer. She glanced at the house every now and then for signs of movement. It was impossible to see through the glazed windows which reflected the houses across the street.

She flipped open her badge for them to see. "I'm officer Ferguson. This is detective Holt. Do any of you know a girl named Aalandra?"

"Am I in trouble?" said the smallest girl, who had dark skin.

"No sweetie, you're not," Anne said, fumbling for her phone. "Is your last name Enriquez? Are you from Guatemala?"

The girl's head bounced up and down.

"Good morning officers, is something wrong?" Their mother walked toward them along the path from the front door, a woman wearing a fashionable white pants and blouse with long earrings that glimmered in the sun. Her face bore a look of concern.

The school bus pulled up in front of the house. A robotic voice invited the children aboard.

Anne looked to Jamison. He shrugged.

“Are you with the federal government? These children are fully documented, I can assure you of that...”

“No ma’am, we are with the San Francisco police department,” said Jamison, “but you might be able to help us clear a few things up, if you don’t mind.”

The children boarded the bus. Anne watched them go. Their innocence was the most she had seen in anyone for a long time.

CHAPTER 20: DAVID TREMBLE

Cynthia spun on her heel.

“She said, ‘Not Monday,’” I said, turning to Fiona. “Would you mind speaking again for your mother? She would enjoy hearing you talk.”

The girl gave us an expressionless gaze before yawning.

“And then she said, ‘Poor humming dock. Doctor not. But gone.’”

“I have no idea what that could mean,” Cynthia said, exasperated. “We’ve never heard her say anything like that. Anything at all.”

The door to the garage flew open. “What did I miss?” Rose said from the other side of the house.

“She talked...she talked...” Cynthia said, wiping tears from her eyes.

Rose approached us, balling up her windbreaker. “Our baby girl can talk?”

“Yes...”

“Not fluently,” I said, breaking in.

“Jesus Helen Keller, I thought you were all busted up. No crutches?”

That was the name of the disabled girl, not her teacher, but I didn’t bother making the correction.

“Oh shit,” I said, remembering that I’d brought the crutches into the Uber but hadn’t taken them with me. I didn’t feel much pain anyway. “I mean, crap.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna have to watch our language around her now,” Rose said. “Maybe the damage has already been done.”

“Could the damage in her brain which has prevented her from speaking until this point be somehow reversing itself?”

“Anything is possible,” I said, shifting my weight from one foot to the other in response to a sudden onset of soreness. “The brain at her age still has a high degree of neuroplasticity. But we don’t know what caused her loss of function in the first place...” As I said the words, I thought of the MRIs from Hiroto’s research. The 2D scans hadn’t been very revealing, but perhaps a look at the 3D data might make the pathology hidden within those grayscale pixels more obvious.

I began placing the mnetic device back into my bag.

“Well, thanks again, David. Whatever you’re doing seems to be helping.”

“I wouldn’t say that it is at this point. But I have an idea. I’m going to head back to the offices and see if I can figure out what’s going on.”

Rose laughed. “On a Saturday? Look who works banker’s hours.”

Cynthia shook her head.

I texted Looper, expecting a huge amount of resistance to asking for his help on the weekend.

– *Hey, sorry to bother you. Need help again. Meet at office?*

I received his reply about a minute later.

– *No prob. When u need me?*

I told him to meet me in a half-hour. He seemed fine with that.

– *I’ll buy you a beer,* I said back, thinking of what Jamison had said.

Jamison. I couldn’t reconcile the man I saw in Anne’s memory with the guy in my hospital room. He seemed like much less of a shithead through her eyes. Seeing him again would be strange, I thought, for I’d have to act as if I didn’t have a degree of knowledge about his past.

But it wasn't just knowledge that influenced my disposition towards him – I also felt, strangely, as if I could trust him as Anne had. Like he was my partner in crime, or partner in fighting crime.

Perhaps I should have told him everything.

Then I wondered if his involvement in the investigation of Hiroto's death and in my assault wasn't as arbitrary as it had at first seemed. He obviously knew something I didn't, given his work with Anne.

Every step from the tram terminal to the elevator caused me to wince.

Looper was waiting for me on the 47th floor, seated amidst pixel-like square walls of his cubicle. He was grinning.

"Anyone else here?" I asked.

"Naw," Looper said, crossing his arms smugly. "I have a joke for you. Let me see if I can state it correctly. A physician, physicist, and a psychologist walk into a bar. The bartender says that their drinks will be on the house if they can prove to him that free will exists." Looper paused, as if judging my interest.

"Okay," I said, settling into the chair within the cubicle across the aisle from him. I did not want to feign so much interest as to seem enthusiastic about what was to come, but I needed Looper's help, so laughing at his joke in addition to buying him a beer was perhaps a necessary sacrifice.

Then again, with Looper's ilk, there is a tendency to underread social cues.

"So the physician explains that free will exists because some people tolerate chronic illness better than others, that every person makes a choice regardless of their temperament to keep on living or to give in and die. But the bartender is not convinced. Then the physicist speaks up. He says that at the quantum level, the universe operates on the basis of entanglement, that the

deterministic view of Newtonian physics is no longer valid, therefore free will is more than possible within a random universe. The bartender doesn't understand and moves on to the psychologist.”

Looper looked at me as if it was my turn to speak.

“What does the psychologist say?” I asked, wanting to get to the crux of the matter.

“Well, what would you say, David?”

“Me?” I laughed. “I believe that people are biological machines.”

“Come on, man! That's no explanation.”

“Look,” I said, feeling annoyance, “I didn't come here to engage in some pseudo-philosophical discussion about free will.”

Looper held up his hand. “Alright, alright. At least hear the punchline: The psychologist says, ‘I am here with my friends to consume alcohol which will stop me from thinking of my failed marriage. The fact that I will use alcohol to inhibit my ability to think is evidence enough of free will for me. Now give me a damn drink.’”

Looper's eyes were brimming with pride.

“I think you have a future in comedy,” I said, wincing.

He sat up and clasped his hands together. “You know what's really funny? It's the pain that a bad joke can cause.”

I had to chuckle at that. “Maybe jokes aren't your thing. Now, I need your help with something.”

“Something to do with that stolen flash drive?”

“Stolen?” I said, sitting up myself.

“I saved a copy of the files on the drive after I decrypted it. They sure as shit didn’t come from any conference.”

“You’re right. They belonged to Hiroto.”

Looper smiled. It was not his usual incredulous look of happiness, but an unexpectedly cunning expression. “What do you need?”

Ten minutes later we were looking at a pair of bulbous gray masses that were scans of Fiona’s cranium, taken three months apart. Looper sat at the controls, peeling her physiology apart layer by layer, vesicle by vesicle, until all we were left with was the neurological material that stemmed from the photoreceptors and ganglion cells of her eyes to the liminal neurons of her occipital lobe. Upon magnification, the apparently smooth cortical surface broke into distinct columns of neural activity that appeared as transparent vertices penetrating deep within the model.

Rendered in such detail, I was struck, as I was whenever viewing detailed models of the brain, by a feeling of uncanniness at the prospect that all human phenomena could emerge as a consequence of the operations of such a complex and strange organ. There were supposedly more connections between neurons than stars in the universe – perhaps that should have been the punchline to Looper’s joke.

“Man, it’s like this software was written in Chinese,” Looper said, flipping through the multitude of menus within the imaging software.

I pointed at one of the dozen buttons within the viewing window. I recognized the icon. “Give us a section view on the right plane, about three inches from the left.”

“Aye aye, captain,” he said.

The view changed, and we were suddenly viewing Fiona's brain as if a third of it had been cleaved off by a laser.

"Just jiggle that slider a bit," I said.

"Jiggle. That's not a word I expected you to say."

I was looking for anything in either of the scans that seemed anomalous, particularly around Broca's region. Holes, no matter how small, would have been an obvious sign of damage.

"What did you say we're looking for again? Aplasia?"

"It's called aphasia, but that's the name of the disorder."

"These cracks supposed to go that deep?"

"Yes, those are the folds of the cerebral cortex."

"Looks kind of like one of those 'all edges' brownie pans."

"Well, they share the same underlying design principle of increased surface area."

"Ah, makes sense. Should I keep jiggling?"

"Uh, no, you can stop."

It didn't make any sense. If her Broca's region was unaffected, what else could cause her speech to be disordered? If the cause of the problem was to be found, perhaps it resided somewhere else along the neuronal chain.

Rose had said that she also complained of fatigue.

"Change it to a section view from the front, about an inch in."

There it was, a fissure the width of a dime and as thick as a sheet of paper lodged in her prefrontal cortex. The thinness of the feature meant that it had been indiscernible within the 2D images.

"Looks like someone slashed it with a razor," Looper remarked.

The prefrontal cortex facilitates working memory. Somehow, Fiona's working memory was so impaired that she couldn't remember the words she wanted to say. Or even remember what she wanted to say.

"Bring up a scan of one of the other children," I said. There was a laceration located in roughly the same area, but much smaller in diameter.

"Holy shit, dude. What does this mean?"

"I don't know yet."

My eyes flitted between the 'before' and 'after' scans. If anything, the tears seemed bigger in the first set of scans. Perhaps my assumptions about when the scans had been taken were incorrect.

Of course, the abnormalities were a clear indication that the magnetic devices used on those subjects had induced mental defects, but I wasn't about to tell that to Looper. The consistency of damage was too uniform and specific to make a natural disorder likely. Moreover, I'd never seen a brain abnormality of that shape and size occur naturally. But how the devices could cause the damage was also inexplicable – the electromagnets in the devices had neither the size nor the power supply to induce that level of neurological change.

I called Dr. Feist. He answered right away.

We exchanged the usual pleasantries.

"I'd like to take you up on your offer to have dinner tonight, if it's not too late for me to do so."

Feist sounded overjoyed. "Oh yes, of course! I have a friend at the North Point wharf, a man I roomed with at Cambridge. He spoke of a large batch of eel which came in yesterday evening. I can assure you that it will taste quite a bit better than it sounds."

“I don’t believe I’ve ever had eel before.”

“That’s good! I have taken it to heart that human beings age better if they broaden their experiences.”

I laughed cordially.

“It is good to hear that you are in good spirits, David. Should I expect you after six?”

“Yes. And would you mind if I brought a friend?”

“Absolutely not! I’ll text you my address.”

I thanked him and said goodbye.

“Whoa dude, you’re inviting me to Feist’s house for dinner?”

I managed to stifle my laughter. “No. I wasn’t referring to you.”

The enthusiasm drained from Looper’s face. “Wait a minute, you can’t just tell him about what we found out here!”

“Who said I’m going to tell him?”

“Hiroto knew about this, and he died.”

“Maybe the guilt of knowing got to him.”

Looper shook his head. “Yeah, that’s what happened.”

I walked to the elevator and pressed the ‘down’ button.

There was a clatter of plastic. I turned around to see Looper standing in his cubicle, his office chair up against the wall behind him. “If you don’t tell someone about this, I will,” he said, his eyes filled with surprising self-assurance.

“Alright, alright – calm down,” I said, holding up my hands as I approached him. “Look, I know this is important, but we don’t have the whole story yet.”

“We’re messing with people’s brains, man. Kids!”

“No. We’re not. Not all of us.”

“We just saw the scans!”

I walked up to him and put a hand on his shoulder, a part of his body that was surprisingly sweaty, meaning that he was having quite the stress response to our discovery. “Look. We know something’s going on here. But we can’t just come out making wild allegations that could ruin everyone’s career. Let’s wait until we know why this is happening. Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

Looper took a deep breath. “Okay. You’re right.”

“We’re in this together now.”

“Yeah, we are.”

“Now let’s call it a night.”

I walked him over to the elevator which was waiting on our floor. We rode it down to the lobby and exited through the park-side doorway, where I bid him farewell.

I strolled down the stone path leading out from the structural trellises at the base of the building and sat on one of the park benches beneath a pair of fairly tall trees turning amber. A gust of wind raked the foliage, causing my surroundings to shimmer with the cool light of the cloudy sky and the leaves to break out in a botanical applause. Moments later a slew of them fell from their branches, landing in swaths along the stone paths and amidst the smaller plants which seemed to be experiencing their own form of death and rebirth. I was allowing my feet to rest before making the journey to Andrea’s. It was slightly chilly, which was to be expected for that time of year.

How would things end between us, I wondered. That is, if they were ever to begin. I imagined that, given her busy work schedule and the quantity of new information she dealt with

on a daily basis, she would at some point become bored of me. Perhaps she was not inclined to have kids, or perhaps that objective was so distant in the future that it had no bearing in the judgement of my character. I envisioned the slow and painful dissolution of the ethereal and evanescent bond which drives people together. The death of romance. The impermanence of biochemical states. I was reminded of a related concept, Calhoun's Behavioral Sink, a phenomenon observed in his 'rat cities' – interconnected straw-filled living spaces surrounded by towering walls where food and water flowed abundantly down tubes and dispensers toward the carpet of flowing flesh. The animals ate and bred, healthily growing in their numbers until a critical mass was reached. Mothers neither cared for their young, nor did they desire to, and were pursued endlessly by the hypersexual males. Among the males, there were those who gave up on pursuing mates – the somnambulists and pansexuals. Members of the former group were known for their aimless wandering of the pens, while the latter slept amongst females but did not mate with them, often attempting instead to mate with dominant males, that small group of genetically superior and physically stronger rodents which guarded the females for themselves. And then there was the group Calhoun referred to as the 'probers,' aggressive deviants who challenged the dominants and often cannibalized the young in their quest for reproduction. Any surviving rats were too traumatized by the social milieu of rat city to function normally even after being moved to a new habitat.

If one is faced with the prospect of being a somnambulist, a pansexual, a dominant, or a prober, is there a most ethical choice?

The clouds it seemed had released the evening sun, causing it to glint harshly off one of the nearby towers, a rectangle of glass dominating the street below as the walls of Calhoun's pens had dominated his straw enclosures.

“Hey,” I said breathlessly, having called Andrea. I was on my way out of Transamerica Park. “Is now a good time?”

“Yeah! I’m just leaving work. What’s up?”

I imagined her smiling as she walked, her hair bouncing with every step.

I told her that I’d been invited to dinner by Dr. Feist.

“Oh,” she said.

“Would you like to come along? I understand if that would be too much for you.” I winced at my phrasing. “Well not too much – too strange maybe, since...you know...”

She laughed. I was unsure of whether it was a laugh of enthusiasm or one of uncertainty. “Um, well...I suppose I haven’t had dinner with many Fortune five-hundred CEOs. Or geniuses for that matter.”

“Alright,” I said, laughing with her. “I’ll see you soon, then. I’m headed back to your place.”

She had already changed into something nice by the time I’d arrived. My best outfit consisted of a wrinkled shirt that had been stuffed in a suitcase and somewhat less wrinkled pair of khakis. There wasn’t time to iron anything. She asked me a few questions about Feist, and this made me realize how little I knew about him. I didn’t know whether he was married or had a family. His educational and professional history was a mystery to me, other than dates of graduation and that he had numerous peer-reviewed publications. I had thought of him in the same way that anyone else thinks of a public figure – as a kind of abstraction beyond the horizon. Of course, it is impossible to perceive the immense complexity around a person’s existence just by looking at him. Yes, he was a man, and a wealthy one at that, but we are often

oblivious to the nested social structures surrounding a person that define the possibilities of their existence.

“You never know,” I said, half-joking. “He might offer you a job.”

“Yeah,” she said, with some sarcasm in her voice. “My knowledge of science would sure be useful to him.”

I sat with my weight on the couch’s armrest. She stood with her back flat against the wall across from me with her eyes closed, something she said she did to compensate for slouching in front of a computer all day.

“Did you find out anything new today?” asked Andrea, letting her shoulders come forward.

“I think I did. Looper and I – one of the techs I work with – went through some of the MRIs today.”

“Looper – ha – what a strange name. That’s not his real name, is it?”

“It’s what he goes by,” I said with a shrug.

“Sorry. What was it about the MRIs? I thought you’d already looked at those.”

“The 2D scans, yes, but these were 3D and can only be viewed through special software.”

“So...what’s up with them?” she said, opening her eyes.

“Well, I guess you could call it brain damage.”

Andrea’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Maybe Hiroto killed himself out of guilt,” I speculated, “or he was killed to cover it up.”

“What kind of brain damage are we talking about?” she said, pushing off the wall towards me.

I found it hard to meet her gaze. “I don’t know. It looked bad, but I’m not a neuroscientist. That’s Feist’s field.”

“Jesus, David. Is that what this whole last-minute dinner thing is about?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it is.”

“Fuck. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shook my head, feeling ashamed. “I don’t know.”

The somnambulists were characterized by their shiny coats of fur and outward healthy appearance. In some ways, they were the most peculiar rats of all, with a pathology that was both invisible and omnipresent.

I got up and rummaged through my bag for the packet of hypogen. I felt Andrea’s eyes on me as I went, but I didn’t care. There was only one left. I snapped it from the packet with too much force and it flew onto the couch and rolled behind one of the cushions. I swore and tore at the block of fabric until the red gel capsule was secure between my fingers. I felt her judgement on me like one feels the ultraviolet radiation of the sun, invisible rays burning the flesh.

The first three cabinets contained no glasses, so I stuck my mouth beneath the running faucet. I’d swallowed the pill but had gotten water all over shirt in the process. I couldn’t find any towels in the vicinity of the sink, so I resorted to patting the splotches with my shirtsleeve.

Andrea observed me from the counter. She looked afraid, which made me feel even more guilty.

What was the next logical step? What was most logical?

“Thanks for having me over,” I said, shutting off the sink, which I realized was still running. “And for making breakfast. And helping me pack.”

“You’re welcome...” she said, frowning.

“But I think I should be going.”

She seemed to recoil at that statement.

That was the best option, to forget about it, to forget everything and move on with my work. Let someone else discover whatever truth there was, for it wasn't worth the destruction of my career or my sense of self. I wasn't worthy of the truth – I lacked the genetic fortitude for bearing it.

I brushed past Andrea without looking at her and began stuffing my belongings back into the closest open bag.

“What are you doing?” asked Andrea.

“What does it look like I'm doing?” I said, closing the last zipper.

She didn't answer my question. Instead, she planted herself in my way.

“Excuse me,” I said, nudging her aside.

She wouldn't budge. “You can't just run away from this.”

“Why not?”

“Doesn't the truth mean anything to you?”

I sighed. “Of course, it does.”

“Then why are you afraid of it?”

I made the mistake of looking her in the eye, which flooded my brain with endorphins and caused a shiver to run down my spine.

“The truth is relative,” I said, unaware for the most part of what I was trying to say.

“That's not what you said the other day.”

I didn't remember what I had said the other day. A sense of calm began to fall over me like a blanket of snow – I had begun to metabolize the hypogen. Blinking several times, I found myself looking into her eyes again, wondering what was in them, or behind them.

I felt the faintest urge to touch her mouth with my lips. Our faces were only inches apart, but the greater valence of her body seemed to have vanished from my subjectivity.

“I should get going,” I said, turning my head.

“Suit yourself.” She sounded defeated. “Are you still going to Feist’s?”

“Yes. But not to have dinner.”

I stepped toward her apartment door and was about to twist the handle.

Then she laughed, which caught me by surprise.

“What’s so funny?”

“You know, our first date was the best time I’ve had in a while. Even with that last part.”

“I enjoyed your company as well.”

“I get the sense that the person I met never existed.”

“I suppose he never did,” I said, feeling a pang of remorse. I knew that statement wasn't true, nor was it the right thing to say, but said it anyway as an excuse to get away. Perhaps getting away wasn't what I really wanted, but I wasn't in the state of mind to see it any other way.

“Goodbye,” I said, unsure of what I'd just done.

I walked away from her apartment, along the sidewalk until my ride pulled alongside me.

The road ended at a black iron gate which automatically parted at the middle, splitting at the vertex of two parabolic lengths of metal with bar work beneath the curves that resembled the vertical lines of a Riemann summation. The bars were tipped with spear-shaped cones which would have discouraged climbers. Not that anyone would have a problem trespassing the property – the walls to the left and right of the gate stood at only a few feet in height and ended after several yards, leaving the surrounding expanse of orange plant litter studded by the occasional smooth redwood without obstruction.

The bars of the gate shimmered as they rotated in the car's headlights. Beyond the bars the brownish grey ghosts of the redwoods floated amidst a sea of their seasonal excrement. The road flowed up one of the mountain's gullies, turning to stone – a trail of smooth river rocks that slid beneath the tires with a sound that could only be described as earthly laughter.

“Surprised that anyone lives up here,” said the Uber driver, the only thing he had said since he had picked me up on the side of the road.

“Why's that?” I asked, shaken by the broken silence. The sun had just set and there were no other sources of illumination along the path. My eyes had become the swath of light before us.

“This used to be public land.”

“Oh?”

“Public land doesn't usually end up in private hands. Usually goes the other way round.”

He was taking it slow on the stones for some reason. It was a few minutes before Feist's estate was visible, at first appearing to me as the corner of a monstrous cube amidst the foliage, divorced from its surroundings like an anthropogenic cancer in the wilderness. There were no

windows through which light could be emitted. A glowering yellow tint touched the grounds, emanating from a slit close to the grade.

The path ended in a loop before the property. The driver came to a stop at its apex.

