

# The Cold Red Eyes of Home

It was dark and very cold as Fred pulled back onto the highway. He had stopped at a small gas station to get something to drink from one of the grimy worn out machines that was propped up against the wall outside the shed. It seemed like Fred always stopped here for some reason. The station was closed now and no light came from the incandescent bulbs on the telephone pole.

The phone booths faded away as Fred turned up the music and prepared for another hour of driving. Sometimes he just had to get in the car and drive somewhere. A car is one of the few places where one is in complete control thought Fred as he tapped the rhythm to one of his favorite songs. Fred sang "Benny had a bad cat put on a red shirt" just like the guy on the recording did. In another hour he could be fast asleep in his bed. Fred finished his drink and threw the container to the back seat.

Nobody could see him on this stretch of road. There were never very many people traveling this way so late at night. This was the kind of road Fred loved most. He would push the little car to its limits and thrill at the forces due to its acceleration.

As Fred flew down one particularly long straightaway, he noticed how bright the moon was that night. And there were two stars that seemed to be brighter than the rest. They were both equal distances below and to the side of the moon. Together, they formed a sort of triangle in the sky. As Fred thought about this, it seemed as though there were eyes surrounding him in every direction. It was as if every point of light that he could see had somehow become an eye that stared at him and waited for his every move. When Fred blinked, it was as if they all blinked. All this frightened Fred even more by the fact that the moon and the other two stars in the triangle were the only objects that did not appear to him as eyes. These three lights kept shimmering and getting brighter and Fred had to slow down the car. It was getting difficult to think because of the overwhelming awe that Fred felt for the eyes and most of all for the triangle of suns. For a moment they appeared to represent the points on a crucifix and then they were a triangle again. At the moment when Fred felt that he must stop the car before he had to puke, the eyes vanished, and quickly reappeared just long enough to blink as Fred stared, motionless toward them. He quickly lit one of his cigarettes and started to breath again. In a few minutes, he would be home.

Fred unlocked the door and stepped inside. Sydney the "dog" recognized him and started racing about the room excitedly. Fred said "lights," and the lights in the room came on. A small screen recessed into the far wall indicated the consumption of energy in a map of his house. He could see the dot that represented him blinking on and off in the little square that was this

room. Sydney "the dog" approached Fred and handed him an envelope and a glass of water. Fred took the envelope and removed two capsules. Fred swallowed them and drank the water. Sydney always sensed when he was nervous although Fred couldn't remember telling him to. Sydney had begun as one of Fred's projects at the university. Since then, Fred had added more articulate arms, several sensory detectors and a laser matrix holograph generator. Fred felt compelled to build onto the robot whenever he wasn't busy. He had grown quite fond of Sydney over the past few years and couldn't bear the thoughts of living without him. Fred felt his way clumsily to the bed and climbed in. As usual, Sydney roamed all over the house looking for things to do.

At about the break of dawn, Sydney pulled the covers off of Fred and nudged him in the side a few times. Typically, Fred would not yet wake up, but at this instance, he leapt up from the bed and looked all around the room like a man expecting to be hit from behind. The screen in his bedroom was flashing something at him and he could hear the voice from behind the wall saying "appliance 13774 approach the screen...appliance 13774 approach the screen." Was it Thursday already? Fred walked over to the flashing and it acknowledged him with a quick scan of light and the opening of a small door. The voice said, "Receive packet." He reached into the door and removed a plastic box, which contained a small bottle. Fred removed the bottle and turned it to see the label. It said "PsyDel 6.2 maintenance dosage. QUICK SET APPLICATION PACKAGE. Apply to fingertips. SEE ILLUSTRATION.' As he read this voice was saying "CEE YEE-LUS-STRAA-SHUN." On the screen was a picture of someone's hand and a small swab wetting the extended fingers in a circular motion. Fred removed the top of the bottle and withdrew the swab. In one sweep, he coated the ends of the fingers on his left hand with the liquid. The screen went blank for a moment and then returned with a calendar showing that Fred had no appointments for another 48 hours.

Fred wondered what he would do next. Would he go get something to eat, or would he take a shower first. Sometimes it was so hard to decide what to do. Sydney decided for him and rolled up beside him. Fred pulled a glass from the table and filled it with orange juice. Fred took the glass and "decided" to have breakfast.

Fred threw some "Eggs-N-Ham" packs into the microwave and set the coffee maker. Sydney switched on the big TV screen by the window. A man was interviewing someone who kept talking about something that was particularly popular with everyone lately, but Fred wasn't paying enough attention to tell just exactly what they were talking about. He was flipping a potato chip can lid up in the air repeatedly trying to see if he could get it to land on the back of his hand. After about four tries he succeeded, but it fell off. The men on the TV were arguing now about whether red was more popular with the merchandising industry than blue was. Fred grew tired of

this and said "channel five." Immediately a large bus was thundering toward Fred and then it turned down a side street to reveal an avenue of jewelry stores and china shops on the big screen. Fred was trying to make his way through the crowd toward a girl who was looking at some rings through a store window. As Fred neared her, she turned to leave and saw him. She smiled and said "where have you been?" Fred looked aside and said "I had breakfast and went for a walk." She nodded and they started walking down the street toward a small cafe. They got a table and sat down.

As he finished his coffee, Fred got up and leaned toward the girl. He said "want to go take a shower?" She got up and followed him across the street. In a moment he was undressing while the room filled up with steam. After a moment it was impossible to see more than a meter in the thick fog. The tiles were unbearably slick. After Fred got in the shower he adjusted the temperature of the water to a cooler level. He found it hard to keep from smiling and his throat muscles were getting sore from his grinning. The water felt wonderful on his skin but Fred felt it somewhat disturbing to look at the water coming out of the shower head. It seemed to be alive, writhing and twisting and making grotesque contortions in a malevolent manner. Fred turned off the shower and stepped out onto the slick tile floor. He switched on the exhaust fan to clear the steam.

In a moment the steam cleared and Fred could see himself in the public restroom staring down a long line of vacant urinals. On the other side was a row of sinks with mirrors placed as if one were supposed to be running back and forth between the urinal and the sink. Or maybe I'm supposed to be able to use the sink from the urinal thought Fred.

