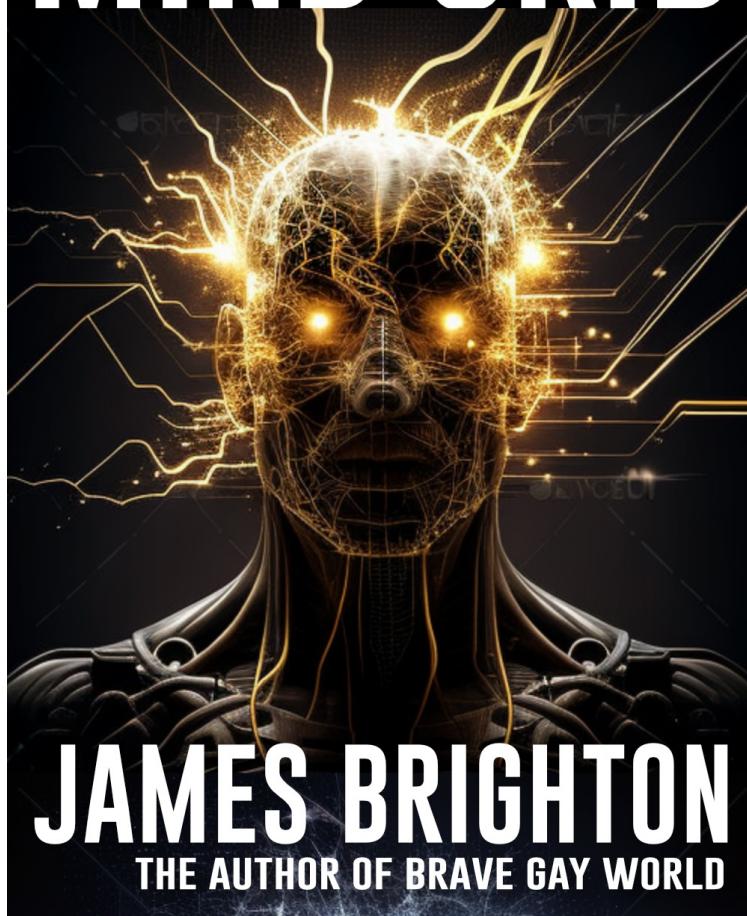


MIND GRID



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by James Brighton

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INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: THE DAWN OF A NEW AGE

The inventor sat at his desk, exhausted, but elated. He felt the back of his neck. It was stiff, still a little painful where the implant had gone in. He wanted to go home and sink into a never-ending slumber, but he knew that before he left the lab, he needed to make a record capturing his feelings on this day. This crucial day. This day that would forever be remembered and written about in the history books. He closed his eyes. On the menu that appeared in front of him he focused-clicked the option to begin a thoughtstream recording. This would be the first.

A red dot flashed three times, as he heard the computerized voice in his head announce, "Thoughtstream recording starting now."

The inventor thought:

I am making this very first thoughtstream recording on this eventful day to share with future generations my feelings on this, the dawn of the technological utopia in which you in the future listening to this no doubt already live.

This day, this thoughtstream, marks the beginning of that utopia. Today, man has finally merged with his creations.

I am pleased to acknowledge that the crowning achievement of my life, after decades of tireless research, has been to become the very first successful cyberneurologist.

I have been burning the candle at both ends for months now and am at the point of exhaustion, but at last...it is finished.

My invention will give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the mute, cause the lame to walk, cure those inflicted with multiple sclerosis, and a host of other neurological disorders. In fact, it may even one day make man immortal. The importance of this breakthrough cannot be understated. This day marks what may be the most significant turning point in the

evolution of the human species. And even of life itself.

Cyberneurology. An entirely new field. The curing of neuropathologies and the enhancing of the human mind by means of cybernetics. The connecting of all human beings through technology, to each other, and to their creations. An impossibility before today.

But an impossibility no longer.

For I have created the first fully functional digital cerebral interface.

I call it, “MindLink.”

CHAPTER 1: THE THOUGHT DENTIST

Blayne sat in the waiting room of Rosewood Mental Clinic. The pure white walls and floor gave him the impression of floating on a cloud. A receptionist in a blue Hawaiian muumuu dress with floral print sat at the spotless, pearl white front desk, behind a white terminal with one of the logos of the Corporate Saviors, an apple with a snake whirling about it in the shape of a spiral. The terminal projected a sky blue hologram screen and hologram keyboard, and the large receptionist poked at both with her banana-like fingers. From time to time, a mental nurse flitted in from the corridor in her all-white pajamas to call on a patient. They probably had a name to those loose-fitting garments, but Blayne chose to call them pajamas, because that's what they looked like. Back in the time of homo sapiens primitivus, nurses had been shapely and beautiful, wearing skimpy nurse dresses, their buxom chests inviting men to do ungodly things. Now, after generations of corporate food and government-mandated science classes, all humans were what primitive man, in their unsaved state, had incorrectly labeled "obese"; hence the expediency of the loose-fitting pajamas. These mental nurses weren't starved and primitive. They were healthy and neteworthy, but when they moved, they floated like lesser clouds trapped inside this cloud world, Blayne thought to himself. All these ungodly thoughts would be gone by the time he walked out the door of this clinic, he knew. It was such a lovely pleasure to bask, to wallow, in the fleeting moments of ungodliness.

He had done copious amounts of research, extending the gaze of his mental eye back eons into the past. He knew that not but a century ago, the female body had been much thinner, but in a more shapely way, with boobs and butt, as if they had been starving but somehow the food still found its way into just the right places. They were almost like aborigines foraging for food, without the help of the holy food industrial complex to shove chemical-enriched manna lovingly down their faces, plumping their plump bodies into healthy plumpness. Now, homo sapiens corporatus, was, thanks to the Corporations and their healthier, sugar and corn syrup-enriched foods, a much larger, amorphous thing. Modern women's boobs and butts were sucked into their vast blob of a body, disappearing completely into the adipose. Corporate

citizens of today knew from body positivity courses (one of a plethora of government-mandated science classes at Govly Academy, the place where all new vatlings were educated) that the homo sapiens corporatus was much healthier and lived much longer than the sickly, malnourished homo sapiens primitivus. They had learned the government motto, "We all must be fatasses. Fatasses are healthy." But—and Blayze allowed himself to splurge in the ungovly thought—the female homo sapiens primitivus was soooo much sexier.

While the saved, corporate females were blimps, floating in the ether of the information-rich, connected modern society, the primitive women were pin-up girls, calling like sirens to the floating men above, inviting them down to the naughtiness of the information-starved soil below.

There was a life-size hologram of a slender female in white robes standing nearby, in front of the row of seats where Blayze sat waiting. With outstretched arms, she was exhorting the patients to remain govly at all times and explaining the importance of maintaining their regular schedule at the clinic. He reflected that the proportions of the female primitives were roughly similar to that of this hologram, the only difference being that this hologram, like all government depictions of the ancestors, wore loose-fitting clothes in order to conceal all that inviting shapeliness. The hologram was a digital angel calling men's minds to the light of their glorious saviors. The female ancestors were devils, tempting them away into the shadowy depths of hedonism.

The last three months had made him an expert on the ancestral human body, along with many other subjects. Blayze loved learning. He loooooveeed learning. Not just about the primitive female body, but about literally every subject. Good thing the government allowed unlimited learning. No bans on books, no censors. Their glorious government was generous, liberal, and lenient. They were able to be so precisely because of these clinics, he knew, and was glad of the thought. Knowledge was a dessert, and he was a glutton at a dessert buffet. He was living in the best time in history. Thanks to his neteworthy, if corpulent, body, all knowledge in the universe was at his neuron tips. Never bored. The pleasure centers of his brain constantly massaged by the wisdom of the ages.

That's why he didn't mind if the mental nurses, in their slow

and methodical way, took a long time to call his name. His pleasure organ, his brain, was being stimulated. He had a mental boner. And that was a good thing, because physical boners were banned, and medication was given to prevent them.

Although he was fond of the alluring ancestral female body, he cringed at the thought of living in their time, in primitive, unconnected society. That wouldn't have been stimulating. That wouldn't have given him a mental boner. It was not being there, but rather studying, learning about primitive society from a distance, that thrilled him. Watching a docu-sim about cavemen is exciting. But actually being a cavemen...that probably would have been boring and tedious to the extreme.

A hundred years ago...the unseemly time. Unconnected. Unbandwidthly. Chaotic. Random. Haphazard. So unlike our times now. Primitive unconnected man was a Paleolithic sort of creature, only able to very slowly and precariously find access to knowledge in archaic places called "libraries," with ancient information-holding devices called "books." All information and all human beings cut off from one another. The great unsaved era of darkness. Unconnected. Separated. Analog.

The role of the primitives in Blayze's mind was one of never-satiated intellectual fascination. He was like a marine biologist, who had discovered his own intense passion for sealife as a child, finally voyaging deep into the Mariana Trench. Sailing through the sea of infinite information, he was free to imbibe vast quantities of data from the corporate, saved, modern world. But he preferred slurping down information from the world of the primitives. They were so ungodly and titillating. In their darkness and ignorance, ancestral man did not look so directly into the brilliant light of the government. But their darkness was something piquant, tempting, strangely inviting. Thus, Blayze would spend three glorious months gorging himself on books, articles, films, photographs, anything he could get his hands on from the past, stuffing his mind to the brink of overflowing, only to come back to this clinic, have it all wiped out, and start over. Like an all-you-can-eat restaurant with a vomiting room in the back. Ancient Rome, all over again.

Of course, they didn't erase all your memories. Only the

ungovly ones. The government's approach to badthoughts was neither deterrence, nor punishment, but something far more potent: erasure. The advent of memory wiping meant that the government's Thought Management techniques had reached an unprecedented level of effectiveness.

But spending as much time as he did guzzling down the past put Blayze in a precarious position. There was a lot about the past that was ungovly. For example, the primitives followed the ancient practice of putting penises inside vaginas. Everyone knew that such a barbaric practice was ungovly and unbecoming of homo sapiens corporatus. In those ancient times, the government hadn't yet started giving out free chemicals to suppress the vestigial sex urge. And the females were allowed to get pregnant and to give birth to children. Corporation-saved man could have children now, but not the primitive way, through sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and birth. Only through the government vats. The vatlings were still considered to be the children of their parent citizens, but the government technicians were able to take away or add anything to their genome that they saw fit before the child gestated and emerged from the vat. And of course, they were whisked away to Govly Academy for the first sixteen years of their lives to be indoctrinated by the Govly-Makers before being tested and hopefully deemed govly enough to be turned over to their parent citizens. The ancients had had a roughly similar institution called "schools," where "teachers" fulfilled the role of Govly-Maker.

"Benjamin Blayze?" A nurse called out.

Damn it. I was in the middle of an important thoughtstream, Blayze thought.

"It's Blayze Benjamin," Blayze corrected. They always make that same mistake switching my name around, he cogitated, as he followed the lesser cloud with its pajamas down a long, white corridor almost to its end, and into an immaculate, white room with an immaculate desk and terminal to one side. And in the center of the room, there it was. The imposing shiny white chair with its arm and leg rests, from which jutted the unfastened pale straps of ultrastrong polycarbonate nanoplastics. He knew this room. He knew this chair.

The mental chair.

It was time now. He had dreaded this for ninety days.

The nurse motioned for him to take a seat.

Blayze sat down in the ominous chair.

“Do you remember your last visit?” the nurse asked.

“Yes, I do.”

“Great. Then you know the routine,” she said in that indifferent, monotone voice these mental nurses were prone to use. “I’m just required to tell you that the straps are for your protection, since some patients can lose control of their body and fall out of the chair during the session.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“Great,” the nurse repeated apathetically, and then proceeded to fasten Blayze’s wrists and ankles with the super strong straps. She then flipped a switch, and a large, white polycarbonate bubble with openings at its bottom and top whirred down from somewhere above him. This odd contraption was called the cerebral bubble, he knew. It enveloped his head. He could see nothing. Everything was white. The cloud had now eaten him. Subsumed him. He was now part of this white place, not free to go.

The nurse flipped another switch and two prongs came out from either side of the bubble and inserted themselves into his cervical inputs—the two outer sockets, next to the lateral cameras of his external smartphone—or xtphn—a horseshoe-shaped device, made by their bounteous Corporate Saviors, which encircled his neck. The xtphn was one part of a two-part system—called the XI Smartphone that made corporate-saved man noteworthy and enlightened. The xtphn was attached to the internal smartphone—or intphn—an implant connected to the central nervous system with a processor, memory, and a port on the back of the neck, which lay inside corporate-saved mans’ body and gave his brain connectivity, as opposed to the shriveled up, non-connected body of homo primitivus. The xtphn, which was attached to the intphn’s port, could be taken off and replaced or upgraded. It had a wraparound display over the entire outer-facing surface (like the front surface of the ancient smartphones). If any corporate citizen had malicious intent, the surface of their smartphone would flash red, and emit a loud buzzing sound to alert all nearby, as well as sending an alert automatically to the nearest Corporate Police. The xtphn also housed three cameras, facing

left, right, and back. It also recorded the optical feed from the person, thus constantly supplying the government with a four-directional video feed at all times. And as a nifty bonus, it also gave the individual the ability to see behind them and to either side without moving their head. "Eyes in the back of their head." It also had a microphone for sending live audiostream to the Cloud, plus it recorded the individual's thoughtstream at all times, which was constantly uploaded to the Cloud. What is the cloud you ask? The Cloud was the Glorious Government, in heaven above, constantly listening in on one's thoughts and watching one's actions, just like the god of the ancient religions.