I still had my suitcase and bag with me, which contained the Mnetic device. I didn't want to bring my things into Feist's house.

I asked the driver if he would wait for me.

"Buddy, this was already a long haul. Hire a robot next time."

I pulled a twenty from my wallet. "I'll give you this now, and another one when I get back."

His eyes lit up. "How long we talking?"

"I don't know. Half-hour to an hour."

"Ain't got no service out here."

"I'll give you thirty when I get back."

He smirked. "Never seen one of you young people carry that much cash."

I watched his car pull away from me down the drive and recorded his license plate number into the notes on my phone, just in case he didn't return. I wondered if fifty dollars was too much or not enough value for his time. On the one hand I had asked him to go above and beyond the obligations of his service, but fifty dollars an hour was more than I'd probably ever make as an academic, and he didn't seem to be the kind of person who possessed of an intellect capable of producing an amount of value deserving of that wage.

The cool Fall air infiltrated my thin attire as I walked clockwise around the structure until I found the entryway, a black rectangle recessed into the gray concrete. The house was more than just a cube, but a series of conjoined and windowless rectangles that sprawled into the woods

toward a break in the trees. There were no cars in sight, no outward signs of humanity, save for several raised beds of earth which were almost sterile in their uniformity.

Feist had instructed me to let myself in. The thing that appeared to be an entrance lacked a handle or any obvious means of interacting with it. As I reached out to its metallic surface, it suddenly and soundlessly popped inward, revealing a hallway that was surprising in its warmth. The floor consisted of wooden planks solid underfoot which exuded an amber hue that crawled up the white walls only to be obliterated by the glass ceiling, which gave one a view the night sky amidst the surrounding treetops. The hallway was far taller than it was wide, giving one the impression of looking up from a crevice. The door began to close automatically, sealing itself with a hermetic slip of the tongue.

I walked down the hallway toward the door at the other end, a much more conventional-looking slab of wood, unable to ignore my reflection in the glass above, as if I was my superego looking down on my bodily self. I was, however, distracted by the room's only other feature, the series of smallish paintings on the right side of the hall by contemporary artists who had yet to die and become famous – or the more probable alternative – be forgotten. Each was grotesque in its own way, comically depicting a chimerical figure in the act of consuming some occupied building, vehicle, or archetypal phone booth, hinting at some on-the-nose commentary about the state of modernity.

“My granddaughter,” said Dr. Feist. I turned to see him standing in the distant doorway. “Her work, in her early teens.”

“Impressive,” I said, searching for the kind of enthusiastic compliment one gives to demonstrate their thoughtful awareness. “She’s an artist?”

Feist smiled. “I suppose she is.” It was a blind smile, an overly enthusiastic smile, as if he had betrayed his inner feeling. “What of your friend?”

“She had prior obligations,” I said, smiling out of a sense of necessity.

“That’s too bad. Come, come.”

The ceilings throughout the house were transparent, giving one the sense that they were walking through trenches. Some of the rooms were round and organic in shape – without any sharp edges or parallel surfaces. Feist talked about the house as he went, explaining how it had been designed by a European firm around a set of psychological principles concerning space and time. We passed through a garage space, where a rather mundane sedan was parked, surprisingly, to get to the living quarters. I had been caught off-guard by his attire, which consisted of a pair of shimmering black pants that looked like pajamas and a matching top that came together in a deep V below his neckline. He wore slippers which encircled his ankles with puffs of white fur.

My palms ran with sweat. My subconscious recognized that I had entered the beast’s lair.

“Are you an only child, David?” he asked as we arrived at an arrangement of family photos, the first of which depicting him next to a bride in a white gown, followed by children at various stages of growth.

I told him that I was.

“Ah, I suspected that you were. I was as well. It’s an unfortunate consequence of civilization, that we can afford to breed below the replacement rate. And children are more isolated now than ever, due to the way we socialize. That’s why I made sure to have three.”

I asked him how his children were doing.

“Fine, to be sure,” he said, nodding and smiling in a way that hinted at some underlying sadness. I wondered if he thought of the researchers as children – if he saw me as his child.

There was only one picture of his wife – the wedding photo. I glanced down and saw that between the pair of rings on his right hand, neither was a wedding band.

“My wife stayed only as long as was necessary.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, unsure of what else to say.

“We provided them with a stable environment into adolescence. I understood her desire. Like many people my age, I didn’t understand myself well into adulthood, and even then it took a great deal of work to push aside my pesky illusions. I marvel at the transparency with which your generation sees itself. It’s an intergenerational struggle. With greater self-knowledge, people are more likely to be empathic.”

“Indeed, it is,” I said, wondering if I was as transparent to myself as Feist seemed to believe. Or was I transparent to myself in the right way? We probably weren’t even thinking of the same things.

I thought of the Uber driver waiting somewhere down the drive and questioned the timing of the conversation I planned to have. I opened my mouth to speak, but it would have been a drastic turn in conversation for me to begin talking about brain scans.

Instead, I told him that I thought of myself as a machine.

He listened with eyes narrowed, the creases of his forehead rendered solid as the long grainy strips in the floorboards.

“That is a powerful and persuasive thesis. I’ve had similar thoughts, but I’m curious about how it makes you feel.”

“Feeling?” I said, “That’s just a result of the limbic system acting in response to stimuli.”

Feist laughed. It was a deep, throaty laugh that I hadn’t expected from him. “Of course, of course, that makes sense. Well, you must be hungry, then.”

We continued down the length of the house, walking up a handful of stairs to an elevated space where the glass ceiling flowed beyond one of the uppermost corners and constituted one of the walls. The bridge to Oakland was visible in the distance, preceded by the dark bay and the cloistered points of light belonging to the homes of the valley below. In the foreground on the table sat a transparent tank filled with steaming water. Suspended within was the eel, a dark and freckled strip of flesh tightly embraced by plastic, its inhuman eyes wide with lifeless panic.

Feist stood behind a countertop which spanned the length of the room, with his back to a legion of shiny kitchen appliances arranged on and within the interior wall. “It seems as if your driver has not left the premises,” he said, looking up from a handheld screen. “Might you have forgotten something? Or were you not planning on staying for long?”

My heart jumped in my chest and a haze fell over my mind – symptoms of the involuntary fight-or-flight response to the subconscious perception of threat.

“No. I was not planning staying long. In fact, I didn’t come for dinner.”

All emotion fell from Feist’s face. “Why did you come all this way?”

I swallowed, feeling anticipation build within myself – a flush of norepinephrine. “After Hiroto died, I began digging into his research. I found a flash drive containing the MRIs of some of my test subjects.”

Feist leaned against the countertop with both hands, still an emotionless slate. “And you saw that some of the children are damaged?”

I nodded and could not meet his gaze. My eyes gravitated towards the dead eel.

“Your curiosity is understandable, given the controversial nature of our work.” He stepped out from behind the counter. “Yes, their brains were damaged. We have settled out of court in a number of cases.”

“Children are used because of their increased neuroplasticity.”

“That is partly the reason.”

I glanced in his direction and saw, to my surprise, some fear in his expression. People often do stupid things when they are afraid, I thought – it was part of the survival instinct.

“I’m sorry that I looked at his data. It was a breach of protocol and trust. I hope that I can continue my work and just forget about this whole thing.”

“Oh, really,” he said. His look of fear had transformed into one of amazement, and then pleasure. “Well of course you can continue your work.”

I breathed out in relief. “I believe in our mission. Even if our work comes at a cost, I still think it’s worth it.”

“Yes indeed,” Feist said quickly, spinning on his heel. He dipped behind the counter and set on its surface a bottle of whiskey and two highball glasses. “Let’s drink to that,” he said, pouring a finger in each cup. He handed me the crystal. “To progress,” he said, and touched his glass to mine.

My drink of choice had always been something other than liqueur, and I struggled to keep a straight face while downing it.

“Oh, David. Now that I know that you’re committed to progress, I think you should begin doing real research now.”

He was smiling, and I was smiling too, and my anxious energy faded in the face of this mutual communicative experience, transforming into a kind of bliss that I had not felt in a long time, not since I thought I was going to have sex the night I met with Andrea, not since I had thought I would sate the state of longing which had existed for as long as I could remember. That

feeling was beyond the interactions of molecules within my brain, beyond any such explanation.

It was meaning.

“Tell me more,” I said.

CHAPTER 21: NEIKO PLEMONS

Maybe I do got a real problem, I'm thinkin', cause I'm outta prison and supposed to feel good, right? Freedom equals good, don't it? Well, I ain't exactly free, cause I got my probation terminology pinned up on my fridge with these cutesy magnets I got from the MILF store along with some plates and silverware so I don't have to karate-chop my chicken in half. Oh yeah, I got chicken too, and boxes of waffles, and a whole bunch of applesauce to balance out my food pyramid. But I'm kinda pissed cause I figure out it's baby food on the bus ride home, and I was wondering why it was so far away from the fruit aisle. Well, it's probably got ten times the calcium of any kind of apple.

I saw the camera dangling over my head at the checkout. The checkout showed an image of me from the top down, like they want me to know that I was watching them watching me, like haha fuck you don't try and sneak an onion. But I'm also seeing the top of my head, that there's more of it showing through my hair more than there should've been, so I'm feeling up there for the thinness, and I'm *feeling it*, that I'm *old*, that it's right there on the top of my fucking dome. What in the fucking fuck. Ain't that the point though? Prison don't just make you bored, you'll also be less alive when you come out the other side.

I'm thinking they took something else too, or that I lost it somehow. I'm looking at all the people in these aisles, buying zoom zooms and wham whams that they planning on shoving down their mouth holes, maybe in front of the television, and I'm wondering, what the fuck do they do all day? This chick has a long coat on that covers her junies. I follow her around a bit to see what she's getting. A bunch of green shit, a frozen pizzas, canned green shit, red shit, eggs, milk, and licorice. Then she sees me and gets this look in her eye like she's about to be murdered and turned into sausage. I must give off a skinny balding dude vibe. In fact, everyone seems to

keep away from me, like I got a disease or something. I just have no idea what the fuck they are, these people-things, like I never been one myself. And they look so afraid, like those herd animals when they see the tiger in the tall grasses. Like they got everything to lose.

That's when I think that there's a kind of freedom if you ain't got shit, if you ain't nobody and ain't got nobody. That I ain't a slave to no one.

So maybe I shouldn't want freedom? That's some kind of bullshit. What else should I want?

I'm afraid of something too and it's eating me up inside. I got Candice's number. I think of calling it but don't, cause somehow I know that she's out there, with her herboyvore friend, buying eggs or something.

I snuck a job application from the supermarket and the MILF store. Sure, I'd like to check out MILFs, but they probably ain't gonna feel the same way about it.

So it's me all by my lonesome with a boneifide limp dick about an hour before my curfew, which makes me feel like a kid all over again. I turn on the tube and start watching people bust their asses doing stupid shit like skating down handrails, swinging into the water, or jumping from moving cars. And I'm thinking of myself watching these montages like I'm one of them, the people too afraid to go out and live the shit.

Do I want it or don't I want it? I ain't ever gonna be great working at the MILF store.

I found Safa's place in the 'yellow pages' after I got all that probation. Wasn't too hard, cause I already knew where to look. She hides her teeth when she smiles in her photos, but I can still see the bulges of her crooked teeth behind her lips cause I know they're there. Her hiding them makes her even more hot somehow, the fact that she ain't gorgeous and she knows it and is afraid of it. That's the thing though, I ain't afraid, just afraid of being afraid, or afraid of being

afraid of being afraid – yeah, I think that makes more sense, cause the layers explain why my fear of freedom is so fucking confusing. She knows suppliers who know dealers who probably know some other kind of jerk that can help me make an honest living. If I can avoid getting tossed back into the slammer, I know I can make bank.

Once I got bank, she ain't gonna be able to stop me from sucking on her molars.

I start thinking of all them in the supermarket, seeing 'em all grazing, like a butcher thinks of his cows. Maybe like how a dealer thinks of his buyers, these stupid fucks who can't get it out of their system. People who ain't free.

As I get going, I kinda wonder if my card's gonna work on the bus or if the SWAT team's gonna start crawling out the manhole covers cause it's past my curfew time. So I nuke my arm for a good fifteen seconds till it's nice and raw. And I have to wonder if I keep doing it, what's gonna happen to my arm? If it's gonna start rotting off from the inside or something, that's even more reason that I gotta keep my shit together and make the fucking bank.

It ain't a minute before I found her place, this three-story block house near the downtown that's the last place I'd break into cause it's the kinda locale where you'd expect to find single moms and prostitutes, or single-mom prostitutes. Ain't much point in preying on the weak if all it gets you is birth control pills and a dab of cocaine.

Not sure what unit she's in, so I pull an old trick from my sleeve. About a second later I've got my phone with the DinerDispatch app in my right hand and a bag with three burgers and a buttload of fries in my left for an order in her name. Thing is, I gotta let myself into the building somehow before I start asking where she's at. So I wait next to a trash can like a dumb fuck on my phone until I see this old fart with a face melted by cancer go walking up to the door and buzz himself through.

“Hey, hey,” I’m saying, running up to him with the app out like it’s my badge or something. He’s lived long enough to probably not give a fuck and lets me in. Single mom prostitutes and old farts it is then.

I dunno why I bought three burgers, cause that’s a lot of meat for one lady to eat. But naw, I got three burgers cause there’s her, there’s me, and there’s her boy with the name I can’t fucking remember, but I see it in my mind, this beautiful thing that’s the three of us sat around a table eating the excuse that I used to break into the place.

I’m deep between these creme-colored walls which are just wide enough for a pair of grandmas to race with their walkers. The doors ain’t marked or anything, and I don’t wanna catch flak for going through the mail.

There’s this skinny chick with black hair obviously dyed and she clutches her bag when she sees me, like she’s got a gun or stunner in it or something. I play it cool and ask her where Safa lives.

“Don’t know her. Sorry.”

“Oh, cool. My name’s Jason. What’s yours?”

Her shoulder tells me to kill myself. Huh. I always thought Jason had good pizza guy vibes.

I keep truckin’. There’s a chill dude in blue overalls down the hall, by the elevator. He’s got a tool bag and a wrench that looks like it could fuck me up as good as it unfucks the plumbing. Probably a couple hundred dollars right there.

“Bro, I’m looking for a chick named Safa. I got no idea which unit she’s in, and there’s only five minutes left before I lose my commission.”

Dude smiles. Nice guy – probably doesn’t notice when girls cheat on him.

“Uh, yeah, I fixed her sink a month ago. She’s on the second floor...221 I think.”

I’m stood there, wondering if ‘fixing her sink’ is a euphorism for dicking.

“Thanks, buddy. I’ll try not to clog it.”

I’m laughing on the inside as I skip up the stairs which has this peeling flooring that goes crunch crunch crunch.

I knock on 221. My heart’s thumping like it’s got a hard-on. Oh man, I’ve been waiting for this moment. This shadow eclipses the peephole and I straighten up. The bag of burgers bangs into my knees. It’s like I’m on a first date, like I’m a virgin all over again.

The door opens but it’s held by the chain.

“Uh, hello? What can I do for you?”

Fucking pipe bro.

“Oh, hi, I guess I got the wrong place. Got a delivery for a girl named Safa. Can you tell me where she’s at?”

She smiles and shuts the door.

“Please, can you help me find her? I’ve got three minutes until –”

A couple clicks later and the door’s open again.

“I’m her roommate,” says smokey eyes.

“Oh,” I say, kinda surprised. This girl’s short and kind of compensating with all the makeup. She’s got one of those faces where her top mouth is way ahead of her chin, like she’s related to the royal family or something, cause they all got weird faces, at least in the social studies books I read as a kiddo. Well, it makes sense that they’re roomies – hot girls always flock together, am I right?

“So, are you gonna give me that?”

“Uh, is she home? I’d rather give it to her.”

“No. But she’ll probably be here in a few minutes.”

“Oh, ok. Mind if I come in and wait?”

She gives me this look. “Yeah, sure. Come in.”

Her place makes me wonder they give places like mine to ex-cons – maybe it’s their way of making up for the shit sandwich that is prison and life afterwards. It’s a long and skinny place and the walls are dark blue with holes in the surface from all the previous assholes hanging up their sentimental photos and dumb artwork that tricks them into thinking their ordinary and boring lives were actually fun and some kind of poetic.

I take a look around and see through the doorway to her kid’s room, where there’s these glow in the dark stars all over the wall that make it look like someone shanked a ghost in there. He’s got some paperbacks on a scratched-up table over there next to a light without a lampshade that are as ragged as a deck of cards that’s made its way round the housing unit one too many times.

There’s dirty plates stacked all over the kitchen area. A big cum stain runs down the wall over where the sink is, probably below where the other sink is upstairs. The couches which used to be leather are as cracked all over as a pimp’s knuckles.

“What’s your name?”

“Uh,” I say, wondering if I should tell her my real or if I should go with Jared for the time being, which sounds way less pizza and more delivery guy. “I’m John. What’s yours?”

That look again. “I’m Sam. I know who you are. You don’t have to lie about your name.”

Uh-oh. She's keen on something, and it ain't ever good in my book when a girl's keen, cause she's keen even though she knows that I'm full-on ape compared to her, she's got an upper hand.

She's closed the door behind me, like the wolfspider before it sucks up its prey. I got the weird feeling that I never thought I'd feel out of prison, the spidey sense that a shakedown's coming.

"Okay, whatever you say," I say, staying where I'm at.

"She said you'd come one of these days, now that you're out."

"Did she?"

"You're that guy from prison, Neiko."

I take a step toward her. She's still stood next to the door and doesn't budge. "Yah, ok I'm that guy Neiko. Want a burger?"

"She doesn't deal anymore, if that's what you're here for. We're both out of that life."

"Good for you. She's on her way here, right?"

"Yep," Sam says, crossing her arms. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

I laugh. "What? No. I need work. Maybe you can help me."

"I can't. Like I said, we both left that life behind."

I plonk down on the closest scabby couch. "Hah, well okay. Are you two like girlfriends or something?"

"No, but we've been through a lot together."

"Ok," I say, not sure where to go from here. Sam sits down on the other couch, far away from me. "So, uh, you dealt too?"

Sam shakes her head. "I had a different hustle."

“Oh yah? You seem like a high-ticket item.”

“Maybe she was right about you,” she says, suddenly all kinds of uppity. “If that’s all you’re about, you should leave.”

“Just take it as a compliment,” I say with a chuckle. I’m looking her over, wondering what she wants with me.

“She’s not going to help you deal either.”

“That’s not my game,” I say. “So what do you do for a living now that you’re clean?”

“I started part-time at the pet store about a month ago. Had the night shift at the laundromat down on seventh ave for about a year now. Even when I worked the street I also did inventory at JC Penny downtown.”

I couldn’t help but smirk. “Sounds miserable.”

Sam lets out a sigh. “I started a Ditsy page awhile back...I’ve been saving up for so I can lease a storefront in Northside.” She gets up and sets this plastic box in front of me on the table full of these artsy fartsy things.

“Beads?” I say, pulling out a clunky string of things.

“Those are onyx. These ones are basalt. The red in them comes from the iron content.”

I slide it over my wrist, dreaming for a second that I just stepped out of a pyramid.

“How much is one of these?”

“Fifty dollars.”

“Not too bad for a string of rocks,” I say with a little too much giddiness. Then I think of making a joke involving anuses, but she’s already kind of peeved. And it’s the first time I’ve talked to a girl in practically forever, which is nice.

“Actually, they’re held together with a silver-plated herringbone.”

“Wow. That’s fancy.” I let the beads slide back into the little cubby they came from. It occurs to me that they might be good for breaking windows or for smashing someone in the face.

“Got any versions for dudes?”

She lifts out another set of tiny brown balls that look more like the collected works of a dung beetle.

“Hemlock treated with oil of Mink. According to Indian legend, the Hemlock tree helps one find his inner strength.”

“That’s your sales pitch?” I’m holding the beads, which are tied together with a grassy strand.

“Some people buy it,” she says with a shrug.

“Well, you sold me. How much?”

“Twenty bucks, but I’ll give you a discount.”

“Really?” says I with a laugh. “I’d buy it if I had any cash.”

Then the door opens, and I look up to see Safa and her boy standing in front of the creme-colored backdrop. I know I’m smiling.

“Christ,” she says, only to turn and drop her heavy purse on a rickety side table. The boy looks at me like I’m an alien. She whispers something in his ear and pushes him into his room.

He watches me the whole time, even as she shuts the door in his face.

I get to my feet and put my hands up, like I’m at gunpoint or something.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to say hello.”

“No, you didn’t. What’s in the bag?”

“Food?” I say, removing the cartons and lining them up in a row next to the box of jewelry. Sam closes the box and goes to put it away.

“Look, whatever you think you’re doing...”

Some girls look so hot when they’re pissed. I don’t think I’ll ever know why.

“Why did you let him in?” she asks of Sam.

“I didn’t see the harm in it,” Sam says, way too cool for comfort.

“Look, I just need your help,” I say, getting closer to Safa.

“Well, sorry, but I can’t help you there.”

“Just a name, phone number, a place, anything.”

“What if he went through the program?” Sam says to her.

“Pfft. Neiko’s not that type. He’ll never get clean.”

“Program?” I say, looking between them. “Like alcoholics anonymous? Rehab? I haven’t been out long enough to be an addict!”

