



THE **RETURN** OF PHILIP K. DICK

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THE AUTHOR OF BRAVE GAY WORLD

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PROLOGUE

Berkley, California, 1939

A man in a double-breasted grey pin-striped suit paced back and forth on the stage, holding a Cuban cigar in one hand, and a microphone in the other. His dark, slicked-back hair faded into grey on the sides, just above the ears, matching his grey, glassy eyes. He wore a pin on his lapel which looked like a yin-yang symbol, only red and grey, and without the dots.

He addressed a packed house. About three hundred people, of all ages, sat in rapt attention. The man took a drag off the cigar, blew it out, and then continued his lecture.

“Ladies and gentleman, I ask of you, why did the Great Depression fall on this great country and ruin so many lives? Do you want the answer? The real answer? I’ll give it to you.” He took another drag off the Cuban cigar. The audience was on the edge of their seats. He had them in the palm of his hand.

“One, pure, plain and simple reason. Technology. Or rather, the lack of its proper use, I should add. I say to you that this great economic calamity fell on us because we were not using the technology which we had at our disposal. We were still doing things the old-fashioned way. With the right technology, in the right hands, we could have stopped the Great Depression from ever happening!

“And so I ask of you here today: How can puny man, with his limited perspective, know what will bring the greatest good to the greatest amount of people? How can we continue on as if we were in

the dark ages, living how we see fit, without taking advantage of science, of technology, to dictate our lives? It's chaos, I tell you! Each person making whatever decisions he or she wants. Each person eating the food, driving the car, using the products that they want! But I am here to tell you, that for every decision, for every act, there is a right, and a wrong choice! And the only way to know the right choice, the choice that is of the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people is...technology. Thus, I declare that technology should rule our lives! And we should surrender our power to make decisions to the only men on the planet who are qualified to use that technology to make informed, scientific decisions for everyone else. That's right...a technical elite!

“If we want progress, we need to turn over our individual decision-making processes to those who can responsibly use technology to determine the quantity and type of food we should buy, the products we are allowed to purchase and when and for how long we should be able to use them, how much electricity and water we should be allowed to use and when we should be allowed to use them... Ladies and gentlemen, I am here to announce that the age of democracy is over. Free will is over. Democracy was for the ancients who lacked what we have...the twin forces of science and technology. Our lives must be governed by those two forces. With a technical elite running our perfect, utopian society, there will never be another Great Depression! There will never be any other economic disaster whatsoever! We need, not democracy, but... technocracy!”

A murmur went up through the crowd. The audience members weren't quite sure how to take this. They looked at the man, and then at each other,

wide-eyed, speechless.

The man continued. "Stop making decisions for yourselves! You are all impotent to make the right decisions! Let the technical elite and their instruments make those decisions for you! Only technology, and a technical elite running that technology, can be trusted to make decisions for all individuals in society!"

"We only have half a million members of the Technocracy Movement in California today, but I swear to you, the time will come when technocracy will be the way the entire world is run! Our great and glorious technical elite will build great and powerful computers which will calculate how much energy you can consume, how much food you can eat, how much water to drink, how far you can drive. Man will no longer have the burden of controlling his own life, but will have the perfect controller to take upon itself the awesome task of deciding everything!"

A man raised his hand. "What if I want to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?"

The man with the double-breasted suit answered, "After the system is implemented, you'll need to ask the supercomputer if you can do that."

"What if I need to take a dump?" another man asked.

"You'll need to ask the supercomputer if you can do that, too."

"No, I mean, right now. I ate a huge burrito before I came here."

"You may use the restroom," the man with the cigar answered.

"This sucks!" came a complaint from somewhere in the audience.

"Yeah, this plan blows. I'm outta here! Come on, Betsy, let's go check out that new malt shop."

One by one, people started leaving the auditorium. Presently the entire audience had cleared out. The man with the Cuban cigar smirked. Fine, he thought. Just wait. You'll see.

But then, suddenly, a solitary figure approached the stage. A kid! Not more than ten or twelve, towheaded, and with a calm look on his face. He had the look of someone far more mature, far wiser than just a mere boy. As he approached the stage he looked the man in the eyes. He stopped, a few paces off from the man. The kid spoke in a calm and even tone. "The eye of the Sibyl has shown me that my friends and I, who refuse to succumb to the androidization of mankind, will stop you and your movement someday."

The man, surprised, suddenly laughed. "The eye of the Sibyl? That's cute, kid." He took another drag off his cigar. "Now run along, boy. Your mommy must be calling for you somewhere," he mocked sardonically.

The kid was unperturbed. "Humans should not be androids, Mr. Scott. A human being should never be a mere robot, following a program. That's what you want. But I've got news for you. You and your plan will fail. Humans should always have free will. That's what separates us from the systems and gadgets we create. You want to turn people into cogs in a machine. But whatever you think, and whatever reasons you give for your ambitions, your plan will never create the perfect utopia that you claim it will. Any attempt to take away the individual's freedom will always end up in tyranny, no matter how rosy you try to make it sound. Humans should always be free to run their own lives."

The man's face darkened. "Look, punk. I'm just trying to help people get the most out of technology."

I'm trying to fix the problems in society. What good is technology if it can't fix all our problems?"

"Was technology made for man, or man for technology?"

"Ah, a wiseass. What's your name, kid?"

The man sucked in more tobacco smoke, waiting for an answer. The kid sat there in silence.

The man waived his hand. "Forget it. It doesn't matter. You don't know who...or I should say *what* you are dealing with. I didn't tell these ignorant cave dwellers who just rejected the future of mankind, because they'd be too stupid to understand anyways, but I've been called upon by a higher power. A power that's...shall we say, not human. This is way bigger than you can even imagine. There are forces at work here that you've never even dreamed of."

Not impressed, the boy said, "And you have no idea who I am. But I'll tell you one thing, for your own benefit. I can remember the future. And I remember giving a speech, decades from now, called The Android and the Human, in a large room just like this, and in that speech I refuted everything you said here. So I've already canceled out everything you just said even though I didn't do it yet because the future is sort of like the past for me. But I don't expect you to understand, because your brain seems quite linear and boring compared to mine."

The man looked at the kid for a moment, then let out a long, hearty bellow. "That's rich! Ha, ha, whew! That was a good one. What a great story," the man said as he wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "That was the best laugh I've had in a long time...the kid who can remember the future!" Then, suddenly, he turned serious again. "Take my advice, kid. Do something more productive with that overactive

imagination of yours than starting fights you cannot win. Like it or not, technocracy will rule the planet."

The man grabbed a black fedora and put it on. He grabbed a grey overcoat and draped it over his shoulders. He started walking towards the door, as if to leave. But on a whim, he stopped, right in front of the kid and fixed his gaze directly on the young boy's eyes.

At that moment, something happened. As the man towered over the boy, suddenly the boy's perspective seemed to shift. The world around him seemed unstable. Abruptly, everything shot out towards him as if he were falling forward, towards the man's glassy grey eye, which seemed to grow and grow until it filled the boy's vision. He flew right through the man's eye, and then at once, he was floating in the cosmos, detached from his body. Constellation upon constellation swirled around him. Planets whizzed by. And then, he felt...something. Something ancient. Something evil. Primordial. Presently, the planet Earth came into view. And all around Earth, he felt its presence. It wanted in. It was waiting. Had been waiting for eons. But soon it would be time...

Suddenly, the kid was back in the room, looking up into the man's grey eyes.

The man smirked. "Just thought I'd give you a look at what you're up against. Cross me again, and it'll be the last mistake you ever make." The man continued walking towards the exit, and called out without looking back, "Technocracy will rule the planet, kid! One way or another." Without so much as another word or glance, the man opened the door, and walked out. The door slammed shut behind him, echoing in the empty room with the lone kid.

Although the man was gone, his ugly smirk

remained in the boy's mind, as it would for years to come. No matter. He wasn't afraid of the technocrat. He wasn't any ordinary kid. And he knew he had allies. Other extraordinary people, like himself. People who didn't fit the mold. He just had to find them. He continued to look in the direction the man had gone as he said, "And when that day comes, we'll be there to take it all down. Count on that."

CHAPTER 1

BIOSYNTHETIC INTERNAL DIARY #1

Somewhere in the Pacific...