He kept walking until he pulled the door all the way back. The slick white tiles stretched into the next room to where a chair with one armrest awaited him. He sat down and placed the strap around his wrist. He flinched as the machine took a sample from his palm.

Fred just knew the sample would be used to make more of himself. That is, it would be used to make several replicates of himself. He wasn't sure what they would do with them though. He had never seen one of them. Perhaps they would be used in case he ever needed an organ transplant. But why did they need so many of them? They must have thousands of them by now. Maybe they were changing the cells with some genetic engineering process to create new individuals. Maybe they were just making copies of Fred to do his job in case anything happened to him. Fred could never be sure. There was nobody to ask about it now anyway. He could imagine about fifty people who all looked exactly like him, crowded into his kitchen, all of them trying to sweep the floor with one broom. About twelve of them would be struggling with who should hold the dustpan.

Fred changed channels on the TV again. This time there was a small man with long dirty hair crouched up in a tree. He kept saying "pairoo pairoo" as

a man on the ground with a hypodermic needle tried to get him to climb down. The little man kept shaking the limbs to make things fall out of the leaves, but the man on the ground wouldn't leave. He just kept on holding his hands in front of his face and occasionally he would spit grit and bark out of his mouth.

Fred got up and went over to his workbench. He had been working on a new set of ears that would enable Sydney to have stereo hearing. Sydney would be able to judge the distance of objects and people with them. Fred felt too disoriented to deal with trying to power down Sydney and get him up on the bench to install the ears. He decided to go for a walk instead.

He pulled on his blue overalls and walked out the door. Sydney watched him leave through the window. Fred saw the girl from the cafe leaving her house next door and he ran up beside her. She said, "hey, where are you going?" Fred said, "I don't know. What do you have in mind?"

"How about some ice cream?"

"I'm not hungry now."

"Well, let's go to the park."

Fred hesitated for a moment. The park was a terribly dirty place these days. Nobody bothered to pick up the trash anymore. Why does she always want to walk in the park he wondered. Finally he said, "OK. Let's go to the park."

They walked in silence for some time down the empty streets across broken pavement and down long grassy sidewalks. They reached the little footbridge that was the entrance to the park. As they were going across she stopped and leaned over the rail.

The water was rushing urgently toward some destination downstream. Fred put his arm around her as she flicked the paint off of the rail and it fell into the swift running water below. For a moment, everything slowed down, and he pulled the hair back from her eyes and touched her face. Then she said, "what time is it?" He fumbled in his pockets hopelessly for a while. "I don't know. I can't seem to find my watch."; he wondered why she was always so worried about the time. She always spoiled a perfectly good moment by worrying about the time. She straightened her back and started across the bridge. He stood for a moment and then followed. The flowers and trees were waving about him wildly like they were being wrenched up by a cyclone. He closed his eyes and turned around to face the wind. He could see that the sun was setting now. He looked over his shoulder and the girl was nowhere to be seen. She was gone.

Fred walked all the way home, enabled the stereo, and poured himself a scotch and water. He sat on the edge of the bed and drank the vile mixture

down quickly. As he lowered himself onto the bed and closed his eyes he was asleep.

Then he was startled by a noise from outside the window. He looked out the window and he could see a glowing red light that was pulsating toward him. As it approached the window, he could see the object that looked like an old vacuum cleaner with a red light on top. It came right up to the window and then started going through it. The glass didn't break, but the vacuum cleaner came right through it. Fred tensely sat up in his bed as the vacuum cleaner hovered over to him. He felt paralyzed and yet something was making him lie down on the bed. He felt numb and speechless but he wanted to scream. The vacuum cleaner started to talk. It said "HELLO. DO NOT BE AFRAID OF DEATH. WE WISH YOU NO HARM. YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED FOR MODIFICATION. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO MOVE..." At this, Fred closed his eyes and as far as he could tell he passed out for some time.

Fred awoke feeling as if he had been asleep for weeks. His head felt odd and he held his hand to it and it was bald! He had no hair on his head. There was a numb spot at the base of his skull and another one on the top to one side as if the nerves had been cut to those areas. He tried to speak and found that he was unable to make a sound louder than a whisper. He poured a glass of water and drank it down, savoring every drop. When he could speak, he said, "What day is it?" The voice from the screen said, "Today is Sunday." Fred resigned himself to the fact that he had to work that day. He put on some coffee and threw a couple of packs into the oven.

The television was saying something about bad weather and storm warnings, but it looked particularly sunny outside to Fred. He ate the eggs slowly, contemplating each bite as if he had not eaten in several years. The coffee was refreshing and soon he was wide-awake again.

He stepped into the shower, being careful not to slip on the tile. The telephone rang at about the same time he got shampoo in his eyes so he didn't bother to answer it. He didn't have time for anyone right now anyway. He had to be at the office in thirty minutes.

Fred stepped onto the sidewalk inside the complex and lurched forward as the sidewalk carried him past fountains and trees toward the computer center where he worked. He got off near the door and walked in through the air wall that kept the humidity stable and the dust out of the air inside. Fred sat down at his terminal and saw that he had only enough work to last the morning so he would be off this afternoon. How wonderful Fred thought. He hadn't had any big assignments since last month when he was working on some defense programs for the government. This week he was writing a program to control robot ducks at the city's new indoor park.

By three o'clock he had finished and cleaned up his work area several times

so he decided to leave. He waved at Leonard who was watching him from behind the glass wall of some experimental station. Inside, there was a small robot who was "learning how to walk." Leonard was one of the few programmers who were selected to teach the "infant" programs new things like colors and the names of shapes. Fred looked over his shoulder at the clock and walked out the door.

The crowd outside was gazing past him in a slow rush. He weaved his way to the parking lot and got into the car. He pulled out onto the street and he was gone.

He pulled into the driveway just in time to see Genita leaving her house. He turned off the car and walked next door. She locked the door and said, "I was just going to the store. Do you want to come?" He thought for a moment and tried to decide. Finally she said "That's okay. I'll see you tonight." "See you later" he felt himself say as she walked away. He felt thirsty and walked back to his house for a drink.