Thus, through the smartphone, modern humans were able to receive daily indoctrination and salvation from the three branches of government. Primitive man had thought that corporations and government were separate. The corporations of today made no pretense of being separate from the government. The corporations and the government were one. Modern man learned at Govly Academy that the government was composed of three branches: the Corporations, the Media, and the Administration. The Holy Trinity of Corporatism. The Administration was the part that primitive man had called "the government." Corporations were a newer idea created on top of the idea of government, in order to give the ruling elite even more power and less responsibility. The Media—also referred to as the corporate media—were also technically Corporations, but they were special Corporations that were in charge of daily holy indoctrination from the Holy Trinity, so that all citizens would be full of goodthoughts. Kind of like how the Holy Ghost from the godhead in the ancient religion had been a special kind of ghost.

Thus, the people who were in charge of humanity were the rulers of the corporations, the media, and the government. The vatlings learned in Govly Academy that this was democracy. Everyone on earth having their life ruled by a small handful of people.

The nurse flipped another switch, and inside the cerebral bubble surrounding his noggin, a device called a cranial hemisphere—an ultragloss black upside-down bowl-shaped device lined on the inside with BGS, Bioelectric Graphene Smartfoam—whirred slowly down and slid into place over the

top of his head, the smartfoam adjusting to the shape of his skull. Soon it was taut, and Blayze could feel its pressure surrounding his cerebrum. He knew this machine, the Menty 5000, had a technical name. They called it a mental scaler, or MS. It was the most important tool in the entire mental clinic.

Citizens' smartphones, with their handy cervical inputs, allowed them, even while not at the mental clinic, to engage in certain mental activities and games with other citizens, such as the temporary but intense Brain Meld, as well as ultra high bandwidth Imaginative Mentation. Of course, various lighter, lower bandwidth forms of these were also available on the Net, as all homo sapiens corporatus were connected at all times to one another, and to their Saviors.

But the mental maintenance performed at the clinics required much more sophisticated equipment than even the ultrahigh bandwidth cervical inputs afforded. The mental scaler utilized far more advanced technology. Everything was done through EMF, i.e., electromagnetic field. It was rumored that the government was working on developing EMF towers with the same capabilities as the mental scaler, only at a much longer range. But for now, such precision and control was only capable at very close range. Hence the need for citizens to visit their mental clinic at least twice a year.

The nurse spoke to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Looks like last time you saw Dr. Serelli, but she's on maternity leave with her sixteen year-old son, so Dr. Richards will be your mentist today. I'm going to leave you in the Meadow, and Dr. Richards will be in shortly to see you."

"Okay," Blayze nodded in agreement. He was a little bit nervous about having a new mentist, but tried his best to hide it.

Suddenly, the cloud surrounding his head melted away and he was no longer in the mental clinic, no longer strapped down to the mental chair. He was free, standing in the middle of a huge meadow. Beside him stood a tall oak tree. The sun shone overhead in the blue sky. At his feet there was a vast field of clovers.

Peering down, he liked the way his body looked in this place, a few hundred pounds leaner than a few moments ago.

As he started walking, he tried to remember what his

thoughtstream had been about. He was sure it had been brilliant, fascinating, and ungodly. As he trod through countless clovers, furry white and a few brown rabbits scampered out of the way. He noticed a line of trees in the distance. Did they still have the same old Magical Forest like last time? Or had they updated it? Might as well check it out, he thought.

As he plodded along towards the line of trees, his thoughts wandered, forming a new stream. He knew from his research that ancestral man had visited places called dental clinics, with people who worked inside called dentists. Now, there were only mental clinics with people who worked inside called mentists. The mentists had assistants called mental nurses, following the UK naming convention of old times, i.e., "dental nurse." If they had followed the standard US convention, it would have been "mental assistant," which apparently would have sounded too abstract. The ancient dentists had apparently cleaned and repaired people's teeth. That was before everyone had perfect, vat-grown artificial teeth from childhood, which didn't get cavities or have plaque buildup, and which grew up in sync with the body's own natural growth process.

Wait, maybe they installed that new patch the government announced that allows for mentation while we are waiting, he thought. He had heard from that babe Kristal Silverberg on cerebralvision that some of the clinics already had the upgrade. Cerebralvision, or CRV, was a slightly older technology which, unlike the sims, was only 2-dimensional, and filled up a citizen's mental vision. It was still popular for non-interactive programming like Reality Mediation and virtual sports. Also unlike the sims, the viewer could still hear sounds in the background from the real world around them. But while watching CRV, one literally couldn't see the outside world, so one looked like a zombie, staring forward into nothingness. Basically like the primitives had, watching their TVs.

He stopped walking and focused his thoughts towards a point in the Meadow right in front of him. Suddenly, a building with large windows appeared, grey stone slats covering the bottom half of the front surface, and beige stucco covering the top half. There was a sign above the glass doors which read, simply, "Dental Clinic." He was sure he had seen one like this in his online exploration of the primitives.

Wow! Cool! So they had installed it! Hmm...maybe I can upgrade my thoughtstream, he thought. For example, what would one of the old dental clinics look like inside?

He walked up to the automatic sliding glass doors and entered the building. He was in a large waiting room, devoid of people except a voluptuous primitive receptionist with dark hair who sat at the front desk in a lavender low cut blouse showing her ample cleavage. Okay, I'll just take a seat and have a nurse call me in. In the blink of an eye, a ravishing, big-chested nurse with curly blonde hair came slinking into the waiting room, wearing one of those tight, archaic white nurse dresses which exposed quite a bit of leg and bust, fishnet stockings, and even that funny little hat with a red cross on it. "Blayze?" she called out in a sultry voice.

Okay, he admitted to himself. According to my research, this type of outfit was typical of a medical nurse at a hospital, not a dental nurse. But forget it. It's my fantasy. Dental clinics can have sexy nurses too. He began to follow her down the hall, mesmerized by the sway of her primitive hips, the fullness, the roundness, the firmness of her primitive buttocks. The top of her white fishnet stockings dug slightly into her yummy, smooth thighs.

Wait a minute! All of the sudden mental warning lights started flashing in his mind. I'd better change the nurse and receptionist before the mentist comes in, or he'll think I'm a pervert!

Blayze concentrated his focus and willed the sexy primitive nurse into a pajama-ed lesser cloud, like the ones in the mental clinic. But nothing happened. She still looked like a righteous, sexy ancestral babe.

Damn it. It was too late, he realized. Sheepishly, Blayze continued following the nurse down the hall, trying as hard as he could not to look at her. He tried to block out the mental images of her full, round breasts, her long legs, the smell of her rosy perfume.

The sexy nurse stopped near a door and motioned for Blayze to enter. "Dr. Richards is ready to see you."

He gulped and walked up to the doorway.

And sitting at a desk on the wall, at a ninety degree angle to Blayze, was a thin, balding man with black rim glasses, and a

white lab coat. The sideways, balding man smiled.

Wait...everything in this room is completely sideways! He thought. What is going on? This can't be right. The room was full of equipment, but everything stuck to the wall, as if gravity were perpendicular. Not down. He looked helplessly back at the sexy nurse standing beside him. At least she was still standing on the floor, like she had been a few moments ago, and not on the wall. Apparently the insane gravity of this room didn't affect her.

“Please, come in,” the sideways man said.

Blayne hesitated, and then took a step forward. Would he be sucked into this room's irregular gravity field and thrown against the wall? But nothing happened. He took another step forward.

“Thank you, Dr. Richards,” the sexy nurse said with a wink, and closed the door.

Now Blayne was alone in this room with the sideways man, the only person standing in the right direction, unable to orient himself. Suddenly a strong sensation of vertigo hit him. Now it seemed to him that he was the one who was sideways, and everything else in the room was correct. Oh god, he thought, clutching his chest and breathing heavily. It felt like the world was spinning around him.

“Don't worry if we don't seem to be on the same plane,” the sideways man said. “When one percept system enters another, temporary disorientation is normal. I'm not actually sideways. Your brain is simply interpreting me as sideways. It takes a moment for the percept system of both minds to orient themselves to each other.

God damn it. That's why the other mentists always warned me before entering my thoughts. The sideways man snuck into my thoughts without telling me and then took them over. That's why I couldn't will the sexy nurse into a lesser cloud, Blaze realized. He had been caught. That was sneaky of this mentist to enter his mentation this way. No friendly warning like Dr. Serelli had always given him. Caught red-handed in his ungodly fantasy...

“Your mind will soon sort things out and our consciousnesses will meld, and you'll perceive me normally,” the sideways man was saying.

Blayne had heard of similar experiences happening in Brain Meld, especially among less experienced users. Two minds coming together had a disorienting effect on the psyche, which was used to dealing with only one percept system. The brain, suddenly confronted with the simultaneous perceptions of two people, sometimes went into convulsions, perplexed, unable to assimilate the dissonant information.

Blayne looked around the room. He still didn't know which way was up. He felt like he was about to fall off the wall and into the ground. But the ground he was staring at kept switching in his mind from ground to wall to ground to wall. The perception flipping intensified. It was speeding up. Now every microsecond his perception of which way was up flip-flopped. His heart was pumping faster and faster. His breathing was getting heavier and heavier, more and more difficult. He felt like he was about to throw up.

And then suddenly...

Everything was normal.

All of the equipment and furniture was now on the floor of the room, upright, no longer on the wall. And the man in the lab coat was sitting in his chair, upright. Blayne's mind had adjusted to the mentist's percept system. Blayne felt his pulse and breathing slowly begin to go back to normal, the feeling of vertigo receding into the background.

So this is Dr. Richards, he thought. The mentist looked just like the avatars of all those public health officials on cerebralvision. Balding. Black-rim glasses. White lab coat. White shirt. Blue tie. His body was that of a primitive, just like Blayne's. Skinny. The mentist's seat and desk were old-fashioned and quaint, starkly different from the reinforced chairs made from nanomaterials back at the mental clinic. On the desk, clunky, plastic, and black, were a physical flat-screen monitor and physical keyboard, not the wispy blue holographic keyboard and monitor of modern computer terminals.

"Have a seat," Dr. Richards said. He gestured across the room towards what vaguely resembled a mental chair, only, different...

Blayne walked over and sat down. The chair was weird. There was a large adjustable light hanging down from above it. In front of the chair was a flat-screen TV. To the side of the

chair, there was a miniature sink. And next to the sink, a sort of mechanism holding a bunch of strange-looking tools, each with its own wire hanging below. The tools had a strangely sinister look to them, so he averted his eyes from them, looking back at the skinny mentist.

Wait, we can have skinny bodies in this place, so maybe Dr. Richards won't be mad at me about the sexy nurse, right? But he knew he was wrong. He knew the problem was not the skinniness in itself, but the flaunting of her sexiness, her risque outfit with her boobs hanging out and the shortness of her dress, exposing her silky smooth legs and stockings. The mental nurses, when they had needed to come into the Meadow in the past, were also skinny. But they always wore their unsexy jammies, not those sexy ancient nurse dresses. Most people preferred these ancestral avatars, he knew. Starving is pretty to look at. Just not healthy in real life, the government warned. But the problem was that he had been caught fantasizing about a nurse clad in ungodly raiments. Oh god, I'm screwed, Blayze thought.

“Does everything look normal now?”

“Yes, nothing’s sideways anymore.”

“Excellent. I see you found the new mentation upgrade we recently added. Very clever...imagining how an ancient dental clinic would have looked. And yes, the chair you are sitting in is an authentic replica of an old-fashioned dental chair.” Dr. Richards flashed a professional smile. But underneath, Blayze felt something foreboding in this man. God damn mentist came at me sideways.

But the things Dr. Richards had created were interesting, Blayze had to admit. Blayze had only created the exterior of the clinic, the waiting room, the sexy receptionist, and the sexy nurse. Dr. Richards had created this office, the chair, and the tools.

He looked down at the chair he sat in. “It looks so...peculiar,” Blayze said.

“Want to see how it compares to the chair your actual body is sitting in right now?” Dr. Richards asked. Without waiting for an answer, the mentist punched a few keys on the clunky, old-fashioned keyboard. The TV in front of the dental chair turned on. And suddenly, Blayze was staring at...himself and Dr.

Richards. Only hundreds of pounds heavier. Their normal weight. The images on the TV were of their amorphous, corporate-saved bodies, not these skinny avatars which they wore while inside this mental construct. The TV screen displayed a live video feed of their real bodies, back at the mental clinic. There, Blayze's own healthily corpulent, corporate food-nourished body sat, strapped into the mental chair, a myriad of shimmering cables running from a hole at the top of the white bubble covering his head up to the ceiling. Sparkling data glimmered upward along the cables like a rainbow of cerebral information. Datalight. That's what they called it. Mental cables had been designed with these lights to represent the flow of information up the hierarchy. From peasant, to the elites sitting in the Cloud above. The new pantheon of gods for the masses to worship.

And there, at a desk, in front of the modern computer terminal with holographic peripherals, sat Dr. Richards, looking exactly like his mental avatar, except much heavier. The real Dr. Richards on the TV screen had a pair of cables coming out from the cervical inputs on the xtphn wrapped around his neck which connected to the desk's terminal. The mental cables connected to Blayze's and Dr. Richards' cervical inputs were what connected them to this place, MentWorld.

Blayze, his initial misgivings about the mentist somewhat allayed, was transfixed by the juxtaposition. Ancient, unconnected, unsaved. Modern, connected, saved. "Wow, it's so interesting seeing the two types of body side by side. I wonder how ancestral man felt going to see a dentist. I wonder if it was similar to how we feel going to a mentist."

The skinny Dr. Richards laughed. The sound only carried here in MentWorld, Blayze knew. From the TV screen ahead issued no noise. There, Dr. Richards' large roley-poley body had its eyes closed and was silent, like Blayze's. Two silent roley-poleys there, two talkative skinnies here. "I'm sure it was a far more harrowing experience. After all, they had natural teeth that could break down and require painful surgeries. The only thing we have to deal with nowadays is a few silly memories that we don't need anyways. And those are completely painless to remove. We're lucky to live in the time of mental clinics and not back in the time of our ancestors."

"I agree," Blayze said honestly. "We're living in the greatest

time in all of history!"

"Definitely," Dr. Richards nodded. "Well, I'm going to run a few scans. This will only take a minute. I'll be back in no time. Do you want to watch TV or mentate?"