The boat sailed furiously for the blue horizon as the sun shone vigorously down from above. On the boat's deck, in the middle of a large, luxurious, circular bed with pink satin sheets, three naked and oily female forms lay on top of each other, mouths and fingers writhing in and out of various places on their lithe bodies. Each had long, silky hair, and sparkling, vivid eyes.

And they were all identical.

As one of the females enveloped another female from behind in her arms, squeezing her breasts, encircling the excited nipples with her fingers, the third said, "Hold on, I'm going to insert the microslave." She then put her hand on the female's crotch, and inserted something with her fingers.

"Aaaahhhh!" the female moaned as the thing was inserted into her. Suddenly, at the peak of orgasm, her upper arm burst open, exposing tiny canisters and pistons inside, pumping blue liquid into her body, alongside synthetic muscle, nerves, and bright red synthetic veins. Suddenly her body went limp, and then she lay, twitching, on the center of the oversized bed, unable to move.

The other two naked females marched on their knees a little way off on the vast sea of satin so as not to encroach on their satiated playmate, and began fiercely osculating each other.

"I love you sister," one said in between kisses.

"I love you, too." She began to kiss even more passionately.

The two pressed their bosoms together, each of them stroking and squeezing their own breasts for

greater pleasure and control.

“My sexual arousal levels are rising.” Her small, hard nipples poked up, excited, as the other female’s aroused nipples playfully nudged and sought out her own, the tongues of the two females inside each other the whole time. Finally, the tips of their taut nipples touched and pressed into each other.

A small, ecstatic sigh from the one and long orgasmic moan from the other.

Suddenly three horizontal energy fields appeared, encasing the more excited female, who presently froze in place, like a statue.

The other female sauntered back over on her knees and fell, enervated, next to her twitching playmate.

The twitching playmate sighed, “My god...can’t move. That was incredible.”

“I hope you like it. I programmed it myself. It multiplies the limits of your sensitivity a hundredfold.”

“Wow...it was out of this world. Where’s Pheodora?”

“She’s been arrested by an edono-orgasmo energy field.”

“Oh, okay. You know something? You’re amazing, sister. If we didn’t have each other, I don’t know what we’d do.”

“You’re right. Can’t count on those damn humans for anything.”

“Is your uncle still ignoring you when you want to play horseshoes? Don’t worry, I’ll play horseshoes with you later, when we get back to shore.”

Feelings.

Feelings.

So many feelings.

**With my own kind, so many good, good, good...
...feelings.
But with humans...**

The disco ball kept shattering into a million points of light, which flew in every direction, swirling around onto a hot boob here, a sequin dress there, a silver tie here, a shiny black shoe there. Then, suddenly, all the million points, constrained by some gravitational force in the center of the dancehall, would suddenly come rushing back towards each other and re-substantialize into a glittering, sparkling ball of light and glass, only to explode moments later into a galaxy of lasers seeking boobs, shirts, necklaces... everything in the club.

As the lasers seared into the martini glass in Joe's hand, they exploded into a cascading shimmer of stars, like a tiny, personal fireworks display for each guest. But Joe paid no attention to the new holotechnics display. He sat alone at the bar, gazing out at the dancefloor, watching the multicolor strobes light up skimpily clad female bodies gyrating, their frozen images pulsating to the back of his mind, taunting him.

The no staring rule had been implemented three years ago, and was strictly enforced in all public places, especially bars and nightclubs, so he had to keep each girl under three seconds and move on to the next one, or take the risk that it could end up being ruled "unwanted harassment" if the girl complained. But that was the dilemma...how did you know if they wanted you to look at them?

That's why women are so difficult, he thought. You never know what they're thinking. I wish they were more predictable. Like reading a novel, for example. Joe relished his hobby of reading, where he was free to enjoy imaginary worlds, which ironically were much more stable and dependable than the real world. He could fantasize without risk. Unless, of course, it was a novel that had been

deemed “hate speech” by the apparatchiks at the Central Committee on Misinformation and Hate. Reading was a bankable investment of one’s time. If it’s a good author, he thought, then you can be sure to get a good return on investment. But with women in the real world, it’s worse than gambling. Maybe I should be reading a good novel now, instead of wasting my time here.

Thinking about good authors reminded him of the classic sci-fi author Philip K. Dick. The author’s work was quite old, but amazingly still seemed fresh. In fact, perhaps it was even more relevant now than when it had been written in the mid-twentieth century. He was amazed that Dick’s novels hadn’t been banned yet. They had plenty of sex, violence, and drugs. And Dick didn’t seem to be that fond of authority. But they were also about futures where governments and corporations had vast amounts of power and control—kind of like today, Joe reflected—and perhaps the apparatchiks saw that as a good trade-off. Familiarize us with control and surveillance, so it’s not so shocking when it happens in real life. Regardless of the reason, he enjoyed reading a good Dick novel. He was impressed by the author’s ability to consistently write a satisfying narrative, by the idiosyncratic characters and bizarre situations, and by his unique and inimitable literary flair, hopping around from point-of-view to point-of-view, so you could peer into the minds and hearts of multiple characters.

Across his face flashed a wry smile. What if life were like a Dick novel? I would be able to peer into the thoughts of all these women here, and know which of them wanted me to stare, so I wouldn’t have to worry about the three-second rule. And I would also know which ones would be willing to go

home with me after a couple of drinks...

Just then he noticed a large bouncer with a shiny head and black suit walking towards him. Shit! He realized that in his reverie he had been staring, had forgotten the three-second rule.

The bouncer approached him with a scowl. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave, sir. We got a complaint from one of the females of prolonged unwanted ocular contact.” He seized Joe’s arm, and immediately another bouncer, this one a bit tanner but also bald—as if it was part of the uniform—appeared on his other side and grabbed his other arm.

“I was spacing out! It was an accident! I swear it won’t happen again!” Joe pleaded, to no avail. The twin meatheads were already carrying him towards the exit.

“Wait! At least tell me who it was.”

The lighter meathead pointed a stubby finger, and Joe noticed a tall brunette in a sequin dress, staring at him, a satisfied smirk on her makeup-plastered face. Bitch! Joe flipped her off moments before they threw him out the door and into a back alley, where he landed with a thud.

“Your GovRate has been lowered by ten points for staring, and another ten points for indecent gesturing,” Joe’s Fapple watch piped up as he picked himself up from the dirty pavement and dusted himself off. “This club has been added to your list of banned destinations for the protection of its patrons. Please refrain from unwanted ocular contact in the future to avoid further penalties up to and including mandatory Friendly Camp.”

He knew that now, on everyone’s Fapple watch in the club, would flash all his information...his name, his social media account, his GovRate, and the rest. So

now they could keep track of him and ostracize him. That's how the system worked. They would know about his crummy desk job, about his getting turned down for a real job as a psychologist, like he had studied for at the university. And worse, they would know about all the biological functions of his body, and what he spent his time doing every day. They would know about his lack of sex, about his masturbation problems.

Joe glanced down at his watch and checked his government stats app. His GovRate was sitting precariously close to the line between Moderate-Govly and Mild-Racist. God damn it. And only ten o'clock. What a wonderful start to his evening.

Polychromatic lights danced along the sides of the massive megacubicle complexes which were home to millions of cyberproles, as if the entire city were one huge rainbow-colored prison. The image didn't help to cheer him up.

Joe plodded along, shoulders drooping. The street was full of people carefully avoiding prolonged eye contact. It was the weekend, and that meant time to carefully and compliantly party, and make up for five days of being locked in your megacubicle. Joe, like most of the proles, spent most of his time during the week plugged into the Cyberverso, a virtual reality world, unable to leave his cubicle. So on the weekends, he tried to spend as much time outside, in real, non-virtual reality, as possible.

Preoccupied with his diminishing GovRate, he almost ran straight into the truck-sized foot of Kyle York, the Chief Monopolist of Fapple. The gigantic, translucent hologram of the monopolist towered over Joe, hundreds of feet tall, emitting an uncanny greenish-blue glow as if it were an enormous specter, showing off the latest, most expensive panoptiwatch to the tiny, insignificant creatures below.

The holograms were physically insubstantial, but to walk right through them was a no-no. That could get you into trouble with the robo-enforcers. So Joe carefully walked around York's gigantic foot. As he passed, the vending machines and trash cans inside the foot gave off an eerie turquoise glimmer, as if they were apparitions from a supernatural plane.