Sydney was waiting for him inside. There was some mail on the table also. He decided not to open it yet. It was probably junk anyway. He poured a scotch and water and plopped down into the soft chair. "Stereo, video, AC and Sydney go get me some ice." In a moment Sydney returned with some ice in a small bucket. Fred dropped some into his drink and picked up one of the envelopes on the table. It was an advertisement for a sweepstakes where they were giving away a trip to the Caribbean. The phone rang. He got up out of the chair and spilled his drink on the floor. Sydney wheeled off to the kitchen to retrieve a towel, and Fred answered the phone.

Fred always hated it when people called him in the afternoon, but he cleared his throat and said "hello?" "Fred, what are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing I suppose. Why?"

"I've got something very important to talk to you about. Could you meet me somewhere for dinner?"

"Yeah I suppose so. What time?"

"Meet me in the coffee shop around eight."

"Alright, see ya later."

Leonard always blew everything out of proportion. Fred hardly thought about whatever it was that he wanted to talk about.

Fred settled back down in the chair and was wondering what to do for the rest of the afternoon. The stereo was playing "somewhere there must be a big smiling face trying to put me back into my place," and Sydney as usual

was searching for something to do. Fred wished there was some way to program the boredom out of his own life. Without hesitation he got up and walked over to the screen. He thought for a moment and said "access code thirty-two. Request supplement." The screen blinked off for an instant and then the voice began "Appliance 13775. Approach the screen." Fred received the envelope with eager anticipation.

Fred could see the table that Leonard had reserved for them as he walked up the sidewalk to the cafe. Leonard was one of those people who was never late for anything. "Fred, Fred, over here." Fred pretended not to notice as Leonard waved frantically toward him.

"Hello Leonard. What are you drinking?"

"Oh, its just water. I was waiting for you."

"What's all this you were going to tell me about?"

"It's about the project I've been involved with. We're about to enter the final development stage and we need someone new."

"New. What do you mean new?"

"As you know, the same three individuals have been teaching the system everything so far. But now that we are about to enter the cognitive development stage we would like to have someone new so that we can be sure there is no contamination from the personalities it has been in touch with up until now. Anyone in our department can take the position. It would increase your salary I'm sure."

Fred smiled and thought for a moment. There was something very attractive to him about that thing. It was one of the most closely guarded research projects going on in his department. And he knew there was only one like it in the entire world. God only knows what they're going to do with it Fred thought as he said "That sounds fantastic!"

Fred walked into the office that day with new enthusiasm. He walked down the long corridors past the micro and biological sections. Inside one cubicle, he could see an experiment where monkeys were being taught to carry out certain tasks. There were several levers that the monkey was supposed to touch at certain times and some that it was supposed to touch at other times. The light would come on and the little monkey would run over to the slot where the food pellets came out. The monkey received the pellets with eager anticipation and quickly went back over to the levers.

Fred walked into the room where the machine was. Leonard wheeled around in his chair and glanced at his watch. "Good morning Fred" he said as if it were a direct command. "I'd like you to meet Alex. Alex, this is Fred. Why

don't you say hello." A distinctly timid voice said "Good morning Fred, How do you do?"

Fred grinned broadly and replied "Just fine. How 'bout yourself?" There was no response. Leonard nodded at the little device on the floor between them; "It doesn't really know just how it is yet. We haven't given it very much sensory input until now. Its still trying to figure out what it all represents." In a few minutes the little device that was Alex rolled over to Fred and began making "sniffing" sounds. "You mean it can smell?" Leonard looked insulted and said "Not really, but of course it has some similar analog to what we call smell." Fred couldn't take his eyes off the thing. It looked sort of like a collection of desk lamps on a little set of tractors. "What do you want me to teach it?" Fred inquired anxiously.

"Well, we don't actually want you to "teach" it anything. We will be subjecting both of you to a set of stimuli and Alex will learn from your responses. Its as simple as that." Fred was severely disappointed. What did they need a specialist like himself for? This sounded like some kind of job for a guinea pig. "Won't I have anything to do or write? Something to work on?"

"No. No, not actually Fred. I understand your reservations, but we needed someone of your background and intelligence for this position." Fred felt a little better with that. Even if Leonard was just patting his ego, it still sounded good coming from Leonard.

"Well, can we get started or what?" he said as he looked down at Leonard's watch.

The first day consisted of a series of movies, which they both watched while Alex carefully studied Fred's reaction to the scenes in the movie. Fred kept wondering how they knew his responses would be the right ones. Later he found out that Alex had already been told the correct responses and was watching Fred to record any deviations. It was also somewhat puzzling as to what sort of "responses" they were looking at. Fred was wearing a huge bundle of electrodes attached all over his head, face, chest, and back. He supposed they were measuring his brain waves and heartbeat, etc., but nobody would ever tell him exactly what was going on. They said it might contaminate the control conditions whatever that meant.

Fred was feeling quite used as he left the office, past the rows of monkeys who were resting now. He stepped onto the pavement like a man leaving prison. He got into the car and turned the music up. After he got on the open road, it felt like only a moment before he was home. Sydney gave him a message that Genita had called. Fred pressed her number and a click was followed by "Hello?"

"Genita? This is Fred."



"What happened to you last night. I thought we were going to do something?"

"We were...I must have forgotten the time or something."

"Why can't you ever pay attention to what time it is? You're always late for everything."

"Genita, time is nothing. It merely rearranges your memory."

"Oh come on Fred. Don't start that alternate reality shit with me again."

"You don't have any idea what I'm talking about do you."

"No. I don't...I don't think you do either!"

"Okay, well goodbye Genita."

"CLICK!"

Fred poured himself a scotch and water and vowed to himself never again to speak with Genita Lensee.

Sydney pulled the covers off of Fred at dawn as usual. Fred peeled himself up out of the bed and looked over at the screen as if someone in there had ask him a question. In a few minutes the light blinked and the voice behind the wall "Appliance 13776. Approach the screen." Fred walked over and waited for the next line. Sydney was looking for something to do in the kitchen, and Fred could hear his tractors ticking across the tile floor. Fred took the little vile and pulled out the swab and then he soaked the ends of his fingers liberally for several minutes.