Safa rolls her eyes. And she yanks open the door. “Neiko, I don’t have the time or patience or desire to deal with you right now. Please leave before I call the cops.”

She’s got that crazy look to her eyes, the look that says she’ll burn down your house and slash your tires if it gets her what she wants.

“Alright, alright. I’m leaving,” I say, shimmying past her. I look back and see that I’ve left the food on the table. Fuck the burgers, she can have them.

I catch her eye as I’m doing the shimmy and I feel something, like the first time I knew I was headed behind bars, like I’m getting locked into something, or locked out of something in her case. Her heart. Her life. Fuck, I’m old.

Then I'm out on the street, looking up at the window to her place, which is next to the sink and the rotting water-infected wall. Cars stream in front of me. People behind me. And I'm thinking of all the times, all the happy dreams of her when I was naked and alone, and I never thought she'd crush my balls in that way, like I was never someone that she'd known, someone that she'd used at least. I'd be happy if she just used me, but now it's a whole other thing. What the fuck is it? What did I want in the first place?

I remember hate, and I want to hate her, to go up there and write all over her bedsheets. But it's like one of those memories that you can't remember, a porno stuck in 360p that's no fun to watch. I can't hate her cause of it. It's like she's on a whole other level, way above me, closer to the stars.

I guess I am in love with her, cause that's the only reason she could destroy me.

"Neiko?"

Sam's crossing the street to me. What the hell?

"We all have the power to choose, Neiko."

"What the hell are you on about?"

She hands me the beads, like she's some kind of priest making me drink the jizz of Jesus before asking me to spew all my sins. She's got nun written all over her face.

"The program run by Habitus. It will change you."

CHAPTER 22: ANNE FERGUSON

In every station she'd ever worked in, the morgue and autopsy room had been located in the basement. In this city, it was located on the second floor. Anne rode up the freight elevator which had a floor stained and pockmarked with the transport residue of any number of fatalities. No one expects to be dead, and no one expects the contents of their body to become a question within a larger web of questions. It was the underworld, which was why it made the most sense for the morgue and its ancillaries to be located belowground.

“So, what've we got?” she said, approaching Jamison and the pretty woman in her thirties who was the senior pathologist. Anne had expected some old white guy who was just a little less dead than the people he dissected – such had been the case in Los Angeles county.

“Wait till you hear this,” said Jamison.

On the gurneys before them lay the three girls, the last of them being Aalandra, whose appearance was unchanged in the week that had passed since the discovery of her body. Lying next to the girls her age, however, her body appeared different somehow, more like a product on store shelving before it is purchased, one of many, congruent with the demographic itself; the curvature of collar bones, the small dip in each shin below the kneecap, their abrupt chins and the small troth between their lips and noses.

It seemed that she'd left the urge to vomit in that Oakland hotel room.

Anne looked to the pathologist. “Hear what?”

“The victims have one thing in common despite the varying circumstances of death.” The pathologist led them over to a wall-mounted display. She brought up the full-body scans of the deceased. “Intercranial hematoma.”

Anne's gaze flitted from corpse to corpse. "So they all experienced head trauma?" she asked, leaning closer. The dark areas were smaller than the computer's cursor.

"Ah, but the exact same kind of head trauma. Right hemisphere, front brain. I wouldn't have noticed it if full-body MRIs weren't standard procedure around here." The pathologist shrugged. "I couldn't sleep last night."

"Neither could I," Anne said, turning to Jamison. "Is there anything about these other two women that links them to Aalandra?"

Jamison shrugged. "Apart from the brain thing, no. They were found in different places, weeks apart. The other two are naturalized citizens. I was wondering if you had any ideas."

"Nope," Anne said, nervously running her hand through her hair. Yet another complication for the skeletal narrative of Aalandra's death. She felt her mind begin to float away, into an abyss of human depravity.

"The injury is too uniform for it to be a coincidence," the pathologist said. "The same person or group of people is behind these homicides. I'd bet money on it."

Jamison laughed. "I wouldn't make a habit out of it. With the number of unsolved cases around here, you'll retire penniless."

"What would a lobotomy look like on that thing?" Anne said, nodding at the screen.

"Jeffrey Dahmer?" said Jamison with a look of bemusement.

"Uh, a cult of copycat killers? Who knows?"

"Oh no, a lobotomy would be much more obvious. This is subtle. But it's not an accident." The pathologist sighed. "I can look through the records to see if other abnormalities were detected in other victims."

Anne and Jamison thanked her and left the morgue.

“I was thinking that we could look through the case files for the two other women and see if we can come up with any commonalities,” Jamison said as they waited for the elevator.

“Actually, I think I’ve discovered something about Aalandra,” Anne said as the doors parted. “I heard back from the state office yesterday. Both the office and the adoption agency have forms for the six-year-old we found in San Bernardino and the fifteen-year-old in the morgue.” She was about to continue when she noticed Jamison smiling at her. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. You’re about to give me the big ‘but,’ right?” He inhaled sharply. “But…”

“What’s gotten into you lately?”

“It’s been a lame week.”

“But,” Anne said emphatically, “The foster parents in the adoption agency’s records don’t match. Six-year-old Aalandra has the correct set of parents. Fifteen-year-old Aalandra does not.”

The elevator doors parted at the first floor.

“Who are ‘older girl’s’ other parents?” Jamison said.

“Let me show you,” Anne said, leading him over to her cubicle. She dragged a pair of newspaper clippings out from under her keyboard and slid them over to him – photographs accompanied by columns of text. They were obituaries.

“What a shocker,” Jamison said. “So they died and she didn’t get relocated by the agency? But that doesn’t explain the different sets of parents.”

Anne dropped the husk of cut-up newspaper in front of him. “They died the day both girls were assigned housing.”

Jamison’s eyes widened. “The agency does all of the setup work, the home assessment, the background checking.”

“And then they file their documents with the state. The foster parents changed before older Aalandra’s file was sent to the state.”

Jamison nodded. “There should be a record of the check in the NICS system. I wonder how the duplicate foster parents got entered into state records without anyone noticing. That’s a pretty big oversight.”

“An oversight or careful manipulation.”

“I hope it’s not that. I’ll brief the deputy director. Then I’ve got a couple of cigarette smugglers to talk to, so I’ll check back in with you later.”

Anne smiled. “Got it, boss.”

She sat down at her desk and got to work. Lunchtime came and went without notice. Then Agent Dan made his coffee rounds, thrusting his fleshy, jovial face over the top of Anne’s space – he was a good guy by all accounts, and a reliable source of caffeine, but he was too encumbered by the squareness of everyday life to think like a criminal, or to seriously contemplate the heaviness of a homicidal heart. He could not warp his consciousness to identify with such an alien temptation. He could deal with cigarette smugglers, and that was about the extent of it. It was tempting to look down upon him, as it was tempting to look down upon anyone unable to comprehend an object of inquiry. But ignorant people sleep well at night, and for that reason alone, society needs them.

Anne obsessed over the obituaries. She had cloud access to both the state database and that of the adoption agency, but manually comparing the documents for thousands of adopted children for discrepancies in foster parents would be a monumental task. Maybe she could get someone at the state offices to do it, some clerk collecting benefits with a taste for paper. They couldn’t trust anyone from the agency to do it. Jimbo the tech could probably write a program

comparing the names of the foster parents, but he was off that day. She researched the obituaries instead.

A white couple – husband died first, then the wife. Getting their medical records wasn't going to be a walk in the park. She called the funeral home and acquired phone numbers the next of kin. Then, pure luck – the daughter answered her phone, on her lunchbreak no less. Husband died of Alzheimer's, wife passed two years later in an assisted living home. The coffee arrived. It tasted of hazelnut, but she drank it anyway. The assisted living home was located in San Bernardino, no less than ten blocks away from young Aalandra's address. Funny, that. It was important not to overvalue a coincidence. She'd need a warrant to obtain the records of those who had died in the home, which would take a fair bit of time. Anne didn't want to wait. She turned to the aggregate news database which she had used to find the obituaries in the first place...perhaps she would be able to draw up a list of names of people which mentioned the assisted living facility by name and use the basic search function in the adoption agency's database to find another adoptee with dead parents.

Thirty-six obituaries in the past five years mentioned the assisted living facility by name. Anne copied and pasted each of the names into the adoption agency's database and stretched her legs as the website's tiny progress wheel spun round and round. The cubicles on all three sides of her were empty. It was a Thursday afternoon, and close enough to Friday that the temptation of the weekend had set in. Anne hadn't made any plans – that was the problem with living far from one's family, being single, and wearing a badge. She'd been invited to fish and drink beer with some of the guys, but the thought of staring at the water for hours on end and/or grilling with other peoples' wives wasn't terribly appealing. She'd sleep in, of course. And then maybe she'd read a book. Or hike up one of the nearby mountain trails – that's part of the reason why she'd

ended up in California anyway, the terrain, which had looked great five years ago on the internet. Maybe she'd make friends with someone on the mountain. Then she could drink with someone about something other than traffic stops, domestic violence calls, and clever break-ins. And if someone happened to find a dead body on one of those afternoons, she might not have cellular reception.

The search for the thirtieth name concluded. Anne's heart skipped a beat. The space below the search bar had an entry. She opened the corresponding file in the state database and saw a different pair of names listed. Anne sent a text to Jamison and left her cubicle for the vending machines.

"Kid's name is Miguel," she said as they headed back to the offices. "He's sixteen from former Venezuela. Same situation with the foster parents."

"He dead or alive?"

"Not sure yet."

"Well, I can tell you how the background checks on the dead people passed. Their status wasn't updated in the NICS system. Somehow that paperwork never made it to where it was supposed to go."

"Maybe the assisted living facility simply didn't certify the death. One of Miguel's foster parents passed at the same facility."

"As Aalandra's? Christ, that's a helluva break."

Anne returned to her computer and dragged and dropped Miguel's photograph into the bureau's facial recognition database of felons and victims. There were no results.

Jamison exhaled audibly. "That answers that question."

“But we have no way of finding him since the contact information probably pertains to another kid named Miguel with real foster parents.”

“His name probably isn’t even Miguel. And her name probably wasn’t Aalandra.”
Jamison sighed. “Email that to me. I’ll shoot it upstairs right now.”

“If he shows up on a CCTV camera, I’ll never let you forget about it.” Jamison was known amongst his colleagues for, among other things, his rants against state surveillance.

“If they help prevent a crime for once, instead of showing that one has taken place, I’ll be a believer.” His phone shuddered in his hands as he tapped out a message. “Now,” he said, pocketing the device, “where do you think we should go from here?”

“I don’t know,” Anne said, yawning. She had grown suddenly tired. The whey protein cookies from the vending machine – everything in it contained some form of whey – weren’t agreeing with her stomach. “I think we’ll need Jimbo to help us compare all the different documents. There’s too many of them, and I just got lucky with this last search. Then I guess we could expand the list of assisted living facilities from there.”

“Yes, we should do that. But right now, I’m thinking that we should look at what this facility might have in common with the adoption agency.”

“What could that be?” Anne rubbed her eyes and reclined in her chair.

“Well, if the agency chose the identities of the dead foster parents so the children could be released from border custody, it stands to reason that they knew the assisted living people hadn’t properly documented their deaths, therefore the background checks and everything else would just slip through the system undetected.” He made a sliding motion with his hand that seemed quite childish for a man of his stature.

Anne nodded. “Sounds plausible.”

“There’s got to be someone behind it...coordinating the movements.”

“Or maybe they’re just negligent and the adoption agency is taking advantage.”

“I doubt that. Someone would’ve noticed a lack of death certificates. It has to be strategic if they’re pulling it off.”

“If they’re pulling it off,” Anne repeated, thinking that it was quite unlikely for an old-folks home to be in on a human trafficking scheme.

“Why don’t you look into the records issue at the assisted living home. I’ll work it from the top down...see if there are any obvious connections between the organizations.”

Anne got up for more whey – the only convenient way of staving off hunger. She ate it outside in the parking lot behind the building, where fragments of the afternoon sun sparkled in the sea of parked cars. A flock of white birds flew overhead, gulls by the look of them. A piece of trash fell from one of their mouths, a black speck twisting in the wind, disappearing somewhere beyond the distant roadway.

She returned to her desk and removed her phone from its cradle. For a place specializing in personal care, the woman who answered didn’t sound particularly empathetic. Anne made the mistake of starting off with medical records at first, and the lady started quoting from what sounded like the HIPAA rule book. There weren’t any informal records at all, no guest sheets that she could look at without the help of a judge.

She tried the city office next. The stoned receptionist gave her an extension. The extension led to an answering machine which stated that Mr. Clerk would return from vacation in two weeks. Anne guessed he was on a beach in Baja, tanning his ass and sipping chili margaritas.

Her chair made a creaking sound as it reached the extent of its backward rotation. She hated filling out Information to Obtain forms. Putting it down in writing often made the narrative more doubtful.

“Hey,” Jamison said, standing behind her. “Robert Amos, the philanthropist, ever heard of him?”

Anne brought herself around. “No.”

“I pulled the financial statements of both places. He’s given millions.”

“Good for him. So he’s the kidnapper in chief?”

Jamison shrugged. “Who knows. He’s got a house in Redwood. Wanna go for a ride?”

Anne laughed. “Sure. It’s been a lame week.”

They are argued about whose turn it was to drive on the way to the lot, but Jamison won out because she was tired, and he was quite persuasive in that charming way of his.

“That’s the second time this week,” Jamison said, guiding them through a four-way intersection.

“Huh?”

“That you’ve slept in the car.”

“Oh,” she said groggily. Maybe it was the only place that she could sleep.

“I thought you were listening with your eyes closed. You missed the whole story of how I talked those cigarette smugglers into giving up their supplier.”

“Sorry. Uh, what’s the punch line?”

“I showed them my vape, and they realized that cigarettes are outdated.”

“I’m sure that’s what happened,” Anne said with a chuckle. She was one of the few people who always laughed at his dumb jokes.

Amos' residence was the kind one expected to find beyond Emerald Hills, secreted from the scrolling sprawl of suburbia by way of a stream and a quaint little stone bridge. The sidewalks were as wide as alleyways and a fertile spread of mulch bordered the curb, punctuated every now and then by a durable fern or colorful bunch of flowers. The streetlights drooped overhead like wilted roses from the nineteenth century, blacker than the shadows they cast.

Partitioned by dense wooded groves, the properties were distanced from the boulevard, separated by landscapes that indicated wealth by their sheer orderliness. Anne spotted a couple of darker-skinned folk wearing straw hats tending to the closest arrangements. They still hadn't invented robots that could garden.

Each residence seemed to have its own personality, ranging from the friendly oversized ranch home to the modern sprawls, which treated windowpanes like gemstones – the more the better. Regardless of their appearance, each projected an air of austerity, as if a normal person couldn't possibly occupy that amount of floorspace.

“Property tax must be more than our salaries combined.”

“No kidding,” Anne said.

“If I lived here, I think I'd have an indoor bowling alley.”

“A bowling alley? You could really use an indoor range.”

“I pass the annual assessment just like anyone else...and besides, I prefer to negotiate.”

“That's right. You've got the gift of gab.”

“And you'd just shoot 'em in the head.”

Anne laughed. “If I thought I could make the shot. Women are better shots than men.”

“Uh, what?” Jamison said with an uneasy chuckle. “That hasn't been my experience. But you might be an exception to the rule.”

“Rule?” Anne said, sitting up and giving him a scrappy grin. “I don’t recall hearing about this rule before.”

“Maybe you should pay more attention.”

“Oh yeah, because I don’t spend enough time crawling around attics and pool sheds before you get to the crime scene.”

Jamison looked at her. “You’re a good agent. And a good shot. You should bring all the girls together and show them how it’s done. Then we could all have...a department shoot-out for the ages at some point. I’d push it up the food chain.”

“You really think men are better shots than women, don’t you,” Anne said, cocking her head.

“I’m just thinking of your social life.”

“Hmm,” Anne said, yawning. “Now that you mention it, the girls could use some instruction.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Then I’m going to shoot your pants off.”

Jamison laughed. “Fine by me.”

“Maybe you could join us.”

He turned his head and smiled.

Jamison brought the car to a stop before a house atop a grassy knoll with a stone path stretching out from its entryway like a red carpet. A handful of trees shaded the yard. The driveway stretched behind the property on both sides, like a horseshoe. A barn sat off to the side. There wasn’t another vehicle in sight.

“Is he home?” asked Anne.

“His secretary wouldn’t say,” Jamison said, also looking at the structure. “No spouse or children, at least according to his Wiki page.”

“Grass hasn’t been cut recently,” Anne said, noticing the waves of reflected sunlight ripple throughout that expanse of lengthy green fibers. “A week or two?”

“Yeah...the fine for a bad lawn around here is probably more than my mortgage.”

Jamison let off the brake and they coasted up the right-side driveway. The windows on that side of the building were obscured by drawn blinds. Anne noted the handful of CCTV cameras hanging from the eaves. A heavy-duty luxury truck sat off to the side of the building with an attached trailer carrying two bales of hay. A smaller front-end loader sat in front of the barn doors – a fork-like piece of equipment hung from its arm. Parked in the background, before a grassy area enclosed by a sturdy wooden post fence, sat a trio of sports cars beneath dome-like steel coverings. They were positioned directly behind the house and were therefore invisible from the road.

“Guy certainly likes his wheels,” Jamison remarked. “Maybe he is home.”

“Look at the hay,” Anne said, leaning over the dash to get a better look.

“That’s hay? Is it supposed to be green like that?”

Anne hadn’t worked with hay, but the bales didn’t look anything like the upright golden spirals she remembered seeing on the farms in her home state of Iowa. “No, it isn’t.”

“I wonder if...” he stopped speaking mid-sentence and brought the car to an abrupt halt. Before Anne knew what was happening, the car door was open, and he was jogging toward the back door.

She got out as well, instinctively bringing the right edge of her jacket behind the grip of her sidearm. With his back to her, he bent over and snatched up an object on the ground, a dark and long thing he held taught between his hands. Was it a snake that he'd found?

"Size 28 at most," he called over the running engine, and she saw the brass buckle at one end.

The metal clattered when it hit the pavement.

"Uh, okay," Anne said, striding over to him. She thought of Aalandra's dress, that it had been too small for her.

Jamison spun on his heel and headed for the back door. She followed suit. "It's unlocked," he said, having tugged on handle. The belt was flimsy evidence for exigent circumstances, but he was running with it, so she would as well. Anne closed on him; her sleep-addled mind cauterized by the heat of making entry. The web of her hand pressed against the backstrap of her holstered sidearm. Her last thought before Jamison yanked open the door was: Amos' lawyers would have a field day if she and Jamison found him sitting next to the fireplace wearing his smoking jacket.

She and Jamison called out his name. They split up and moved quickly. Corners and doorways. There wasn't time to see much else. It was dark. The only source of light was what bled through the window shades. There was a slight odor of animal fur. No barking; no dogs. Ornate carpet quieted their movement. She and Jamison encountered one another in the front hall minutes later where there was a staircase. Second floor. Toilets were flushed. Showers dry. Guest beds had been made, but not the master bed. Swiss watch on the nightstand, still ticking. Locked safe in the closet. No mobile phone. There was a laptop in the study requesting face unlock.

She bumped into Jamison again.

“Looks like I’m here in time to check the attic,” he said wryly.

Anne stood watch at the base of the stairwell. His footsteps barely registered through the thick ceiling.

“Just a bunch of farm junk,” he said as he came down the stairs.

“Think he just left his back door unlocked?” Anne said, letting out a held breath.

“A guy with a dozen cameras around his house, not to mention one in his doorbell, leaves his back door unlocked?”

“Good point. Maybe he’s in the barn?”

They left the house and headed for that tall and rustic-looking building. As they crossed the driveway, Anne looked to the fenced-in field, wondering where the animals were. If there had been animals, perhaps they could date the fecal matter. She never had to work with animal poop on a case before.

The side door to the barn hung partly ajar. Its interior was even darker than that of the house, as there were no windows. Jamison opened the door further and leapt backward, his face twisted in disgust.

Anne smelled it a moment later and began breathing through her mouth.

“People don’t smell that bad, do they?” he said, grimacing.

“You’ve smelt more dead bodies than me,” Anne said, feeling sick at the thought of the putrid odor entering her lungs.

“Fuck,” Jamison said. He took a deep breath and pushed into the barn.

The light switch was nowhere to be found. Anne had drawn her weapon and held her torch in her other hand. The straw underfoot appeared dark and slightly damp, slipping beneath her shoes. Oppressive was the sound of flies, an eternal drone that was perhaps the sound of

death itself. The thought of one flying into her mouth. She held her breath. Her torch's circle of light captured her surroundings in sequence: a metal bucket, a chainsaw, a mound of fur within a stall, a dripping faucet. Then she saw him hanging from a wooden beam. Blanched face and bulging eyes, as if he had been boiled. She called out to Jamison.

Then they left the barn. She holstered her gun and watched as Jamison returned to their parked car and turned off the ignition.

"You good?" he asked.

Anne had been leaning against the hood of the car, already thinking of the place as a crime scene. She nodded. The questions were already unfolding in her mind.

"I'll call it in."