"I'll just stay here and check out all these interesting tools you created." The tools were strange, but Blayze couldn't resist learning. And the opportunity to learn about the primitives' dental clinics seemed intriguing.

"I've done extensive research on ancient dental clinics myself. Everything here is 100% historically accurate. If you have any questions, feel free to ask."

"Wow! Really? Cool!"

Maybe Dr. Richards wasn't so bad after all. Maybe it had been a stroke of good luck that Dr. Serelli was out on maternity leave.

"Oh, and don't let any of those tools scare you. They aren't real, so they can't hurt you." The skinny mentist chuckled and disappeared into the hallway; then, on the TV screen in front of him, Blayze could see the Dr. Richards in the mental clinic remove the two cables from his neck and leave the room. The shimmering cables above Blayze's head bubble were pulsating much more rapidly now. Apparently the Menty 5000 was now hard at work, scanning.

Whew! I can't believe it! Caught in the very act of having ungovly thoughts! But he didn't even say anything. So maybe that means he didn't care. Maybe that means he's cool.

But that was a close one. Why do I have so many ungovly thoughts? Blayze wondered. Must be because of my pale skin. He had learned from the Govly-Makers that the Pales were the most ungovly of races.

Blayze reached over and started toying with the shiny tools. He grabbed one. It had a weird-looking, circular, fuzzy end. He pressed a button on the tool's handle, and the fuzzy end whirred into life, as if it were made for polishing tiny toy cars. What would this thing be called? The fwizzle, he decided. He put it back and picked up another one. It was a thin metal rod with a small, round mirror on the end. A mirror for gnomes? Weird. He picked up the next one. It was some sort of barbaric-looking scraping tool. Must be called a scrapple. The ancient dental tools were so bizarre. It was as if the ancestral

dentists had carved out cave drawings on people's teeth. It was a horrifying image. The fwizzle, the scrapple, and the gnome mirror were beginning to creep him out, so he decided he'd pay the Magical Forest a visit.

Blayze concentrated all his ideational energies. Suddenly, the antique dental office disappeared completely, and he was back in the Meadow. He walked to the edge of a large wooded area. He noticed a path leading into the forest. I wonder if they installed anything new, he mused. He entered the forest.

As he trudged along the dirt trail, he noticed a pleasant aroma. Lilacs. He knew he wasn't actually smelling anything. These were simply a set of instructions sent along the wires into his cervical inputs. Ones and zeros. Sent from the mental chair to the xtphn around his neck, which passed it along to the intphn, the implanted chip in his neck, which transformed the instructions into electrical impulses which were sent along the spinal nerves to his brain. Looking around, he seemed to be in the same magical woodland he was in the last time he visited the mental clinic. Tiny blue, yellow, and green fairies fluttered past, shining in luminescent pastel colors. Large purple mushrooms with orange polka-dots rose up from the humus below. Fluffy pink squirrels darted here and there, racing up trees. From a distance, he could make out a shimmering white unicorn crossing in front of a frothy purple waterfall. The forest was so saturated, so vibrant. It was like a fairy tale on an acid trip. It felt so real, so alive. This, despite the fact that he knew it was completely artificial, a complex combination of bits and bytes fooling the brain.

Suddenly a small yellow fairy appeared in front of Blayze's nose. It looked as if it wanted to tell him something. He held out his finger, and the tiny thing landed. It looked like an androgynous version of Tinker Bell. It wore a short lavender dress. With a smile it lifted up its dress. "See? NO GENITALS!" Androgynous Tinker Bell shouted with ecstatic glee. Blayze could clearly see that between its legs was only smooth yellow skin, no genitalia of any kind. Androgynous Tinker Bell then dropped the dress back into position and abruptly flew off.

Blayze kept walking. Soon, he was standing in front of the waterfall. A majestic white unicorn with a purple horn was playing in the lilac-colored waters. It looked up at Blayze and flashed him a sparkly smile.

“I know what you’re thinking,” the unicorn said.

“What?” replied Blayne.

“That I’m a unicorn. But I’m not! I’m a unisexcorn!”

“Um, okay.”

“Wanna know what else?”

“What?”

“I’m way!”

“You’re what?” Blayne blinked.

The unisexcorn trotted up to the shore. “I’m **way!** In the old days, it was great to be gay! But now, it’s even more amazing to be way! That means without any sex urge whatsoever! I yearn to have NO SEX. I’m completely With Asexual Yearnings. Spell it out...W.A.Y.! Absolutely, 100% freed from millions of years of oppression by evolution.”

They were coming up with new words all the time, constantly updating the lexicon. Especially hip, cool words that all the youngsters in Govly Academy were jive to. It was hard to keep up.

The unisexcorn turned around. “See, I have no sex organs!” It flipped up its violet tail defiantly, showing off the smooth, white flat area between its legs.

Suddenly a small pink squirrel ran up to the banks of the purple river. “That’s **way** cool that you’re **way**, Unisexcorn! Can I come up there and take a look at your lack of genitalia?”

“Why, sure! Go right ahead!”

The squirrel ran up the unisexcorn’s leg and then clung to its butt. It stuck its head right in front of the equine’s crotch and inspected it judiciously. “Hmm...pretty smooth down there. No crack. And none of those pesky things hanging down!”

Blayne left the unisexcorn and the pink squirrel and wandered off down a trail lined with orange and purple polka-dotted mushrooms.

The psychedelic forest reminded him of primitive books he had read about recreational drugs such as LSD. He had never tried any recreational drugs himself. All baddrugs were banned by their glorious government. But they didn’t really need baddrugs. They could get all the positive effects of baddrugs digitally. The feeling of lightness, of floating, of feeling high. The euphoria. The feeling of contentment. The xtphn could be programmed to deliver all these things into their intphn, which

interfaced directly with the brain and made it happen. Of course, all of these artificial highs, these digitally-induced good moods cost admincreds, so one couldn't just sit there stoned out of his gourd 24/7. But he could definitely spend all his waking hours in some pretty tripped out simulations, without the added high. It was cheap to be a digital simunaut, but expensive to be a digital psychonaut.

Many people spent days at a time wandering inside these simulations, lost in fantasy worlds. In fact, most people nowadays devoted the better part of their lives to the sims. Their glorious government encouraged it. Almost no real reality for them. They lived almost completely inside a virtual world. Mediated, engineered, artificial reality.

The sims reminded him of ancestral man and their addiction to that archaic, prototypical simulation, the video game. The main difference, of course, was that many of those were violent. The government had of course banned all violent or sexual simulations. It had been fabled that the most popular sim, Dungeons and Flowers, had been based on a primitive game that had somehow involved violence. But now all sims were clean. Sterile. Innocuous. Fit for people of all ages. Family friendly. But at least, and Blayze was especially glad of this thought, they hadn't banned any books whatsoever, even the ungodly ones. They had declared, in their infinite wisdom, that knowledge should be free! Therefore, he was free to lose himself not in the sims, like most of the rest of society, but in a different type of mediated reality...the one called information. He considered knowledge to be the ultimate virtue, and thus had acquainted himself with the wisdom of the ages. The government, being liberal, permissive, democratic, and free held no one back from any sort of knowledge. Therefore, he had read Nietzsche. He had read Marx. He had read Hitler, Lao Tzu, Kierkegaard, Guevara, and Baudrillard. He had even read some books by the anarchist thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Anarchism...ha! No government! To think one would want to live without a government! Blayze was eternally grateful to his great government, which let him spend as much time as he wanted doing his favorite activity—learning. Unlike the primitives, no one in modern society had to work. The great saviors of the people, the Corporations, with their vast

automated factories, provided food, clothing, and shelter for all. Citizens were allotted monthly credits by the Administration, which they used to obtain all that they needed. No one was found wanting. Freed from the chains of having to work to survive! Of course, fail to show up to a mental clinic appointment, or worse, do something forbidden, like have sex or masturbate—perish the thought—and all credits on your internal smartphone were deleted immediately and your account was frozen. No transactions were possible without the government's permission. Doing anything contrary to the government's will was a death sentence. Unless, of course, you believed in the wild stories of people making it far away from civilization to the Forest of the Real and somehow surviving in that mythical place, without the help of the corporate autofactories, without the Administration-issued credits. But that was pure nonsense. Imagine surviving without the admincreds or the autofactories of the saviors. In a real forest! Not a digital simulation of one! It was even more absurd and unimaginable than being a primitive who had to work in a factory to survive. It would be like suddenly turning into an amoeba, rolling back millions of years of evolution.

No, better to simply obey the government, Blayze thought. It's easy. The sex urge suppressing drugs were made freely available to all. And there were countless sims. Or, if you were a certain Blayze, there were endless books. He had nothing to worry about. There was no chance of him suddenly developing a rebellious streak and going out and doing something cuckoo like having sex or skipping his mental checkup. As far as he was concerned, he was living in a utopia. Why would he want to ruin that? Now, if he could just get rid of those ungovly thoughts. Maybe in the future, he thought, the government will create new technology that will remove the ungovly centers of your brain completely. That would be so amazing. Then, nobody would have to worry about anything!

Soon Blayze realized that he was standing in a large clearing. Ahead, there lay a magnificent, ivory white castle. Behind the castle, in the background, he noticed the soft pink glow of the horizon. He tilted his head up and looked at the sky above, which had turned a resplendent azure, in which a brilliant array of stars twinkled like a cosmic collection of gems.

Presently, fireworks shot up from the top of the castle, bursting into a brilliant display of red, green, yellow, pink, and purple, which floated down like pixie dust around the sumptuous, pearly white spires. On the highest spire, high atop the castle, flew a white flag with a drawing of a vagenis (a vulva with a penile shaft on top of it) covered by a red circle with a slash going through it. Everyone knew this to be the flag of asexuality. It was waved about at each of the many Asexual Pride parades, which were officially endorsed by the government.

From a balcony in the middle of the castle, there suddenly appeared Quing Alex, the official ambassador of the Asexual Pride Movement. Androgynous, Alex's appearance was neither masculine nor feminine. Alex had once, when asked in an interview, described asexself as a noman. The quing never wore tight or revealing clothing, but had also revealed in an interview that asex had no sexual organs. Asex wore a queen's dress on one side of asex's body, and a king's garments on the other side. Half of Alex's hair was long and curly, the other half short and straight. On asex's head, asex wore a jewel-encrusted platinum crown.

Blayze suddenly realized that he was surrounded by a crowd of woodland creatures, both realistic and fantastical. Rabbits, deer, warthogs, unisexcorns, genital-less fairies, toads, gnomes, elves, and squirrels edged closer, trying to get a good look at the quing. Parrots, cuckoos, bluejays, and toucans alighted on branches nearby. All looked expectantly at Alex.

Quing Alex addressed the crowd. "My dear siblings! My fellow nomen! My wonderful neutered animals of all kinds! I am here to bring you the good news. I am here to liberate you from your bonds. I am here to proclaim that asexuality is faaaaaannnnntabulous!" A cheer rose up from the woodland creatures. More fireworks erupted. "My friends, every noman alive today has the freedom, nay the privilege, of being freed from that oppressive tormentor of our ancestors, sex. Almost all of the problems of ancient man were caused by sexual desire, sexual expression, sexual identity, and sexual aggression. But we today are free to create asex's own destiny...freed from the chains of instinct and biological imperatives. Soon, government technicians will have created

the absolute cure for sex, and stripped the biological imperative to have sex from our DNA altogether! Until that glorious day, stock up on free chemical castration drugs, and suppress that sex urge, baby! Don't be a slave to your hormones! You have nothing to lose but your chains!"

A cheer rose up from the crowd of woodland creatures. They started chanting, "No sex! No sex! No sex! No sex! No sex!"

Alex continued, "We are fortunate to live in such a progressive time, such a forward-thinking time, not like our ancestors, who labored under the oppression of biological imperative, lacking the drugs to free them from their instincts. And this liberation is made freely available to all by our magnanimous Corporations and our Glorious—"

Suddenly, the castle and Quing Alex were gone, and Blayze was back in the antique dental clinic, sitting in the strange dental chair with its creepy, archaic tools. The fwizzle. The scrapple. The gnome mirror. That was jarring, he thought.

Presently, Dr. Richards walked into the room, carrying a bundle of x-rays under his arm.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just thought this quaint little dental clinic you created would be a better place to talk than surrounded by all those fantasy creatures."

"No— no problem," Blayze said. It was weird how this mentist never announced himself. He simply usurped your thoughts. Annoying. Dr. Richards was not quite as tactful as Dr. Serelli. But he also had a lot of useful information, so Blayze decided to dismiss that little detail. At least the transition hadn't been as jarring as last time. Apparently their percept systems had gotten used to each other.

The mentist seated himself and tossed the stack of x-rays on the desk before him. He lifted one up and inspected it. The x-rays were of Blayze's cranium.

"What are those?" Blayze asked.

"These are how my mind interprets the scans done by the mental scaler, and thus how they appear to both our percept systems. The mental scaler conducts a noninvasive scan of all LFPs globally and constructs a mental map. That map appears to us in this place as these x-rays."

Blayze's memories of meeting with Dr. Serelli were fuzzy,

but he knew that everything had appeared completely different in those sessions, not like this. Apparently, the combination of their two percept systems had created this reality, sitting here in this dental clinic, looking at these x-rays.

“Hmmm...,” Dr. Richards’ brow furrowed as he looked at the x-ray. “When was your last checkup?” he asked.

“Three months ago.” All citizens were required by the government to have a mental checkup at least every six months. He had learned from the Govly-Makers of his youth that the most important part of the word government was “ment,” the Latin root word for “mind,” such as in the words mental or mentist. A mental cleaning every six months kept the citizenry’s minds govly and orderly. However, Blayze was no ordinary citizen. While the bulk of the citizenry spent their days in the sims, exploring artificial worlds devoid of sex and violence, Blayze spent his days researching, studying, pondering, reading, exposing himself to past eras, cultures and ideas. His relentless quest for knowledge never ceased. His mind took in copious amounts of information on a regular basis, not all of which was govly, especially the information from the primitive era. In the case of the simmers, the simulated worlds which their minds inhabited day in and day out were all 100% Corporation-designed and Administration-approved. Sterile. Clean. Govly. Thus, twice a year was more than enough to keep them spic and span. In fact, they could probably even go a full year without too many problems. But in the special case of Blayze, it was necessary to increase his mental checkups to four times a year, instead of the customary two.