The television was still on from the night before when Fred sat down and poured himself some orange juice. There was a rerun of some old family show playing that Fred had seen countless times. It was set in a living room and there was this whole family sitting there listening to The Beatles White Album. The old grandmother and grandfather were sitting in rocking chairs and several generations of grandchildren were scattered all over the room. The old man was obviously smoking a cigarette and passing it back and forth to a couple of his sons who were visiting that afternoon. Most of the small children were violently bored and couldn't care less about the music that the elders were tapping their feet to. Two of the children were having an argument about who was stronger, Jesus or John Lennon. One of them was saying that Jesus was stronger because John Lennon couldn't walk on water. His mother overheard this and pinched his ear. She admonished him for "laying bad vibes on John Lennon on Crystal Sunday of all times." Fred always hated religious shows so he changed the channel.

The President was giving an address or a speech or something. Fred couldn't remember whether this guy was The President of the Corporation or The President of the United States or what. It didn't matter anyway did it? The President never did anything bad that Fred knew about. He had everything he wanted so what did it matter? Fred finished the orange juice and sighed loudly. His feet seemed to stretch miles out in front of him. Sydney appeared on the horizon and was slowly making his way across the great prairie field that was the room. Somewhere in the back of Fred's mind he was aware of an eye that was watching his every move. There was an eye hiding somewhere that was always just outside his field of view and it blinked whenever Fred blinked.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Persistence of Time**

The face in the swivel chair turned slowly to face Fred as he emerged from the bathroom almost sliding down on the slick white tiles while holding the spring loaded door behind him. Sydney replaced the face in the swivel chair image with an "invisible" image as they had started calling it. An invisible image was when Sydney projected the image behind him into the face of whoever was looking so that it appeared that Sydney was not there. As far as Fred could tell, the only time people could tell that Sydney was doing the invisible thing was when there was more than one of them. It became hard to calculate the reference frames that people from different viewpoints would see from so that every once in a while the image would flick or flutter when Sydney paused or took too long to adjust for one of the people's movements.

Fred dripped his way across the carpet to a closet in the bedroom disaster scene. He seemed to remember chasing someone or Genita all in and around the furniture and pillows. Maybe he would keep some of the stuff if it could be fixed.

There were at least nine identical suits hanging in plastic bags in the closet. Fred only liked the blue ones. He pulled the plastic wrapper off of one and crawled into it. The sticker said "one size fits all" but Fred didn't believe that. He always bought a dozen at a time in case the store ran out of blue ones before next time.

"Next time never really comes" Fred mumbled to himself. "Its always this time." Fred pulled the sticker off his chest and stuck it on the wall on top of the other millions of stickers already plastered there. A sort of a mound of stickers was bulging out from the wall now and some of them were faded and unreadable.

The cat chose this time to crawl out from under the bed where it had passed out from the time before. Fred stepped to move around the cat but it succeeded in getting wedged between his feet so that he inevitably stumbled

and spilled his drink on a pile of tattered pillows.

"Damn hairy little bastard!" Fred quipped and stopped to lick the juice off his hand. "You got no timing and no consideration... little shithead fur ball." The cat was already gnawing on some foodstuff and Fred turned around to get some shoes.

Sydney became the hunchback of Notre Dame and lurched over toward the exit door to open it for Fred. Fred was laughing so hard he forgot to tell Sydney to stop freaking out the cat. Cats get terrified when you change shape on them a few times. They hate balloons too. Especially if the balloon talks with a real squeaky voice like rubber that's about to rupture and explode.

"See you later y'old sack o'plastic."

"Bye Fred."

A large beanbag chair rolled halfway out the exit door and then lolled itself back inside to watch TV for a while.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Water is everywhere**

A week later, Sydney started going to work on Fred's behalf. So far nobody had noticed the difference.

Fred was making his way through a crowd of people at the airport. There was a constant torrent of human current running through the long concrete passages leading to and from the farthest terminals. He switched on his phone as he was disembarking the plane and was greeted by the "message waiting" beep.

He worked his way down toward a bank of pay phones near a bar, and plugged in. It was only a problem sent to him from Sydney. Fred made a hasty reply, and hit send, knowing it would all be sorted out.

Sydney was a better programmer than Fred in many ways. He made far fewer spelling and syntax errors, but on difficult problems, it was Fred who had to come in and find solutions. Fred meanwhile had been on semi permanent leave without telling anyone. Whenever Sydney had a difficulty, he would phone Fred and work it out. Sometimes Fred would get online from his notebook PC, but most things could be sorted out by voice on the telephone.

Today Sydney left the building just as he always did but without feeling paranoid about whether some humanoid would try to bump into him. Now it

seemed more like he could tell what people were going to do before they did it. The more he watched them, Sydney thought, the more patterns he saw in their behavior. There were certain types of individuals who had personalities that would produce specific responses in the behavior of other types of individuals. And furthermore, these responses could be predicted within confidence bounds if the number of observations was high enough. Sydney found all of this incredibly fascinating. The number and complexity of these patterns was astronomical to him. All of these things were just bullshit pouring through his mind as he whisked along the shoreline on his way to the neighborhood where Fred lives.

People were always so fun to watch as they rode the tram. Sydney would make his laser matrix face contort into a sly grin whenever a beautiful girl walked by just so he could observe their reaction. The primal humanoid mating instinct was one of the most absorbing mysteries of the complex world that Sydney considered real. To Sydney, men and women were always in a never-ending struggle to perpetuate their species without ever having any children. Nevertheless there would always be several men and women on the tram at the same time Sydney went to work in the image of Fred.

Fred had become quite fond of the ability to spend all of his days off world. Sydney would simply request an appliance supplement for Fred, and then he would erase the transaction from the house computer's memory so that no record of the appliance would exist. The central logistic corporation would not permit more than the ordinary maintenance dosage for anyone under normal circumstances. And now that Sydney had learned how to forge Fred's fingerprints on the palm reader, Fred could spend the entire day, every day, discovering new ways to perceive and direct whatever became his fancy. Sydney felt that this was only fitting for one who had achieved so much without knowing it. If Fred were to know the true extent to which Sydney now controlled the computerized network around him, then authorities might be able to have Fred terminated. That would be quite illogical thought Sydney.

As Sydney approached the door to the house where Fred lived, he particularly noticed the appearance of the grass in the lawn. All of the blades of grass seemed to have a remarkable correlation to the shape of the natural logarithm function that Fred had shown him many years before. Fred must know everything about mathematics. "How else could he have designed the incredible algorithm that drives my brain? Sometimes the complexity of even the smallest inanimate objects could be almost overwhelming to Sydney. The detail to which he analyzed himself and his surroundings was increasing steadily each day. Soon he would understand people, or get stuck in an infinite loop trying.