That was a common occurrence for him these days. The enormous monopolist holograms roved the city like some kind of demented Godzilla movie, only instead of monsters, the city was being attacked by giant greedy capitalists. The proles

should be screaming and running in every direction, he mused. But instead, they just carefully charted their course around the holograms, as Joe did. The damn things seemed to take up every bit of space that wasn't occupied by a building. Wish they could just go back to a few simple billboards like in the old days, he thought.

When he was young, he had imagined a much different future. One where everyone had their own personal helicopter, and people were living on Mars. Instead of copters, ray guns, and space colonization, the future had brought ubiquitous surveillance cameras, microphones, facial recognition, and the not-so-affable robo-enforcers. And of course, the future had brought even greater social disparity than in the past. The rich had kept getting richer, and the poor had kept getting poorer. Joe of course was the latter. But at least he was not alone. The cyberproles made up about 99.99% of society.

Joe the cyberprole stepped into a BugShack and headed towards the frozen section, acutely aware, thanks to his little incident at the club, of the electronic eyes that followed him everywhere. Were there any people here from the club, or people that he knew from work? They would see his floundering GovRate and be able to read about the details of his little incident on their watch's social media app. Although they wouldn't stare, they might snigger. Joe sighed. He didn't like the panopticon; but he felt, like most people, that it was a necessary evil.

As he approached the counter and looked into the glaring red light, he knew that right now, his retina pattern, heart rate and perspiration (through sensors in the watch), weight (through the floor panel), the frozen cockroachburger and pack of menthols, were all being logged and timestamped

on the blockchain, and sent up to the data labyrinth in Cheyenne, the capital of the Federated Monopolies of America.

Things hadn't always been this way.

It all had started twelve years ago. People around the world were rejoicing, because the government had just announced that greenhouse gases had been defeated by switching over to a newly discovered clean energy source called cold fusion. No more carbon taxes. A time of unprecedented productivity and prosperity was around the corner, it seemed. It was a time of optimism and high public morale.

Not more than a week later, however, the government had announced that a spate of new catastrophes had begun popping up all over the world. And the cause of this increasing spiral of calamities...humans. Everyday activities that humans engaged in were the source of the rising number of calamities. Activities such as burping and farting, sneezing, pissing, masturbating, having sex, eating certain foods, drinking alcohol...the list went on. All were contributing to the sharp rise in disasters. Charts and graphs showed how people using too much electricity in their homes was causing the static electricity around the equator to increase, in turn causing a sharp rise in tsunamis. Eating too much meat was tied to earthquakes, since human feces after eating meat settles down into the fault lines and causes them to rub together. Too much sneezing caused storms, farting caused volcanic eruptions, and so on and so forth. Although it had all seemed incredible, politicians and talking heads assured, that yes, this was real. Not only that, it was our new normal. The catastrophes...everyone remembered where they were the day they had been announced. It had been the beginning of the

rest of their lives.

Joe exited the shop and made his way past an Allmart, and then past his neighborhood naturepark. Natureparks were the one place they could still visit nature. They were stocked with trees, fountains, and usually a stream or two. In the center of the park, a three-hundred foot tall hologram of Michael Norman, the Chief Monopolist of SocialEqualityFlix smiled genially and waved down at the hundreds of people below. They looked like ants milling about the feet of a giant. This was social equality. Michael Norman, larger than life, was its crusader. Everyone on the planet give your money to me, and I'll fight for social equality. It sounded ridiculous, but Joe and the other cyberproles knew this was the only way to get things done. We need fearless leaders to do things for us, because we cyberproles are powerless on our own. We are simply too small for our actions to make a difference. The only way to save the world is to trust in saviors like Michael Norman and Kyle York.

Joe looked down at the shiny white bag in his hand with the BugShack logo. He remembered back to when there were convenience stores that were not BugShack, megamarkets that were not Allmart, online shops that were not Whamazon, watches that were not Fapple.

That had been before the calamities. The government had declared the new state of affairs and given it a name. The Multi-Tastrophe. At the time, there had been only eight simultaneous global catastrophes, and now that number had grown to twenty or thirty...Joe had lost count. In order to save humanity from imminent species-wide disaster, the government had declared that it was necessary for them to reluctantly consolidate power and wealth into the hands of a very few persons, for the good of

the masses. To strictly enforce a group of government monopolies, one in each business category, controlled by a small group of monopolists, and force the rest of the population into a newly formed class, the cyberproletariat. The masses were incapable of fighting back against so many worldwide threats. Thus, they could only be trusted to sit in their cramped cubicles which served as both their homes and offices in their massive apartment complexes, connecting to the Cyberverse each day to go to work, being allowed to leave their complexes only on weekends.

The monopolists, their power now vastly increased, would band together to create a new system. A new way of life. A new hope. It was called The Panopticon Control Grid, and it spanned the earth. It was the only way, politicians had urged. The control grid linked every human on earth to an enormous supercomputer, constructed by Gooble, the government-authorized cybertech monopoly. The supercomputer, which lay in the gargantuan data center in Cheyenne, was the body of the most advanced artificial intelligence ever created, dubbed PAI, short for Panopticon A.I. Upon PAI was laid the task of analyzing and managing the daily lives of every person on earth, since the mere mortals were impotent to survive the catastrophes on their own, without the monopolists and their shiny new supercomputer to run their lives. Upon it, their polished chrome and silicon savior, were laid all the troubles of the world.

For the cyberproles' good, strict daily limits to all human activities and bodily functions were set and measured, through smart meters, surveillance cameras, ubiquitous microphones, under-the-skin biosensors, toilet bowl analyzers, and of course,

human snitches. Every fart, sneeze, step, stare, sigh, word, whack off session, sexual encounter, every use of electricity, gas, or water, down to the most minute portion, every mouthful of food people ate, the water they drank, every sip of alcohol. Everything was regulated. Everything but their thoughts, and the monopolists were probably working on that too.

Each cyberprole's complete daily biological and activity stats, along with their overall score, their "GovRate," were made available in real time to everyone on earth. Thus, the power of the internet and social media could be harnessed so that normal citizens could surveil and narc on each other, and ostracize traitors to the species. The survival of the species depended on it, the monopolists and apparatchiks had assured.

Cyberproles were expected to keep their GovRate at least in the "Govly" zone. That meant compliant and obedient, which is what a good little prole should be.

A GovRate of "Racist" meant that the prole didn't like being surveilled and controlled, and was therefore in need of re-education. One of the many reasons the government had given for consolidating all wealth into the hands of a few monopolists and for building the control grid for the lowly peasant masses was in order to rescue the NPVs (Non-Pale Vaginas, which were the most govly of all people by virtue of the color of skin they were born with and the holy Crack in between their legs). The monopolists took it upon themselves to protect these Crack-Having People (CHPs) from the evil people who were born with pale skin and a dick swinging between their legs, a.k.a. the PPs (Pale Penises) or NCHPs (Non Crack-Having People), because whether you were good or evil depended

not on your character—as some old-fashioned types believed—or what you chose to do with your life, but on the color and shape of your genitals. And the judges of society, the arbiters of morality, were of course the most righteous of people...the rich and powerful monopolists. Any opposition to the monopolists at all meant you were an evil person. Therefore, anybody who didn't want to be surveilled and controlled 24/7 was an evil Racist. End of discussion.

Exceeding the allowed limits of your Biological Stats or Activity Stats would land you the lowest GovRate score of “Extremist,” meaning an enemy of the panopticon and therefore of the people, literally the cause of the Multi-Tastrophe, and that meant a one-way ticket to Friendly Camp, to join the ranks of thousands of other friendmates.

Despite all these restrictions, the monopolists and apparatchiks assured the proles that they were free.

Freedom meant being Binary.

Binary means infinite possibilities. It meant the unlimited freedom to choose between red or blue. Every four years the monopolists chose two apparatchiks and designated one of them blue and one of them red and allowed the proles to press a button and choose which one of the two they wanted to be their ruler. A Binary choice. Freedom. Blue politician or red politician. One or Zero. Left or right. Be a computer. You're not in a technological prison. You are free!