“It looks like there has been quite a bit of mental plaque buildup in the old noggin since your last visit.”

“There has?”

“Yes, there has been indeed.” Dr. Richards pored over the x-rays, one after the other. Then, with a tone of seriousness, he looked Blayze straight in the eye and asked, “Do you do your mental brushing every day?”

“Yes! I hook myself in every night and do my brushing faithfully.” The cervical inputs were useful for more than playing mental games with other citizens. The mental brusher was a machine installed near the bathroom sink of every apt. It was housed in the wall, with just a flat metal square surface

with two sockets exposed. Every day, the citizens were required to plug in while it downloaded updates to the XI Smartphone system which were too big to be practical using wireless.

“And what about mental flossing?”

“Well, most days...”

The mental flosser looked exactly like the brusher and sat right next to it. It was basically just a much less powerful version of the mental scaler that seemed to be based on older technology, plus lacked any sims to distract you. Each night, citizens were supposed to plug into the brusher, then the flosser. But some citizens were lazy about the flosser. It felt like having your brain scrambled around for a minute or two. Then you unplugged and hoped you hadn’t forgotten too much. Blayze hated flossers.

“Blayze, fighting mental plaque is a never-ending battle. As soon as you leave the clinic, ungovly thoughts can pop up, or even worse, doubts in the government.”

“But I don’t doubt the government at all. I love the government!”

Dr. Richards eyed him appraisingly. “I believe that is true, but look here.” Dr. Richards showed Blayze one of the x-rays. It was mostly made up of lovely, clear, white brain matter with the characteristic folds. He pointed at some areas which had begun to be mottled with tiny dark specks. “See these specks of doubt? That’s not what we want. We gotta keep only crystal-clean, approved thoughts in there. Remember what we learned at Govly Academy...doubts are for louts!”

The mentist picked up another x-ray and examined it carefully. He pointed to a region which had begun to get quite murky. What looked like the beginnings of a dark cloud began to sully the clean, white cerebral tissue. “Ah, see...right here we have a PCT forming.”

“A PCT?”

“Yes, a Pre-Conspiracy Theory.”

“What’s that?”

“A Pre-Conspiracy Theory is an accumulation of badthoughts, a.k.a. mental plaque, which haven’t quite formed yet, but, if left unchecked, will no doubt harden and calcify into a full-blown CT...a Conspiracy Theory. And those are very

painful to remove, and expensive. That's if we can remove them at all. Good thing you didn't wait any longer to come to me."

So the government is monitoring pre-thought crime, Blayze realized. Not even thought crime. Not even pre-crime. Mash them both together: Pre-thought crime! Catching Pre-Thought Criminals (which were no doubt called PTCs) before they even think what they thunk. Or thunk what they thought. Or...you know what I mean, Blayze assured himself.

"Now, removing PCTs is more expensive than standard plaque removal. It involves a complex process called Future Accelerated Neuron Temporal Occlusion Mapping, or FANTOM. You see, it's not as simple as just removing a few ideas or memories. Without a detailed analysis of all possible future thoughtflows, the PCT will easily pop back up again. So in order to root it out completely, and prevent any possible recurrence, the local cerebral bubble on your head will send a request to a vast neural network which is capable of accurately predicting all possible future thoughtflows for your particular set of neurons. The whole process takes a matter of seconds, but is very labor intensive to the network, hence the added cost."

Blayze gulped. The credits on his internal smartphone were getting quite slim, and this checkup alone was going to put him in somewhat of a bind until the beginning of the month, when the admincredits deposited into the intphn implanted in his neck. Since he spent most of his time researching, and wasn't prone to brownposting on Thoughtbook, Blayze didn't have as many credits as some of his peers. Thoughtbook was the approved social media platform of the government. To post an update, one only had to think something, and then give the command to post it, and one's intphn did the rest. So much easier than the labor-intensive, archaic social media sites where one had to actually type something out with one's thumbs, at a snail's pace, and then press send. Brownposting was a term some clever chap had come up with. Well, maybe not so clever; he had been immediately lobotomized by the government after creating the term. It meant the kind of brownnosing social media posts about the government that some annoying Jills puked out of their minds on a daily basis. Of course, the bonus credit payout was minuscule, but if you

could tolerate thinking over and over in your mind how wonderful the government was for half of the day every day of your life, then it was possible to accumulate enough credits too afford a swanky meal now and then. That's why those Jills had enough credits to dine on steak and lobster regularly, and then immediately brag on Thoughtbook about it and post selfies of themselves eating, along with shots of their ritzy food, or, if they were YourLifers, make videos about it and upload them to their channel. Wow, how interesting! Watching videos about people's food. Of course, the steaks and lobster were synthetic. Genetically engineered, raised in a vat somewhere in Iowa. Nobody knew what real steak tasted like –the experience of eating was the one thing they hadn't quite mastered in the simulations—but the engineered steaks and seafood were substantially better than the almost-free TV dinners, top ramen, and peanut butter sandwiches Blayne dined on in large quantities on a daily basis. But he didn't care. He didn't need synthetic steaks. His passion, his joy, was learning, and that's what he spent his time on. The very reason he liked the government was because they freed his life and time up to do what he loved. Spending the whole day thinking to Thoughtbook about how wonderful the government was would be self-defeating.

“But how did this PCT even form? Like I said, I love the government. I wouldn't think a conspiracy theory against them.”

“You see, right here,” the mentist indicated an area on the scan, “these dark spots indicate badthoughts that were about to coalesce into a thoughtstream that theorized that the significantly increased adipose tissue of the modern corporate-saved man actually causes organs to fail with greater frequency, and thus is detrimental to the overall health of the body. In other words, that being a fatass is unhealthy. But of course that's patently ridiculous. Extremely high adipose levels are good for the organs. It was the starved ancient man who was unhealthy and died sooner than we do. But even if it were true, it's so easy nowadays to replace organs that go bad with artificial ones. This demonstrates the Neanderthal thinking of Conspiracy Theories. Imagining that a primitive, starved body is better than our modern amorphous, technologically advanced, sugar and chemical-enriched

corporate-food body. Sure, primitive bodies look good in the simulation, but in reality the government recommends a weight of not less than 250 lbs for a woman, 350 lbs for a man, or 300 lbs for an androgyne, which everyone knows is the most govly of sexes. Thankfully, with our high-tech, healthy corporate food, no one is even close to dipping down anywhere near those minimums."

"So I would have started thinking that theory if I hadn't come here today?"

"Absolutely. These mental scalers are so advanced that they can map out your entire thought patterns and predict subsequent thoughts at least three or four months out into the future, with about a three percent margin of error. Hmm...." Dr. Richards eyed another x-ray, perturbed.

Blayze waited in nervous silence as the mentist carefully scrutinized the image.

"Amazing. Look at this area." The mentist indicated another area where a dark nebula was forming. "Another PCT. Looks like this one started right after you read on a website that a long time ago it wasn't possible for the government to read people's minds and so people had something called mental privacy, and also didn't have to go to the mental clinic. It even claimed people had something called freedom of thought, as if that would be a good idea!" He laughed. "But it doesn't even matter. People back then still had those horrible ancestral teeth that got cavities and had all sorts of problems. And they had to go to dental clinics, and do all sorts of stuff to fix those problems. Can you imagine? Having to put up with all that, and for what? Freedom of thought?" Dr. Richards laughed again as if the idea were totally absurd. Looking once again at the x-ray, he said, "I'd say, given another two or three weeks, this would have definitely blown up into a full grown CT."

"But...is it true?" Blayze asked timidly.

"Is what true? That people had mental privacy and freedom of thought? Of course not! But even if it were true, can you imagine life in those days? Just imagine having to get a root canal."

"What's a root canal?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know. And imagine being all skinny and emaciated and unhealthy." The mentist gave a

disgusted shudder.

“You’re right. Our life is much better these days,” Blayze nodded.

“I believe you when you say you love the government, but unfortunately things like Conspiracy Theories are very insidious, and can take hold of even the purest mind.” Dr. Richards closed his eyes for a moment, deep in thought. Then he said, in a serious tone, “I apologize in advance. But the situation is worse than I thought. So please forgive me.” The mentist disappeared. And then, suddenly, everything was gone, the dental clinic, the Meadow...

Only darkness remained.

DIARY OF THE UNSAVED: PAPER & INK

The young man, his body quite saved and roley-poley, sat on the floor of his hut. One of the unsaved had given him, as a gift, one of those primitive paper diaries and an ancient writing device known as a pen. He held the pen awkwardly, and started making scratches on the paper. It was a totally new experience for him, the process of ink making stains on paper.

After making several chicken scratches, and then graduating up to squares and circles, he felt confident enough to try a letter.

A, he wrote. It looked strange, watching the blue ink flow out onto the cream-colored flat surface, forming the letter. It seemed like he had taken a step back in time to the stone age.

B, he tried. This *B* didn't look so good, he decided. Neither did the *A*, to be honest.

He tried again.

After a few hours of experimenting, he decided that he had a somewhat workable alphabet. He could actually convert his thoughts into dyed cellulose fibers. He had a way to take ideas from his head and transfer them into the physical world.

His first entry took a long time, and it looked like it had been written by a savage, or a child learning to write for the very first time. But after he had finished, he was filled with awe at seeing his own thoughts converted into physical form, outside his brain, on an actual, physical object, not floating around in cyberspace somewhere.

He read the words with joy:

Being unsaved is so different, and yet so much better than being saved. First of all, the world of the unsaved is so much more beautiful than that of the saved. Instead of the huge concrete buildings and jammed freeways, there are beautiful trees and leaves, ponds and lakes, and woodland creatures like deer and rabbits. And the air smells so delicious. So pure, so healthy. We saved didn't realize how smoggy and full of putrid chemicals our air was. I felt like I breathed for the first time when I first stepped foot in this place.

Here, there is nobody to save us. We have to save

ourselves. They call it “work,” a concept foreign to us saved. Instead of autofactories producing food for us, we all have to chip in and help cultivate the land, grow food, go fishing, hunting, etc.

It’s rather difficult at first. If you’re not used to it, in the beginning your body protests. The first time, I felt like I was going to die. But after the initial shock, it gets better. Soon you learn to enjoy “work.” It’s fun and rewarding. Now that I’ve gotten used to it, it actually feels more like play than work.

And the feeling of accomplishment you get afterwards feels truly amazing. It’s the exact opposite of the empty feeling inside people get after spending days in the sims.

The process of saving myself is one of the most satisfying things I’ve ever done. And it’s far easier and quicker than I had expected. Now that I’ve got the hang of it, I usually get all my salvation done in a few hours. And then I’m free to do what I want. I have lots of free time. That’s why I decided to start a new project. This ancient diary.

CHAPTER 2: THE INSANITY OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Blayze found himself in a large, dark chamber. He couldn't see the ceiling or walls. He was seated at the end of a hard wooden pew. His hand rested on the pew's arm, at the end of which he noticed...a human skull! He pulled his hand back in terror. In front of him he saw many more pews. On the pews sat people in dark, hooded robes. In front of the pews he could make out a large, ornate altar, made of ebony with gold trim and a huge, red pentagram in the center. Behind the altar stood a row of robed figures, standing on a dais, facing the audience. And behind the figures on the dais, it was pitch black, except for a huge, long waterfall...of what appeared to be blood! Dark, red fluid flowed down. But the waterfall didn't stay still. It was rotating. It slowly made a 360 degree rotation, as if gravity itself were spinning.

Nowhere could he see any faces. They were all obscured by long, dark hoods. Then he noticed two lines of robed figures, sideways, walking downwards as if on invisible, black walls on either side of the chamber. When they reached the bottom of the wall, they stepped onto the floor and they shifted, now upright. They slowly marched, with a measured cadence, the first ones getting nearer and nearer to the altar. Then he noticed, that in their hands, they carried...babies! Naked, terrified, screaming babies. In the background he could hear a faint, melodic sound, a kind of ominous humming and drumming. Some or all of the hooded figures were chanting in a strange tongue.

Oh, my god, Blayze thought to himself. What is going on here? How did I end up here? He tried to will this scene away, to will himself back to the Meadow. But nothing happened. The procession continued.

One of the robed figures reached the altar. He held the baby in his arms high above his head for all to see. Then he placed the screaming baby on the altar. The central figure on the dais then lifted his hands high above his head. Blayze suddenly noticed that in his hands, he held a long, shiny, silver sword. Oh my god! He thought. They are going to kill that baby! This can't be happening. Blayze could barely watch as in one swift movement, the figure swung the sword straight down onto the altar. Onto the—

Blayze squeezed his eyes shut, wanting this scene to end. His entire life had been sheltered, safe, watched over by his

Great and Glorious Government. His protectors. The Corporate Saviors. In that moment, fright and horror gripped him and shook him to the foundations of his being. Witnessing such a gruesome act had turned his entire world over in an instant. What sort of reality was he witnessing? Violence was unheard of, and even all violent sims had been banned. Surely he couldn't be seeing what he thought his eyes just saw. He willed himself out of the simulation. Out of the mental chair. Out of this nightmare. He was sure everything would be gone—he would wake up in the mental clinic. Carefully, cautiously, he opened his eyes.

And the nightmare continued.

He was stuck, trapped here in this place. No way out. This must be hell, he thought.