His words barely registered. She returned to the house and headed for the second-floor study, donning a pair of nitrile gloves. The laptop flexed in her hands. She held her breath this time as she entered the dark of the barn. The pale glow of the screen lit up his face, finding in those dead eyes permission to reveal its secrets.

She set the laptop on the hood of the car. His use of the Tor browser told part of the story, and the names of password-protected downloads told the rest. A few clicks later, she had phone numbers and emails for a number of contacts within his calendar app. She began writing them into a warped back-pocket notebook.

The last contact was Michael Suarez.

CHAPTER 23: DAVID TREMBLE

Fiona fell asleep after our long and taxing session. I gathered up the device and dizzily stumbled from her room.

“She was under for a while,” said Rose, sitting with her legs crossed at the dining table.

“How is she?” asked Cynthia, before I could reply.

“Doing well. She still has aphasia.”

“So, uh, whose memories did you see in there?” asked Rose.

I couldn’t quite remember what I’d told them after the first session, after I’d vomited. I hadn’t gone into much detail, and we hadn’t spoken about the memories since then.

“They belonged to the woman. The federal agent,” I said, thinking that I should spare them the details. “Just a day in her life.” I began packing my bag.

“How much of this woman’s life do you think our girl has?”

“I don’t know,” I said, coiling up the cabling. “I’ll have to keep investigating it.”

“Could she have kidnapped her? How long would it take for that many memories to cross over?” Rose got to her feet. “We should find her.”

“Don’t bother. I have her obituary.”

“How did she die?”

I pulled the main zipper of my bag shut. “I don’t know yet. Obviously she died after the transfer took place, so in all likelihood —”

“Our girl is...” Cynthia said, and I turned to see that she was crying. “Brain damaged, and now you’re telling us that she has this whole other person living inside her head...”

Rose went to comfort her. I didn’t know what to say.

“Do you really think you’re cut out for this, David?” Rose said, looking at me over Cynthia’s shoulder.

I was taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what the hell you do over there, but if word of this gets out...it ain’t gonna be pretty.”

“Are you planning on telling anyone?” I asked, slipping the backpack straps over my shoulders.

“Only if you try to sweep it under the rug. You don’t seem that disturbed by all this head trauma.”

“Look, I know it’s a problem, and all I can do is gather information. If you go to the media or the authorities, that will only stop me from figuring things out. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

With that, I said goodbye.

On the tramway, I searched for the ownership history of the TransAmerica Pyramid and discovered within three search results what I already knew to be true, that it had been purchased nearly a decade ago by a number of apparently noteworthy investors, among them Robert Amos, who at the time was chair of Dimetricom’s board of directors. According to the papers, his suicide was the result of his rugged individualism, a lesson to all that the isolated are the most vulnerable to themselves. Feist had spoken at his funeral, describing him as a rugged individualist, an avid agriculturalist, and a good friend.

As one always does when reporting on the deceased, the text wrapped around images of him as a young and confident investor, then as middle-aged figure, inspiring literacy in school children.

The Wall Street Journal's posthumous dedication to him was a half-page longer than that of Gates.

Could I live with it – knowing that something rotten was in the state of Denmark? I sat with this question as the city passed beneath me, like every street was a ripple in its current. The mind implicitly imposes a moral framework, an inarticulable sense of good and bad which is one's limbic response to markers of internal or external validity of action. Had I been made to participate in religious rituals as a child, perhaps I would have considered my options differently, insofar as one's limbic response is tuned in accordance with the narratological metaphors of those articulated systems. But I lacked that form of brainwashing. Moreover, I knew the truth of our existence, that my behavior at a fundamental level was the result of mediation by neurotransmitters and engrained pathways which constituted pragmatic motor routines and patterns of perception. This to me was the most valid perspective, that which considers with great precision the fundamental mechanisms of our being, and it allowed me to free myself from the typical concerns that arise from such a situation.

The problem with suffering, particularly where children are concerned, is obvious, but what of the problem of stifled potential? The death of the unrealized future? I felt in that moment on the tram a sense of omnipotence, as if I could see both potentialities in the space before me, that I could weigh them simultaneously, one in each hand. On the right, there was my career and the integrity of the careers of all the researchers and professionals touched by the corporation, and most of all the potential of the technology to change the world, as it had done throughout history. On the left, there was the dark unknown which I had just begun to glimpse, the source of great fear and uncertainty which had a certain flavor in my mind. The fact that there were two realities and that I conceptualized them using the metaphor of my hands indicated that basic

tendency to dichotomize. And I thought with an element of whimsy: If I was not a symmetrical being but trinary in nature and possessed a third hand with which to reason, perhaps I would have conjured a third side to the problem. But there was no third option, and I came to see it as my duty to accept that suffering was part of the human condition no matter the heaviness it added to the heart.

“What’s up with these protests, man,” said the Uber driver. “Second one this month.”

I had been preoccupied by a rather strangely-worded email from Anderson – he seemed to be insinuating some recalcitrance on my part – such that the driver’s comment had barely registered. I looked up and to see vehicles on all sides of us with brake lights unanimously lit like the torches of some modernist procession. Leaning to the side, I gazed down the gap between the lanes of traffic and saw people in the distance – a hoard of angry bodies in the shadow of the great pyramid.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said, ducking out of the car and navigating between bumpers to the nearest sidewalk.

The protestors’ signs seemed to have the same designs as those on the night of the pre-conference banquet, but they appeared larger and more colorful this time. The crowd had grown as well, seeming from my vantage to completely encircle the building, as a leukocyte engulfs bacteria.

I saw no other way to the building but through the mirage of fists and signage.

“You there! My friend, Mr. Tremble!”

Jonas Malak’s amplified voice boxed my ears. I turned and saw him hovering above the crowd with his feet planted on top of one of the boulevard’s public waste receptacles, towering over the crowd like a medieval baron.

I forced my way through the bodies.

“Think of me as an old hound following your...drops of blood. Sniff, sniff! Ah, they may look on us as old hounds loping our way through the dark, but here we are, the whole lot of us...like the blind men – and women – feeling the elephant! Ah, he feels a trunk, and she feels a tail...have we an elephant or an aardvark? Ha-ha, we may only know what we feel, but we *are* beginning to feel it, aren't we, friends? I'm not talking about justice; I'm talking about the Truth. Bring the Truth to Light and Judgement shall Follow! Mr. Tremble, shall we remember you as a Thomas Cromwell? One Archbishop Vigano? Tell us what you knew and when you knew it – ha-ha-ha – it's never too late to bury the blue dress! Or dig it up? Hmm. I'm having too much fun. Please, please, let him through, for he is just another useful idiot who will live on as a footnote in some choir boy's florid manuscript! That's the warp and woof of history, dear friends – it's a big club, and you ain't in it. But we're *looking* into it! With sharpness of tongue and strength of wit, no less. We know all about your corporate lobbying and vile injections of liquidity; your war profiteering and your false flag facts; How about the military industrial drug trade? And the schemes to control the population and reduce intelligence and vitality through our medicine and water? Three cheers for drugs, intelligence, and vitality! Drugs! Intelligence! Vitality! And now they want to control our brains, folks. You think they'd be satisfied with stopping at thought since they're already artisans at that – ah, but here lies a whole new realm of science! And they can't wait to...eat it up! Wait, wait, don't go Mr. Tremble – I'm almost finished with my sermon! Remember this: I'll be waiting, *right here*, for when you scurry out of that sinking ship straight into my open arms...”

I was out of breath by the time I stepped off the elevator. It was chaos up there as well; all the researchers were clustered around the column-mounted television screens which displayed

in unison an overhead drone feed of the protestors below. The researchers murmured amongst themselves, and I was reminded of the Fall of Saigon, the faces of the people on the rooftops after the last helicopters had departed.

To others, that was the Liberation of Saigon. Malak probably saw it that way too.

“What’s going on?” I said, having tapped Cara on the shoulder.

She was crying. “Oh, David, oh my god, they’ve got pictures of these brain scans all over the internet, and they’re saying...we did it.”

“Did what?” I said, grasping her hands with unexpected force. I already knew what she was going to say, but I wanted to hear her say it. In fact, I knew I’d revel a bit in knowing that she’d been excised from that pleasant and sustainable world of hers, to be submerged in my realm of darkness.

“We’re all monsters.”

I observed her sobbing at arm’s length, as the limbic forces overcame her executive functioning.

I gave her a minute to regain control.

“We’re not all monsters,” I said, still holding her hands. “You haven’t hurt anybody. I know that for a fact.”

She raised her reddened eyes to mine. “How could you know that? Did you know this was going to happen?”

“Have you talked to Looper recently? Have you seen him?” I said impatiently.

“He called you out, David. Why did he do that?”

“What?”

“Just now, when you were down there...did you leak the brain scans, David?”

I let go of her hands. “I need to find Looper,” I said, turning back toward the elevator.

She grabbed me by the shirtsleeve. “Tell me the truth! You know something!”

I shook her off and ran for the elevator. A pair of security guards stepped off an open car and I slipped inside.

A hand and forearm jutted into the gap between the elevator doors just as they were about to close, causing them to retract, and there was Cara glaring with determination.

Short of pushing her away, I saw no way of persuading her to do otherwise, so I beckoned her inside.

“I found the scans in Hiroto’s research,” I said once the doors had closed. “I needed Looper to help me open them.”

“You stole his data after he died? David that’s...”

“Highly illegal, I know.”

“But he’s the only other person who knows, right?”

“Uh, no.”

“Who else could possibly...”

The elevator doors parted on Looper’s floor. The technicians stood arrayed in the office space, their faces blank with fear as they gazed at the figure in their midst, Dr. Anderson, minus his silver hat, and a bright red fire axe held overhead.

Looper was nowhere to be seen.

An eruption of sparks showered Looper’s empty chair. Anderson cleaved one of the monitors in half, embedding the axe head into the tabletop. Bits of plastic and circuitry flew like depraved confetti in all directions.

With a guttural groan, he yanked the tool from the wooden surface and brought it overhead again, only to cleave the next monitor in half.

“Clear it off. Bring up the tower next.”

The nearest two techs hurried to do his bidding.

The elevator doors began to close. Anderson’s head snapped in our direction.

“Good to see you Dave. Come and join us.”

Cara tapped the ‘open doors’ button. We stepped onto the carpeted floor.

“That isn’t the most reliable method of data destruction,” I said. The techs hoisted the heavy, steel tower onto the table and stepped out of the way.

“You’re right – it isn’t. But it’s the most cathartic.”

It took five blows to obliterate the tower to his satisfaction. Each strike elicited a metallic shriek that caused everyone to jump. The computer caved in on itself as its components were cleaved and crushed inside. The thing toppled over and onto the floor within Looper’s cubicle. Apparently some current had remained inside – although the machine had been unplugged, it started smoking. Anderson looked on as the tendrils of vaporized silicon and graphite crawled toward the ceiling. The piercing screams of the fire alarm ensued.

“Someone turn that off,” Anderson hollered. The techs scrambled to carry out their new task, as if they were all desperate for an excuse to get out of the room. Anderson signaled for Cara and me to come closer.

“You’ve been rather busy for someone who is supposed to be resting. I’ve kept an eye on your device logs. I know you’ve been collecting data behind my back.” He began hobbling down the aisle toward the server room. The wooded axe handle was too short to be used as a cane and it simply dangled from his side. Cara and I exchanged a nervous look before following suit.

“I’m sorry for not clearing it with you,” I said, lacking a reasonable excuse.

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” Anderson said as he yanked open the door to the server room.

He hobbled down that corridor of flashing lights and electric umbilicals. The racks of computers ran floor to ceiling, semi-animate black obelisks calculating impassively as they respired on a constant draft of conditioned air. Anderson looked the machines up and down as he went, like an executioner selecting his next charge from an assortment of oblivious captives.

He halted before one of the racks and opened the door. The machines blinked innocently before him. I wondered if the wooden handle would insulate him from the one hundred and twenty volts coursing through their power supplies. But I didn’t mention it – it wasn’t obvious to me, given the circumstances, that Anderson’s electrocution would be a bad thing.

He was still standing after that lower block of computers lay in ruins.

“Dave, my boy,” said Anderson, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Once this blows over, we’re going to have to have a little talk. I’ve been too easy on you, and that has compromised your work ethic, I suspect. Out there in the real world, goodness of heart only counts for so much, you know?” He put a hand on my shoulder, partly to steady himself, it seemed, and he pushed me toward the exit.

“Feist may have taken a liking to you, but remember that I am the gatekeeper. I am the only reason you will gain acceptance in this community of discourse. Think of my word as...the word of God, both of you.”

The guttural tone with which he had spoken seemed alien to his own. A shiver ran down my spine.

Anderson slammed the door behind us.

“Oh, my back,” he exclaimed, dropping the axe and feeling his lower spine with both hands. “Lumbar lordosis! I’ll have to make an appointment. Until next time, you two. Looks like it’s going to be a busy day!”

He kicked a swath through the electronic debris in the aisle.

Cara looked sad. I felt the urge to put my arms around her but stopped myself. That pro-social urge ran counter to the state of mind I required to proceed. As I continued to observe her, she grew so sad that it began to sap my strength of will. I averted my gaze.

My phone rang. Feist was calling me. As I brought it to my ear, I wondered whether he would have more bad news.

“Ah, David, good to hear from you. Due to a change in my schedule, we’ll have to move our demonstration ahead. You’ll have to get moving as soon as you can. Where are you now?”

I told him I was at the offices.

“You’ll have to find a way out of there! I’ve been told by the commissioner that they’ve cleared a perimeter around the building, and they’ve detained that asshole with a megaphone. I’ll meet you at the corner of Battery and Pine in five minutes.”

I pocketed my phone and headed for the elevators. As I was about to step over the computer debris, I turned and said to Cara: “I think I can make this right. Everything will be alright. I promise.”

She looked at me as if I was insane.

“We’re not monsters. You’re not a monster.”

“I don’t know who to believe anymore,” she said, hugging herself.

CHAPTER 24: NEIKO PLEMONS

Since DinerDispatch didn't seem to give a fuck about my record, I figured I'll just stick with it till I found something else. So I got me a secondhand e-bike that probably was some poor high school kid's that got sole' from a street rack and next thing I know I'm moving meats at twenty dollars an hour. Gotta say, Chinese food is always a pain in the ass cause there's always so much of it, or people always get so much of it and I end up with that sauce of ducklinguini on my back. Even though it's been a lifetime since I rode a bike, next thing I know I'm weaving through traffic and talking shit at the stoplight to anyone who looks twice. I work the SF area since that's where the hungry people is at. And it ain't a bad way to see the city, y'know? But how long's it gonna last? I'm already getting tired as shit of running up four flights of stairs just to give some dingus his dappermeal. And most of them don't give a shit about me either, and they're even pissed about it, like they expect Jesus himself to drop off their sloppy joe with buns unscathed by his fiery entrance. It gives me a good lay of the land though – when I graduate from pie school, I'll know where the treasure's buried.

Course, if I was gonna hit some of these places, it ain't gonna be long before Mr. Colombo puts two and four together and Neiko Lemon Cake becomes the prime suspect.

Asswipes.

So I'm going slow to drop off this birthday girl's ice cream cake, cause it's her birthday and all that and I won't get a bonus if it's all jarred to shit like the brains of a quarterback. But when I see all the fucking traffic downtown, I get the meat sweats, cause it also ain't gonna be a bonus if it's all melted to shit either. So I hop the curb to get past the clot of cars, but before I know it there's so many fucking people all round that I gotta get off and walk. And there's this lunatic with a megaphone talking shit like he's the gospel – just my fucking type, and I wanna

swing that goddamn ice cream cake like it's a mace right into his pie hole. But good Neiko Lemon Peel keeps his shit together and keeps on until there's room to ride his jacked bike to little miss sunshine's tea party.

He even says 'ur welcome' when momma MILF thanks him. Her set of DSLs are gonna do a number on that mountain of cream.

It's about then that I'm rethinking my agreement to go to Sam's habits-r-us hypnotherapy thing. Kind of sounds like the ads you hear on the old-people radio station at four in the morning to stop binge eating or to suck the dick out of life. I'm seeing that there's a whole shit ton of hungry people at this rally downtown, and it's real tempting to just feed on that clusterfuck. But I promised her I'd go and I'm kinda thinking that if I just bullshit my way through it and act like I learned something Safa will go down on me. Also don't want to flake out on Sam cause she's cute even though she's got a bead fetish. Actually, I got a few comments about them from the old ladies when I handed them their gluten-free burritos.

So I head to this address that's like thirty minutes out of my zone, "Dimetricorn," some big corpo building filled with cogs and lock my bike up at the rack out front, where it looks totally out of place next to the wheels these people got and head through the revolver door.

It ain't much like I expected, this hypno joint. Don't look like many quacks around, more like penny-pinchers in suits and peachy punks with pocket protectors. And the shit's all sleek and gold and shit like it's totally a Trump dump. I walk up to the desk and talk to this chick without ovaries who lives on the elliptical when she ain't behind that desk, and she tells me that I'm all set to go up to suite seven b, on the eighth floor. And I'm like ok, ty before I bolt for the elevator, cause I'm feeling that thing again, like the walls are crushing me in a vise of their richness and I'm surrounded by people from another planet who don't give a shit about anything or anyone

and would happily put rust in the mcnuggets if it made them an extra buck. The same jerks who donate to St. Jude but don't give a fuck about a bloke like me cause I'm rude? Next time I'm in the slammer, I'll write miles of poems on the toilet paper so the sewer rats can get a fucking clue.

"Glad you made it," says smiling Sam. She's like the only one there sitting in these rows and rows of stackable chairs that cup around your junies. They even got a fart hole – like, I thought all these anal-detentive types would want to keep that shit to themselves.

Know what, I am happy to see her, cause she's my friend and quite doable. She's kinda like the sister I never had, cause the last few times we've hung out and she's told me some stories of the crazy prick who chased her into the safe house or about that one guy who gave her an abortion, I got real mad, like with the spirit of my old man, and I wish I could go back in time and snap their necks. Maybe that's what family-like love is, like wanting to bust ass for someone? Sounds like it to me.

"So, uh, hippo therapy," says me, reading the room. She thinks it's funny that I'm a dumbass, which I like to be sometimes. Maybe the brain Candice would say that I feel "safe enough" around her to be stupid me. I didn't tell Candice about the hypnotherapy – my guess is she wouldn't buy it cause it ain't in none of her textbooks.

I dunno what sound hippos make so I make a 'moo,' and Sam starts looking at me like I really am a dumbass. But shit, the room is so empty and there's only like two other dudes in there about fifty miles from us and it's weird and kind of creeping me out that it's like the Ritz Carlton everywhere but there ain't no Carltons around to make it so.

Another chick with no ovaries comes in and says we're about to begin. Like WTF lady, you're not even going to ask for an offering?

"It's going to be ok," Sam says.

Then this Doctor Wolfenstein looking dude gets onstage and starts talking about healing, and shit gets weird real fast –

– “Could it have been anyone else?” I said as Feist and I pulled away from the intersection between Battery and Pine.

“A handful of people had access to Hiroto’s data. But yes, it is very likely that Mr. Lewis, or Looper, as you call him, leaked the images.”

“Why did you have Dr. Anderson destroy his computer?”

Feist seemed surprised. “He what?”

“With a fire axe. And part of the server room. Chopped everything up pretty good.”

“Goddamn eccentric,” Feist said, holding his head with both hands. He sat on the bench seat across from me, the same molded leather as that of Anderson’s vehicle, except everything about it was a glossy black. “It will be much more difficult to establish the legitimacy of those files without a record of them.”

“I still have the flash drive,” I said.

“Thank goodness. That’s probably the only place where the originals still exist. Where is it?”

“My bag, which I left on my desk.”

“Good. As long as he doesn’t know that they’re there, they should be safe. I’ll collect them right after the demonstration.”

“We could call Cara. Tell her to hold onto them,” I offered.

“I don’t think I trust anyone to handle them, other than you.” Feist sighed. “Then there’s the problem of Malak.”

“He’s a quack, isn’t he?” I said, wiping my hands on my trousers.

“Indeed,” Feist said with a nod. “And the waves he’s made could be good for us in the long run, but we need to do everything in our power to prevent him from gaining further momentum. Mr. Lewis’ public testimony would add a lot of fuel to this fire.”

“Yes,” I said, glancing at his shoes. I’d been unable to look Feist in the eye since I’d gotten into the car.

“A HIPAA lawsuit will go a long way to discouraging Mr. Lewis from doing any more damage, but I fear that we need to do more than that.”

“I could talk to him,” I said, looking up from his shoes. “He trusts me. If you have his address or if we can find where he’s staying, I could convince him that getting on Malak’s show is the wrong thing to do.”

“You could do more than that...” Feist said with a veiled smile.

“What do you mean?”

“If we can find him, that is. As you will see later today, there are, shall we say, more powerful versions of the mnetic technology than the public is aware of.”

“I saw the versions in Hiroto’s research...”

“Yes!” Feist said, his eyes alight with joy.

“You’re asking me to use it on Loo...Mr. Lewis?” The words caught in my throat. “To reduce his prefrontal cortical function?”

“No! You wouldn’t be giving him brain damage! That’s an unfortunate consequence of overuse...one of the technical difficulties we’ve yet to work out. Perhaps you could perform what we might call...a surgical strike, rewriting his memories of the MRI scans such that he

believes he was in error...ah, perhaps he made the whole thing up! Then he could get on Malak's show and issue an apology."