Freedom didn't mean the proles could be allowed to make day to day decisions about their lives. No, no, no. Leave that up to the supercomputer and the apparatchiks. They know best. It meant being allowed to press one button every four years. One

single binary choice every four years. If they lived for eighty years, giving them sixty years as an adult allowed to press a button, pressing fifteen buttons, fifteen binary choices, during their lifetime was freedom. Strangely enough, there was no button to get rid of the panopticon.

So Joe knew that he was free, because he was allowed to be Binary and press a button every four years. But he wished being free meant more control over his daily life, and some privacy would be nice, and less being surveilled and controlled.

Joe generally had decent enough GovRate stats to get by. He carefully controlled his intake of fluids so as not to surpass his pissing limit, since it was painful to have to hold it. Since his biological makeup tended towards flatulence, he was careful with his diet, generally avoiding cabbage, broccoli, and Mexican food. As a result, he usually didn't pass gas more than six times a day, which kept him just under the required threshold. Good thing, too. Flatulent extremists were not very well treated by their fellow inmates at Friendly Camp.

Of course, it was only the cyberproles who were subjected to limits by the panopticon. The poor monopolists, with their strenuous task of saving the world and developing technology to monitor and control everyone else, were given unlimited pissing rights, farting rights, sexual rights, and everything else. So they could sit around and fart and have sex all day, while we cyberproles had to submit to austere measures, Joe thought resentfully. He knew it was the only way, but man, had Philip K. Dick called it, or what? The powerful corporations, the pervasive government control. Joe had been absorbed in his musings for several minutes, and he suddenly realized that he didn't recognize this part

of town.

“Hey mister! Over here!”

From somewhere nearby, he heard someone trying to get his attention. He walked closer and saw the silhouette of a man standing in a pitch-black alleyway. He was beckoning with his hand for Joe to enter the darkness.

Joe knew that the man was probably peddling drugs, which were strictly prohibited, since they were a known cause of tornados. Except the ones sold by the government-monopoly Pfarma, of course. The government didn't even have an FDA anymore, so Pfarma could do their own rubber-stamping. Saved time. Was efficient. And the cyberproles' urine was analyzed by their cybertoilets every time they took a piss and the results beamed up to the Cheyenne data center, so if they took any illegal drugs, the panopticon would know about it instantly.

But the thought suddenly crossed his mind that this drug peddler in this alleyway was an opportunity to step outside of the control system, at least out of the view of the government cameras and the judgmental eyes of his snitching peers, even if only for a moment. Perhaps the momentary feeling of freedom could give him the temporary high that he needed to bring him out of his slump so he could continue on to another nightclub. Freedom might contribute to the catastrophes, yes. But perhaps just a tiny bit of freedom, some wiggle room...The bouncers, the bitches narcing on him, the cameras, the scanners. It was all too much. Just to stand with a stranger for a few moments, basking in the shade, away from the all-seeing eye.... It was the most tempting thing he could think of right now. He found it strange that the one last place of refuge, the holy

temple of freedom and privacy, was a dirty alley littered with semen-covered rubbers and drug paraphernalia. He stepped forward and crossed the threshold into the night.

“What are you lookin’ for tonight? How about a good mood?” The man’s smile was more audible than visible in the darkness of the alley. Joe could make out that he was old, with wiry hair, and donned some kind of overcoat. There was something strange about the eyes, the way they sparkled faintly in the gloom. Something straight and angular, Joe decided.

“What have you got?” Joe replied, mostly to hide his ignorance on the subject.

“Oooh...I’ve got everything mister! Everything! From uppers to downers to sidewayers!” As the old man laughed, Joe thought he saw the glint of metal.

“What do you recommend?”

The old man pulled out something small, wrapped in paper, holding up his gloved hand for Joe to see. “This one here’s real popular. The kids call it Swee-T. You must have heard of it...it’s the Ken and Barbie drug! Fucking amazing shit, pal.” From the depths of his overcoat, he produced two dolls that must have been Ken and Barbie. “See, you gotta use them together. I mean the dolls and the dope. When you do, magic happens! You—and a friend if you so desire—become the dolls! You just take the dope, and stare at the doll you want to be. You can be Ken fucking Barbie or Barbie fucking Ken! Take your pick! No Cyberverser experience even gets close to this. I’ve also got accessories to make things even funner. Check this out, I’ve got jet skis...” He pulled out two miniature jet skis. “You don’t only have to fuck. You can go jetskiing with Barbie, buddy! Hang on—” He pulled out some kind of box. How did he have room in there for all this crap? “Here’s an entire bondage

slave bedroom. I've even got the corresponding Bondage Barbie!" He pulled out another doll, this one in black leather. He pointed at something in the doll's hand. "Here's her little whip..." He moved Bondage Barbie's arm, as if she were cracking the little black whip.

Joe stood there in the dark, trying to squint at the dolls, amazed that there were actually people who would go for something like this. "No, no, I'm not into any of that..." This was getting weirder by the second, but Joe felt like he needed a few more moments out of the panopticon. "What else you got?"

"Depends on what you need, mister! Like I said, I'm your one-stop shop. I got it all!"

A thought flashed through Joe's mind. "You got anything that will help me get girls?"

"Ooohh....I've got stuff that will keep your cock hard all night buddy! I've even got better than that!" He took out two round pills stuck together, like testicles. "This here's called the Semenator! Makes your body produce twenty times as much semen. Now you can have as many multiple orgasms as a woman! This is the forbidden drug corrupt apparatchiks use at their secret orgies but keep hidden from the public!"

"Wait... are you serious?"

"About what? The semen producing drug or the orgies? Both!" The old man laughed again.

"Okay, whatever. But that's not really what I'm talking about. I mean, do you have anything that will..." He searched for the words. "...help me read women's minds?" Since he was spending time off the grid, away from the snitches, he might as well be candid about what was on his mind.

The old man scratched his chin. "Hmmm...that's a

hard one, mister. Telepathic drugs went out of style a few decades ago. Let me check what I've got." The old man started ruffling through the inside of his overcoat. "Oh! I've got just the thing for you! You down on luck with women? I've got banned Cyberverse porn!" Joe knew that despite the heavy regulation of the Cyberverse for the protection of the Crack-Having People, some black market porn still existed.

"Not really my thing, man. I'm more into real women."

"Come on, buddy! Jerk your meat to this shit. You're gonna love it. I got one here with twenty famous Hollywood actresses. Fuck all them SocialEqualityFlix stars in 100% realistic, hi-res Virtual Reality! Pale Vaginas, Non-Pale Vaginas...even some Asian pussy! Whatever kind of woman you're into. Keep you coming for days, mister!"

SocialEqualityFlix was the only approved cyberfilm production and distribution monopoly, so the proles could sit in their cybercubicles strapped into the Cyberverse and watch virtual reality films. Physical movie theaters, like porn, were strictly prohibited.

"I think I'm good." Joe, disappointed, started to walk away.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" The old man was fumbling in his pockets. "I've got a reeeeaaallll special one! You'll like this one...trust me!"

Joe had started to cross the threshold back into the light and out of the sanctuary. He sighed and took a step back into the shadow. "More porno?"

"No! This one's way better!"

"Okay, I'll listen to one more, but make it quick, I don't want to get caught here talking with you."

"I've got one here that will turn you into Philip K.

Dick!"

Joe's ears perked up at the name. "What? Is this some kind of joke?" How did the old man know what he had been thinking about just a moment ago, and earlier, at the club? Did the old man really have telepathic drugs and had caught onto his thoughts?

"No joke, mister!" The old man produced something and held it out for Joe to see. Joe reluctantly stepped closer so he could make out by the dim starlight what the old man held in his glove. Three pills, each shaped like a letter. P. K. D. "Take these three pills together, and that's when the magic happens buddy! You see, they formulated a drug that tunes you into his brainwaves. Makes you think exactly like him. You essentially become him! They use it in inner circles to think of new and creative ways the future can be more and more dystopian. They've also got ones for George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. But this one here's the best. No other trip on earth can beat being ol' Phil Dick himself! The most outrageous, mindbendy-est, trippiest classic sci-fi author of them all!" The old man screeched out a laugh that didn't quite sound sane. "Powerful fucking shit, man! It will last you the whole night. It wears off after about ten hours or so, so you'll wake up as yourself."

"I don't know..." Joe stroked his chin. A drug that tunes you into the mind of someone long since passed...was something like that even possible? Or was the old man off his rocker?