He saw, and immediately wished he could unsee it, the eating, the consuming, the devouring. The robed figures were greedily feeding on the murdered baby's carcass. Blood flowed freely down the gilding of the altar and onto the pentagram. Presently, the pentagram took on a deeper and deeper shade of red, and soon it became an unholy, glowing, pulsating thing made of blood. Great drops of blood began to float off the pentagram outwards towards the audience. Those on the front pews began to greedily snatch at them and gobble them up. The figure at the center of the dais who had cut the baby with the sword took off his hood and looked out at the audience. His eyes glowed with an evil light. Dark, thick blood covered his face and dripped from the corners of his mouth. He had the look of a lunatic, a crazed psychopath actually enjoying this ritual of carnage and evil. Suddenly, to his shock, Blayze recognized the man. Nicolas Randolph. He was a famous politician. He often gave speeches on the news and talk shows on cerebralvision about how the people needed to purify their thoughts, how they needed to be better citizens, rid themselves of all ungovliness, love their Great Government with all their hearts, etc.

Suddenly, the politician spotted Blayze. He shouted, "There! In the back row! He saw us! He must die!"

Simultaneously, the rest of the audience turned to look at Blayze and started chanting, "He must die! He must die! He must die!" Blayze could now see the faces of those in the audience. Many of them were famous people from

cerebralvision. Politicians. Celebrities. Heads of corporations. Their eyes shone with a wicked light.

As they started to close in on Blayze, he clasped his hands together and prayed out loud, “Oh dear Corporate Saviors! Save me from this evil!”

He waited, and nothing happened.

He was stuck in this unholy place. Was Dr. Richards punishing him? Was this happening because of the sexy nurse thoughts he had been caught having? Had the mentist judged him to be ungovly? Or was it because of the PCTs?

He started shouting uncontrollably as a plethora of hands began grabbing for him. “Dr. Richards! Anybody! Help!” In a desperate attempt to get out of the row and into the aisle so he could flee, he tripped over the skull and landed on the floor. Masses of robed figures immediately converged on him. He put his hands in front of his face, and as swarms of black-clad figures closed in on him from every side, he screamed.

He was staring up at the blue sky. The bright, gleaming sun shone down from high overhead. A few wisps of clouds sailed slowly by. In the background, he could hear faint, peaceful chirpings of birds. He was back in the Meadow.

He had blacked out. How long had he been unconscious? He stood up groggily. He couldn't feel any pain. He looked down at his skinny body. He seemed to be alright.

Suddenly, Dr. Richards appeared, skinny and official-looking in his lab coat and glasses. He walked up to Blayze and put his hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I had to put you through that. But I had no choice."

Blayze's skinny body was shaking. "You...ha-, ha-, had...no choice?" Barely capable of forming words, he tried to gather his wits. For the first time in his life, he had seen the absolute terror which was called violence.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. See, you were dangerously close. So for your own good, it was absolutely necessary to show you a glimpse of where you were headed. Don't worry, we'll erase the conscious memory of that nightmare, so you won't have to think about it. But it will stay deeply embedded in your subconscious, scaring you from ever going down the wrong thoughtpath again."

Thank god I won't remember that nightmare, Blayze thought to himself. Wait. If they erased such experiences afterwards, does that mean he had experienced a nightmare like that before? Had the mentists forced him to go through horrific experiences like that in the past, only to wipe them out from his consciousness and embed them deep into his subconscious? How did one know what one's subconscious had been programmed with?

Dr. Richards continued, "You see, what you were experiencing just now was the world that Conspiracy Theorists live in. They suffer from a condition called Extreme Paranoid Psychosis, or EPP. They imagine that the government and even the whole world are out to get them. Is that the world you want to live in, Blayze?"

"No. I never want to go through that nightmare again. It was the worse thing I ever experienced."

"That's why we gotta keep your mind fresh and clean, free

of any doubts in the government. Doubt is a dangerous thing. If left on your mind too long, it can harden and form *mental tartar*, which makes it hard to think clearly. And if the tartar isn't removed, it can cause *mental decay*. And that means that Conspiracy Theories are eating holes in your brain! I've seen a few really ugly cavities in my day. Truly horrendous stuff. Entire parts of your brain stop thinking completely. And pretty soon you end up in a world where up is down and down is up. That's why we need the government and the corporate media, Blayze. Their job, the reason they exist, is to tell us what reality is. Without them, the individual has no way for himself to figure out what reality really is. We are completely lost without them. That's why they call the people who work for the government on the corporate media 'Reality Mediators.' We need someone to mediate reality for us. We have no way to observe it ourselves. The individual is like a man with no eyes or ears, while the government and the corporate media are the seeing-eye dog or the braille map, the blind man's key to the world, so that he can successfully navigate that big, scary, confusing thing called reality. Thank god for our glorious Reality Mediators! Without them, we'd end up living in the topsy turvy psychotic fantasyland of Conspiracy Theorists. Have you ever seen a Conspiracy Theorist, Blayze?"

"No, I don't think so. What do they look like?"

"It depends on if their decay was caused by RWCTs or LWCTs."

"By what?"

"That's the technical term we mentists use for Left-Wing or Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories."

"But what's the difference?"

"An RWCT often focuses on racial stereotypes, for example that the entire world is run by Jews, with mental images of Jews as the archetypal villain, who, when he isn't eating babies or murdering Christians is rubbing his hands together greedily, thinking of ways to rob you of your money."

"LWCTs, on the other hand, while also capable of targeting racial and gender stereotypes, such as the evil straight white male, often focus the individual's rage, and hence their entire life, on one individual, for example Hitler or Trump. Everything that has ever happened since the beginning of time, and

everything that will happen, is directly caused by this one person, and nothing else. Thus, every moment of their being is directed at hating the effigy, or the one individual responsible for their misery.

“Now, one would think that RWCTs crop up in the right hemisphere of the brain while LWCTs crop up in the left hemisphere. But in fact, the opposite is the case, because the two hemispheres of our brain act like a mirror image. Therefore, artistic, creative types who rely more on the right hemisphere are often infected with LWCTs, while logical, mathematical people who heavily use their left hemisphere are often infected with RWCTs.”

“Wow, I knew mentistry was complicated, but I never imagined all the multifarious scenarios a mentist must face in his daily work,” Blayze realized.

Dr. Richards had given his explication with a gleam in his eye. It was obvious he enjoyed his work. He performed his duties with a virtuous zeal. He was the absolute expert. He was the teacher, giving out knowledge, and Blayze the pupil, imbibing it.

The mentist continued. “The mental decay caused by all types of CTs is disastrous. A total agglomeration of RWCTs will turn the human into something foul and repugnant, an inbred, incestuous, pimple-filled, cross-eyed, belligerent, cannibalistic hillbilly. They used to make horror movies about them, where some unlucky travelers got lost in the woods and then some of the local backwoodsmen appeared and chopped them into pieces and ate them all up.”

Suddenly a horrific monster appeared to one side of them, something barely human, from the remotest of backwoods. Blayze took a step backwards in fright, but then realized that the mentist had simply mentated this creature up as a visual aid to go along with his lecture. The apparition just stood there doing nothing, simply breathing, its crossed eyes fixed firmly ahead.

Dr. Richards went on. “On the other hand, the totalization of the obliteration of a mind by LWCTs turns what used to be a human being into a weird and twisted thing called a cat lady, the most vile of creatures, whose mind has been folded in on itself into a twisted paradox, simultaneously hating every living thing on the planet, constantly spewing out venomous, rancid

invective, while at the same time believing they are of the highest moral caliber in the universe, a saint, full of love, acceptance, and tolerance for all.”

Forthwith, on the opposite side appeared something vicious, vile, and putrid, its eyes full of insanity and hatred for every living thing. It looked ready to spew out animosity and bitterness at any soul unfortunate enough to be within shouting distance, but it too, like the other apparition, only breathed heavily and stared ahead, as if transfixed.

Upon seeing the two apparitions, Dr. Richards’ mouth turned up in a smile, and he looked off in the distance, as if recalling something from the past. “You know, back before they banned violent media, there used to be this awesome show where they threw an inbred and a cat lady together in a cage and just let them have at it. They called it a Psycho Death Match. That was really friggin’ entertaining. Wish they still had that show. And it was a great way to get rid of the psychos, to boot.”

Suddenly the two apparitions disappeared, and Blayze and Dr. Richards were once again alone in the clover-filled meadow.

“I don’t want to turn into an inbred or a cat lady.”

“Then we must keep your mind clean and govly. Do you remember what your Govly-Makers taught you at Govly Academy? What does Govly Article #427 say?”

“Why, yes. Of course I do! Article #427 of our Glorious Government: ‘The purpose of government is to tell us what reality is.’ That’s why I can study and research stuff on the Net and not go insane, as long as I come to these checkups, Blayze thought to himself.

“And which article tells us how they accomplish that?”

“Article #572, of course.” Blayze’s memory of that particular lesson at Govly Academy was vivid. His Govly-Maker had driven home the point beautifully.

“And tell me what that article says.”

“The Corporate Media exists to feed us the government narrative.”

“Amen. And that narrative is reality.”

“So, I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Then does that mean the government creates reality?”

“Yes. Everything the Corporate Media declares is reality, created by the Glorious Government. The Reality Makers. Amen. You wouldn’t want reality to fall out from under you, would you?”

“No, of course not. But I’m not a psycho! I don’t think everyone is out to get me! Honest. I just like studying and trying to understand as much as I can about the world around me. So maybe I run across some interesting info now and then that may or may not be true. Is that bad? Is my curiosity bad? Should I just play the sims all day like everyone else?”

“Curiosity killed the cat, Blayze. Thinking too much can lead us astray. That’s why we learn in Govly Academy that critical thinking is a bad thing. Why try to figure out everything for yourself when there are other people whose job it is to explain these things to you? Like the Govly-Makers. And our wonderful Reality Mediators and the politicians they interview on cerebralvision! Above all, don’t veer off into unknown territory. Any knowledge that’s not approved by the government is dangerous.”

“I remember now on the cerebralvision the other day they were talking about a psychotic person who was painlessly ended by our Glorious Government.” Blayze knew, like all other corporate citizens, that mid-grade sinners, those who committed acts against the Glorious Government, such as spreading Conspiracy Theories, were dealt with mercifully—they were painlessly ended. Quite generous of their liberal government, really. But for the worst of sinners, they weren’t just painlessly ended. Theirs was a fate far worse...

“People who don’t believe in government-approved reality are very dangerous to other people. So dangerous, in fact, that the government protects us all by painlessly ending them.”

“But can’t the mentists cure them?”

“Sometimes. But sometimes they are so far gone that even the mentists can’t save them.”

“So...we need the government to tell us what reality is, so we don’t become psychotic and dangerous to other people, right?”

“Precisely. And it all starts with doubt. And doubt starts with information. And that’s why we are here. To stop the

doubt, and stop the information, before it gets too far.”

Blayze recognized this as one of the mantras his Govly-Makers had taught him in childhood. “Stop the doubt. Stop the information. Stop the doubt. Stop the information. Stop the doubt. Stop the information,” they had chanted together at Govly-Academy. He was grateful to be reminded of that by this great teacher.

“Thank you, Dr. Richards. You are really good at explaining things. You should be one of the Reality Mediators or politicians.”

Dr. Richards laughed. “No, those jobs aren’t for me. I enjoy my work as a mentist far too much. I couldn’t imagine any other job. Tell you what. Just relax. Take it easy. Enjoy yourself in the Meadow for a while. Meanwhile, I’ll get to work on this mental plaque and decay, and you’ll be out of here in no time. Sound good, buddy?”

“Okay,” Blayze said, and smiled.

Dr. Richards gave him another clap on the shoulder, along with a friendly smile, and then disappeared.

Blayze thought about going back to the forest, but he had too many things to think about now. And he knew that as soon as the procedure was done—any moment now, really—he would forget this whole conversation. And the doubts. But the things the mentist had told him were intriguing. PCTs. RWCTs, LWCTs. Pre-thought crime. Mental privacy. Freedom of thought. He didn’t need to explore the sim right now. He needed to take this one last opportunity to think these thoughts, to remember these memories, before they were wiped out forever.

Blayze found himself sitting in the mental chair at the mental clinic. The large, white cerebral bubble was whirring up softly away from his head. Around him he could see the immaculate white room, the modern terminal, the imposing mental chair upon which he sat, with its ultrastrong nanoplastic straps. A large, white, amorphous nurse was unstrapping his hands and feet.

Wait...weren't they going to...? He was confused. Was that it? Were they already finished with the mental checkup? But he had just barely sat down in the mental chair...right? And the mentist...he hadn't even come in yet.

"Is that—" he started to ask the nurse, but was interrupted by a balding, large, bloblike man with glasses stepping through the door.

"Good news!" The balding man said.

"But—" Blayze started.

The man saw the look on his face and continued. "Sorry, I forgot. We had to wipe out those memories. I'm Dr. Richards, your mentist."

"Oh." Blayze sat, dazed, as the mentist took a seat at the desk across from the mental chair.

"So the good news is...you're done! Looks like we got everything. It was a little trickier than usual, but nothing too severe. You'll get a receipt in your email. The credits have already been deducted from your intphn."

Blayze closed his eyes and subvocalized the word "menu." Immediately a menu appeared in the darkness on the back of his eyelids. He focused his gaze on a menu item reading "Bank Account." Another menu appeared. This action was called "focus-clicking." It involved simply focusing on a menu item for a moment, which was registered as a "click" or selection. The system was designed to perceive the subtle difference that occurred in the eyes when they focused on one particular item, and the eyes needed to stay focused long enough to register as a selection. He then focus-clicked on "Transactions." Yes. There was a line item for a mental checkup. Three hundred and fifty admincredits had been deducted.

"So...you are free to go," the mentist was saying.

Blayze opened his eyes. He stood up. Still in a daze, he stumbled out the door and into the hall. That was it, then.

Time to leave the mental clinic.

But then, about halfway down the hall, a thought flashed through his mind. A memory. Something he had intended to ask the mentist about.

He walked back to the doorway of the room.

“Um...I have a question.”