"I could make him do that?"

"Yes, with a bit of practice. But we haven't much time. You'll see later today...you'll see. The interface is quite intuitive, as it is with the basic version. But you must be surgical with your imagination."

"I see," I said, feeling overwhelmed by what I was being asked to do. It was terrible and terrific at the same time, the prospect of manipulating a mind, and an act of tremendous responsibility to be sure.

"David," said Feist, leaning towards me, "the fate of the company, the fate of this technology and its potential to change the world is at stake here."

I glimpsed within him then, in that split second, a slip of the manic or megalomaniacal, that which I'd only ever seen in video recordings shown as part of case studies in my graduate seminars – possession by a spirit, something beyond oneself that was great and awesome but terrifying all the same. And this slip made me afraid of him, as I realized that even someone like Feist, someone in possession of the most acute moral faculties and library of self-knowledge could be bent in that way.

And I cannot deny that I trusted him implicitly, that whatever psychomimetic bond had grown between us had grown to the point of being unbreakable. I felt good at the prospect of rewriting Looper's memory, immensely grateful in fact to have the privilege of carrying out so significant a deed bestowed upon me. His future was in my hands. My hands.

I also felt immeasurable guilt, for that trust had not been up to that point reciprocal. I had hidden much from him, suppressed my knowledge of the situation. And with that awareness came the urge to bring things to light.

“I wanted to tell you,” I said, swallowing, “that I know about Robert Amos, about the things he may have done, and that he was your friend.”

Feist straightened, the look of fleeting euphoria about him replaced by alarm.

“While I don’t fully comprehend the situation, I hope to in time, and I will do what is necessary to continue our work.”

“Glad to hear it,” Feist said with sudden glibness. “That is...a long story, to be sure, and you will know the details of it. But I’m afraid that we don’t have time to discuss it now.”

The car pulled to a stop. I’d been so deep in thought that I hadn’t noticed that we were surrounded by concrete, the walls of a parking garage. The vehicle’s door swung upward, revealing the back entrance of the Dimetricom building.

We exited the car and walked to the elevator.

“Great things await us,” Feist said. Then he entered suite 7B and one of the attendants led me to the examination room –

– Wolfeinstein gives us this spiel about human beings and all that, like how we think and shit. And it’s kinda cool actually cause I see a lot of what he says is exactly the same shit as what I’m thinking, that people are basically cunts and we’ve gotta do something about it. So about five minutes in I’m like ‘oohrah’ sign me up, but that’s it. And I’m looking at Sam guessing whether or not she gets it, and she totally does, and it’s cool like that. Must be what it’s like going to church. But then the spiel’s over and I just want him to keep talking, cause he totally gets me and

it's like he's the dad I never had. Then he gets the hell out of dodge like he's gotta piss or something and the lady's back handing us papers to sign. They're like ten times as long as my probation papers, so I just flip to the end and sign on the dotted line, which is always dotted, right? Like even when it ain't dotted we still call it a dotted line. Anywhoever...

Then they split us up. Sam smiles and tells me that she'll be waiting downstairs and I start getting really antsy in a good kind of way. Like, I never been hypnotized before, so I'm wondering how expensive a piece of jewelry they're gonna do it with. Ooh, maybe it'll something scientific like a magnet that sucks on my soul. Haha, I'm completely retarded. If I ever get back behind bars, maybe I'll be the hypnosis guy instead of the drug guy – I'll whisper sweet nothings into some old head's ear until he starts sobbing and tells me the story of how he used to be a real man. Yeah, that shit would be fun.

One of the working girls takes me down the hall to one of these rooms like I'm about to be interviewed, and I'm questioning whether I should've read at least the last page of those forms to know what kinda shit I was getting into. But Sam's done it, so why should I care? The girl opens the door real kind like and I see this dude in there, a real pocket protector punk type who looks like he ain't been laid in longer than I been behind bars, and I'm thinking – yo, this my doc? Gimme a break.

“It's nice to meet you. I'm David Tremble,” I said to the man standing in the doorway. He seemed confused. I was a bit off balance as well since I wasn't familiar with the meeting procedure. I stood and held out my hand to welcome him.

So I shake this dude's hand, which is so weak and soft that I wonder how he ever jerks off with it, if he's even into that. “Uh, yah, nice to meet you. Name's Neiko,”

“Have a seat,” I said, pulling out the other chair. There were only two chairs in the room and a small table between us.

Man, I’m getting a weird vibe from this place, like it’s a doctor’s office cause it’s got that smell to it, but there ain’t nothing on the walls and there’s just me and him and this waffle iron looking thing with a bunch of wires coming out of it and a couple of gamer goggles, one for the each of us I guess. I thought we was hypnotizing, not playing fucking Megacraft together. “What kind of hypnosis is this shit?” says me, looking the punk over.

There was an edge to his gaze. I sensed within him a great deal of aggression and felt safer once he was in his chair.

“It’s...an advanced form of hypnosis,” pocket punk says, tidying up the wires and handing me the goggles. Thing feels kind of heavy, like it’s made of gold or something.

“Feels expensive,” he said, weighing it in his hands. I was unsure of how to reply to that comment. His mannerisms struck me as those of a delinquent, which gave me pause.

It hits me for some reason, maybe this was the kind of thing Suarez was going on and on about, this goddamn waffle iron that’s make waffles outta my brain.

“You’ve worn a virtual headset before?” I said, noting his confusion. “You can just put this strap over the back of your head...”

“Haha, yeah, I’m not retarded.”

“Okay then.” I seated myself. The attendant told me that I would need to take a dose of the sedative as well, so I dispensed two slips from the little pod. “It will dissolve on your tongue.”

“I’ve done more of this kind shit than you can think of,” I say to pocket punk. Unless the shit’s acid, I can’t dream of it giving me any more than a bit of a buzz.

“Good,” I said, and picked up my headset. I waited until his was fully in place before putting mine on...just in case he tried anything.

Whoa shit, that little tab sticks to the roof of my mouth and like soaks into my brain, like it's straight gasoline, and then I'm dreaming, like I was there until I wasn't. That shit would be good for all kinds of things, I'm thinking...

Neiko's mouth hung open, and his head fell back at such an angle that each breath was a light snore. I began to feel the drug's effects and let the headset fall over my eyes. Then I waited with bated breath for the wonderous ordeal that is the opening of another's mind –

– It existed in nonexistent space, the mind of the other, that distant constellation of experience spiraling around itself as the stars of the universe revolve around a galactic nucleus, a thing that was, as it grew in magnitude, a great irony, for a whole galaxy was within a person's head and that is never anyone's experience of it, the reality which shows itself to be more of a guessing game, but here there are no guesses involved, for all was laid bare, the secrets, the faces, the obtuse insults hurled at one time across the grade school playground, the names, the places, each moment burning like a candle flame, turning past the next like the array of records within a juke box, each of them a neuron or set of neurons forming amongst themselves more connections than there were planets in the universe, but within that incalculable mass much of it would be useless, like the circuits of a machine that perform only one function, the transfer of energy, the cascade of perception that happens without thought, much of it useless but culminating in a stream of data with marked potentiality once interpreted by that family of other structures, to be forwarded at last to one of a handful of addresses, these houses at the center of town near the nucleus, the prison where that man lived, the one from both places whose name

was Suarez, and all the truth about him was revealed, as was the truth of all else within that space, as when one dreams of revelation and sees the world in a new light which is destined to reside behind the wall of sleep, failing to reach the unreachable star that is the sleeper and cast shadows in the real, doomed to be forgotten outside this godless Eden where the machinery of man makes reason by churning the matter of its maligned existence –

The screech of sneakers against a waxed floor. I emerged from the blackness only to see the seat opposite me empty and the door to the room open. Neiko's headset sat on the table. I got to my feet and stumbled after him.

"Neiko," I called, seeing his form disappear around the corner. I followed the sound of his movement through the building, thinking that he would eventually find the elevator or stairs and go to the girl in the lobby waiting for him. Her name was Sam, and I suddenly saw her in my mind's eye on the night he went to Safa's, where she gave him one of her bracelets.

But he didn't stop for the elevator. Nor did his shoes reverberate throughout that concrete column many stories tall, the stairwell. Where had he run to?

I burst through the door to the parking garage and saw his bent figure loping away from me, toward the distant edge of that plane of asphalt. He looked back and for a moment I thought of calling out to him again, but the urge to do so was no longer within me. He had run away from me out of fear, I realized, and that made me want to let him go. He had enough things in life to be afraid of.

I headed back to gather up the advanced mnetic device, for I had work to do.

CHAPTER 25: DAVID TREMBLE

I texted Looper...

– *Where are you? Need to talk*

...and slid my phone back in my pocket when Jamison entered the room.

“Thanks for agreeing to come on such short notice,” he said, settling into his well-worn chair.

“Don’t mention it,” I said, hiding my irritation with a smile. Feist had asked me to go once he’d gotten wind that someone had gone to the authorities over Anderson’s behavior. I agreed that it would be in our best interest to get rid of him since he was such a loose cannon. Moreover, it seemed possible that the false MRIs could be shuffled onto him, wiping the slate in one felled swoop. Feist was working on that end of things.

Jamison was naturally the person I was sent to speak with about the day’s events.

“So, tell me what happened,” he said with hands folded.

“Well, he had an axe, and he was using it to destroy computers in the office.”

“Did he say why he was doing it?”

“He said it was cathartic.”

“Hmm. And who else was there, other than you and Cara?”

I paused. “How did you know Cara was there?” I’d forgotten about Cara.

“I already interviewed her,” Jamison said, reclining smugly in his chair.

“Then you already know what happened.”

“I’d like to hear it from your angle,” he said, fidgeting with his pen.

“Well, he was there and he busted up a bunch of computers. The whole department saw it. They were beside themselves.”

“Did he smash up all of the computers? Or just some of them.”

“Just some of them where he thought the files were stored.”

“What files?”

That look of smugness. I despised it.

I attempted a nonchalant shrug. “Who knows. The files on TV?”

“Your friend said that you knew what files he was trying to destroy.”

“That’s right,” I said, swallowing, “I thought I might have, but I haven’t seen the ones that aired on Malak’s show, so I’m not sure if they’re related.”

“We could look at them now if you’d like...” said Jamison, opening up his laptop.

“Is this a criminal investigation?” I asked, wanting to throw him off balance. “Is someone’s life in danger?”

“Not yet,” Jamison said, turning back to his computer screen.

“I believe that Dr. Anderson could be a danger.”

“You don’t seem too afraid of him.”

“He threatened to jeopardize my work after he smashed up the computers. You can ask Cara about that. She was there too.”

He rotated his computer to show me the screen. It displayed images of the MRIs from Looper’s workstation.

I leaned closer, as if I was examining them. “Those are MRIs. Without seeing them in 3D I couldn’t say...”

“Thing is, I’ve seen this before,” Jamison said, tapping the prefrontal hematoma with his finger. He got up and leaned against the desk. “I’ve seen it in dead boys and girls. Victims of sex trafficking.” He brought up pictures of their bodies for added effect. “David, people’s lives are in

danger. Frankly, if you don't tell me everything you know right now, you'll become an even bigger part of this investigation."

The image of him standing over me, trying to shock me with corpses, that got to me. I realized that I needed to hit him as hard as I could to throw him off.

"This is all about Anne, isn't it?"

He slammed the lid of his computer shut and stared coldly into my eyes. "Tell me what you know," he said.

It had been an effective move. I had to keep pushing. "I know that she was your partner. That you and her were close. That she..."

"What happened to her? After she went undercover, how did she die?"

"I have no idea," I said, pushing back my chair out of instinct. I could see the rage building within him.

He took off his jacket and came around the table. "If you don't tell me what happened to her, you'll be spending the night in a fucking cell, you hear me?" He grabbed me by the shirt.

"What happened to her?"

Jamison was hurt as much as he was furious. His eyes were wet. And I was sad for him, for I couldn't help but remember the close bond between them. I realized that I'd never felt so strongly about another person before, and it made me realize how much like ghosts others within the life of school and academic work appeared to me, somnambulists of intellect floating along on the currents of our knowledge and our careers, drifting aimlessly toward the even more vague apparitions of the future.

Within him I saw a real love that transcended the mere utility of a social resource. And I was sorry, and felt like sheading tears with him over his loss.

Emotion had overwhelmed me. I had to maintain control, otherwise I stood to lose everything.

The latch to his office door clicked as the handle turned. A uniformed officer stepped in while his compatriots stood beyond the glass. He muttered a few words and Jamison backed off.

He turned and left the room. I felt the urge to tell him more just as he left, that I was sorry, but the opportunity seemed to have passed, and I was left to think through my own discomfort.

I was allowed to leave and checked my inbox outside. Looper had given me the address of his apartment in Daly City. I guessed we'd be hanging out after all.

CHAPTER 26: NEIKO PLEMONS

It didn't feel much like a hypnotizing at the time, but it did afterward, like I'm swimming in it. And I feel bad about leaving Sam in the lobby, but I know I can't go back in there, cause there's something about that dude that read my mind...like, I dunno even what it is about him, but he's got my number. Man, I'm tired as shit. I don't even feel like riding my bike. So I take the rail to get back home and zonk the fuck out. That place probably has more cameras than a prison, so it's not like anybody's gonna try and steal it. Heck, they might dial 9-1-1 when I go to get it back.

I wake up over the bay, headed back toward the big city which is now all lit up by its lights, like it's this giant Christmas tree with every point of light being some kind of happiness. That David guy did something to my brain. I know his type. If he was cool, he wouldn't go by 'David' either – he'd go by 'Dave' or 'Davey-o,' something more hip that's got less tongue in it. Why did I sign up for that shit anyway? I ain't got the faintest idea what happened, but it was like watching one of those science shows where they show you where the Earth is and then where all the other shit is at. Except, some of the planets were people.

Sam's left me messages. She cares about me. At least I got a friend.

A friend, yeah, everyone needs friends, cause they're like a resource, and we're all interconnected like the roots of trees in the same batch of soil.

Huh, never thought of it like that before. I call Sam.

“Hey, sorry I abandoned you.”

“You had us worried.”

Safa, worried about me? Man, what the hell. “You can tell her I'm all right.”

“Oh, no, I was referring to Dr. Feist.”

That Wolfgang looking dude. “Uh, you can tell him I’m all right too,” I say, thinking of what his deal was. They had some sort of plan...a big secret going on. David was afraid.

“They wanted to schedule a follow-up.”

“Oh, yeah, thanks. I’ll do that.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Good,” I say, nodding even though she can’t see me. The next stop for the tram is coming up on the monitor, the same one I got on hours ago. “I’m feeling good. How about you?”

“Are you seeing things...better, Neiko? Are you feeling...lighter?”

I can’t help but laugh. “I feel like I just woke up.”

“At first, I felt dizzy, but trust me, it gets better. After your second session, you’ll be used to it.”

“Uh, okay. I’ll take your word for it.”

“You’ll see. Take care, Neiko. Get some sleep.”

I put my phone away and have this scary thought, like her voice was so calm and shit – maybe that waffle iron thing replaces people on the insides – maybe this first meeting was like an assessment, like they were just taking measurements before they put me into a straightjacket. Like in that movie about the body snatchers where they just make copies of people. Like, would I even know if I was a copy of myself? Would it even matter if the copy of me was better in every way? Maybe that’s why I don’t like that David dude, cause he’s one of them. Sounds ridiculous, but it could be true couldn’t it?

Then I’m trying to remember when I even saw that movie, but I can’t really place it, like the thought is just kind of there, floating in my head. It don’t sound like my kind of movie since there’s no gunslinging or tits.

I get off the tram and figure I'll just get my bike and maybe a burger along the way before I head home. It's gotta be close to curfew anyway and I don't wanna end up with officer thunder nips breathing down my neck. I got about an hour.

I walk down the concourse and get onto the elevator that's gonna take us to ground floor. There's a few other people there, two dudes and a chick. I'm standing behind them, and normally I'd be looking at their pockets wondering how deep they are and if anything's in them, but instead I notice their warped reflections in the metal elevator doors, how they stand there with this blank look on their faces, all facing in the same direction like they're particles in a magnetic field, and I'm struck by how much like robots they all are, just standing there, following this commandment by some robot Jesus to look bored as fuck. And I'm right there with them, but for some reason thinking about the things I'm actually doing, like where my hands are at, how straight my posture is, etcetera, etcetera. Then it hits me that these people are all standing a little further away from me, like I smell bad or something. But I don't lift my arms to smell my pits or anything because that would be really un-fucking-couth. Something about me has got them by that circuit in their brain, something completely apeshit that produces that response. They're afraid of me. Well, they goddamn should be! But it's in their brain, in their amygdala, the things that look like testicles in that thought sandwich.

I never noticed how people walk before. The elevator door opens and the dude to the right of me starts with this trot like he's got a wad of benjamins shoved up his ass and he wants everyone to know. I follow him out the lobby to see where he goes. He pulls out his phone and starts yammering about the weather in Budapest like it's the most important thing anybody could know, and I figure it's more likely that he's low in sexual dysfunction but high in the interpersonal kind.

He gets into a car and heads off. I stay on track to get my bike. I'm thinking, the city is beautiful at night! It's like I'm surrounded by brightness, all these glowing rectangles into everybody's lives – there's a person behind each one of them, and they're all working together as part of this global dance to keep things going – to keep the lights on! A lady passes me on the street, pushing a stroller as she sings a song about elephants to her little one. What the heck is she doing? Just singing a dumbass song? No, there is something more to it, something mechanical – the child's need for comfort and to have these early experiences – it will grow him in some way.

I stray into her path and peek into the crib. I say 'hi buddy,' cause I should be nice to kids. His momma looks at me like I've got something on my face, a look that pricks me in the eye and I take a step back. She smiles at me fake and blows past. That affects me, and I start wondering if all David did was make me a pussy. That would fucking suck.

Then I'm walking past this patch of green called Jefferson Square Park that's all lit up for some reason. And there's a whole bunch of people there, enough to fill a housing unit, and they're all dressed up and sitting in rows, facing uphill at this dude stood with a book, and I'm wondering if I'm watching a cult. Maybe they worship the far under; maybe they're all gonna drink poison at the same time. Then this lady wearing this absurd dress that looks like it's made of tissue paper steps out from behind a tree with a whole lot of it dragging behind her, and I realize that I never saw a wedding before in real life. Then this dude in a suit comes at it from the other end and walks up to her, and I can't even see him cause of how blinding she is. And I stop to watch this little drama unfold – the priest says a bunch of shit, the couple kiss, and the rest of the asshats throw rice at them. But there's something spectacular about it, these people, taking that illusion so seriously, when in reality they were just responding to the right kinds of signals.

Is that what my feelings are for Safa? Has my brain just been making that shit up? Naw. It's gotta be real. It feels real. Even if I can explain it as a cheap trick, that don't change the fact that I wanna bend her over the proverbial table.

Then I realize what this David dude's done to me – he's given me his mind, cause I can see that chick he was with and all the back and forth he did, and I'm thinking to myself that I'd just have sucked her titty and gotten on with it. But I'm thinking back to that moment, feeling all that fear he felt, the shit shrivels and shivers me all over.

I can't hate the dude cause of that. Really, I can't help but feel sorry for him.

And I know what he's gonna do, that he's gonna go to this dude's place and trick him into thinking something else. I think of how he's gonna be living with that secret for the rest of his life, just like Suarez, and man, I know I gotta stop him from turning his life into a prison.

This dude, Looper, I know his throwaway phone number cause Dave had it memorized. So I give him a call.

CHAPTER 27: DAVID TREMBLE

Looper's flat was located above an automated laundromat in a yellow stucco building on Citrus Ave, just a few blocks from the high school. The fire escape was located on the far side. Through the blackout blinds bled an aura of red light, a devilish hue closer to that of a strip club than a hacker's residence. I'd never been to such a club, so the association with that kind of venue was a mystery to me. I entered through the unmarked black door and treaded lightly on the stairs thereafter. The straps of my bag were tight against my shoulders. Within it was the mnetic device.

I knocked on the door. Seconds later, my phone rang.

"You alone?" asked Looper over the call.

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Open the door."

"Alright, alright..."

The door opened, and Looper greeted me wearing flipflops and pajamas.

I was surprised to see that there was something living aside from his organism in that red emporium – a pair of fish tanks stretched along the back wall, each with their own bank of lights highlighting the greens and swimmers inside. There was also a cat, a black and bulbous feline which came trotting out to observe the new source of commotion before rolling onto its side next to its feeding dish rather like a dog.

Ah, yes, these forms of life were one way in which he simulated companionship. His computer sat at the far end of the other room, this thing filled with colorful, childlike LEDs.

“Oh, let me change the lights,” he said, adjusting them with his phone until they took on an orange hue. “Preserves the night vision, you know?”

Looper reached into his microwave and retrieved a bag of microwave popcorn. He tore open the oily sack and pointed it in my direction.

“No thanks,” I said, not wanting to get my hands dirty before the act. I set my bag down on the table.

“What made you change your mind about Malak?” he asked, awkwardly slinging a handful of kernels into his mouth. He caught most of them with his lips, but a few fell to the floor, which seemed to grab the cat’s interest.