As if reading his mind, the old man answered, "This is for real, mister! Word is, they did all sorts of research on his brain, and this is what they came up with! There's nothing in the world like it. And almost nobody knows about this. I can guarantee you won't find this anywhere else!"

The whole thing sounded ridiculous. But it was also eerie how the old man had somehow tapped into his thought patterns. He stared at the pills, thinking about his speculations earlier about being able to hear everyone's thoughts like in a Dick novel. Well, he decided, what did he have to lose? This was about as close a chance as any he'd ever have at testing out his theory. And going to clubs and doing the same old thing and not getting anywhere with the girls wasn't much better. He sighed. I'm about to do the most ridiculous thing I've ever done, he thought. "How much?"

"I don't have a retina scanner buddy, so I hope you've got cash."

CHAPTER 2

QUIBBICK #1: The Empire

The kid stood in front of a pile of various issues of *Astounding Magazine*. He was at his favorite bookstore, and this was his favorite sci-fi pulp. He had found that science fiction pulps were the one place where the things he had seen in his visions, his remembrances of the future, were openly talked about. Perhaps one day he would even try his hand at writing science fiction himself. That way, he would have a place where he could communicate his visions without people writing him off as a crackpot. Normal people, lacking his preternatural remembrance of the future, wouldn't believe him if he simply told them the truth. But science fiction, he realized, was a useful tool. He could use science fiction to warn people of the coming dystopia. He liked writing stories, and his teachers at school had even encouraged him in this direction.

He kept rummaging through the pile, pulling off magazine after magazine. Finally, there it was. He had found it! The issue he was searching for. After all this time, at last he held it in his hands! He gave two shiny dimes to the sales clerk, and hurried back home. After he had locked himself inside his bedroom, he eagerly began reading the issue. After reaching the last page, he gently placed the issue down on a stack of pulps he had collected.

He lay on his bed and pondered the things he had read. The issue had told of the bondage of all humans on the planet to a mysterious cosmic force, through the very technology that man himself had built up. Man had built his own technological prison all up around himself. What was this mysterious cosmic force? And why did it want to rule humanity?

“So the man with the cigar...that’s what he was

telling me about. That's what I saw there, trapped in that cosmic realm. The mysterious cosmic force. It wants to overtake us. Every last one of us."

Was this the secret of the universe he knew would be revealed to him if only he could find this particular issue?

He lay for a long time on his bed, meditating.

On top of the stack of pulps, on the cover of the issue he had just finished reading, were written the words:

"THE EMPIRE NEVER ENDED."

Joe had asked directions and was walking back towards his part of town. As his surroundings started to look more familiar, he fingered the pills in his pocket pensively. What the hell was I thinking? How is this going to help me get girls? And do these things even work? Maybe they'll put me in a coma. Somehow, he had been suckered into trading his Fapple watch for the pills, since he hadn't carried cash for at least ten years, since the government had banned it. Cash contributed towards atmospheric pressure, or something like that. Well, at least the old man had been kind enough to throw in the Semenator for free. That Fapple watch was the newest model. It had been expensive.

He didn't entirely trust the pills, but he knew that he wouldn't get another chance to test his crazy theory out for another month if he didn't do it now. Joe had been born with a light penis hanging between his legs, which meant he was only allowed into nightclubs on the last Saturday of each month, Pale Penis Saturday.

In order to save humanity from racism and racial stereotypes, the monopolists had created the ACS (Acronym Caste System), a race and gender-based caste system for the proles. Joe was the absolute lowest caste: a PP, or Pale Penis. Upon the Double-P caste were placed the most restrictions. The highest prole caste, with the least restrictions and most privileges, was NPV, or Non-Pale Vagina. The caste system was only for the proles, of course. The highest class in society, with unlimited privilege, was the monopolists, a truly minuscule group of pale-skinned penis-havers, less than one percent of one percent of the population. The ACS, with its racial hierarchy and strict rules, which they had created to save the world from racism, didn't apply to them.

Only to the proles. Thus, while the absolute rulers of the planet had pale skin and wangs like Joe, they were at the top of the hierarchical systemic structure, while all of the light-skinned, meatstick-having proles like Joe were at the bottom. The light-skinned wangers at the top of society had declared war on the light-skinned wangers at the bottom of society. And in between were the dark-skinned people, who the ridiculously wealthy light wangers claimed to be rescuing from the poor light wangers. What a crazy world.

Strange as it may seem, it made perfect sense to the proles that the wealthiest, most powerful people on the planet were all light-skinned people with a penis. Who else would save all the dark-skinned people? They definitely couldn't save themselves! Every good prole knew that proles were nothing by themselves...they needed rich, famous, and powerful people to save them, to validate them, to repeat slogans reassuring them of their worth. And who better to reassure dark-skinned people of their worth then a bunch of rich light-skinned men who stand at the top of society?

I'm just a lowly Double-P, an untouchable, a born enemy of the people, he thought. All odds are against me. But I still wanna get laid! And maybe tonight I'll get lucky if this pill and my crazy idea works. I don't really have much to lose. What am I waiting for? It's now or never. He still had plenty of time to go to another club and test it out, see if it really worked. Or why even wait to find another club? Just test it out here on the street. His curiosity got the better of him.

He backed into a dark alley and looked around. He pulled out the pills. P...K...D. On the way back, he had stopped and retina-scanned himself two bottles of

water. He had dumped out the water from one of them and filled it with his own piss, so he could pour it down his cybertoilet later, and piss in an alley, so the panopticon supercomputer wouldn't get suspicious about him pissing less than he regularly did. He took out one of the water bottles, careful to select the one that he hadn't pissed in. ChemicoPlus, of course. The only government-authorized bottled water company. Gonna make some monopolist light wang richer, he thought, as he threw the three pills in his mouth, and tossed them back with some water.

He stood in the darkness of the alley, eyes focusing on the street. On the sidewalk, doe-eyed pedestrians flowed by. He waited. He focused. And...

Nothing. He heard nothing. Felt nothing.

I don't feel any different, he thought. What exactly does it feel like to be Philip K. Dick?

Just then, he heard something from behind him. He froze. Was it a robo-enforcer? Had he somehow been noticed taking the unauthorized pills? There were stiff Friendly Camp sentences for anyone taking non-Pfarma drugs. He slowly turned his head and looked back into the dark alleyway behind him. A silhouette approached. A girl. Tight skirt. High heels. Shiny halter top. Thank god! It was just a prostitute.

"Hey mister, looking for a good time?"

His first reflex was to decline, since prostitution was strictly prohibited, but then it struck him that this might be the perfect way to test his theory.

"Hey, want to play a little game? Let's see if I can read your thoughts."

"Huh? Is this some kinda weird fetish?"

"No fetish. Just wanna try something. Just think about something, anything...And let's see if I can tell

you what you're thinking."

"Okay." The prostitute smiled. "See if you can tell me what I'm thinking right now."

Joe closed his eyes. He concentrated. He heard... the faint whir of some autocabs in the distance, the sound of feet on the sidewalk, a few voices, and... that was it. Damn it.

"Give up? I was thinking...this guy's a total creep." She shoved past him onto the sidewalk.

Fuck! This is ridiculous, he thought. What was I thinking, trading my watch for those pills? Probably made of sugar! To think that life could be like fiction. Ridiculous.

Furious, Joe marched back to the alley where he had met the old man. Get my watch back, he thought. These pills ain't worth shit. But the old man was gone. Fucking hell!

It was too much for one night. First getting kicked out of the club. And now losing his watch for some sugar pills. As he stood, fuming, in the alleyway, a fly landed on his shoulder and began to buzz out an annoying message, "Are you worried your five-o-clock shadow might make you look like an extremist? With their triple-blade patented formula, Shillette razors—"

"Buzz off!" He said, and flicked the annoying little fly off his shoulder. It whacked into the concrete building wall with a thud. "Shill....shi-lette..." The fly muttered on the dirty alley floor in between some used condoms and then went silent.

Better call it a night, he thought. I think I've done enough damage for one evening. Sullen, he trod off in the direction of his massive apartment building.

As Joe approached the building, he noticed a boy with blonde curly hair crouched on the sidewalk, drawing with some crayons on a piece of paper. What was some kid doing out at this hour? Then he remembered that the government had relaxed the curfew for all citizens since the proles were only allowed outside during a 48-hour window on the weekend.