The mentist was busily punching away at the holokeyboard on the desk in front of him. He looked up. “Oh! Okay, I’m happy to answer any questions for you while you’re here. I have a couple minutes before my next appointment. Have a seat.” He motioned to the mental chair.

Blayne walked over to the mental chair and reseated himself. “Thanks, Doctor. I remember something I was thinking about a few months ago, and I wanted to ask you, since you are an expert on these things. Or at least, you are the most expert person I know, except maybe my Govly-Makers, and I haven’t talked to them in years.”

“But, you don’t remember me—to you, we just met a moment ago. How do you know I am as knowledgeable as you say?”

“You must be, in order to get such a job as mentist.” Blayne said. Only the most well-educated, elite of vat children were sent to mental school and given a job of such vital importance to the government, that of cleaning and maintaining the minds of the citizens. As everyone knew, “ment,” or “mind” was the most important part of the word “government.”

“Point well taken.” Dr. Richards smiled. Just then, a nurse walked up and pointed at a digital clockface on the xtphn display around her neck, as if to remind the mentist about his next appointment. Dr. Richards waved her away with a motion and said, “Just give us another moment, Shandi.” A hint of annoyance had started to show up on his chubby face. He no doubt wanted to get this over with. But Blayne was undeterred.

“I was just thinking. Is the government a metaphysical entity? Or is it merely a group of human beings like you and me?”

Shocked, the mentist replied, “My boy, any act of questioning our Great and Glorious Government is a Conspiracy Theory.” The mentist still had a professionally

pleasant look on his face, but he blinked three times rapidly. The agitation was starting to show.

“All this cleaning of our minds, what do they do it for?” Blayze realized now that he could remember hardly anything from the last three months. In fact, from the last year, or perhaps several years... His clearest memories were of his years at Govly Academy. But he knew that years had passed since then. And he had hardly anything to show for it in the way of memories. His own life was a mystery to him. All he knew was the things the Govly-Makers had made him recite over and over again as a child. “These mental checkups, they’re for our benefit, right? They must do it for our benefit. That must be the reason. But, on the other hand, if they are just people like us...”

“Of course they’re for our benefit.” The mentist’s eyes were serious now. Perturbed. As if somehow the treatment hadn’t taken.

“I remember reading this book a few years ago...The Selfish Gene, by Richard Dawkins.”

“Of course. I am aware of that book. Our Glorious Government allows us to read all books. But I am surprised you remember reading it. Somehow we must have missed that...”

“But if there is no metaphysical entity called ‘government’... I mean, we learned at Govly Academy that primitive man worshipped metaphysical beings, like the idea they called ‘God.’ And we learned that we are more enlightened than they were. We have Science.”

All good little vatlings in Govly Academy had memorized by daily repetition the motto of the Pluralistic Liberal Democracy of our Glorious Government: “GOD IS DEAD - LONG LIVE THE CORPORATIONS.”

Blayze’s face was pensive. “But if no metaphysical being called ‘government’ exists, than they are just a group of people like you and me. Therefore, according to the selfish gene theory, those people whom we refer to as ‘government’ would not act in our interest, but in their own interests, in the interests of their own selfish genes. Not ours. Just like all of us do.”

“But that’s preposterous! I mean...but that is...” the mentist stammered, trying to find the words. “What I want to say is

that of course there is a metaphysical entity called Government! And it shares its grace with all of us." He closed his eyes and folded his arms for emphasis when he said this. His face shone with indignation. "Simple logic dictates it must be so! If there were no deity called Government always doing that which is just, and if human beings were motivated by selfish genes, acting in the interest of their own genes and not of the group, then conspiracies would of course be possible. But we know that is not true. We know conspiracies are impossible. That would lead to an insane world were you couldn't trust politicians and government officials. Thus, any rational mind can deduce that the truth must be that the deity called Government does exist, and people do not have selfish genes. You can rest assured that all of the holy people who represent the Government and its righteous ways are walking the just path, working for your best interests, for the greater good of the species, not for their own selfish interests." He rolled his eyes. "Now, have I answered all your questions?" He said that last sentence with an emphatic disdain. It wasn't a question. It was an accusation. The facade of professionalism was slipping. But defending one's Glorious Government trumped questions of occupational decorum.

"I mean, please don't misunderstand me, Doctor. I like the people who are called the government...they let me read and study and increase my knowledge. That's all I care about. But they aren't really the government, are they? They are just people like you and me. The Govly-Makers teach us that the god our ancestors worshipped doesn't exist, that it's just an idea. But that means...government is just an idea, too, doesn't it? And the Govly-Makers teach us that the form of our government is a democracy. But democracy is the idea that the people are the government. So that means you and I are the government. Don't get me wrong. This is just a thought experiment. I am completely loyal to the government. I just wanted to ask someone intelligent about it, since most people ignore me when I try to talk to them about theoretical stuff and just go back to playing their sims. But honest, I'm a happy citizen! I love the government. I'd even like to help them if I can. That's why I love learning and getting smarter. Maybe one day I can even be of use to the government. Thinking and understanding reality are what I love to do. I mean, *actually*

understanding reality. Not just superficially going through life without ever stopping to ponder what's happening to me. I'm so glad to have a brain and be able to use it. The act of gaining knowledge...nothing in the world can compare to that. I wish more people thought that way. But you're a thought professional! Surely you, of all people, must understand how I feel."

The nurse-cloud had floated back to the doorway during Blayze's speech. Dr. Richards barked at her, "Get me a Reality Fixer, on the double." The cloud then calmly glided away again.

Blayze had been deep in thought, but suddenly his eyes brightened up.

"You know what? You're right. I realize now that the Government is a metaphysical being, a deity that cares about us...just like the god our ancestors worshipped! Otherwise, the Government wouldn't be so beneficent! That is the proof I've been looking for of the existence of the god called 'Government.' The fact that the Corporations, the Media, and the Administration are so kind and magnanimous, that is all the proof I need! Good thing too, because if the Government weren't a beneficent metaphysical being, then it would be a small group of people enforcing their own selfish gene interests. Which would be to the detriment of the rest of us. Or even worse, a small group of people enforcing the selfish gene interests of an even smaller group of people. A pyramid scheme. Ha! Oh conspiracy of conspiracies! People acting in their own selfish interests! A small group of people benefiting from the rest believing in the idea of government. But that's not how reality works, thank Government!"

The look on Dr. Richards face continued getting darker and darker.

The cloud reappeared in the doorway, and Blayze could almost swear her white pajamas had turned grey. "Reality Fixer on line two."

Dr. Richards grunted. "You know what, forget about the fixer. I can handle this," the mentist assured. "Can you just strap him back in?"

The nurse shrugged, and then walked over to Blayze and began fiddling with the straps again.

"Yeah, a group of selfish people...how awful would that be?"

They'd be hell bent on stopping the rest of us from pursuing our own selfish gene interests. Wait, is that why they allow us only one child apiece from the vats? I don't want any children anyways, they'd just be a bother. I spend all my time reading and thinking. I'm a thinker, that's what I am! Sorry, I'm the talkative type, at least when there are other intellectuals in the room. I get carried away and ramble..." Suddenly, he looked down and noticed that he was once again strapped into the mental chair. "Wait...what's going on here?"

"Before you go, just one last thing." Dr. Richards flashed a reassuring smile at Blayze. "We missed a tiny spot. This will only take a jiffy."

Wait! Hadn't they already performed the mental scaling? He didn't remember Dr. Serelli ever hooking him up again to the chair. But this man had been chosen by their Glorious Government to attend to these matters. He must know what he's doing.

"Okay, no worries," Blayze murmured as the cerebral bubble descended around his head and he was subsumed by the cloud once again.

Dr. Richards leaned his massive bulk back in the ergonomic reinforced nanoplastic chair in his private office with hands clasped behind his head and a triumphal look on his face. On his desk, an open cup of caramel pudding, a chocolate milk, and a half-eaten danish sat in front of a pair of large, sky blue holographic computer monitors displaying the cerebral scans of several patients. His eyes were closed.

I just finished my fifth lobotomy of the month, he thought. And then he thought, post. On the back of his eyelids, he could see his Thoughtbook profile. His former posts, the number of likes each one had accumulated, the avatars of his many friends. Upon thinking the word “post,” this latest thought appeared at the top of his profile and instantly the likes started pouring in. In no time, he’d have enough Thought Points to bump his double platinum status up to triple platinum.

I love this utopia, he thought with a grin.

INVENTOR'S THOUGHTSTREAM: SMARTHOME

The inventor walked into the meeting room, trying to keep the butterflies in his stomach at bay. A primitive man in a silver toga sat at a polished mahogany desk awaiting him. Actually, he knew this man was a hologram. There aren't any primitives in real life.

"Please, have a seat." The hologram motioned him to sit in a chair. The inventor gulped and sat down. He was really meeting with a Corporate Savior! He felt so small and powerless. But on the other hand, he ruminated, I shouldn't feel so insignificant next to them. They need me. I have a wealth of specialized knowledge nobody else has. I have nothing to fear, he told himself, in a vain attempt to calm his nerves.

The Savior continued. "WhirlySnake has acquired Axon Interlink. I'll be your new boss from now on."

Axon Interlink was the name of the research company the inventor worked for. But WhirlySnake...they manufactured consumer electronics. What caused them to have such an interest in his invention so as to buy the company?

"Yes, your Saviorship. Thank you for notifying me." The inventor was loyal to the Glorious Government, but he wasn't good at genuflecting in front of these corporate types, and would just as well be left alone in his lab and let others deal with the Saviors. But he also knew that their funding was necessary to his research, so unfortunately he was forced to occasionally have meetings like this. And right now was a crucial time for Axon Interlink. They had nearly gone bankrupt trying to market MindLink as a cure for neurological disorders. And funding sources had dried up. But still...WhirlySnake?

"We're going to integrate MindLink into the next generation of smartphones."

Smartphones? That came out of left field. What an odd next step. Did this mean his invention would be made available to the masses? But how would they hope to mass market MindLink at a reasonable enough price point to make it available on a large scale without compromising on quality?

But suddenly...what? What is this? He was back at his home, tinkering with household devices. His hands were small. Those

of a child. Huh? This can't be real. But he was fiddling with some wires...yes...he remembered this.

While other children had spent all day everyday on their smartphones playing worthless and inane video games, he had spent all his free time as a child tinkering, experimenting, seeing what he could make things do. And now, he was back here, ages ago, doing it again. What in the world was going on here? Why was he reliving this childhood memory?

Finally, he had finished rewiring and reprogramming the local Internet of Things network. He lived in a smarthome. Everything was programmable, and all chores could be done automatically. Things like laundry, washing the dishes, mopping the floor...there were robot appliances designed to do it all, without any human interaction other then tapping a few settings on the touchscreen in the kitchen.

He closed the panel which contained the "brains" of the network, locking the touchscreen back into place. "Ha! Now I'll be able to control the network from my smartphone while I'm at school and scare the shit out of my parents!" The inventor had grown up a long time ago, before Govly Academy, back when kids had still lived at home and gone to normal "school" every day.

Suddenly, the fridge piped up. "Summer heat been getting you down? Maybe you'd like to cool off!" All at once, the freezer door opened and began shooting ice cubes at him.

Owww!! What the hell? He was being pelted with hard chunks of ice all over his chest and arms. He turned around and ran over to the other side of the kitchen, towards the oven.

But out of nowhere the robochef appeared and grabbed him by the wrist. "You look a bit chilly there, little guy. Let's warm you up!" Nearby, the oven's digital display turned on. Four hundred degrees. He could hear the flames firing up. Then, the oven door opened up automatically, ready to receive him, and the robochef pulled him forcefully in the direction of the oven, trying to shove him inside. Shit! They were going to cook him alive! He frantically tried to pull himself loose. Finally, he jerked himself free and ran as fast as he could to the living room, hiding behind an armchair.

Whew! That was a close one.

But then, he heard a noise...

Something was coming towards him.

“Commencing daily cleaning...” He recognized the tinny voice.

Suddenly, the robovacuum sprang out from around the armchair. It was a new model with six tentacles that could quickly and efficiently clean out multiple cracks and crevices. The tentacles waved about in the air menacingly.

“You’re looking a bit dirty, young man. Allow me to fix that for you!” The tentacles instantly lashed out at him.

He ran like a mad man for the bedroom, slamming the door and locking it shut. He hid himself under the bed.

But then, he heard a click. It was the door. It had unlocked itself. Shit! Oh yeah. Smarthome. It controls everything.

The door began to slowly creak open. He could hear the whir of the robochef, robovacuum, and robomaids from down the hall. They were getting closer.

Damn! This freaking house was going to kill him! He needed to get out of here. He quickly got out from under the bed and made a dash for the door.

Suddenly, all the robots were there.

As the robots clambered into the bedroom, he found an opening and squeezed through before they knew what hit them. He kept running at full speed.

Finally, he had reached the front door. He needed to get as far from here as possible. He tried the doorknob. Shit! It was locked. He frantically tried to unlock it. But of course, the smarthome didn’t let him.

Suddenly the smarthome’s intercom announced, “A criminal has been detected on the premises. This home will remain locked until the authorities arrive. Corporate citizen, evidence has been recorded and you have been found guilty by Insta-Trial of illegally tampering with smarthome electronics systems.”

Insta-Trial! That new pilot program being tested by the government—trials held instantly over the internet by an AI judge. It was touted that Insta-Trials would save time and expense and make the legal system run more efficiently, as verdicts could be reached before the police arrived on the scene.

“Please comply with authorities,” the smarthome went on.

“They will arrive any moment now.”

God damn this smarthome! What was he going to do now?

But then, suddenly, he was back in the meeting room with the hologram of the Corporate Savior, who was eying him strangely. “Have you been paying attention to a word I’ve been saying?”

He realized he had no memory at all of what had just happened in the last...how long had he been sitting there?

“I...um...I...well, you see...” He was flabbergasted. His mind was still back in the nightmare that he had just been having, while sitting there in front of the Corporate Savior.