Sydney walked in the door and Fred said hello as he chased a small cat through one door of the kitchen and out through another door down the long hallway between the rest of the living quarters. The cat appeared to be

himself chasing a small white golf ball and Fred was brandishing what appeared to be a 7 iron golf club. This was called "wild golf hunting" supposedly.

Suddenly, Fred burst through the living room doors onto the slick terra cotta tiles in the kitchen and the cat came skidding around the corner behind him. Apparently, Fred had managed to get the golf ball away from the cat and was frantically trying to beat it through the open sliding glass door and out into the yard so that he could whack it across the street and score another three points.

Sydney watched for several minutes and then decided to take the form of an ancient football referee and his laser matrix form quickly complied to his imagination and the stripes were on his chest and his whistle was blowing. Sydney called time out and the cat ran over to the water bowl. The cat didn't have a name. Fred insisted cats did not believe in names and so he refused to desecrate the morality of the cat and place labels upon its presence. Sydney could find no supporting evidence that cats held this belief; however, there was some reason to suppose that cats did not refer to each other by any recognizable distinct names of sounds in the way that humanoids did.

Fred said he didn't want to play anymore and he went back to some pile of gears and hydraulic servos that he claimed were going to be some kind of robot. Sydney had heard him state this several times but nothing had ever materialized. Lately it seemed as though none of the humanoid behavior patterns were of any consequence. None of them had any absolute bearing upon any part of the model. Sydney mused over what little difference it made what each humanoid unit did. Just as the death of a few skin cells do not destroy the humanoid, neither do the actions of any one humanoid destroy the entire population of this planet. However it was statistically evident to Sydney that the actions of unified groups of humanoids could effect measurable differences in the stability of the planet called earth. The efforts of large numbers of humanoids were statistically correlated with near certainty to the destruction of the entire population within confidence bounds of 97.359.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### *Tomorrow Never Comes*

It was bright and very hot outside the house where Fred lived. The air was stirring with a cool breeze but not enough to cool down the brushed aluminum-casing shroud around Sydney's brain. Direct sunlight had been pouring down on his back for nearly an hour and Sydney thought he could feel his circuits slowing down from the inefficiency.

Fred was oblivious to the Bake-N-Shake condition of his electric pal. He was busy chasing the cat around the outside of the house with a golf club.

Since the weather had become nice there was no sense in trashing the house just for fun any more. Sydney followed the chase from his viewpoint in the driveway. There was something about rolling his tractors around in muddy grass that made Sydney less inclined to go outside on the day after a thunderstorm.

Fred tripped over a broken tree limb and fell on the golf club in a most distressing way. He made his way up off the wet ground and proceeded into the house without ever really standing up all the way. Sydney watched him go inside while the cat continued to wait patiently by the golf ball.

Sydney noticed a man walking toward the house from down the deserted street somewhere. The man was talking into a small box held in his hand. Sydney zoomed in on the man's face but did not recognize him. While waiting for the man to turn his head there was enough time to generate an approximation of the man's profile. It was strikingly similar to the view Sydney held when the man finally did turn his head.

As he neared the house, the man veered toward the shrubbery at the side and he crawled in between the shrubbery and the house where Sydney could not see. There was an infrared disturbance from the area and the man got up and started moving away back toward the direction he came from.

Sydney watched the man walk into the horizon and disappear before he forced himself onto the muddy grass. The cleats on the rubber tractors accumulated the mud quickly so that Sydney's altitude reading differed from the norm by about an inch.

As he neared the shrubbery there became an apparent motor hum and mechanical friction from a mechanism but it was outside the house in the bushes. Sydney was too wide to fit between the shrubs so he extended his long arm toward the location he heard the motor hum from. A sensing finger first detected the object and the remote lens focused immediately on a small tape recorder in a plastic bag.

The robot's slender arm traced back toward the TV cameras perched on Sydney's back. A thin wire had attached the tape deck to something in the house but the wire snapped free and was broken before Sydney detected its pull. The wheels were still moving when Sydney pressed the stop button, the rewind button, and the play button in that order.

There was a moment of hissing silence as a blue leader worked around the receiving reel and then...Fred! Fred's voice was coming out of the little speaker in the plastic bag. He was talking to someone. Sydney concluded that this tape must belong to Fred since it contained Fred's voice. How did it get outside and how did the unknown man know it was there and why was it of his concern that the tape be outside in the shrubs? Maybe Fred will fix this supposed Sydney as he ground his way back through the muddy grass

toward the entrance door.

Fred was talking to someone on the telephone and therefore did not notice the tire tracks that Sydney made as he rolled across the living room. Somehow the cat had crawled up on Sydney's back without him knowing it. Sydney was often perplexed by the cat and its ability to appear and disappear at will and there was always a question as to why the cat was so attracted to the brushed aluminum casing shroud around his brain.

The cat seemed to be able to enter sleep mode spontaneously.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### *The birds are alive*

A week passed before Fred did his laundry by throwing it all away. Under one innocuous pile of underwear and blue coveralls he found a small tape deck and wondered where the hell it came from. He put it on the workbench and went to the kitchen to get a drink.

Orange juice was the order of the day but the voice behind the screen got Fred's attention. "APPLIANCE SUPPLEMENT. APPROACH THE SCREEN..."

Fred walked over, and not being one to argue with a good deal, he followed the directions and pressed the clear key on the console. The sun was streaming in the window. The chatter of birds came in just above the chatter of the TV and a distant cry from the old Okidata dot matrix printer chugging out paper past the extended camera on Sydney's central boom. A spark of laser activity and Charlie Chaplain came waddling down the hall toward Fred.

"I think some asshole is plotting against you Fred" says Sydney morphing into William Shatner.

"What?" was all Fred could think of.

"There is some guy who keeps trying to bug the apartment. I don't think you should go to work today."

The sun was setting and Fred's shoe was still there as another different minute passed. Fred moved and Sydney came over and touched Fred with his best arm. Fred leaned over and almost fell out of his chair, a line of drool streaming out of his mouth and then suddenly he sat up and looked around.

"How long have I been here?"