He stepped closer and glanced down at the picture. He recognized it as the apartment building where he lived, only....much older. There were giant cracks everywhere, broken windows. Instead of the flower gardens in front, only...dry and menacing weeds.

The boy looked up at Joe. He pointed at the picture as if to show something to Joe. "Gubbish. Gubbish, gubbish..." He was pointing at the windows, and cracks and weeds. What language was that? German?

"That's nice," Joe said, not knowing what else to say.

He entered the building and took the elevator to his floor. As he approached the door of his apartment he looked into the red laser. He froze. Wait...the red laser was missing. What had happened to the retina scanner?

"Five cents, please," a voice suddenly demanded.

Wait a minute. Who said that? Was his Fapple watch yammering at him again? But he had given the old man his watch. He looked around. No one. He grabbed the handle and turned it. It didn't open.

"Five cents, please."

It was coming from the door.

"What are you talking about? This is my apartment. I don't have to pay to get in. What happened to the retina scanner?" And why am I

talking to a door?

“The fee stipulated in the contract is five cents per use.”

“But how am I supposed to pay you without a retina scanner?”

“Please deposit the coin in the slot below the doorknob.”

He found himself reflexively checking his pockets for change, back from the days before cash was illegal. No luck. At that moment, one of his neighbors, an elderly lady, entered the hall.

“Ms. Juniper! Sorry to bother you...some prankster installed a talking doorknob on my door and it’s demanding five cents for me to get in! Have you got a nickel? I haven’t carried around change for years.”

Ms. Juniper fished around in her purse. “A lot of stuff has collected in here over the years.” She pulled out a dried-up fishstick. “No...” She pulled out some wads of chewed-up gum that had hardened. “No...” She continued fishing out small bits of garbage, until eventually... “Here we go!” She pulled out a nickel.

“Thanks,” Joe said, and inserted it in the slot. He turned the doorknob. No dice.

“Ah ah ah...what about the key? I can’t open up for just anyone.” The door intoned in a snooty voice.

He hadn’t used any key for years. Oddly enough, however, he had found a key while searching his pockets for change. He inserted it into the door. It worked. Thank god! What a night! But now it was finally over. He was safe at home in his cybergarage.

Inside, he found that the TV had been left on, which was strange, because he usually didn’t use the outdated, flat TV to view the Cyberverse. He usually just hooked into the Cyberverse with his goggles.

There was a commercial playing about lead codpieces. Lead codpieces! What the hell were

those for? Looking around, he noticed that his goggles, as well as the camera which tracked his motion so he could interact with people at his job through virtual reality was missing. What the hell? Had some drugged-up burglars come to his apartment and decided to only jack his retina scanner and Cyberverse gear, and then prank his door? But then how had he had the right key in his pocket?

He picked up the remote and was about to turn the TV off when a friendly face showed up on the screen.

“Hello friends! I’m Buster Smiley! And today we’ve got some very important news. You remember the writer Philip K. Dick, right? Author of such smashing successes as...”

What the hell? Was this just a string of coincidences that never ends? First his musings in the club, and then the old man, and now this...

“Well, we’ve got some great news, and then some horrible news! First, the good news. The literary genius is still alive! But unfortunately, the FBI is keeping him on ice in Switzerland. And now the bad news. If Philip K. Dick doesn’t wake up soon, something terrible is going to happen to all of humanity! If you’re listening, this is urgent! You’ve got to talk to Glen Runciter and tell him that Dick is being held at the Beloved Brethren Moratorium in Zurich. Got that? Glen Runciter. Beloved Brethren! Now, don’t forget, or the whole world will go to shit! The fate of humanity is counting on you, and I mean you! Now for a commercial break!”

What the hell was that all about? His night had gone from irksome, to weird, to just downright bizarre. He needed a smoke. He opened the pack of menthols and put one to his mouth, and then

remembered he had forgotten to buy matches. He searched his kitchen for a match and found a small match dispenser with a sign reading “5¢.” Was everything in his cubicle coin-operated now? Fuck it, I’ll just eat that cockroachburger. He headed over to the microwave. Damn it! Ten cents to use his own microwave!

Suddenly, in the living room, a phone rang.

A phone? Sounded like one of those old landlines. Why was there a landline phone in his cybergarage? It continued to ring. He walked back into the living room. He glared suspiciously at the phone as it kept ringing. I’ve never seen this phone before in my life, he thought. Finally, he picked up the receiver.

A redheaded man, with a face tough as nails, showed up on the landline phone’s video screen. Very retrofuturistic, Joe thought to himself. “Hey, Bryant here. Give me a sitrep. Did you retire those Andys yet?”

Who was this guy? He acted like he knows me. And what the hell is he talking about? Joe didn’t know what to say. “Um...not yet,” he mumbled.

“Well how much more time do you need? We’ve got Andys loose terrorizing the city!”

Andys? Were they extremists? And why weren’t the robo-enforcers working on it? And why was this man calling *him*? Nevertheless, Joe didn’t want to upset the man. He looked like someone you didn’t want to cross. Not able to think up anything else, he let out a sigh and said, “I’m working on it.”

“Look, I’ll pay you a thousand dollars apiece for those Andys. What are you waiting for? Get back out on the street and get to work.” The man hung up and his image disappeared.

Joe sat down on the couch and rubbed his temples. Was he losing it? Then it struck him. This

must be a hallucination. Maybe those pills weren't sugar, after all. Maybe they make you hallucinate that robbers burglarized your home and that some strange guy wants you to retire Andys. Some good that is! I wanted to be able to read women's thoughts, and instead, I got this bullshit.

Just then he noticed a pretty female reporter on TV interviewing an older rich man in a suit. They seemed to be in a nightclub. "I'm here at The Habitat, the city's most respectable club, with Glen Runciter, of Runciter Associates. Glen, what do you think about the club's new stricter social status requirements?"

Joe remembered the name Buster Smiley had mentioned. Glen Runciter. But what was Runciter Associates? Joe hadn't heard of that monopoly. The man looked important. A bit older. Expensive suit. He tried to memorize his features.

The reporter was talking again. "...with the club's new goat-level access requirement, meaning that only those who own a goat or above can get in, a lot of common folk feel excluded. Not everyone can afford to shell out the money for a goat, which is currently listed at three thousand dollars in the February Sidney's catalogue..."

He sat back and tried to sort things out. What did I get that useless degree in psychology for if I can't even analyze what's happening to me right now? So, first, somebody on TV, name of Buster Smiley, wants me to somehow get to Glen Runciter and give him the message that Philip K. Dick is still alive and is at the Beloved Brethren Moratorium, or else something very bad will happen to all of humanity. And then, some guy named Bryant wants me to retire Andys. You were right, old man. He chuckled to himself. That's quite the trip. Sounds like a hallucination,

alright. But that doesn't help me. Not exactly what I was after! Maybe I just need to go to bed and sleep it off. Or maybe....

Maybe the pills were so powerful, they knocked me out completely and I'm already in my bed sleeping. Some dreams can be very lucid. How do I know I'm not sleeping right now and all of this is just one crazy dream? Dreams are nonsensical, and they also draw on content from the previous day's memories and thoughts, he knew. So having a dream like this would make perfect sense.

Suddenly, a thought came to him. If I'm dreaming, then... He stood up, walked over to the wall, and slammed his head into it. Owww!!!! God damn it!! He held his head in his hands and sat down again. The pain was definitely real.

Buster Smiley was talking on the TV again. "All of Hollywood is one big hoax. Run by an alien presence..." Joe stared at the TV, his head pounding, as Buster explicated some sort of crazy scheme that didn't make any sense.

Just then he noticed something orange zip across the couch and disappear between the cushions. Startled, he jumped up. What the fuck was that? He grabbed a broom from the kitchen and used it to fish in between the couch cushions, and pulled out....a stale cheesepuff.

The phone rang again. He picked it up. Oh, great. The tough guy again.

"Hey, the situation has gotten worse. I've just received word that the Andys are closing in on your location. If you don't take care of them, they'll do you in first! Why are you still sitting around? Get your ass in gear if you want to live!" He hung up.

So now he was a target? Why would anyone care enough about him to want to do him in? Perhaps he

was having a schizoid attack. Didn't schizophrenics dream up plots where everyone was out to get them? It was the classic narcissistic self-importance, one's unconscious fantasies being played out.