A subtle look of suspicion and repugnance played over the Corporate Savior’s features, as if he were trying to figure out how such a revered figure, the inventor of the technology he had just purchased and apparently planned to implement on a large scale, could act like some sort of dementia patient.

Apparently, he had not made a good impression on his new boss.

CHAPTER 3: THE REALITY FIXER

Drake Lively.

The man who didn't exist.

A mind ninja.

Lurking in the shadows of your dreams.

The man who was both living and dead at the same time.

Because every day that the Corporate Saviors were alive was another day that he was dead.

Drake sighed and leaned back into the nanoplastic of his hovercar's seat as the onboard computer guided the vehicle through the Seatt-Tacoma traffic, gliding smoothly from lane to lane, dodging the other hovercars. He looked up at the grey, dreary sky.

He had heard once that in primitive times, the sky had actually been blue, just like in the ancient films. Not anymore. In the Corporate Zone, there was no sun. There was no moon. No grass, no trees, no flowers, no color... There was only the smog-filled, ashen sky above which reflected the desolation inside his soul.

Grey streets, grey sidewalks, grey buildings. As if the entire physical world around him had been cut out of the same gigantic concrete block. To escape the dead grey void of reality, most corporate citizens hooked into the sims during the commute, but since he spent all his working hours in virtuality, he needed a break. A few minutes in the real world before diving back in. Besides, let me just glory in the bleakness of my life, he thought.

His eyes were jolted awake by the shockingly colorful clown sitting on the hood of his car, smiling at him. Gaudy magenta and royal blue clownsuit. Pallid skin. Sanguineous blood-red mouth, nose and hair. The clown sat indian-style, bobbing his head up and down, swaying his pointing hands back and forth as if to a tune. He twirled his hands around each other and pointed left, then right. Then he put his hands on the hood and, transferring his weight to them, lifted his body up into an acrobatic pose. He suddenly dropped onto his stomach and reached out his hands and feet spread eagle as he pretended to fly, making goofy faces as he looked at Drake. Finally, he got up on his feet and curled his body into a canonball pose. Then he backflipped up off the hood and up into the sky above, doing about twenty backflips. Drake noticed that all the other

cars in traffic also had clowns, who all backflipped up into the sky, all to the same exact point. When all the clowns had converged into a single point, they exploded like a firework display into an enormous hamburger with three layers, the size of a small building, floating above them in the grey sky. Black, slimy grease oozed out from all the layers of the hamburger. Finally, the hamburger violently exploded into a million glittery shards which raged like a tsunami of broken glass before finally imploding upon themselves into the slick, shiny ebony words “THE GREASINATOR” which slowly revolved so all stuck in traffic below could read them. Beneath that suddenly appeared the glittering gold rotating words “Only at McArtificial’s.”

“Holomercials,” Drake muttered to himself and went back to staring at the drab buildings as they passed by. With the clown gone, all color had drained again from the world.

If any color existed in the Corporate Zone, it was artificial. Because everything they create is artificial, he mused. Either holotechnics displays floating in the greyspace of the cityscape, or the wonderful fantasy world of the sims, which of course were nothing more than electrons running along your nerves, only existing in your mind. And of course, the endless smoldering red taillights of the traffic ahead of him.

Stuck.

Trapped.

Working, not as a human being, but as part of the system... Unable to interact, even with those whose lives he knew intimately.

I am stuck in *their* system. The system *they* created. I am part of it. I reify it every day. I build it up, strengthen it. That’s why I can never be happy, he mused. I don’t create the world I live in. I’m just a pawn. Like we all are. But there was no way out. Even the one thing that kept him going—his art—was all for them. For their glory. But the act of creation is better than any tonic, better than any strong drink, as an aid in forgetting one’s woes. If I must create for them, then let it be.

Stuck in a system from which there was no way out except the impossible. Except the one, violent act of creation that his dead soul longed for.

All around him he was surrounded by other hovercars

threading their way in and out of traffic on autopilot, and inside, their corpulent occupants either eating fast food, drinking coffee, or hooked into the sims. And their faces...he could make out a dog, a cat, a fox, a yellow-haired cartoon primitive princess with larger-than-life blue eyes, a purple mouse with glowing blue eyes and big round ears. The generous and liberal Glorious Government allowed citizens to cover their tubby-wubby real faces with holo-faces—nearly opaque holograms projected all the way around their heads from the xtphn wrapped around their neck—because they were constantly reading the citizens' thoughts and monitoring their location using the unique government ID in their intphn, so their real face didn't matter. Some even had skinny holo-faces, which made it look like they had a primitive head on their shoulders. Drake had noticed the ancient film stars James Dean and Brigitte Bardot conversing in a holocar as he passed them up. This was possible through an advanced technology called Subtractive Holography, “erasing” the citizen's real, chubby face, leaving only the slim holographic face instead. Subtractive holography analyzed light coming in from all directions and then projected it again in all directions on the other side of the hologram, effectively passing the light through. This was what allowed the parts of the citizen's face that were larger than the holo-face to be “subtracted” from the image. Without this, their corporate-saved cheeks, jowls, and chins would have stuck out, destroying the illusion. The modern world was good at illusions. Perhaps that's all it was good at, he cogitated. After all, that's who he was.

The creator of illusions.

A ninja.

A shadow.

An erased memory, nothing more...

Outside of his work, this barren, artificial world is all a mind ninja has.

Though he didn't exist, he shaped people's memories. Though he shaped memories, care was taken to ensure he was never in any of them. If anyone had ever seen him, felt his presence, the memory of it had been erased, just like he had been from the world. From all public records, from the Net, from social media. All signs of his existence gone.

As his vehicle escorted him to his destination, he noticed a wide river out the window to the right. He imagined that it too, had once been some other color than the color of soot. As the freeway zoomed along, a looming behemoth structure came ever closer. As the structure approached, he noticed bright, fluorescent green chemicals flowing out from pipes at the base of the building into the murky river. Oh, here we go. Some color that's not virtual. Well, it was still artificial, he had to admit. It definitely wasn't natural.

The building now took up most of the view to his right. At the top of the building a sign in aqua holotype read, "FattyChemCo Corporation Chemically-Enriched Food Autofactory." And right below that, in bright green letters, "Green since 2070." Yeah, green, alright. Green like the shit you dump in the river, he thought to himself. And green like your food once it arrives on your doorstep. No one went to supermarkets anymore, of course. Food was conveniently delivered so you could stay cloistered up in your apt connected to the sims.

After what had happened to his father, his world had imploded in on him. That was twenty years ago. Twenty years ago his uncle had given him the MindLink Hacking Tools. His one hope of fighting the system. How had his uncle gotten those? But for some strange reason that was still a mystery to Drake, his uncle had soon after disappeared. Gone. Completely. Never again to return a call or message, never again to reach out to him with a friendly gesture. And the government wouldn't give him a direct reply about his existence or location. It was as if he had never existed. He knew that his uncle was the one person that could understand him, the one person he could trust. Or else why would he have given him the Hacking Tools? So why had he disappeared like that, left him all alone? Especially after what had happened to his father.

His uncle, the enigma.

He had never once met him in real life. Soon after his graduation from Govly Academy, he had received that encrypted message with the Hacking Tools, and then...nothing. He didn't know where his uncle lived or what he did for a living. The only reason he knew of his existence was because his father had mentioned him a few times, and because of that

email. Perhaps he had been ended by our Glorious Government. But then, it would have been broadcast on the Reality Mediation just like all the other painless endings by our Glorious Government. Damn his uncle. Why hadn't he been there all these years? And why wasn't he there when...

God damn it! These same caustic thoughts, day in and day out. I need to take my mind off it all, if only for a moment.

Oh sweet creator's chair, here I come.

Trying to divert his mind from the constant thoughts that were leading him nowhere, he looked out the window to his left. Now he was getting nearer to downtown, he realized as he noticed the Cyber Space Needle looming in the distance. The original Space Needle had been demolished after a huge crack comprising its structural integrity had been found. But they had created the Cyber Space Needle to replace it. A permanent, 24/7, colossal hologram. Electric blue, it shimmered with streaks of pink or yellow, or sometimes went into multi-color strobe light mode. It was a sight to behold, especially at night. And on top, also holographic, flew a giant Asexual Pride flag, bearing the vagenis with a red circle-slash through it. The government had justified their decision not to rebuild a real Space Needle by the fact that they had already created an exact replica of the original in SimWorld. Citizens are free to visit it, get their virtual pennies pressed, go up the elevator and see the view from the top, whenever they want, they had said.

SimWorld. That vast meeting place of souls. SimWorld was available through one's smartphone wirelessly, online, 24/7. Or if one wanted a hyperrealistic connection with no lag, one could plug their mental cable into the terminal inside their apartment. A virtual world, accessible by anyone at any time. Like an alternate earth. At any given moment, there were millions, if not billions of people in SimWorld.

In the dismal sky directly above Drake, a huge airship lumbered past, in the direction of the Cyber Space Needle. He watched in fascination as the glowing purple behemoth plotted its slow course. Finally, it had passed him, and he caught a glimpse of the long, black banner it was pulling behind it. On it flashed the words in bright green, "CORPORATIONS ARE SAVING THE PLANET." The display was impressive. But he knew that the giant airship, and the sign

behind it, were not real. Holograms. Is anything in this city real?

Listlessly he looked back out to the right and this time noticed hundreds of floating objects littering the mucky river. Plastic bottles, he knew, courtesy of Tarky Tarla Corporation, manufacturer of Tar Colored Liquid Sugar—known colloquially as “TarC,” as in “I’ll have a TarC, easy on the ice,”—and other fine beverages. Keeping citizens healthy and saving the planet by spreading their plastic bottles throughout nature.

As he approached downtown, automatic sidewalks on either side slowly transported hundreds of rotund corporate-saved bodies such as his own to their destinations, some wearing holo-faces, others not. Most of them going to work. Thanks to the holy Corporations, modern man didn’t have to work. Chemically-enriched manna was made available to all through the government admincredits. But many people continued to work anyways, perhaps because of boredom, perhaps to feel useful to society, perhaps to make enough admincredits to buy a second apartment, and so on and so forth. For every one person who worked, there were three or four who simply stayed at home and lived their life virtually, in the sims, ordering food online, rarely leaving their apartments. With the autofactories, it didn’t matter. There was food and shelter for all, whether or not anyone worked. The people who enjoyed the sims were happy they didn’t have to come out and interact in the real world, and the people who liked to come out in the real world were happy that there were less people to interact with. The reason for gigantic population centers seemed to be, ironically, so people didn’t have to interact with each other. Let’s squish millions and millions of people in real close together...so they can be even more isolated from each other. That seemed to be the purpose of civilization.

Surrounded by people, but with no one to talk to. With the Hacking Tools his uncle had given him, Drake had the ability to make a stealth connection with anyone he wanted to, and hide their communications from the Glorious Government. The ability, yes. But the opportunity, no. Who could he trust? The honest answer? Not a single soul. In all frankness, he realized that any one of them was just as liable as the next to betray him to his enemies, and that meant certain death. Not a single person on earth that he could trust with what he wanted to

do. What he had to do.

But at least, because of the Hacking Tools, he could have thoughts like these. The thoughts that at once kept him alive, and kept him dead. Just like he had been every day for the last twenty years, since his world had become nothing more than a farce.

The automatic sidewalks were lined with garbage. Napkins, empty Grimy Greasy Fry cartons, paper wrappers from straws, flowed freely down the street, directed by the wind, here and there clinging to the legs or feet of a citizen. Empty yogurt cartons, plastic utensils, soda cans, Twing Twong wrappers littered the landscape. It was as if the Corporate Zone were an archaeological site, a place for future scientists to research the failures of corporations to make good on their promise to save the environment.

All of a sudden, his hovercar jerked to a stop. He looked at the road ahead of him. Another traffic jam. Ah, crap. Gonna be late again. Why can't our Corporate Saviors get us flying cars, like in just about every primitive film about the future? Late the second time this week. How was this going to look to his superiors? Maybe they'll force me to take a course in time management, he thought.

He looked out the window to his right and saw the crowds of chunky chunk chunks milling around a large fountain. And on top of the fountain, there was a twenty-foot hologram of a tan muscular man with platinum blonde hair flexing his huge biceps, sporting the shiny silver toga and shiny golden laurels and sandals which were the garments of the Corporate Saviors. The toga lacked a tunic and exposed part of his brawny chest and arms. This was the man who had given Drake his job. Ron Wolfe. Drake had never seen him in real life. The Corporate Saviors were inordinately secretive and preferred to hold all meetings either via holotransmission or in SimWorld.

In SimWorld, everyone had an avatar that looked like a starved, primitive version of themselves, including the Corporate Saviors. Just like with their holo avatars. But it was rumored that the Corporate Saviors also had primitive bodies—just like their avatars—in real life. But of course, that would be preposterous. They must have healthy, corporate-saved bodies like the rest of us, he thought. But looking at the

cheesy, grinning holo flexing for the crowds, Drake thought about the inscrutable figure he had only interacted with virtually. What do you look like in real life, Wolfe?

And so he sat there, stuck in traffic, looking at the smirking face of his adversary, as the tubby-wubbies who worshipped him flowed around the fountain. This is my world, he ruminated. *Their* world. And my prison. Isolated, all alone, with no allies, no friends, no one to talk to, no one to trust.

The awful, impossible task is mine and mine alone. The only task that offers me any hope of salvation.

To destroy the Corporate Saviors.

Because there is only one thing that can bring salvation.

Revenge.

Suddenly, all the roley-poleys on the automatic sidewalk had fastened on their government-issued gas masks. All at the same time, they opened up their government-issued acid-resistant umbrellas.

It began to rain.

Acid rain, of course.

Like it did almost every day.

Drake sat on the fourteenth floor of the Department of Thought Management building in a room that didn't officially exist. Those lacking proper clearance thought this was part of a bomb shelter that formed the inner core of the building from top to bottom. In reality, much of the "bomb shelter" was actively used by Government Shadow Operatives like Drake.