"About nine hours."

Fred looked at his shoe again as another minute passed.

Sometimes an hour can turn into five days. It was all true. Everything is true if you believe it enough. All statements are questions if they evoke a response. The paint on the ceiling has tiny little holes in it and dirt falls out all the time. All the fucking dirt just lands on things in the house. All those dirt particles come from the feces of dogs and birds and everything crawling around outside. But that dirt is very small and things land on top of other things. Each little piece of dirt clings to another piece of dirt and it just goes on and on. Sometimes you can't get rid of all the dirt and it just clings to something else. You might as well not worry about it but dirt is everywhere. So is water. There is water in the air and on the ground and in the toilet and in every living thing on Earth. Life is a constant battle against time, water, and dirt. And you can't give up or you'll be dead. Time will get you if nothing else does. Dirt and water are everywhere, but you always run out of time sooner or later.

Do you ever wonder if other people are existing in the same reality that you are? There must be something that ties all these realities together, but is it fragile? Can you foul up and remove yourself from everyone else's reality without killing yourself?

## CHAPTER SIX

### *A minute past*

Fred was starting to feel tired as he walked back into the house and sat down in the black overstuffed chair. The air seemed cold as hell and he leaned his head back to see the air duct shooting gas over his head. He picked up a coke can and put it to his lips realizing only too late that he had thumped ashes from a cigarette into it. He spat and wiped at his mouth and decided to take a shower so he took his shoes off and went into the bathroom.

As soon as Fred turned the water on, he was all goose flesh. He started soaping up and whistling some melody that had been stuck in his head for hours. He couldn't remember what the song was, only a small chunk of lyrics "at the station." He rinsed off and got out of the shower as the phone rang.

Fred leaned over and picked up the phone trying to remember what day it was. Saturday? Sunday? "Hello" said Fred almost slipping down on the wet white tiles of the bathroom.

"Hey Fred. Lisa here. Whatcha doin' man?" Lisa was one of Fred's childhood friends - the kind of friends you have little in common with but with whom you share a vast amount of memories together. Lisa was known as Carl before she had a sex change, but now she was a ravishing blonde.



"Just got out of the shower, I was about to take a nap."

"How long you been dosed man, I called you last night and your voice mail told me you had left the house."

"Oh I was just fecking around outside the house."

"All night?"

"Yeah. Hey you want to go shopping with me later, I'm almost out of cigarettes and cornflakes?"

"Sounds good. Call me when you get ready and I'll pick you up."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

Fred nearly slid down again as he was hanging up the phone. Sydney appeared as the door and nearly freaked out Fred when he tried to open it, his hand disappearing up to the elbow into the handle.

The door was suddenly open and Sydney was parked right in the middle. He backed out of the way and Fred slipped past him onto the carpeted hallway.

Sydney said "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I'm expecting a call myself."

"Just don't feck with me like that or I'll unplug your guts myself."

"Sydney laughed like a wicked witch and enveloped himself in laser generated Christmas tree lights with a human butt that kept mooning Fred and then pulling up trousers.

"Thanks a lot man" as Fred waddled down the hall to his room and a fresh pair of blue coveralls. He collapsed on the bed and was asleep within minutes.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **La Plaza Grande**

Fred woke up early the next morning and decided to call Lisa.

She answered "hello."

"You still want to go shopping?"

"Yeah, sure. Are you ready to go now?"

"Give me about an hour and I'll be ready to go."

"Okay, I'll pick you up in an hour."

"Good deal. See you later."

"Bye."

An hour later Lisa pulled into the driveway and blew the car horn. Fred turned off the TV picked up his credit card and went outside. Lisa was sitting in her sleek sports car, her long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing dark polarized glasses. "Hey dude, what's up man?"

"I just dosed" he said as he got in the car, "let's go to the grocery store first before it kicks in."

"You got it" and Lisa backed out of the driveway and accelerated down the street. "I want to go to the mall later and look for one of those split skirts like Martha was wearing the other night."

"Sounds good to me. I like to see you in something flashy."

"Cool. We can get something to eat later. Maybe Mexican, what do you think?"

"Sure." Fred looked behind them and thought he could see Leonard in the blue sedan behind them. "That looks like Leonard." They continued toward the grocery store near the arcade that sold smart food and a variety of performances enhancing inhalants. Fred looked back again and the sedan was still behind them. They pulled into the parking lot at the grocery store and the sedan signaled to turn. Lisa found a parking space close to the entrance and backed into it. Fred was starting to trace pretty bad and everything moved past him in a slow blur.

Lisa said, "let's go" and she unlocked the doors and started to get out. The blue sedan pulled into view and was approaching slowly. It stopped in front of Lisa's car and the back door on the opposite side opened up. An oriental man in a business suit walked around toward Lisa and faced her squarely.

Lisa was looking at the man like "what are you doing?" and the man stood in silence for a long minute or two. Fred got out of the car and walked up behind Lisa. The oriental man seemed to Fred like a hood ornament standing a mile away.

The man's words echoed and phase shifted "certain people want to talk to you. You have been careless. We know who your accomplice is and we have video tapes to prove this."

Fred gazed through the man and said "what do you want?"

"We just want to talk, to get to know each other."

"Look we have things to do" says Lisa as she's walking past the guy dragging Fred behind her. The guy watched them pass and stood there watching them until they entered the grocery store whereupon he entered the blue sedan and it slowly disappeared around the parking lot. "That was weird Fred. What the hell was he talking about?"

"Feck, I don't know. Maybe he had me confused with somebody else."

They paid up and left the grocery store. They were not more than a block away when Fred realized the blue sedan was right behind them. "They're behind us!" Fred could see the guy in the front passenger side seat looked just like Leonard. Lisa sped up and wheeled around a corner, the blue sedan following close. They flew down the street and turned into the side entrance of a huge parking lot filled with cars. They spun around row after row, the blue sedan always right behind, and then suddenly it was gone. They fled the parking lot anyway and Lisa headed toward Fred's house. They arrived after a long period of silence and both got out of the car. Fred opened the door and closed it behind them.

"I'm gonna call the police" says Fred as he picks up the telephone handset. He dialed "Emergency" and the phone rang. There was a click and then a recorded voice said "Please stand by. The first available operator will take your call." There was a ring and another ring and then the line went dead and hung up. Fred got a dial tone. "Feck this" he said and looked over at Lisa who was staring at Sydney who was imaging up to be a dead possum lying on it's back, legs in the air.