I shrugged. “Not sure,” I said, hiding how amused I was with the situation, the fact that he knew nothing of what I had in store for him. Our conversation was superfluous since I would be in possession of his memory shortly, but there was something funny about it, as if I saw the one-ton weight hanging over his head and found myself holding the trigger. It was like we were playing a little game, he and I, in which I held all the best pieces along with a loaded die. “After I saw how people reacted, I just knew that it was the right thing to do.” I examined his expression, his smallish looking eyes which held an aspect of perennial innocence. “What made you leak the files?”

Looper sighed. “I couldn’t deal with it, man. I lay awake all night and kept thinking about it. I know you didn’t want me to do anything with the files. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You thought you were doing the right thing.”

“I wonder if it was the right thing now though.”

“Well,” I said with a sigh, thinking of how I would subdue him. “We’ll all probably be under investigation. A lot of people will lose their jobs. And the technology...the public will be too afraid to see its potential.”

“But it was necessary. They hurt so many children.”

“More than you can imagine,” I said, shaking my head.

I’d learned from my experience with Neiko, that there was a difference between merging and replacing – I’d go in and pluck those star-like thoughts from Looper’s head and replace them with my own concerning Malak. Then he would share my distrust of him, but it would take some convincing from me to get him to go back on Malak’s show and recant the data.

That was the rough idea anyway. I’d probably have to improvise.

“You don’t seem too disturbed by it,” Looper said.

“So much has happened today,” I said, thinking of how to get him unconscious. “How about a drink?”

He said he didn’t have any alcohol.

“Hypogen? Come on, let’s take one or two together.”

Looper shook his head and took a step back from me.

I removed the dispenser of sedative tablets from my pocket and set them on the table.

“Which way do you want to do this? The easy way or the hard way?” I’d meant it as a joke, but I was unable to laugh or smile at it, as if I’d had a sudden onset of seriousness. Because if he didn’t take the tab, I guessed I’d have to strangle him, something that I’d only seen Neiko do in his mind’s eye. And I didn’t relish the thought of choking out another human being, but I’d already made the decision to do what was necessary.

“Hey man, help!” screamed Looper. He flung the bag of popcorn in my direction and propelled his hefty frame into the other room.

I caught up to him in the bedroom. Instead of trying to open the window to get to the fire escape, he was fumbling with the combination for what looked like a safety deposit box. I lunged forward to stop him. It was too late when I noticed the other person in the room, the dark figure who crashed into me moments later. The wooden bureau against the wall cracked as I flew into it.

Fuck. It was Neiko. What the fuck was he doing there?

“Bro, don’t, you idiot!” Neiko shouted at Looper.

I looked up and saw through starry vision Looper’s fingers sliding along the dials. A second later the box clicked and he flung the lid open. With slippery fingers he tugged on the slide of that Saturday Night Special.

Neiko said something about staying down. But I was in fight-or-flight mode and acted on instinct, diving after the weapon.

I grabbed his wrist with both hands and ended up knocking him sideways with my bodyweight into the nightstand. His head smashed into the lampshade which littered his pillow with a collection of plastic shards.

I managed to get one of my palms around the gun and wrench it from his grasp. Then I felt an explosion in the side of my head, almost as if the gun had gone off next to my ear, and I turned and saw that Neiko was upon me.

He was too close to be struck. The three of us were piled into the corner of Looper’s bedroom. Neiko had one hand on the gun and another around my neck, holding us tight. Locked

together, we ended up toppling onto the bed, onto Looper's stale-smelling sheets and comforter that sunk in on itself like a dilapidated pastry.

Somehow Neiko ended on top. Both of us were holding the gun. One of our fingers must have touched the trigger.

I felt a pain in my hands and looked down to see if I'd been shot. Then I looked up at Neiko, and saw that he was looking at Looper, whose side had already begun to soak with red.

"Oh shit!" Neiko said, still holding me down.

"Take the gun," I said, watching the blood spread across Looper's shirt. Neiko's hands were still clamped onto mine. "One of us has to help him!"

He loosened his grip and my hands slid out from under his. I was so full of adrenalin that I felt nothing. All I knew was the necessity of applying pressure. I rolled Looper onto the bed and pressed a shirt from his bureau into the wound. I noticed that blood was also staining the sheets beneath him – the exit wound. I rolled up his shirt to see where the bullet had landed and saw that it had cut a long swath in his fleshy side. It hadn't come close to hitting an organ.

Neiko was somewhere off to the side. His phone made the touchtone sounds for 'nine-one-one.'

"Am I gonna be alright?" Looper murmured.

I turned to see the bullet embedded in the wall behind me.

"Yeah, you're gonna be fine," I said and got up. Neiko looked up from his phone just as I smashed into him. The gun went flying into the next room. I scooped it up as I went and grabbed my bag before running down the stairs to Looper's apartment and into the starry night.

CHAPTER 28: NEIKO PLEMONS

I knew soon as I tapped out that nine-one-one I was fucked, cause that's exactly what I get for trying to do something good for people. Now I'm sitting on the wrong end of the one-way glass, about to get fucked up the ass. I didn't say shit to none of the other guys cause why the fuck would I? First thing they thought was that I done it and put me in cuffs. Where's my lawyer? I keep asking it cause that's how I got fucked last time, thinking that these blue monkeys are somehow the giving kind. All they give ain't a shit – roger that assholes. I'm oscar-dyke.

They take the cuffs off once I'm at the table and gimme a cup of water. Fuck their cup of water – that's what I think of 'em. And fuck that Looper too cause he deserved to get shot by his own gat – pussy assed piece of shit. I'd shoot him five fucking times over for his goddamn stupidity.

Then this gumby-looking dude comes in, and he's got this outfit on that is literally the color of shit, and I'm like: great, here we go again.

Then I think, he's this Jamison dude that Dave and that other cop chick knew, but it's all just like an inkling at the end of a stick in my brain cause I been punked by the church of the White Glove.

“I don't have time to play games,” says this Jamison, “so be honest with me. What were you doing at Mr. Lewis's apartment?”

I look at him like he's a tree.

“Look, I frankly don't give a shit that you're an ex-con.” He pulls out the other chair and sits in front of me. “Just tell me what fucking happened.”

He's real fucking tired. I see it in his eyes. Maybe he'll believe any kind of bullshit story I tell him. Maybe he'll even believe the bullshit that's the real story. Fuck me – I'm guessing which way gets me the better chances.

So I say, "I was there cause I knew that your pal Dave was going there cause he gave me his memories. I know a lot about you too. He put all his shit in my head using that hypnotize machine. I wanna lawyer."

Jamison seems to wake the fuck up. "David was there?"

"He was gonna put the machine on him and fuck up his thoughts about some brain scan shit."

"Wait a minute – what made you go to Lewis's residence then?"

"Oh, cause I wanted to stop him. Looks like that was a stupid move on my part."

"How did he end up shot?"

"Well, he was a dumbass and tried to pull a gun on David after he attacked him."

"So David took the gun and shot him?"

I could just say yes and nuke my involvement in the whole thing, but Loop-D-Loop might end up saying otherwise, if he hadn't already. "I was trying to get the gun away from him and it went off by accident."

"Hmm," says Jamison, rubbing his shitty beard. "That explains the powder burns on your fingers. So why go there in the first place?"

I shrug. "Didn't want him to fuck himself up more than he has. Dave's so fucked in the head, he can't even fuck women."

That cracks my Jamie dude up. Guess that means I'm on his side now.

He lets me out of the ‘interrogation’ room and takes me to the ‘situation’ one, and I’m wondering if I’m like part of the ‘situation’ now and if that’s a good thing.

“As far as I’m concerned, as long as you’re helping me with this investigation, you’re helping me with this investigation, got that? Don’t try anything or leave the building without my permission.”

“Okie.”

“Still want a lawyer? Good ones ain’t cheap.”

I’m thinking, is this guy for real? “Still thinking about it.” Wow, a chill-assed cop. Probably still a dick around lunchtime.

The situation room’s got this table with comfy chairs and all these screens around for watching things go down. Few other cops come in, more like desk jockeys, and they’re looking at me like I should’ve been aborted or something.

“Our guy’s name is David Tremble,” says Jamison, stood there with his hands on his hips like the basketball coach. “He’s armed and dangerous. His last known location was Mr. Lewis’s apartment on Citrus Ave in Daly City. That was three hours ago.” He said to one of the cops, “Put out an OES alert on the suspect. Get a copy of his file with his picture over to CHP. I want a subpoena request for Tremble’s financial accounts and wireless carrier in the clerk’s mailbox by sunrise. Chop-chop, people.”

Some of the dudes get up and walk out, leaving us chosen ones. Then Jamison sits down, but does it like a tree – he pulls out the chair a bit and swings his leg over it like a madman. I guess if you’re tall you can do that.

“Now our task is to figure out where he’s headed. Mr. Lewis didn’t seem to know anything, so you’re our next lead, Neiko. Since you’ve got some of his memories, do you have any idea what he’ll do next?”

I’m thinking. Thinking real hard. But I can’t come up with anything. I tell him I ain’t got a clue.

So Jamison takes out this pad of paper and starts writing names down. *Parents* – he’s circled that. *Dr. Feist*. His writing’s so bad, it’s worse than mine – hard to imagine how he got past grade school.

“Any others you can think of?”

I know I’m smiling. “Yeah, I got a whole bunch.”

He slides me the pen and paper.

CHAPTER 29: DAVID TREMBLE

It was then, as I walked the cold and empty streets, cell phone in hand, when the warmth of the daytime sun had fully given way to the chill of the night beneath the grim glow of the glowering moon, that I felt myself truly awaken. Better than any psychedelic or neuromodulator was fear, the emotive result of adrenalin and cortisol at the eleventh hour of my circadian rhythm, but that fact escaped me, as did the body of knowledge I was so accustomed to, shuffled off by the biochemistry of the moment and the vulnerability of my form.

The air was far from freezing – according to my phone, the temperature was well above forty. My shivering must have been a psychosomatic response to recent events, I reasoned, an embodied algorithm activated by subconscious forces. The ring of the gunshot muffled my footsteps, making it seem as if I was floating along the roadway. I continued heading East, down the valley road that would take me away from the golden drapes of suburbia.

I was utterly alone, I realized, devoid of allegiances, and I felt for the first time the psychological trauma inflicted by isolation I had so often read about in schizotypal case studies, the sensation of directionless flight, of pursuit by unavoidable specters, of the bottom of the world falling away, subsequently rendering everything chaos. As I walked, even the smallest environmental details became supremely relevant – the direction of gazes, the speed of cars, the city's aural ambiance which smothered sirens in the distance on which I focused all of my attention to determine whether they were approaching or receding.

There was nowhere else to go. Given Looper's chances of remaining conscious after I'd left him, it was likely that my actions had been reported as an assault with a deadly weapon. Officers would be waiting at my apartment by the time I got there. The company offices would also be off-limits. Feist had not responded to either of my calls. I needed to conserve battery life.

Andrea might help me survive the night, but she had too great a conscience and would likely turn me in once she had discovered what I'd done. I ruled out Cara and Anderson.

I could call for an Uber, but that would only leave a record of my new location. If I wasn't flagged in their database in the first place. I uninstalled the app and set my 'location services' to off.

That left Malak. I had his personal number in my contacts from the message he'd left.

"My prodigal son!" he said with a level of gusto that only served to piss me off.

"I'm on Guadalupe Canyon Parkway."

"Ah, and what are you doing out there at this hour of night?"

"I need a ride you son of a bitch."

"A ride! I suppose you're not asking for a ride around the *neighborhood*, I take it?"

"I'm no use to you behind bars."

"Ah! That's your trouble. Well, I beg to differ – you'll be of great use to me *behind* anything really. Oh, just think of the rumors, the theories, the speculative juices will be positively *flowing*."

I wanted to shout at him through the earpiece but was afraid of attracting attention. "You wanted me to come to you, so here I am! Look, I can give you so much information...more than you could ever dream of."

"I don't want or need your information, David. The spectacle of history is far greater than anybody's petty details. Hah! But you're a naïve young man – I knew that as soon as you reached out to me. Don't worry, I'll make sure that your precious bleeding heart is eternally on display. Think of yourself as an exhibit in my museum, a little taxidermy of one of those extinct furry mammals which unfortunately were crushed between a couple of glaciers."

I told him to fuck himself and hung up. I'd said too much already. I couldn't decide whether it would be better to shoot him or fuck with his mind if I ever found him. I turned my phone off and pocketed it.

The road darkened as I entered the park, and then there was only the moon to light the way. It was only a partial moon, a lunar sickle which bathed the uphill path and the surrounding foliage in scant lumens, starving the hungry retina. The cloudless sky was a kidnapper's hood covering the globe, admitting only the stars on this rare absence of urban light pollution. The road was bordered on both sides by forest, its trees appearing as black, twisting apparitions seemingly in motion as I passed by, as if they came alive having been released from the bonds of daylight. Was it Oedipus who was cursed to forever wander the afterlife blind and senseless? I could only apprehend the image of the man walking with arms outstretched, bandaged ocular cavities, stumbling through celestial blackness.

My thoughts swirled around my failures like rats of the behavioral sink, altogether constituting an exhaustive particle wavefront which threatened collapse. The rats were the non-psychopathic algorithm attempting to determine, like a panel of researchers, just what had gone wrong with my mechanical specimen. It was love, I realized, or my lack of it – the inability to form those interpersonal bonds which strictly codify behavior. Had I stayed with Andrea the night I had left, or had brought her with me, things would have turned out differently. And I would have avoided the entire situation if I had long ago settled and denied the advanced degrees which placed me closer to the cutting edge of civilization. I couldn't decide which was more valid, to take for granted the sapien episteme and therefore live in ignorance or to strive for truth and progress. Which was more human? Perhaps it was a false dichotomy and succumbing to it was my error. Should I have attempted to love knowing that the experience was nothing more

than a hall of mirrors – an illusory mix of sensations brought about by embodied systems which exist to do no more than carry on natural selection? The story of Oedipus is poignant only due to the presence of genetic predisposition to avoid inbreeding common to most mammals – not because of some ethereal decree by “God.”

I realized that I had not lived and would most likely die without living. With that thought, I allowed myself to slide down a tree trunk and fall until its roots cradled my thighs. Exhaustion triumphed.

Then morning arrived, a sensual pink glow diffused by my skin-covered eyes. I opened them, only to see in the orange haze of low-angle solar energy that the forest was indeed moving. Dark shapes which detached from the trees like forest spirits, moving in the space between trees, stretching and mumbling amongst themselves. I thought I had imagined them, and then I saw beyond them a formation of tents of various shapes and sizes, the transplanted inventory of a sporting goods store, used well beyond the factory warranty. The people moved about them, rubbing their necks and forearms, seemingly unaware of my presence. The wail of an infant sounded like the dim cry of the dawn.

They were too numerous and too close to civilization to be recreational campers. They were a city within a city, a society in their own right, with a future that was no further than walking distance. As I further awakened, I saw that the tents were covered in leaves – they had been staked there a long time. Technically they were “homeless,” but the forest was their home.

I decided that I could never live like them. I imagined that they had each other – they had love, and perhaps they loved more fervently than any of us due to their daily struggle for existence. But they had no future – they were far from contributing to the advancement of the species. That was my true love, a love of the whole species and its progress, and how ironic that I

was to realize my essential nature as soon as the possibility of its realization was taken from me.

No – not taken, squandered through my own actions.

I knew of one other such lover of humanity. As all roads lead to Rome, all roads led to Feist's door. I had no other recourse.

CHAPTER 30: NEIKO PLEMONS

It's turned into a party in here. They got hot chocolate, coffee, doughnuts, the whole ninety yards. And it's a new kinda entertainment, watching the street corners all day, seeing the wheels of civilization turning and all that. One dude runs a red light and gets his truck clipped by a couple of chicks going too fast in their hunky-dory eco-pod. It's funny listening to them scream about insurance, like it's reality TV but without the commercial breaks. Actually, I should probably think that it's really fucking boring, but being in prison so long has fried my sense of boredom, so anything that ain't a voiceover on squids is a good thing.

I try and nap in the corner, but people keep on coming and going, like this is the first 'situation' that's happened in a while. And, I mean, I guess that manhunts don't happen every day, even in a big city – most people keep to themselves, am I right? But there's this energy behind it, like it ain't just any manhunt, but they're hunting for *the man*, like he's ate somebody's children and didn't just shoot some dumbass in the side by mistake.

They got Looper there, all bandaged up, and they're questioning him, and he's all sweaty like cause he's got those little red pills rolling in the back of his throat and where they come from.

Jamison asks, "Hey, since you've got David's memories, would you happen to know anything about the contraband at Looper's residence?" And he's giving me this cutsey smile like we're best buds.

I scratch my head, like I gotta think about it. "Naw man. I don't know nothing."

"Thanks," says Jamison with a whiff of sarcasm. He goes off to fuck with Looper again.

Feeling jazzed, I eat another doughnut and spurt more coffee into my cup.

Then I leave the room, cause rush hour's over and I'm tired of watching traffic. So I go out onto this balcony that overlooks the first floor and all the cubicles down there which are so square and perfect and full of people that they look like the cells of a plant and the cops in blue are like the water molecules getting pumped about while the people in suits are the minerals that make shit tick. I'm thinking that David's right, we are all just these machines off doing our thing, and it's quite the miracle that any shit at all works in life.

I dunno what makes me think of my parents, but I do, and I realize that I haven't called them since I got out. Next thing I know, I'm walking down the stairs into some lady cop's cubicle.

"Hey, if you're not too busy, mind looking me up? Need to call my parents."

She smiles and gets to work, but she ain't smiling after she sees that I'm a felon. But I got my number anyway and scoot out of there before she starts asking questions.

"Hey, Merle," I say, hearing that trademark heavy breathing on the other end of the line.

"Is everything alright?"

"Uh, yeah, everything's fine. Just calling to say hi."

"What's that I hear in the background?"

"Oh, well I'm in a police station. Lots of folks here."

Merle blasts my ear with static as he sighs. "You never cease to amaze me."

"Don't worry! I'm helping with a case. Can't talk about it though. You might see it on the news."

"Oh, well that's good then. I'll, uh, keep my eyes peeled. I'm afraid that your mother's sleeping at the moment."

"That's fine. You can say hi to her for me."

“Okay. I’ll do that.” He pauses, and all I hear is breathing. “So, you want me to bail you out, son?”

I’m laughing. “No. It ain’t like that at all. Uh, tell me how you’re doing.”

I’ll spare ya the details, but my old man Merle starts going on and on about this elderly couple who went to his church that died on the same day from natural causes – an act of Gawd if there ever was one – and about how there ain’t no kids no more where they’re at cause they’re all moved to the Godless city to make their Godless money, so there’s only these old folk out there who are just dropping like flies and about half of them have lung cancer, and I’m thinking to myself that that’s exactly why I got the fuck out of Dodge, but I don’t say it cause I know it’ll just make him depressed and pissy.

“Sounds rough,” says I.

“Getting old is rough.” Merle coughs, as if to prove his point.

“You guys should take a road-trip over to this Godless city. Mom was talking about the RV last time.”

“That’s the last thing I thought you’d say.”

“Well, I said it.”

And I wait, and realize that Merle ain’t talking cause he’s getting emotional.

“I’ll call you back sometime,” says I.

“Remember that God forgives all sins.”

“Alright. Bye.”

Now I feel good and weird.

So I head back up to the situation room and see that I've got a whole new one all to myself. These two chicks are stood in there looking real awkward trying to make conversation, and I know exactly who they are and keep that smile all to myself.

My coffee's on the table right between them, so I got an excuse to intrude. I go at it from the other side and have to lean across the table, which catches their attention.

"You must know David Tremble in some capacity," says Cara, like she's gotta prove how packed her skull is. "That's why we're all here, isn't it?"

"Uh, yeah. Guess so," I say, tapping my fingers on my cup.

Andrea's shooting me this look that says, *How the fuck are you friends with David?*

"I'm Cara, by the way," and she reaches across the table like her arm's an I-beam.

"I'm Neiko," I say, taking it gingerly. "And you're Andrea," I say, nodding at her.

That ratchets things up a notch.

"He told you about me? What the fuck did he do?"

I feel like I'm in this delicious position to make anything happen, cause she's exactly like David remembered her, a real gazelle, and to my eye she's wounded and in need of saving.

But both of these chicks seem kind of pissed at being there, and the longer they stare at me like I'm some kind of rapist, the less I feel like fucking with them.

"You must be his drug dealer," Cara says, breaking the silence.

"What? No! Don't say that!" I glance over and see if there are any cops standing near the door. "I know who you are cause he knows who you are."

"He must have interfaced with you..." Cara says.

Andrea looks at her. "You mean with that memory device he has?"

It's funny, seeing them in the flesh, cause I can't help but think back to the memories and feelings he has for them. They run right through me, but I know they're not mine – they're his, and that's fucking with my head.

“Why are you so pissed?” I ask Andrea.

“Oh, I don't know, you must remember how I tried to help him and then he pulled that weird shit at my apartment where he got high and left and now they're treating him like he's a serial killer.”

“You're wrong there. He's not a serial killer. But he shot someone by mistake.”

“Well, that's a whole lot better, now isn't it.”

Cara is beside herself.