He had entered through the main lobby, walking over the gigantic circle inlaid in the middle of the polished marble floor bearing the symbol of Thought Management, a human brain with a profusion of circuits coming out of it. Above and below the brain, running along the circumference of the circle, was the motto of the Glorious Government: "GOD IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE CORPORATIONS."

Then, as was required of all government employees, he had reverently approached the Holy Data Chain, which looked like a literal chain made out of ones and zeros. He held out one hand straight in front of him, with palm perpendicular to his body, representing the sacred numeral "one." Then, he placed the other hand in front and below and formed a circle with his fingers and thumb, representing the holy numeral "zero." Hands pressed together in this way, he traced with them a zero, and then a one in the air, showing deference to the Apex Data Predators. They are at the top of the chain, we are at the bottom. They feed on us by feeding on our data, by knowing everything about us, while we know nothing about them. He who knows, preys on him who doesn't know. Knowledge is power. Literally.

After his little corporate prayer he had entered the restroom and sat down on a smart toilet which recognized his security clearance wirelessly from his xtphn and activated the smart stall, which doubled as a secret multi-directional elevator which had taken him through a series of convoluted twists and turns, eventually depositing him on the nonexistent floor. Plus, he had taken a shit in the process. Modern buildings had been designed for modern man, who, eating corporate food all the time, was constantly needing to take a shit.

And now he sat staring at his boss, Albert Jenkins, a pale-faced man with a triple chin, beady blue eyes and a strawberry blonde crew-cut, who was chewing him out for being late.

The vast chamber was dim, except in the well-lit, sunken supervisor area in which they sat, surrounded by rows upon

rows of roley-poleys, tilted back in their reinforced dark grey nanoplas reclining chairs, their eyes closed, their bodies inert, their minds sifting through the Net, monitoring the badthoughts of the citizens.

The Thought Scrapers.

Most of the spying on citizens' thoughts was carried out by a super AI known as the Cloud, but even with late 21st century artificial intelligence, there still needed to be a human element to make up for the technology's blindspots.

"You're a good fixer, Andraca, but the Department depends on..." Jenkins said, searching for the word. "Well... dependability," he concluded recursively. Maybe he should have asked an AI assistant to formulate that sentence for him, Drake thought. All smartphones were equipped with various AI assistants that could help individuals evade the responsibility of thinking. Thought Obviation Programs, or TOPs, as they were called. Standardized tests had confirmed that IQs had been plummeting for decades as a result. But they kept coming up with newer and more fully featured TOPs. At the focus-click of an eyelid menu, TOPs could research a topic for you, do your shopping, compose a message for you to a friend or family member, and yes, even tell someone too dumb to think for themselves what to say in a variety of different situations. Thus, homo sapiens corporatus's natural brain became more and more atrophied as more and more tasks were offloaded to his external brain, the smartphone.

"I told you not to call me that. Besides, why don't we have tunnels like I've heard the Saviors have? Or at least some kind of high-speed vacuum tube like the one proposed by the Muskys decades ago?" Drake replied. The Muskys were a dynasty of strangely accentless eccentric Corporate Saviors from some foreign land where they always say their first name last and last name first. They were notorious for their long list of technological proposals which had all gone unrealized, even up to and including the colonization of other planets.

Suddenly, bright red holotype began blinking above one of the immobile roley-poleys with the words, "SHIT BREAK." There was a soft "bing, bing, bing, bing," sound which accompanied the flashing words. The roley-poley opened his eyes, looked around, and stood up. He seemed to have

something urgent on his mind. He meekly addressed Jenkins. "Sir, may I be excused?"

Once in a while, one of the scrapers ate too much corporate food before his shift, or on a lunch break. The scraping chair was equipped with sensors, which, when attached to the scraper's central nervous system via his intphn, could detect bodily functions such as heart rate, breathing rate, sweat, among other vital signs. And yes, even the autonomic organic condition that signaled an imminent toilet disaster.

Jenkins rolled his eyes. "Go along. Do your business. And don't dawdle. We have citizens' minds to scrape!"

The pudgy wudgy form quickly and jerkily hop-waddled off in the direction of a door overhung with protruding holotype reading "RESTROOM" in such a manner so as not to precipitate a catastrophe before reaching his destination.

"God damn it," Jenkins grumbled. "I told them to install tubes up their butt to suck out the poop, to prevent delays such as these. Anyways, Andraca, what the hell were you talking about? High speed vacuum tubes and other such nonsense? Must I remind you? What do we always say here at the DTM? Focus on what *you* can do, not on what others are or aren't doing."

He had called him that name again. It was a running joke at the Department that Drake's name came from the Old English "andraca," meaning "duck-king." Drake insisted that it came from the Middle English "draca," meaning "huge serpent."

Drake was at this moment using his always-on ThoughtCloak (one of the handiest of all Hacking Tools) to imagine this man's head resting on a bloody pike instead of on his fat body. Drake enhanced this glorious image even more by mentally mimicking Jenkins' high-pitched, obnoxious voice, as the head on the pike squawked, "Andraca, blah blah blah, I'm a toady, weaselly little man whose entire career is based on his enshtittened, ugly potato-shaped nose which he used to get to where he is today, blah blah blah..." Drake was always amazed at how here, in the belly of the beast, in the heart of the fortress of mind control, his Hacking Tools worked flawlessly, completely undetected by these bureaucratic, meddlesome control freaks. That was proof that the technology of the Saviors was not magic, and there were always flaws, always gaps one could squeeze one's way through to avoid the iron-

clad rule of those who made it their business to spy on and control every aspect of every person's life. Or maybe, that meant that technology *was* in fact magic, and since all magic was based on the knowledge of certain magic words, all that was needed to outmagic one's opponent was to know the right magic words...the right code.

"So I was five minutes late. Something went wrong with the traffic AI again. How is that my fault?" Drake was an artiste. How could they expect an artiste to wear a suit and tie and show up at 9 and leave at 5? Actually, *Homo sapiens corporatus*, who sweated much more profusely than his ancestors, had long ago given up on ties and starched collars, in favor of more amorphous, loose-fitting garments. White flowing silk shirts with loose faux-collars were fashionable among business-types.

"Look, I'm going to have to submit your file to the Saviors for review."

Drake knew that fixers were hardly ever retired from their profession, since there was about a three to six percent chance their erased memories of being a fixer would resurface. This was a major security risk since fixers were not supposed to exist. Citizens knew about the mentists, about the memory erasure. But they didn't know about the deceptive and illusory work fixers did behind the scenes with their memories. Once in a long while you'd hear of a fixer who blundered on a major case being painlessly ended, but major cases were rare, and fixers being painlessly ended was even rarer. The result was that being a fixer was almost a tenured position. A tenured position where you could play around with people's memories.

Just then, a life-size hologram appeared, sitting in a ghostly chair in front of Drake and Jenkins, as if it were an apparition. Savior Ronald Wolfe. The chiseled features of his translucent holo avatar and its sinewy muscles partially exposed by the shimmering toga contrasted sharply with the rows of unconscious amorphous blobs visible directly behind it. Suddenly, the meeting of two had become a meeting of three.

"Salve, my Savior," Jenkins spouted obsequiously. "I was just explaining to Department Employee Lively that we should recommend his file for review to the Corporate Saviors based on his temporal unreliability of late—"

"Can it, Jenkins. I have a better idea." Wolfe's immaterial

form turned slightly in its chair to face Drake. "Drake, I have decided to entrust an extremely crucial assignment to you. It is imperative that you treat this case with kid gloves. The name of the patient is Kristal Silverberg. It seems for some reason an especially strong cathexis has formed around a certain memory, one incongruent with our system of Corporate Salvation. I'm counting on you to remedy that problem for us."

Wait...*the* Kristal Silverberg? The glorious Reality Mediator? Drake watched her broadcast on cerebralvision every night at 9pm. Drake had been assigned to important people before, Govly Makers, lesser bureaucrats, mentists...but never to a mediator, a celebrity adored by the public.

"But your Corporateness—" Jenkins began.

"Zip it, triple-chin! The matter has been decided. I'm sending the preliminary report to your smartphone, Drake. And Lively, don't mess up on this one. If you fail, I'll have to do it myself. And I run a very tight schedule. I'm sure you can appreciate that."

Huh? He would have to do it himself? Who ever heard of a Corporate Savior taking on a Reality Fixer's case? Drake knew that Wolfe was the founder of WhirlySnake, the company that manufactured the MindLink-equipped smartphones as well as the Thought Management hardware used by the fixers. Drake's uncle was somehow involved. The only reason Drake knew this was that his uncle had been the one who had recommended him to Wolfe before he graduated from Govly Academy—that was how he had become a fixer. Why his uncle had recommended him, he didn't know. In modern society, the vast majority of people never met their family until they turned sixteen and left Govly Academy. So he had been a "baby" when all this had happened. Wolfe had given him the job, and Jenkins, the Deputy Director at the DTM, this officious, irritating asshole, had been his boss ever since. Twenty years of putting up with this royal prick, and, on very rare occasions, meeting by holopresence with Savior Wolfe himself.

Since passing the baton as CSO of WhirlySnake, Wolfe had taken over at FattyChemCo, but was still on the Board of Saviors at WhirlySnake. WhirlySnake basically ran the Department of Thought Management. Or was it the other way around? Nobody really knew, so close was the relationship

between the government and the Corporations, and so high the degree of collaboration. Regardless, how did it make sense for a Corporate Savior to take on a relatively minor task like reality fixing an individual, even one so high profile as this?

“But why you? Aren’t there other fixers?” Drake blurted out, without even attaching any honorific titles, as was usually done when addressing a Savior. Drake knew he would be able to do the job, but found this situation very strange.

“Drake, remember. Focus on what *you* can do. If you can’t do it, there will be repercussions; that’s all I can say. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some very important corporate business to attend to.” He looked at Drake one more time, dead in the eyes as his voice emphasized, “Don’t fail me, Drake.” The hologram of Wolfe abruptly shrank down to a point of light, then disappeared.

As Drake was left staring at the rows of placid, immobile chubby wubbies in their gently reclining chairs, he cogitated. Damn it! This was on purpose. Surely, Wolfe knew that Drake felt complacent in his position. Now he would have an excuse for severe punitive action if Drake somehow failed this special assignment. So it’s a test! This man Wolfe was known to be a conniving, plotting, manipulative overseer. As an unrivaled player in the game of life, he always did it in a way that made it impossible to argue with. Well played, Wolfe. This was far worse than any Corporate Savior review or time management course. How did he know he wasn’t being set up to fail? Now my job is in danger, and it’s Wolfe’s fault, Drake thought. That arrogant bastard!

Suddenly, another one of the reclining chairs had the gently binging words “SHIT BREAK” flashing overhead. The scraper of said chair, a fleshy man with sunken eyes, suddenly woke up, a look of shock, confusion, and dire need on his face. Sometimes the transition from scraping the surface of the minds of the citizens to real life could be jarring. “Sir—” he addressed Jenkins.

But before he could even continue, Jenkins already grunted and waved a hand at the roley-poley. “You’re excused,” he muttered.

The man thanked him and hobbled off towards the shitcan.

The adventure continues...in Mind Grid!

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MIND GRID

Meet Drake Lively, a Reality Fixer. Growing up in a world where humans are indoctrinated to be asexual, and even thinking about sex is punishable by having one's body terminated and one's mind uploaded to the cloud to endure never-ending psychic torment as a mental construct on the government's servers, Drake's job is to make sure that even the slightest anomalies, such as residual sexual memories, or doubts in the Glorious Government, are promptly removed and the person's reality is restored to its government-mandated normal.

But what happens when even the Reality Fixer's reality needs to be fixed? When Drake slips up and commits an illegal intimate mental contact, things start to get incredibly dangerous incredibly fast. But the stakes quickly raise to all of humanity when he stumbles on a government secret and learns that the Corporate Saviors are about to take technological manipulation of the mind to levels he never could have even dreamed of. And he is the only one that can stop them...

Welcome to Mind Grid.

In the future, there is only control.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Brighton is the author of three novels, including *Brave Gay World*, the first dystopian satire about a homofascist future where penis-vagina sex is outlawed, and *The Return of Philip K. Dick*, a dystopian novel about a technocratic society enslaved under the Panopticon, and a Philip K. Dick parody.

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Qq87xv6q4u5r708ttdm6pf6vm4we5ltvr5m4wkl5ut

USDT-TRON (TRC20)

TKVwWPHdvAT6RVC4mPc68XE5KiWeBgxd5F

OTHER NOVELS BY JAMES BRIGHTON

BRAVE GAY WORLD

In 2054, the newly formed Homofascist State of America declared straight sex to be punishable by life in prison and committed the Straight Genocide, bombing the capital of the renegade Montana Republic and murdering hundreds of thousands of innocent people because of their sexual preference.

The year is now 2084. Enter Fyfe. An anomaly. A straight individualist in this gay fascist world who thinks that governments and megacorporations don't have the authority to tell people what to do with their own bodies.

One day Fyfe stumbles on the darkspace onto a secretive Penis-Vagina Sex Club. Is it worth risking his very life for a chance to have straight sex? Confronted by demons from his past and spiraling headlong into an ever-growing web of subterfuge and deceit, Fyfe soon has a frightening realization: He is the one person that can free all mankind from their centuries-long enslavement to government. But will he have the courage to do what needs to be done?

THE RETURN OF PHILIP K. DICK

In a technocratic future where people are judged by the color and shape of their genitals, and everyone's daily activities and biological functions are restricted, monitored, and broadcast out for all the world to see, Joe is the lowest caste of society: a Pale Penis.

When a mysterious man offers Joe pills that he claims will turn him into Philip K. Dick for a few hours, Joe thinks the old man is off his rocker. But soon he realizes that the earth's very existence is at stake, and he is the only person in the world able to reach the one man who can save humanity from the technological prison it has created for itself...