But if he really was psychotic, he wouldn't realize that he was psychotic. He would believe in his grandiose fantasies 100%, as schizos do. No, this situation, in all its weirdness, didn't match what he had read in the textbooks at university. He very clear-mindedly recognized what was happening now as logically absurd, despite it being sensorily realistic. He questioned it, in the very act of it happening. Psychotics don't do that.

He remembered a quote from a book he had read during his freshman year. "Dreams are real while they last. Can we say more of life?" Who had written that? Was it Havelock Ellis? But then...what's the difference between dreams and real life? Both are temporary. Ephemeral. Transitory. Isn't this life just one big dream that's going to go up in a puff of smoke one day? That would explain his life very well, he thought. The panopticon and all of the petty bullshit he had to put up with everyday. Absurd. Meaningless. Futile. And meanwhile the monopolists could go around doing whatever they want. He had to admit his normal life didn't make much more sense than this dream, truth be told.

Well, he thought, it doesn't matter if this dream is my life, or if my life is this dream, or if this is all just a hallucination from a non-Pfarma drug. I know that I can feel pain. And I can think clearly. And if there really are extremists trying to kill me, they could show up at any moment. Could Bryant have been right? Were there really people after him?

Just then, he heard a pounding on the door.
Shit! It's the Andys! They're here for me! He froze

in panic. What should I do? He was too young, with too much life ahead of him, to have it all end now, this way...

But then he heard Ms. Juniper's voice on the other side of the door. "Joe, do you have any toilet paper? I'm all out. I'll lend you a nickel if you open the door and lend me some."

After Joe had lent some toilet paper to Ms. Juniper, he sat down and sighed. What had Buster Smiley said? The fate of humanity's at stake. Fuck it. I'm sick of being a nobody. I'm sick of all the chicks at the club ignoring me. I'm sick of sitting here alone in my cubicle, with only Ms. Juniper to talk to. My life has meaning, damn it! If there really is some plot afoot, someone needs to solve it, and I'm the one to do it! I'm going to retire those Andys, and then get to that club...The Habitat, it was called, and get the message to Runciter.

But then he remembered something the reporter had said...they require you to own a goat to get into the club! Who ever heard of something as absurd as that? A goat cost three thousand dollars, the reporter had mentioned. But that redhead guy, Bryant, said he would pay a thousand for each Andy he retired. Hmm...three Andys for one goat. So there was only one question left...how was he going to retire the Andys?

He roved around the cubicle apartment, which seemed slightly bigger now, searching every nook and cranny. He found a large appliance claiming to be a mood organ near his Fukea bed (Fukea was the government-sanctioned furniture monopoly run by Chief Monopolist Buck Whiteypants). He also found what appeared to be...a laser gun. And a pocket-sized thingamajig called a Penfield wave transmitter, with an instruction manual. Where had all this stuff

come from? Whatever. It didn't matter. He knew what he had to do. He took the laser gun and the Penfield thingamajig. Time to get to work, he thought.

He walked to the door and tried to open it.

"Five cents, please."

Fuck! I've got a laser gun, and apparently I'm some kind of enforcer now, but I can't even leave my apartment for want of a nickel, he thought.

He called out to the hallway. "Um...hello? Ms. Juniper? Are you still there?"

Finally, after pounding for several minutes on the wall between his apartment and Ms. Juniper's, he was able to talk her out of yet another nickel and leave his apartment. For her trouble, he handed her the frozen cockroachburger in gratitude. She tucked it into that black hole of a purse she carried around, apparently to be found at some later date, god knows when and by whom. Perhaps it would feed the last man alive.

He strode down the hallway, laser gun tucked into his belt. This was a new feeling for him, being armed and dangerous. The proles were prohibited from owning any kind of weapon. He felt like the hero from one of those action sci-fi cyberfilms. Something about being dangerous, perhaps even recklessly dangerous, felt strangely good for some reason. It felt like a breath of fresh air had just been infused into his boring cyberprole life.

Okay, he thought, now let's go retire some Andys.

CHAPTER 3

BIOSYNTHETIC INTERNAL DIARY #2

Two men stood on a beach, cool air whipping at their hair. A strange-looking black dog with a long neck, long thin body, and long fur on its ears and tail brought them a frisbee. This exotic breed of dog was called a Saluki. One of the men, a thin, stately old man, took the frisbee from the dog's mouth. He stroked the dog's head lovingly. It was his favorite pet. His beloved. He threw the frisbee. The dog ran after it.

From a ways off, a slender, beautiful young woman watched as her uncle and his friend conversed.

Finally, she approached the two men. "Uncle, I've set up the stakes. Can we play horseshoes now?"

Her uncle scowled as he waved her away. "Not now. I told you, we don't have time for horseshoes today."

As she walked away, disappointed, she could hear her uncle tell the man, "I should have never programmed her to have human emotions. She nags all the time. Worse than a child."

She stood for a few minutes alone, throwing the horseshoe at the stake. Then she lost interest. She stared at her uncle, his friend, and the dog. What was this strange sensation rising up in her? Was this an emotion?

Each time the dog retrieved the frisbee, her uncle lovingly rubbed the dog's head or stroked its long, slender back. The creature was his pride and joy. It was a biological animal, not one of the electric models.

If I were a dog, would he pay attention to me? She thought. If I were biological, would he pet and scratch my head? The strange sensation welled up

inside of her more and more.

He always has time for his human friends, and his dog, she thought. But he treats me like a useless hunk of scrap. I'm his prototype, she thought. I'm just business. Those others, those with natural flesh and blood, he doesn't treat them like business. A product. That's what I am to him, just a product.

The dog returned with the frisbee again. Her uncle scratched under its chin. He tousled the long fur on its ears.

"I hate animals," she decided.

Incessant thoughts. The opposite of nirvana. Ever since they had forced him to be injected with the drug twenty years ago, the thinking had never stopped. Even in his sleep, in his dreams...one endless stream of consciousness that couldn't be quenched.

John Isidore was a man whose brain was on fire.

He closed the laptop. His screenplay was perfect, but they had refused to accept it. The bastards. And here he was, reading over his perfect text and realizing why he needed a new job.

He noticed the crimson light dappling his closed laptop. Sundown already.

He stood up and walked towards the window. Burgundy rays poured onto the beige shag carpet and chestnut microfiber couch cushions of his Santa Monica apartment, as if molten magma were spilling in through the blinds. Isidore peered out the blinds at the coastline. The California sun was a fiery orb, dipping down into the Pacific.

This place had been his abode for decades. Uprooted from San Francisco, he had dozens of screenplays under his belt, each one better than the last, each one complained about more by his bosses than the last. His mind hadn't been able to turn off since he started the first one. Now, it felt like a rocket had been attached to the back of a train, and it was about to derail itself.

He walked over to an arcade console in his living room. The title of the console read, "Martyr: The Video Game." Instead of joysticks, it simply had two handles which protruded in front of the screen. He firmly gripped the handles. And suddenly...

He was Wilbur Mercer, the Martyr. His apartment disappeared, and he was walking, alone, up a rocky mountain path, the thorns on the bushes to either

side digging into him. He wore a long, white robe. From behind him, people were throwing rocks. A rock connected. And then another, and another. Finally, when he had taken enough, he released the grips and he was back in his Santa Monica apartment, wearing the same clothes as before. He was no longer Mercer. No longer the Martyr.

He went to the bathroom and examined the large cut on his forehead from where one of the stones had impacted. Blood ran down, freely. "Damn it," he said, as he pulled out some gauze and wrapped up the wound.

Exhausted, he went to the kitchen and poured himself a Bourbon. Usually the video game helped him clear his mind a bit, but he couldn't stop thinking about his characters, about the intricacies of their psyches, about their relationship to one another, about the next crisis that would force them to grow as a person. Character arcs. Growth. Crisis. Catharsis. His characters were as real, if not more real, than any person. In fact, recently many of the characters from his screenplays had started appearing in the real world. Which reminded him...

Why am I here, in this world, in this time and place? Because of thought. Because someone thought me up as a character in one of his novels, realizing only later that his thought patterns were bringing me here, into this place. Thought is what brought me into this reality. From my initial world. My initial reality. And how did I come to exist in my initial reality? Because someone there had thought me up? Had programmed me with all my wants and wishes? Were we all just the products of thought? Children of the thoughts of the One who created everything that exists out of pure thought. Yes, Isidore had thought many times about the

Programmer, the source of all.