“Why don't you text him?” I say.

Andrea shakes her head. “I don't think that would be a good idea.”

“If he texts you back, maybe they could figure out where he's at.”

She looks down and sighs. “Exactly. I really don't want to have anything to do with this.”

“Come on. He needs help. You have no idea how he feels.”

Andrea walks out of the room.

“Hey, wait!” I'm headed after her.

She runs down the stairs and is headed for the exit. She's out the door by the time I get there. My palm is just about to hit the handle.

“Hold it!” Jamison booms.

I swing around. “I'm gonna get her back.”

“No, you're not,” he says, looking past me through the glass. “We'll just have to find another way.”

I watch as she crosses the street and disappears around the next corner.

CHAPTER 31: DAVID TREMBLE

I did some dumpster-diving and found a ball cap and sweatshirt to mask my appearance. With exception to my high-quality bag, I looked like any other person low on the socio-economic totem pole. I rubbed the canvas down with a handful of mud to compensate. I'd been walking for hours, as much time as it would've taken me just weeks ago to run to the other end of the Golden Gate bridge. I began to feel the pain in my feet a short while after I'd gotten started that morning. It began as a feeling of pins and needles growing with each step until it felt as if I was walking on coals. I had to rest and sat for thirty minutes in a dingy cafe next to an outlet that I used to charge my phone. The people who came and went kept their distance. On the small ceiling-mounted television in the corner, the morning news was interrupted by an alert bulletin for a person armed and dangerous followed by the picture from my driver's license. Their response seemed disproportionate to the class of crime I'd committed. Perhaps Jamison was behind it – he'd smelled blood in the water and was in the process of bringing the whole state apparatus to bear against me.

If that was the case, it wouldn't be long before they tapped my phone or simply triangulated my location using the cellular network.

Perhaps I could use that to my advantage.

I left the café and turned on my phone as I walked. There was a voicemail from Feist. I didn't bother listening to it and went straight to returning his call.

"David," Feist said three rings later.

"You need to help me."

"What are you –"

"This was all your idea. Your plan."

“You’re not making any sense.”

I adjusted my hat in frustration. Of course he wasn’t going to admit to anything over the phone.

“David, the police are looking for you – please go to them. Everything is going to be fine, just tell them what has happened and I’ll do what I can to support you.”

“No. You’ll make sure that I end up just like Robert Amos.”

“What?” he said, and I sensed genuine confusion in his voice. “That man died of a heart attack. He was addicted to cocaine, among his other substances. It was quite tragic.”

“You’re lying,” I said, wondering then if he really did know the circumstances of the man’s death.

“David...use of the mnetic technology may have had unforeseen effects on your cognition...I’m willing to cover any medical expenses.”

“The hell you are,” I said and ended the call.

I had to ditch the phone, but before I could, I needed to send one last message. I ducked into an alleyway to write it. My dirty fingers had a hard time registering on the glass surface. The phone shook in my hands. At first I had written to Andrea that she had been right, and that I thought she was a wonderful person and that she had a great life ahead of her. I even thought of using the L-word. It was all very presumptuous of me to think that I had such an effect on her, a complete stranger among strangers who had trampled through her twenties. She had a long life ahead of her. I rephrased that part of the message and focused on how it had all been my fault and that my leaving had nothing to do with her. Still, very presumptuous to think that I had had such power over her, for I probably did not, and reminding her of that strange and unfortunate happenstance would only be annoying.

Why was I writing to her at all? Did I see myself as some martyr worthy of grief? In the end I told her that she was right and bid her goodbye. That would make her feel good at least, to be validated.

I sent the message and waited the several moments afterward for confirmation of its delivery before dropping the device and smashing it beneath my heel.

Then I continued walking, feeling freer than I ever had. I avoided the middle of the city, working my way around it via the waterfront, where the cool gusts of air brought with them the clean smell of the bay. It was one last tour of what was for me the most beautiful part of the city: the water, the boats, the birds, constant sources of movement. The sky was cloudy and gray. It was majestic.

Hours later and with numbness in my legs, I began to cross the Golden Gate Bridge, wondering if that was where they would apprehend me. With that dull orange-red railing to my right, I looked over the edge to see the suicide netting which I had noticed long ago hanging below. I would've never guessed that I'd end up making use of it. But it was an appealing option, for everything else seemed impossible. Yes, I was certain that I could survive one or two years behind bars, but what of life afterward? Who would hire me in my field of expertise? Could I ever be trusted to do more than sweep floors? That life appeared to me as a gray and dismal thing, a flatline of human potential dipping with every monthly bill in my mailbox, a fine existence as far as the census is concerned.

Ah, but there was a way for me to come back from the whole travesty. If I read Feist's mind and discovered the names and places of the conspiracy, I might just end up further ahead than I could ever have possibly imagined.

I pressed onward toward Feist's with haste.

CHAPTER 32: NEIKO PLEMONS

Cara, Jamison and me had been watching David cross the city on the monitors around the room for over an hour. As soon as he left the frame, the view switched to another traffic cam that he was walking into. The dude is determined, I'll give him that. First, I was wondering why Jamison didn't just have one of his patrols snatch him off the street. Then I realize, they want to figure out where he's headed, cause he might just lead them to something good.

And then Andrea steps back into the room. "He texted me," she says.

"Yeah, we saw that about an hour ago," Jamison says, pointing at the screen. "What did he mean by 'you're right'?"

"He was referring to the last conversation we had. I told him to tell the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"The brain scans that have been all over the news."

"Hmm. Any idea where he's headed?"

Andrea slumps into the nearest chair. "None."

Cara goes back to telling me about her research, and then she starts asking all these questions about race in prison that I have no idea how to answer cause I ain't got her kind of knowledge. I explain how the rec yard works, how all the dudes lay down on the grassy knoll to tan their junies as a way of also mooning the tower guards and she's fascinated by it. Jamison thinks it's hilarious but he's trying to hide that fact. I keep looking over at Andrea. She's looked down at her phone, reading that text message I think, at least a dozen times, and keeps looking up at Dave on the screen.

I'm deep into a story about when Frank the Tank stole Eddie's chicory root and them two old heads went at it.

“It was almost like they was making love,” I say, cracking myself up, “cause they both got arthritis.” I’m sleep-deprived as fuck, running on free sugar and caffeine on a manhunt, and chatting up a pretty little genius. Best day of my life.

Then this police dude pokes his head in the door. “Sir, should I have officers stationed at the other end of the Golden Gate? We could have another unit post city-side and trap him on the bridge.”

Jamison stands. “Thanks, but that will be unnecessary.”

“Sir? We’ll lose visual on him after he leaves the city.”

“In fact, please tell the unit we have at Feist’s residence to return to the station.”

“I’m afraid I don’t...”

“Just do as I say. That’s an order.”

“Yessir.”

Then Jamison sits back down and stares at the monitors like one of them hungry city dogs stares at his next meal.

“Uh, Jamison, my man, do you want Dave to kill Feist. Cause he’s got that gun and all...”

“I’m aware of that,” says Jamison, clenching that jaw of his.

We’re watching for the next ten minutes to see if David turns onto the bridge. I’m actually kind of praying that he doesn’t, that he’s going somewhere else. But nope. There he goes.

That’s all that Jamison wanted to see apparently, cause he gets up and says to me, “I’ll have Officer Warren outside make sure you’re confined to the building. Ladies, thanks for your

help in this case. Andrea, thank you for returning. We will keep you informed as our investigation develops.”

“You’re going to stop him, right?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Jamison says with a smile, and he leaves the room.

Andrea stares at the screens. I slide out of my chair and into one next to her. “You gotta go after him.”

“Who? The detective?”

“Dave. You gotta stop him from ruining his life. Cause he’s a good guy deep down, even though he’s all fucked up right now. And, uh, he’ll listen to you, cause – take it from me – that boy’s loved you since the moment you met.”

Andrea runs a hand through her hair. “This is crazy,” she says, staring at the table with blankness in her face and eyes flickering with thought. “Where should I go?”

I ask for her phone and punch Feist’s address into the maps app. She looks it over a moment before dashing out of the room with her blond hair trailing behind her like a flame.

“I never believed in love at first sight,” says Cara absentmindedly.

“Oh, it’s a very real phenomena,” I say, sliding back her way. “Lemme tell ya ‘bout it.”

CHAPTER 33: DAVID TREMBLE

I had left the bridge behind and passed the visitor center when the sidewalk ended. The commuter traffic to and from the northern cities flowed at an afternoon trickle, a pressure wave that blew past every few seconds with each passing steel box on wheels. Despite their color, shape, sound, or size, each was like a concept identical to the next, carrying its traveler through space and time on a whole other plane of existence, for I must have appeared as an insect to them, dark and small and easily crushed. Their perspectives were altered by the vehicles they occupied, those cybernetic shells moving at inhuman velocity, leaving me in their wake. And I regarded them not as people driving cars, but as the machines themselves, for the person within was nothing other than a blurry image hardly perceptible through glazed and tinted glass, a seed within a larger organism.

And then there were the vehicles which clearly did not have drivers. Through their behavior alone, they would be indistinguishable from the rest. It was easy to think that people had come to mimic machines, but it was also the case that as machines came to live in our world, they began to mimic people.

Everything was finite. Calculable. Given the proper perspective, one's judgements about their environment, others, and themselves could be made absolute. But that was the rub, one's perspective. For it is impossible for a human mind to calculate everything, so we must make estimates, and gross ones at that. What was the value of a technology, of a life, of a machine? Such judgements concerning vehicles are quite simple given their explicit purpose, but what of people? How should anyone know the value of one's life relative to another? The answer to this question was outside the scope of my body of knowledge, I realized. I had been so busy studying what people are, how they work, and why they work at a mechanistic level that I had ignored

perhaps the most important question of all: who are people? Who is the emergent property within that evolving network of billions of interconnected neurons? The question had emerged before me, like the rise of the morning sun, just beyond the horizon of my hypoglycemic understanding, a hazy apparition floating in my mind's eye like the figment of a poignant dream. I wanted to know where I'd gone wrong in my conception of humanity! They were not a 'what,' but a 'whom'...

I was torn from this line of inquiry by the sound of screeching tires. With a great woosh of air, a black SUV departed the traffic at my back and barreled into the breakdown lane with its turn signal on. Behind its tinted rear window, there was a bank of lights only found on unmarked cop cars. They remained dark. Seconds later the driver door opened and out stepped a man in brown.

I reached into the sweatshirt's front pocket and felt the grip of the Saturday Night Special. The garment was stretchy enough that I could point it in his direction and fire without removing it from the cloth.

Jamison walked toward me with his hands raised. "Looks like you could use a lift," he said, shouting over the passing traffic.

"To where? A jail cell?"

"To where I think you're going," he said, letting his hands drop. We stood a few yards apart. "Feist's house. He's there. I'll take you to him."

"Why would you do that?"

"We want the same thing, you know? To find out what's really happening."

I could only see sincerity in his gaze.

"That tech," he continued, "is going to make my line of work obsolete."

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll go with you.”

He held out his hand. “Give me your gun first.”

I took the gun out of my pocket and handed it to him sideways.

He jacked the round out of the chamber and caught it before ejecting the magazine. He walked back to the SUV and tossed the gun and its ammunition into the glove box.

“Put your bag in there,” he said gesturing at the front seat, and I obliged.

As soon as I’d dropped the bag in the footwell, he yanked me from the vehicle with surprising force and slammed me against the rear door.

“Hold still,” he muttered. Seconds later, cold metal encircled my wrist, followed by the rasp of a ratchet mechanism.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” I said, trying to pry myself away from the vehicle. But he had already grabbed my other wrist and pulled it into submission.

“We’re doing this my way,” he said, before tossing me into the back seat.

It was not long before we had arrived at that long drive made of smooth stones. I watched the trees go by through the reinforced glass, preoccupied with the feeling of failure, that even if the truth was publicized, somehow it wouldn’t save me. In fact, I’d likely become part of the problem, one of the scapegoats at whom outrage could be directed.

“I don’t know how Anne died,” I said. “Her memories were in a girl. Fiona. I didn’t have enough time to see all of them.”

“Her body was found at home. She took a leave of absence and had been gone for three weeks. Coroner said she’d overdosed on heroin.”

“I didn’t know she had a drug problem.”

“She didn’t. That’s the thing. She was the last person I’d expect... After we brought in Suarez, and she came back in, it’s like she was a different person.”

I thought back to what I’d seen of her. She seemed to believe in justice and good will – and if one were to lose their sense of the world, only so much could happen to them.

But speculating about her was pointless, as I would never learn the whole story given the way things were going.

Jamison brought the vehicle to a stop in roughly the same spot as the Uber driver had days before. He took my bag out of the front seat and opened the rear door to let me out. As he pushed me toward the house, I realized that he had no intention of removing my handcuffs.

“You’re going to tell me how to use the machine,” said Jamison with his hand between my shoulder blades.

“You’ll both have to be unconscious in order to use it. We typically use a fast-acting oral sedative, but I left my dispenser at Loop – Mr. Lewis’s apartment.”

“Oh, I took those out of evidence. Figured they were part of the package.”

The door to the house opened for us as expected and we walked down the long hallway into the house. Through its glass ceilings, the gray sky overhead smothered its lively surfaces in a cool dolor. Lacking any other sources of illumination, the place seemed like it had been immersed in water, and that we were divers walking along the bottom of the sea toward an immense treasure.

“Dr. Feist? I’ve come to update you on the situation,” Jamison called.

“I see that you have a visitor!” said Feist, descending the stairs to the kitchen area.

“Come and have a seat.”

Jamison nudged me forward with what felt like a sharp edge, and I realized that he'd drawn his weapon and was obscuring it with my body. "Keep walking," he muttered, glancing through each open doorway we passed.

No eel awaited us in that culinary space. Without the presence of that carcass, the room felt quite hollow and devoid of personality. Feist stood in the open with his hands clasped before him. He was wearing his customary casual attire and seemed quite pleased by the turn of events. Jamison stepped out from behind me and looked behind the counter with his gun in full view.

"I have no weapons and can assure you that we are the only ones here."

Jamison holstered his weapon and placed my bag on the counter, where he began removing its contents.

"Is this really necessary?" said Feist, looking my way and smiling pleasantly.

"Pardon me for not believing a word you say," said Jamison. He had connected both headsets to the central hub and removed the box of sedatives from his pocket. "Which of these should I wear?" he asked of me.

"It doesn't make a difference. Both headsets are the same."

"What? Then who's in control?"

Feist said, "No one is in control. It is a mutual exchange of thought. However, there are certain techniques which you may not be familiar with."

"You're lying," said Jamison, looking the headsets over. "This is labeled 'one' and the other is labeled 'two.'"

"I can assure you, the numbering is arbitrary," said Feist.

"He's right," I said, "I thought the same when I first used it. This one is different from the models the public knows about."

Jamison smirked. "Then I'll take my chances."

He pulled me over to the flush wall-mounted oven and reattached my handcuffs with the chain running through its handle. Then he went to Feist and made him sit in a chair next to the counter.

"I think you would prefer it if we just talked this out," Feist said.

"Hold out your hand. Or would you prefer that I knocked you out the old-fashioned way?"

"As you wish," Feist said, accepting the tab. He put it in his mouth and was fast asleep.

Jamison dragged over another chair. "You better be here when I come back around," he said with a smirk. "Otherwise, I'll just have to find you again."

I strained against the oven, managing to pull its door open partway. "Don't go in there with him. You don't know what he's capable of."

Jamison dropped the number two headset onto Feist's head. "We'll see about that," he said. Then he seated himself with the headset on and slipped a tab into his mouth.

I watched their still figures for what seemed like a long time but was probably closer to ten or fifteen minutes. I strained against the oven handle with all my might, only managing to bend the thick metal slightly. I thought that if I could get onto the floor somehow and push against the wall with my legs, I might just be able to shear the metal off. It already felt as if I had shredded the skin on my wrists. I wondered if I could do it in my weakened state and was about to ease myself onto my knees when Feist came to.

I looked to Jamison, expecting him to wake any moment, but alas he did not.

"Foolhardy," Feist said, steadying himself. "I suppose that's why I'm a scientist and he's a cop."

“What did you do to him?”

“The damage was minimal. After he wakes up, he won’t remember anything from the last couple of days, perhaps longer.”

“That’s what you do to them, isn’t it? The children? Make sure they don’t remember anything.”

Feist regarded me with a look of intense scrutiny. “If you believe in those stories, how is it that you ever came to trust me?”

“I don’t know...going to Looper’s was a mistake.”

“It was pragmatic. People are afraid of what they don’t understand!” Feist threw his hands in the air. “In a perfect society, the truth would preclude all disputes, but we are not such simple creatures.”

“What creatures are we, then?”

“God only knows! But my life’s work has been to ease its suffering using the tools of medicine and capitalism and look what it’s gotten me. The creation of empathy, David, that was my work, for it is empathy that we lack for ourselves and for others, for the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the criminalized. If only we could understand the experience of the other...to radically empathize, then we might just be able to cure the division that has defined our species.”

“What about Robert Amos? And the dead immigrant children?”

Feist shook his head. “It would be better if we did not speak of such things...”

He walked around the counter and dispensed a tab.

I said nothing and fell to the floor, pulling with all my strength on the oven handle until I felt the snap of metal. I then tried to roll onto my back to defend myself, but I was too late and

his weight was upon me, and I lay there with my hands still cuffed behind my back as he held my nostrils, forcing my mouth open, whereupon he slid that sedative slip between my lips.

And I saw the doctor's life unfold before me, and it was far more tremendous than I could have imagined, filled with love and loss, pain and regret, and an energy that betrayed his calm and collected outward appearance. His existence had been a culling of essential things, the sexuality and angst of youth, the passion and attachment of middle age, until he was no more than the self-actualized entity that he seemed to be. A religious sense of selflessness had consumed him, and he derived great satisfaction, more than any love could provide, from the feeling that he was perhaps closest to humanity's helm. And I saw him there with Amos and others like him, selling at great profit the mnetic technology under the pretense that they were tools of sexual satisfaction, knowing that they would indelibly empathize with their victims, that after a time, their neurology would turn against them.

Hiroto had killed himself. He could not live with the guilt of knowing. For who could sit idly by as monsters consumed their prey in the dark antechambers of our civilization? None but a person of great conscience, and he was not one of them, not strong enough to shuffle off the bonds of his morality.

Then I saw Malak, and I saw how Feist had used him, anonymously feeding him rumors to gain trust amongst his own clientele.

And I saw that Feist was right, that the people were too comfortable with the system of justice to consider an alternative, for who in their right mind would allow those crimes to go on? It was not justice they wanted, but the sense of it, the accomplishment one feels upon hearing the

clap of the gavel striking the block, no matter how small the justice – the smaller the better, perhaps, for the people are pleased by the *amount* but not the *quality* of it.

At first, I had to roll onto my stomach. Then I pushed myself up using my forehead and scrunched forward until I was on my knees. Only then could I stand, and that's when I saw the doctor's body there on the floor in a lake of his own blood and Jamison's sidearm on the floor next to him. The detective was still asleep, his chest rising and falling with each breath. The device was still on the table. And then I noticed an envelope on the counter; written across it the words: *David – this future is yours*. I would have torn it open if I wasn't wearing handcuffs.

And I thought of the future and felt nothing but dread, for everything I had assumed had been incorrect, and the grand narrative with all of its evidence that I needed to obtain my acquittal did not exist. Would I be blamed for the doctor's death? How could any of it be explained without Jamison's memory of recent events.

"David –"

I turned to see Andrea standing in the doorway.

"Oh my god..."

"He killed himself. The gun's on the floor next to him. Can you get me out of these handcuffs?"

Her eyes darted back and forth between me and the corpse.

"Andrea, please!"

"Alright!" she said and rummaged through Jamison's pockets until she had found it, and then she came over to me with shaking hands and undid the restraint.

Once I was free, I knelt over Feist's body and felt his pockets for a wallet or device.

Finding nothing, I left the kitchen to search the bedroom.

"David, what the hell?" said Andrea, chasing after me.

"I've got to go. That's the only option now. I've committed a felony, and now there's this whole situation, and there was no conspiracy involving Feist, by the way – it was all just smoke and...media mirrors."

I pulled apart his nightstand, tossing silk garments one after the other onto his minimalist bed. What did I expect to find? A suitcase of cash? I opened his walk-in closet and rifled through that gallery of fabric artifice.

Andrea said something in the next room. I stepped out and caught her putting her phone away.

"Who was that?"

"The ambulance is on its way."

"Christ," I said, and left the room.

I should have killed myself when I had the chance, I decided, as I took off into that expanse of curated redwoods, which were not red at all in that weather, but quite gray and sad. I couldn't bear the thought of it, knowing that there was no escaping destiny, that I would have to live on with Feist's potential within me – the potential of the whole world, dormant, as I subsisted on the future's limited possibilities, as the immense power of the imagination and the mind is trapped in the narrow and fragile vessel of the body, to be smothered over by the death that always comes.

Andrea called my name and caught up to me with her hands and brought us tumbling to the slope covered in the detritus of beings centuries old.

“It’s going to be alright,” she said breathlessly. “You’ll be alright.”

There I lay, listening to the sound of our breathing.