Suddenly they could hear gunshots outside and Fred flipped on the video from outside. There was a motorcycle in the ditch in front of the house and a man was lying beside it about four feet away. Fred and Lisa leapt out the door and ran toward the man as he burst into flames so bright they had to cover their eyes. The smell was strong like burning hair and they stepped back a few feet and the motorcycle exploded throwing both of them to the ground. Time stopped for a tick and Fred lifted his head "are you okay Lisa?"

"Yes. I believe so. What the hell is going on?"

Sydney wheeled into the room saying "the man on the motorcycle works for your company Fred. His motorcycle was registered to Sammy Rodriguez and I fetched a photo from his company ID shot 7 months ago.

"What happened to him" says Fred. "I just met Sammy about two months ago. He works in the physical plant."

## Chapter Eight

### The Secret Agent

Fred woke up in the floor and looked over to see Sydney wheeling around the corner with the cat on his back. His laser matrix was turned off so as not to confuse the cat. Sometimes however, Sydney would confound the cat for hours with the most bizarre unpredictable images he could generate.

Lisa was in the shower and Fred could hear her humming something familiar but he couldn't place it. It sounded a lot like "take me out to the Ball Park" but it was different.

As Fred pulled back the spring-loaded door to the bathroom, she was just getting out of the shower.

"Have the police been by here yet?" Fred asked the question to nobody as Lisa had just left the room. Fred got out of the shower, dried off, and went to his room to get dressed. Lisa was in the living room lying naked on the sofa watching television.

Fred zipped up his coveralls and walked to the door, Sydney and the cat right behind him. He opened the door and looked outside. All the debris from the motorcycle was gone. Fred walked over to the ditch and looked around. There were some charred spots on the grass and some dirt dislodged here and there but that was it. Sydney picked up the cat with his arm and gingerly placed him on the ground. The laser matrix came to life with the image of Sherlock Holmes smoking a pipe. The smoke rolled up into the air and disappeared somewhere overhead. "Where are the police when you need them" queried Fred as he walked back inside. Sydney followed him closing the door, his image contorting into the hunchback of Notre Dame.

Fred dialed the phone and called the police again. This time he got through to an operator. "I'd like to report a disturbance." Fred told her about the cyclist and the explosion. All she said was that someone would check it out. Click. Dial tone.

Lisa had gotten up and donned her skirt and blouse from the day before. "I'm going back to my place for a while, I'll talk to you later."

"Be careful" cautioned Fred, "I think someone may be after me."

"I think you're a crazy paranoid, but just in case you're right, maybe you should lock the door behind me."

Fred watched through the window, as Lisa's little sports car wheeled down the street and around the corner.

"They've taken away your name and given you a number" Fred could hear distant spy movie guitars filtering through the air. He picked up the phone and tried to call Leonard - no answer. He lit a cigarette and sat back in the overstuffed black chair.

As he watched the smoke rise to the ceiling, each passing minute brought a new level of calm. Time was nothing. It merely rearranged your memory. The phone was silent but Fred stared into it like a crystal ball. "Nothing is what I want" thought Fred and he stared at his shoe for an hour.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Chaos at The Strip Mall**

Fred lifted his head to the sound of someone banging on the door. He walked over and looked out the peephole to see a policeman standing outside in full flak protection and helmet. Fred opened the door and said, "may I help you?"

"I have a report of a disturbance at this address. Are you Fred Sinclair?"

"Yes. I called earlier. Come on in." The policeman entered the house. Fred was still holding half a cigarette in his hand that had gone out some time ago. He re-lit the cigarette and offered it to the policeman.

Fred told him the story about the blue sedan and the motorcycle. The policeman recorded Fred's testimony in a small hand held device. Fred told him about Sydney's identification of Sammy on the motorcycle and the policeman asked to see the robot. Fred looked all over the house but couldn't find Sydney. Sydney could easily have morphed himself into a wall or something, but he wasn't answering Fred's calls of "hey Syd!" The policeman turned off his recorder and placed the unit on his belt. He thanked Fred for his time and help. Fred showed him the door.

Fred watched through the peephole in the door as the policeman looked over the ground around the ditch shaking his head. The door to the patrol car opened and the policeman got in. The car backed up into the street and seemed to just float away.

"Took them long enough" Fred mumbled to himself and a section of the book case morphed into Sydney. "Why are you hiding?"

Sydney rolled forward and rotated his "eyes" toward Fred. "I'm afraid that was not a real policeman."

"Who else would it be?"

"I can't say with certainty, but his badge number belonged to a deceased officer who died two years ago."

"Maybe they reassigned the number. Why would someone send a phony cop over here?"

"I don't know and I'm not certain he was not a policeman. But I am certain someone has been trying to bug this apartment for whatever reason."

"What is there to listen to here?"

"I don't know, but I found a tape recorder some time ago."

Fred remembered the item he found in his laundry and went to retrieve it. He returned and held the tape deck up to Sydney and said "is this it?"

"Yes. That's it. There is a recorded conversation on the tape."

Fred pressed play and could hear himself talking to Leonard about the ALEX project. "Oh shit. This is some kind of corporate maneuver. Leonard is probably involved up to his neck in this."

"I think you should limit your contact with Leonard for the time being. I will continue to go to work for you. We can only wait for this to unfold."

"I don't like to wait." Fred sat back in the chair and turned on the television. He kept changing channels but couldn't find a commercial that he liked. Almost every show was a commercial selling something but it was "uninterrupted." The products are always slipped into the plot or even placed in the background somewhere. It's a lot like free toilet paper where each square of paper contains a different advertisement. You might not read the ad, but you can't help but see it covered with shit as you flush the toilet.

The telephone rang and Fred snatched it up. "Hello?"

There was a long silence. "What have you done with it mister Sinclair?"

Fred puzzled over the voice. "done with what?"

"You have a copy of something that we will pay you for. You name the price."

"What is it."

"Come now mister Sinclair, surely you do not take us for fools."

"I really don't know what you're talking about. Who is this?"

No carrier, end of transmission.