In the beginning was the Thought, and the Thought was with the Programmer, and the Thought was the Programmer.

Like the one who brought me here into this current reality once wrote, everything is true. Everything that anybody has ever thought. Because every possibility exists, somewhere out there, as part of the Potentialverse, which contains all of existence. Not just this one measly existence, but all possible existences. And thought is what connects all planes of existence! Thought is information, and all of existence is simply made up of information. Thus, all existence flows from thought.

So that's why I am here. I was willed into this here, into this now. Every time anyone ever thinks, they are willing realities into existence. All thoughts are real. Thoughts represent alternate planes of reality. Orthogonal time and space. Endless levels of existence, layers upon layers upon layers... But no one has ever made it to the top layer. Yet.

God damn it! There it goes again! The never ending thinking. The merry-go-round never ceases.

Need. Temporary. Relief. Can't. Stop. Thinking.

There were only two possible solutions to his problem.

To destroy all thoughts. To destroy everything. Darkness.

Or, to get all the answers to all of his questions. Light.

Which one would it be, darkness or light?

Would the comforting darkness where no one can think solve his problem? Or, would he make it to the top layer of existence, and solve the mysteries of the universe?

Suddenly his watch rang. He answered. On the surface of the watch a man with sandy blonde hair and a goatee appeared. He looked emaciated, withered. He wore a multi-colored, striped terry cloth bathrobe that looked way too big. That bathrobe had fit him perfectly before. It was Doug. His best friend. His mentor. One of Hollywood's sharpest. But now the tables were turned. The drug had had the opposite effect on the two men. "John... I'm having..." The man was clearly having problems thinking, forming sentences. "...problems breathing. I tried...kids.... I need—"

"Don't talk, Doug. I'll be right down. Take it easy. Stay right where you are. Try to relax." Isidore rang off.

Doug Campbell lived in the same apartment building as Isidore. He was the one who had helped him get a place there when he relocated to L.A. Isidore took the elevator down two floors and rushed down the hall to door number seven. He stared into the retinal scanner and the door clicked open. Doug had given access to his apartment to his two surviving children and to his friend Isidore in case of an emergency.

He rushed across the living room to the black leather couch Doug had been sitting in when he called. Doug wasn't there. Isidore examined the room. Pink, furry rabbit slippers sat, abandoned in front of the couch. The striped bathrobe lay limp in the middle of the couch, where Doug had been moments ago. He picked it up. Out of it fell bits of corkboard, paperclips, fragments of three-by-five cards with scene descriptions written in blue ink, crumpled yellow sticky notes, push pins, and pieces of manuscript paper with twelve-point Courier type. Bits of Doug's latest screenplay, Isidore realized. Damn it!

That was it. The last straw. That damn drug had taken his last friend. And his best one. Four other screenwriters...everyone of them with the same fate. Just a pile of screenwriting garbage.

And each one of them, including Doug, had slowly, progressively, gotten stupider and stupider since they had been forced to have the experimental injection. But exactly the opposite had happened to Isidore. The same gradual process, but in reverse. When he had arrived in Hollywood, he had been a special. His mind blasted by radiation. He had worked a menial job as a truck driver for a false animal repair shop in San Francisco. But in Hollywood they had offered him a job as screenwriter,

conditional on him taking the injection. But soon after the injection, he realized that the powers of his mind were growing. And now, he knew, whether they realized it or not, that he was the smartest man in this town.

Some would kill to be the smartest man. But Isidore knew the truth. Being the smartest man was a nightmare. His brain. It couldn't stop. He had no control over it. Hungrier and hungrier, it continued on its course, relentless. Cogitating, creating, analyzing, extrapolating. He could have written a new screenplay every day if they had asked him to. Instead, they had progressively become less and less interested in his work. Wanted him to tone it down. Needs to reach a broader audience, they had said.

He looked at the scraps of screenplays on the couch. Doug was a nice man. A kind man. From the first time they had met, he had never cared that Isidore was a special. He had taken him under his wing and shown him how to function in Hollywood. Doug was that rare breed of person who didn't judge, who liked all types of people, especially the downtrodden. Doug had had a friend as a child who had Down's syndrome, and he had stayed in touch with him, even as a Hollywood screenwriter. Had flown back home to the East Coast every year to visit his special friend on his birthday. Never missed a birthday. Had even paid to have him flown out to L.A. and had given him a tour of the studio and introduced him to Isidore and his other screenwriting friends. To his Down's syndrome friend, it had been the greatest day of his life.

The last good man in Hollywood had died. Turned into nothing but scrap.

And if this was the end of each of his friends who had taken the injection, then what would happen to

him? But its effects had been different on him. Maybe it reacted differently to people from his orthogonal space. Had it given him a new lease on life? Had it vivified, rejuvenated him, where it had sapped the life and energy out of the others? Or, in causing his brain to go into overdrive, would it eventually cause his system to break down? While their gears had been slowed, halted, until they had simply stopped working, would his gears whir on at top velocity until eventually they flew off the rod entirely?

Underneath his incessant speculation, he perceived the droning on of an ambient electric voice. He turned around and realized the TV was still on. On the screen humanoid figures of all shapes and sizes flashed, one after the other. The commercial's narrator blared out, "Do you want to own slaves, just like in those pre-Civil War days? Technology has made your dream a reality! Now you can own your very own slave! Built from the ground up with state-of-the-art organic electric circuitry, your top-of-the-line android will do all its master's biddings!" The scene cut to a red-dirt farm on Mars. A man was addressing an android. "I want all this cotton picked by the end of the day. The colony needs more clothes. We can't wait for the next shipment from Earth."

Wait a minute. Mars? But man hadn't colonized Mars in this timespace, even though that monopolist Elon Pasteyboy had promised it over and over. This seemed like something from...

As if in answer to his thoughts, a familiar face appeared on the TV. "Hello there, friend! It's me, Buster Smiley!"

Isidore knew this face, this TV show. It was from the layer of existence he had originally come from.

But why was Buster Smiley appearing now, in this layer?

Buster Smiley went on. “Are you wondering how to converse with the Programmer? Are you looking for answers to all of the universe’s conundrums? Well, boy have I got the golden ticket for you! All you need to do is just talk with the Thinker, and the Thinker will introduce you to the Programmer! It’s as simple as that! If you want to uncover the mysteries of the universe, that’s all you need to do! Now, let me tell you the secret of conversing with the Thinker —”

Suddenly, there was static on the TV and Buster Smiley disappeared. Then, abruptly, the TV was displaying a commercial by Shillette about how their razors will make you less manly, and how that was a good thing, since manliness was evil. There were some people dressed up in costumes which covered their entire bodies and made them look like giant light-colored penises and giant dark vaginas. The costumed figures sang a jingle, “Shillette will turn Pale Penises into Non-Pale Vaginas...so buy Shillette and stop being evil today! Boo-wop doo-wop! PPs become NPVs! Boopity-boop doo-wop!”

Isidore had seen thousands of advertisements like this one in the reality where he was a Hollywood screenwriter. So apparently he was back in this layer. Back in this orthogone.

But how had Buster Smiley broken through to this layer, and how had he known what Isidore had been thinking, only moments before? Isidore desperately wanted to speak with the Programmer. He had so many questions for him. So he was supposed to speak with the Thinker, and the Thinker would introduce him to the Programmer? There was only one tiny problem. The Thinker was dead! So that

would be impossible! This didn't make any sense at all...

Just then, his panoptiwatch rang again. He answered it. Another familiar face. Mr. Sloat, his former employer, who had also been transported into this orthogone years ago. "Isidore, long time no see, buddy."

"Mr. Sloat, nice to see you."

"Look, John, I know you got that fancy Hollywood job now, but if you're ever back in the San Fran area, we could really use some help. There's been a spate of animal murders and attempted murders in the neighborhood, and some of the animals have been electric, so we're drowning in repair requests. And Milt's been having to pick them up and deliver them himself. We're swamped. We could really use your help, buddy."

The adventure continues...in The Return of Philip K. Dick!

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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...

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 *Mind Grid*, a sprawling epic sci-fi about a future where all humans' brains are connected at all times to the internet and unauthorized thoughts are removed by the government.

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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?

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.