I hoped her words would come true.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

In this reflective document, I will discuss the decision-making process behind many aspects of the novel with respect to the technical and creative sources which informed them.

The fundamental concept of the novel, which I consider to be a form of “mental connection” that transcends the boundaries of physiology, facilitated by technology, came to mind a number of years ago and emerged through writing in many iterations. The seed of the novel remained the same as variable elements revolved around it: What was the nature of its technology? Who was to be using it? For what purposes? And where and when? And, most importantly, would these elements culminate in an entertaining and impactful narrative? At least as impactful as melodramatic, contemporary science fiction can be... The kind of novel I had in mind was one that combined the entertainment value of contemporary, well-crafted “genre fiction” with a component of “social commentary” borrowed from the realm of “literary fiction.” When in Madhu Dubey’s 2011 essay “Post-Postmodern Realism?” I encountered Johnathan Franzen’s lamentation of the novel’s loss of social relevance and learned of his mission to recapture it through staunch realism, I found myself in complete agreement even though I had yet to encounter his work. It seems to me that the novel has an obligation to respond to “something,” or to perform some complex “social action” with respect to society. Elaborating on this process of response or performance is not within the scope of this reflection; I indicate this premise in the vaguest sense, as something I had intuited prior to the novel-writing endeavor.

This commentary will revolve around the literature and films which inspired the novel, while touching on some explicit conventions of fiction writing which played a role in my writing process. I’ve long been enamored with Michael Crichton’s work, of which I’ve read more than a few titles, and the associated design principle known as “high concept,” which the Hollywood

“script doctor” John Truby refers to as “a catchy one-line description that audiences will understand instantly and come rushing to the theater to see” (17). Truby is referring to film but states many times over the applicability of his “principles” to novels and other media. For *Jurassic Park* the film, he states that its one-line description might be the following: “What if you took the two greatest heavyweights of evolution—dinosaurs and humans—and forced them to fight to the death in the same ring?” Fair enough. I think it is easy to construe refined one-line premises for much of Crichton’s work. *Time*: What if a bunch of modern-day scientists time-travelled back to the middle ages? *Cell*: What if scientists developed nanotechnology that began to emulate humans and eventually sought to destroy them? *The Andromeda Strain*: What if future scientists needed an extinct species to synthesize the cure to a world-ending plague? The consistent strain of thought regarding all of these premises is “what if” and “scientists,” and I found myself implicitly copying these elements. “What if scientists developed memory technology that was used by a junior researcher to uncover a vast criminal conspiracy?” Off to the races.

But Truby is critical of Hollywood’s reliance on the “high concept” premise because he claims that it does not give rise to “organic storytelling”: “[The high concept premise] gives you only two or three scenes” (18). With my premise, I had intuited the same number of moments – one in which the memory technology is introduced, another in which the technology is used to discover something major, and one more in which something unexpected happens (the technology is used against the narrator). These are vague descriptions and involved some level of concrete realization. I had already written a futuristic version of the story which centered on a guy in Austria with a robotic foot, and a near-future version in which a “Neiko Plemons” was the main character and was visited by a “Dana Tremble.” This is to say that some design elements

predated the thesis draft, but in approaching this project, I scrapped many elements and reverted to the one-line premise, which only had a handful of scenes.

When I think of Crichton's novels and film adaptations, what comes to mind are stories that emphasize their scientific concepts to the detriment of their social and human commentary. While it is the case that his concepts are relevant to moral quandaries which typically emerge in the media – the current issue regarding “gain of function” research into engineered virus strains, so as to ostensibly prepare vaccines before such ailments emerge naturally, or through other means, certainly seems to be in conversation with *Jurassic Park*'s question of “if we can do it, should we do it?” – the stock character-types which facilitate this broad kind of societal commentary are not well-suited to social commentary. Crichton's stories do not seem to locate the zeitgeist in the individual – the individual is an accessory to history, and the institution of science has a mind of its own, manifesting itself at will in a selection of human-shaped actors. Moreover, I wanted to produce a novel that went beyond the theme of scientific inquiry and correlated scientific movements with economic, social, and historical developments as well. Whereas Crichton presents a microcosm, a “what if” that is the entirety of the story, I wanted to present a social image which corroborated a scientific “what if” with other “what ifs.” My aspirations might be aligned with Franzen's in this regard – his writing has been described as “[refusing] to back away from [the complexity of the American scene]” (Dubey 369), a scene which, influenced by the material conditions of postmodernism, consists of numerous subcultures that complicate the formulation of a “social totality.” While I currently agree with Dubey that society is too complex, too plural, for the heterogenous entirety to be adequately mapped out between two paper covers, apprehending a number of its subcultures and fitting them within a more-or-less realist container seemed to be a worthwhile undertaking.

My reading of John Truby and Robert McKee prior to the program foregrounded the question of “who” in the novel: Who was to use the mind-reading technology? Who was the story to be about? Both authors conceptualize the “main character” in terms of a “conscious desire,” an object or idea that they pursue throughout the story, and an “unconscious desire or need,” which differs from or even contradicts the conscious desire but is necessary for their fulfillment in life. One of the things that’s striking about *Jurassic Park* the film is Dr. Grant’s change of desire as the film transpires. Prior to entering the park, he finds children annoying and states his desire to remain childless. While the survival of the group could be considered his “conscious desire” throughout the film, he must also save Dr. s grandchildren, and by its end he has formed a bond with them. We could say that while his conscious desire was “survival,” he learned to get along with kids – a contradiction for his character. Truby and McKee have their own terms for this kind of story development: “reversal” or “revelation,” respectively. The status quo for a character needs to be turned around by the story’s end. Screenwriter Jill Chamberlain similarly states that the character needs to end up “180 degrees” from where they started (20). The concept of “reversal” is the bread and butter of the Hollywood screenwriting discourse community. It is the fundamental element of any story.

The character of Neiko Plemons preexisted the current draft of the story and was initially the focal point of the narrative. He encountered a “Dana Tremble,” a female researcher who was also interviewing “Anne,” an ex-cop who had gone undercover as a prostitute and discovered a hidden child-trafficking ring. Through interactions with Dana following his release from prison, Neiko would learn of the criminal conspiracy and near the end of the story would somehow work to change it. He and Anne would have a standoff and she would learn that not all criminals are

evil. Dana would grow out of her timid, scholarly self and embrace worldly darkness. Neiko would just become a good guy. Those were the trajectories of the characters.

The problems with this configuration were twofold. On the one hand, I didn't know how to make Neiko interesting as a main character. While he still possessed a vulgar, hypersexualized vernacular, I was having difficulty justifying why he would undergo the "reversal" demanded of him by the story. On the other hand, Dana was a very pedestrian contemporary millennial type of character who just reacted to everything with shock, in a way that was perhaps realistic, but not very compelling. These two things weren't unfixable problems in and of themselves, but together in the context of the story, I had a selfish and vulgar guy interfacing with this bold but naïve kind of woman, and some kind of transformation had to take place in both of them. The characters had nothing in common, but also no meaningful contrast. At the end of the day, their conscious desires, which were self-evident, didn't have complementary unconscious contradictory desires or needs. One plus one equaled two, not the square root of negative one. From what I have encountered so far about Hegel's dialectic, synthesis is not necessarily the difference between the thesis and the antithesis but can also be something else entirely which has traces of those elements. The story could not be just a simple equation if it was to be successful. It needed to defy the logic previously established. Similarly conceptualizing the issue of transformation in "The Perfect Gerbil," George Saunders writes the following:

Einstein once said something along the lines of: "No worthy problem is ever solved within the plane of its original conception." Touching on the same idea, a famous poet once said: "If you set out to write a poem about two dogs fucking, and you write a poem about two dogs fucking, then you've written a poem about two dogs fucking." What we want our ending to do is to do more than we could have dreamed it would do. (180-181)

The main characters of the narrative needed to extend and complicate one another in a way that transcended pure addition.

Related to this structure of complication is Truby's concept of the "double reversal," in which "[t]he hero should learn something from the opponent, and the opponent should learn something from the hero" (86). While Truby claims that the "hero" and their "opponent" need not share the same weaknesses or desires for a double reversal to occur, I felt that commonality between Neiko and his counterpart would make whatever transformation that would occur more poignant.

The genesis of the "David Tremble" character was not straightforward. As with many elements of the novel, and with the creative process in general, I did not set out to write David with a set of explicit criteria in mind that would give rise to the textual features representing his character. McKee seems to speak to this when he refers to writers as "improvisationalists":

Writers are improvisationalists who perform sitting at their word processors, pacing their rooms, acting all their characters: man, woman, child, monster. We act in our imaginations until honest, character-specific emotions flow in our blood. When a scene is emotionally meaningful to us, we can trust that it'll be meaningful to the audience. By creating work that moves us, we move them. (153-54)

I could attempt to recount the composing process and the meaning of these characters at any level of formality or specificity, but at the end of the day, it seems to me that what I have written is the result of intuitive processing which is literally beyond my awareness. I've been following the work of Dr. Matthew Walker, a sleep researcher, who has cited research that finds REM sleep facilitates the selective formation of weak associations (Strickgold et al.), enhancing the "creative processing" of information" (Walker et al.). He has even said in an interview with Dr.

Rhonda Patrick (2019) that epiphany in the wakeful state is the experience of recovering lost “IP addresses” to prior dream-associations. While this is highly speculative, it remains the case that sleeping is very important for memory retention and to creativity, and one usually cannot rationally account for the emergence of new ideas – at least I can’t on a consistent basis.

This is to say that David Tremble came together as a result of loose association prior to the composing process and became more refined as he was written. David’s character was “flowing through my blood” even when I couldn’t grasp him fully. He, along with my other characters, are like whole historical eras only ever rendered partially in static images. Of course, they are just characters, and I don’t think of them so fancifully outside the genre of “critical reflection.” (Much less dream explicitly about them!)

David Tremble emerged from David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet* and Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*, two films which comprise in my mind a lagoon of mystery and self-discovery. The influence of these two films is, in retrospect, obvious in terms of the actions taken by David’s character. On the one hand, I sought to emulate the scene from *Blue Velvet* in which Jeffrey, the story’s protagonist, hides in a woman’s closet and witnesses an eerie sexual encounter between her and another man – what literally happened in the first draft of my novel’s second chapter. Of course, the circumstances for why my character was in someone else’s closet and those of *Blue Velvet* were dissimilar, and upon receiving feedback from Professor Adams about how predatory my version of events had made David out to be, I changed this to the less-immediate digital voyeurism seen in the current draft. The influence from *Eyes Wide Shut* is, among other things, that David makes himself out to be an authority figure, a “researcher,” on numerous occasions, as Dr. Hartford uses his title of “doctor” to do the same. The two films involve self-discovery, and they involve their protagonists’ journeys into the seedy underworlds as part of a process of

discovering the truth about human sexuality (as far as I can tell). I think I've been obsessed with these films because of how they go about juxtaposing the "normal world" and the "underworld," the notion that somewhere out there is a rupture to the comfortable boredom of the day-to-day and the emergence of the unpalatable. These films have influenced my novel in more ways than this – probably more than I can recount – but I think I've said enough about them here.

The decision to change the sex of the novel's principle character – from 'Dana' to 'David' came about as a result of these filmic sources of inspiration. My thinking about the lead character's object of desire, and therefore their weakness, began to revolve implicitly around those aspects as they were represented in these two films, and with Neiko's perspective, the text became centered on masculinity. What may have emerged as awkward and perhaps humorous (but uncomfortable as well) interactions between Neiko and Dana – some of this was retained in the dialogue of chapter 32 between Neiko and Cara – became an expression of similarity as David and Neiko, despite differences between their respective social and economic contexts, came to possess similarities in consciousness. In retrospect, I see that the combined darkness of these characters may be overwhelming to the reader, pushing it in too much of a negative and sexualized direction.

My male narrators' conscious desire for intimacy isn't a consequence of romanticism but of alienation, I think. I partly explored this with Neiko through some of his pre-prison backstory, but with David the causation of his issues with women isn't really explained. I think this is the case because I was also figuring out exactly how I wanted him to behave as I was writing the novel. I remember a moment in Chapter 6, in which David meets Cynthia, when I felt that the scene needed a source of tension and decided from that point forward that David was "obsessed with women," and that informed the rest of the content of that scene. Between the content of this

chapter and that of Chapter 2, an association between his acute discursivity regarding the mannerisms of others and his own appearance, that tendency and his objectification of the female form had begun to emerge. To me, this is what obsession looks like, and I use the phrase “looks like” because I don’t have a more precise way of getting at whatever it is that I’m interested in. As such, David became an obsessive neurotic with that set of features, and on top of that I layered the rumination about people being machines, which was a thing that was easy to revisit throughout the novel. I’d just been exposed to Jane Alison’s *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, which offered a myriad of metaphors for how I could go about imagining the story. I realized that it made sense for David’s narration to “spiral” around this concept when I needed to transition from one aspect of a scene to the next. David emerged in this way as an obsessive, spiraling kind of guy that for some reason gets sucked into a conspiracy.

I haven’t really talked about Neiko because his formation was much more a matter of intuition. The structure of the novel was partly inspired by Martin Scorsese’s *The Departed*, in that there is a “criminal” element and a “lawful” element which run parallel. In the pre-thesis draft where Neiko had already been written, I utilized the memory technology for purposes akin to the Ludovico treatment from *A Clockwork Orange*. I also watched videos by ex-cons on YouTube, among them the channel “After Prison Show,” with whom Neiko shares some of his noteworthy vocabulary. (I seek to change this in the next draft of the novel.) I also watched some excerpts from *The Trailer Park Boys*, which inspired the misspelling of certain words and misuse of phrases by the character. Out of this media milieu popped my version of the criminal type: selfish, antisocial, vulgar, violent. Dr. Todd L. Grande of YouTube also contributed to my understanding of narcissism and sociopathy, both of which seemed to be relevant in Neiko’s case.

What this web of resources seems to imply is that the process of character creation can involve – and in all cases probably should involve – more than the fulfillment of explicit criteria set forth by the screenwriters or proponents of such writing conventions. The conscious desire and contradictory unconscious need of these characters, and any other characterological features, while being explicitly demarcated in my case, comprise but a fraction of their potential substance. The space beyond explicit criteria concerns, in my view, a kind of sociological inquiry evidenced by some noteworthy literary works: Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which was inspired by news reporting of a woman's death, who due to the circumstances was reviled by the public for her apparent hedonism, a public image Flaubert sought to complicate through a sympathetic rendering. Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* also comes to mind, in which he created a fictitious counterpart to the communist revolutionary Sergey Nechayev as a means of representing the wellspring of violent radicalism in late 19th-century Russia. While guided by some explicit intention, inquiry of this sort seems to resemble exploratory play with ideas that merely reflect the author's context. Chuck Palahniuk, author of *Fight Club*, said something to this effect in a recent interview with entrepreneur Tom Bilyeu: "Boy, sometimes I don't even know [what the big issue of the book is] for two or three years after the book is done, and then I am absolutely mortified what I put out into the world and I hope that nobody ever figures out what I was actually talking about." Also contemplating the issue of understanding literature after-the-fact, Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, a volume written in the style of "literary montage" (460), consisting in part of long quotations from other authors displayed in sequence, cites the following from Grenoble (1930):

The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active

enough to scan such surfaces perfectly. Many pages in Marivaux or Rousseau contain a mysterious meaning which the first readers of these texts could not fully have deciphered. (Benjamin, 482)

While it is possible for me to articulate at the level of convention what the novel is doing in terms of its structure and plot (I could say much more in this regard, but I feel as if my analysis thus far has been sufficient), its actual meaning is beyond my comprehension.

From the beginning, something I wanted to address or represent is the cultural division between alternative and mainstream forms of media, and an obvious way of implementing this theme was to include a stand-in for Alex Jones in the novel, the “Jonas Malak” character. I find the phenomenon of “conspiracy theories” to be a defining feature of this cultural period – the last nail in the coffin of modernism, for even at the height of the postmodern period, the nightly news consisted of the same five or so corporations. On the one hand, I knew that I could not, like Flaubert, render Alex Jones a tragically sympathetic character, although now that I have made this comparison, such a project might be in my future. But I feel as if there’s something about him and the movement that he represents that is worth capturing and that he is not to be represented in an overtly dismissive manner. I sought to build him up intellectually and to make him somewhat compelling through the other characters. Of course, in reality, I have no idea what Alex Jones actually wants or who he really is, but by representing him in this way – by ‘acting out’ his character – I felt that some kind of understanding regarding the realm of “alternative facts” could be reached.

I attempted to locate his antithesis in the character of Andrea, who contrary to Malak, represents the “mainstream” and is immediate whereas Malak is distant throughout. While the

implementation of Malak is for me the most functional aspect of the novel, defining Andrea's role in the plot was more difficult given her increased level of involvement. In short, she ended up being a completely inactive character who showed up when the plot needed her to, and this was because of my focus on the novel's male leads. By the time I had figured out how David's decisions and events would track throughout the story's runtime, I didn't see an obvious way to make Andrea the kind of challenging and active character I had originally envisioned her to be. In the current draft, she seems a lot like the love-interest of an "80s action movie" in that she functions as more of an accessory to the main male character's actions than as an independent agent within the story. This role has been reproduced in recent films such as *Aquaman* (2018) whereby an attractive woman (Amber Heard) accompanies the male protagonist on *his* journey, more or less uncritically adopting his object of desire. Ideally, she would have her own agenda in helping David, and would end up opposing him and complicating his more controversial decisions, further dividing him between the worlds of "conspiracy" and "reality." She also didn't have a reason for being attracted to David that was obvious to the audience. All in all, not a successful implementation of this character and what she was supposed to represent.

The same goes for the character of Anne, who was supposed to be David's introduction into the criminal underworld. The idea for her was that she would enter a criminal organization as an undercover prostitute and find out how the mind-connecting technology is being used by those people. Neiko was also supposed to become involved with this organization after his prison release, but I couldn't figure out how to implement that transition in the time I had remaining. I was hesitant to commit to the portrayal of this character and still am not sure if the confluence of prostitution, human trafficking, and the female perspective is worth pursuing. Alex Jones and his allegations concerning "pizza gate" and the revelations about Harvey Weinstein, along with

reports of an “epidemic” of sex trafficking in the UK (Dearden; Pidd & Dodd) seemed to establish the relevance of the subject matter. However, when it came to actually implementing Anne’s entrance into this underground network, I didn’t know how to portray it, and I didn’t know how to portray it from Neiko’s perspective either, so in either case both characters ended up doing other things, and that allowed me to finish the novel on time.

Writing the novel, I didn’t know how to put its elements together in a way that satisfactorily fulfilled their potential. Opportunities for the reader to critically reflect on institutions such as online dating, social media usage, prison, gender relations, criminality, news reporting, corporate culture, and the relationship between technology and the human experience could have been better afforded than they are in the current draft of the story. I encountered too much difficulty in constructing David Tremble’s trajectory in the current plotline to flesh out the umbrella of associated concepts within the allotted timeframe. Writing this draft of the story allowed me to flesh out some of its essential elements, but more importantly it has allowed me to recognize the parts of its constitution which require further development.

It seems to me that there is a degree of risk involved in writing a narrative that invokes a controversial social context and includes a female perspective while also being told from a male perspective. It would probably have been easier to write a story that avoids entirely the possibility of offending the reader’s sensibilities, but I don’t find such an approach to be as interesting. A story about a scientifically-minded character who is not obsessed with women, or who does not have some psychological problem causing him or her great distress, does not seem as compelling to me. I had to laugh when I came across the following quote from the 19th century poet Baudelaire:

For certain spirits, more precious and more jaded, delight in ugliness proceeds from an obscurer sentiment still – the thirst for the unknown and the taste for the horrible. It is this sentiment . . . which drives certain poets into the dissecting room or the clinic, and women to public executions. I am sincerely sorry for the man who cannot understand this – he is a harp who lacks a bass string (qtd. in Benjamin 248).

Ugliness and art go hand-in-hand. A similar sentiment is echoed by Palahniuk in his interview with Tom Bilyeu:

I would much rather be around people who want to talk or, you know, who want to risk looking bad, because when I'm around people who are just looking good, just telling their hero stories, um, I feel like I might as well be watching mainstream television, or so much media that is heavily marketed and filtered and sent through test audiences that it's like this fantastically processed cheese – there's nothing left to it...there's nothing to be gained from it...there's nothing raw about it anymore.

It is necessary that the novel capture the tendencies of objectification, misogyny, antihumanism, etcetera associated with the scientific, corporate, and governmental structures I have identified, for these are the areas within 21st century society where the species has erred, at least in my opinion. This problem-identifying function, which I believe to be the essential function of the novel, and perhaps artwork in general, necessarily entails the transgression of “acceptable” forms of representation.

In closing, my novel represents some association between scientism and sexuality, criminality and enlightenment. With this draft, I figured out the who, what, when, and where of the novel and how its principal technological agent should be utilized, but I also learned of

places in which I need to develop the story further, and perhaps reconsider my writing decisions. I'll have to write it again and see what happens.

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Eric Arnold grew up in the Bangor-Maine area and graduated from Brewer High School in 2012. After studying microbiology for two years at the University of Maine and then taking a semester of mechanical engineering, in 2016 he finally decided to become an English major. He was awarded a B.A. in English from the University in 2019 and is now a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Maine in August 2021.