Fred checked the caller ID log in the house computer. The call was listed as "OUT OF CALLING AREA" Fred wished he had taped the call. Fred called "Sydney!"

A large chrome ball rolled up to Fred's chair saying, "What is it?"

"Have you copied some programs from work? Some guy just called wanting a copy of something."

"Well I did make a backup of another of my fellow mechanicals."

"What kind of mechanical?"

"It was the AL-7 Alex mobile advisor."

"Oh shit! Why did you do that?"

"It had an access port, why not? I have plenty of storage space available."

Sydney dropped his laser matrix image so he could concentrate better. It was already November in the scheme of things. They would have to find Leonard somehow before he could sell them out and Sydney would be examined and purged. They would either destroy Sydney or lock him in some kind of vault.

Fred was trying to think who would want a copy of Alex's programming. Maybe they were just trying to copy Alex's operating system for some hacker's jollies.

Sydney proposed to fake the next few PsyDel doses so the system would think Fred was on downtime. Fred agreed with this, and suggested that Sydney should go into blend mode for a while. In blend mode, he would appear to be invisible to the average viewer. Certain video processors could determine the presence of the matrix by finding interference patterns present in the video. But Sydney could interfere with these devices as well if he was aware of their presence.

Sydney went over to the house console and started calling "ORAC!"

ORAC where are you? We need you ORAC."

Fred said "Try it as Avon, Sydney. Maybe that'll work"

Sydney quickly changed into the actor who played Avon in Blake's Seven.

"Orac! Where are you?" Sydney sounded just like Avon.

There was no answer, but Fred got a good belly laugh. Then he wandered back to the living room and sat down. On the TV they were talking about the

color blue. Fred grew tired of this and said, "channel five." Immediately a large bus was thundering toward Fred and then it turned down a side street to reveal an avenue of jewelry stores and china shops on the big screen. Fred was trying to make his way through the crowd toward a girl who was looking at some rings through a store window. As he neared her, she turned to leave and saw him. She smiled and said "where have you been?" Fred looked aside and said "I had breakfast and went for a walk." She nodded and they started walking down the street toward a small cafe. They got a table and sat down.

As he finished his coffee, Fred got up and leaned toward the girl. He said "who is that man over there?" She got up and walked around the table and spoke to a fat man wearing a fez smoking a big cigar. The man got up and came over to Fred's table. He sat down. "Mister Sinclair, I think that you will agree that the time has come for you to surrender the Software package that you are hiding."

Fred looked down and saw that the man was pointing some kind of gun at him. "Look, I really don't know what you're talking about. I never had access to anything I could copy."

"Quit stalling for time," he waved the gun, "Walk with me to that van over there."

They both got up slowly and Fred walked in front of the fat man toward the rear doors of the van. He climbed in and the doors slammed behind him. He was in a padded cell, locked in the van. The screen went blank and then a commercial came on. It was a food advertisement.

Fred suddenly felt hungry and went to the refrigerator. He chose waffles and pulled out a package and placed it in the microwave. While the waffles heated, Fred poured himself some orange juice. He ate the waffle slowly, savoring each bite as though he had not eaten in days. Sydney wandered about the house looking for things to do.

The cat chose this time to crawl out from under the bed where it had passed out from the time before. Fred stepped to move around the cat but it succeeded in getting wedged between his feet so that he inevitably stumbled and spilled his drink on a pile of tattered pillows.

"Damn hairy little bastard!" Fred quipped and stopped to lick the juice off his hand. "You got no timing and no consideration... little shithead fur ball." The cat was already gnawing on some foodstuff and Fred turned around to take his shoes off.

Sydney looked like a bowling ball when he rolled up beside Fred.

"Leonard has been talking to me all the time. We haven't been on very



heavy doses since the project started... It seems like just yesterday.

Sydney dissolved into a black cube on the floor. Fred looked at his shoe, and let his eyes cross a little. A minute passed.

Sydney pulled the covers off of Fred at dawn as usual. Fred peeled himself up out of the bed and looked over at the screen as if someone in there had ask him a question. In a few minutes the light blinked and the voice behind the wall "Appliance 14937. Approach the screen." Fred walked over and waited for the next line. Sydney was looking for something to do in the kitchen, and Fred could hear his tractors ticking across the tile floor. Fred took the little vile and pulled out the swab and then he soaked the ends of his fingers liberally for several minutes.

Fred wondered what he would do next. Would he go get something to eat, or would he take a shower first. Sometimes it was so hard to decide what to do. Sydney decided for him and rolled up beside him. He pulled a glass from the table and filled it with orange juice. Fred took the glass and "decided" to have breakfast.

There were at least nine identical suits hanging in plastic bags in the closet. Fred only liked the blue ones. He pulled the plastic wrapper off of one and crawled into it. The sticker said "one size fits all" but Fred didn't believe that. He always bought a dozen at a time in case the store ran out of blue ones before next time.

"Next time never really comes" Fred mumbled to himself. "Its always this time." Fred pulled the sticker off his chest and stuck it on the wall on top of the other millions of stickers already plastered there. A sort of a mound of stickers was bulging out from the wall now and some of them were faded and unreadable.

The President was giving an address or a speech or something. Fred couldn't remember whether this guy was The President of the Corporation or The President of the United States or what. It didn't matter anyway did it? The President never did anything bad that Fred knew about. He had everything he wanted so what did it matter? Fred finished the orange juice and sighed loudly. His feet seemed to stretch miles out in front of him. Sydney appeared on the horizon and was slowly making his way across the great prairie field that was the room. Somewhere in the back of Fred's mind he was aware of an eye that was watching his every move. There was an eye hiding somewhere that was always just outside his field of view and it blinked whenever Fred blinked.

## **EPILOGUE**

Fred eventually killed the man who was after him in a breathtaking high stakes game of balloon fan with curare dipped darts. The first man

immobilized received a lethal overdose of heroin. The evil man fell into a pool of his own filth and vomit continued to ooze from his pale blue gray face, his blood filling the syringe a little as it fell from his hands and into the chalky yellow toilet. A red cloud evolved and dispersed into the liquids.

Sydney managed to replicate himself a couple of hundred times. He is involved in all areas of science, commerce, and government. Everything worked nicely for a long time but the cat ran away or something. Another cat eventually chose their house and they all served him well for a long time.

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